

Compton, California: How the City became Notorious for Gang Violence in the 1980s and 1990s

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Famous hip-hop artists such as Eazy-E, Ice Cube, MC Ren, Dr. Dre, and The Game have originated in Compton, California. Even the first hip-hop billionaire, Andre Young, grew up in Compton. Andre Young serves as a famous music producer for hip-hop artists who use music to express the traumas of gang culture in Compton, California. A protégé of Andre Young, Jayceon “The Game” Taylor, claims to have participated in and witnessed a number of tragedies while residing in Compton, including the death of many of his companions. As a result, Taylor expresses that traumatic memories still remain lodged in his mind. In conclusion, Taylor claims that his deeply ingrained traumatic memories are the result of Compton’s powerful influence.

This paper argues that African American gangs in Compton, California developed their violent rivalry after a basketball game in the 1970s.

According to Jayceon Taylor, Compton originated as a peaceful suburb within Los Angeles, California, in the 1940s. During this time, Americans with European descent viewed Compton as an ideal area to raise a family. Even former United States President George W. Bush resided in Compton as a child. All the while, African Americans had been prevented from living in Compton.<sup>1</sup>

Excluding African Americans from the right to housing ensured that real estate values in Compton would remain high. Housing discrimination further fueled racial tensions. For example, Americans with European descent in Compton expressed disgust when they noticed someone of a different ethnic group from their own in their claimed area of Compton at night. Americans with European descent would respond by physically assaulting African Americans if they noticed African Americans within the east portion of Compton past sundown.

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<sup>1</sup> Streets Of Compton, "Streets of Compton - Part 1," YouTube, June 14, 2016, accessed January 21, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nyrg8BceJgk&has\\_verified=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nyrg8BceJgk&has_verified=1)," 1-5 minutes, 9-10 minutes, 12-14 minutes.

As Americans with European descent violently expressed their hatred of African American physical existence in Compton, they still allowed African Americans to work in a select few occupations within the city. Yet, housing authorities still rejected African Americans from purchasing property within the city. Housing authorities discriminated against members of ethnic groups other than Americans with European descent. For instance, Mexican Americans also had been restricted in where they could live within Compton. Mexican Americans had only been allowed to reside in one small area within Compton.

Later, in 1948, the United States Supreme Court objected the use of housing covenants according to ethnicity throughout the country. Compton had been one of the first areas to allow varying races to move into its formally racially exclusive houses. At this time, middle class African Americans viewed Compton as a neighborhood of much higher quality than a local ghetto. Jayceon Taylor's grandparents purchased a home in Compton in 1953, viewing the transition to Compton as a chance to live a higher quality life than residing in a slum within a ghetto. Yet, as African Americans ecstatically and hopefully moved into Compton houses, a number of Americans with European descent families left Compton to live in other neighborhoods.<sup>2</sup>

The separation of African and Americans with European descent citizens in public education systems and districts helped advance interethnic hostility. For instance, Compton's Americans with European descent citizens displayed firm intransigence to racial integration. At times, racial hostility--such as Americans with European descent rejecting African Americans from participation from community or school events--showed itself in both indirect and blatant ways. For example, it had been a social norm that African American students would be rejected

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 10-12 minutes.

from membership of all-Americans with European descent school dance clubs. At Centennial high school, school authorities rejected African Americans from involvement in after school activities to reinforce the social norm of preventing African Americans from participating in school and community events.

Not only did Americans with European descent seek to dictate housing, educational, and community-wide policies, but they also attempted to maintain control over hiring procedures in Compton. A local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), an organization formed in 1908 to fight for African American rights, oversaw hiring procedures. The local chapter attempted to influence the peaceful integration of African Americans by encouraging employers' non-discriminatory hiring practices. In March 1958, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department altered its leadership and the local chapter praised the outgoing sheriff for his fair hiring procedures when he hired police officers of minority ethnicities. Yet, the chapter worried that the sheriff-elect would go back to its former tendency of employing African Americans as a final resort and terminating African Americans from employment before firing other employees. However, the police department continued its fair hiring procedures even after its shift in leadership.

The local chapter also oversaw the regional schools. In 1959, the individuals in charge of the Compton NAACP united alongside parents and other community associations to challenge the termination of Vivian Thomas from her occupation as a librarian at Centennial High School. School principal Benjamin Jamison suggested that her documented occupational agreement should not be renewed due to her inability to perform job duties. In suggesting that her contract be rejected from renewal, Jamison initiated among his critics an impassioned dispute and

accusations that his own decisions were immoral and irresponsible, which ultimately paved the way for the board to discharge him from his position as principal.<sup>3</sup>

Although Americans with European descent had not entirely banned African Americans from existing in Compton, Americans with European descent basically rejected African American children from involvement in any Compton community events. A few Americans with European descent students openly proclaimed their hatred of African Americans.<sup>4</sup> According to Omar Bradley, an African American and former resident of Compton during a time of racial tension, Americans with European descent emphasized that they rejected African Americans from staying in their towns past the afternoon, even in the case that the Americans with European descent would be rejecting some business opportunities.<sup>5</sup>

A number of racist Americans with European descent teenagers later became police officers within the Compton area. Young Americans with European descent formed the original violent gangs in Compton in order to try to control whether or not African Americans walked, drove, or worked in the eastern part of Compton. For example, during the 1950s, a gang of Americans with European descent known as the “Spook Hunters” would physically assault African Americans who walked or drove between West Compton and East Compton in the evening.

In response to the Spook Hunters, a group of young African Americans congregated together to defend themselves against the Americans with European descent gang in the 1950s. One group of African American youth purchased brass knuckles and labelled themselves “The

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<sup>3</sup> Brad Pye, Jr., "Will Centennial High Become Another Little Rock?" *LAS* (Los Angeles), April 16, 1959, C1 sec.; Brad Pye, Jr., "Librarian Case Held 'Explosive,'" *LAS* (Los Angeles), April 30, 1959, A1 sec.; Brad Pye, Jr. "Centennial Librarian Stays." *LAS* (Los Angeles), May 14, 1959, A1, A2 sec.

<sup>4</sup> Emily E. Straus, *Death of a Suburban Dream* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), p.88-89.

<sup>5</sup> Omar Bradley, *The King of Compton!: The Assassination of a Dream* (Los Angeles, CA: Milligan Books, 2007).

Brass Knuckle Boys.” Following the group’s formation, Americans with European descent would tolerate and yield to members of the Brass Knuckle Boys rather than violently assaulting them.

Thus, African American gangs began as a fraternal cause with a shared goal of defending their civil rights as American citizens. Later on, however, African American gangs would fight amongst each other.<sup>6</sup>

With multiple campaigns, the NAACP in Compton swiftly expanded, claiming to have roughly five hundred individuals possessing membership in October 1959. During the time period that Compton’s NAACP increased in its number of members, people threatened the Compton branch of the NAACP. In October 1960, Americans with European descent reacted to the NAACP’s protesting lines outside of Compton’s Woolworth business establishments by vandalizing the NAACP’s Compton office with paintings of swastikas on the building’s windows and sending threatening letters. Within one month, a person launched a brick at the NAACP Compton office’s window with a note connected, which read “Get the hell out of town.”

Hostilities grew increasingly apparent. In June 1961, Compton representatives responded to racial tensions by founding the Council on Human Relations to generate a more amiable community environment. Although the founding of the Council displayed some degree of transition toward facing Compton’s issues, the Council’s establishment supplied no panacea. Within a few months, a couple of delinquents shot thirteen times at the Compton NAACP building’s glass window.

Aggression between African and Americans with European descent students also flared up in a few of Compton’s public schools. During February in 1962, three African American

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<sup>6</sup> Compton, "Streets of Compton - Part 1," 12-14 minutes.

Compton secondary school students fought with four Americans with European descent Dominguez secondary school students following a basketball game between the schools. After the conflict, one of the Americans with European descent students stayed in a hospital with a busted skull. The booster club at the majority-Americans with European descent Dominguez High School considered removing from the calendar, or rescheduling for the daytime, all later basketball games against the majority-African American Compton High School.<sup>7</sup>

Compton's newspaper, the *Compton Herald American*, at the time widely known for its racially hostile input on African Americans and for provoking further animosity amongst African and Americans with European descent Compton citizens, labelled the physical altercations as "brutal and savage." The authors in the paper accusingly portrayed the African Americans as participating in a "gang." The paper's disputatious fabrication of the occurrence might have influenced the paper's sustained attraction to the story. Journalists writing for the story stated that in the aftermath of the interracial altercation, police arrested three African American students, and police intended to arrest fourteen more African Americans in the near future. Gaps between Compton's African and Americans with European descent citizens increased in depth, and their racially separated public schools exemplified their division.<sup>8</sup>

By 1970, American citizens viewed Compton, California as less than an ideal city. Alongside middle-class citizens' leaving Compton, poverty grew increasingly evident. During the 1960s and 1970s, Compton transitioned from being a neighborhood with multiple levels of income classes to a community with solely lower-level income classes. The transition from a

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<sup>7</sup> Odessa Ausbrooks to Anonymous Field Secretary of the NAACP, 1955-1981, NAACP Folder 37, Box 78, Compton, California; Straus, *Suburban Dream*, p.92-93.

<sup>8</sup> "Teen Violence Plagues Police at High School," *Compton Herald American*, February 9, 1962; "Fourteen More Arrested in High School Violence." *Compton Herald American*, February 15, 1962.

multi-class to a solely lower-level class city predisposed Compton to an even more intense scarcity of resources and an escalation of criminal activities.

“With poverty came gangs, crime, and drugs,” claims Emily Straus in her book, *Death of a Suburban Dream: Race and Schools in Compton, California*, as she discusses the social aftermath of criminal activities following Compton’s loss of community funding. During the winter of 1965, the *Compton Herald American* stated that four varying “youth gangs” combined into two rivaling “social clubs” and Compton “erupted into gang violence.” While the newspaper, led by Americans with European descent owner and publisher Colonel Smith, unmistakably expressed antagonism for African Americans moving into Compton neighborhoods and frequently published instigative words to portray Compton’s new ethnic residents, the paper corresponded with multiple other documented publications of Compton’s heightened crime rates. Also during that month, authoritative statistics on the number of criminal activities performed exposed that Compton ranked third in Los Angeles County for significant violations of national and local law, only lagging behind the more populous cities of Los Angeles and Long Beach. Criminal activities developed into an issue that would persistently disrupt the town.<sup>9</sup>

During the time that the number of documented criminal activities rose, the awareness of heightened crime also increased, generating both a cause and consequence for Compton’s employment agencies to decay or utterly evacuate the town. The categorization of Compton as a black area exacerbated the town’s notoriety for crime. A number of Americans with European

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<sup>9</sup> Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2003); Gary J. Miller, *Cities by Contract. The Politics of Municipal Incorporation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Mass - London MIT P VIII, 1981), 136; Straus, *Suburban Dram*, 111; “‘Gang War’ Erupts in Compton!” *Compton Herald American*, December 9, 1965, 1-2; “Compton Is Third in Major Crimes,” *Compton Herald American*, December 12, 1965.



descent had already formulated opinions of African Americans as menacing, and Compton supported their beliefs. Business owners rejected Compton, which they perceived as floundering. By January 1966, Compton's business area was described as such: "the appearance of the town is bad... the street itself is filthy" and "any plan [for improvement] seems hopeless unless you can get someone to spend money."

In 1965, the move of Americans with European descent from Compton to another neighborhood grew in severity. A larger number of Americans with European descent left Compton after a number of African Americans in Wyatts, a nearby city, instigated riots. African Americans participating in the riot claimed to have rioted out of frustration about the injustices that they endured from Americans with European descent suppression.

As Americans with European descent flight from Compton took place in 1965, Americans with European descent businesses moved out of Compton as well. When businesses left Compton, the sales tax base was significantly reduced. As neighborhood funding from Compton's sales tax base decreased, the quality of Compton's school systems declined. The decrease of revenue from sales tax nearly severed Compton's ability to provide for its public schools' textbooks and teachers' salaries. By 1970, the lack of community funding impoverished Compton. As a consequence, Compton became more and more urban than suburban.<sup>10</sup>

Compton itself, as well as independent businesses, lacked sufficient funding to provide money for necessary town repairs. Consequently, the small number of businesses that existed in Compton searched for other areas to accept their services. When the businesses found another area to gain more income, the business owners closed their businesses in Compton and moved

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<sup>10</sup> H. A. Thompson, "Why Mass Incarceration Matters: Rethinking Crisis, Decline, and Transformation in Postwar American History," *Journal of American History* 97, no. 3 (2010): 703-34; Wilsey, Ham, and Blair. "Compton Central Business District Study: Technical Supplement Report" (San Mateo, California: Wilsey, Ham, & Blair, 1966), 6; Straus, *Suburban Dream*, 111-112.

their businesses to another area. The transition of the last few businesses from Compton to other areas paved the way for further increases in criminal activities and decreases in community funding through taxes.

As time went on, housing and schooling authorities continued the practice of separating African and Americans with European descent residentially and educationally. However, the 1968 Kerner Commission addressed the issue of racial segregation in America. After its observations of a sequence of riots, the Kerner Commission surmised: “Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.”<sup>11</sup>

As an illustration, public education districts’ hiring policies demonstrated the conflict between European and African Americans over employment opportunities. Schools in Compton hired the most people compared to other occupations within the city, and Americans with European descent citizens of Compton clung firmly to their power over the hiring process. In an interview conducted by Emily Straus, Maxcy Filer, an African American Compton citizen, says, “We didn’t have one black teacher when I came here, or one black administrator. We didn’t even have a custodian in the schools when I moved here, nor the city.”

In 1970, African Americans made up 70% of Compton’s population. Eventually, Compton, California evolved into a representation of African Americans’ abilities to advocate for their rights as United States citizens. For example, citizens in Compton, California eventually elected an African American mayor, and the Black Panther Party, an association of African Americans that represent African American rights, established a public office in Compton.

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<sup>11</sup> National Advisory Commission of Civil Disorders, *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, 2 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1968); Matthew D. Lassiter and Christopher Nietd, "Suburban Diversity in Postwar America," *Journal of Urban History* 39, no. 1 (2013): 4.

As a result of the Black Panther Party's resistance to governmental discrimination, the American Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)--a division of the federal government that investigates specific violations of federal law--attempted to bring an end to the Black Panther Party. The FBI fought to destroy the Black Panther Party by invading the offices of members of the Black Panther Party and placing lead members of the Party in prison. By 1972, the American government completely deterred the Black Panther movement.<sup>12</sup>

Within the time frame of the Black Panther Party's campaign in Compton, African Americans in South Central Los Angeles formed gangs that would later rival one another. African Americans formed both the Panther Party and gangs to defend themselves from oppression and to work together toward obtaining social and monetary support. Initially, African Americans in South Central Los Angeles formed the Crips. The Crips attracted African Americans to join, promising a sense of respect, fraternity and wealth. By 1970, the Crips moved into Compton, California. Yet, prior to the Crips' influence in Compton, African Americans living on Piru Street in Compton, California had developed a gang called the "Pirus" to defend themselves against Americans with European descent suppression. Both the Black Panther Party and African American gangs provided African Americans in South Central Los Angeles with a sense of belonging and solidarity in their shared struggle to survive and obtain civil rights.

The rivalry between the Crips and the Pirus began as a competition between high schools. The Pirus dominated Centennial High School in Compton, California, which used red to represent the school. The Crips dominated Compton High School in Compton, California, which

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<sup>12</sup> Straus, *Suburban Dream*, p. 89; Compton, "Streets of Compton - Part 1," 14-16 minutes; Garrett Albert Duncan, "Black Panther Party," Encyclopædia Britannica, December 27, 2018, , accessed February 05, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Black-Panther-Party>.

represented itself with blue. What began as a competition between the schools over sports grew increasingly violent.

According to George Taylor, Jr., Centennial defeated Compton in a high school basketball game. Centennial scored roughly fifty points, while Compton scored little to no points. In response, students from Compton High School hurled bottles, threw bricks, and swung baseball bats at Centennial students after the game. This violent uproar by Compton students injured a few Centennial basketball players. Consequently, the violent altercation between Compton and Centennial students initiated an aggressive, murderous rivalry between students of the two schools because students joined together to express their anger toward the opposing school by physically assaulting or killing their students.<sup>13</sup>

Gang warfare began in Compton in the mid-1970s. What began as frustrations about a basketball game evolved into a vicious cycle of revenge. After a basketball game in which Centennial High School defeated Compton High School, factions developed. As factions formed, members of either faction would murder a member or a relative of a member from the other faction. Thus, opposing African American factions in Compton, California have warred against each other since the mid-1970s. As a result of violent rival factions since the mid-1970s, Americans associate the city of Compton with gangs and violence.

Starting in the 1970s, Latino Americans' citizenship increased as Mexican settlers moved to the south-central area of Los Angeles County, California. A large portion of Mexican movement to Los Angeles developed as a result of major changes in federal law around that time—specifically, the Hart-Cellar Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. Particularly, the additional legislation banned the allotment method that had directed America's immigration

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<sup>13</sup> Compton, "Streets of Compton - Part 1," 22-23 minutes.

policy since the 1920s. The former regulations favored immigrants from a select few European countries and the new legislation instead prioritized immigrants who had specific skills or had familial relations with United States citizens or residents. In this manner, Hart-Cellar provided immigrants from around the globe a fair chance to enter America.

The Hart-Cellar Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 altered California's population. Subsequent to its enactment, Asian and Latin American immigrants moved to America in large numbers. Mexicans, both registered and unregistered, became the California's biggest collective crowd of immigrants. During the year of 1960, roughly 1.75 million individuals originating from Mexico resided in the America, and by 2000 they surpassed 21 million. California contained approximately 40 percent of their overall population in 2000 and housed the greatest number of unregistered immigrants in America. "California's non-Hispanic white population dropped from 77 to 48 percent between 1970 and 2000, due to the growth of the Asian and Latino populations," explained Emily Straus as she described the demographic variety of minority citizenship of Compton between 1970 and 2000. As gang culture progressed as a norm, minority groups identified with members of their ethnicity, formed their own gangs, and rivaled local gang entities in Compton.<sup>14</sup>

African American citizens in Compton, California committed more murders each year as the city grew poorer from 1969 through the 1990s. Consequently, what once had been a Americans with European descent's luxury town became more and more like a typical urban ghetto. Cultural depictions of Compton portrayed Compton as an urban ghetto. For example, in

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<sup>14</sup> Mae M. Ngai, *Americanism: New Perspectives on the History of an Ideal*, Michael Kazin and Joseph A. McCartin ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 108-127; Albert M. Camarillo, "Citites of Color: The New Racial Frontier in California's Minority-Majority Cities," *Pacific Historical Review* 76 (2007): 16; Passell, "Estimates of the Size and Characteristics of the Undocumented Population," *Pew Hispanic Center Report*; Sandra Bass and Bruce E. Cain, *Racial and Ethnic Politics in California*, Sandra Bass and Bruce E. Cain ed. (Berkeley, CA: IGS Press, Institute of Governmental Studies, University of California at Berkeley, 2008), 1.

1988, the music group NWA issued *Straight Outta Compton*, which portrayed Compton, California as a symbol of urban gang violence.

Depicting Compton as cruel and reckless, the *Straight Outta Compton* album's lyrics, music videos, and cover design stress social norms learned from Compton's neighborhoods and fractured economic system. Ice Cube's lyrics in the song "Straight Outta Compton" portrays a character who identifies as a gang member who shoots and kills other people. In NWA's music videos, the music group blatantly and confidently shows the streets and alleys of their city, emphasizing the geographical area that they represent. The camera angles revealing the city of Compton supplied a visual representation for American citizens to attribute their understanding of Compton's gang culture.

On the album cover of *Straight Outta Compton*, the six music artists involved in NWA fix their eyes intently into the camera, as NWA's leader Eric Wright aims a firearm at the viewer. The group's aggressive posture and facial expressions, along with the firearm aiming at the viewer, contrasts with the serenity of the sky in the background. The *Straight Outta Compton* album's notoriety, along with John Singleton's 1991 movie *Boyz n the Hood*, effectively reshaped Compton, California into a powerful representation of African American gang society along the West Coast of America.<sup>15</sup>

Still, in many ways, the actual Compton in the 1980s and 1990s truly represented and reinforced its folklore. Every election period appeared to escort a new array of deceitful governing officials into Compton, during a time in which racial and cultural discord monopolized evening news programs. Compton's news reports, alongside music and movies

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<sup>15</sup> NWA, *Straight Outta Compton*, NWA, Priority Records, 1988, CD; *Boyz N the Hood*, dir. John Singleton (United States: Columbia/Tristar Studios, 1991), film; Straus, *Suburban Dream*, p. 8-9.

which depicted the violence being committed in Compton, comprised much of what American citizens learned about the city.

In *Streets of Compton*, a documentary that aired on the television channel “A&E” in 2016, Jayceon Taylor expresses that people living in Compton develop firm affections for individuals residing within their own block (urbanites use the word “block” to refer to an immediate surrounding neighborhood) by spending time with one another, forming bonds, and seeking to defend one another as a united group from gang assaults (such as shootings or physical assaults). This means that Compton citizens identify and unite with others living within their residential block to defend each other from being killed.

As of 2016, varying local gangs claimed territory within each area of Compton, California. Altogether, twelve divisions of the Piru (also known as “Bloods”) gang, twelve divisions of the Crip gang, and approximately fifteen to twenty Latin American gangs claimed ownership of specific blocks within Compton. Each gang competed with one another for territory and retaliatory purposes. The gangs use territory for drug distribution, and retaliation as an expression of revenge for the murder of a relative or a peer.<sup>16</sup>

As they claim territory and take part in activities to support their gangs, Crips and Bloods members wear specific colors to represent their gang involvement. Members involved in the Crip gang represent the Crips by wearing blue, orange, or purple, while members involved in the Bloods gang represent the Bloods by wearing green, red, or burgundy. Jayceon Taylor claims that juvenile African Americans who lack guidance from adults make up the majority of members involved in a gang, implying that African Americans affiliate with gangs to counteract feelings of despair due to a lack of guidance. Rationally or irrationally, according to Jayceon

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p.9; Compton, "Streets of Compton - Part 1," 5-10 minutes.

Taylor, gang members within Compton as of 2016 lived and died for the sake of their perceived identity within a gang.

As gangs formed and competed with one another in Compton, the city became associated with violence and gang affiliation. On a positive note, the homicide rate as of 2016 had been lower compared to that of the 1980s and 1990s, when Compton's local news displayed stories of gang violence the most frequently. Nevertheless, Compton citizens still openly shot at and killed one another, as of 2016.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 6-10 minutes.



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