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Becoming the Imperfect Friend: Sḵw̓xwú7mesh and Contemplative Pathways to Healing and Reconciliation in Higher Education

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Abstract

Keywords

Decolonization;
Reconciliation;
Indigenization;
Healing;
Indigenous
knowledge;
Lateral violence;
Contemplative
inquiry

Throughout this reflective essay I explore Sḵw̓xwú7mesh Indigenous philosophy and contemplative education as ethical pathways to healing and reconciliation in higher education. I put forth the idea of becoming the imperfect friend in a world ethos of death by a thousand cuts as a response to the violence of colonialism perpetuated in academia. I reflect on the Sḵw̓xwú7mesh values of eshlélha7kwhiws and stélmexw as contemplative dispositions that lend themselves to the process of becoming the imperfect friend. I conclude by describing a Sḵw̓xwú7mesh -led program hosted by Simon Fraser University (SFU) in 2022-2023, named Moving Together In The Ways of The People. The program is captured in a documentary film following a dedicated group SFU educators, graduate students and staff endeavouring to take meaningful action towards reconciliation by embarking on a sacred learning journey led by Sḵw̓xwú7mesh elders and knowledge carriers on traditional, ancestral, unceded Coast Salish territories.

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Preamble

I am a *Skwxwú7mesh* (Squamish; Coast Salish Peoples Indigenous to Southern British Columbia, Canada) contemplative educator and practitioner-scholar. I have spent over 20 years working with Indigenous Peoples across Canada facilitating educational processes aimed at ameliorating the harmful legacy of colonialism and residential schools. I am one voice of many who yearn for and continue to work tirelessly towards reconciliation, healing, liberation, and justice for Indigenous Peoples.

My academic colleagues who are also working for the rights and knowledges of Indigenous Peoples continue to suffer “death by a thousand cuts” (J. Wilson, personal communication, March 14, 2023) as they navigate epistemic and systemic violence even in institutions of higher education. In the face of this brutalizing banal reality, I endeavour to find an ethical way forward that transcends the psycho-social-cultural patterns of harm and destruction that are part of the legacy of colonialism.

We now find ourselves at the precipice of massive transformation where serious calls for reconciliation within higher education are creating entry points for the accommodation of Indigenous knowledges. However, in my experience, despite some receptivity to our ways, many people are not adequately prepared for the paradigm shift and psychological transformations that are initiated through Indigenous ways of learning and coming to know.

The psychological, emotional, and often spiritual awakenings that can occur when learning about Indigenous Peoples’ histories as well as participating in Indigenous ways provoke strong defensive and even violent responses in those who know teaching and learning as exclusively intellectual activities focused on knowledge and skills acquisition. Many do not see reconciliation as a process of transformation that demands change of their whole being: their mind-heart-body-spirit. They do not see reconciliation as a learning process in which they are personally implicated. They still see it as an action item on a checklist.

I assert that reconciliation must be undertaken as a sacred rite of passage, and like all rituals, there are intentional steps one must take to prepare for a journey that moves them beyond the familiar territory of intellectual learning into the terrain of deep heart healing and transformation. Colonialism is a hurtful, harmful, and destructive worldview and way of value-making. Wounding is inevitable, even to those who impose it on others.

In this essay I put forward a way of being in the world and encountering “death by a thousand cuts”; I have named this way as becoming the *imperfect friend* (IF). Perfectionism, I will argue, is part of the violent legacy of colonialism. I will demonstrate how becoming an imperfect friend in a world driven by perfectionism could create effective pathways towards reconciliation, healing, and transformation in higher education. I introduce *Skwxwú7mesh* philosophy as a way of life and show how *Skwxwú7mesh* ways provide a powerful pathway for becoming the imperfect friend in a world ethos of death by a thousand cuts. In the process, I also show the affinity of *Skwxwú7mesh* Indigenous philosophy to contemplative education that is currently receiving growing attention worldwide.

The essay concludes with a description of a *Skwxwú7mesh*-led program, Moving Together in the Ways of the People, an Indigenous education program at Simon Fraser University (SFU) that I led the development of. This program is an example of how *Skwxwú7mesh* philosophy and contemplative wisdom traditions and education can serve as powerful pathways towards

healing and reconciliation.

The Perfect Stranger and the Violence of Perfection

Through my community work and scholarship, I have come to understand that the first step in the process of reconciliation is developing an awareness of what Lenape and Potawatomi scholar Susan Dion calls *the perfect stranger position* (Marchiggin, 2013). The perfect stranger can be described as one who maintains their distance, denies culpability for harms done through the process of colonialism, and maintains a position of willful ignorance, thereby refusing to take personal responsibility. The perfect stranger avoids being personally implicated in the problem and does not wholeheartedly participate, nor feel moved to participate, in anything that would risk changing their heart. Thus, the perfect stranger's participation in reconciliation remains superficial, even though busily and, even exhaustingly, participating in the many activities orchestrated as part of reconciliation. I would go as far as to say that the perfect stranger may politely look down at and silently opt out of reconciliation, excusing themselves on the basis of not knowing enough and not being personally implicated.

In a journal article entitled "Identifying and Working Through Settler Ignorance," Rice, Dion, Fowle, and Breen (2020) unpack the nuances of settler ignorance that result in silencing and erasure of Indigenous realities and reinforcement of the status quo. Dion indicates that normalization of the perfect stranger is the result of long-standing narratives that prioritize the ideas and ideals of the Modernist Industrial West concerning what it is to be educated. While there are various ways of characterizing what these ideas and ideals are, I would not hesitate to characterize them as the legacy of colonialism. Colonialism is about invading, violating, and subjugating *different* others, with the justification that they are "inferior" by the standards of "perfection" imposed by the invader, that is, the colonizer. The motivation for invasion is straightforward: taking away the lands and resources from those who have cultivated kinship and reciprocity with these lands over time, rendering the victims of their violence into economically and socially disadvantaged and underprivileged circumstances. These initial violations that result in oppression are systemically maintained through the governing work of perfect strangers who occupy positions of power.

I discovered Dion in my search for Indigenist thinkers and theories that would assist me in articulating an insidious relational dynamic, pervasive in marginalized and oppressed groups that I encountered repeatedly in my work with Indigenous communities and peoples. This dynamics is named *lateral violence* (UBC Learning Circle, 2015). Lateral violence takes place in a hierarchical social structure, as in colonialism, in which the violence that is exercised from above (the superior) towards below (the inferior) is then discharged laterally. Lateral violence stems from psychological defenses that prohibit vulnerable connection. The violated defends themselves by hardening against "weak" emotions they may experience in facing those who are hurt and suffering, including themselves. Weak emotions would be characterized as empathic responses of tenderness and sympathetic pain, both necessary for healing, that may dispose the violated to take compassionate actions. Through this same psychological mechanism, one begins to dislike and despise the hurt, the weak, and the vulnerable, leading to an ongoing cycle of hurt, suffering, and the perpetuation of trauma.

Although Dion talks about the role of the perfect stranger as occupied by settlers, I have come to see that this is a role also taken up in Indigenous peoples' relationships to each other. This makes sense. To repeat, perfect stranger relating prohibits psychological intimacy and empathic understanding from developing. When this happens to us, we become dismissive of,

and minimise, hurt and suffering that we and others experience. We may even go very far in this direction and become cruel and act in brutality, becoming bullies as a way of surviving. In witnessing the magnitude of violence in the world, I propose that the future of our planet depends on freeing up ourselves from these dynamics of perfect stranger relating.

The perfect stranger position is a way of relating that promotes a kind of relational blindness, objectification, and othering of Indigenous Peoples, histories, ways, and knowledges. This distance makes empathic relating impossible and prohibits healing, transformation and ultimately, reconciliation. We remain distanced strangers: aloof, cold, unresponsive, and unmoved. The perfect stranger does not have to enter the messy terrain or relational vulnerability that reconciliation calls for. Instead, the perfect stranger maintains an image of perfection, infallibility, and competence, while promoting a stereotype that marginalizes those who do not and should not ever fit this image.

It is my conviction that Indigenous Peoples and knowledges are needed now more than ever before. However, introducing Indigenous ways of knowing and being into educational institutions is a path fraught with psychological and political obstacles, for the Indigenous ways are in stark contrast to the colonial ways. For instance, inviting spirituality and emotion into the classroom would feel overwhelming and even threatening to those who have thrived within an educational paradigm that has normalized perfect stranger ways of relating.

Contemplative Education and Skwxwú7mesh Philosophy

Everywhere there are signs that educators and students are not only growing tired of but also becoming sick from adhering to colonialist modes of teaching, learning, and relating that are rooted in perfect stranger positionality. People are looking for ethical ways to shift from perfect stranger and its accompanying sense of estrangement to what I come to call “imperfect friendship” and its conviviality, honesty, caring, and compassion. But it is not as though we can just adopt this new way, like going out and shopping for a new dress or a coat. Becoming an imperfect friend is a process of education in that transformation of all aspects of self is required: mind-body-heart-spirit/soul. In the process, the learner may also experience healing of their wounded self, which is integral to education itself. It is here that I wish to introduce and talk about a mode of education known as contemplative education.

I am a graduate of a Master’s program, called Contemplative Inquiry and Approaches in Education, at Simon Fraser University. This program has three pillars as its aims of education: contemplative education, holistic education, and transformative education. My immersion in this profoundly transformative program resulted in coming to understand the multiplicity of pathways for learning that go far beyond intellectual and skills development. I came to see that my lived experiences, emotions, body, and ancestral ways of knowledge transmission were important aspects of teaching and learning that had not been included in my previous education experiences. The program was incredibly validating for me in that it gave me an opportunity to consciously develop existing knowledge channels which had been guiding me intuitively throughout my life, such as my physical body, dreams, and emotional experiences. These knowledge channels that feel so natural to me were never included as part of my educational journey until immersion in this program in contemplative inquiry which resulted in my own healing and transformation. I was as if I had come home, finally finding myself in an educational setting with instructors, in which my whole imperfect self, lived experiences, and ancestral knowledges were invited and valued.

I was encouraged throughout the program to engage with my lived experience and in doing

so, came to realize that demonstrating vulnerability and imperfection as opposed to performing perfection was an aspect of mastery that many other contemplative teachers and scholars had explored and written about in the context of ancient wisdom traditions and contemporary education.

For instance, I experienced a major life tragedy during the program. My initial reaction was to quit simply because I felt as if I were falling apart. I could not see myself showing up and being able to hold it together, to perform, in order to be a good/perfect participant. I came to see, through the mentorship of the instructors and the support of my cohort mates, that my life experiences were profoundly pedagogical and that what I was going through offered an important pathway for coming to know which was unique to me. Again, the focus was not on being a polished expert but on becoming the imperfect friend and encouraging that imperfection within the cohort so that we could accommodate, value, and include the realities of peoples' lived experiences past and present. The ethos of imperfect friendship that was created resulted in learning and development that went far beyond typical knowledge acquisition to encompass an embodied way of knowing and being that included emotional, spiritual, and ancestral dimensions of learning akin to *Skwaxwú7mesh* values about whole person development, teaching, learning, and healing.

Although healing is not explicitly articulated within Indigenous worldviews, the achievement of whole person development and concomitant harmonious ethical relating are considered among the highest aims of education; traditionally approached holistically, they encompass the development of wisdom, ethics, and good intersubjective relating. Within dominant educational paradigms that narrowly define "academic rigor," these aims tend to get neglected and regarded as not within the domain of "serious" academia. The multiplicity of capacities we carry to read and respond ethically to our world, which normally lay dormant in traditional pedagogical settings, can be developed through Contemplative Education and Indigenous knowledges, and specifically *Skwaxwú7mesh* philosophy and values. Contemplative education, in particular, can provide educators and students with a safe praxis for becoming the imperfect friend in preparation for participating in and experiencing Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies, which often leads to serious paradigmatic shifts and healing.

In the introduction to the book, *Contemplative Learning and Inquiry across Disciplines*, Gunnlaugson, Sarath, Scott, and Bai (2014) describe the development of the ability to read patterns as a central aspect of contemplative tradition and education. They share that the traditional role of being contemplatives is as masters of observation and interpretation, skilled at reading patterns and signs as a result of engagement with nature. While intellectual development has been the main priority and measure in mainstream higher education, Gunnlaugson et al. remind us that contemplative capacities have not been given the same consideration. I agree, and can add that the authors here would corroborate my sense that mainstream higher education in Canada does not adequately develop the psycho-social-ecological aspects of educators and learners for the re-emerging priority within higher education: healing needed for truth and reconciliation.

The qualities and dispositions of persons developed through contemplative education are aspects of society that have been neglected by conventional education to the point that we can no longer ignore the deleterious impacts of human irresponsibility. Engaging with contemplative education creates powerful inclusive learning and healing ecologies in which the whole person can develop, not just their cognitive and intellectual capacities. Contemplative education can offer a praxis for healing from the deep wounds all peoples are suffering from

while supporting the development of the capacities necessary to change the trajectory of our world.

Contemplative education offers highly contextualized pedagogical pathways for healing and transformation that provide both teachers and students opportunities to develop inner capacities to address outer realities. Breaking down the wall of objectivity in dominant colonial paradigms and becoming the imperfect friend can be done respectfully, lovingly, and with dignity through contemplative education, and can adequately prepare people to engage with Indigenous Peoples, knowledges, and ways that bring people together to heal and to reconcile.

Eslhélha7kwhims is a *Skw̓xwú7mesh* philosophical view that is also shared across many contemplative wisdom traditions. *Eslhélha7kwhims* is a worldview in which we perceive how we are all related, and we are all one. In other words, it is an ethical, relational way of being in the world from which an awareness of the inter-relatedness of all things guides what we think, feel, say, and do. It is an ontological disposition cultivated through immersion in *Skw̓xwú7mesh* life, theories, and practices and one that the world needs now more than ever.

For a *Skw̓xwú7mesh* person, *eslhélha7kwhims* is a sacred teaching with complex philosophical, ontological, and epistemological implications for existing in the world. The mark of a good education includes the embodiment of *eslhélha7kwhims*; however, this requires careful cultivation through *Skw̓xwú7mesh* traditional and cultural lifeways and would otherwise be at risk of lying dormant in traditional learning settings.

Indigenous education, teaching, and learning encompasses the processes of healing, transformation, and whole person development as integrated processes that require the right conditions. Developing a worldview in which *eslhélha7kwhims* is perceivable necessitates a vulnerable healing journey and the recovery of sensibilities dulled by the noise and violence of colonialization. Striving to understand and embody *eslhélha7kwhims* helps remind us of the vulnerable and shared experience of being human, which is the *Skw̓xwú7mesh* philosophical disposition of *stélmexw*.

Stélmexw, which means being human, reminds me to be the imperfect friend and to invite imperfection in those around me by connecting through our universal shared existential destinies and conditions such as birth, death, love, loss, suffering, joy, disappointment, and longing, to name a few. Embracing *stélmexw* renders me open to the intersubjective relating that we need for reconciliation and healing, which aligns with messages about holistic learning and transformation that characterize contemplative education. These teachings help me not only to understand *Skw̓xwú7mesh* philosophy in the aftermath of colonization, but also to embody a much-needed way of being in all that I do as a mother, educator, scholar, and earth walker. Through this shared understanding of the existential condition of imperfection and our need for friendship, love, and conviviality, we can recover and re-ignite our capacity to recognize the sacred, and to become whole, ethical, reflective, integrated beings.

From the position of imperfect friend, we can reconcile and heal from the past and reimagine a new shared vision of education and the future. *Skw̓xwú7mesh* philosophy and the wisdom of *eslhélha7kwhims* and *stélmexw* intertwine beautifully with contemplative traditions that include exploration of the shared human condition, providing potently transformative learning ecologies that are holistic, nurture human development, and facilitate social and ecological integration through transformative education that heals.

The recovery and development of heart and spirit, and our universal and innate human

capacity to perceive and respond ethically to the ever-changing patterns all around us through understandings and experiences of *eslbelba7kwihins* and *stelmexw*, are shared aims of *Skwxwú7mesh* philosophy and contemplative education. Revitalizing these philosophical understandings can guide healing within my own nation and inform healing centred pedagogies (Ginwright, 2020) within higher education institutions grappling with reconciliation. How I practice education flows from this way of being in the world, and my pedagogy aims to restore that which is sacred, and that which invites and fosters imperfect friend relating through embodying *eslbelba7kwihins* and *stelmexw*.

Moving Together in the Ways of the People

Within educational institutions like Simon Fraser University, where despite reconciliation policies (SFU Aboriginal Reconciliation Council, 2017), the system itself is set up to maintain a perfect stranger position; resistance to meaningful engagement with the truth and ultimately, with each other, is normalized. Distance, performance and perfection are continually rewarded and held up as the gold standard.

In the summer and fall of 2022, I led the development of a *Skwxwú7mesh* education program intended to support decolonization and Indigenization in the classroom, in partnership with Simon Fraser University's Centre for Educational Excellence. The aim of the program was to bring the Simon Fraser University Aboriginal Reconciliation Council's *Walk This Path with Us* report to life, and to carry forward the faculty's and graduate students' visions of decolonization and reconciliation in their personal, professional, and academic lives.

As we began to conceptualize the program, we formed an advisory group comprised of local Indigenous scholars, Elders, knowledge carriers, students, and allies as an important first step in honouring the ways of the people. Through discussions about *stelmexw* and what it means to be human and to cultivate Coast Salish and *Skwxwú7mesh* educational concepts of coming to know, the group determined that the program needed to take place within community, led by local knowledge carriers, and within the context of ceremony. We determined that carving and painting cedar paddles in preparation for paddling in the Salish seas in the *kwuhulb*, or canoe, carved from 700-year-old red cedar, would provide a powerful pedagogical praxis for coming to know what it means to become an imperfect friend and to be *stelmexw*—living, learning, and teaching in sacred Coast Salish lands. This wisdom is desperately needed in academia in an ethos of reconciliation where many are struggling to make sense of calls to action and what it means to truly decolonize education.

Centring concepts of *stelmexw* enabled us to create a space in which both Indigenous Peoples and settlers could come together safely within community and ceremony led by *Skwxwú7mesh* knowledge carriers and Elders. Stepping away from the walls of the institution required an openness not commonly encouraged in traditional academic settings where performance often perpetuates and normalizes perfect stranger relating. It became apparent early on that this project would provide a pathway for reconciliation and healing amongst participants and organizers, transforming perfect strangers into imperfect friends. We witnessed a rapid shift in the learning environment as participants, organizers, Elders, and knowledge carriers came to know and care for one another. A sense of family developed that lent itself to vulnerability within the daily circles during which participants shared personal reflections, insights, hopes, and regrets about their roles in the future of education and the meaning of reconciliation.



Photo by Calder Chevie, October 2023, MTWP Cohort

The program was considered highly unconventional by the non-Indigenous participants, in that it was led by *S'kw'w'w'um* Peoples, Elders, and knowledge carriers, and took place, for the most part, off campus on sacred Coast Salish, *S'kw'w'w'um*, and Tseil-Waututh lands and seas. These two significant factors changed the usual power dynamics present within academic institutions by breaking down the relational barriers that serve to maintain the institutional hierarchies that are based on othering and depend on, in many cases, the perpetuation of fear, exclusion, oppression, racism, and marginalization. In other words, they are dependent on the perfect stranger position. Instead, participants found themselves immersed in the safety of ceremony and *S'kw'w'w'um* protocol every step of the way.

Looking inward was supported through immersion in community, participation in sacred ceremony and ritual, being cared for by *S'kw'w'w'um* knowledge carriers and Elders, learning to shape a traditional Coast Salish sea-going canoe paddle out of red cedar, eating meals together, engaging in personal reflection, and sharing stories. These experiences facilitated an integration of learners' mind, body, heart, and spirit through contemplative, creative, spiritual, and holistic means that helped us all in becoming imperfect friends.

S'kw'w'w'um ways of knowing and being provided opportunities for coming to know through indirect psycho-social and community integration. In "Fitting in Breath Hunting," Leiser and Sakulkoo (2014, p. 86) cite Canadian educator Jackie Seidel (2006) who describes contemplative teaching as "something that can turn our work into a form of love, memory, and intimacy, reminding of us of our deep life relationship time and place, and possibly having incalculable implications for our curriculum interpretation and classroom practices." By providing a praxis that invites participants to take up a relationship with their own lived experiences, emotions, and thoughts, we facilitate a process by which psycho-social transformation and ecological and community integration can unfold. We become better relatives and imperfect friends more equipped to respond in ethical ways to each other, the land, and the problems we face.

Coast Salish *S'kw'w'w'um* Peoples have flourished along coastal areas since time immemorial. My dad and my grandfather were both raised on the water, fishing along the

coast, and both developed a unique and complex intelligence (and sense of humour) as a result of their relationship with the Salish lands and seas. The canoe is an important symbol representing connection between land, ocean, communities, past and future generations, and ceremony. The complexity of the teachings of the canoe are vast; one could spend a lifetime trying to understand this way of life and still only know only a fraction of it.

According to knowledge carrier and the head of the *Skwxwú7mesh* canoe family Larry “Shucks” Nahanee, the canoe is teacher and is considered the single most important manifestation of Northwest Coast Salish culture (Nahanee et al., 2021). Its revival represents a complex holistic pedagogical pathway that facilitates teaching, learning, and healing in political, ecological, psycho-social, and cultural domains that are not adequately or ethically evaluated with methodologies typically used within higher education.

How might we ethically measure a learning process that fosters a sense of safety and vulnerability, and engenders a sense of inclusion, community, and family? Within this process, coming to know through carving a paddle provided a praxis for understanding—to some extent—the ways of the *Skwxwú7mesh* People and our philosophy of being all related and of being human. Outside of an educational system decimated by colonialism, each participant developed a unique inner capacity to carry these teachings back into their lives in personally and professionally relevant ways, as educators and students.

One of the most obvious results that emerged from Moving Together in the Ways of the People was a collectively witnessed, deepened capacity for intersubjective vulnerable relating and respect for difference. Carving a paddle and paddling together as a cohort facilitated a powerful, safe, dignified, and culturally distinctive praxis for becoming the imperfect friend. As a result, we witnessed individual and collective healing, expanded imagination (Sheridan & Longboat, 2006), revitalization of hope in the face of overwhelming institutional burnout, and a renewed sense of community spirit and feelings of being empowered in our ability to make a difference in teaching, learning, and community.

Many educators proclaimed that before the program, they were questioning their role in the institution and whether they could continue under current circumstances, feeling alienated and unappreciated. However, after participating in the program they felt renewed, hopeful, cared for, revitalized, re-engaged, and part of something bigger and more meaningful than themselves. Indigenous Elders and knowledge carriers involved experienced a sense of dignity and pride, and a re-establishment of trust. An expanded sense of community and conviviality amongst participants and a palpable spirit of reconciliation, emerged between nation and institution.

Moving Together in the Ways of the People provided a profoundly transformative praxis for educators and students to participate in the emplaced, land based, spiritual, and ancestral life ways of the *Skwxwú7mesh* Peoples. This experiential pathway developed their inner capacities to engage in self-inquiry, intersubjective discourse, and contemplative inquiry and to discover unique implications for practice that each one of them came to know differently. These are understandings and ways of knowing that I believe may have otherwise been highly provocative within the institutional educational setting and may have caused people to retreat to the familiar and defensive position of perfect stranger. Instead, Moving Together in the Ways of the People resulted in a strong sense of togetherness and revitalization of much needed kinship relationships; a connection to place and land; respect for Indigenous knowledges, teachers, and Elders; and, I think most importantly, the development of a

powerful learning community with a renewed sense of hope and imagination for possibilities within education and for reconciliation at Simon Fraser University. *Moving Together in the Ways of the People* showed us that together, *Sḵwx̱wú7mesh* philosophy and values, along with contemplative education, can offer ethical and innovative pathways for healing and reconciliation in higher education, simultaneously contributing to healing for and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and community.

Glossary

eslhéha7kwhiws	we are all one; a <i>Sḵwx̱wú7mesh</i> word used to describe the way all things are related
kxwu7lh	the <i>Sḵwx̱wú7mesh</i> canoe, carved from a 700-year-old cedar tree by Cedric Billy between 1992 and 1993
<i>Sḵwx̱wú7mesh</i>	Squamish; Coast Salish Peoples Indigenous to Southern British Columbia, Canada
stélmexw	being human, being an Indigenous person
Tsleil-Waututh Nation	the peoples of Burrard Inlet, previously known as the Burrard Indian Band or Burrard Inlet Indian Band, in British Columbia, Canada

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