Community Story Circles: An Opportunity to Rethink the Epistemological Approach to Heritage Interpretive Planning

Lesley Curthoys, Brent Cuthbertson & Julie Clark, Lakehead University, Canada

Abstract

Storytelling is one way of sharing what it means to live in a particular place: its history, inhabitants, opportunities, challenges, rhythms, ways of life, and obligations to that place. This paper offers an exploration of the nature and significance of coming together to orally share place-based stories, within the context of environmental and cultural interpretation. The community story circle invites co-existence of diverse stories independent of time. Historic, near past, and in-the moment stories of place mingle and play in unexpected ways, offering textured insight into what it means to be in a particular place. While all forms of narrative inquiry are valuable for interpretive planning, our findings suggest that the synergy of the community story circle provides a depth and diversity that may not emerge with more individualistic narrative methods. Beyond interpretation, this mode of coming to know place offers possibilities for other forms of place-based education.

Resumé

La narration est un moyen de partager ce qu'est vivre dans un lieu particulier : son histoire, ses habitants, ses occasions, ses défis, ses rythmes, ses modes de vie, et les obligations envers ce lieu. Le présent article porte sur la nature et l'importance des rassemblements visant à partager oralement les histoires locales, dans le contexte de l'interprétation environnementale et culturelle. Le cercle de narration collective invite à la coexistence de différentes histoires, indépendamment de l'époque. Des histoires locales anciennes, récentes et contemporaines se rencontrent et se mélangent de façon inattendue, jetant un éclairage révélateur sur ce que signifie d'être dans un endroit particulier. Tandis qu'en planification interprétative toutes les formes d'enquête narrative sont valables, nos constatations indiquent que la synergie du cercle de narration collective donne lieu à une profondeur et une diversité que les méthodes narratives individualistes ne peuvent pas créer. Au-delà de l'interprétation, cette façon de découvrir le lieu permet d'élaborer d'autres formes d'éducation locale.

Keywords: story circle, heritage interpretation, knowledge of place dwellers, pluralist meanings of place

I am bound to the earth by a web of stories.
-Scott Russell Saunders (1993, p. 150)

Our Story

In this paper we investigate the role of story circle as a research method that appears to enrich and diversify heritage interpretive planning. Our story circle took place at Rainbow Falls Provincial Park on the shores of Lake Superior (Kitchi Gami)—the most northern and pristine of North America's Great Lakes. A group of eight people gathered around a campfire, immersed in a landscape of contrasting elements: the hushed silence of a snow-covered woodland broken occasionally by the spring calls of Black-capped chickadees and the crashing waves of an inland sea. Three of the people were researchers, the remaining five were north shore residents. We met to share stories *about* place, *in* place. The stories flowed readily for two hours, punctuated with laughter and friendly jabs, narratives building upon one another, then suddenly diverting in new directions, creating a rich storytelling experience. This setting and follow-up focus group in a nearby café, provided the opportunity to experience a story circle, and explore how the act of sharing place-based stories might aid heritage interpretive planning.

Story Context

Heritage interpretation is defined as a specialized communication process and educational activity designed to facilitate intellectual and emotional connections with places, communities of life, people and events through firsthand experiences (Interpretation Canada, 2010; National Association for Interpretation, 2010; Tilden, 1977). Kohl and Eubanks (2008) describe interpretation as a "cultural discipline that has evolved to mediate meanings that place managers wish to promote with meanings diverse audiences find relevant and personal" (p. 63). While it has been debated whether mediation of place-meanings is required or even desired by tourists (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006), most interpreters recognize story as central to experiencing place-meanings (Clifford, 1994; Kohen & Sikoryak, 2001; Voase, 2007). However, the interpretive profession has been criticized for privileging Western science-based thinking as the dominant source of story. For example, Staiff, Bushell, and Kennedy (2002) called for more attention to the epistemological underpinnings of heritage messages, and the need to question: Who owns heritage and who should speak for it? What is said about heritage values and why? These questions are central to planning efforts aimed at creating authentic, inclusive, and responsible interpretive experiences. As Shar (2007) notes, "Too many community projects interpret only one individual or group's experience and other narratives, sometimes the key to understanding the interpretation, are not considered" (p. 11).

Local involvement in the identification and communication of locally significant landscape values is a hallmark of community interpretation. This relatively new branch of the profession broadens the focus from "place managers" to "place dwellers" by providing a vehicle for neighbours to say, "This is our heritage, this is what we value in our environment, this is part of us, this is what we want to share and how we want you to know us" (Binks, 1989, p. 190). More recently, civic tourism advocates the need for urban and rural planners to listen to local voices. For example, Shilling (2007) suggests that, "every town *is* a story, and through conversations with the entire community, not just historians and the museum crew, you're likely to uncover the narrative and determine if and how it can be shared with guests" (p. 69). However, the danger of colonial-based communities favouring Eurocentric history over Indigenous history was noted by Leader-Elliott (2005) as one limitation of community-based interpretation. A pluralist approach to interpretation aimed at creating what Batten (2005) termed a "shared history" is important for any community wishing to minimize cultural misunderstandings. Abram (1996) takes the challenge one step further in calling attention to the human tendency to marginalize the voices of our more-than-human community members. How might we bring their individual stories (in contrast to abstract scientific accounts) into the interpretive planning milieu?

In working with story as a tool to capitalize on knowledge assets, Colton and Ward (2004) argue that story form offers a way to shift from: the general to specific or unique moment; the abstract to the real; theory to practice; and from models to meaningful experiences and examples. Thus story's attributes hold space for the dweller's experiences and knowledge systems. Techniques used by interpretive planners to access human community stories include documentary research, field studies (e.g., transect walks), oral histories, interviews, environmental memoirs, community mapping, focus groups, and story circles (Australian Heritage Commission, 2000; Brochu, 2003; Carter, 2001; Kaufman, 2007; Pieresené, 1999). Here we investigate the story circle as a method to expand the epistemological centre of interpretive planning to home-place as known through the ongoing, lived-experiences of community members.

Why a Community Story Gathering?

The story circle event evolved organically via collaboration with four Northwestern Ontario towns (Nipigon, Rossport, Schreiber, and Terrace Bay) involved with a multi-year action research project of a community-focused interpretive planning framework (Clark, 1999; Curthoys, Cuthbertson & Clark 2007). During several focus groups, residents expressed concerns over the ongoing loss of regional knowledge. One community co-researcher recommended a social gathering to share stories as a possible solution. We acted on this suggestion for four reasons. First, taking a narrative approach aligns with our belief that the interpretive planning process is a prime opportunity to engage people in a

dialogue with and about their home-place (Curthoys & Clark, 2002). Second, the act of oral storytelling raises awareness of place into everyday consciousness (Strauss, 1996) and is the time-honoured way of sharing what it means to live in a particular place: its history, inhabitants, opportunities, challenges, rhythms, ways of life, and obligations to that place (Abram, 1996; Basso, 1996; Chatwin, 1987; Gyorgyfalvy, 2002). Third, bringing to light the stories of everyday life addressed the need to expand the source of interpretive stories beyond science. Fourth, "conventional methods of sociological interviewing tend to suppress respondents' stories" (Chase, 1995, p. 18; see also Mishler, 1986). Thus, a form of narrative inquiry was engaged in which participants' stories were not only encouraged and validated, but were the focus of the gathering, a detail communicated in advance to the participants.

Community Story Circle as a Research Method

This research draws upon narrative inquiry both as an epistemological stance (story as a valid way of knowing) and a research methodology (story as a way of studying and gathering place-based knowledge). Following Wells (2011), the terms "narrative" and "story" are used to mean the same thing in this article. Narrative analysis has gained prominence as a research methodology in a wide range of disciplines including social work, nursing, psychology, anthropology, education, sociology, organizational studies, health research, philosophy, and business (Elliott, 2005). However, the dynamics and outcomes of *collective* story sharing have received minimal attention. Nor is the story circle addressed in prominent handbooks on narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2007; Riessman, 2008; Wells, 2011), likely due to the limited published accounts of its use in research settings. These accounts are discussed below. Our case study adds to this methodology discourse through exploration of the research potential of collective story sharing within an interpretive planning context.

Organizational behaviour studies offer insight into the story circle as a research method. Snowden (1999; 2000) and McCormack and Milne (2003) used the method for the purpose of understanding corporate change and knowledge management. As a way of knowing, Snowden (2000) describes group storytelling as an organic and non-invasive way to communicate values and complex tacit knowledge. He found that directly asking people what they know only accesses superficial knowledge, whereas narrative reconstruction accesses a deeper comprehension of key heuristics, experience and natural talent associated with learning.

Within the heritage interpretation literature, Kaufman (2007) introduced the story circle as a technique to learn about a community's place-based stories. He recommends a structured narrative event where flexible research participants individually tell stories for a limited amount of time. Here, we build on the work of Kaufman by applying the story circle method in a more organic, collaborative

way. In this regard, our application of the story circle shares similarities with Indigenous epistemologies where story is a recognized means of co-creating knowledge (Kovach, 2009).

Thinking About and With Community Stories

One of the ongoing debates in narrative inquiry is the "proper" methodological treatment of personal narratives: thinking *about* stories versus thinking *with* stories (Bochner, 2001). Frank (1995) explained the different approaches in this way: "To think about a story is to reduce it to content and then analyze the content. . . . To think with a story is to experience its affecting one's own life and to find in that effect a certain truth of one's life" (p. 23). We found both approaches of value for the purpose of this study, which was to investigate the story circle as a method to expand the epistemological centre of interpretive planning to home-place as known through the ongoing lived experiences of community members.

In thinking *with* stories, we considered the overall campfire experience, the dynamic interplay of storytellers and stories told, the unfolding sense of place, and the lasting impressions of whole stories that re-surface even to this day for the researchers. Living with the stories told and thinking about the story gathering is more akin to Indigenous epistemologies that tend to be less fragmentary (Atleo, 2004 as cited in Kovach, 2009). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) commented that "narrative expressions" (actions, doings, and happenings) are "the stuff of narrative inquiry" essential to making sense of individual stories as part of a much broader social landscape (pp. 78-79). Thinking with stories and their socio-ecological context complements a holistic interpretive planning approach (see Curthoys & Cuthbertson, 2002 for details).

In thinking *about* stories, thematic analysis was applied to both story content and story sharing process, as well as to the focus group discussion. We used what Denzin (1978) termed "investigator triangulation" to check and establish validity. Each researcher initially coded transcripts of the sessions independently. Results were then shared among the researchers and discussed on several occasions in order to begin theme development. The term "research theme" is meant to distinguish its methodological connotation (reoccurring patterns of thought and core meanings) from the interpretation profession's connotation (main message of a communication medium). Initial coding descriptors were compared and reorganized to reflect relationships in the observations made. The entire analysis followed an inductive process, as is typical in the examination of recorded conversation (see Silverman, 2003). A search for meaning in text sought to gain insights into interactions among speakers and whole messages as well as single phrases and sentences.

Facilitating a Community Story Circle

Through our previous work with community members, a list of potential local story circle participants was generated. Individual invitations were extended to people on this list, with encouragement to invite others who might also be interested in the story-sharing event. Five residents (three women and two men) from four communities along the north shore of Lake Superior met with the research team on a late-winter day at a campground beside the lake. Community members recommended this location. Trust is an important element to consider when planning a story circle (Kovach, 2009; Snowden, 1999); techniques for trust building in community settings are offered in *Kitchen Table Sustainability* (Sarkissian et al., 2008). In our case, the participants were already acquainted, and they all knew us through an ongoing action research project on community-focused interpretation. Thus the existing element of trust and friendship lent itself to an atmosphere conducive for telling tales. The group was loosely organized around a local trail hiking club, but the participants' interests ranged across a variety of outdoor-oriented activities including hiking, power boating, bird watching, and sea kayaking. We began with a campfire story sharing session at a local park, which became spontaneous and organic in its development.

The sharing of stories at this event lasted nearly two hours, beginning with introductions between residents and researchers as people arrived and gathered around the campfire. An initial awkwardness gave way to an organic and spontaneous telling of tales rooted in place. This purposeful gathering was to encourage participants to share regional stories. The session began with an invitation by the researchers—conducted through story—for others to share their own north shore stories. We, as researchers, believed that immersion into the research event (i.e., joining the story circle as opposed to being passive observers) was the most appropriate way to create a comfortable setting conducive for natural story sharing. As noted by Knapp (2007), "In qualitative research, it is thought that the researcher can learn the most about a situation by participating in and/or being immersed in it" (p. 2). Participants were then encouraged to share their stories (however the idea of story might be interpreted) of places, events, and experiences that were important to them.

Community Reflection on the Story Circle Method

Listening to personal narratives told around the campfire was immediately followed by an informal, one-hour focus group at a local restaurant, designed to debrief the participants' experience. Here the classic focus group method (Madriz, 2003) was followed to facilitate reflection upon the story sharing session, and to a more general discussion about the role of story sharing in community life. Examples of questions asked include:

- Did listening to today's stories or hearing today's stories have any kind of impact on you?
- Is storytelling one of the ways you came to know this place?
- Do you think sharing stories is a useful way to explore your home-place?
- What role do you think stories could play or even should play in a community?

Findings: Story Circle Research Themes

Thematic analysis revealed five themes. Two themes were associated with the story sharing *process:* "story salting" and "story weaving." Three themes pertained to story sharing *outcomes:* "enhanced knowledge of place"; "realization of north shore connectedness"; and "engaged emotions." Participants specifically stated the first two outcomes when asked what impact telling and hearing stories had on them, while both observations of the story circle and follow-up reflection revealed the third outcome. The outcomes were closely intertwined with the very nature of the story sharing process itself.

Research Theme One: Story Salting. An interesting element of the process was the way one story would trigger other stories. It was clear that the mention of an experience that might have a slight parallel with someone else's experience provided an opportunity for sharing, sometimes about those thoughts "tucked away" or forgotten. The story circle provided the space and the time to *remember together*. The joy of remembering was quite evident in facial expressions and language. Beilin's (1998) study on the connection between Australian farmwomen's life stories and landscapes found that "the process of storytelling invites the participation of a collective memory. As the stories of one woman trigger collective recognition, the other women add to their descriptions" (p. 173). This was also the case for our own study. Threads could often easily be traced from one anecdote to the beginning of another and then on to the next story. For example, at the outset of the conversation, one participant noted she was originally a "flatlander" after one of the researchers had introduced herself as being from the prairies. This sparked a memory from another participant who recalled: "It's interesting the people you meet around here from the flatlands." A story then unfolded about taking that individual to see a local geological phenomenon, which in turn triggered a sharing of information about the area's geological history and formations. "Oh I've got a story much the same" and variations of this sentiment were expressed throughout our gathering. This contagious nature of social storytelling lends itself to creating collaborative community narratives, thereby providing a more complex, pluralistic sense of place.

Research Theme Two: Story Weaving. Throughout the story gathering we observed (and participated in) spontaneous and continual interjections into the various narratives in progress—to add details based on personal experiences, to question, to ponder, and to express emotional responses. Thus, there was a circuitous flow of stories, shared elaborations upon those experiences, and the

role of storyteller versus listener was readily interchangeable. The interchangeability of narrator-audience role resulted in shared authority in storytelling. As one participant commented, "The funny thing is it just occurred to me we all have a story to tell here." These findings suggest shared authority of group storytelling serves to socially construct place knowledge and influence place-oriented relationships.

Research Theme Three: Enhanced Knowledge of Place. Through the interactive nature of the communal narrative and shared contemplation of place, the opportunity existed for participants to develop a collective and enriched sense of the north shore. Specifically, this outcome was evidenced by:

- comparisons of different experiences of the same place or life-form;
- discovery of new information;
- realization of shared place-based experiences and intimate knowledge of local distinctiveness;
- articulation and consensus building around locally significant heritage values; and
- triggered memories about past experiences and places.

The participants commented on their amazement at the "expansive amount of knowledge" jointly held by this small group of storytellers, as well as their appreciation of learning about their home-place from each other. Over the course of the afternoon, the storytellers imparted their regional knowledge on topics as wide ranging as ancient microfossils, human history, lake travel safety, boating adventures, close encounters with caribou, blueberries, lighthouse lore, trains, shipwrecks, and more. Group story sharing lends itself to gaining insight into what local dwellers value about their region. Related to knowledge of place, reflection upon the story circle evoked comment on the responsibility of residents to keep their stories alive: "That's the one thing I think, if stories are not passed on from generation to generation they are going to get lost. You know its up to us to use the stories that we have. We should pass them on to our children so they can pass them onto their children, so they're not lost into history. You know I think we need to do that."

Research Theme Four: Realization of North Shore Connections. The second outcome of sharing place-based stories explicitly stated by the study participants was the realization of north shore connections: "[the stories] made me realize we're all connected to the area. You've been places I've been, you know, we've both felt the same things when we've been out there." Lutts (1985) suggests that stories create continuity between experiences, transforming *my* stories into *our* stories. Through the act of telling and weaving north shore stories, relationships between storyteller and listener appeared to strengthen, though to what degree is not known. We further suggest that when the stories are grounded in participation with place, the web of relationships might extend to place and

its more-than-human community members as well. Several caribou held their place in our community story circle. Their presence through oral word changed one author's conception of caribou. The immersion into multiple layers of knowing particular caribou via the lived experiences of the storytellers opened up an epistemological shift whereby caribou as generic animal ("the caribou") became caribou as individual being ("that caribou living on this island"). Similarly, participation in the story offered multi-layered understanding of the many moods and nuances of Lake Superior, which can only be gained through direct experiences, or vicariously through others stories of first-hand encounters. One can say, "be careful on the ice," but a near-miss story can have much deeper impacts. For example, one author still shudders at the thought of being caught on spring ice so thin that a skier felt the surging power of Lake Superior's hidden currents. These and other north shore tales were much more than entertaining. From an interpretive planning perspective this shift from generic to particular offers a rich foundation for creating authentic interpretive experiences. And importantly, the shift invites a broadened ethic of care for the needs of more-than-human community members, and the humility required to live respectfully among them.

Research Theme Five: Engaged Emotions. Emotional engagement throughout the narratives was observed via body language, voice volume and tone, individual and collective comments (*aahhhs, wow*, *oooh!),* laughing, and explicit statements about frustration, pride, wonder, amazement, excitement, disbelief, admiration, and happiness. What is significant from an interpretive planning perspective is the role emotions play in remembering and forging connections with place. Regarding the connective power of story, Kittredge (2001) stated:

> …[being] emotionally located in place leads to symbiotic relationship with the land. Stories help us find intimate, imaginative connection with one another and with the world – the environment, other creatures and the biosphere, the living thing we are a part of, without which we would be nothing. (p. 28)

Kovach (2009) notes that, "[stories] promote social cohesion by entertaining and fostering good feeling." (p. 95). This is of relevance to interpretive planners. Wolfe (2001) noted that information with strong emotional content is attended to first and is more likely to be remembered for a longer duration. It is also known that emotion and facts combined increases the likelihood of long-term changes in feelings and behaviours, in comparison to presenting facts alone (Cable & Ernst, 2003). Thus stories that elicit high levels of "emotional engagement" might serve as a planning criterion during the story selection process. Furthermore, we suggest that place-based knowledge conveyed and received in a joyful setting such as social storytelling lends itself to creating both lasting impressions and connections. Reflecting on the definition of interpretation, one might consider the community story circle as an interpretive event in and of itself.

Limitations

We acknowledge that community story sharing is not without its challenges. One challenge noted by our study participants during the focus group was the issue of "so many stories." As narrative researchers Clandinin and Murphy (2009) note, "Lives are lived, told, retold, and relived in storied ways on storied landscapes" (p. 598). Regardless of what methodology is chosen, the ever-changing and contested nature of community stories will remain a constant reality for interpretive planners. The abundance of community stories also poses the question of story selection. Cruikshank (1998) offers wisdom regarding storytelling and desired outcomes. Her many years of work with Yukon Elders revealed that, "storytellers of Yukon First Nation ancestry continue to tell stories that make meaningful connections and provide order and continuity in a rapidly changing world" (p. xiii). Perhaps a preliminary, though abstract, response to what stories should be told via interpretive media is to carefully weigh each narrative against its perceived ability to contribute toward an inclusive sense of place and community wellbeing (as defined by residents). However, the focus of this paper is solely on the story circle event, without attempt to suggest how to honour, analyze and re-tell the stories shared. The answers to those questions are best sought within the context of the specific culture of the storytellers and the specific purpose for stories gathered (Kovach, 2009). Finally, we suspect that the energy, learning, and connective power of the community story sharing event is maximized with direct involvement of the interpretive planner(s), which may be logistically difficult for some projects.

Concluding Thoughts and Recommendations

Our story has allowed us to suggest the story circle as a new, yet ancient, way to co-construct place meanings and broaden the epistemological scope of interpretive praxis. A primary goal of heritage interpretation is to forge "emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and the inherent meanings in the resource" (National Association for Interpretation, n.d.,¶.4). We assert that when "the resource" is the very being of a community—its past, present and future tangible and intangible heritage—seeking community stories not only provides a more inclusive sense of place, but is an inherent right of the dwellers of that place. As Robertson (2009) notes, "Local populations may assign importance and value to places and landscapes according to their own cultural criteria which may differ from that of professional groups" (p. 153). While the narrative reconstruction of place-based experiences yielded insight into locally significant landscape values (Lake Superior's beauty, complexity and immense power; highly changeable weather; safe harbours; caribou behaviour; ancient fossils; pictographs; geology; sacred burial grounds; fishing; lighthouses; shipwrecks; gold; railway history; light-pollution free skies; best places to swim;

spectacular views; and old growth lichen), in our opinion the *process* of gathering, sharing, and building local knowledge was equally as important as the knowledge gained. In other words, what we have presented here is not an analysis of the interpretive potential of the north shore gleaned via one story circle, but rather an analysis of the nature and significance of coming together to orally share community stories.

Story salting, story weaving, realization of place-connectedness, and engaged emotions provide a richness and diversity that may not emerge with more individualistic narrative methods (such as documentary research, oral histories, environmental memoirs, and interviews). Furthermore, we believe the unstructured and informal nature of the gathering gave power to the participants to share their landscape experiences in a joyful, non-threatening way, as is the case when friends gather around the campfire. Importantly, a place-based story circle is an active and engaging way not only to "collect" stories, but simultaneously serves to keep regional stories alive through oral sharing. Finally, if passion is indeed a key element of meaningful interpretive experiences, we suggest that interpretive planning processes would benefit from emotionally engaged ways to come to know both the people and the place being interpreted. The community story circle offers one such conduit.

Despite the limitations noted, this paper beckons the interpretive profession to expand the epistemological approach to interpretive planning by creating spaces for social narrative sharing with a conscious place-based focus. We believe that the insights gained warrant further investigation into story circle as research method for heritage interpretive planners. In particular, the relational aspects of the story gathering require further examination beyond what is capable through thematic analysis. Moving beyond methodological to civic considerations, we suggest that the story circle be revived as a way to engage neighbours in the act of remembering, performing, and witnessing their landscape stories and place-connections. For many Indigenous Peoples, the landscape holds wisdom stories, which through self-reflection, serve to guide people towards proper relations with place and with each other. For example, according to Dudley, a member of the White Mountain Inde, "Wisdom sits in places. It's like water that never dries up. You need to drink water to stay alive, don't you? Well, you also need to drink from places" (Basso, 1996, p. 127). Inviting community members to re-live a landscape experience through oral stories is one way for humans to *drink from their places*.

In summary, we offer this work as a critical assessment of the story circle as a research method for interpretive planners seeking a deeper understanding of locally significant landscape values.

We welcome feedback regarding ways to pragmatically bring back this ancient tradition as a method to collectively contemplate and interpret our storied landscapes.

Notes on Contributors

Lesley Curthoys lives on the shores of the majestic Kitchi gami. Her teaching and research interests focus on joyful ways to increase place-based awareness, curiosity, conversations, and life-sustaining actions. Lesley currently teaches at the School of Outdoor Recreation, Parks and Tourism at Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Ontario. **Contact:** lcurthoy@lakeheadu.ca

Brent Cuthbertson is an Associate Professor in the School of Outdoor Recreation, Parks and Tourism at Lakehead University. His interests revolve around leadership in outdoor education and recreation with a focus on people's connection to the natural world. Brent currently has a developing curiosity in literary fiction as a force in the construction of outdoor culture. **Contact:** bcuthber@lakeheadu.ca

Julie Clark is a facilitator and sustainability educator. She is passionate about helping people work together in creative ways for the resilience of their home-place and workplace. Julie currently does sustainability planning work for regional government, grows food, and travels self-propelled as much as possible, on the Sunshine Coast of British Columbia. **Contact:** jules.a.clark@gmail.com

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