



**PATHOGRAPHIC REPRESSION OF CORONAVIRUS-INDUCED TRAUMA
IN REMI RAJI'S *WANDERER CANTOS***

**IWABI ABRAHAM MODAHUNSI, (PHD)¹ AND JOSEPH AJAGUNMOLU
MAYAKI²**

¹Department of English, Federal College of Education, Kontagora, Niger State, Nigeria In Affiliation with the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria

²Writing and Rhetoric Studies, University of Utah, USA

joseph.mayaki@utah.edu, iwadahunsi@gmail.com, 08165100409

Abstract

Coronavirus (also known as Covid-19) is one of the deadly pandemics in the history of mankind. It claimed many lives in Nigeria and across the globe in 2020. Some survivors of the virus employed different means to recount their experiences. Such narrative helps to suppress the trauma and possible posttraumatic stress disorder of the virus. In the medical humanities, such literary narrative is dubbed pathography, scriptotherapy, bibliotherapy and pathotextualism. This study examines the pathographic repression of Coronavirus-induced trauma in Remi Raji's poetry collection, with a view to explicating the poet's experiences, in poetic thought, at the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) of the Oyo State Infectious Disease Centre, Olodo, Ibadan, in December 2020. It adopts a qualitative research methodology within the ambit of the Freudian psychoanalytic theory. The poems reveal that the poet undergoes traumatic conditions such as solitary confinement, anorexia, syncope, trance, hallucinations, thanatophobia, and also witnesses a condition worse than his. Raji represses these traumatic experiences by narrating them in the pathographic text called *Wanderer Cantos*. The poetry collection affirms the therapeutic potency of poetry. Poetry performs therapeutic functions by soothing aching minds. Raji employs the poetic genre to heal his psyche of coronavirus-induced trauma and sensitises his readers to its devastating effects.

Keywords: Pathographic text, Coronavirus-induced trauma, Remi Raji, *Wanderer Cantos*

Introduction

The travails of diseases and infirmity are challenges the whole of mankind had to contend with over the years. Human beings suffer from different afflictions at different stages of their lives. The pain they experience constitutes the narrative motif of their social interaction. Sometimes, the lettered in society explore diverse artistic mediums to explain their experiences and the nature of their dis-ease, in order to purge out their minds and get relief from their traumatic state, as well as educating others about their illnesses. Such experiences, of ill-health, are communicated sometimes in songs, artistic designs, prose narrative, drama and in poems. The preoccupation of this article is the communication of morbidity in poetic thought, within the ambit of Remi Raji's Covid-19 experiences, as reflected in his poetry collection entitled *Wanderer Cantos* (2021). Communication is an integral part of medical procedures resulting in healing. It plays a pivotal

role in the medical practice, from the point of consultation with the physician, diagnosis, treatment and monitoring of healing process. Such communication is usually oral and in writing. It is incumbent on the patient to narrate what (s)he feels in the body chemistry while the doctor scribes the salient points of the narrative, as a guide in the course of treatment. The narrative, in the medical humanities, is dubbed pathography. The other terms used to describe it are bibliotherapy, scriptotherapy and what Stephen Ese Kekeghe (2020) calls pathotextualism.

Traumatic State and Psychoanalysis

Trauma is a term denoting deeply distressing and disturbing experiences resulting in psychic wound after one is exposed to traumatic conditions. Traumatic experiences sometimes result in Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The American Psychiatric Association (2013), in Omobowale and Sakiru (2018), explains PTSD as “a mental disorder that can develop after a person is exposed to traumatic events such as sexual assault, warfare, traffic collision or other threats”. It encompasses the response to a deeply overwhelming, distressing or disturbing occurrence which someone tries to cope with. Traumatic experience is usually shocking and upsetting, causing psychological disturbance. Cathy Caruth (1996) describes trauma, from a psychoanalytic perspective which is the interest of this study, as “the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena”. It operates on a repressive and eruptive oscillation causing ugly memories and psychic pains. Mdika (2014) argues that Caruth draws her postulation about trauma from Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory, by stating that: “what the parable of the wound and the voice thus tells us, and what is at the heart of Freud’s writing on trauma...is that trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available”. The crux of Caruth’s view of trauma is that traumatic experience makes its sufferer wallow in bewilderment of what is known and what (s)he does not comprehend about his/her condition. In the proem to *Wanderer Cantos* (2021), the poetry collection studied in this article, Raji exerts that:

The last section of this collection is devoted to the personal experience of coronavirus, and the triumph over the trauma of the scourge. The lines were clipped from recollections of sensation, desperation and alertness which came upon the awareness of my immobility in December of 2020, in the intensive care unit of the Oyo State Infectious Disease Centre, Olodo, Ibadan.

How does it feel to be down with the coronavirus? Or is it freak flu, or an invented illness more wicked than malaria? There have been too many denials and counter-denials. I am aware of too many conspiracy theories for and against the virus. All I know, as a blood witness, is that the virus is freaking real, with an unyielding intent to suspend all living organs in the body, to congeal the veins, to seize the trachea and execute a coup d’etat against the lungs, to bring down or suspend the gift of oxygen in the body and induce it to atrophy. For a familiar Nigerian reference, it causes the loudest palpitations of the heart and makes the body temperature to go up and up like the pump price of petrol. The spike rarely comes down. I

know surely that it is all about immune deficiency and freak organ failures. Sadly too, between the saved and the lost, I think the virus behaves like a lottery.

Raji tries to communicate his traumatic experiences with coronavirus in poems. It is the potency of communication in healing that Sigmund Freud theorised into psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis is a narrative-based healing which Freud propounded to treat his psychiatric patients. He would make his hysteric patients narrate their biographies in order to pinpoint the psychogenesis of their hysteria. This clinical-psychological and psychiatric procedure was afterwards brought to bear on literary hermeneutics to psychodiagnose the characters in literary texts, the creative process of literary works and the psychological effects of literary texts on the readers. Narrative of a (dis)ease and its attending traumatic impact by a physician-writer, patient-writer or an observant creative writer offers a snapshot of the affinity between literature and medicine.

Raji's *Wanderer Cantos* (2021) presents the poet's traumatic experiences of his contact with the vicious coronavirus, in December, 2020. The poetry collection offers a patient-writer/survivor's account of how a patient feels when they contact coronavirus. It chronicles how the virus rendered Raji's immune system defenceless, shattered his thought and his struggle to reconcile his movements and exact contact with the deadly disease, which constitute the pathogenesis of his traumatic state and poetic-therapy. The part of the poetry collection which is covid-19-induced traumatic narrative, is premised on omniscient point of view – otherwise known as first-person point of view. This helps to bring to the fore the interior monologue of the poet and foreground the therapeutic essence of the poems in the face of illness-induced trauma. The therapeutic potency of the poems manifests in the poet's purgation of his emotion when he struggles to survive Covid-19. This involves the sublimation, by a patient-writer and survivor, of psychological wound and tremor which the deadly coronavirus triggers into a thought-shared readable material to repress the memories.

Pathography/Clinical Autobiography

Pathography is premised on the axiom which says that only the wearer knows where the shoe pinches. Pathography is an autobiographical experience of an author during sickness. It is a patient-writer's testimonial of their illness or affliction. A pathographic narrative borders on a patient-writer's experiences with illness and the medical care sought for wellness. Such narrative presents the writer's health condition, the medical procedure for treatment and the traumatic impact of the infirmity on the patient. Anne Hunsaker Hawkins (1999) writes that, as a literary genre, pathography is a personal narrative concerning illness, treatment and sometimes death. Hawkins (1999) in Annemarie Jutel and Ginny Russel (2021) describes pathography as "articulate[ing] the hopes, fears, and anxieties so common to sickness, but [also serving] as guidebooks to the medical experience itself, shaping a reader's expectations about the course of an illness and its treatment". Such (clinical) autobiography pinpoints the thought, assumptions and attitudinal disposition of the patient towards their illness, as well as the myth which people conjure about the ailment. Donna McCloskey and Dina Mckelvy (2012) see pathography

“as a form of autobiography or biography that describes the personal experiences of illness and sometimes death. The duo adds that:

pathographies, authored not only by patients and their families but also by physicians and other health care professionals who have experienced infirmity either firsthand or as witnesses, help to make sense of what is happening to them during often chaotic and overwhelming circumstances. The reading of pathographies by health care providers helps them to understand their patients better and teach them things that they won't learn from textbooks. Pathographies can provide a unique window into the experiences of patients whether in the form of poetry, graphic novels, vignettes, or other narratives.

Stephen Kekeghe (2022) opines that pathography is the narrative of a patient's health condition from the auto/biographical perspective. The common denominator in these scholarly definitions of pathography is the place of self-narrative, first-hand experiences and personal encounter with an infirmity. Such clinical narrative – a first-person illness documentary – in the medical humanities, is also referred to as scriptotherapy, bibliotherapy or pathotextualism.

Many writers have emphasised the imperative of autobiography in relation to firsthand account of the nature of ailments and the patients' feelings during infirmity. Femi Oyebode (2003) in Sola Owonibi (2009) opines that:

Autobiographical accounts of the experiences of psychiatric illness provide an insight into the nature of psychiatric disorder in a way that is not possible from standard psychiatric texts.

The thrust of Oyebode's assertion is that the patient's narrative offers more valid account of the effects of a disease and the pains the patient feels than the second-hand information of a medical practitioner contained in a textbook. Indeed, Oyebode (2003) avers that an autobiographical account of an illness enables health care practitioners to have detailed nature of a patient's health condition and health comorbidity. An autobiography allows individuals to express the most significant aspects of their lived lives — either positive or negative. Not all autobiographies offer in-depth clinical testaments of patients' diagnosis with illnesses, detailing the medical procedures and recuperation.

Poetic-therapy

Poetic imagination is therapeutic. Poetry performs therapeutic functions by soothing achy minds. Nick Mдика (2014) argues that poetry plays a pivotal role in therapeutic conceptualisation of literary works. He adds that “as a genre, poetry plays a significant – perhaps in some respects unique – part in providing a therapeutic memorialisation of history and its trauma (p. 51). Soumai Osamnia and Yasmina Djafri (2020) opine that poetry is considered as one of the most widely employed forms of creative and curative writing in therapeutic healings. These scholars postulate that writing poetry helps to identify and overcome the psychic ache a person may be contending with. In this wise, repressed thoughts and emotions are purged out and indirectly shared with the readers. Such poetic composition falls within the scope of scriptotherapy and can be the reason Riordan Richard (1996) recommends scriptotherapy for the individuals suffering from psychic pain.

Chavis (2011) in Osamnia and Yasmina Djafri (2020) submits that poetry performs a distinctive therapeutic and inspirational function in human health. Chavis (2011) asserts that the unsurpassed place of poetic-therapy has been affirmed from antiquity all through medical practice. She confirms categorically that the...medicine men and women of ancient civilizations chanted poems as part of their healing art. In *Writing to Heal* (2004), James Pennebaker enjoins people to write and read poems, because they help in healing psychic wounds. Therefore, poetic-therapy involves an accurate description of the cause(s) of an ailment and the pain it triggers. It also gives clues to the socio-cultural perception of the sickness depicted in the poem. Often, the poet recounts his/her survival strategies and medical procedures in order to instil hope in the readers. By so doing, the poet undergoes traumatic narrative and healing, on one hand, while the readers, on the other hand, learn how to take precautions against the disease. Little wonder that Chavis (2011) states that “concise lyrical expressions, confessional and personal intone, tend to grab and hold reader’s attention as they speak to the senses, mind and heart”. Good poems elicit an emotion from the readers and spur them to make imaginary journey into the wor(l)d of the poet.

Pathographic Indices of Traumatic Covid-19 Encounter in *Wanderer Cantos*

Remi Raji’s *Wanderer Cantos* (2021) is a poetry collection that is made up of Sixty-eight unequal poems divided into two parts. Part one of the collection comprises an array of poems portraying different socio-cultural, socioeconomic and socio-political settings and themes. The second part subtitled: “Corona Canto and monologues: my life in the bush of the impossible virus”, gives a pathographic account of Raji’s contact and diagnosis with the deadly coronavirus. The poems in this part can be subcategorised into: (I) poems dealing with the critical stage of Raji’s battle with coronavirus, (II) his response to treatment, convalesce and flashback to activities before he was diagnosed with the virus and (III) his discharge and thanksgiving. In “A quiet and lonely place”, the first poem of the second part, Raji recounts the abrupt immobility the coronavirus brought upon his wellbeing. The decimating effect of the virus on his immune system is as if:

Everything stood still: motion, breath and clock,
except voices which became bodies asking,
praying,
whispering.

The quote above succinctly shows how devastating coronavirus is. It makes one configure the imagery of its horrifying and debilitating nature. The virus destabilises every normal routine of the patient. The voices the poetic persona hears are, probably, those of his immediate families who are agitated and supplicating to God for divine intervention and healing. This coincides with the voices of the medical personnel who arrive to take him to the Oyo State Infectious Disease Centre, Olodo, Ibadan. The disease pulls him down so much that he can hardly fix any idea or comprehend anything, except the sound of the siren of the ambulance that takes him away. The poem also portrays the alertness and prompt response of the medical personnel upon the arrival of the poet at the hospital. “Everybody arrived in their expertise” (p. 85). The medical

personnel, metaphorically compared with the “Astronauts in white and green and blue” (p. 85) arrive to draw the poet’s blood for laboratory test. The metaphoric trope of “astronauts” alludes to the vigilance put up and the protective gear the medical personnel wear against the deadly virus. The poet is petrified by the discomfort the virus brings upon him and opines that, at that material time, everything – animate or inanimate – becomes immaterial except the premonition of death. Raji croons that:

Everything stood still.
Everything,
Everybody,
Except Death.

These lines reveal the overwhelming physical and psychological impact of coronavirus on the poet. The second poem narrating the experiences of the poet with coronavirus reflects the swing mood and abnormal body temperature the virus triggers. The virus makes one behave infantile and brings about awkward temperature characterised by “a screaming coldness in the heat of day” (p. 86). Whenever this bizarre coldness descends, the patient finds it extremely difficult to stand, as if he/she is expiring, due to “mutations and organ failures” (p. 96). This ambivalent nature of the virus is captured in stanzas three and four of the poem entitled “The pickpocket”, which is a metaphor for the killjoy stance of coronavirus. According to the poet:

The coronavirus has a golden knife.
It peels the orange for you in a moment,
and stabs you in the arm thereafter.
In the morning, it is black seed oil,
hot tea, inhale steam, then cold bath before breakfast.
The most dreadful time is when the sun goes down,
It is cold, it is hot, the temperature spikes,
The nurse is confused by the viral sequence
fluctuating, between 38.5 and 37.8 and back again.
The spike is the cruel cudgel of the virus,
to make a mess of the vital organs.

The virus is capable of paralyzing a person’s wellbeing. It makes one completely uncomfortable and plunges him/her into psychological disorder. Deploying verisimilitude, through repetition and stream of consciousness, Raji laments, in the poem entitled “A Different December,” that:

I arrived with a petulant bag,
a screaming coldness in the heat of day.
a simmering anger against the virus,
I stood up but I sat down watching

as I walk out of my body
bundle of phlegm, turbo of menthol and mint
the breathless hysteria of a silent tempest.
I arrived with a different rhythm in my blood.

It is psycho-diagnostically evident, from the above verses, that the spike of the coronavirus plunges Raji into syncope and/or unconsciousness. To walk out of one's body is to faint. The severity of Raji's condition, in comparison with the other patients', also compounds his anxiety. The poets makes one understand that he meets many patients of different ages – men and women at the Oyo State Centre for Disease Control – who are victims of the virus he metaphorises as “the pickpocket” (p. 87). Some of the patients have been treated and survived but they are still monitored. In the words of the poet: “these patients are agile, unlike me, they scare me” (p. 87). The poet longs for the little freedom these individuals enjoy, in spite of their confinement to the hospital. His sensitivity to freedom becomes more expressive in the poem headlined “Too many calls spoilt the solitude” (p. 96). Raji melancholically asserts, in the poem, that “...I needed freedom to fly, the energy to run...” (p. 96). What it implies to be confronted with (dis)ease is made clearer in these particular poems. Given the above line, it seems solitude is Raji's anathema. Unlike in the course of treating other non-contagious diseases that few relations are allowed to visit or stay with the patient, a coronavirus patient mostly lives in isolation from non-infected people. This is part of the measures to contain the spread of the virus. The disadvantage of such solitary confinement, in the words of the poet, is that “Death could be very cheap, and lonely” (p. 96), if a patient's condition deteriorates in the absence of the medical personnel.

Raji does not only despise his confinement to the isolation centre but also the noise the recuperated patients make jars his “chest” (p. 87). As the virus continues to decimate the poet's immune system and the noise made by the convalesced patients playing “scrabble, ludo and other games” (p. 87) causes him mental dis-ease, he probably recalls his status as a scholar-poet and professor vis-à-vis the status of the other patients and realises that, coronavirus, as a “thief does not know character, tongue or quota” (p. 87). Raji's opinion is a home truth; diseases are not respecters of social strata.

The incessant pains caused by the coronavirus and the mental dissonance of the noise snowball into auditory, tactile and visual hallucinations. In his psychoanalytic postulations, Sigmund Freud (1936) in Craig Steel (2015) “argued that the phenomenon of hallucinations was a product of forgotten or repressed traumatic memories entering the conscious mind”. Auditory hallucination is a sensory perception of hearing voices without external stimulus. Tanu Thakur and Vikas Gupta (2022) assert that auditory hallucination is associated with schizophrenia but it is not specific to it. “Nonpsychotic disorders associated with auditory verbal hallucinations are affective, trauma-related, substance-related and neurological disorders. Tactile hallucination is a bizarre or false sensation of touch or perception of movement on one's body. Visual hallucination occurs when someone sees things or people that are not really present. Visual hallucination can be caused by mental illness,

the side effects of medication and physical illness (Chitra Badii, 2019) like coronavirus which Raji is diagnosed with. In the poem titled “Note to self: I travelled”, Raji recounts that:

All those who left without consent came back:
Harry carried me to Atukwei in Accra,
in search of a cure,
Pius kept telling them nothing was wrong.
“Can’t you see, he’s just resting,
take him back please; give him the band,
give him the band.”
When I turned to reply,
the doctor was muttering and smiling,
setting my arm for another drip.

Raji’s condition may have transmogrified into trauma-induced trance culminating in hallucination. Harry and Pius are probably Raji’s two deceased allies, Harry Garuba and Pius Adesanmi. Both allies appear to him in the trance. Line seven of the poem titled “Breaking new#1” (p. 90) affirms that the poet undergoes “ten days of vacuous emptiness” (p. 90) before he begins to show signs of recuperation signified by self-controlled defecation. The use of *vacuous emptiness* – two synonymous words – in the same context attests that the poet’s state transcends the emptiness of his stomach as a result of anorexia but unconsciousness. The poet affirms, in the poem dubbed “Denial” (p. 98), that he wakes “from a new unfamiliar bed” (p. 98) unable “...to write, or think...” (p. 98) and wonders how he gets “...caught/in the unpredictable valleys of the truant virus” (p. 98).

The two poems entitled “Breaking news #1” (p. 90) and “Breaking news #2” (p. 91) dwell on Raji’s response to treatment and convalesce. The former borders on the poet’s ability to defecate at 2:00pm – “the fourteenth hour” (p. 90) – of December 18, 2020 and the latter reflects the diminutive task he is able to perform. The poet chooses to wash his “two dirty underwears” (p. 91) not because they are filthy but “to perform a rite of presence” (p. 91), indicating his convalescing. Raji’s ability to perform this minute task manually is an elixir to his COVID-19 morbidity, sign of recovery from and triumph over it. Having washed the two pants, the poet is able to ascertain the restoration of his sense of smell and expresses a sigh of relief. He adumbrates that:

I loved the little ocean of foams
and bubbles created by joyful waters...
The smell was sweet of the Atlantic ocean in my hand
the innocent smell of two pants,
one blue, one grayish, now wringed,
both relieved of their own antiseptic sins.

The decontamination of the pants symbolises the gradual restorative process of the poet's health and fortification against the virus. This gradual response to treatment and hope of survival reveal Raji's posttraumatic stress disorder. Conflicting flood of thoughts permeate the poet's psyche, struggling to pinpoint and reconcile the exact point of his contact with the lethal coronavirus. Raji exclaims, in the poem titled "The virus is a metaphor" (p. 99) that: "I kept plodding through flashes and fences of receding past" (p. 99). The eruption and repression of the memories of his past movements before the diagnosis are indices of the traumatic state of the poet. Raji metaphorically likens the attack of the virus to a stray bullet that hits a defenceless fellow and resolves that: "I got felled without knowing, it was like the Lekki shooting/I carried no weapon. Perhaps I wandered too far from home/harmless. The bullets cut deep in the dark, cut-and-dried". Allusion to the "Lekki shootings" (p. 99) during the #EndSARS protest in October, 2020 in Lagos makes Raji point easily understood. Scores of unarmed youths were killed during the protest. The imagery the poem elicits is melancholic and the cathartic effect is empathetic as fear and the possibility of death becloud the psyche of the poetic persona. He echoes that:

Malaria denied complicity; Blood Pressure raised her hand
helplessly
the other members of the Immunity Battalion declared non-
involvement
leaving only the volatile virus to plead its own case.
No case, actually, for the virus is the lord of all morbidities.
Fear and ignorance became the dual weaponry of death.
Courage was the last murmur or tether to survival. Nor blood nor
breath.
I became a precipice, hovering between fear and courage,
fluctuating, between the glowing darkness and the gloomy lights.
A levitating evidence of luminal existence, I was here but not here.
I was water but I needed fire to burn me into a coolness.
I was the beginning of an end, but I saw the end of old beginnings.

The last five lines of the above quote bring to the fore the uncertainty and the thought of death inscribed in the mind of the poet when he is being treated for coronavirus. They also capture the severity of the virus, which the poet calls "the lord of all morbidities" (p. 99). It is altogether oxymoronic that *darkness*, which symbolises everything gloomy – including death – is said to be *glowing* while *light*, which personifies life becomes *gloomy*. It simply means that that Raji does not give in to the coronavirus is by providence, because it is implied in the excerpt that the poet has developed thanatophobia and becomes traumatic.

Raji's poetic account of the killer coronavirus lucidly affirms that every stage of the treatment of the virus, to the point of discharge in the case of the lucky survivors, is traumatising. The poet himself is continuously traumatised to the point of

the exit fumigation at the hospital. Before he leaves his solitary ward for the High Dependency Unit (HDU) for debriefing, discharge and exit fumigation, the poet witnesses a traumatising emergency coronavirus condition. Female unconscious patient in need of oxygen is “wheeled supine” (p. 97) into the ward where the poet is, prompting the doctors to neglect him abruptly and attend to the woman. Raji writes that:

I watched as the doctors tested pulse and breath
The bouncy graphs appeared slow, long and rise
tiny bleeps and frantic sounds on the screen.
A decade of minutes after, the machine revved her back to voice.
Then she became a riot of tongues and stories
The doctors waited all through and forget my presence.

This scene appears didactic to the poet. Raji comes to appreciate the solitary confinement he had despised. He admits that: “The solitude I loved and hated became so dear” (p. 97). The woman’s critical condition, which the poet is unaware of its end, prompts him to adhere strictly to the doctor’s prescriptions, as well as advice “like an order” (p. 97). He becomes appreciative of his own condition and sees his healing as “a miracle” (p. 97).

Conclusion

The pathographic section of Raji’s *Wanderer Cantos* (2021) is a stream of traumatic experiences of his struggle to survive coronavirus. It explains what it feels to be down with the deadly coronavirus. In this poetry collection, the poet offers a conflation of personal reminiscence of pangs, feelings, medical procedures and precautions against the coronavirus affliction. His critical condition bestrides the doorstep of death and life, but he is divinely granted a second chance to live. Those who survive the attack of the virus, like the poet, are miraculously lucky. The survival notwithstanding, the lucky ones live with the traumatic strain of the virus. Raji takes to writing, through the poetic genre, to ease the trauma of the dis-ease and repress the posttraumatic stress disorder his encounter with the virus has triggered or may still trigger. Raji’s situation can be likened to that of someone who strays into the lion’s den and comes back alive. Such person will forever be grateful and tell his story and retell it. Telling the story infuses inner joy – a sense of triumph – and therapeutic effect that heal the psychic ache the experience has caused.

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