# 2

# Waking up the Snake: Ancient Wisdom for Regeneration

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## Opening

We are a collective of four Western Australians. Anne is a *Yimardoowarra marnin*: a Nyikina Indigenous woman who belongs to the Martuwarra Fitzroy River in the Kimberley (northwest) region. Bill is a Wardandi Noongar man who belongs to the southwest coastal region, where 'wardan' in the Noongar language refers to ocean and hinterland. He was one of the last of the 'fringe-dwellers' living in the Geographe Bay bush, which is now a tourist resort. Sandra is an Anglo-Celtic (Wadjela) woman whose family has been in Noongar *boodja* (Noongar Country)<sup>1</sup> for about eight generations, while Naomi is a Wadjela woman of European descent living on Wardandi *boodja*. We acknowledge Indigenous custodians and caregivers in our homelands, and in all parts of the world.<sup>2</sup>

Each of us is committed to biocultural stewardship, unity and collaboration, strengthening solidarity for climate action and planetary justice through ancient wisdom – First Law – for regeneration. By 'ancient wisdom', we mean the Law of the Land known to Elders, who hold these knowledges and teach them when the time is right for people to learn. Young Indigenous people are now taking these knowledges and making modern stories for planetary wellbeing (Poelina et al, 2022). We work to create eco social transformation in and through our community work, action research, writing, environmental education, public pedagogies, and by our collective wisdom and actions. Drawing attention to continuing colonization is part of this process.

In this chapter, we build on Indigenous environmental humanities literatures to frame the central argument with a deeply interconnected, Earth-centred nature of reality. Indigenous scholars like Lewis Williams

(2019, 2021) use onto-epistemological framings to bring to life the agency of a thinking, sentient, feeling Earth. We use Indigenous methodology and the conversational method (Kovach, 2019) to compose reflexive narratives through yarning – the *kapati* (cup of tea) method – from the Kimberley and Wardandi Noongar regions. *Kapati* is a method of story sharing within the safe space of conversation, which Ober (2017) notes has become a cultural norm in Indigenous communities and families. Our project used multiple cups of tea, sometimes with all four of us, sometimes in pairs (including mixed pairs) and often together with an audience to create stories and this chapter. Our narratives therefore take the form of small stories, poetry and autoethnography.

We recognise business-as-usual as continuing colonization, and illustrate the connection between decoloniality, climate justice and ecological health. The change we advocate is profoundly regenerative (Wahl, 2016; Poelina et al, 2022), emphasizing Indigenous knowledges of the vital nature of living places to reinvigorate life, love and living. We argue for collective consciousness as we come together for guardianship responsibility for Country; looking, listening, learning and practising while these life forces cleanse us together in a kindred spirit. This is transformative change of a type that we suggest is solutionary (rather than revolutionary). We seek solutions to right size the planet 'ground up', using ancient wisdom, which is living place-based Indigenous knowledge existing in a nonlinear time scale of past-presence-emergence. In our experience, relational onto-epistemologies inform local knowledges and practices that are vibrant, vital, practical, artistic/creative/dramatic, ceremonial and often invoke the energies of the sacred, the living Earth. These onto-epistemologies are ancient, drawing on multigenerational wisdom and experience.

We trust the world will wake up to First Law, the Law of the Land, which shows us how to perform an ethics of care, love and response-ability with more-than-human beings. By 'response-ability', we mean that humans can respond to the living, communicative, sentient world around us; to all our more-than-human kin with whom we live interwoven lives (Bawaka Country et al, 2019). Ancient wisdom transforms the banal into the beautiful, the significant and the sacred, a lifestyle of simplicity. We want to inspire an active narrative of hope for regeneration. Solidarity, in this sense, is responsibility, and response-ability is inclusive of our relations within our places; rivers, forests and other nonhuman co-inhabitants. These are living beings with agency. For this, we work towards socioecological reinvigoration *as* cultural resurgence.

# Colonization as epistemic violence: decolonization as regeneration

Uncle Bill describes the invasion as the 'Taking Away'. He shares a Wardandi prophecy from thousands and thousands of years ago:

There will come a man to this land, and he will change it. He is not a sharer or carer. He won't leave a good footprint and he'll shape and change the land for himself. He'll never put back the things he's damaged. Overnight he'll turn the place into a desert, with species loss, deforestation, and degradation of rivers and waterways. He'll take away the dream of millennium-geared environmental scientists. He has no ambition to change his practice.

Uncle Bill explains that we must redress the viciousness of these people who removed our access to our land and did not allow it to become part of our earthly co-existence. There cannot be reconciliation and healing until they own up to the massacres and the indiscriminate killing and stealing of our people and spiritual places. Uncle Bill laments that the pristine waterway where Wardandi folks used to drink directly from the river, is now green and polluted. There is always an almighty dollar sign in the cloud. These stories need telling, and then we can move on as a nation.

Across Australia, Indigenous nations recognize a serpent as a creator spirit of rivers and waterways, which remains to protect water and First Law (Radcliffe-Brown, 1926). The metaphor of 'Waking up the Snake' is to wake up the consciousness of the people to restore the ancient wisdom of our places through an ethic of care and love (RiverOfLife et al, 2020). This Kimberley Indigenous metaphor restores obligations of stewardship and enables practices that increase awareness and consciousness that vital landscapes are animate, active, agential, inspirited and communicative. These obligations are First Law, the Law of the Land, and therefore apply to everyone without prejudice. In other words, once people walk, live, or do business on these Lands, whether borne of Country or as migrants, they carry these obligations of stewardship.

Indigenous nations across Australia know the sacred water snake by many names. In the Martuwarra Valley, Nyikina Indigenous peoples use Yoongoorookoo, an ungendered term (not he or she). In Noongar *Boodja* (Country) Noongar people know the sacred snake by several names, including Waugal. Uncle Bill shares a Waugal dreaming that connects the north and south of Australia:

The big snake came from Flinders Ranges to Uluru and had two baby female snakes. One went to the north and one came to the south, to Wyadup on Wardandi *boodja*. The snake created all the waterways and rivers, ridges and mountains. She also had a baby and left it in the Yaragadee aquifer, and then she went back to the Flinders Ranges. Her baby snake remains in the Yaragadee to make sure that the beautiful Wardandi environment is cared for. The snake is our big overall connection and our belief of co-existence of all species.

We recognize Snake by its many names as integral to Australia's Earth dream, a long story of sentient worlds. Snake is dynamic, fluid, radiant and reconnective of places, beings, people, intuitions, spirits, archetypes and shadows. There is only relationship and connectedness in this worldview rather than separation.

In Australia, using the colonial paradigm as justification, corporations and governments still invade and colonize Indigenous communities and environments. Drafters of legislation frequently use colonial logics in ways that overlook Indigenous knowledge holders and their cultural interests. For these reasons, Australian laws, rules and policies such as the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act 2021 often do not serve the interests or the greater good of people or Country (Poelina et al, 2020). They do not relate to cultural-environmental interests where there is a mining or extraction claim. For instance, in 2020, Juukan Gorge, a 46,000-year-old record of human history in artistic form, was destroyed for iron ore mining<sup>3</sup> (Allam and Wahlquist, 2020).

#### Cultural stewardship as collective consciousness

Within this worldview we are sketching with Nyikina and Wardandi Noongar perspectives, stewardship of Country is enmeshed in a relational ethic of care and love. This is in the sense of caring for a more-than-human family within First Law (deriving from Country) over deep time, whereby intergenerational knowledge - that passed from one generation to another - is of great cultural significance. For stewardship of Country, knowledge systems are (always) cared for by the ancestors for present and future generations. This is known as a kincentric ecology, an ecology based on relationships, where environments are viable only where humans understand life around them as relation or kin (Salmon, 2000). It is a collective sense of self, where self is seen within a collective, and the more-than-human collective of people with Country is the greater interest rather than a narrow, egotistical sense of self. An example of this knowledge system can be seen in the Nyikina Calendar by Milgin et al (2020); a full colour chart of West Kimberley seasons. In this way, crises of sustainability are crises of relationship (Milgin et al, 2020). We are all beneficiaries of this relational, intergenerational knowledge through the care of precious places we now inhabit. By the same logic, we are ancestors for future generations of carers of Country.

# Waking up the Snake for regeneration: collective action

Indigenous groups and alliances are currently reconstructing songlines along rivers and waterways in Australia, renewing awareness and prompting revitalization following years of colonial repression (for example, Gay'wu Group of Women, 2019; Mulligan et al, 2021). At the same time, local relationships and networks are extending outwards to link narratives across place, time and people, locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. This chapter records one of those reconnections, energizing regeneration through waking up consciousness of northwest-southwest Australian narratives through academic work.

As we conceptualize it, climate justice is climate care, that is, caring for all peoples, diversities, and everything – including ourselves – as part of our extended place-families or more-than-human kin networks through a radical transformation of oppressive systems of power (Godden et al, 2021; Whyte 2021). As Bawaka Country et al (2020) put it, we *are* our climates, in the sense that we co-become with local climate through knowing, doing and being. Acting in solidarity, together as one voice for climate justice, we recognize reinvigoration as the emergence of new stories of healthy connection for our planet at this time of conflict, famine, floods, fires and other emerging crises. From this point of view, environmental justice, climate justice and planetary justice co-arise with Indigenous justice.

### Indigenous methodology

Kovach (2019) comments that those who use an Indigenous methodology need to place as much focus on that which connects the various elements as on the elements themselves. Thus, before we tell our stories, we declare the interconnected nature of our chapter with the Earth Unbound group with and for whom we developed this thinking. We participated in one planning conversation before a presentation to an Earth Unbound collaborative scholar group, who provided encouraging comments. Next, they supplied a transcription of our presentation with points of interest highlighted. With this, we collaboratively developed a proposal for submission to the editorial group, who offered substantial written conversational feedback for us. In this way, our ideas were already collaborative with the Earth Unbound group before we began to write.

### Narratives

**Anne:** As an Indigenous leader, human and earth's rights advocate, my dream is the creation of peace, despite the violence that continues today. Yin Paradies writes that 'relatively scant attention [is being] paid to ongoing colonial presence/presents in which systemic, structural, physical, epistemic, and ontological violence continue to oppress, assimilate and eradicate Indigenous peoples' (2020, p 1). The pathway forward demands being brave and exploring the most appropriate way to support Indigenous

peoples. We write and share stories of our colonial lived experiences to build reconciliation and a greater understanding of co-existence with our fellow Australians so that we can better understand how we, as human beings, can once again live in harmony with each other. When we refer to living in harmony with each other, we mean in ways that are mutually respectful of all more-than-human relatives, a term that includes people, nonhuman beings and Country – that is, in ways that are anti-racist, decolonial, underpinned by all forms of justice and that incorporate forms of development that use free, prior, informed and continuing consent. In other words, there will be no power-over, supremacy of any description or imposition of worldview, preference or any form of domination. The greatest challenge in the Kimberley is to create Peace with nature and Indigenous People, especially our young people.

#### Martuwarra Dream

Martuwarra Youth Council Elders cry it can't be business as usual 'Sorry business' can't become the normal Too many generations of lost lives Kimberley holds highest suicide rates in the world We Dream to hold them up and give them hope Martuwarra Youth Council Re-Generational Hubs are their life portal Why is it so hard to get a hand up? Culture camps Mum Annie's calling up Go to Geegully, just a bough shed is all she wants Aunty Annie does not get the call But millions of dollars goes to the richest people of all Public monies to fund the richest rich A 'Feasibility study for an agriculture' they call it Re-Generation Hubs – the Elders are dreaming this Young people are standing, sharing, and dreaming Why is it so hard to hear what our young people want? We want to shift them from poverty, to work hard, to be free Free to Dream and reach their full potential We want them to experience being human We want them to live in a Nation Where Black lives matter Where the Nation cares Come on be brave and stand with us Don't stand against us We can help you to hear, feel and see your Country

Your home, you are now part of a new story Let's make a stand, let's plan, let's send the Dream out Invest in Martuwarra Youth Council.

#### Chinna and Poelina, in press

Poems such as this contain multiple stories to demonstrate risks, hopes and dreaming – all vital ingredients for building and sharing a spirit of goodwill from Indigenous Australians. Despite the violence and trauma, our intention is to reconcile with fellow Australians and with our Nation (Reconciliation Australia, 2016). It can't be business as usual; the planet and humanity cannot sustain it. The time is now to create peace with Indigenous people and with nature (Redvers et al, 2020).

**Sandra:** In the wet, firm beach sand there are footprints, bicycle tracks, snail trails, little balls of sand and tiny crab holes. A light mist over the ocean reveals a translucent glow. There is no wind. Beach beckons people towards her; irresistibly magnetic. Her gesture is palpable, stronger as we draw closer. Cable Beach, Broome, entices people, and thousands respond. She is alive, pulsing, vibrant and shimmering with memory. She tenders peacefulness. Beach loves life – song, dance, music, children laughing, youth playing, adults smiling, dogs running joyfully, crabs scurrying and birds playing in the waves.

Indigenous voices speak compellingly, re-storying and regenerating Country, cultures and histories. Thus, reciprocity with Country strengthens, while response-ability<sup>4</sup> grows. Indigenous authority, dignity and nationhood are re-emerging from colonial subjugation, inviting collectivism and union, and showing how to care for Country. Snake of living places re-emerges, waking up the consciousness of the people, interweaving Indigenous voices, sentient rivers, animate mountains, breathing forests, enlivened woodlands, storied places and solidarity renews wisdom in we who hear and respond. We feel the call of Indigenous Country as *longing to belong*. Country needs us to feel *in relation with* more-than-human worlds. This is the essence of decolonization; a journey for each and every one of us.

Indigenous people narrated Country for eternity. Then colonization, and silenced Indigenous voices took these stories to ground. Industrialists and agribusinesses now speed up resource extraction for the wealthy to get wealthier, while the poor get poorer and Country gets sliced, cut, mined and drained. Extractive colonization holds power over Indigenous people and Country, including we who stand together in solidarity. Complicity with colonization through our daily lives – in supermarkets, kitchens and energy systems – is destroying Country, stories and Snake, maintaining colonial disempowerment.

Waking up the Snake is to peel back layers in order to understand the impact of colonization, together with recognition and relearning of behaviours that reconnect. We *feel* sentient places when we care for Country through solidarity. There is hope because *you* are part of this story now.

**Bill:** My Wardandi mob has been around for over 65,000 years. Our Country was pristine, with a cultural and spiritual connection. We made sure everything was intact to pass on to our future generations, because rightfully it does not belong to us; it always belongs to the future. *Boodja* is the land and our heart. A lot of people are missing that real true connection to the land.

The Wardandi role in society is that we protect the spiritual pathways across land, of all spirits gathered. In my Country, the morning sun puts these spirits on a spirit trail across the land, moving into the caves comforted by *ngilgi* (the good sea spirit) and into the arms of Wardan (the great ocean spirit), to the ancient land of the setting sun (Kornup) and then dispersed in the cosmos reincarnated as a Jungara, a chosen time traveller. We all come from stardust, and the Jungara travels in space and time to the land to see if we are doing the right thing, looking after and caring for Land. He's not there to harm to you, he's there hoping that you recognize how important this place is right now in continuing ancient time. We can share our place, and these spiritual and always beautiful stories.

I can see that the children of today are confused about such questions as where their place is, how they're going to be in the future and which way they're going. They're searching. My dad had a vision that young people, whether they are Black, white or another ethnicity, will band together and make their future footprint as a unity of people. My role is building cultural awareness within people. I'm educating the kids, the future, how to band together to walk one journey. We must keep that old knowledge, that old culture and the spiritual connections with places, and these younger generations will all feel that collaborative harmony, culture and vibration energy consciousness. The future generations will be very responsible; they will take control through conscious learning from Indigenous peoples.

**Naomi:** Sometimes I look at my beautiful children and wonder, with profound grief, if I made a mistake by bringing them into this world. The climate science is undeniable – we are hurtling towards environmental, economic and societal collapse, and the growing collective demand for climate justice is criminally dismissed by governments of all persuasions. Climate change is a reckoning for colonialism, capitalism, Euro-patriarchy and white supremacy, and dismantling these oppressive systems of power is extremely difficult and painful. Hope can often feel fanciful and naïve,

and many people fear for our children, all children, including children of all species. But, as Elders like Uncle Bill and Aunty Anne so generously and patiently teach us, generating collective consciousness through ancient wisdoms, particularly with our children, is our pathway forward.

I am a Wadjela woman who grew up, and is now growing up my own children, on Wardandi *boodja*. My family has deep love, attachment and spiritual connection to this place. With vulnerability and humility, I listen to Elders who share wisdom, stories and truth telling as we confront the insidiousness of ongoing colonization on this Country. Wardandi Elders have taught me that I am not separate from the interconnected system of *boodja*. I am *boodja*, and *boodja* is me. We are *boodja*, and *boodja* is us. Caring for the rivers, the forests, the more-than-human is caring for ourselves. This is not an intellectual process; it is a heart process, a spiritual process, an embodied process. As our consciousness expands and our egos diminish, we can conceptualize the more-than-human as our kin. Collectively, we are the Snake.

In the pursuit of climate justice, *boodja* and her Indigenous custodians are not victims, stakeholders or end users, but the central, interconnected system of sacred knowledge and wisdom from which all abounds. As the Snake awakens, humans in solidarity with *boodja* can (and must) dismantle oppressive colonial systems that cause climate injustice and work towards new (old) ways of collective knowing, being and doing that are grounded in Indigenous wisdoms.

### Discussion

Readers of these narratives and perspectives recognize that concepts need a relational, imaginal, experiential, creative and connected sense of knowing, which is different from a Cartesian, Western, separated and individuated categorical sense in which business-as-usual thinking and knowing sit. This is not to say one way of knowing is more important; rather, it is to recognize their different contexts, languages, cultures, histories, purposes and outcomes. Recognizing this difference in worldview is to acknowledge that Indigenous knowledge holders have acted upon obligations arising from a cultural ethic of care, reciprocity and vitality for aeons. Waking up the Snake is liberating Country and the consciousness of the people to reconnect collectively as ecological families.

Each narrator writes with passion about defending and reconnecting with Country, strengthening Indigenous voices, and restoring agency to Country and more-than-human beings. We call for the liberation of the Snake of consciousness from repression, to voice the ancestral power of the continuing past once again for the sake of our children's children. Together we ask: why destroy Country and spirit along with our children's future and the stories that keep us strong for the continuing present? Like never before, we need to act in solidarity.

In his text *Sand Talk*, Tyson Yunkaporta proposes that if First Peoples' knowledges were respected 'as the most sustainable basis for living and being on this planet', Australian people would be able to move from 'sorry' to 'thankyou', and after a while, to 'please' (2019, p 267). These ancient wisdoms are a very generous offering as we (humans and more-than-humans) collectively grapple with the intersecting crises of climate change, environmental degradation and deepening social inequalities. Indeed, Robertson and Barrow (2020) explain that the Noongar people are very adept at surviving, and thriving, through climatic changes. They reference, for example, the continuation of Noongar peoples and cultural traditions through a 10,000-year drought. Likewise, the resilience of First Nations peoples in Australia persists through the brutal and continuing apocalypse of more than 240 years of colonial genocide.

Uncle Bill explains that technological solutions will not save us, and the least-impactful solution to climate change is the old way. He reinforces that if there were no harmful capitalist or colonial industries, there would be no social or environmental damage on this planet, and Indigenous people would still be living in harmony with Country. For our collective survival we must change how we think, joining the old ways and the new ways for future generations. This is explained in Poelina et al (2022), where they deploy Bird Rose's (2017) notion of the shimmer of life as ancestral power, a very different worldview from 'business as usual'. They explain:

Shimmer comes with the pulse of season change, and the shininess and health of new growth, new generations. Shimmer might also be a pattern, or a dance, or a piece of art. It is the love story between species, such as the lure felt by the flying foxes to the angiosperms. It is the flourishing of life. (Poelina et al, 2022, p 5)

Uncle Bill attests that youth-led social movements such as the Seed Indigenous Youth Climate Network and School Strike 4 Climate (see Chapter 12) reflect his father's vision of young people uniting against a prevailing system that is obliterating biodiverse places, and certainly not doing the right thing for future generations. Of course, young people did not cause climate change and they are not responsible for resolving it (Godden et al, 2021). Yet, as a deeply conscious, progressive and benevolent generation, young people demonstrate our immense hope that the Snake is awakening and that collective consciousness is building. In contrast to the mainstream climate action movement, youth-led climate justice organizations in Australia actively respect Indigenous peoples' rights and knowledges, and

work to protect Country, in their activism for radical structural change (see, for example, Seed, 2022).

Societal collapse due to climate cataclysm is a likely outcome of the lifeways of the West. Australians have the opportunity for a decolonizing process of rewilding, a returning to land and attending to neglected Country (Paradies, 2020) to systemically upend the capitalist addiction to the myth of human superiority over the planet. As Uncle Bill argues, we need to be people who are conscious of Indigenous cultures and how they successfully live their lives. Ancient beliefs will become a 'new' belief of creating collective consciousness for reinvigoration of First Law.

It has long been argued that Aboriginal knowledge holds solutions for planetary health, particularly climate disruption and species recovery. Writers such as Redvers et al (2020) and Milgin et al (2020) describe the intricacy and wisdom of interrelationship. Country – and River – holds kinships of inextricable rapport, which is the significance of this wisdom. Things – and all beings – have recently been seen as separate in the Cartesian worldview. Rather, the space between – the relationships of deep connection – holds the entangled consciousness of the Snake that is awakening. We acknowledge the joyfulness already emerging in Country, including the ceremonies and protocols of deep respect at conference openings. We conclude the discussion with one of the many living protocols that speak for us, offered by Theriault et al (2020), members of a transnational group of scholars, activists, artists and communities. One protocol is 'Our Teachers':

We have been gifted with many teachers who continue to bring messages from the Creator on how to live according to the instructions of our ceremonies, songs, and speeches. We are fortunate to have so many young ones emerge from the earth who take our culture seriously. Our stories and songs guide us to stay in balance, and if we stray the Creator does not judge us but understands that we are on this difficult human journey. We say nya weh [thank you] for our teachers, and let it be that way in our minds. (Theriault et al, 2020, p 897)

## Conclusion

In this chapter we make the point that colonization is commensurate with business as usual, and that we are each complicit in many ways due to the ubiquitous nature of interconnectedness. In other words, people are interrelated with nature for good or for bad; through business as usual with devastating consequences, and entirely differently, through Earth-kin with healing outcomes. Through four narratives from different perspectives, we show that the decolonial invitation through Indigenous onto-epistemologies and, in particular, ancient wisdom and First Law can lead to climate justice, the potential for life and ecological recovery. These are framings of hope that accompany the waking up of the Snake, a metaphor to reinvigorate the Indigenous consciousness of all people.

We advocate for Indigenous knowledges of the vital nature of living places, and solidarity with Indigenous voices. We argue for solidarity and collective consciousness as we come together for response-ability with Country and responsibility for Country; using creative, imaginal, artistic and experiential ways of knowing, being and doing (see also Chapter 9). The transformation we call for is cultural resurgence, which is solutionary. In this way, decoloniality, climate justice and ecological health allow for the possibility of a good life for young people. Ancient wisdom – the Law of the Land – shows the way to an ethics of care, love and response-ability with more-than-human beings. We hope you, the reader, will devise an active narrative of hope for regeneration with Indigenous teachers, and implement it.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In Australia, Country (capital C) and Land (capital L) refer to a rich, living, spiritual notion of place that is inclusive of Indigenous earth-based laws and socioecological relationships, more-than-human beings and kin relationships. Australians tend to use Country rather than Land, whereas the reverse is true in the Americas. Also, this may be equivalent to 'Territory' in Latin American First Nations and Afro communities.
- <sup>2</sup> This research is part of a consortium of the University of Notre Dame Australia, Edith Cowan University, Millennium Kids, the Pandanus Park Community, the Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council, Madjulla Inc, the WA Museum and the Water Corporation of Western Australia. It is financially supported (partially) by the following organizations: the Australian government through the Australian Research Council's *Linkage Projects* funding scheme (project LP210301390); the Water Corporation's Research and Development Program; the Millennium Kids Enviro Fund; and the WA Museum.
- <sup>3</sup> In 2020, as part of its Pilbara mining operation, Rio Tinto blew up Juukan Gorge, a gallery of ancient arts with a sacred spring which had never stopped running until now. There was an outcry in Australia and around the world about this act of terror. Rio Tinto responded by sacking a few senior staff members, apologizing and continuing its operations.
- <sup>4</sup> 'Response-ability' refers to the ability to respond to Country or beyond (Bawaka Country et al, 2019).

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