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Anti-racist Adult Education
A Conversation with Professor Stephen Brookfield

Robin Neustaeter and J. Adam Perry

See table of contents

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Article abstract

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EDITORIAL

Stephen Brookfield, Robin Neustaeter, and J. Adam Perry

ANTI-RACIST ADULT EDUCATION: A CONVERSATION WITH PROFESSOR STEPHEN BROOKFIELD

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Abstract

In this interview with the editors-in-chief of the Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education, *Professor Stephen Brookfield reflects on what it means to be an anti-racist adult educator.*

Résumé

Professor Stephen Brookfield is currently Antioch University's Distinguished Scholar in Educational and Professional Practice, adjunct professor at Teachers College, Columbia University (New York), and emeritus professor at the University of St. Thomas (Minneapolis–St. Paul). Throughout his career he has written, co-written, or edited 19 books, six of which have won the Cyril O. Houle Award for Literature in Adult Education. His most recent book, Becoming a White Antiracist, co-authored with Mary Hess, was published by Stylus Publishing in 2021. Professor Brookfield also leads a pop punk rock & roll band, the 99ers. Their most recent singles, "Trumpland" and "Kissing Johnny Ramone," were recorded in 2021.

Dr. Robin Neustaeter and Dr. J. Adam Perry are both assistant professors in the Department of Adult Education at St. Francis Xavier University. They are the editors-in-chief of the Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education.

This interview has been edited for clarity.

Podcast

AntiRacism AdEd.mp3

Robin: There is so much going on in the world today and in our communities and contexts that relates to adult education in diverse ways. In light of the dynamics that we are seeing around race and racism in our respective countries, we would like to start by asking you what it means to be an anti-racist adult educator.

Stephen: Wow. That's a big, big question. Probably the theme that I see as threading through all the different ways you can do this is an intentional commitment to considering racial dynamics and power imbalances in whichever situation that you find yourself. As educators, a lot of that is going to be understanding those differentials in adult education, higher education, community education, and so on. But then there is also the part of our lives as citizens and political actors. To me, that's the main arena in which I put my efforts these days. So I think, first of all, it's about noticing and being alert to those power differentials around race. But the focus of anti-racist identity for me is on action—it's always on action to change systems, structures, and policies. As someone interested in critical reflection, I've always been committed to the idea that we need to keep analyzing our own assumptions, opening ourselves up to multiple perspectives, and being alert to the presence of hegemony, how we accept dominant ideologies without understanding that's what we're doing, and how those ideologies frame our actions. But I think with anti-racism the emphasis is even more on doing and not so much on self-reflection. I think it's easy to commit theoretically and intellectually to anti-racism, but the sign of commitment is action.

Being in a white institution or community, it's about taking the responsibility for identifying the presence of racism and working on, well, what specifically do we do to address this in this particular context, what needs to change, what practices need to be instituted, and so on. Personally, I've fallen short a lot in that regard because it's always been easier throughout my life to read and think and analyze. But that's not really a commitment to anti-racism. It's hard to talk about this because it makes me sound like I'm some paragon of activist virtue and I definitely don't think of myself that way. But I do think I've got to be prepared to lose something and suffer a lot of negative consequences because of that. I think that's the essence of it to me—a commitment to recognizing and then dismantling racist structures, policies, practices, systems, institutional processes, all those things. So when I'm asked by an organization to help them become more anti-racist, I try and talk myself out of doing workshops because a lot of that is performative and institutionally convenient, and it allows the institution to say, "Well, look at what we're doing." But it's really the day-to-day, nitty-gritty, procedural details, the process, practices, and policies that are in place. That's what needs to change. If you are going to have conversations about anti-racism, instead of having them in a professional development workshop, they need to be had at a unit level and at a department level.

Adam: My question is about the risk of doing anti-racist work, and the implications this may have for an early career adult educator, especially for someone who doesn't have a lot of institutional power.

Stephen: There's two ways to do this work: imperfectly or not at all. In terms of action, this is a really difficult thing politically. If you are early career and you have no institutional security and you take a stand on your own, there is a very real risk that that will be the end of the story in terms of your influence within that particular environment. When you come up for second- or third-year review, and then tenure—and I've seen this happen—you are quietly let go. It's never for your anti-racist work. It's for other reasons, having to do with scholarship usually. So you have to make a political calculus about where your sphere of

influence is going to have the greatest effect. If you are convinced that it's going to have the greatest effect within a particular community or organization, then you have to become politically sophisticated and shrewd and make the decision that, and this might be from Saul Alinsky, but basically try not to get fired, because you will probably be replaced by someone who will do far more harm than you are doing. If you decide that this environment is the one in which you are going to act, then you have to develop some strategic and political acumen about how you are best going to move things. And if younger colleagues are driven by a spirit of radical immediacy, then it's hard to hear some of this stuff. Because changing structures and policies is a long-term project.

I always say, number one, view yourself as a cultural, political, institutional anthropologist for the first few months of your time at the institution. Get to know whose voices are listened to with respect and credibility. Show up at community meetings, faculty meetings, town halls, and just get the sense of who people listen to, because those are your initial targets at building networks and alliances—people who are already opinion leaders within the organization. And then, secondly, start to build networks, because the last thing you want to do is to act individually, commit professional suicide, and sort of spiral into martyrdom. As with community organizing, a lot of network building has to go on. Then you need to get a good sense of the institutional culture, history, and language. Symbolically, what things does the institution publicly pay obeisance to. And you use those. You take them and you adapt them. Most institutions do have public commitments to, broadly speaking, humanitarian impulses. So you take that and say, "If we are really concerned with students becoming critical thinkers or with contributing to the public good, then given that racism is such an ever-present factor, how is this practice or this curriculum, or this program, contributing to the public good?"

As an institutionally marginalized person, you always try to link your efforts within the dominant paradigm. And there is a real argument about that because it means you can be co-opted. But it is much harder for people to reject a critique or a proposal out of hand if it is carefully framed within "Well, this is what we say we are about, so let's do that."

Then you have to think about the actions that you take as being team or group actions. In a classroom sense, you have to think about opportunities for team teaching in which the way that you try to engage in this particular project is modelled with someone from a different positionality of some kind, so students can see their instructors grappling with the difficulty of this work and understanding that there is no easy resolution, and that we're not going to have a series of seminars and come out at the end with perfect racial understanding and intersubjective communication around race. That's not going to happen. We are just going to have to learn to live with the acknowledgment of difference. So you need some models of that. I believe strongly in autobiographic modelling—using narrative disclosure of your own racism as a pedagogic strategy—but it is easier for me as an old white man to do that than it is for an early career person of colour, a woman, to do that, because you are dealing not just with white supremacy; you're dealing with patriarchy and all the other dominant ideologies that are around.

Then you have to be a good classroom researcher. You have to keep running tabs on how people are responding to what you are doing. You have to use a lot of formative evaluation. This allows you to get a sense of, all right, what are you doing here and what is working well, and what are you doing that is creating confusion and misfiring. You have to be able to make good judgments about how will the institutional, cultural, and intellectual capital

you've got best be used for the greatest effect. To do that you have to know how students are responding. You will need to build trust early on. That relational dynamic underpins everything, as it does with all critical thinking, but particularly with a contentious issue like race. It may be that you need to build trust before you can say, "All right, now I'm really going to push the boundaries and take people deliberately out of their comfort zone, and they'll be much more ready to go along with me then they would have been six months ago." And it is very difficult because you have this immediate impulse to shake up their world views, and you say as an educator the best thing that can happen to you is to be productively disoriented right now, because that will be—to reference transformative learning theory—a disorienting dilemma that will begin the journey toward greater anti-racism. But it is so hard to judge, I find anyway, when that productive disorientation optimally happens. I think I've been guilty of being too self-indulgent in the past and of thinking, "Well look at me. Aren't I great for introducing this stuff to them, and their confusion is a sign of my success." Really, that shouldn't be how you think as an educator. The confusion can be productive, but it can also be so demotivating that people just say, "Oh god, this is the last time I'm going to be in a course dealing with this." Keeping on top of the process is crucial to making good decisions about how to act in a very specific and contextual way. I speak for myself, but it is so easy to become demoralized. It took me a long, long time to realize that I have to acknowledge the reality of the learning process that is happening in front of me. Sometimes things take longer because more trust needs to be developed, but that has to govern my actions. What I find out about where students are and what I'm dealing with is ground zero of everything that I do, at least in terms of procedural choices: "What article am I going to look at this week, what language am I going to use, how much autobiographical modelling should I be doing?" All those procedural decisions have to spring from that information that you are getting from people. Sorry. A very long answer [laughs].

Robin: You talked indirectly about the need to be vulnerable and recognizing the power dynamics within an adult learning space. We sometimes have to put our shields up and our armour on, which in some ways contradicts what you are saying around the importance of being vulnerable as educators in the classroom. I'm wondering if you could speak a bit more explicitly about vulnerability for educators, particularly in the complex realities of teaching for social justice.

Stephen: The notion of vulnerability that has been around in humanistic adult education is a very white male–generated idea. That doesn't mean that it's not worth anything, but I think a lot of it has its origins in Rogerian therapeutic philosophy—that idea that you should be a model of openness and vulnerability as Carl Rogers would advocate, at least as I remember reading him a long, long time ago. I think that kind of vulnerability can be very powerful. But I also know that the way in which the expression of vulnerability is perceived and the meaning that people create around it are completely altered by positionality. And I have seen this very blatantly in my own team teaching with women and with women of colour in particular. When I admit to screwing up, and when I say, "You can do it imperfectly or not at all, and here's how I messed up yesterday or last week, and here's something that I didn't really understand early on"—you make an experiential biography of how you've grown through mistakes—that is usually received very positively. I get incredible acknowledgment, and people use words like courage and brave and "you are so brave in talking about your mistakes." But it is not brave at all. It's just acknowledgment of a necessary dynamic. However, I get rewarded for it. And I know it's because of my

identity as an older white man. I've got all the stuff going in my favour, symbolically and politically speaking.

Then I do a lot of work with women of colour and I see them engage in the same disclosure of experience, and I have read stuff on anonymous back channels that we use all the time, where you get comments like "Okay, so now we're being led by an incompetent" or "If you don't know how to do this, why the hell are you in a position of authority telling us how to do this?" And I have occasionally got a comment like "Here's affirmative action screwing us over again." There is a lot of vilification and condemnation and accusations. And I have had instances in which I have cried in public in a classroom, and a woman of colour has cried in public in a classroom, and the response could not be more glaringly different. Not from everyone, but there is a strong segment, and it is through a patriarchal as well as a racial lens, who see a woman crying and think, "She's not up to it." That's their conclusion. And then they see me crying, "Oh, what a model of an advanced and evolved man." Also, I have taught with colleagues of colour where we critique each other's positions, and we read the students' responses to watching us engage in a critical disagreement. And there have been situations in which the student responses have pointed out "I'm really bothered by how disrespectful he or she is to Dr. Brookfield." I don't think I've ever had feedback that said, "Look how disrespectful Dr. Brookfield is toward the other person." I think there is so much influence that your positionality has around the expression of vulnerability. This has repeated itself over and over again, and so we as a team, if I'm lucky enough to be teaching with a woman of colour, we can point out this dynamic as it's happening.

Robin: *We are socialized in the public not to be vulnerable, particularly in institutions. We can role-model vulnerability in the classroom, but we still have no idea where our learners are at in regard to vulnerability or if there are triggers for them being vulnerable, because we don't know their backgrounds, so it's something for us to navigate.*

Stephen: The degree and way to which you are vulnerable is a highly contextual decision based on where you know people are and the effects that your disclosure will have on them. These days, when I'm teaching about critical thinking or critical theory, I make a lot of disclosure around my own clinical depression and anxiety. I led off a book about critical thinking and teaching where right in the first chapter I said that critical thinking has really saved my life because I was in such a bad way in terms of my own depression. But that was something I hid from everyone other than my wife for many years. And I learned many coping strategies not to be open about that. I would invent health problems that I was having. I would invent excuses for why I couldn't do particular things. When I finally got stabilized about 20 years ago, I thought, "Okay, now I need to be very open and vulnerable about that." So I realize the disclosure of vulnerability could only come at a time when I had a lot of experience around that issue, and I was emotionally stable enough to do that. The decision of when and how you do this is so contextual, and I'm aware that a lot of the things I do now I did not do in the first 10 or 20 years of my career. When I see younger colleagues having an understanding of all these dynamics, I'm just blown away by their intelligence and at their courage when they choose to be vulnerable in this way. It has to be done in a particular way as well.

When I've run workshops around race, one of the things that I've found hard to gauge is when do we bring the racism that is inherent to the organization out into the open. If I bring it out into the open by quoting the things that people are saying and the history of what has been going on, this can be very traumatic and triggering to the folks of colour in

the room. They've heard all this, and the last thing they need is for their white colleagues to be confessing to the deep racism that lies within them and kind of laying out all their experiences of that. I have often worked from the assumption that when white people are vulnerable about their own enactment of racism, this is going to be appreciated by colleagues of colour, and it has taken a lot of experiences for me to realize that that is a very questionable assumption. There may be many cases in which it's the worst thing that can happen, because your colleagues of colour are just sort of thinking, "Oh god, here we go again, moving into this confessional mode. They're looking to us for approval, and for absolution, and to tell them that, no, you're really a good person and you're an ally and so on." That is such a complicated dynamic. So just saying "be vulnerable" is like a 100th of the story.

And that is how a career should go. You should become increasingly interested and entranced by the puzzles of complexity you encounter. If you go through a career thinking you are getting further and further clarity, I don't see how that can happen really—if you're awake.

Adam: Earlier you said that if an organization approaches you to help them be less anti-racist, that you would talk yourself out of doing a workshop. I found that interesting, as our readership is made up of adult educators. When I was a community-based adult educator prior to my academic career, my knee-jerk reaction was often to facilitate a workshop. I'm wondering if you could say more about what you meant and what practical things adult educators could do instead?

Stephen: I just want to emphasize, I'm not saying "Don't do workshops," because a lot of great things can happen in them and because of them. I'm just aware that it's often the first response we have. That has an honourable adult education history and pedigree, especially if you are in a community-based mode of saying, "Well, we need to hear from those who are most impacted by this problem, so let's convene a community-based conversation that prioritizes the experiences of those most affected." It's just good community-development practice. That is important, and I don't want to underestimate it.

However, the comment from me springs from what I've seen over and over institutionally, which is that let's say some serious problem is revealed and it becomes clear that there is much more endemic racism here then we had imagined and we need to do something about it. It is much easier if the doing something about it is to put on a series of workshops, because the workshops can happen without any concerted effort at systemic, policy, structural, or procedural changes. I have seen this where that is the first thing we do. You announce to the world, "We are going to do this training, we are going to have these workshops, we are going to bring people up to a greater level of information, we are going to encourage anti-racist practices and dispositions and so on, and we are going to talk about what it means to be anti-racist and what are the best classroom techniques to use to bring students to that and all of the stuff we talked about procedurally." That is all useful, but it doesn't get to the nitty-gritty of institutional practices on a daily level.

It seems to me a good adult educator should be very aware of context, external situations, and the way that ideologies and culture frame actions. So as you're defining what people should be learning, and you are thinking you want them to work in more anti-racist ways, what will teach them to do that?

I think what will teach them to do that will be, on a daily basis over a long period of time, engaging very intentionally in ways of making decisions about curriculum, about

assessment, about pedagogy, about how to respond to particular student problems in a way that's very deliberately and intentionally informed by an anti-racist orientation. So I would say to an organization, "If you have x number of dollars and you want to employ me, you are going to get better advice from me that will help the organization deal with this problem if you pay me to hang out at department meetings and unit meetings to see how decisions are made and talk to the staff." We need to be talking to the union, we need to be at union meetings, we need to be at departmental and unit meetings, at staff and faculty meetings. We need to get a good sense of the institutional history. What has happened in the past 5 to 10 years, or even further back. With all that information, we start thinking about what are the levers that can be pulled that would have the greatest potential for strategic change.

Personally, I'm often going for the reward systems in the institution. How is excellent performance judged? How are performance appraisals conducted? What criteria are in place for institutional advancement in faculty but also in staff? Who wins the awards that are regularly given across the institution, and what is it that they do that causes them to win those awards? All those specific things around the reward system are often the beginning point of thinking, "Well, here is the very practical stuff we need to get changed." In thinking about an educator's work, we have to think about what is rewarded in the institution to allow you to stay there and get promoted, draw a wage, and so on. And to what degree is a focus on anti-racism at the heart of those criteria, and if it is in the criteria, what is the evidence operationally that you really are engaged in anti-racist work? The community-development orientation is very much where, as an educator, you think of yourself as a change agent, and you think about the learning that has to happen, not just of your students but of those formative influences like the staff in the institution, and then you have to think about, in higher education, who really is the power behind the throne? I have often said if you want to have influence as an anti-racist educator, and you're trying to get institutional change to happen and they want to do workshops, maybe the first workshop is a public conversation among the trustees where they are publicly engaging in a conversation around how does the racial identity that we negotiate in our daily lives play itself out in specific decisions and actions. I have always said that I would be happy to moderate that conversation. Seeing the most senior members of the organization committed to a difficult exploration of this challenge will actually be much more influential than many other things that you do. But I've not seen that happen. I've never been able to convince people that that's a good thing. If you are thinking of behavioural change, it has to be a global project rather than just a classroom-based thing.

Adam: *Can you say a little bit more about the connection between individual change and structural change and how you see that work?*

Stephen: I think you have to go back to Eurocentric epistemology, where there is a heightened emphasis on the individual as a thinking being—someone in charge of their own destiny. In the United States that's very strongly tied up with notions of liberty and freedom, which themselves are tied up with the ideas of individual entrepreneurship. The whole Horatio Alger myth in the United States, that anybody can be anything. You hear this all the time across communities—not just in a white context: "You can do anything. You can be anything. There are no limits on what you can achieve." That is a very powerful and pleasing myth to hear. It is a myth. It's empirically crazy to think that way, I think.

Because I think from a critical theory viewpoint, I always see things systemically. There are always outliers, but then the outliers who do achieve stuff against all odds are often held

up as the norm. It's very hard to get people to think structurally and systemically. Even using the word *structural* is itself problematic because people think, "Well now he's gone off to an abstract realm." I liked the Ibram Kendi (2019) book *How to Be an Anti-Racist*. In that book he constantly says, "Don't talk about systemic, structural, and institutional racism, talk instead about racist policies." Because when people use the word *policy*, they understand that there is a link between a policy that's in place in a department or in a unit, or nationally, and their own actions. It is easier if you frame it in terms of racist policies, which are deliberately framed and enacted to elevate one racial group as superior and advantaged over all others. This is one of the reasons why I am such a big proponent of autobiographical narrative methodology.

If I'm trying to teach a structural idea or demonstrate the importance of structural conditioning, I would usually start off with an individual example from myself or from somebody else—a very practical individual thing that happened at a particular time and place—and work back out from that and say, "Now why did this happen? Why did I say or do this thing at this particular moment in this particular context?" And I'll talk about, "Well, it seemed like a good thing at the time, I was trusting my gut." Well, where does trust in an instinct or an impulse come from? And you start unpacking that. Some of it is from experience, some of it is from cultural and professional conditioning, some of it is from the broader political culture. How do you know that your gut is to be trusted at that moment? What experiences do you have that support it? And then I'll go through the experiences I've had that made me think this was a good thing to do. Then I'll start taking those apart and saying, "Well, why did I think that those are good trustworthy experiences to follow?" Instead of laying out all the structural data and saying, "Look at these embedded patterns of exclusion around the penal system, around material economic prosperity, around educational achievement, around early death, around infant mortality, around cancer death." If I start with that, I've noticed that people will get outraged and have righteous anger and become irate, and then they will think, "Oh, shit, this is everywhere, what the hell do I do in the face of this?" And you get this radical pessimistic deflation going on. I prefer to get to that point from an autobiographical analysis, because I find that people can follow the connections easier if you begin with a narrative. It's still deflating, and you feel hopeless and so on, but you got there through the analysis of individual behaviour and experience. And along the way, as I'm unpacking this narrative, I'm saying, "Well, I could have done this or I could have done that," so I'm laying out alternatives. That is one way to get the individual and the structural in greater harmony.

In a sense I'm arguing against my own emphasis on structuralism, but I just find that getting people to structural thinking happens best in that way. At least that is what I've observed pedagogically.

Robin: *Canada has a different popular narrative around racism and slavery than the United States. The majority of Canadians are familiar with racism and slavery in the United States and how that grew into the social injustice we see now. When we hear the word slavery associated with Canada, most Canadians are going to think about the Underground Railroad, because that is the narrative that has been perpetuated. Whereas simultaneously there is a history of racism and slavery in our country as well. Recognizing we are in different historical and present-day contexts around racism, anti-racism, and reckoning with white supremacy, how do adult educators challenge these popular narratives around such big issues, especially when other stories have been so hidden and pushed aside?*

Stephen: I try and keep up to some degree with Canadian events. I've been reading about the teacher in Quebec who has just been dismissed for wearing a hijab, and over the last year or two the mass graves that have been discovered in residential schools. I do realize it's a completely different context on some important matters, just as the United Kingdom, where I come from, has its own dynamics. But I do think—again, this is because of the critical theory perspective—that the central question of critical theory is "how does dominant power reproduce itself and neuter challenges to its authority?" The way that it does that is through the dissemination of a dominant ideology or a dominant narrative like, "Well, the United States is clearly racist and beating people up, and the police are enactments of a militaristic attempt to repress communities of colour, whereas in Canada we understand the evils of racism and we are very committed to a truly democratic, inclusive society, and we celebrate diversity, and so on." Sometimes I pick up a little bit of that when I'm in Canada. And I'm very impressed with a lot of stuff that goes on in Canada. I often feel like I should be living in Canada, rather than in the United States [laughs], because I love being there. Though I do think that the structural issue is "how does dominant power keep its position relatively unchallenged?" And the same processes go on irrespective of the context in which you find yourself.

There is always a dominant ideology. There is always a dominant narrative that is purporting to explain the evolution of the society. The way that you challenge those dominant narratives and dominant ideologies is pretty similar wherever you go, I would say. You need some counter-narratives. This is the whole critical race theory viewpoint that has gained a lot of traction over the last 30 years in the United States. The notion of counter-narratives needs to be taken seriously and placed front and centre, and that sort of stops people in their tracks hopefully. You need to have an emphasis on models of autobiographical disclosure, so you need people who are ready to talk about this stuff. My interest is working in predominantly white environments, because that is what I am facing in Minnesota. So you need to have an understanding of how to talk to a dominant group, which regards itself as on the right side of history and morally good, in ways that shake them into realizing that things are not as favourable as they assume them to be. And those dynamics are the same with any dominant group. Part of it is having members of that dominant group who represent a very different analysis, and who talk experientially and autobiographically about their experience of the problem. That would be just as relevant in a Canadian, or any other, context as it would be in a United States context. I think it's very important if you can identify specific practices and symbols which are almost universally applauded. What do we pride ourselves on in Nova Scotia, what are the touchstones of our identity that we think, "This represents the best of who we are"? Then you say, "Well, where did these come from, and how has this established itself with such prominence? What is it about this narrative that serves our interest? What other narratives have been excluded?" You kind of do an ideology critique around a particular symbol. I do feel that those moments of disorientation can be productively triggered initially around dominant symbols and dominant narratives—something that everybody has accepted as unequivocally good and positive. In the United States there has been a lot of conversation around statues. Who funded the statues, what did the statues represent, whose bodies are present in the statues, how do those statues contribute to our contemporary thinking and framing of issues around race or any other kind of exclusion? Maybe I'm naïve and ill-informed, but when I think

about "How do I interrupt a settled framework in people?" I think the dynamics are very similar wherever you are.

I will say that if you are going to bring people to a position of completely dismantling what they thought was a legitimate way of understanding the world, it always has to be relational. It has to be based in a sense of deep trust. If I was imported into another cultural context, that would be my first thing. I would be an anthropologist, I would get a sense of what was revered, of whose voices are listened to. If all I do is just talk and we socialize and hang out, and they get a sense of who I am, that is the beginning for all of this stuff. And that might take a lot longer than I would like. But you can't wish away the reality of the dynamics of learning, no matter how much an activist spirit may want you to do that. Reality will torpedo your theory of activism sooner or later if it's not in line with whatever the situation is. Reality is very inconvenient [laughs], so you just have to accept that.

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