

## ACCELERATION KIGALI-STYLE

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### I. MIND THE SPEED

In Kigali, folks don't really read the street signs. To be fair, they have only existed since the summer of 2012, when in one fell swoop the Kigali City Council assigned new names to the more than 2,600 roads, avenues, and boulevards comprising Kigali's lymphatic system. Prior to 2012, there were very few named streets in Kigali: most of those were in the downtown neighborhood known as *Centre ville*, and all bore French names. The new system relinquishes the symbolic, victorious, patriotic street names of post-independence Africa, like Avenue de la Paix, Rue de la Justice, or Boulevard Mandela. Rather, they follow an efficient numbering system, all starting with an abbreviation designating one of Kigali's three districts (Nyarugenge, Gasabo, and Kicukiro). KN 324 for example, is a street in Nyarugenge District, while KK 109 is in Kicukiro District. In January 2014, I found myself back on one of Kigali's ubiquitous moto taxis, ignoring my ever-growing collection of moto accident stories in favor of cheap speed. I gave the driver the number of the street sign I had memorized—just steps from where I was staying. He shook his head—enveloped in the trademark sturdy kelly green helmet, with a registration number painted on it in yellow—and affirmed the nonsense of this locational reference. I gave him the neighborhood name and said I'd guide him, and to the gas his foot went. Everyone I spoke with—taxi and moto drivers, residents, local merchants—told me decisively that Kigalois (residents of Kigali) had not yet learned the signs and did not yet refer to them. Indeed, I soon



A street sign in Kigali. January 2014.  
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found that, for those of us discovering parts of the city for the first time or slowly assimilating to the sometimes indistinguishable, steep, rocky, burnt burgundy unpaved roads, navigating the city still entails a prepositional dance with your driver: *iburyo, ibumoso, hepfoya, hariya* (right, left, down there, over there)!

It is not just the French street names that have disappeared, but French itself has been abandoned in favor of English. However, many Kigalois are not very comfortable speaking English. Of course they will greet a white woman in English and exchange pleasantries—graciously and patiently they will also let her practice her Kinyarwanda. But she may quickly discover that her interlocutor is in fact much more fluent in French. The clinicians and civil servants I work with in my research are also overwhelmingly Francophone, but in the process of improving their English. Rwanda changed the official language of instruction from French to English in 2008—a swift change, first implemented in primary schools, and then in higher education. Media and scholarly analyses explained the change as one motivated



Centre ville. January 2014.

by the government's desire to reposition Rwanda as a member of the East African Community, which is comprised mostly of English-speaking countries, such as Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya. Economic and business priorities aside, some highlighted the symbolic value of the linguistic policy shift as a rebuff to the former colonial power and involvement of Belgium and France, respectively. Of course, many Kigali neighborhoods, from Centre ville to Nyabugogo to Nyamirambo, still boast cobblers, hair salons, boutiques, office/school supply stores, pharmacies, clinics, hospitals, and NGO offices bearing signage in French, whether or not alongside Kinyarwanda or English.

“Acceleration defines Kigali in its achievements and triumphs, in its fissures and gaps.”

I consider numerical street signs and English as instantiations of a broader process in Kigali, that of acceleration. Acceleration defines Kigali in its achievements and triumphs, in its fissures and gaps. It seems that the order of the day defines experience in such a way that Kigalians are constantly “getting up to speed” or “catching up” to changes long after they have been decisively implemented by a state that has an explicit commitment to accelerated development and leadership. There is a lag. Certainly, capitalist flows and processes have taken hold in Kigali as in many other African cities. However, here I am not invoking the Marxist idea of accelerationism, which states that to engender radical change, the dominant capitalist system should be augmented, and its growth accelerated, in order to catalyze the full realization of its self-destructive propensities. Rather, I mean acceleration akin to its definition in physics: the derivative of residents’ actual velocity comes to define a broader teleological project. This means that acceleration encompasses a recalibration of the actual speed of citizens in their everyday interactions, struggles, and routines. People are literally being pushed along, but they are not necessarily adapting. Rwanda’s national strategies are not simply about development, they also coalesce into a teleological project. The process is a kind of intensified upgrading of society, an attempt to bypass the West and its central telos, wherein a society must progress through necessary and sequential stages of development in order to become modern. Beneath Rwanda’s new teleological model, we might identify a desire to confirm the proposition that “in the history of the present, the global south is running ahead of the global north, a hyperbolic prefiguration of its

future-in-the-making” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012, 19). There are high stakes involved in this process—acceleration as a teleological project is meant to enable an entire generation to overcome a recent past of extreme violence and ethnic divisionism, as well as the trauma and scars that endure from it. In accelerated urban and national developments—such as the naming or renaming of all city streets, the rapid classroom conversion to English, or the introduction of a cell phone service headquarters that is open 24/7—we see evidence of a nation-state’s attempt to outpace the “post-traumatic” period, to achieve development characterized by particular notions of efficiency and advanced technology in order to make up for lost time.

“People are literally being pushed along, but they are not necessarily adapting.”

This is a think piece about how in Rwanda, acceleration is about rewriting the temporal requirements that we typically associate with the teleology of modernity. Here, Rosalind Morris’s (2008) work on speculation and value creation amongst young South Africans facing the overwhelming catastrophe of the AIDS epidemic is especially useful. Puzzled by the exaggerated AIDS prevalence statistics that youth offer in a mining town in Merafong municipality, just south of Johannesburg, she uses an analysis of burial societies and insurance schemes to illuminate the “emerging dialectic between panic and rush (rush and panic) as it takes hold in the changing landscape of epidemic South Africa” (201). For Morris, the “rush” is one against time and fate, involving a panicked avoidance. In Rwanda, the “rush” is not against time and fate, it is a disposal of old time, catching up a nation in a “slow” Africa—it is a teleological race. Time is being expanded so that more events and



Kigali City Tower. January 2014.

changes can be fit into its units. The Rwandan “rush” is the effect of a projective developmental strategy that throws itself into the future with little calculation of the time needed for citizens to learn new ways and adapt, or of intermediate stages of resource and knowledge accumulation that might be necessary. These are dealt with *ex post facto*, after a change or national project has been initiated. This type of rush can be seen as a product of the panic engendered by the mass trauma of time, bodies, and generations lost to the genocide. This teleological race produces disjunctures, such as a

capital city in which no one uses the street signs and many struggle with English.

## II. ACCELERATING IN THE CITY

How is acceleration to be seen and felt in Kigali? Here I will consider the central downtown neighborhood of Centre ville, touring its high rise office and retail buildings which are all near the Place de la Constitution, identifiable by its well-paved (like most of Centre ville) round about. Today, that Place is called KN 1 Round About, and the spokes that radiate from it have names like KN 4 Avenue and KN 2 Street—streets that previously had names like Avenue de la Justice. So the new street signs have also carried re-christenings for the phoenix city, ones that affirm a process of rationalization and efficiency within an accelerationist teleology by converting French names into abbreviations and numbers. A shift from the qualitative to the quantitative. There is Centenary House, owned by Cartas Rwanda, the organization of Rwanda's Catholic bishops who initiated construction in 2000 for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Rwanda's evangelization. Testament to the old and new temporalities of improvement, the building stands on the site of Cartas Rwanda's former offices and was financed by the Catholic Church as well as a 1.5 million USD loan from Rwandan commercial bank CobeBank, which has a branch in the building. It's rusty red with neatly spaced horizontal panels of windows on each story, and a curved facade of windows jutting out at one end.

Centenary House rents out office and commercial space—the income it generates finances the charity work of their group Caritas Rwanda—and some of its clients include Ethiopian Airlines, Flash FM radio, and Simba Supermarket, which is co-owned by a Rwandan and an Eritrean. Simba is one of Rwanda's largest

supermarkets, boasting a butcher, bakery, furniture and electronics, beauty and household supplies, and a restaurant café with indoor and outdoor seating. The café is full of Kigalois on lunch break, discussing business deals or mulling over their next university exam—when making plans to meet at Centenary House they say *kuri Simba* (at Simba). There is the occasional white tourist boasting predictable signs such as an enormous backpack or dreadlocks—perhaps they represent an ironic anachronism as seeming hippies in 2014 Kigali—as well as the occasional expat professional.

Across the street from Centenary House is UTC (Union Trade Center), a white concrete mall featuring the smaller Nakumatt: a 24-hour Kenyan supermarket with an inventory similar to Simba, only the store feels more like an African Walmart in terms of lighting, size, and quantity. UTC also contains the 24-hour MTN store (a major cell phone provider in Rwanda), clothing boutiques, restaurants, Access Bank, souvenir kiosks selling African-made wares and accessories, and a Bourbon Coffee shop. The 24-hour Nakumatt speaks further to the expansion of time itself that characterizes Rwanda's teleological project of acceleration, and of the prioritization of quantity, though I am not claiming that quality is being sacrificed everywhere.

Then there is Kigali City Tower, built by the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) for \$200 million USD, but without any publically declared owner. Of course, this points to Africa's position in a new era of globalization. Along with the predictable banks and stores including an ever-larger second Nakumatt supermarket, a Mr. Price, and a Bata shoe store, where the shoes are affordable for a middle class Kigalois (I bought a pair of comfortable city sneakers for the equivalent of \$5 USD) and made both regionally and across the globe. On the third floor of the Tower



View 1 from Bamboo Bar and Restaurant, T2000. January 2014.

one finds Century Cinema, which opened in March 2013. General Manager Charles Gasigwa told a reporter that the theatre's machines are similar to those used in the US, and that the 5D screen is the first in all of Africa (Asiimwe 2013). 5D? Yes, you didn't misread that. The theatre offers 2D, 3D, and 5D movies—the ticket price increases proportionately to the dimensional order you desire (3000-5000 RWF or \$4.42-7.36 USD at the current exchange rate). The 5D movie experience involves a 3D screen, a chair in motion, and surround sound. There is a scaling up of experience itself—Kigalois can accelerate through orders of complexity. Thus, the teleological race marks not only linguistic and infrastructure changes, but also leisure within Kigali's developing consumption culture.

I also spent a solid hour at T2000's two-story Chinese supermarket—more like a Chinese Target—on middle levels of 2000 House, a pavilion-style commercial high rise (built and owned by a Chinese firm) just down the hill from a gas station which faces Kigali City Tower. In the market one finds German hair



dye, Tuscan and French wine, Kenyan cookies, and Rwanda's local brands, and then there is the gargantuan quantity of shoes, bedding, furniture, toiletries, fake plants, dishware, clothing and school supplies all made in China. Certain imports aside, across categories T2000 is certainly cheaper than Nakumatt and Simba. The affordability of certain items there might be beneficial to poor Kigalois families, the many young people who are unemployed, or recent migrants from rural areas (most of Rwanda)—I was struck that I could buy a toothbrush for 500 RWF (about 75 US cents). I spent a memorable evening with my favorite Rwandan doctors and their American collaborators at the open-air Bamboo Bar and Restaurant on the top (5<sup>th</sup>) floor—one can enjoy striking sunset views of Kigali in every direction. The plethora of Chinese goods to be consumed at T2000—like numerical street names, 24-hour service, and English—affirms a process of rationalization and efficiency within the teleological project of acceleration. The direction of this process is inevitable, and surges on, but not without certain losses. I was struck by the comments of many Kigalois friends, of different ages, professions, histories, and strata within the “middle class.” They were all concerned about good quality. “Now we can buy many more things and cheaply, but be sure that they'll fall apart quickly,” said one. “Our options haven't really diversified because now we just have a lot more Chinese junk,” said another. These remarks evidence a critique by Kigalois—a disappointment about sacrificed quality in the name of quantity and range. In the quest for accelerated development towards affordable goods for consumption, the element of quality has been skipped over, but the locals have not yet accepted this. Perhaps they see Chinese speed as counter-productive; if you drive too fast in order to get up to speed, your wheels may fall off. The street

slang for the building is “T2000 nshyashya,” which means “new T2000.” It turns out that in the 1980s and perhaps even earlier, the same Chinese merchants occupied an old, small building in another part of town before moving to their new tower in 2012.

Our last stop in Centre ville is Grand Pension Plaza, or in Kigalois lingo, *Simba 2*. Financed and owned by the Rwanda Social Security Board (RSSB), built by the Belgian firm Thomas & Piron, and true to its nickname, it is home to the larger Simba supermarket (with clothing and more furniture, etc.), shops, banks, and the like. A few local newspapers have featured stories on the low occupancy rate of the plaza and RSSB's broader real estate investments. Perhaps this is evidence that these investments have accelerated beyond the actual economic capacity of the average Kigalois entrepreneur. Most interestingly, a large, detailed model based on the Kigali City Master Plan lives in an enormous glass case in the lobby of Grand Pension Plaza. It displays how planners envision Kigali in 2040. I found it ironic and disturbing that the glass case is already shattered in a few places. There are buttons that were intended to allow the viewer to illuminate different parts of the model city, but the circuits need repairing—there is no light. The city is white and stainless; but enveloped in the broken, dusty grey cloud of its armor, it stands like a defeated knight. Who chose to vandalize the model and why? A detailed plan for 2040 speaks once again to the local idiom of acceleration, but how to explain the shattered glass in a building replete with security guards?

### III. KIGALI, CAPITAL OF MODERNITY

First published in 2007, the Kigali Conceptual Master Plan has since been updated in the 2013 Kigali City Master Plan Report. The plan was designed by US

firm Oz Architects and Singaporean firm Surbana. It is striking and ambitious—it proposes transforming slum areas into ecological theme parks and commercial districts, building new housing developments, enabling further growth of the tourism industry with amenities like 900-room hotels, and turning Kigali into the Singapore of Central and East Africa, imagined as a critical regional hub for technology and financial services undergirded by a mostly informational economy. The Rwandan government has initiated slum clearances and land expropriations in preparation for implementation of the plan, which has already drawn criticism from foreign donors and the UK Department for International Development for not actually incorporating the poor and being unsustainable (Goodfellow 2013b). The Kigali City Master Plan is fundamentally linked to Rwanda's aspirations to become a middle-income country by 2020, as stated in the Rwanda Vision 2020 plan, with the requisite capital city to accompany such status. Problems aside, the plan instantiates the idea that Rwanda can abandon the central telos of development science and Western modernity, wherein a society progresses through necessary, sequential and well-defined phases of de-agrarianization, industrialization and economic growth before becoming a society based on an informational economy and widespread technological capacity. Aided by considerable foreign direct investment, and transnational planning, the post-traumatic nation can accelerate to build an informational, high-tech society, and a middle-income country.

A review of recent literature on Kigali reveals a concerted engagement with the consequences of Rwanda's accelerationist telos. As one example, Tom Goodfellow, a scholar of urban and development studies in Rwanda and Uganda, is one of the few who have thought about

the reasons behind the striking silence of Kigali's majority of poor citizens and the absence of civic conflict (see Beall et al. 2013) that marks the city despite policies and structural developments that gradually marginalize them. In a comparative paper that considers urban politics in Rwanda and Uganda, he uses a heuristic dichotomy between "noise" and "silence" to capture the differential extent to which violent protest constitutes a regular type of state-society interaction in a given context. He argues the following:

In Kampala the regular mobilisation of urban informal groups into protests and riots has institutionalised a politics of noise, which has become rather self-reinforcing and serves certain functions for both political elites and ordinary city dwellers, even though this functionality may not have been created by design. In Kigali, by contrast, there is a marked absence of protest, and in part, this can be linked to the way city dwellers mobilise (and are mobilised) into orderly, structured community activities and self-policing: relatively silent forms of engagement which are institutionalised in the sense that they form "stable, valued and recurring patterns of behaviour" (Huntington, 1968, p. 12). (Goodfellow 2013a, 437)

This contrast forces us to consider motivation—why is it that Kigali's citizens are never moved to protest despite developments such as expropriation of land for the Kigali City Master Plan? While he paints a rather straightforward portrait of how in Kampala, the city and the state learned a certain politics in the current moment, he gives a rather more complex account of the "politics of silence" in Kigali that takes into account political learning but also how recent history and

experience play into this learning of social behavior. He acknowledges the pervasive impact of Rwanda's top-down authoritarian government and the dearth of formal mechanisms for urban residents (such as market vendors) to express complaints, but goes on to make multiple assertions: a) avoidance of protest has become a social norm; b) most citizens assume that it's counter-productive to confront the government directly; c) while some Rwandans have likely internalized certain aspects of the authoritarian government's agenda for orderly, secure urbanization, both they and those who maintain internal resistance have regularly behaved in a way that "perpetuate[s] norms of relatively silent compliance" (447); d) strict social hierarchy and respect for authority have marked Rwandan culture for centuries; and e) silence is probably deeply *valued* owing to desires for social reproduction, stability, and self-protection. Goodfellow insists that since Rwanda yet lacks the technology and infrastructure for a modern "police state," powerful social norms serve as self-reinforcing mechanisms in sustaining a politics of silence. However, another way of reading Goodfellow's data is to conclude that Rwandans have internalized an ideology of acceleration to such an extent that they assume the rush of sudden changes but skip the stage or moment of urban protest and dissent that we associate with many histories, whether those of European, American, or postcolonial African cities. There is a link between silence and speed. The realization of a developmental telos based on acceleration hinges on a certain amount of silence—the silence that allows for school programs, street signs, and commercial ventures to be implemented relatively quickly. Abandoning French for English is also about silencing, at least for a while; a Francophone past and all its

baggage is symbolically cast away, while many struggle to speak in a new tongue.

In his consideration of the Kigali City Master Plan, Goodfellow (2013b) reiterates the idea that Rwandans avoid protest out of desire for the wellness and stability of a still very fragile nation, but his message is a cautionary and pessimistic one: silence is not conducive to inclusive urban transformation, Rwanda yet needs to establish avenues for political contestation, and "the illusion of a conflict-free city, so appealing after the bloodbaths of the past, surely cannot last forever." In another paper, Goodfellow and Smith (2013) contend that the Rwandan Patriotic Front's consolidation of political control both nationally and locally, in tandem with a developmental agenda focused on attracting investment and integrating the population into the social and economic transformation of Kigali has changed urban security in ways that exceed expectations for post-conflict cities. Again, the authors caution that the chosen political mode for overcoming Rwanda's catastrophic past carries its own limitations, and state that "the question remains as to whether Kigali really is a 'model' of development broadly conceived, rather than just a model of order" (3198). This interrogation offers us a moment to turn towards rural Rwanda, which is the majority of the country, in terms of physical space and citizens.

#### IV. THE COUNTRY AND THE CITY, AGAIN

With the respect to the development of rural Rwanda, the Belgian development economist An Ansoms has produced a number of insightful analyses of Rwanda's agricultural sector reform and the vision expressed by its rural policies. Ansoms (2009) is concerned with the Rwandan elite's ambitions for a wide-ranging re-engineering of rural society, which she defines as threefold:

The conversion of the agricultural sector into a professionalized motor for economic growth, centered on competitive and commercial farm units; the artificial upgrading of rural life via insertion of “modern” techniques and strategies into local realities while hiding poverty and inequality, and the transformation of Rwanda into a target-driven society at all levels. She reminds us that rural development policies are intimately intertwined with the position of elites and their relationship(s) with the peasantry, and should not be viewed as simply technical issues. In fact, her analysis exposes a powerful dichotomy between the rural and the urban, or the country and the city (*pace* Raymond Williams), at work in Rwanda’s accelerationist teleological project. The poor are seen as slow, stuck in another time zone—they too need to catch up, they need to be caught up to speed and upgraded like Kigalois, and in a uniquely fast way. Ansoms openly criticizes the “very top-down developmentalist agenda” expressed by the “social engineering ambitions of the Rwandan government officials” (308). She laments a lack of opportunity for grassroots participation or for bottom-up feedback, the absence of a clear public vision of alternatives for Rwandans leaving agriculture following land holding consolidation, and the yet untapped though ample productive potential of small-scale farmers. Ultimately, she condemns the Rwandan elite for its seeming lack of political will to orient rural policies directly towards the rural poor, cautioning us to understand Rwanda’s vision of accelerated rural development as one that leaves behind the majority of Rwandans: poor small-scale farmers.

More recently, Ansoms and Rostagno (2012) have analyzed the progress of Rwanda’s Vision 2020 program, which the government incarnated in a document finalized in July 2000. Vision 2020 encompasses the

government’s broad development aims to be achieved by 2020, structured by six “pillars”: (1) good governance and a capable state; (2) human resource development and a knowledge-based economy; (3) a private sector-led economy; (4) infrastructure development; (5) productive and market-oriented agriculture; and (6) regional and international economic integration (GOR 2000). Ansoms and Rostagno acknowledge that Rwanda is on track to meet the Millennium Development Goals in the fields of education and health care, and that the political leadership has been praised for its quality of technocratic governance and proactive approach to creating an appealing business atmosphere. However, they insist that “some indicators remain problematic” (427). They characterize Rwanda’s current development strategy as one of maximum growth at any cost, and denounce it as counter-productive to the aim of achieving the greatest possible poverty reduction given that its ultimate outcome is to concentrate strong economic growth in the hands of a small elite with limited trickle-down potential. The accelerationist teleological project crystallizes once again in an economic agenda of maximum growth at any cost. As Ansoms and Rostagno suggest, rapid-fire development may generate sacrificial costs.

They list many such costs: Land dispossession, evictions in Kigali, a lack of democratic freedom, little space for dissent and debate in civil society, a seeming lack of correlation between private capital injection into the Rwandan economy and poverty reduction/job creation, growing centralization of power despite the purported goal of decentralization in Vision 2020, the questionable quality of education given the sudden adoption of English as a classroom language, and so forth. Ultimately, Ansoms and Rostagno propose that Rwanda investigate and pursue a broad-based

inclusive growth model drawing on existing strengths and the principle of capacity building among rural small-scale farmers, with investment in both small-holder, labor-intensive agriculture and investment in artisanal training centers and small-scale industries existing in the informal economy. They emphasize that a more inclusive, pro-poor model of growth is essential for poverty reduction and to avoid radicalization while fostering long-term stability and peace in Rwanda.

While Ansoms and Rostagno are vehemently critical of Rwanda’s actual success in achieving the development agenda laid out in Vision 2020, other scholars have highlighted how the document crystallizes a shared imaginary of change and temporal power amongst Rwanda’s political leaders and civil servants. In their characterization of Rwanda as a developmental patrimonial state, Booth and Golooba-Mutebi (2012) argue that “contrary to what happens with equivalent documents in most countries of the region, [the Rwanda Vision 2020 document] is a real point of reference for ministers and civil servants. The assumption underlying the vision is that *if economic and social progress occurs fast enough*, a new generation will emerge who are capable of fully assuming their national identity as Rwandans rather than privileging what divided them in the past” (391, emphasis added). Their empirical conclusion lends support to the notion that in Rwanda, there is a certain fetishization of acceleration amongst the nation’s leadership—if development and change can accelerate to their realization “fast enough,” an entire generation can overcome the trauma of Rwanda’s past of ethnic divisionism and genocide, assuming a new identity as unified Rwandans. The authors go on to assert, “Many critics of the regime see this as naïve and argue that reconciliation needs to be attended to in

a more direct fashion. But in so doing they also confirm that this is indeed the vision that drives policy” (391).

Finally, other scholars have foregrounded the Rwandan state’s direct surveillance of public discourse and how various formal institutions constrain Rwandan citizenship (Straus and Waldorf 2011). Andrea Purdeková (2011) has argued that a deep-seated belief that the state has “so many eyes” perpetuates the silence of Rwandan citizens. However, our analysis of such crucial issues cannot be reduced to the power of entrenched authoritarian government, particularly in a post-disaster, post-traumatic, recently reborn city.

Time as a cultural production and experience has always been a major object of anthropological inquiry. What is more, from the colonial period onwards, Africa was cast as a place of slow tempos against which the West could define its modern history of fast achievements. Rwanda’s present teleological project is an endeavor whose eventual success is meant to debunk that age-old narrative. The accelerationist teleology applied to and experienced in Kigali is meant to enable an entire generation to overcome a recent past of extreme violence and ethnic divisionism, in spite of all the scars that endure. In a moment where cultural change and social stability are framed around getting up to speed, Rwandan society is grasping for the possibility of outpacing the post-traumatic period, of leaving it behind in the dust. To live in Kigali is to be pushed along, to be reminded each day that one must catch up, upgrade, hurry up. It is a quotidian condition that does not spare people a certain sense of loss—loss of quality (whether of goods or of education); a lack of meticulous care; a certain silencing. And yet, in the wake of so many ruptures, this teleological breach may seem worth the sacrifice.

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