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## Resistance to Deforestation Represented in Louis Owens' *Wolfsong*: An Eco-Critical Reading

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### Abstract

Deforestation has been one of the most detrimental consequences of the prevalence of European anthropocentrism in North America. European settlers who immigrated to North America found themselves in a bountiful paradise with infinite untrammelled natural resources that could be utilized to make a fortune. Likewise, they inflicted irremediable damages on nature upon the onset of their settlement in this continent. Investigating Louis Owens' *Wolfsong* from an ecocritical standpoint, this article seeks to highlight the massive deforestation conducted by the white Americans in the Northwest of the United States of America. As a qualitative, research-based study, this article commences with the theoretical framework and subsequently focuses on the representations of the critical concepts in *Wolfsong*. It shall be indicated that the perspective held by the White Americans towards nature drastically collides with that of the indigenes. More exactly, the argument of this research follows the distinction between the treatment of nature by the Euro-Americans and Native Americans in *Wolfsong*.

**Keywords:** Deep Ecology; Anthropocentrism; Deforestation; Nature; Land.

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## Introduction

Louis Owens was a distinguished novelist and a leading interpreter of Native American literature. He is also known for his scholarly interpretations of American novels, 1. particularly John Steinbeck's works. As a 2. "mixed-blood" professor of Native American studies at the University of California, Owens dedicated himself to the survival of Native American culture. Moreover, he was preoccupied with the devastating impacts of man's manipulation of nature. "Stranger or not, Louis Owens truly loved America, a land so beautiful it hurt his heart to see it mistreated. Resisting ecological destruction was as central to his work as the question of Native identity" (Bruchac 47). Before his appearance as an outstanding literary figure, Owens worked as a wilderness ranger in a period of his life when his concern for massive trees was intensified. Likewise, when he dolefully depicts the clearcutting of oaks in *Wolfsong*, Owens is indeed referring to the trees he had witnessed in the Cascades.

Louis Owens' *Wolfsong* is a vehement depiction of the massive deforestation in the Cascade Range of Northwest Washington. Indigenous characters are highlighted in *Wolfsong* in which Tom Joseph, the native protagonist of the novel, has a pivotal role in the development of the story. Tom Joseph is a young Native American who returns from the South, where he attends a university as a student, to the Northwest of the United States in the state of Washington in order to participate in his uncle's funeral in the small town of Forks. Tom finds out that on the one hand, the logging industry has cleared the bulk of forest trees in the region, and on the other hand, the construction of a road that is supposed to end in a large copper mine in the heart of the remaining section of the forest is exacerbating the state of the forest by

accelerating the pace of deforestation. Numerous trees have to be chopped to clear the land for constructing this road.

## Theoretical Framework: Ecocriticism Revisited

The ultimate consequence of man's detrimental interventions in nature for the purpose of shaping it for his convenience has been the exacerbation of environmental degradation. Although the growing awareness of the public concerning environmental destruction has contributed to the emergence and development of ecocriticism, the relation between literature and geography has always drawn the attention of certain writers and critics throughout the world. The preoccupation of poets, novelists and even dramatists with nature and environmental devastation is evidence of the close relationship between literature and environment. Hence, notwithstanding the novelty of ecocriticism as a recent approach of literary criticism that emerged in the late twentieth century, environmental issues have always been a major concern for novelists and poets throughout the world. Some of these writers could indeed be called ecocritics. Ecocriticism was pioneered by British Romanticism and American Transcendentalism of the late eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century as the prime eras of ecocritical concern and embrace of the natural world.

Recent environmental and ecological crises, including global warming, depletion of ozone layer, and the rise of acid rain has exacerbated the already catastrophic state of the natural world in the last decade of the twentieth century. Likewise, ecocriticism emerged as the literary approach that

investigated the representations of environmental degradation in literature. William Rueckert coined the term “ecocriticism” in 1978 in an essay titled “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” that was later included in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), the canonical book edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. However, the emergence of an organized movement to examine the environmental concerns of poets, novelists and essayists were postponed to 1990s, when ecocriticism gathered momentum in the United States. Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism in the introduction section of the canonical book, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, as “simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty and Fromm: xviii).

As an earth-centered approach that reprimands man’s anthropocentric attitude towards nature and non-human species, ecocriticism is characterized by the commitment to environmental preservation. Greg Garrard argues that ecocriticism is “the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term ‘human’ itself” (5). Ecocritics, then, examine the representations of environmental degradation within literary texts. They keep an eye on the depiction of man’s harmful relationships with nature and track the way in which culture affects nature. Furthermore, Huggan asserts that apart from its investigation of the literary studies with regard to the relationship between literature and environment, ecocriticism “also extends to the fields of environmental philosophy and bioethics” (2008: 64). Huggan’s idea refers to the incorporation of deep ecology

and its environmental ethics into ecocriticism.

### 3. An Ecocritical Exegesis of *Wolfsong*: A Practical Study

#### a. *The Detrimental Impacts of Anthropocentrism*

Anthropocentrism refers to man’s claim of superiority over other creatures. Greg Garrard defines anthropocentrism as a “system of beliefs and practices that favors humans over other organisms” (183). Western philosophers and thinkers have maintained all along that human beings are the most significant living beings. Likewise, the man could rightfully claim a sort of lordship over other creatures. Anthropocentrism is, then, “the view that human beings are primary and central in the order of things” (Steiner: 1). The human-centered idea of anthropocentrism clearly expresses that mankind is the sole being bearing intrinsic value, and all other creatures exist to support human beings in their lives. Anthropocentrism is the antithesis of biocentrism which suggests that all species are equally valuable.

The twentieth century witnessed the emergence of novel and groundbreaking schools of thought that sought to reform the long-held beliefs that had been deleterious to nature and non-human species. Robert Livingston Schuyler, a prominent professor of American history at Columbia University, was a pioneer in the denunciation of man’s assumption of being the center of the universe. Schuyler wrote a canonical article, titled “Man’s Great Illusion” (1948), a few decades before the emergence of ecocriticism, in which anthropocentrism is heavily denounced and referred to as an illusion. He asserts that human beings are subconsciously influenced by a feeling of

vanity. This feeling that valorizes man has marred his relationships with animals and plants. Schuyler argues that we have come to believe that no species is more significant than man. Castigating the advocates of the so-called significance, he adds that “we can, of course, no longer believe, as our forebears believed up to some ten generations ago, that we are, literally, at the center of the physical universe” (47). Schuyler calls into question the privileged status of man as the Supreme Being among all species.

The anthropocentric view toward the world was one of the most influential incentives inducing many environmentalists throughout the world, particularly in the United States, to commence their campaigns in order to denounce and overcome hostile assumptions towards nature. According to Garrard, “ecocriticism has taken for granted that its task is to overcome anthropocentrism” (176). These hostile assumptions, upholders of ecocriticism contend, should be compensated by non-anthropocentric ethics, namely ecocentrism, and biocentrism, in that anthropocentrism is the origin of environmental and ecological disasters including deforestation and species extinction. Ecocritics argue that anthropocentrism “is in tension with nature, the environment and non-human animals” (Boddice: 2).

*Wolfsong* opens in a forest on the mountains at the vicinity of Forks where several Caterpillar bulldozers, graders and trucks are removing the chopped trees. The project in which these machines have a pivotal role is the construction of a road that could have devastating impacts on the forest, for thousands of trees have to be chopped to clear the land. Jim Joseph, an elderly indigenous North American, is deeply moved when he observes the destruction of the forest

for reaching a large copper mine. White Americans are relentlessly felling massive trees that date back to hundreds of years ago. They chop ancient trees to provide jobs for large numbers of people in the region. Meanwhile, certain companies and contractors accumulate wealth through their engagement in the logging and mining industries. The image provided by Louis Owens in the very beginning of the novel indicates the row of heavy machinery working in the forest:

A big man came around the back of the machine that had been cutting at the mountain. He glanced skeptically down the road to where a line of caterpillars and dumptrucks and graders crouched. Then he turned and spat before he looked up at the mountainside. Behind him a new road stretched into the trees alongside the river, the rusty earth torn and uneven where the gravel trucks had not yet reached. (*Wolfsong*, 2)

As a native who cannot tolerate the destruction of the forest, Jim Joseph damages several of the heavy machinery by shooting bullets at them. Even though his individual resistance to environmental devastation could not stop the chopping of trees, he frequently attempts to interrupt the activity of the white loggers and drivers by shooting at their machines. Since Jim repeatedly performs this operation and then runs away from the machine, the drivers have recognized his identity. To threaten him and remind him of the futility of his endeavors, the drivers yell at him as they say “we can get Taylor's hounds, and you know you can't get away from them hounds, old man, just like you can't stop this here road. Now come on down outa there.” (ibid, 3). Even though Jim Joseph is a decrepit old man, he practically implements his plans on the ground, for he holds that the whites are inflicting irretrievable damages to the environment.

The pace of deforestation in the Pacific Northwest had been faster in private lands. Thousands of acres of forests are private in the states of Washington and Oregon. In contrast with the eastern states of the United States, the western states did not host European settlers at the onset of colonization in the early seventeenth century. Likewise, the wilderness remained immune against the threat of European settlement and its subsequent detrimental impacts until the acceleration of westward expansion in the New World. Consequently, the history of deforestation in the state of Washington dates back to no more than 150 years ago. Meanwhile, the locale selected by Louis Owens as the setting of *Wolfsong* underwent the most severe form of logging. Christopher E. Souldard *et al.* remarks that “historically, much of the logging in Washington has taken place in the Cascade Mountains due to its abundance of softwood conifer forests. Even today, logging of Washington’s forests continues to be an essential part of the regional economy and a major source of wood products produced in the United States” (1). Various logging companies that managed to acquire vast areas of wilderness during the privatization of forest lands in this region gained unprecedented wealth as timber was much in demand in Europe after World War II.

Charles L. Bolsinger *et al.* note that “forest area amounted to 13.4 million acres in western Washington and 8.0 million acres in eastern Washington, giving a total of 21.4 million acres statewide in 1933-36” (42). The forest area in the same region reduced to 19 million acres in 1992. That is, more than 2 million acres of forest lands were cleared in Washington in the time span between in 1933 to 1992. The incessant chopping of trees in *Wolfsong* mirrors the massive logging of the

Pacific Northwest forests in the twentieth century. In the last moments of his life, Jim Joseph mournfully stares at forest trees. The noise of the machinery that are clearing the chopped trees spread everywhere. As he is holding his rifle, the old man utters a sentence and dies. He contends that “today, it seemed sometimes that the whole world was being thrown away by the whites” (*Wolfsong* 6). The white drivers are delighted to find the corpse of Jim Joseph who has frequently troubled them.

The decline in biodiversity collides with the principles of deep ecology. According to Naess, “biodiversity, that is to say, the diversity of species on earth has an intrinsic value and must be protected. (Hence) the richness and variety of life must be maintained as far as humanly possible” (2002: 150). Nonetheless, the premises proposed by Naess are disregarded by the white Americans in Louis Owens’ *Wolfsong*, for their conception of the forest seems to be a source of substantial economic revenues. Forest lands are not infinite in *Wolfsong*, for the bulk of wilderness has already been cleared when the novel opens. The extensive chopping of trees, however, is relentlessly pursued in that the whites are indifferent to the environment the consequences of their manipulations in the natural world. As an elderly Euro-American character in *Wolfsong*, Ab Masingale who has been engaged in timber harvesting for long years conspicuously expresses the regret and shame he feels over his participation in the chopping of old-growth trees. Regretting upon the construction of a thirty-mile road that has exacerbated the extensive loss of forest trees, Ab recalls the time when there was no road in the surrounding forests and mountains in which foxes, wolf, and other wild animals

roamed. Talking to a young white American, named Buddy, he remarks

What I'm getting at is that once this whole valley and all these mountains was the finest danged country a man could lay eyes on. And now most of it's been clearcut and got roads through it and most of the game's gone, and it's a crying shame. And it was fellas like me that done it, me and Floyd and Sam and the rest of you yahoos that made them roads and cut them trees and shot ever last grizzly and wolf below Canada. (*Wolfsong*, 185)

Buddy is not moved by Ab's confession, for he is directly benefitting from the chopping of forest trees. That is to say, his father, J. D. Hill, is the wealthy contractor of the road the construction of which requires the felling of old trees, including tall evergreen cedars. He aggressively reminds the old man that this road cannot stop. Ab contends that several generations of white Americans have relentlessly chopped the trees and shot various kinds of wild animals, but Buddy boldly remarks that human beings could not be considered guilty about these events in that a man has to work and make a living. Buddy is enraged as Ab continues to blame the whites for their depredations in nature. Consequently, he rudely addresses Ab as he says "you old bastards make me sick. You sitting around here pretending to be some kind of goddamned genius, and that old fool over there digging holes all over town because he don't have the sense to know where he buried pipes" (*ibid*, 185). The extensive loss of the forest and its environmental and ecological consequences, including the loss of biodiversity, does not arouse the feeling of regret in Buddy in that he prioritizes financial progress over wildlife preservation.

**b. *Deep Ecology and the Native Americans***

As an environmental philosophy that emerged in the 1970s and later evolved to

become a significant part of ecocriticism, deep ecology could be thought of as the most idealistic movement that has emerged with the aim of ecological preservation to date, in that not only does it censure environmental degradation but also reprimands those environmentalists who seek to protect nature for the sake of its contribution to man's well-being. Proponents of deep ecology argue that anthropocentrically oriented outlook toward the world has resulted in the exploitation and devastation of the natural environment. Moreover, they remark that "postcolonial criticism has been, and remains, resolutely human-centered (anthropocentric); committed first and foremost to the struggle for social justice, postcolonial critics have been insufficiently attuned to life-centered (eco or biocentric) issues and concerns" (Huggan, 2008: 65). As an environmental philosophy, deep ecology is based on the conviction that human beings should bring about a drastic alteration in their relationship to nature.

Deep ecologists maintain that man should not value nature merely for its utility to human beings. More exactly, they assert that nature is inherently valuable regardless of its usefulness to man. The attitude of native characters towards the wilderness in *Wolfsong* resembles the principles of deep ecology, whereas the treatment of the forest by the whites is rooted in anthropocentrism. As members of an imaginary indigenous tribe, named Stehemish, Tom Joseph and his uncle, who dies of a heart attack in the early pages of the novel, are preoccupied with wilderness preservation at the vicinity of Forks.

The term deep ecology was coined by Arne Naess, a distinguished Norwegian philosopher, in his seminal article titled "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology



Movements" in 1973. As the most prominent advocate of deep ecology and ecocentric philosophy, Naess argues that man's utilitarian attitude towards nature is rooted in "shallow ecology" that he considers as the antithesis of deep ecology. Shallow ecology is based on the human-centered belief that all living beings are inferior to mankind as the species endowed with common sense and rationality. Deep ecology opposes anthropocentric perspectives and advocates, instead, the intrinsic value of all species independent of their usefulness to man. Deep ecologists argue that instead of consuming natural resources, a man should treat nature in ways that guarantee the conservation, restoration, and flourishing of all ecosystems and the species that constitute them.

Deep ecologists suggest that ecological disasters stem from the focus of not only advocates of anthropocentrism but also certain environmentalists on human needs above the needs of other species. Arne Naess argues that "all living creatures have their own intrinsic value, that is to say, a value irrespective of the use they might have for mankind" (2002: 6). Naess remarks that human beings have had a utilitarian attitude towards nature all along that has damaged nature. He urges a radical change in this perspective, hence, formulates the major principles of deep ecology that are also applicable in ecocriticism:

The well-being and flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth have value in themselves. These values are independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes. Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs. (1995: 68).

Naess holds that human beings should allow nature to flourish without imposing any limitation on it. He asserts that humans

have not been entitled the right to make any decision concerning the fate of non-human species. With regard to the rampant killing of animals, deep ecologists assert that although man's survival depends on the flesh of certain animals, the over-exploitation of wild and domesticated animals is to be censured. By richness of life, Naess is indeed referring to the abundance of members of every species, and by diversity, he urges human beings to prevent the extinction of species.

Tom Joseph and his uncle Jim are the indigenous North American characters whose perspectives towards the natural world sharply differ from the materialistic attitudes of white Americans towards the environment and its inhabitants. In contrast with the Euro-American characters whose detrimental interventions in nature leads to the extensive loss of forest trees, Tom and Jim Joseph denounce the over-exploitation of nature in that they refuse to consider the natural resources as the instruments of economic development. Recalling Jim's viewpoint towards nature, Tom notes that his uncle revered the environment and the country was "sacred" to him. "Besides, he thought, if it was a sacred place, shouldn't it be sacred to him, too, and to his brother Jimmy?" (*Wolfson*33). Tom is impressed by Jim Joseph's reverence for nature. As a decrepit indigenous character who abhors the capitalistic treatment of nature by the whites, Jim Joseph repeatedly shoots several bullets to the heavy machinery utilized by the Euro-Americans that devastate the forests of Forks. Indigenous do not value the western assumptions concerning consumerism and materialism. They denounce the devastation of the forest in Forks by Euro-Americans, for Native Americans are concerned with the loss of trees whose growth might have taken hundreds of years.

Reprimanding the whites for their conception of nature in a large gathering of loggers, Tom asserts “isn't it true that you're cutting many of the oldest and largest cedars left in the continental United States just to put the road in? At a time when there are almost no old-growth cedars left? (ibid, 126). Tom's perspective towards nature resembles that Jim who finds his nephew, an indigenes, preoccupied with the conservation of the natural resources. Jim informs him of the threats that endanger these resources. Reprimanding the whites for their abuse of non-human living beings, Jim tells his nephew that indigenes even think of edible beings as decorative tools. “We eat the fish, but they stuff them and put them on their walls. I've seen that, Tommy, fish on walls. Even just fish heads sometimes, with their mouths open like grizzly bears” (ibid, 36). These sentences could be used to indicate the violation of the principles of deep ecology by the whites. Deep ecology is indeed an environmental philosophy that encourages the man to question more deeply the fundamental assumptions underlying the materialistic tendencies prevalent in western societies. Jim reprimands the whites for their abuse of living beings. Tom's mother also criticizes the whites and quotes her brother, Jim Joseph, to highlight his disapproval of them:

But I thought that maybe if they left this country to us Indians we could fix it again. Indians used to know how to live so's we didn't destroy our mother earth. We had to live that way because we knew we would always be here. I think white people treat the earth like they do because they think they'll only be here a little while. They believe Jesus Christ, our Lord, is going to come and fix everything and take them all away, so they don't take care of things (*Wolfsong*, 77)

Tom's mother elaborates the attitude of white Americans towards the natural world that has induced detrimental damages on the

forest. Comparing the adverse treatment of the natural world by Euro-American with the sustained-based relationship indigenes maintain with nature, she asserts that Native Americans who have always refrained from damaging the environment are the preservers of nature, whereas the white Americans do not lose any chance to over-exploit nature and procure its resources for their own benefits. As she notes, indigenous North Americans would rarely inflict any damage on the territory they owned prior to the arrival of Europeans to the New World.

Delineating the tenets of deep ecology in an interview with Stephan Bodian, Arne Naess remarks that “one of the basic norms of deep ecology is that every life form has in principle a right to live and blossom”. He adds that “as the world is made, of course, we have to kill in order to eat, but there is a basic intuition in deep ecology that we have no right to destroy other living beings without sufficient reasons” (qt. in Bodian: 28-29). Naess contends that human beings are not ethically allowed to hunt more than what is required to survive. He favors deep ecology rather than shallow ecology in that in contrast with shallow ecology that seeks to preserve the natural resources for the future use of humans, deep ecology defends the preservation of species on the basis of endorsing their rights to live and flourish. Nevertheless, the harmful manipulations of the natural world by the whites whose treatment of nature has destroyed the forest in Forks indicates their indifference to the platform of deep ecology presented by Naess. To portray the catastrophic consequences of the projects conducted by the White Americans, Louis Owens refers to the adverse alterations created in nature:

He'd come to the wilderness first as a boy, stepping in the bootprints of his uncle, and

the wilderness had been an enormous, boundless world of meadows and waterfalls, silver lakes, granite and ice. But as he'd grown, the wilderness had shrunk, and he'd come, finally, to know the smallness, the delicacy of the place, a fragment of what had once been, with everything connected so carefully like the strands of a spider's web across a path at sunrise. (*Wolfsong*, 82)

As these sentences clearly indicate, Tom observes that no longer is the wilderness characterized by the richness of the ecosystem. That is, the wilderness has been devastated, and its biodiversity has been lost. Euro-Americans inflict detrimental damages on the natural world in *Wolfsong*, for they are apathetic to the principles of deep ecology raised by Arne Naess. They devastate nature and reshape it to be adapted for its new functions. Apart from selling its timber, the white Americans clear the forest land to prepare it for farming or constructing a road. They seem to be totally indifferent to the preservation of biodiversity within the forest ecosystem. Native Americans, however, are nature lovers.

#### 4. Conclusion

Louis Owens adequately portrays the devastating impacts of anthropocentrism on the North American wilderness in *Wolfsong*.

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Deforestation is the most significant environmental crises in this novel. The northwest forests of the United States in the state of Washington have been devastated by Euro-Americans at the onset of Owens' *Wolfsong*. Owens addresses the distinction between the perspective of the whites and Native Americans towards nature. He exhibits that in contrast with the white Americans, indigenes wish to live in harmony with the environment. Even though the reckless abuse of the forest has led to the loss of the bulk of forest lands at the vicinity of Forks, Washington, the Euro-American residents of this city do not cease their incessant chopping of trees. Moreover, they insist on the accomplishment of a mining project that could be a threat to the environment. Meanwhile, Jim Joseph and his nephew Tom, severely denounce the whites for their abuse of nature.

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#### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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## مقاومت در برابر جنگل زدایی در رمان آواز گرگ اثر لوییز اوونز از منظر نقد بوم‌گرایانه

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### چکیده

جنگل زدایی یکی از زیان‌بارترین پیامدهای رواج انسان‌محوری اروپایی در آمریکای شمالی بوده است. مهاجران اروپایی، آمریکای شمالی را همچون بهشتی زیبا و دارای حجمی انبوه از منابع طبیعی بکر یافتند که با استثمار آنها می‌توانستند ثروت کسب کنند. سکونت آنان در این قاره به خسارت‌های غیرقابل جبرانی انجامید که به طبیعت وارد شد. این پژوهش با بررسی رمان آواز گرگ، اثر لوییز اوونز، از منظر نقد بوم‌گرا جنگل‌زدایی گسترده که توسط آمریکایی‌های سفیدپوست در شمال غرب ایالات متحده صورت می‌گیرد را به تفصیل بررسی می‌کند. یک پژوهش کیفی مبتنی بر تحقیق، این مقاله با تشریح چارچوب نظری آغاز می‌شود و در ادامه بر نمونه‌های عینی مفاهیم انتقادی در رمان آواز گرگ متمرکز می‌شود. این مقاله تضاد دیدگاه آمریکایی‌های سفیدپوست و سرخ‌پوستان آمریکایی در رابطه با طبیعت را واکاوی می‌کند. به بیان دقیق‌تر، بحث انتقادی این پژوهش نشان دادن تفاوت‌های مواجهه آمریکایی‌های اروپایی تبار و سرخ‌پوستان آمریکایی با طبیعت در رمان آواز گرگ خواهد بود.

واژه‌های کلیدی: بوم‌شناسی ژرف‌نگر، انسان‌محوری، جنگل‌زدایی، طبیعت، زمین.

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