If a common purpose of oral history and life writing is to uncover or preserve expanses of human experience which have been disregarded or suppressed, lesbian, gay and bisexual subcultures would seem obvious candidates. Yet apparently necessary terms (such as self, history, orality and life) are problematic; the more so because oral history and life writing have embedded deep in their construction, and in their textual practice, a claim for authenticity, legitimacy, presence and, in short, reality. For instance, one premise is that we should be speaking or writing for ourselves, but the process depends on the activist who organises the archive.

I have been reading ten books published in Britain and the United States which rely on personal testimony and interviews, offering a fuller account of lesbian and gay lives. A key distinction is whether the material is presented as a sequence of specified men and women, each of whom tells his or her story, framed by a few introductory remarks by the editor; or whether the archival material is organised by the editor into topics, with paragraphs of individual accounts placed strategically to illustrate the topics. Exploring this distinction may lead into some of the dilemmas and achievements (faultlines) of the genre. (Note that I don’t use the familiar acronym ‘lgb’ and its amplifications - currently standing at ‘lgbttq’ I believe - because they were scarcely current until recently. Bisexuals in particular may well complain at the lack of attention to them in all the books studied in the present essay.)

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Kevin Porter and Jeffrey Weeks in Between the Acts give a chapter to each man; they have been asked to tell their life histories: ‘A soldier’s life’, ‘A rough life’, ‘A loner’s life’, ‘A kept life’, and so on.1 The editors explain that the interviews were conducted in 1978-79 with the goal of retrieving gay history, but not published until 1991, so they are doubly archaic. (The oldest man was born in 1892.) The book is offered as history ‘told by the men themselves ... ordinary people’ (pi). However, Porter and Weeks admit that ‘as editors’ they have ‘helped shape the material’ (p2).

Actually they have a considered view of how gay men lived in the period between the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 which, decisively, made all sexual acts between men illegal, and the Sexual Offences Act of 1967 which began a process of decriminalisation. The emphasis on the two laws, as well as making a nifty title, offers the ‘important point’ that ‘homosexually-inclined people were forced to come to terms with their desires, construct their

personal and social identities, build relationships and discover new ways of life in a situation of illegality, prejudice, ignorance and social hostility’ (Porter and Weeks, p1). The forms of dissident sexual expression were determined by those prevailing conditions. ‘These years between the acts formed the crucible in which lesbian and gay identities were formed’ (p1). Porter and Weeks associate themselves with Mary McIntosh, Ken Plummer and the University of Essex, where the idea that sexual dissidents come to occupy a ‘homosexual role’ was being developed (pix). Thus they oppose the view of other scholars, who believe queerness to be innate and its forms basically the same through the ages. For Porter and Weeks, the twentieth-century modes of gay life are subcultural responses to legal harassment and social stigma. It was ‘through contact with others that most people were able to make sense of their feelings, and to begin to forge viable identities’ (p3). Best of all, in the conclusions of several accounts, these older men might find CHE (the Campaign for Homosexual Equality) or Gay Switchboard, and hence political commitment and an unprecedented dignity and comradeship.

A comparable collection shows the flexibility of the chapter-per-person mode. For Roger Sutton in Hearing Us Out, the target readership is American young adults, who may believe they are alone in facing peer-group harassment: there is hope. The contributors offer a sequence of personal testimonies; the mode enables a rhetoric of sincerity and intensity. This is supported by portrait photographs, mostly of men and women by themselves or with their partners, displaying a basic reality and decency. Ultimately we must ask ourselves ‘What does being gay or lesbian mean to you?’ (ppxv). There is the sense that community is necessary, as it is for Porter and Weeks. But basically Sutton’s gay young person is in communion with himself or herself, in quest of a gayness so authentic and affirmative that the straights won’t be able to undermine it.

The Hall-Carpenter Archives were formed in 1982 (named for Radclyffe Hall and Edward Carpenter). With the support of the Greater London Council, an oral history project was established in 1985. Despite the withdrawal of funding when the GLC was abolished, two volumes were published, one about women and one about men. Both, like Between the Acts, present their materials in chapters coterminous with individual interviewees. They regard this as protection against a premature closing down of topics: ‘We felt we could not assume we knew what a lesbian history consisted of’, the introduction to Inventing Ourselves observes (p1). The editors have found reason to be wary. ‘We have certainly realized how partial and duplicitous family stories are’ (p4). To recognise the power of traditional structures is not to overthrow them, however. A pattern appears: ‘In our interviewing we evolved a life-story approach which included family background, childhood experiences, school, and work, as well as coming out, friendships, and sexual relationships’ (p4). Left to themselves, both interviewers and respondents (re)discover the most conservative agenda for lesbian and gay self-understanding: the individual life cycle, with its implicit goal of explaining sexual dissidence through personal and familial development.


- as opposed, for instance, to an analysis of the sex/gender system, a review of institutional constraints, or an evaluation of subcultural potential. Ideology always provides a conservative default position.

Parallel lesbian and gay volumes were produced also by an offshoot of Mass-Observation (M-O), the National Lesbian and Gay Survey. In their introductions (ppix-x in both books) the Directors explain their method. Following M-O, they invite correspondents to address a topic. The topics become the chapters of the book. Within the chapters, individual contributions are strung together (they vary from one to ten pages in length). Having confessed to this framework, the editors feel able to deny exercising control. ‘There is no censorship within NL&GS; everything submitted is logged and placed in the collection’. Consequently ‘There are conflicting views, there are contradictions. We make no attempt to draw conclusions, that is the prerogative of the readership whose views will be quite as diverse’ (What a Lesbian, pix).

The influence of the choice of topics is evident in Proust, Cole Porter ... The promise of ‘observations on such themes as their earliest perceptions of homosexuality, and coming to terms with their own sexuality’ suggests another developmental version of gay (pi). Within this framework, nonetheless, the editors have made a bold decision. In the book on women, the chapter ‘Out’ is followed by one on therapy (favorable), whereas the equivalent chapter in the men’s volume is titled ‘Convenience’. The Director explains: ‘It is tempting to make a generalization: a lesbian in coming to terms with her sexuality heads straight for the public libraries while her male counterpart heads straight for the public lavatories’ (Proust, Cole Porter ... pvii). It is particularly provocative that cottaging is said to follow upon coming out. Gay orthodoxy, I think, has generally supposed that sex in toilets should fade away as new opportunities for love-making are asserted. ‘What has changed about casual sex’, John Shiers observes, is that it has become easier ‘to get it in safer places, meeting people in pubs and clubs as opposed to toilets and parks’. It now appears that some men will find enduring excitement in the risks that occur on the margin of private and public sex. Hence George Michael’s song ‘Outside’, his response to his arrest for cottaging. However, sex in the open air is not validated in Proust, Cole Porter as in some way fulfilling. The Men’s Director is apologetic:

Indeed, there is material here which might be employed by the lobby opposing reform of the age of consent, together with material supporting this cause. Gay men have nothing to hide. Here are the stories of real people whose emotions have been circumscribed and compromised by law and who have challenged the unjustness of such legislation with their lives (pviii).

By treating the theme of cottaging in this way a certain ‘truth’ about gay men is discovered. The topics broached by the editors produce particular kinds of gayness.

The influence of an agenda is acknowledged in Growing Up Before Stonewall by Peter M. Nardi, David Sanders and Judd Marmor. An interview with


Marmor, about the depathologising by the American Psychiatric Association in 1973-74, is followed by chapters deriving from interviews with apparently ordinary gay men (one per chapter). However, the topics are more blatantly leading than we have seen thus far:

Bennett: Sissy boy, teenage crushes, and choices  
Ed: Immigrant, late bloomer, and independently single  
Frank: Father of four and closeted  
Jim: Sissy, flappers, and a long-term roommate (pp5-6).

The intellectual and political concerns of editorial interventions, Nardi points out, are explicit:

These men have given meanings to events in their past filtered through their gay identity and American gay subculture in 1979. They reflect the kinds of questions asked by David Sanders, a psychiatrist, and developed with psychiatrist Judd Marmor, working under a prevalent model of that decade that sought to understand homosexuality by probing into parental-child relations, gender-nonconforming childhood activities, and sexual activities in an age before AIDS. (p67)

(The reference is to the American theory that gays have a bad time because the sissy boy forms poor relations with his manly/insecure/homophobic father.9) Meanwhile, Peter Nardi, a sociologist, was deciding which contemporary references to include or exclude (p67).

Further, the respondents in Growing Up Before Stonewall are specially selected. Though originally from diverse class, ethnic and religious backgrounds, they are now predominately white, affluent, urban, coastal. ‘They were purposely selected to demonstrate how psychologically healthy, middle-age white gay men negotiated their personal, professional, and sexual lives in their past and in the present’ (pp67-8). Compare the notoriously sanitised version of gay men in the film Philadelphia (Jonathan Demme, 1993); these men aren’t going to get caught cottaging.

An agenda is again explicit in Bob Cant and Susan Hemmings’ Radical Records. These editors see their work as part of an active political struggle; they have collected or commissioned autobiographical accounts from people who have been situated at the main points of strain and achievement in lesbian and gay politics since the mid 1950s. They document hostility and discrimination at work, and in child custody battles; interactions with the GLC, the Anti-Nazi League and the trades unions; the founding of GLF (the Gay Liberation Front), CHE, support groups and pressure groups; and in some cases experiencing these various situations more intensively as a person of colour and/or disability. ‘A book like this can give us the opportunity to make history: to describe our lives and to reflect simultaneously upon ourselves as social and political beings’ (p1).
Radical Records supplies the most responsible account of HIV-AIDS in these books. We should consider why it is handled so weakly elsewhere. The answers are partly pragmatic. It takes years, rather than months, to collect money from grants and publishers, to record interviews, to bring it all into proper shape for the press, and to arrange publicity and marketing. Of course, minor changes can be made at the last minute, but that may not be enough. Cant and Hemmings embarked on Radical Records in early 1985, and published in 1988. They began their project at an optimistic conjuncture, therefore, and HIV-AIDS required them to register and respond to an unanticipated change of mood. ‘This was also a time when a public concert of homophobia returned in a strength that perhaps young lesbians and gays had not previously experienced. Day after day the media attacked us, through exploiting fears about AIDS, as British deaths rose’ (p2). The dominant script had posited a steady advance, as more and more people came out and transmitted moral and cultural power to the others. HIV-AIDS abruptly countermanded that script.

I have shown a spectrum in oral history and life writing, from projects where the informant is offered as the nearest we are going to get to the authentic voice, across to purposeful dispersal into the projects of editors. Also, archival materials may be absorbed entirely into the interviewer’s narrative. Jack Babuscio, in We Speak for Ourselves: Experiences in homosexual counselling, avers: ‘it has been my wish to allow gay men and women to explore the personal and social implications of their own situations and in their own words’. Notice, however, Babuscio’s subtitular claim to be a counsellor: it seems to authorise him to make his own deployment of our lives. He links edited transcripts, solicited letters and personal statements. They are woven into a narrative, offered in the person of Babuscio, who quotes chunks from his sources as they seem fit.

The more appropriative these editors, the more insistent that they are innocent of imposing themselves. ‘Each individual represented in these pages speaks for him or her self alone. No one claims to be, or is presented as, a representative of a type’, Babuscio declares (pxiii). Yet the narrator stands above it all. So in Proust, Cole Porter...: ‘Each man’s story is unique’, these are ‘stories of real people’ (ppi, ppviii). ‘Individuals react, of course, in their different ways’, Porter and Weeks observe, while specifying class as having ‘subtly shaped lives’ (p4). Cant and Hemmings claim for their work the actuality of history: ‘it’s quite untidy, like real history is’ (p2). What is disclosed is a principled unease. Social history requires the use of categories, classes, groups, cultures. If the respondent appears manipulated, as may be the case when his very own words are deployed as a prop in someone else’s argument, respondent and reader may need reassurance. Also, the predominance of conventional images of camp men and butch women has produced an anxiety among sexual dissidents that any attempt at generalisation will end up with stereotypes. Others believe that little is lost by going along with conventional modes. We are all individuals; all right. But we are playing on the stage of history.
I have tended to think of Mass-Observation as rather purist, preserving the unadulterated voice of the suburban middle classes. But a Penguin Special, *Britain by Mass-Observation* (1939) announces ‘The book arranged and written by Charles Madge and Tom Harrisson’. There are plenty of quotations from the archive, many of just two or three lines, framed by an argument about democracy, (what was later called) the establishment, Neville Chamberlain and appeasement. The book aims ‘to give both ear and voice to what the millions are feeling and doing under the shadow of these terrific events’ (p9). Observe the acknowledgement - ‘both ear and voice’ - that M-O both discovers and creates opinion. Its very existence is a triumph for democracy: ‘Out of the ordinary man’s bewilderment and desire for fact has grown also a new organisation ... Anyone can be an Observer, no special training is needed ... Through M-O you can already listen-in to the movement of popular habit and opinion’ (p10). Notice the metaphorical appeal to new technology (listening in), in a cause (diary writing) that depends largely on the fountain pen. These men know where they are heading.

**INTERVIEWING BRIGHTON OURSTORY**

With these precedents, I develop my analysis of lesbian and gay histories by subsuming interview material into my own narrative. Linda Pointing and Tom Sargant, leading figures in Brighton Ourstory, allowed me to interview them. Their achievements include the founding and maintaining of an archive focused on Brighton lesbian and gay people; performances and displays designed to promote the archive; a newsletter, books and pamphlets; and survival for eighteen years. Among the most moving and successful achievements is the book, *Daring Hearts: Lesbian and gay lives of 50s and 60s Brighton*, published partly under the wing of the Brighton oral history group, QueenSpark. The interview with Linda and Tom took place at my house in Brighton (close to the action), where I tried to probe their attitudes, ideas and feelings, mainly with a view to elucidating the opportunities and dilemmas that confront oral history in and around lesbian and gay people. Linda and Tom have commented valuably on this article.

Generally in oral history on queerness it has not been easy to get respondents. In all the instances in these books, I believe, local networks have supplied casual contacts; there is no question of a statistical sample. The group supporting *Daring Hearts* have done exceptionally well to gain taped interviews with 40 people, together with 17 pages of photographs and many smaller photographs and line drawings, mostly showing gay people in Brighton having fun, decades ago. Names and personal biographies are not disguised, and may be reconstituted through a list at the end of the book. After a brief historical introduction, the editors make only minimal explicit intervention: an occasional page divider (three hearts) indicates a new, but unspecified topic. As I have argued, this does not mean that no direction is being exerted.


I ask Linda and Tom what had inspired it all. Section 28, Tom replies - the Conservatives’ law of 1988 against ‘promoting homosexuality’. ‘There was a great sense of the culture under attack’, he observes, and ‘of a need put down our roots strongly’. Far from any intentions of its promoters, Section 28 promoted ‘a coming together of lesbians and gay men, who had been campaigning entirely separately ... we were all together’ (Linda). Daring Hearts responds to this radically, presenting the experience of women and men on a level footing. There were other harbingers, including Lillian Faderman’s ‘rooting around in lesbian history’, and the establishing of the Hall-Carpenter archives. The BBC Radio Ballads, dramatised documentaries about working class life broadcast between 1958 and 1963, seem not to have been an influence. Relations with the QueenSpark group were uneven and indicated the need for a dedicated gay project. The straight group had published an oral history about a Pullman Coach waiter - a bachelor - without wondering at any point whether he might be gay. Even leftist oral history had been their story.

As elsewhere, the impact of HIV-AIDS is barely registered (p107). This, we believe, is because the interviews were focused on ‘lesbian and gay lives of ’50s and ’60s Brighton’ (subtitle). The project is to record recollections from a date when most of them would have been in their twenties and thirties, way before the onset of the epidemic. Linda believes that is the age people mostly want to talk about; afterwards, life becomes less interesting. (Well, I remark, elderly people make only rare appearances in these oral histories, with the exception of Between the Acts. We talk a bit about prospects for lesbian and gay care homes.)

Also, Brighton is a holiday town, and it had built up an unparalleled lesbian and gay residency. Daring Hearts is steeped in youthful holiday jollity. ‘It was a refuge’ (Linda). The town is the hero/ine of the story - as it is unearthed by the editors. Tom sees their work in archeological terms: ‘it was a huge excavation. It was like finding the city of Troy, realising that Brighton had been this humming, buzzing place, yet there was nothing anywhere about this ancient civilisation’. ‘It was living under the dirt’, says Linda with relish. ‘It only took a small brush to reveal what was there everywhere - if you’d turn up any stone there was some queer life underneath it’. And it was a huge task. Similar attempts to sustain oral history groups in other towns have run into difficulty: Brighton felt both safer and more accessible - though Tom recalls that they used to get hate mail.

The emphasis on a holiday town before 1970 or so enables the Ourstory team to suggest a revisionary thesis: Brighton, it is admitted, afforded special conditions, but generally things were not so bad in the old days. Intermittent police crackdowns were terrible, and you had to be very careful at work, but otherwise people had quite a good time. This was heretical, Linda observes: ‘not the Liberationist position at all’ Tom adds. (I think by ‘Liberationist’ they mean a ‘1960s’ emphasis on the historic oppression of gay people, requiring a transformation of the sex/gender system.) Daring Hearts ‘aims to celebrate our hidden pleasures and commemorate our “crime”’ (p10). Brighton was a
There were already people making money out of gay facilities, I observe. Tom and Linda don’t recall any (political) distrust of gay entrepreneurs at this date. Respondents mention the 42 Club as rather precious and the Spotted Dog as rather dissolute. This was before the New Curtain Club, the Palace Pier, and the New Heart and Hand - products of the 1970s. One of the projects of CHE in Brighton was to hold discos that would rival the commercial sector - in integrity if not decor (upstairs in the Hanbury Arms, now Circus Circus. The side door was right by the stairs, so you could enter boldly and without passing through the main bar). In the earlier period there was ‘more a sense of a club, clubbing together, needing each other for safety’ Linda opines. This thought prompts a sense of tragic loss, partly at odds with the story so far. ‘Those who made it through, who stayed in it, are the survivors, the ones who could handle the gay life. They are the ones who put themselves forward for interview. The others were lost to depression or suicide’. That is why ‘there can’t be a complete story of gay life’, Linda says. Hence the dedication to Daring Hearts: ‘For all the voices that will never be heard’.

The leading idea is still retrieval and recording - if you can just get these older people in front of a mike they will uncover the true narrative of gayness. But, as I have pointed out, Daring Hearts is highly organised through an intricate process of cutting and pasting. The outcome is twin, interwoven histories: (a) of the individual - with a recognisable personal life sequence: from initial inchoate lesbian and gay feelings, through the first sexual-loving relations; moving away from home; telling your parents; negotiating landlords, neighbours and employers; and on into a life of social and sexual opportunity among other lesbian and gay people. And (b), alongside that individual history, there is a history of gay people as a group - who develop communal resources and enjoy themselves while feeling that eventually they might be advancing toward social and political recognition (as it transpires, the partial decriminalisation of 1967). Daring Hearts was designed ‘to get a sense of community, and people being different within that community’, Linda admits. So growth in personal truth correlates with collective growth and self-determination.

The unanimity which informs this twin developmental pattern, and its culmination in self-realisation within a longstanding subcultural context, tends to support the idea that queerness is innate, in some people at least. They just need to find the others. At this point oral history and life writing encounter the big dispute of the last generation: about how far gayness is innate and spontaneous (which most gay people believe), and how far it is an effect of the social, sex/gender system and subject to transformation in historical contexts. Most academics (including, I have suggested, Porter and Weeks) hold the latter view. Tom is aware that a sense of innateness might derive from a tendency to construct stories that make sense of our lives. Individual experience ‘does get rewritten, retrospectively. You meet other gay people, and then you start making sense of this and that, and pick out
this event and say, Oh, that was a harbinger of this’. An invitation to take part in an interview may encourage this tendency. As an oral historian, Tom has to live with the thought that the goal of historical accuracy recedes as he approaches it - as the respondent constructs the coherent account which the interviewer seems to want.

Linda shares the conviction of most respondents in *Daring Hearts*. People have ‘always known this truth about themselves ... practically everybody we interviewed either had an absolute certainty or an inkling by puberty ... having an interest in their own sex, and knowing that it was unacceptable ... they might or might not act on it, not until their twenties ... even until after marriage, but at the altar they knew’. When they do find their way to a club or a pub, they often say they’re ‘at home’. Then it all makes sense: s/he had in fact been one all along, and the others were waiting to show how it’s done.

So respondents may contribute ‘genuine insights’, Linda insists. ‘Oh yes, they’re genuine’, Tom rejoins. There is no account of human experience, I gloss, that is not mediated through interpretive frameworks; no self beyond the constructed self.

‘As you get older you put your life in order, through distance and perspective’, Linda admits. But ‘that’s something you have to beware of, doing oral history: creating, writing, producing history’. The task for the oral historian, on this argument, may be quite pragmatic - like requiring two or three people to corroborate a detail. I remark, provocatively, that this sounds rather like the police fitting up a suspect: when you’ve got one lead you look around for the other two, ignoring contrary evidence. Linda responds with an instance: someone speaks in passing of a hitherto unheard of Pink Elephant club; further research reveals that, briefly, it did exist. Yet there is still, potentially, a contradiction. If lesbian and gay lives are naturally so coherent, why do they need such a radical intervention from the editors?

**ONGOING PROJECTS**

A sequel to *Daring Hearts* is planned. It will involve our contemporaries, Linda observes, being interviewed about their own youth in the 1970s and 1980s. These respondents will have to cross the ‘psychological threshold’ of themselves becoming history: ‘But this is my life’, they may protest; ‘Oh! it is history as well’.

The opportunity for *Daring Hearts* was the Brighton Ourstory archive, the maintenance of which in a secure space has become the main activity. It costs £25 to keep on a shelf for a year a grocery box of sorted materials. Linda’s ‘great big shed-load of anxiety’ that she carries round with her all the time is paying the rent. The group is drawn toward activities which will attract money and helpers. Recently it has gained charity status, and thereby access to certain resources. Public occasions must be seized - getting exhibitions and presentations into Pride, the Brighton Festival, Remembrance Day. But it’s not easy to communicate the thrills of an archive. There are illustrated talks...
and readings, display cabinets (letters and photos). The group is celebrated for its documentary-dramatic performances. There is a temptation to fall into sound-bites, cherry picking and cultivation of celebrities; weird or sentimental instances may be highlighted; all this is at odds with a steady accumulation of the archive. Tom and Linda are well aware of this. ‘Unmediated transcript is very boring to read’, Tom remarks. ‘There is an inverse proportion between how much editing you do and how many people read it’, Linda observes.

A principal resource is the newsletter for supporters, sustained since 1996 and ongoing. It summarises newly published research, observes anniversaries, reports benefactions, and announces events in the district and in queer culture. It has a faintly perverse air of gravestones and memorialising; it is strong on obituaries and suicides. In 2007 a campaign was mounted to get people to leave money in their wills. Recent newsletters register multifarious acquisitions. As a literary person I appreciate the discovery that Caroline Spurgeon, author of the interwar classic, *Shakespeare’s Imagery and What It Tells Us*, lived most of her life with two other women in Alciston.¹⁵ The lead came from an explicit gravestone. The newsletter is at www.brightonourstory.co.uk.

Tom notes that they had a tent at Pride, but it didn’t get much attention, especially among young people. The party was going on outside. Tom and Linda launch into a critique of the level of culture in Brighton - ‘so little queer cultural activity’ in a town full of artists and performers. People may feel, as perhaps they did in the early 1980s, that everything is more or less sorted. Yet many lesbians are *not out*, Linda observes. We are living in ‘an anti-intellectual age’, Tom adds; he sees a decline in lesbian and gay thoughtful culture as part of a wider decline in gay politics. [Since this interview *Gay Times* has changed its name to *GT*.] Also, there is a general failure of interest in oral history (Tom). It features much less on television; instead, we get phone-ins, reality TV, the expert (Simon Schama, David Starkey, Fred Dibnah, Ray Mears), focus groups, and blogging.

Yet, like other cultural producers, oral historians and the proponents of life writing are a settled part of how we interpret ourselves, with special opportunities and responsibilities. I have argued elsewhere for the role of the organic intellectual in subcultures of sexuality and gender.¹⁶ My explicit agenda is to clarify issues in lesbian and gay subcultural production so that they can be pursued even more effectively. I am overwhelmed with admiration for the skill and commitment in Brighton Ourstory and the other archivists and editors I have studied. Looking for a peroration, I ask Linda and Tom how they see themselves. ‘As generators’, Linda offered - ‘not of stories, but of the energy that switches the light on in people’s minds, to show them that they can tell their stories’; contributing ‘a sense of depth in our community’. ‘It’s for love’, Tom avers; ‘I think we’re quite heroic really’. Linda gasps, but adds: ‘passion and belief and idealism’.

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