

The nomadic subject in student organising

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Abstract

There is significant interest in the way that collective subjectivities emerge, and in how they negotiate power to create change. Through a discussion of work that I have done with the Red Square Movement (a national student network organising for a radically different educational system in the UK) I argue that the posthuman theorist Braidotti's conception of the nomadic subject is a compelling conceptual lens by which to read this activity. Drawing on my experiences, I suggest that the nomad is greatly strengthened when she works transversally, and thus alongside both the comrade and the non-nomad. This research has taken place as part of my doctorate and uses a militant research methodology.

“Were I to write an autobiography, it would be the self-portrait of a collectivity...”
(Braidotti, 1994)

For those interested in political change, subjectivity – and specifically a sense of collective subjectivity — is critical for enabling an understanding of how to overturn the “oppressive cultural norms which define our worldview” (Reinsborough, 2004, p. 30). Thus, recent decades have seen a reconfiguration of understandings of subjectivity towards more collectively informed models. These collective subjectivities are emergent and they are, as Lazzarato (2004) suggests (and riffing on Gramsci), caught between the old and the new. For Haarstad (2007), an analysis of collective subjectivity "can be understood as the theory and practice of constructing a project around the interests of a broad range of actors who can negotiate the fundamental power relations in contemporary capitalism" (p. 57). This reminds us of what is at stake – collective agency and the ability to make change, particularly change which orients towards anti-capitalist futures. These new subjectivities, or more accurately these experiments with new subjectivities, revolve in part around economic questions, which Lazzarato (2004) argues are particularly focused on questions of precarity. In alignment with Harstaad's (2007) suggestion that the task at hand is primarily about creating space for the ‘imagery’ of new collective subjects to emerge, part of the way that this interpersonal, or more precisely

transpersonal, sense of subjectivity is being developed by scholars is through the creation or identification of figures or figurations (Sandoval, 2000). The nomad is one of these figures.

I argue that the posthuman theorist Braidotti's (1994) nomadic subject is a compelling conceptual lens by which to examine work I have done with a national group of student organisers called the Red Square Movement (RSM). RSM is a good case study for a nomadic form of collective subjectivity for several reasons. This includes the nomadic subject's restlessness and the way that she demands the assembling of 'dissident communities'. It also includes the nomad's approach to negotiating difference and particularly identity, and through her understanding of power, discussed here in relation to my role as a militant researcher. However, to generate substantive change, the nomad needs to be understood as a specifically transversal subject. Based on my experience, the comrade and the non-nomad are equally as important subjective figure, who are required to support the nomad's ambitions.

To briefly contextualise, this work has taken place within the context of my doctoral research where I am using a militant research methodology. This is an approach where the researcher actively uses their labour time, as part of their research, to help further political projects. As Halvorsen (2015) writes, it is "a committed and intense process of internal reflection from within particular struggle(s) that seeks to map out and discuss underlying antagonisms while pushing the movement forward" (p. 466). Thus, I have been active in numerous political and/or educational spaces throughout my research. This includes the focus here, on the work with RSM, but also work with the political education organisation The World Transformed (TWT) and a campaign called #SaveUEL that focussed on halting the University of East London's plans to make redundant potentially hundreds of staff, among other things.

In thinking through this specific experience, or set of experiences, the artificial separation of the theoretical and the everyday does not hold. Ahmed (2017) writes about the way that these interact: "[t]heory itself is often assumed to be abstract: something is more theoretical the more abstract it is, the more it is abstracted from everyday life... We might then have to drag theory back, to bring theory back to life" (p. 10). Further, the process of learning more about subjectivity has altered my sense of my own subjectivity. As I have discussed these ideas with comrades, their sense of their subjectivity has changed — as has mine of theirs. This aligns with the following sense of how subjectivity be analysed, where a "more substantial conceptualization of cultural experience is in order, one in which the collective and the

individual are intertwined and run together and in which power and meaning are not placed in theoretical opposition but are shown to be intimately linked in an intersubjective matrix" (Biehl et al., 2007, p. 14)

The Red Square Movement

In early 2021 I had a phone call from a key member of the emerging Red Square Movement about the work we were doing within the #SaveUEL campaign. They talked about how a group of student organisers were coming together and exploring forming a new national network around a shared political horizon. The group consisted of representatives from many of the major student campaigns across the country from the previous tumultuous year of student politics. This included students who had recently gone on rent and fee strikes. It also had representatives from student groups like Pause or Pay who campaign around art schools specifically (Pause or Pay, 2020), Liberate the University, who campaign for universities to be 'demarketised, democratised, and decolonised' (Liberate the University, 2021), and Young Labour, who operate within the Labour Party (Your National Committee, 2022)

As far as I know, those who are involved in the group broadly work from emancipatory political positions – those which are anti-imperialist, decolonial, anti-racist, abolitionist, feminist, queer, anti-capitalist (communist, socialist and/or anarchist), among others. The person I spoke to mentioned that the group were interested in developing some political education activity by arranging an 'organising school' for student activists. I joined the group soon after the phone call and began discussions to work on the proposed school, which was eventually delivered as a partnership between RSM, TWT and the National Union of Students in April 2021. Roughly 30 of us worked together to deliver the project, and my role was primarily to coordinate across the various branches of activity. In the end, the school brought together around 100 student activists for a weekend of reflection, training, and planning.

Partnerships between different organisations were at the heart of the school and it is the relationship between TWT and RSM that I can best speak to. TWT's strategy is partly influenced by the work of Milburn - he identifies a critical demographic group that he calls 'generation left'. It broadly refers to the generation of young people whose material prospects are significantly less promising than older generations (Milburn, 2019). His argument is that this group is increasingly being politicised through the experiences of precarity within

capitalism, especially in relation to the generations who came before. As one of the ‘brokers’ of the arrangement between RSM and TWT, I could see how it would be mutually beneficial. RSM benefitted from the organisational capacity to run a large online event, and TWT has an interest in engaging younger people. The partnership proved fruitful - since the school the two organisations have continued to work together. A delegation of roughly 20 students attended the 2021 TWT political education festival in September in Brighton in an official capacity. We organised a session at that festival called ‘Reimagining the Student Movement’, which asked attendees to discuss solutions or proposals around three core areas that had emerged in the strategising and collective work of the group, including at the organising school.

I want to clarify that the aim here is not to offer a concrete analysis of RSM’s work, nor to represent or convey all the work RSM has done (which goes far beyond the things I have been directly involved in). Instead, I want to ‘drag theory back to life’, and to relay some highly personal reflections on the way that the nomadic subject position operated within my work with the group. The school and the wider work I have done with RSM helps to clarify some of the specific ways in which my political subjectivity has evolved through collective processes of politicisation and political action that this PhD research is partially documenting. It also offers clues as to how we might replicate these processes – how we might, to recall Reinsborough (2004, p. 1), ‘decolonise the revolutionary imagination’.

To briefly set out how this process of change has operated within this collective subjectivity there are two core theoretical components. The first is the role of Foucault’s (1985) concept of the care of the self, which my increasingly politicised subjectivity has partly been driven by. It relates to how an individual sees themselves as a subject. It is both a relational and an active process – there is no standalone ‘self’ which needs to be found, and instead the process of caring for oneself is how subjectivity is realised. Via these ongoing processes of caring for oneself, Foucault essentially argues that we can challenge some of the ways in which disciplinary structures subjectivise us and we can also create new, different subjectivities in the process – albeit always temporary and always evolving (Peters & Besley, 2013). The research in this PhD has involved a great deal of caring for myself using many different forms of reflection — for example, through engaging with theoretical materials, through conversations with others, through attending events, and through action. Though the most profound acts of ‘care of the self’ have happened when moving transversally between the logics of the organising I do, and

the logics of the academic milieu I am in (when something I have read surprisingly ‘fits’ with my experience organising, and vice versa, for example).

The second is the various relationships and networks that have been central to those processes of caring for the self, offering spaces for collective learning and growth via singularisation. Much of the knowledge I have developed has come through, as noted, the various groups and collectives I have worked with, for example through people sharing articles or book recommendations, or conversations to flesh out ideas. I am deeply indebted to those with whom I have worked —most of whom give their time voluntarily to the projects we have worked on. The sense of collectivity varies across spaces and organisations, but when moments of synergy surface, they are profound, moving, and motivating experiences. Critically, some of the most profound experiences have been articulated via culture, an inherently collective act. These cultural experiences work in a way that other experiences do not. Laughing at a political meme, dancing with comrades at a party (or on Zoom) — these experiences are instantiations of Guattari's singularisation and in these processes, Guattari saw a role for "desire, a taste for living, a will to construct the world in which we find ourselves, and the establishment of devices to change types of society and types of values that are not ours" (Guattari & Rolnik, 2008, p. 23).

RSM's nomadic subjects

Braidotti's creation of the nomadic subject is widely understood to have offered a compelling new way to understand subjectivity (see, for example, Kliem, 2014). Braidotti is interested in the new and the emergent and she asks where creativity in theory and politics can be found (Braidotti, 1994). While a straightforward reading of the nomad (which comes initially from Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) work) is that of a traveller, actual movement or travel is not critical for Braidotti's nomadic subject, although it does appear regularly. Instead Braidotti (2011) argues that being a nomad is about rebelling against conventions, and thus operating as “a creative sort of becoming, a performative metaphor that allows for otherwise unlikely encounters and unsuspected sources of interaction, of experience and of knowledge” (p. 6). Nomadic subjects operate as a myth or a political fiction – albeit one still heavily motivated by ethical and pragmatic concerns. Braidotti (1994) argues that “[p]olitical fictions may be more effective, here and now, than theoretical systems” (p. 4). Critically, Braidotti's understanding

of subjectivity is deeply transversal (Salari, 2018) – the nomad can then be also read as a transversal subject.

There are several ways in which my experience with RSM aligns with a nomadic subjectivity. In the first instance, the nomad is restless, and this aligns with the restlessness of RSM. Guattari's (2014) understanding of subjectivity is a hugely significant influence on Braidotti's nomadic subject. For him: “[v]ectors of subjectification do not necessarily pass through the individual, which in reality appears to be something like a 'terminal' for processes that involve human groups, socio-economic ensembles, data-processing machines, etc.” (p. 36). One of the principal ways in which my work with RSM has operated is through our collective involvement with a series of different groups in and around student politics (the relevant groups for me are #SaveUEL, the University College Union (UCU) and TWT). In many respects, the ‘organising school’ came about in the way that it did because those of us involved are active in many different spaces. As Braidotti (1994) argues:

... the nomadic subject functions as a relay team: s/he connects, circulates, moves on; s/he does not form identifications but keeps on coming back at regular intervals. The nomad is a transgressive identity, whose transitory nature is precisely the reason why s/he can make connections at all. Nomadic politics is a matter of bonding, of coalitions, of interconnections. (p.n.?)

The description speaks to the form of politics we have enacted – as a composition of different groups who have formed a coalition for a period of time. While more sustainable structures are coming out of this work, they will not be around forever and there is thus a sense of constantly making what you can of the resources you have. In this transitory movement, the nomad rejects the liberal subject’s fixity: the nomadic subject instead works as what Braidotti (2019) calls a ‘haecceity’. But while the nomadic subject partially dismantles the liberal subject through her rejection of fixity and her mythological status, the positioning of the nomad as a figure or as a myth is problematic in other ways.

This springs from the way in which the mythological status of the nomad relates to ‘the real’. Tamboukou (2021) has mounted a critique that oscillates around the nomadic subject’s contemporaneous relationship to real lives. She asks if we can “still use the nomadic subject in the era of the recent huge refugee waves that have uprooted millions of people across the globe

and have forced them to take up nomadic paths as the only feasible way of going on living?” (p. 4). Tamboukou (2021) proposes the figure of the ‘non-nomad’, who is not a negation of the nomad, “but rather points to its shadows and margins” (p. 20). Critically, in this framing the non-nomad is demythologised – but a sense of political imaginary remains (Tamboukou, 2021). This point is echoed by Hanafin (2010, p 131), who notes that while Braidotti argues that the nomad was based on the subjects emerging in politics ‘from below’, he argues that there is very little in her work that actually makes these connections.

In relation to the organising school – to relate the nomad back to ‘the real’ - my personal experience was hugely determined by the way that I was positioned within the various groups in and around RSM’s orbit. Within #SaveUEL, I was a new campaigner, but I was buoyed by the connections we had made, what we had learnt, and to a certain extent what we had achieved in our campaigning. In relation to RSM, I was a novice (particularly when it comes to direct action - I have almost no experience of this, while others in the group are much more experienced). To a certain extent, I was keen to demonstrate my worth by showing that I did have skills to offer. Within TWT, I was slowly understanding what useful roles I could play as I became more involved in the organisation. Finally, within UCU I was listening and learning, and growing an awareness about the tools at our disposal from more experienced comrades.

Essentially, it was the interaction of my positioning within these three spaces that enabled me to operate as a nomadic subject in the development of the school – to use Braidotti’s (1994, p. 35) words, creating ‘bonding’, ‘coalitions’, ‘interconnections’, working in a way that “connects, circulates, moves on”. But this somewhat celebratory approach to movement and circulation needs to be tempered. The other aspect of my positionality – the economic aspect – is that I have funding for my PhD. And while this comparatively comfortable position does not entirely negate the nomad’s value (arguably a project like an organising school would struggle to function without several nomadic subjects operating within it), the challenge the non-nomad brings does sound a note of caution. Relating the nomad to the real brings an attention to the specificity of our positions (however fleeting or temporary), which make our nomadism more or less feasible.

Dissident communities: assembling ‘a people’

The second aspect of the nomad’s character that fits with my experience within RSM is that within this restless nomadic movement, we need to avoid moving alone. Braidotti (2019) suggests that one of the critical tasks is to assemble ‘a people’. She writes that “to activate solidarity and resistance, it is better to avoid hasty recompositions of one ‘humanity’ bonded in fear and vulnerability. I prefer to work affirmatively and defend grounded locations, complexity and a praxis-oriented, differential vision of what binds us together” (p. 42). In terms of how this works in practice, one of the most significant tensions here is between homogenisation and difference. On the one hand, we live in a world that wants to homogenise our experiences, so we need to hold on to what defines us from one another. At the same time, capital thrives on difference, which means that we need to find ways to act collectively and in solidarity both to resist this, but also to suggest other ways of being. We need to find ways to create subjectivities which are diverse and hybrid, but also directed and organised. To recall Guattari’s (2014) framing, we need to be more united and more different at the same time.

Thus, for Braidotti (2019), the question is how we build collectivity in difference. Or, as she wrote in 1994, the task “is how to restore a sense of intersubjectivity that would allow for the recognition of differences to create a new kind of bonding, in an inclusive (i.e. nonexclusionary) manner” (p 36). One of the ways in which this can play out is by developing what Mohanty (2020) calls ‘dissident communities’. Mohanty (2020) argues that we need to look for alternative information and alternative sites of knowledge, and we need to do the work of ‘materialist imagination’, where we deliberately create communities based on diversity. She argues that we need people from all kinds of different spaces talking about how different histories and politics intersect.

Fundamentally, there is a sense of difference or pluralism in the politics of the groups and individuals involved in RSM. There are various political traditions and organising approaches represented – from those who hold positions within their student unions, to people like me who have operated more autonomously (and the people who do both roles at once), among other configurations. Thus, there are numerous pockets of power and we are not all aligned in our ideological views of how the world should be. The strength of the nomad here is that she can relate (however fleetingly) to a much wider range of other positions – she can work with and through this diversity to create something new. But this negotiation of difference comes with

challenges. The tensions here can be articulated through the way that the nomadic subject intersects with the form of collective subjectivity offered by global social movements. While both collective subjects square up to the challenges of the highly distributed forms of power we face today, as Harstad (2007) writes, one of the critical challenges is that this same sense of multiplicity and distributed power is also where the weaknesses of movement across scales within global social movement subjectivities lie. This is because the scaling up and down is framed as an antagonistic process (Haarstad, 2007).

The nomad partially counters this challenge via a ‘principled’ movement between scales, to use Sandoval’s (2000) framing. Or as Braidotti (1994) argues, we should “respect the complexity, not drown in it” (p. 15). On a pragmatic level, one of the ways that we can respect complexity and the scaling up and down of power in the creation of dissident, nomadic communities is that we can operate on the principle that we need to start from a place of common ground. This is what Braidotti is getting at when she talks about defending ‘grounded locations’. This is where we reject a politics of working either purely for our own self-interest, or solely on behalf of others. Instead within a solidaristic framework, “all act on their own behalf in the interest of creating a better world for all” (Sundberg, 2007, p. 148). Recalling Lazzarato’s (2004) sense that many collective subjectivities are today built on a sense of precarity (or a structural position of precarity), this is particularly relevant here. In relation to RSM, the most obvious common ground is our shared experience as precarious students in the UK right now. While individual circumstances vary widely, for undergraduates and master’s students this precarity relates to the prospect of enormous post-university debt, which has all sorts of repercussions, for example in terms of the future housing security (see Gayardon et al., 2021), and for PhD students this relates (among other things) to the precarity of the prospect of employment (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2021). The shared political horizon discussed earlier is another key space of common ground.

However, the most concrete aspect of finding common ground comes from the lessons of the comrade, who, alongside taking action, also takes sides (Dean, 2019). It is fundamental that the RSM group has taken sides. We are broadly against the financialization of universities and all that it entails – our ‘enemy’ is the university managers who implement these changes, but also the current Conservative government under which these changes are being implemented. The camaraderie that comes from having a shared enemy (however much that is a vague or moving target) is substantive and helps to negate the nomad’s tendency towards flightiness.

Negotiating identity

However, this celebration of difference (including but not limited to identity) and unity (precarity, a shared political horizon, a common enemy, among other things) means a partial downplaying of identity. That tension is particularly difficult. As Dean (2016) explains via the work of Jennifer Silva and Carrie Lane, identity is continually reinforced as the primary sense of legitimacy in the world – in particular, there is a difficult sense that identities are more valuable when they are marginalised. As Dean writes, in this context, “[s]olidarity feels like a demand to sacrifice one’s own best thing, yet again, and for nothing” (p.n.?). Braidotti (1994) argues that nomadism is “vertiginous progression toward deconstructing identity; molecularisation of the self” (p. 16) but this sense of being *able* to sideline identity is embedded in a colonial outlook, as is the sense of being *able* to continually relocate (even intellectually).

To a certain extent, this colonial logic was replicated through the work we have done within the group. For example, RSM has had a relative absence of organisers from groups working directly around issues that stem from colonial structures – Palestinian solidarity, migration and the hostile environment, and abolition stand out, but there are others. Importantly, many in the group are working on these issues to varying degrees. But while almost everyone has a sense of nomadic allegiance to these causes, the group was brought together through different logics – the commonality of being precarious students. This means, however that at present, RSM’s work does not align with the needs of the most (racially) marginalised students – including the international students relying on foodbanks, students who have experienced racial trauma, students who are forced migrants or who otherwise have a precarious immigration status. There is a possibility that the failure to fully centre these students means that we may have re-articulated colonial logics. There is a concern that we have nomadically claimed these causes because of the social value it brings to ourselves and to the organisation, once again replicating colonialism’s extractive model.

The challenges here are highlighted in Tamboukou’s (2021) work, when she proposes the figure of the ‘non-nomad’, who is not a negation of the nomad, “but rather points to its shadows and margins” (p. 20). Critically, in this framing the non-nomad is demythologised, although a sense of political imaginary still remains (Tamboukou, 2021). The demythologisation of the nomad – the dragging of theory back to the real – of this specific challenge within our organising, points to the need to find other ways to work, and other ways to negotiate the

colonial legacies we uphold. This is deeply challenging work and some of us are at the beginnings of these journeys. However, what is promising is that these difficult processes are also part of what it means to unlock some of the desire that is critical for new subjectivities. Again going back to Braidotti (1994), she argues that “inner, psychic or unconscious structures are very hard to change by sheer volition” – she goes on to note, via Irigaray, that what is needed within nomadism is something that “allows for internal contradictions and attempts to negotiate between unconscious structures of desire and conscious political choices” (p. 31). This negotiation of internal contradictions, unconscious desires, and political choices is critical to the sense of emerging subjectivity I think we have generated in the work within the Red Square Movement – which the comrade and the non-nomad help to move forward.

(Self-)reflecting on power

One of the identity markers I held within the school is that of a militant researcher, and it is useful to explore the way that this played out in terms of questions of power. Militant researchers who work in universities occupy an extraordinarily privileged position – we are funded, however precariously, to do the organising others give their time to for free. I am deeply conscious of the fact that I coordinated the school – while as much as possible was done as collaboratively as was feasible, I still designed the agendas for meetings, coordinated across teams and organisations, and pulled the overall schedule together. Getting to play that role is an expression of power, and part of the way that this was enabled was because my schedule as a PhD student is reasonably flexible. It is also impossible to escape the fact that gaining a doctorate is partly motivated by the sense of prestige it brings. Thus, one of the most important things I have been aware of is the ethical challenges this combination of nomadism and prestige presents.

Throughout the school, one of the issues we faced was the very substantial problem of overwork and burnout. The same motivation that keeps us engaged and connected to one another through camaraderie quickly gets exploited into overwork. We have discussed it since, and there is a sense that perhaps we should have been less ambitious in our programming. Some of that responsibility sits with me. I worry that the rather bold scale of the school (two days of programming, which we pulled together in about six weeks) was partly enabled by my subject position *as a nomadic, militant researcher*. The nomadic subjectivity I was able to inhabit has the very real threat of leaving a trail of destruction, rather than of care and creation.

However, if we take the arguments about identifying a common enemy seriously, we need to be aware of the wider structural conditions that make burnout so common amongst organisers. While I am attuned to Dean's (2019) argument that as comrades we need to "confront our own continuing yet unwanted attachments to hierarchy, prestige, inadequacy" (p. 16) – as well as the arguments made within militant research literature that we need a type of subjectivity that is "capable of submitting itself to a radical criticism" (Colectivo Situaciones, 2003) – the 'enemy' is the capitalism and the financialization of universities, which leads to conditions of stress and burnout. And it is thus important that this is precisely what RSM is fighting against.

Nomadic futures?

How then do we overturn the "oppressive cultural norms which define our worldview"? (Reinsborough, 2004, p 2). My experience of working with RSM points very tentatively to some of the options at our disposal. The discussion sought to more fully articulate how a nomadic subject position operates through two critical processes within subjective change. The first is the Foucauldian sense of care of the self, which has been most profound when it sits at the intersection of academia and organising. The second is the salience of the various relationships and networks who have offered spaces for collective learning and growth via singularisation, which is precisely the relationships we have benefitted from within RSM.

I argue that the broad conception of the nomad ('connecting, circulating, moving on') aligns with the nature of RSM and the various political positions we encapsulate, as well as the way that this manifests in practice, for example through the partnership model that the organising school entailed. However, it is important to be attuned to the specificity of our real-world positions within this nomadic movement - my personal experiences within RSM are greatly implicated by my positionality, including as a funded PhD student. This is where the non-nomad helps to clarify one of the nomad's blind spots – essentially, the spaces in which nomadism is feasible, or desirable.

A nomadic subjectivity also requires the assembling of 'a people', understood here as a dissident community, and this has taken place through the identification of a grounded location, or common ground. In the experience of organising with RSM, this relates to the precarity of student life in the UK in the early 2020s and a shared political horizon. However, the inclusion of the comrade to walk alongside the nomad is important here too - she encourages a focus on

having a shared enemy, and on taking sides. Our collective enemies help to unite the group, which in turn relates to the way that the nomad negotiates identity.

The celebration of the dissolution of identity within the nomad's framing is problematic and upholds colonial framings, and I think that we have to a certain extent replicated this in our work. While there are few easy answers here, the negotiation of these contradictions and challenges is greatly aided by the comrade and the non-nomad. These intersections in turn play a critical role in the generation of desire, which itself is fundamental for the generation of the new subjectivities we need to decolonise the revolutionary imagination. Finally, returning to identity - throughout the school, one of my identity markers was that of a militant researcher. A discussion of the operations of power within this, from the perspective of radical self-criticism, reveal failings in relation to my (and our) ability to create spaces of care. At the same time, these failings do not undercut the wider project, which is to dismantle the very systems that create the conditions for the lack of care so many students, and others, experiences.

Tamboukou (2021, b) suggests that in more concretely relating the nomad to the real there is a need to "make cartographies of mobility assemblages, wherein nomadism is a component of entangled relations and not a category or a figuration of a subject position" (p. 5). I would argue that the nomad's transversal nature means she is able to align – to be a comrade – with other subject positions. Thus, nomadism does for me function as a subject position, but as only one of many positions that also include the comrade, and the non-nomad, in a transversal haecceity.

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