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GAZING UPON THE INVISIBLE: 
WOMEN AND CHILDREN AT THE OLD BATON ROUGE PENITENTIARY

Connie H. Nobles

This research involves analysis of two works related to the same archaeological site. The archaeologists’ unconscious exclusion of information found in their scholarly report resulted in a public booklet that tells only part of the history of this site. A third historic document supplements this comparison and provides detailed information relevant to this analysis. Professional archaeologists interact with the public on multiple levels and their connections with education and curricula are established through their writings as well as more deliberate and obvious choices. Increasing levels of consciousness and recognition of responsibility to public education could result in more careful analysis of material culture, interpretation, and choices for all works involving archaeological sites. Foucault (in Gordon 1980) discussed the inclusion of hidden ruses and discourses about decisions, regulations, and strategies pertaining to particular institutions. Using the work of critical theorists, these issues are interwoven to examine this archaeological investigation with connections to the past through patterns that still pervade today.

Esta investigación se enfoca en dos publicaciones sobre el mismo sitio arqueológico. La exclusión subconsciente de la información encontrada por los arqueólogos resultó en un panfleto público, que describe parcialmente la historia de este sitio arqueológico. Estos arqueólogos en compañía de ciudadanos han desarrollado otros niveles pedagógicos y planes de estudio que ofrecen oportunidades para reflexionar y aumentar la responsabilidad ciudadana en los temas concernientes a la cultura, tradición, y conservación de este yacimiento arqueológico. En 1980 Foucault enfatizó los misterios escondidos y los discursos que hacen referencia a la creación de leyes, decisiones, y estrategias adoptadas por ciertas instituciones. El trabajo de estos críticos y teóricos muestra la conexión y validez de reglas y normas que aún siguen vigentes.

In his book, the location of culture, homi bhabha (1994) rethinks some provocative questions about social agency and identity, as well as national affiliation, as he brings together writings from the fields of literary theory and cultural criticism. Edward Said does similar work, and in his essay, “The Politics of Knowledge” (1993:312), he discusses issues related to knowledge and power:

By linking works to each other we bring them out of the neglect and secondariness to which for all kinds of political and ideological reasons they had been previously condemned. It is only through the scrutiny of these works as literature, as style, as pleasure and illumination, that they can be brought in, so to speak, and kept in. Otherwise they will be regarded only as informative ethnographic specimens, suitable for the limited attention of experts and area specialists.

The scholarly reports which are written about archaeological sites are examples of those Said classifies as “suitable for the limited attention of experts and area specialists.” Some would not consider archaeologists as important in influencing the curriculum. However, their written records and interpretations of material cultures may be the only information available for some groups of peoples and/or particular sites. With only a few exceptions, the reports remain “informative ethnographic specimens.” The scholarly survey of the Old Baton Rouge Penitentiary was converted from a site report to a literary work when it was edited and published as a public booklet. In the following pages, the site report and the booklet are compared as texts, and a third text is used for supplementary documentary information and historical context.

This paper questions the concepts of landscapes, categories, “the gaze” (Foucault, in Gordon 1980), and invisibleness as well as the choices that influenced the writing of identity (or lack thereof) by

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archaeologists, and the relationships of these writings to curricula. I have endeavored to scrutinize these as literature, as Said recommends to bring them in, as the printing of the public booklet reaches beyond the fields and attention of archaeologists.

An interviewer stated to Foucault (in Gordon 1980:38) “In your study of the prisons, you seem to regret the absence of a certain kind of source material, of monographs on particular prisons, for instance.” In the exchange that followed, Foucault discussed “establishing a corpus of source data” including the discourses that arise within a prison, the decisions and regulations, means of operation and strategies, and hidden ruses and discourses which guarantee permanence of the institution. He said, “All of this has to be brought together and made visible by the historian” (in Gordon 1980:38).

The Data

*Hard Labor: A Cultural Resources Survey of the Old Louisiana State Penitentiary, Baton Rouge, Louisiana*, was published in November 1992 by an archaeological firm in the area (Wurtzburg and Hahn 1992a). The archaeological and historical study was conducted between August 1989 and March 1991. Archival research guided the cultural resources survey, which will be referred to here as the *Survey*, and was completed prior to the archaeological investigations. Details of the initial survey, including auger testing and hand excavations in three areas of the main prison compound, were combined with information from the archival records to create the *Survey*.

The second document under consideration is a direct result of the *Survey* and is a booklet written for and distributed to the general public, *Hard Labor: History and Archaeology at the Old Louisiana State Penitentiary, Baton Rouge, Louisiana*. The acknowledgments section begins: “This booklet represents a portion of a more detailed and scholarly manuscript about the *history* of the first Louisiana State Penitentiary...” [Wurtzburg and Hahn 1992b: i, emphasis added]. This 44-page document is free and available to the public.

Uniquely different, but linked to the other two documents is the paper “Women in the Walls: The Imprisonment of Women at the Baton Rouge Penitentiary, 1835–1862” by Marianne Fisher-Giorlando, a professor in criminal justice at Grambling University. Her article is part of a larger publication on corrections in Louisiana (Fisher-Giorlando 1996b). This research was used as a supplement to the other two works.

**Landscapes of Domination**

In 1833, construction began on the Louisiana Penitentiary in Baton Rouge. One hundred state prisoners, a warden, 10 guards, and various assistants were moved to the site from the New Orleans prison. The land was bought from John Christian Buhler Jr. who had purchased it in the estate sale of his mother, Edith Smith Buhler Devall. The U-shaped, three-story brick structure was 154 feet wide (4694 cm) and surrounded by a wall with a foundation 3 to 5 feet (91 cm to 152 cm) below the surface. The underground wall base was 5 feet (152 cm), but decreased in size to 26 inches (66 cm) at ground level where it stood 24 feet high (61 cm). Due to this particularly foreboding feature, the prison facility soon came to be called “The Walls.” (Wurtzburg and Hahn 1992a)

The cells were brick-floored, each 7 x 3.5 feet (213 cm x 107 cm); there were 240 cells in the Upper Cell house and 200 cells in the Lower Cell house. Each cell had poor ventilation, with a less than 12 in² (31 cm²) iron-barred opening in an otherwise solid iron door. There was no heat in the winter and no beds or cots. The prison structure included 1) the northern wing that housed the hospital, provision rooms, and workshop; 2) the keeper’s quarters in the southwest corner; 3) the main entrance between the lower cell house and the keeper’s quarters; 4) a brick wall that separated the main complex from the prison yard and workshop area; and 5) a brick wall that surrounded the prison yard and workshop area.

In late September 1844, a reporter from the *Daily Picayune* visited the penitentiary and noted the presence of 171 males and 6 females. All of the females were women of color and described as “occupied in washing and ironing for the convicts” (Wurtzburg and Hahn 1992a:21). Details of the male prisoners’ work and the prison’s physical facilities are described in detail in the *Survey*. Included are details of the lease system, where prisoners were leased out to perform hard labor such as the building of levees under horrendous conditions. Those not working on levees labored in the manufacture of bricks, shoes, and cloth, or worked in the carpentry shop, foundry, or blacksmith’s shop.

No mention of female prisoners appears again in the *Survey* until a discussion of the prison population in December 1857, when there were 12 black females,
4 white females, 89 black males, and 232 white males incarcerated in the prison compound. An italicized quote in the introduction to chapter 2 gives information on the female prisoners, quoting from the Board of Control report of 1855, “From the present arrangement of apartments for female convicts, it is impossible to keep them clean; being two large unfinished rooms, occupied in common by women and children” (Wurtzburg and Hahn 1992a:5). Federal troops took control of Baton Rouge and the penitentiary in May 1862. Included in an 1867 description of the damages to the complex was the female prison. However, no photos are available of the three-story-high female prison structure that was reported to be 70 feet by 30 feet (2134 cm x 914 cm).

In 1901, the number of prisoners at the penitentiary was reported as 128, with only 5 listed as females. The old gin room was transformed into the women’s cell block around 1905 (Figure 1). Another Survey diagram, dated 1908, marked the old gin room structure as the Women’s Department.¹ The city of Baton Rouge purchased the main compound of the state prison in 1917. By 1918, all of the structures from the Penitentiary compound had been sold, dismantled, or leveled.

The Survey also has three appendices. Appendix B is a copy of the 1867 “Report of the Committee of Examination on the Damage to Public Buildings at Baton Rouge” and includes the estimates of damages to the Louisiana State Penitentiary. The cost to repair the female prison was $2,224.75. Also quoted is the cost to rebuild “garden and female prison fencing”: $1,475. This is the last entry pertaining to females in the prison and the only mention of a garden.²

Borrowing again from the ideas of bhaba (1994:50) and his “world of double inscriptions,” the prison was a literal and figurative landscape of domination with intertwining spheres of the public and private. This was a public place that also was a private one where black slave women were imprisoned for crimes such as slapping their white plantation owner’s wife. It was a place where the female prison was encircled by a fence and possessed, reportedly, a garden. Where did the rape of (black) women considered property take place in this public/private landscape of domination? Where were these slave babies born? The mulatto girl, Clara Williams, was born in this prison as were the slaves Peter and Emily. All were allowed to stay with their mothers because of the legal code in Louisiana that kept slave mothers and children together until a child was 10 years old. In a photocopy of the State Audi-
tor’s Office Account Book 4 dated January 1, 1857 to December 30, 1859, Fisher-Giorlando showed me the recording of the births of slave children and the sales of slave mothers and children.

Bhaba (1994:9) wrote, “The recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions.” His discussion continued and he redrew the domestic space to include “the personal-is-the-political; the world in the home” (Bhaba 1994:11). Can the prison be considered the home in the world? Either way, the title of both the Survey and the public booklet, Hard Labor, seems especially appropriate. These landscapes of domination included spheres of public/private, home/prison, slave/prisoner, and body/property.

Material Culture

Cultural Resources Survey

There were a total of 1,310 artifacts collected from this site. Five major categories of items include: 1) ceramic goods, 2) glass vessels, 3) metal, 4) faunal materials, and 5) leather goods. According to the Survey, “these artifacts include a variety of goods that express the lives of both the prisoners and their guards” (Wurtzburg and Hahn 1992a: 91).

Few ceramic goods were expected to be recovered because of their potential use as weapons. Those few found represent vessels for storage or utilitarian use and include stoneware jugs and yellowware chamber pots, with only small quantities of tableware. The Survey states that the three areas where these types of artifacts would have been used were the kitchen for food storage and preparation, the hospital for storage of medicines, and employee residences for sanitary purposes.

More glass was recovered than archaeologists expected. These artifacts were listed as: 1) alcohol containers, 2) medicinal vessels, 3) hard liquor bottles, 4) flasks, 5) wine bottles, 6) one champagne bottle, 7) foodstuff containers, and 8) ink wells. Numerous medicinal bottles were identified, including Buffalo Lithia Spring Water. It was reported to be used for several ailments, including the treatment of rheumatic conditions associated with gout and “Albuminuria of Bright’s Disease and Pregnancy” (Wurtzburg and Hahn 1992a: 94).

The metal artifacts recovered relate to: 1) architectural items, 2) sewing machines for manufacturing prison clothing, 3) apparel of prisoners and guards, 4) levee construction tools, and 5) a guard’s gun. Discussion of the metal items also include a single brass safety pin and parts of Faber fountain pens.

There was abundant evidence of the prison’s leather works, indicative of the fact that prisoners were employed as shoemakers. Items recovered include a leather hat, belts, dozens of shoes, and large quantities of leather scraps. Most of the shoes were men’s, but several were women’s. The Survey also noted the recovery of a child’s shoe sole and four leather items are illustrated in the report (Figure 2).

Public Booklet

The title of the public booklet, Hard Labor: History and Archaeology at the Old Louisiana State Penitentiary, is extremely significant for this study. The acknowledgments of the public document plainly

Figure 2. The Survey description reads "Leather goods recovered from the Louisiana State Penitentiary: A) adult male shoe; B) child’s shoe; C) hat; D) belt." (Courtesy of General Services Administration and Coastal Environments, Inc.)
state that the booklet represents a portion of the original Survey. However, some of the portions deleted are significant to the history and therefore, the representation of this site. For instance, discussion of the historical background begins with John Buhler as one of the owners of the acreage purchased by the state for the location of the Penitentiary with his mother’s name, Edith Smith Buhler Devall, excluded although Devall Town is referenced. This area was specifically named after Buhler Devall, and helps to create the context.

Although details concerning the prison complex and cells are included, as one would expect, the reporter’s description from September 1844 is excluded in the public booklet. Therefore, no mention is made of the six females, nor their race, nor the work they performed at the penitentiary. Also excluded is the quote that described the “two large unfinished rooms, occupied in common by women and children” (Wurtzburg and Hahn 1992a:21).

Obscured in a long inventory list is the description of damages to the female prison that were the result of federal occupation. Other disclosures include the fact that there were five female prisoners in 1901, the transformation of the old gin room into a cell block for women, and the 1916 Sanborn Fire Insurance diagram which shows the women’s department.

The section on “Artifact Collection” follows the same format as the Survey. The information for all of the five major categories is the same, with one critical exclusion. The leather goods discussion does not include the same photo as the one in the Survey.

The photo in the public booklet (Figure 3) shows only a man’s shoe and the leather hat. In addition to omitting the child’s leather shoe sole from the picture, the written text does not state that women’s shoes also were recovered.

Akin to the thoughts of Edward Said (1993), establishing non-European “others” and in the case of the prison, the women and children, as a separate category does not take the place of evidence, argument, and discussion. Therefore, I am not suggesting the necessity of such, but rather, to dismiss their existence from those categories already established is to skew the history of the place, the women, and the children.

**Curriculum Connections**

Susan Edgerton (1993:222) wrote, “The ways in which groups, individuals, and ideas come to be marginalized in a given culture, society, and/or place has much to do with what is considered to be knowledge and who is considered to possess it, who is perceived as knower and who as known.” Whenever categories are used, as for material culture in the case of archaeological sites, the choices for those categories result in the inclusion of some and the exclusion of other information. Because material culture represents human beings, categorical choices include some people and exclude others. At the Old Baton Rouge Penitentiary, the material culture revealed some folks who were rendered invisible once the public booklet was published.

Public booklets and documents, whether primary or secondary sources, are incorporated into the cur-
riculum by some teachers. By carefully analyzing the information from this particular place, the power of the authors in determining what is set forth as the history of the Old Baton Rouge Penitentiary, and the unconscious acts of exclusion, patterns of Eurocentric and androcentric influences linking archaeologists and their work to the curriculum are evident.

In the introduction to *Understanding Curriculum as Racial Text* (1993:7), the editors, Castenell and Pinar, enlarge “the curricular debate from an exclusive preoccupation with equity or with multiculturalism to include debates regarding the relationship between knowledge and ourselves.” They also write on repression including African Americans and women, as well as a “a curriculum that is Eurocentric and unrelated to the lived experience of students.” They discuss African Americans and European Americans as “two sides of the same cultural coin, two interrelated narratives in the American story, two interrelated elements of the American identity” (1993:8).

The Penitentiary study links issues and multiple identities across time and literal and figurative landscapes. Messaging thoughts and experiencing the pain of new knowledge of self and others has led to a greater understanding of features of the intricate design on both sides of this American coin. “So it is that European Americans cannot hope to understand themselves unless they are knowledgeable and knowing of those they have constructed as ‘different,’ as ‘other’” (Castenell Jr. and Pinar 1993:8).

The research on the Old Baton Rouge Penitentiary and those children and women who were housed there as prisoners and family members includes but reaches beyond those individuals. Fisher-Giorlando’s search (1996b) of the Board of Control records, census reports, and other state records has turned up facts that counter commonly held beliefs concerning southern pre-Civil War imprisonment. Louisiana was the exception in several particulars that relate to the Old Baton Rouge Penitentiary. Both male and female slaves were prisoners in “the Walls” and there were never fewer than 5 women in the Baton Rouge facility. This proportion of imprisoned women constituted at least 5 percent of the total imprisoned population, considerably higher than traditionally believed. These figures are comparable to the 1980s, a time reported to be an all-time high for female imprisonment, on the state and federal levels (Fisher-Giorlando 1996b:24).

The commonly held belief that women did not stay long in Southern prisons proved to be questionable. The pattern that emerged in Louisiana’s antebellum penitentiary was that once incarcerated, black women were there to stay, even though white women came and went. “The sentencing and release patterns of Louisiana’s antebellum penitentiary were a precursor of Southern incarceration patterns after the Civil War and into the present day for African-American women” (Fisher-Giorlando 1996b:24).

In 1992, the American Association of University Women published its report, *How Schools Shortchange Girls*, a study of major findings on girls and education. This work reveals other patterns that were established from the founding of our country and still presently exist. Research on teacher-student interactions indicates the following about African-American females in elementary school:

a) they have less interaction with their teachers than do white females or black or white males

b) they make many more attempts to initiate interaction with their teachers

c) unconscious rejections by teachers eventually leads to reliance on peer interaction; this in turn leads to their

d) emergence as the “class enforcer or go-between for other students” (AAUW 1992:70)

In addition, black females do as well academically as white males, but teachers credit this success differently. They attribute black females with working hard while white males are assumed to have worked below their full potential.

Furthermore, the AAUW study reveals that girls receive measurably less of their teacher’s attention than boys. The multiple barriers to equality in school and society faced by all females are compounded by racism and frequently low-income households for minority females. The grievous conditions for children from low-income families include low teacher expectations, poor nutrition and health care, as well as inferior schools in dangerous neighborhoods (AAUW 1992:35).

Regarding women-headed households, “The families most in danger of poverty are those headed by women, particularly women of color” (AAUW 1992:8). Childhood poverty is higher in female-headed households, with the rates of 47 percent among whites and 72 percent among blacks. This condition is almost inescapable when the mothers do not have high school diplomas. The narrow range of
occupations considered traditionally appropriate for women is even more extreme for women of color, with 41 percent of black women employed as cleaners, nurse’s aides, chambermaids, and welfare service aides.

Although the Old Baton Rouge Penitentiary was a physical place with horrid and inhumane conditions, the facts are that many of our nation’s women of color are still prisoners, albeit of a different institution. The children of women who have inadequate educations jeopardize their own and their children’s opportunities, and affect the communities where they struggle to be effective citizens and heads of households.

**Invisible-ness**

A female descendant of slaves, A. Jin (bhaba 1994: 45–46), writes of the diaspora in her poem, “Strangers on a Hostile Landscape.” The verse reads:

We arrived in the Northern Hemisphere when summer was set in its way running from the flames that lit the sky over the Plantation.

We were a straggle bunch of immigrants in a lily white landscape.

…

One day I learnt a secret art, Invisible-Ness, it was called.

I think it worked as even now you look but never see me…

Only my eyes will remain to watch and to haunt, and to turn your dreams to chaos.

In describing aspects of the postcolonial condition, bhaba (1994: 47) used poetry to discuss how “The evil gaze of the eye alienates both the narrational I of the slave and the surveillant eye of the master.” Comparing these thoughts to this project, are the gazes of professional archaeologists, their interpretations, and thus their influences on the curricula similar to the gazes of the warden? Do we look, but not see?

bhaba also used literature to interrogate identities, with the issue of invisibleness established as one of the strongest. The authors of the public booklet, who are the same as the authors of the scholarly work, made choices as to the information which would be included in the work for the public. By excluding certain information and artifacts present in the site report, the public is forced to rely upon a few scant references to the female prison—the building itself. My initial reading of the public booklet was one of experiencing the women and children’s “presence through absence” (bhaba 1994:52).

In the Survey, a photograph from ca. 1901 shows male prisoners lined up outside the dining hall. It had no particular significance until I found the original photograph in the archives. The discovery of the original was extremely important because it is the only photograph in the archives of a female. A white female child is standing beside a white male overseer who is seated and both are facing the line of prisoners (Figure 4). One of the sentences in the Survey describing the leather goods is “Interestingly, the sole of a child’s shoe…was recovered from Well 1” (Wurtzburg and Hahn 1992a). The authors attribute the visibleness of this find to the possible manufacture of leather goods for charitable organizations. Again the authors looked outside “the Walls” to see and the children are once again rendered invisible.

Another of bhaba’s (1993:47) provoking challenges is to “see what is invisible” and leads to a specific question about the previously cited poem by A. Jin (bhaba 1994: 45–46). He asks, “What is the secret of Invisibleness that enables the woman migrant to look without being seen?” I continue to look for the invisible and using his work ask the same question in regard to the inclusion and specificity of the woman prisoner, the female child on the porch, the slave children, and any female family members. The copy of the original photo used in the Survey was cropped by one of the authors, resulting in the absence of the female child and overseer (Figure 5).

**Conclusions**

Edward Said (1993:311) discusses three issues important to those who are widening their own cultural awareness and sharing those experiences through their studies. First, our work is not just “to reaffirm the paramount importance of formerly suppressed or silenced forms of knowledge,” nor is it “to surround ourselves with the sanctimonious piety of historical or cultural victimhood as a way of making our intellectual presence felt.” As I have applied his work elsewhere as pertinent to archaeological categories,

…it was never a matter of replacing one set of authorities with another, nor of substituting one
center for another. It was always a matter of opening and participating in a central strand of intellectual and cultural effort and of showing what had always been, though indiscernibly, a part of it, like the work of women, or of blacks and servants—but which had been either denied or derogated.

The Old Baton Rouge Penitentiary was a place where race intersected with class and gender. Unconscious acts of omitting a white female child from a photo and other information from a public booklet are acts of exclusion. The women and children at this particular site both gazed at and were gazed upon,
yet still they are not seen. I have gazed upon the women and children and they have gazed back hauntingly. As a member of the dominant culture, I gazed with fear and desire working through the scholarly report and material culture, but returning again and again to the names of slave children sold from this prison. bhaba (1994:50) said “...the very question of identification only emerges in-between disavowal and designation” (emphasis in original).

Ellen Bryan Moore is the daughter of the last warden who lived on the grounds of the penitentiary. Moore is 88 years old and still resides in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. I interviewed her and learned that she was born inside “the Walls” and lived there until she was five years old. In 1917, the family moved across the street and lived in the building that had been the penitentiary store. Living quarters for the storekeeper’s family and subsequently the warden’s family were located on the second floor. This building is now privately owned.

I have worked closely with both of the authors of the two texts analyzed here, doing field work, lab work, and public presentations. They are both archaeologists of great integrity who care deeply about public education. The initial contact with Fisher-Giorlando was the result of Thurston Hahn sharing her business card with me. On several occasions, he and I have discussed my findings and he brought my attention to the photograph in the Survey as I did not recognize that it was the same one I had located in the archives. The original copy of the Survey was on loan to me, and it was through Thurston Hahn’s self-reflection that he asked me to check the photo since he knew he was the one who had cropped it. Both of these researchers continue to encourage me in my efforts to take archaeological work into the public realm.

My experiences as a professional educator span over a 15-year period and include the teaching of middle school, university undergraduates, and graduates as well as presenting papers on the international, national, and local levels. The authors of texts are usually viewed by students and many teachers as experts on the information they have provided in their written work. The research of archaeologists contributes to and greatly influences the public’s understanding of the history of our nation and the world. I encourage archaeologists to continue dialoguing with those outside the profession while attempting to reach increasingly larger audiences. I also encourage them to reflect upon their interpretations of data and examine acts of exclusion that may result in a written history that is incomplete. While scholarly reports are viewed primarily by experts in a field, works that are the results of these reports are distributed and shared with the public including students and teachers.

The marginalization of people and ideas can be addressed and changed by those who possess the knowledge and willingness to reflect upon choices and methodologies. Scholarly examination of U.S. history has resulted in illuminating previous denials of our multiple identities. Slowly these findings make their way into the school curricula. The research of archaeologists has contributed to the writing of our history and will continue to influence it. The responsibility of us all is to gaze upon those rendered invisible and ensure that patterns of the past do not continue to be those of the present and future.

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Notes
1. The presence of liquor bottles as well as the conversion of the old gin room to the women’s cell block may indicate a change associated with updating the prison from an old English practice. Ignatief (1980:32) discusses the practice of in-house taprooms or taverns where prisoners could purchase liquor.
2. For additional information regarding the significance of the garden for the female prisoners, see S. M. Spencer-Wood (1994).
3. Another possible direction for this paper would have been to situate this work within the context of feminist research on women reformers. Additional references for information on the wide range of their reforms consult S.M. Spencer-Wood and S. Baughker (2000). A reference for the discussion of the redefinition of the domestic sphere is S. M. Spencer-Wood (1991: 234–44).

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