

Beyond the “Pine Pig”

Reimagining Protection through the US National Park Ranger

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During the first days of the Trump administration, the verified Twitter account for Badlands National Park published facts regarding climate change, and the official account for the US National Park Service (NPS) retweeted a post noting the removal of several policy areas—including climate change and civil rights—from the new White House website.¹ Both social media accounts later removed these posts, and the NPS issued a formal apology. But a collection of NPS “rogue” accounts soon emerged on Twitter, with their anonymous owners claiming to be park rangers and posting defiant messages against the Trump administration’s policies.² Seemingly prompted by a pure and abiding desire to safeguard the natural world (among the Badlands account’s retracted tweets was a single line from the 1916 Organic Act that created the NPS: “and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations”), these accounts amplified the image of the ranger as educator and protector against the threat of destructive violence. Indeed, multiple commentators subsequently named the NPS and its rangers as unlikely leaders of the resistance in the Trump era.³ One widely circulated tweet set the stage as follows: “The year is 2017. America is a tire fire. The resistance is led by *Teen Vogue*, Badlands National Park, and the Merriam-Webster dictionary.”⁴

This framework, which places the NPS ranger alongside a dictionary and a magazine pitched to teenage women, links the three entities as similarly mild-

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mannered and apolitical, making them equally surprising agents of resistance.⁵ Yet the creation story of the NPS ranger is one of politics and power struggle: the ranger is a social role developed by US government agencies to maintain a white masculinist order in the national parks, spaces which themselves are constructed through government seizure of land and forced removal of populations indigenous to that land. How can the US national park ranger be imagined as a protective counterforce to discursive and material violence, even while the ranger's very purpose for being is to preserve the effects of violence that make up the parks system itself? This article shows how the US national park ranger comes to function simultaneously as friendly, educational caretaker and as policing authority forged through and upholding state violence. I argue that long-standing government and popular discourse distinguishing rangers from "real" police naturalizes and actively supports the ranger's authoritative role in hierarchies of power. This framework further obscures the violent mechanisms of social and environmental control that underwrite the national parks as such. At the same time, however, I suggest that persistent efforts to cast rangers as other than police offer an opportunity to conceptualize collaborative and antiauthoritarian forms of protection.

Although employees of federal agencies including the Bureau of Land Management, the US Forest Service, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service also oversee areas classified as US public lands, I focus specifically on the NPS ranger because of the national parks' particular place in the cultural imagination and in conservation history. As Mark David Spence argues, "The uninhabited wilderness had to be created before it could be preserved, and this type of landscape became reified in the first national parks."⁶ Moreover, Carolyn Finney observes that the NPS is "a site where cultural identity, environmental values, and American history intersect and are actively transmitted to the public."⁷ With this in mind, I attend to the national parks as one significant and specific example not only of how policing extends into those areas designated as "natural," but how the ranger likewise helps naturalize policing authority in the national parks and more widely. I draw on a range of texts narrating the creation and maintenance of the national parks—including federal legislation, popular histories, government-funded reports, and commercial and government training materials—to trace how the figure of the NPS ranger both entrenches policing and throws it into question. In a broader sense, then, this article is concerned with the question of how policing and protection are linked discursively and ideologically, and it uses the figure of the NPS ranger to explore one trajectory of that linkage and to engage latent possibilities for reimagining protection.

I begin by examining long-standing public and governmental debates over the ranger's policing role. Although there are two basic types of NPS ranger—the "interpretive" ranger tasked largely with education, and the "protective" ranger tasked primarily with law enforcement and emergency management—this article's first section shows how law enforcement becomes central to conceptions of the

ranger regardless of formal title or task. Paradoxically, this occurs in part through continual efforts to differentiate the NPS ranger from standard police forces, most commonly by emphasizing the ranger's role as educator and environmental caretaker. I argue that repeated descriptions of the traditionally friendly ranger, who is as much friend as lawman and as much educator as cop, allow the ranger to enact policing authority that can go relatively unquestioned as such. With this framework in mind, the next two sections of the article show how the NPS ranger has played a critical role in displacing violence away from the national parks system and locating it instead in individual visitors' criminalized behaviors. In this sense, the ranger is responsible not simply for protecting the parks as material environments but also for protecting the parks' collective image as public land that is a beneficial yet vulnerable space. Cast as a necessary social role, the NPS ranger thus helps establish policing as an inevitable and required force by occluding the foundational violence of the parks themselves. Finally, I turn to a 1976 NPS training manual for interpretive rangers. Without attempting to wholly recuperate the ranger figure or recast it as one of liberatory political resistance, I engage this text as one site of possibility emerging from the fraught desire to differentiate the ranger from police, suggesting that it opens space to reimagine the parks' concept of protection as an interdependent rather than punitive and controlling practice.

Traditionally Friendly: Naturalizing the Ranger's Authority

From the first iteration of US national park rangers in the early twentieth century, both governmental and nongovernmental narratives consistently worked to distinguish such rangers from police. Two primary methods characterize this work: the placing of policing tasks alongside myriad other ranger duties not typically associated with police work, and the explicit decision-making and descriptive processes that refuse to incorporate rangers into the US Park Police and other formal police forces. Consideration of these ongoing efforts can illuminate how such narratives simultaneously inure audiences to the ranger's policing function and create space through which we might develop other models of protection and care.

Even before the formal creation of US national parks, the Chief of Engineers' 1886 annual report said of the general category of park rangers that they are "really park-keepers, doing daily the work of gardener, laborer, and watchman. . . . The entire time of these watchmen is devoted to making their parks as beautiful as possible."⁸ Though we might consider "watchman" a term commensurate with police, this report associates the role more with facilitating the natural beauty of the environment than with authoritative social control. Early NPS planning meetings in 1912 and 1915 carried this approach forward to the specific job of national park ranger, casting NPS rangers "as friendly hosts and guides, as rescuers, as firefighters, and as medics" as well as law enforcement.⁹ Popular texts similarly define rangers' work and character through descriptive lists. A 1965 book written

by ranger-naturalists observes that a national park ranger "must be a little of everything—gentleman, mountaineer, sportsman, daredevil, lawman, philosopher, diplomat, best pal, and all-round public servant."¹⁰ More recently, former ranger and first president of the Association of National Park Rangers Charles "Butch" Farabee opened his 2003 book about national park rangers by writing that they are "an amalgam of Jedi Knight, favorite teacher, and Smokey Bear," and "a rough mix of explorer, pioneer, conservationist, lawman, and teacher."¹¹ And a 1999 textbook for prospective rangers notes that "in the early days of the Park Service, the ranger was truly a man of all seasons. A ranger was a firefighter, a naturalist, a manager, an interpreter, a trail blazer, a game warden, a trail builder, and a biologist."¹²

For more than a century, this repeated descriptive form has positioned the national park ranger's law enforcement job as one that is secondary at most. The ranger is distinguished from police not merely by formal status, but more importantly by the diverse and numerous roles a ranger embodies. In this way, policing authority can come to seem only a minor part of the ranger figure, with the responsibilities of naturalist, gardener, teacher, and mountaineer made equivalent to that of "lawman." If these roles are understood as equally significant, then such characterizations may create opportunities to imagine other ways the ranger figure could enact protection, without reliance on hierarchical and punitive authority. Yet even if this descriptive framework does not position the ranger's law enforcement role as primary, it nonetheless casts it as fundamental. Listed amid so many other characteristics without special attention or fanfare, the task of policing is taken for granted here as an inherent and unquestioned component of the ranger's work. Moreover, when narratives repeatedly place law enforcement alongside jobs such as teacher, diplomat, and best pal, policing can be made to seem not only unexceptional but wholly nonthreatening and even desirable. The common jack-of-all-trades characterization of NPS rangers thus mutes the sociopolitical effects of the ranger's law enforcement authority and related actions. These lists exemplify the ways that policing power has always been essential to the national park ranger, and they help explain how such power can nonetheless come to seem different from that of "real" law enforcement agents.

The distinction drawn between national park rangers and police officers occurs not only through implicit means like the enumeration of duties noted above, but also through explicit government and public debates over the parameters of rangers' roles. Here we might consider the US Park Police, an agency dating back to 1791, which today forms a unit of the NPS responsible for national parks in the metro areas of Washington, DC, San Francisco, and New York City. Park Police officials are also assigned to NPS regional offices across the United States. A promotional brochure produced by the NPS notes that since 1882, "the duties of the US Park Police have been synonymous with that of an urban police department."¹³ Yet as a unit long tasked not only with "providing a patrol" but also "care of the grounds,"

the Park Police have been the subject of extended debates over their potential incorporation into the city police force.¹⁴ In 1934, seeking to maintain the Park Police as a distinct group, the NPS director and National Capital Parks superintendent proposed more deliberate training of Park Police to provide tourist information and to be “more helpful to visitors” as a way of making them “irreplaceable by Metropolitan Police officers.”¹⁵ Three years later, a *Washington Post* editorial argued for merging the two police groups, citing the Park Police’s “inadequacy” in addressing the “urgent necessity of enhancing safety in the parks.”¹⁶ Yet the NPS administration fought such claims, maintaining that “the type of officer needed for park work—one good at public relations—would seldom be developed” if the Park Police merged with the city police force.¹⁷ Across several decades, efforts to convince NPS officials and the general public that urban parks such as those in the DC area were “far more dangerous than the city’s streets,” and therefore required the greater force attributed to the Metropolitan Police, met with counterarguments seeking to retain the educational, environmentalist, and public-interest aspects of the parks; these debates routinely centralized the Park Police’s role and public image.¹⁸ In the early 1960s, NPS and Interior officials sought to distinguish Park Police from standard police officers in appearance as well as responsibilities, reoutfitting Park Police in “green ranger uniforms” to signal that they devoted “at least as much attention to interpretation as to law enforcement and traffic control,” and announcing that they would “function more as a dispenser of information to the public and less as a law enforcement agency.”¹⁹

Debates over the responsibilities and image of the Park Police also affect understandings of the NPS ranger’s role. Popular narratives discussing the Park Police tend to distinguish carefully between these two forms of park authority, with one text noting that while the ranger is “more concerned with the natural beauty of the lands he administers,” the Park Police are “an elite corps of highly trained law enforcement officers.”²⁰ However, the 1975 mandate of federal law enforcement training for national park rangers threatened to blur this distinction. One history of the Park Police describes the training requirement as part of a “conversion of generalist rangers to parapolice,” which raised concerns about “an erosion of the traditional ranger image.”²¹ Addressing this period specifically, a ranger textbook notes that NPS officials deliberately declined to shift park control from rangers to police: “Concerned that the public would be adversely affected if law enforcement was too conspicuous,” they decided instead to “give park rangers sole responsibility for crime control.”²²

Narratives and policies that distinguish between punishment and correction-via-education in order to separate police from rangers commonly do so to shore up the ranger figure against the “macho cop.”²³ They seek to shelter the ranger from the influence of “a police subculture,” guarding against any “shift in the personality of rangers” created by close association with policing authority.²⁴ Yet this active work

required to preserve the "traditional image of a friendly park ranger" itself demonstrates the impossibility of ever truly separating rangers from the policing power through which their formal role is forged.²⁵ Moreover, the reliance on attitude and personality in these accounts individualizes and depoliticizes the NPS ranger in ways that can impede attempts to confront that power. Repeated efforts to separate rangers from "real" police displace overt policing power onto others and allow the ranger's fundamental authoritarian role to exist without criticism. It may be possible to use these ongoing delineation efforts as openings toward imagining other ways for NPS rangers to function. But those possibilities cannot be isolated from the ranger's historically naturalized policing role, which is part of the national parks' founding conditions, as the following sections of this article show.

Furthermore, the distinctions drawn between interpretive and protective NPS rangers—according to which the former is associated with education and the latter with law enforcement and emergency management—emerge through the repetition of job descriptions and NPS training modules that make "protection" synonymous with policing and with the weaponized, hierarchical authority of law enforcement in the parks, even as public and government discourse cautions against eroding the image of the friendly ranger. This friendly image helps naturalize policing as a benevolent, protective practice within the parks, yet it simultaneously casts the ranger as a figure outside policing functions. For instance, while conducting fieldwork for her 2017 study on national park rangers, Alice Kelly Pennaz observed a park visitor's surprise upon realizing that a ranger was carrying a gun. Informed that the ranger was a law enforcement officer, the visitor responded with "incredulity," and "after a pause she asked, 'Since when were Rangers police too?'"²⁶ This anecdote efficiently illustrates how the image of the friendly ranger can position rangers as wholly distinct from police, even as rangers retain the status of authority figure that enacts policing regardless of formal title (or visitor awareness) of law enforcement. To be clear, this is not simply a question of semantics that would seek a more accurate term or definition for national park rangers. Rather, the formal and informal distinctions made between "ranger" and "police"—across job descriptions, government reports, news media accounts, popular texts, and educational materials—illustrate the impossibility of recuperating the ranger figure as one of full-bodied resistance to policing, because they enable the willful forgetting of social control central to the very creation of the national parks and their rangers.

Implicit and Unavoidable: Protection through Policing

The persistent attempts to differentiate the national park ranger from the US Park Police and from other forms of law enforcement open onto several ongoing arguments about control and power in which the ranger remains a central figure. For example, inasmuch as they present parks in urban areas as more dangerous, arguments for increasing policing authority participate in long-standing debates about

what constitutes wilderness and which groups should be understood as threats to it. This carries forward the disavowed history of violence underwriting all US national parks, even those located farthest from urban areas, parks that themselves can be represented as remote, untouched wilderness only through the encroachment of white settlers who violently crafted a pristine backcountry by evicting indigenous and nonindigenous people formerly living on that land.²⁷

Multiple scholars have traced the history of US national parks as one of white settlement and ethnic cleansing, a process largely unmarked in popular and governmental literature about the National Park Service.²⁸ The omission of colonial violence from such accounts parallels the discursive erasure of Native people altogether in several key legislative initiatives underpinning the parks, which entail what Isaac Kantor describes as “the fallacy of ‘unpeopled wilderness.’”²⁹ The 1872 legislative designation of Yellowstone as the first national park specified Yellowstone as a “public park or pleasure ground of the people,” where those people were understood to be park visitors rather than indigenous to the land.³⁰ Some forty-four years later, the Organic Act of 1916 named the national parks’ “fundamental purpose” as conservation of “scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein” and referenced people only in terms of tourists.³¹ Similarly, the 1964 Wilderness Act explicitly defines wilderness as that space where “man is a visitor who does not remain.”³² These central pieces of legislation cast the parks as wilderness that must be preserved in part because it is uninhabited, such that the very language of the law renders Native people absent and sets human life against the rest of the natural world.

Many early environmentalists, for whom the US national parks constituted one central project, conceptualized the parks not simply as protecting the wilderness generally, but as specifically protective against the threat of what Sarah Jaquette Ray calls “ecological others”: those human bodies positioned as impure, unnatural, and unmanageable, and thus as dangerous to environmentalist goals.³³ The development of national parks and the US environmentalist movement coincided with the early US eugenics movement, such that “the racial and class fears surrounding purity and degradation” that were cornerstones of eugenics “became a primary means through which wilderness and environment became discernible.”³⁴ For famed environmentalists and national parks champions such as John Muir, the parks not only protected unspoiled wilderness from the polluting presence of ecological others (particularly Native and Black people) but also protected white visitors from these same threats.³⁵ William Cronon observes that the material and discursive erasure of those indigenous to the national parks’ land also helped shift the character of that land in the white national imaginary. As part of a larger argument that wilderness is not natural but constructed, he writes, “Among the things that most marked the new national parks as reflecting a post-frontier consciousness was the relative absence of human violence within their boundaries. The actual frontier

had been a place of conflict. . . . Once set aside within the fixed and carefully policed boundaries of the modern bureaucratic state, the wilderness lost its savage image and became safe."³⁶ This intervention illustrates how protection merges with policing: carefully policed boundaries protect both the land and its (white) visitors, keeping racial and economic others at bay.³⁷

The 1965 book *Guarding the Treasured Lands: The Story of the National Park Service*, written by ranger-naturalists Ann and Myron Sutton, exemplifies this process. Prior to Yellowstone's designation as the first US national park, the Suttons write, the area was "a little known land, inhabited by wild animals and roving bands of hostile Indians ready to destroy intruders or drive them away."³⁸ An expedition comprised of white ranchers faced continual hazards in the form of weather, hunger, and "Crow Indian raids," but persevered to discover the area's previously unknown and untouched beauty.³⁹ In two pages, the book covers more than a year of expeditions and legislative debates, sweeping briskly from the initial idea of national parks to the 1872 creation of Yellowstone that closes this chapter of the book. Ongoing struggles with tribal nations including Shoshone, Bannock, and Crow, which continued long after the 1872 legislation, are omitted entirely.⁴⁰ The brief presence of Native people in this narrative frames the park as a wild and thrilling place (beset by "the constant threat of Indian attack") and as a pristine land that must be protected for (white) visitors' enjoyment.⁴¹

The Suttons' next chapter begins by outlining the difficulties of managing the park: "There were no roads, no railroads, no bridges, scarcely any trails. Illegal hunting was being carried on."⁴² The authors assign no specific agent to the activity of illegal hunting, leaving the reader to infer whether this is carried out by white ranchers, tourists, or indigenous tribes who had hunted on the land for generations. The passive voice structuring this sentence helps naturalize the illegality of hunting within the region now designated as Yellowstone, discursively conveying the necessity of laws and their enforcement there and foreclosing any questions about the imposition of such laws in the first place. With this groundwork laid, the book's narrative need not justify the ensuing military oversight of the parks beyond a brief note about insufficient congressional appropriations. The fact that "the Secretary of the Interior had to appeal to the Army to come in and take over" appears as a natural next step, because the Suttons' narrative has already efficiently established the need for a policing presence in the parks.⁴³ Indeed, they follow this discussion with a sentence that cements both the importance of policing and the inherent whiteness of American identity: "None of this lessened the zeal of Americans to save their scenic lands while they could."⁴⁴

The Suttons can note the domestic deployment of US armed forces in part because military presence within US borders was already normalized in many areas. As Karl Jacoby explains, by the late 1800s the US Army had frequently served as "the police of choice" to quell uprisings and impose order in multiple domestic

situations.⁴⁵ It was not only the Suttons' "Americans" who took military administration in stride; most officials made little of the decision to employ US military forces in the first national parks. In a historical account published just six years after the National Park Service's formal creation, Jenks Cameron suggests that the use of military oversight "was probably unavoidable in the early days of the parks, and probably saved the Yellowstone from injury."⁴⁶ Cameron aligns with the Suttons in taking for granted the imminent harm that Yellowstone would experience without a policing presence. Yet, he continues, "as time went on it became more and more apparent that a system of civilian control was to be preferred."⁴⁷

Although the 1916 Organic Act "gave designated personnel of the National Park service the authority to make arrests, to bear firearms, and to enforce all federal laws," officials and legislators did not initially conceive of rangers as law enforcement agents *per se*.⁴⁸ Attendees of the 1915 National Park Conference in Berkeley, California, first envisioned national park rangers primarily in terms of their "experience in outdoor life," prioritizing prospective rangers' abilities to "ride and care for horses," "cook simple food," and "have some knowledge of trail construction and fighting forest fires."⁴⁹ Yet, as I showed earlier, the absence of any formal title of law enforcement does not in itself detach these earliest conceptions of rangers from policing practices or police authority. The Berkeley conference focused heavily on the perceived need for development to make the parks more hospitable and accessible to visitors. A lengthy history of the national parks written for the 2016 NPS Centennial follows earlier narratives in assuming the need for a hierarchical system that imposed public order, explaining that the campgrounds, lodges, and eateries envisioned at the Berkeley conference "could not spring from relative deserts without infrastructure, including a water supply, sanitation, electricity, telephones, and policing."⁵⁰ However, multiple environmentalist groups at the conference opposed widespread development in the parks. With this in mind, we might understand the early national park ranger as a mediating figure: the ranger restored the parks to civilian control and supported new infrastructure but was primarily employed to care for the parks' environment, cushioning the effects (and fears) of development. By 1918, park oversight had completely shifted from the Department of War and army forces to the Department of the Interior and its new set of national park rangers.

Even if not explicitly marked as law enforcement at its creation, however, the national park ranger held this position implicitly, because the parks were already discursively positioned as spaces where social control was key to "protecting hard-won parks and facilitating the public's enjoyment of them."⁵¹ Cameron's sketch of the national parks' organizational structure reflects the assumption that the ranger's role as environmental caretaker is also one of policing. Taking Yellowstone as his example, he assigns the category of "protection" to the chief ranger, who is charged with the park's "general policing, all fire prevention and control, the protection of

wild life, the destruction of predatory animals, the winter feeding of animals," and several other tasks specific to animal, plant, and environmental well-being.⁵² More pointedly, in a textbook published by the nongovernmental press Copperhouse, Luke Lukas writes that "law enforcement is a park management tool," explaining that it "is not a recent development stemming from today's problems, [but] has been an important tool since the inception of our first national park."⁵³ Citing conservationist and nature writer Aldo Leopold's observation that "recreational development is a job not of building roads into lovely country, but of building receptivity into the still unlovely human mind," Lukas explains that "this corrective process fell to the early rangers and the cavalry as it does today to the National Park Service's frontcountry and backcountry rangers."⁵⁴ Although national park rangers were not formally law enforcement personnel in the early decades of the NPS, multiple historical narratives position them as essential authoritative figures who would impose the social order necessary to protect a heretofore untouched wilderness.

From Violent Displacement to the Displacement of Violence

Despite noting the arrest authority that the 1916 Organic Act conferred on all NPS employees, Lukas marks the 1970 Stoneman Meadow Riot as the "major impetus for adding law enforcement to the rangers' bag of tools."⁵⁵ Since the end of World War II, the perceived need for law enforcement in the national parks had receded somewhat: the protracted evictions of people who lived on and used the land now designated as parks had been "successful" for the NPS in the sense that the parks were now more commonly populated with white wealthy tourists, and ranger roles had shifted accordingly to emphasize environmentalism and tourism more than law enforcement.⁵⁶ The events at Stoneman Meadow, wherein a Fourth of July weekend celebration developed into a massive conflict between Yosemite park rangers and more than four hundred young "hippie types," with rangers using "ropes, chemical Mace, and nightsticks" against the crowd, appear repeatedly as a turning point in NPS rangers' role as law enforcement.⁵⁷ Environmental historians observe that "the riot fundamentally changed how the Park Service understood the growing national fear of lawlessness and the counterculture," and claim "there were few incidents more ugly and few more prophetic."⁵⁸ Lukas notes that this event resulted in recommendations for rangers to be specifically trained in law enforcement, explaining that "the National Park Service was totally unprepared for the violent encounter. By the time the uprising was quelled, much of the conventional understanding of what rangers should be doing was irreversibly altered."⁵⁹ His narrative effaces the violent expulsion of Native and non-Native populations in the national parks' very formation, placing Lukas's "conventional understanding" of what rangers should do at odds with the history of the parks system and its rangers.

Further complicating the suggestion that the NPS was "totally unprepared" for conflict with young people at Yosemite, the Stoneman Meadow events occurred

in the context of widespread state violence and criminalization as backlash to Black and American Indian resistance movements, antiwar protests, and many other interrelated struggles for racial, sexual, and economic justice. By 1970, many national parks had already been sites of political protest against which the Department of the Interior exercised increased policing power. Claiming that park rangers' public image has taken two central forms, the 1986 *Park Ranger Handbook* contrasts the "traditional, positive 'Smokey Bear' image" against a view of the ranger as authoritarian figure, "seemingly held by a vociferous minority of primarily youthful visitors" who viewed the ranger "as a 'pine pig' who's [*sic*] primary task is to 'hassle' them and deny their rights to do 'their things' within the park."⁶⁰ The latter perspective was, according to the handbook, at "a peak during the late 1960's."⁶¹

A 1989 history of the US Park Police illustrates how national parks are not wild spaces cordoned off from the political and social world. The book pointedly emphasizes "the violent demonstrations and increased lawlessness of the late 1960s and 1970s, when instead of policemen becoming more like rangers, rangers had to become more like policemen."⁶² A specific example immediately follows this claim: "The Poor People's March on Washington in 1969 begot the Resurrection City encampment in West Potomac Park," and officials gave the participants "virtual immunity from criminal arrest as the camp degenerated into a lawless morass, making Resurrection City a notably thankless assignment" for the Park Police.⁶³ As noted above, the Park Police are not equivalent to NPS rangers, but their intertwined histories mean that the former's trajectory sheds light on the latter's. Thus when this history of the Park Police claims that police forces necessarily (and beneficially) expand in times of "domestic upheavals" like the "challenges of crime and disorder that rended American society during the Vietnam era," and that "no organization exemplified this trend better than the Park Police," we can better understand how NPS rangers are likewise shaped by political struggle, racist violence, and youth uprisings.⁶⁴

With this context, we can reassess Lukas's suggestion that the NPS was "totally unprepared" to respond to resistant young people at Yosemite in 1970. Because a variety of narratives already cast the national parks as spaces for (white, class-privileged) "visitors," it may be more accurate to understand rangers as unprepared to control and respond with force to specific people who could otherwise be legible as safe, benevolent tourists. After all, park authorities had long practiced control over those indigenous and nonindigenous groups whose forced expulsion made possible the parks' very existence.⁶⁵ Lukas's descriptions of later problems in the parks extend and reinforce the notion that park endangerment comes at the hands of racial and economic others: "gangs of youth roam the backcountry," "methamphetamine manufactures have invaded" the parks, and "poachers are still at work," he writes, concluding that "the war to protect our backcountry is still on."⁶⁶

In the years following the events at Stoneman Meadow, calls for more robust crime control in the national parks resulted in NPS requirements for permanent commissioned rangers to receive training at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Centers (FLETC), which train all federal law enforcement agents. During 1975 and 1976, congressional reports and hearings as well as NPS documents specified that commissioned rangers must undergo standardized law enforcement training and would be the only NPS employees authorized to carry out law enforcement tasks.⁶⁷ Lukas takes this formalization of law enforcement authority as evidence of “the transformation of the role of the ranger from that of a naturalist and interpreter to that of a police officer.”⁶⁸ But we ought not imagine the ranger of previous decades as a softer, friendlier figure who worked merely as environmental caretaker. Rather, the NPS ranger is a central authoritative figure in the long creation of what Lukas can casually articulate as “our” backcountry, a pronoun primarily designating white settler tourists. The very conception of the national park ranger as a legible role presumes that humans—and particularly ecological others—are inherently threatening to the parks, a framework enabling park regulations and policing agents to stand as unquestionable necessities. Hence the *Park Ranger Handbook* can define NPS “enforcement services” straightforwardly as “those actions taken to both prevent the violation of rules, regulations, and laws and to handle situations arising as a result of such violations,” taking park rules, regulations, and laws as a given.⁶⁹ This framework participates in a tautological cycle in which the parks’ fundamental status as beneficial and vulnerable authorizes rules of control, which in turn require the ranger to uphold regulations protecting the parks from outside threats. These threats themselves then affirm the inherent fragility and goodness of the parks as legally protected spaces.

Lukas likewise perpetuates this approach when he writes plaintively, “What causes visitors to bring their violent natures to our beautiful national parks? Perhaps no one can explain the reasons for violent crime, especially in our national park backcountry.”⁷⁰ Locating violence as that which threatens the park from the outside naturalizes the ranger’s policing role (regardless of formal law enforcement status) by employing policing discourse that codes racialized and impoverished populations as dangerous criminals, and by using that external danger to occlude the founding violence of the national parks system.⁷¹ That is to say, the ranger as a policing authority is made necessary only through the violent imposition of laws and land use that the parks themselves both engender and rely upon. We might return again to Leopold’s oft-cited lines contrasting the “lovely country” against the “still unlovely human mind.” In conceptualizing humans as having an oppositional and even inherently destructive relationship to the natural world, common narratives of NPS history disallow any possible relationships with the environment that might be mutually beneficial and capable of thriving outside of a hierarchical and authoritarian structure.⁷²

National park rangers—in terms of both formal policing power and informal perceived status as authority figures—help locate violence in individual visitors’ criminalized actions rather than in the stolen land and violent removal practices that are the very conditions for the national parks. In this way, the ranger’s role is not only to uphold and enforce laws but to assist in making the very fact of those laws—and the fact of the parks’ existence as such—appear unquestionable, inevitable, and beneficial. With this in mind, we might read more carefully Lukas’s ode to early environmentalists and champions of the national parks including Leopold, Muir, and Theodore Roosevelt, all of whom he credits with having seen “the need to do something to protect our resources and our environment from being destroyed by overuse and neglect. Without their efforts,” he writes, “this text would be unnecessary because there would be no backcountry to protect or visitors to visit.”⁷³ Though clearly intended to convey the national parks’ importance for environmental preservation, this last sentence also points to the constitutive policing practices through which the national parks and the necessary regulation of visitors emerge as naturalized facts.

More Art than Science: Protection through Interdependency

In the repeated displacement of harm away from the national park ranger, we find a desire to guard against the ranger as a punitive controlling authority. Yet even as this practice perpetuates the ranger’s authoritative role in hierarchies of power (in part by distancing the ranger from policing as such), it might also suggest the possibility of imagining other approaches to care and protection. The policing authority built into the national park ranger via the very creation and maintenance of national parks need not be understood as seamlessly inevitable. For instance, while descriptions of NPS rangers implicitly and explicitly narrate them as maintaining order and enforcing laws, they also commonly position rangers as responsible to human and nonhuman life related to the parks’ environments. Lukas’s textbook demonstrates this when it values national park rangers’ responsibility to “safeguard human life” as equivalent to their “obligation to the land, water, plants, minerals, wildlife, and all other living things.”⁷⁴ This framework “places humans alongside nature in the category of things to be protected rather than placing humans squarely among enemies to the park.”⁷⁵

If it is irresponsible to cling to an image of the ranger as friendly caretaker because that image already works to normalize the ranger’s authoritarian role, then efforts to rewrite the ranger as a strident figure of political resistance—as illustrated by many responses to the rogue NPS ranger Twitter accounts—are similarly misguided. However, by looking more closely at the vision of and reasons for the interpretive ranger, we may yet find in the national park ranger the potential for conceptualizing and enacting “protection” differently. To do so, I turn to a 1976 training program produced by the NPS for interpretive rangers. Though not the sole

example of such an approach, this training program is particularly relevant to my discussion because NPS developed it during the years immediately following the Stoneman Meadow Riot, which otherwise prompted major investments in law enforcement training for rangers, including the 1975 NPS requirement for FLETC training.⁷⁶ That NPS produced, during that same period, an interpretive ranger training program forwarding a remarkably different framework illustrates the persistent desire to imagine the national park ranger differently. Consisting of a written manual and five half-hour videotapes, the program suggests that while rangers may indeed be tasked with protection, that goal can be accomplished by methods other than the hierarchical, punitive, or authoritative. In its structure and approach, the training offers imperfect but promising possibilities for reimagining the work of protection in the context of national parks, perhaps coming closer to what Robin Wall Kimmerer articulates as "a different relationship, in which people and land are good medicine for each other."⁷⁷

The training manual opens with an excerpted 1975 essay by Tom Danton, then a park technician in Rocky Mountain National Park. Placed before the manual's table of contents, this essay forms a preface that prepares readers for the program's approach to interpretive practices in the parks.

Interpretation is not just giving facts, not the explanation of an event or natural phenomenon . . . it is arousing the curiosity of a visitor, inspiring new attitudes, and assisting the visitor in the visitor's attempts to interpret his or her own park. . . . Once visitors realize they can interpret a park, [and] they can communicate with their surroundings without knowing scientific names and data, we may enter a new era in park use. When visitors can begin to feel as one with their environment, a real part of it, rather than an external "visitor," maybe greater park respect and concern will be evidenced.⁷⁸

While the use of a generalized and unmarked "visitor" in these lines participates in the same colonial fantasy of unpeopled wilderness that underpins the parks overall, this is not a defensive approach that imposes law and order. Instead, it emphasizes curiosity and collectivity, the latter not limited to humans but extending through "their environment."

On the page following Danton's remarks, yet still prior to the table of contents, the manual's authors clarify how interpretive ranger practices ought to differ from "traditional 'teaching' methods" found in "formal schooling."⁷⁹ The training package thus "acknowledges that . . . we know what is expected of us as 'teacher-interpreters,' and the possibility of losing control of, or respect from, a group of visitors probably is more frightening than not knowing 'the answers.'"⁸⁰ Here, the authors frame the training as well as the interpreter role as one that turns away from practices of authoritarian control, acknowledging as well that "we already use other more effective ways of learning that don't depend on a teacher."⁸¹ To

support this approach, the manual introduces readers to its author-instructors through photographs and short biographical statements about their ranger and parks experience, noting that “you will also see them participating as visitors on some of the tapes.”⁸² Rangers thus appear both as knowledgeable figures and as participants. In these ways, the training program creates a markedly different framework for conceptualizing the national park ranger. Even before beginning to convey its formal educational content, it instructs readers through modeling in its own structure and language how rangers might interact with human and nonhuman aspects of the parks collaboratively.

This rejection of an authoritarian model, made plain in the manual’s opening pages, recurs throughout the text. Having already gestured at the troubling disciplinary effects of “formal schooling,” the authors later note the panoptic effects of the parks’ structure and of the ranger figure: “Every interpreter in every setting structures that setting in some way. This might be done consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly. Just the fact that an interpreter is present affects the way visitors behave.”⁸³ These lines suggest an awareness of the power dynamics built into the parks, and they assess those dynamics clearly, without attempting to cloak them in the guise of a friendly ranger image. Instead, this portion of the text prefaces a more detailed discussion of options for “structuring” interpretive work to “maximize the possibility for [visitors] deriving meaning from the park environment.”⁸⁴ The manual then offers seven potential ways of organizing groups for exploration and conversation. These include small groups and tutorial structures that rely at least in part on the ranger’s oversight, as well as a “conference structure” that prioritizes “free, uninhibited discussion by visitors among themselves on a topic of importance to them” and in which “all the interpreter can do is to stay out of the way”; a “group meeting structure” wherein the ranger “enters the discussion as a participant rather than a leader”; and a “Socratic structure” created by questions that can “best be answered through the open exchange of ideas, through comparisons or perceptions, and through dialogue by sharing each person’s meanings.”⁸⁵ In this flexible vision for ranger practices, knowledge and resources can be distributed in many different ways according to collective needs, and rangers need not occupy a position of authority, even as the text reminds us that the parks are structured such that ranger authority cannot simply be erased or ignored.

If the manual can be said to have a guiding principle, it is perhaps best understood through the hand-drawn illustration on its cover, which is reproduced and discussed in the text’s first chapter. A Venn diagram of three overlapping circles, the image positions “the visitor,” “the park,” and “the interpreter” as interdependent and equally important components of interpretation. The drawings symbolizing each of these components are certainly imperfect: in their stylized representation of the parks’ various elements they convey (and reinforce) many of the sociopolitical harms foundational to the national parks. For instance, “the visitor,” at the top of the

image, is readily legible as a white, heteronormative, class-privileged family of four, with the simple line drawing showing the father figure wearing a necktie, the mother figure in high heels and a dress. “The park” in the lower left circle appears to us in the form of a mountain, several trees, and a deer—the fantasy of an unpeopled wilderness in sketch form. In the lower right circle, “the interpreter” wears a uniform complete with badge and hat, smiling and pointing left, in the direction of the park. We need not excuse this visual recreation of national park tropes, which also continues to erase the parks’ violence, in order to also take seriously the framework that this illustration attempts to convey. For example, the ranger points toward the park rather than at the visitors, suggesting a shared engagement with the natural world rather than a punitive oversight demanding compliance. Importantly, the overlapping circles visually refuse any semblance of hierarchy and thus break from both the ranger-as-necessary-enforcer and the ranger-as-friendly-authority models that are otherwise so common. The manual’s written text reinforces this: “The value of an interpretive program is directly related to the inclusion and quality of the areas represented by the three interwoven circles. To omit one or more of the circles significantly reduces the value of the program.”⁸⁶ Again, the ranger’s uniform reminds us of the uneven distribution of power structuring the park, but the manual also forwards a pedagogy built on a profound interdependency. As such, it opens space for reimagining and differently practicing relationships between human and nonhuman life in the areas designated as national parks.

Finally, the pedagogical philosophy structuring this training manual itself creates and encourages more expansive ways of understanding the national park system. When it stresses that “creating an interpretation is closer to being an art than it is a science,” we can read this text as one that speaks not simply to the specifics of an interpreter’s job but to the possibility of an organic and improvisational—yet not impulsive or disorganized—approach to protection.⁸⁷ This approach resonates with abolitionist frameworks wherein we seek to envision and build what is not yet manifest, “taking small steps that move us toward making our dreams real and that lead us all to believe that things really could be different.”⁸⁸ The manual emphasizes the importance of interpreters modeling both feeling and actions: “When the interpreter exhibits emotion for the beauty, awesomeness, pageantry, or grandeur of his park, the visitor will feel free to react with a similar sensitivity.”⁸⁹ In this sense, the interpreters’ role in facilitating questions, experimentation, and critical thinking—and their participation in these practices, rather than merely overseeing or installing them—models other possibilities for our relationships with the environment and one another. Here too, we might find kinship with abolitionist practices in which even our smallest efforts toward “making our dreams real” both build that world and model its possibility for others.

Although it has much to offer, this interpreter training program cannot serve as a simple blueprint for transforming the figure of the national park ranger, not

least because it carries forward many of the problems built into the parks that I noted earlier. Like most materials produced by the NPS, the manual takes for granted that the parks are “your parks,” effacing the ongoing settler colonial practices that enable an easy language of ownership for an unmarked reader/ranger. In sample content meant to provide concrete examples of its pedagogical approach in practice, this text leaves unmentioned and unquestioned the violent history and present through which national parks come to exist as such. The specific context of its production in the mid-1970s—a period otherwise dedicated to what Pennaz terms the “police-ification” of NPS rangers—further clarifies how the manual can constitute both an alternative vision and a continuation of the status quo.⁹⁰ Many NPS administrators and field rangers opposed that police-ification, citing the need for “low-key” law enforcement to maintain the parks’ image as “havens of peace” as well as their desire to differentiate rangers from “urban law enforcement agencies” that were “very negatively viewed by much of the American public.”⁹¹ Such internal critiques of policing thus also supported rangers’ policing power, even if unintentionally, by obscuring or disavowing it. In this context, the interpretive ranger manual can likewise contribute to that disavowal precisely through its articulation of a different form of ranger.

This does not mean, however, that the manual’s lessons are wholly compromised. Tracing the persistent desire to distinguish national park rangers from police can provide more nuanced insight into the naturalization of policing and can illuminate opportunities to support different forms of protection. While this cultural text does not and cannot rectify the violent legacies and maldistribution of power that structure the national parks, it nevertheless refuses to take for granted the necessity of top-down, punitive enforcement of laws. It works to more evenly distribute responsibility for the environment and for one another, offering a framework that depends on and deeply values interdependency between all of these elements. Notably, the law enforcement ranger, so commonly referred to as the “protective ranger,” never appears in this training manual. The absence of this figure recalls the elision of the national park ranger’s policing power. Yet it also suggests an opportunity for practicing relationships between humans and environments that can thrive without hierarchical social control, creating protection instead through shared responsibility, curiosity, and collaboration.

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Notes

For their careful readings and generous feedback, I am grateful to this issue’s editors, particularly Monica Kim, and to the three anonymous reviewers.

1. *The Guardian*, "Badlands National Park."
2. Davis, "Rogue National Park Accounts."
3. Parker and Welch, "3 Things You Need." The NPS and *Teen Vogue* also made it into *The Advocate's* list of "Top 10 Unexpected Heroes of the Resistance" (Reynolds).
4. Chandler, "The year is 2017."
5. *Teen Vogue's* content starkly reveals the sexism, racism, and ageism structuring these perceptions. Particularly since Trump's election, the magazine has been a consistent source of progressive political analysis on topics including labor organizing, immigrant justice, and reproductive justice; during the first full year of the Trump administration, *Teen Vogue's* editor in chief was Elaine Welteroth, the youngest ever and the second Black editor to hold that position.
6. Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness*, 4. Spence echoes Cronon's broader argument that "wilderness hides its unnaturalness behind a mask that is all the more beguiling because it seems so natural" ("The Trouble with Wilderness," 214).
7. Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces*, 29.
8. Mackintosh, *United States Park Police*, 8.
9. Pennaz, "Is That Gun for the Bears?," 244.
10. Sutton and Sutton, *Guarding the Treasured Lands*, 51.
11. Farabee, *National Park Ranger*, vii.
12. Lukas, *National Park Service*, 14–15. Lukas contends that rangers' roles have since narrowed to three specializations: law enforcement, resource management, or interpretive services. Yet by grouping these under the shared heading of "ranger," he maintains the image of a multifaceted ranger for whom policing is only one possible role.
13. US National Park Service, *United States Park Police*.
14. US Park Police Research and Planning, *The United States Park Police*, 11.
15. Mackintosh, *United States Park Police*, 30.
16. Mackintosh, *United States Park Police*, 31.
17. Mackintosh, *United States Park Police*, 33.
18. Mackintosh, *United States Park Police*, 35.
19. Mackintosh, *United States Park Police*, 41, 45.
20. Sutton and Sutton, *Guarding the Treasured Lands*, 50, 51.
21. Mackintosh, *United States Park Police*, 57.
22. Lukas, *National Park Service*, 15.
23. Lukas, *National Park Service*, 48.
24. Lukas, *National Park Service*, 19.
25. Lukas, *National Park Service*, 20.
26. Pennaz, "Is That Gun for the Bears?," 243.
27. Jacoby further shows how efforts classified as conservation "interlocked on multiple levels with other, ongoing efforts—treaties, the establishment of reservations, allotment—to displace Indians' claims upon the natural world in order to open up such areas to non-Indians" (*Crimes against Nature*, 151). See also Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness."
28. See for example Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness"; Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces*; Jacoby, *Crimes against Nature*; Kantor, "Ethnic Cleansing"; Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness*; and Taylor, *Rise of the American Conservation Movement*.
29. Kantor, "Ethnic Cleansing," 43.
30. US Congress, "Yellowstone National Park Protection Act."
31. Kantor, "Ethnic Cleansing," 43; US Congress, "National Park Service Organic Act."

32. Merchant, "Shades of Darkness," 381. Finney reads the Wilderness Act and Civil Rights Act, both central pieces of US legislation in 1964, alongside one another to show how the "visitor" in the former is implicitly white (*Black Faces, White Spaces*, 43–48).
33. Ray argues that "in producing environmentalist bodies," environmentalist thought "must create ecological others as well," and she is particularly concerned with how racism and ableism work together in this formulation (*Ecological Other*, 10).
34. Kosek, "Purity and Pollution," 137.
35. Taylor, *Rise of the American Conservation Movement*, 360–62; Finney further shows how the protection of US national parks emerged concurrently with periods of intense racist violence and legal efforts to "limit both movement and accessibility" for people of color (*Black Faces, White Spaces*, 37).
36. Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," 223.
37. Safety in the national parks continues to be a profoundly racialized discursive characteristic and material experience. See for example Golash-Boza et al., "Why America's National Parks Are So White," on national park rangers' increased surveillance over women of color; and Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces*.
38. Sutton and Sutton, *Guarding the Treasured Lands*, 17. The Suttons published widely on US national parks and wilderness areas. They were ranger-naturalists at Grand Canyon National Park; Ann was a geologist and Myron a ranger for several national parks. Their collected photographs and audiotapes are held at the Institute of History Survey Foundation.
39. Sutton and Sutton, *Guarding the Treasured Lands*, 18.
40. Kantor, "Ethnic Cleansing," 49–51. See also Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness*, 41–70, and Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long as Grass Grows*, 93–95.
41. Sutton and Sutton, *Guarding the Treasured Lands*, 20.
42. Sutton and Sutton, *Guarding the Treasured Lands*, 24.
43. Sutton and Sutton, *Guarding the Treasured Lands*, 24.
44. Sutton and Sutton, *Guarding the Treasured Lands*, 24.
45. Jacoby, *Crimes against Nature*, 97.
46. Cameron, *National Park Service*, 27. This text is from a monograph series prepared by the Institute for Government Research between 1918 and 1934 for in-depth study of US government services.
47. Cameron, *National Park Service*, 27.
48. Lukas, *National Park Service*, 72.
49. Hansen, *Prophets and Moguls*, 88.
50. Hansen, *Prophets and Moguls*, 86.
51. Hansen, *Prophets and Moguls*, 88.
52. Cameron, *National Park Service*, 64.
53. Lukas, *National Park Service*, 1. Because Copperhouse published multiple textbooks for law enforcement jobs, its publication of this book—pitched to prospective NPS rangers—reinforces the link between rangers and police.
54. Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 176–77; Lukas, *National Park Service*, 10.
55. Lukas, *National Park Service*, 15.
56. Pennaz, "Is That Gun for the Bears?," 245–46. On the continuation of these struggles, see Pennaz, "Is That Gun for the Bears?," 252; Keller and Turek, *American Indians and National Parks*; and Seigny, "Not Your Playground."
57. Jones, "National Parks."

58. Childers, "Stoneman Meadow Riots," 32; Runte, *Yosemite*, chap. 13.
59. Lukas, *National Park Service*, 15.
60. Shiner, *Park Ranger Handbook*, chap. 1, 5. This text was published by the commercial press Venture Publishing, which focused on manuals in the areas of recreation and leisure.
61. Shiner, *Park Ranger Handbook*, chap. 1, 5.
62. Mackintosh, *United States Park Police*, 47. This text was produced by the History Division of the NPS, primarily to convey Park Police history to NPS employees.
63. Mackintosh, *United States Park Police*, 47.
64. Mackintosh, *United States Park Police*, 51.
65. Jacoby, *Crimes against Nature*.
66. Lukas, *National Park Service*, 18.
67. Pennaz, "Is That Gun for the Bears?," 248.
68. Lukas, *National Park Service*, 16.
69. Shiner, *Park Ranger Handbook*, chap. 4, 1.
70. Lukas, *National Park Service*, 173.
71. For further discussion see Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces*, and Merchant, "Shades of Darkness."
72. Kimmerer notes that students in her third-year general ecology course could not think of "any beneficial relationships between people and the environment" (*Braiding Sweetgrass*, 6).
73. Lukas, *National Park Service*, 66.
74. Lukas, *National Park Service*, 123.
75. Pennaz, "Is That Gun for the Bears?," 251–52.
76. On other less authoritarian approaches to environmental protection, see the guides' associations' understanding of rural communities as stewards rather than threats to land in the Adirondacks (Jacoby, *Crimes against Nature*, 71); coalitional work between Native and non-Native groups to protect sacred land in southern California (Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long as Grass Grows*, 132–62); and organizations forwarding explicitly antiracist environmentalist frameworks (Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces*, 110–13 and chap. 6). Among many works on indigenous resistance movements for environmental justice that practice protection in ways that are "part of being a good relative to the water, land, and animals, not to mention the human world" (Estes, *Our History*, 21), see recent examples including Estes, *Our History*; Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*; and Dhillon, "Indigenous Resurgence."
77. Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, x.
78. National Park Service Division of Interpretation, *Personal Training Program*, 4.
79. National Park Service Division of Interpretation, *Personal Training Program*, 5.
80. National Park Service Division of Interpretation, *Personal Training Program*, 5.
81. National Park Service Division of Interpretation, *Personal Training Program*, 5.
82. National Park Service Division of Interpretation, *Personal Training Program*, 8.
83. National Park Service Division of Interpretation, *Personal Training Program*, 58.
84. National Park Service Division of Interpretation, *Personal Training Program*, 65.
85. National Park Service Division of Interpretation, *Personal Training Program*, 74, 76, 78.
86. National Park Service Division of Interpretation, *Personal Training Program*, 26.
87. National Park Service Division of Interpretation, *Personal Training Program*, 24.
88. Critical Resistance, "What Is the PIC?" Similarly, drawing on W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of abolition democracy, Angela Davis defines abolition as "not only, or not even primarily,

- about abolition as a negative process of tearing down, [but] also about building up, about creating new institutions" (*Abolition Democracy*, 73). See also Heynen on "abolition ecology," which seeks "to better organize around the racialized questions of who gains from and who pays for, who benefits from and who suffers from particular processes of political ecological change" ("Toward an Abolition Ecology," 245).
89. National Park Service Division of Interpretation, *Personal Training Program*, 109.
90. Pennaz, "Is That Gun for the Bears?," 247.
91. Pennaz, "Is That Gun for the Bears?," 247–48.

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