NARRATING THE SILENCE OF TRAUMA

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ABSTRACT

Conception by racist pack rape kept secret for more than 30 years; rape as war crime kept secret for more than 50 years; a doctor sexually abusing a five year old; child abuse within a family. Silence is a ubiquitous by-product of traumatic crime. And when the subjects of such crime finally decide to speak, the interview process itself can be a traumatising experience. And then, the handling of information by the journalist, particularly in long form narrative, is integral to that experience.

Contextualising these narratives within the genre of literary journalism, this paper is an exploration of professional practice when dealing with traumatic memory in subjects. The paper will draw on interviews which form part of a manuscript of creative non-fiction entitled *Speaking Secrets*.

This paper argues for a greater discussion within the academy of empathy as a tool of journalism, rather than a notion regarded by most as anathema to the industry. It argues that empathy must and should be taught and embraced within journalism education in Australia, particularly within the long form literary journalism.

There is a fleeting intimacy established between story teller and story gatherer. An immediate relationship is formed when a journalist and subject come face-to-face; even before, in negotiating agreement, time and place for an interview. It smacks of opportunistic potential at the time of interviewing but ends when the journalist walks out the door with what they came for, in the first place: the story. The question that must be asked is: what is left behind? Is it an empowered subject feeling they have achieved what they set out to achieve? Or is it a damaged person – re-traumatised by remembering – and wondering whether they have said too much and how it will be used and retold by this person who seemed so genuine and 'friendly' at the time? Trusting that the integrity of what has passed between them will be maintained but really, having no idea until it is seen or heard, after reproduction.

Janet Malcolm's controversial book *The Journalist and the Murderer* highlighted the notions of false friendship. Malcolm takes one case history in her seminal text published in 1990, and does more to damage the already quite challenged name, reputation and profession of journalism and journalists than any text has done in the past. The opening lines of the book position her immediately: 'Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible' (Malcolm 1990, p.3).

Malcolm's story *Reflections: The Journalist and the Murderer*, in the form of extended essay, first appeared as a two-part article in *The New Yorker*.[1] But as an example of the extreme of writer/subject duplicity, Malcolm's dissection of literary journalist Joe McGinniss' journalism practice surrounding his coverage of the Jeffery MacDonald case is damning.

Philip Weiss in *Newsday* wrote at the time: 'If Janet Malcolm had blown up an ink factory, forcing the presses to shut down for a week, she couldn't have sparked greater outrage in the media kingdom' (Weiss 1990, p.24).

If Malcolm is guilty of one thing, it is hyperbole in those first few lines of her book. Perhaps it was intentional because it has certainly kept her in the forefront of mainstream journalism analysis and education, frequently cited in discussions surrounding journalistic ethics and practice, for the past 18 years. But most striking is what she eventually concludes – this <u>is</u> a relationship, and both parties have something to do with its dynamic and reality. Malcolm places heaviest responsibility

[1] in the March 13 and 20, 1989 issues

on the journalist but also concedes subjects play a part in the dance, albeit a mostly compromised part: 'The subject's side of the equation is not without its moral problems, either' (Malcolm 1990, p.143). This role is often overlooked by critics of journalism practice. She writes:

> Journalistic subjects know all too well what awaits them when the days of wine and roses – the days of the interviews – are over. And still they say yes when a journalist calls, and still they are astonished when they see the flash of the knife (Malcolm 1990: 145).

Subjects of the journalistic interview are part of what is widely believed to be a clearly defined relationship. But in reality, it is not. The journalist, when sitting in front of his or her computer, ultimately has the final say, despite what has transpired throughout the interview process. American literary journalist Jon Krakauer warns: 'I explain that if they decide to talk to me it will have to be for their own reasons, and they had better be good reasons, because what I write could turn their lives inside out' (in Boynton 2005: 168).

Although both Malcolm and Krakauer argue that subjects have a certain agency in their choice to become involved as interviewees, journalists must make continuous ethical judgements about the capacity of their subjects, particularly subjects talking about deeply personal, traumatic, and/or sensitive topics, to continue with the interview. The mere fact the interviewee agrees to the interview is insufficient consent. Journalists must continuously question themselves and monitor the cues of the interview.

The manuscript *Speaking Secrets* delves into 10 people's lives, asking them questions about their most haunting and secret sexual traumas and memories, and how and when they finally spoke about them. And as such, is an evocative example of the tension between a writer and subject.

The manuscript research sets out to establish an overt, visible relationship with each of the subjects and to hand that onto the reader in order to create an evocative and believable space for their voices to be heard and their stories to be told. Each story has been accompanied by rigorous research and fact checking, to allow a freer momentum for their voices. But indeed, there is a perception of false friendship about this process. It doesn't matter that the interviewee has <u>agreed</u> to talk about deeply personal and sometimes traumatic memories, the question is still, what right the interviewer has to be there in the first place?

In the majority of interviews conducted for *Speaking Secrets*, at some stage it was necessary to ask the subject if they wanted to halt the interview because of how distressed they became through the telling of their story. The stories were necessary for the research and somehow, the more upset or re-traumatised the subject became, the more evocative the story-telling became – very possibly a “morally indefensible” stance. But as Catharine Stimpson writes: ‘It offers little consolation to writers of some integrity…such writers do what they must, but some blood will fleck the keyboards of even the wisest among them’ (Stimpson 1990, p.902).

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The subjects include: Uniting Church leader Dorothy McRae-McMahon, of her public coming out at the 1999 Church forum; former international casting agent Liz Mullinar, following her near death illness and discovery of childhood sexual abuse at the age of five, memories she had expunged for decades; David Cunningham, the NSW Greens Party convenor and physically disabled, and his need and desire for some sort of fulfilling sex life; Kate Richards[2], a young lawyer, brutally abused by a family member from the age of eleven to fifteen; Russel Sykes, son of black activist Dr Roberta Sykes, on his discovery at the age of 30 that he was the product of a gang rape of his then 18-year-old mother – it was a race crime and she was left for dead; Jenny Mendick and her desire to claim a space for women who have had mastectomy but choose not to have prosthesis – her virtual gagging from the breast cancer community because of her stance; Rachael Wallbank, a sexually reassigned lawyer who took on the Australian Attorney-General against the Commonwealth – and won the right for sexually reassigned people to marry; academic Jim Malcolm, who married at 20 even though he had been having sex with men for years – he regarded himself as bisexual, finally leaving his wife and three children, more than a decade later; Lyn Austin, the first Stolen Generation survivor to receive financial compensation for the systematic physical, sexual and emotional abuse she sustained, once removed from her family as a ten year old; and finally, war crime victim Jan Ruff O-Herne, brutally raped by hundreds of Japanese military in the last few months of WW2 in Indonesia.

[2] not her real name

Each interviewee has been constrained, some for decades. So, how did they finally manage to speak up, and then why did they agree to speak to me? Is it the impetus to confess that sociologist Michel Foucault wrote about?

> Truth, lodged in our most secret nature, demands only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place, the violence of a power weighs it down, and it can only finally be articulated at the price of a kind of liberation (Foucault 1976, p.60).

What Foucault has identified is a human need to confess, even when societal norms may discourage it. Perhaps this innate tendency to confess answers the age-old question of why people talk to journalists and divulge, sometimes, their deepest, darkest thoughts, moments and memories for public consumption.

All interviewees were silenced or unable to tell their secret stories for various and varied reasons. But finally, each of them sought out the media to disclose their secrets. Their reasons are as diverse as they are personal. Sociologist Catherine Kohler Riessman writes:

> …some experiences are extremely difficult to speak about. Political conditions constrain particular events from being narrated. The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from awareness. Survivors of political torture, war and sexual crimes silence themselves and are silenced because it is too difficult to tell and to listen (Kohler Riessman 1993, p.3).

These subjects were not solicited. Each subject was approached in the first instance by phone or email. During this contact, the method and nature of the research was explained. Namely, that they would be interviewed and photographed for inclusion in a manuscript with the possibility of publication. All but one person – and that particular circumstance will be expanded upon later in this paper – agreed to this, each for varying reasons. Ted Conover calls himself a 'nuts and bolts' writer when it comes to literary journalism, and talks also of a contract he strikes, not so much with his subjects but with his readers. He writes: 'Either something happened or it didn't. I have a contract with my readers according to which they can expect my material to be true, and I honour that. I believe in the literal truth of non-fiction' (Boynton 2005, p28).

This 'literal truth of non-fiction' is an imperative of literary journalism, one I have adhered to rigidly in *Speaking Secrets*. But one of the main aims of the manuscript was to give a voice to those who did not have one – literal truth then becomes the subjects' truth or more simply, their own story, in their own words.

Given the confronting nature of the subject interview, when interviewees appeared distressed, they were offered the opportunity to terminate the interview. Various theorists argue about the appropriateness of this – indeed some proffer that it is preferable just to be silent and wait for a sign from the subject. However this paper argues that it is incumbent on the interviewer to monitor the verbal and non-verbal cues of the subject and – where a subject is distressed – to remind them that they have a choice in the process of being interviewed. None of the subjects in *Speaking Secrets* elected to terminate the interview, despite probing questioning.

Raymond Schroth writes in the *Columbia Journalism Review*: '...that is the journalist's moral tension: one person's pain is another's stimulation, his living. Suffering sells. Yet the journalist, insofar as he or she is a human being, must strive to alleviate suffering' (Schroth 1995, p.45). Schroth is arguing for the integrity of the story as told to be reproduced, not a version that makes for better reading. He is really calling for the highest integrity of the reporter.

Pulitzer Prize winning columnist Jim Dwyer claims only one true justification for intruding on a victim's life – that the journalist will help:

> The journalist knows that…his moral obligation is to help that foundry worker find the language, to be his scream, a scream that takes flesh in bold headlines, pictures, text, and layout that make the story jump off the page into the reader's heart (Schroth 1995, p.45).

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This paper argues that the mere fact the interviewee agrees to the interview is insufficient consent to an interview. Journalists must continuously question themselves and monitor the cues of the interview. They must adjust their 'moral compass' (Kovach et al 2002, p.181) continuously and reassess the ethical ramifications of continuing with the interview if there is clear distress.

Juxtaposed against this is the notion that if a victim or survivor has elected to speak to a journalist, respect must be given to how the subject tells the story. The journalist must not be deterred by a highly emotional subject. Some victims and survivors may even find it patronising if a journalist attempts to stop an interview because the subject becomes emotional, or the journalist themselves is upset. Psychiatrist Frank Ochberg suggests the journalist should come prepared, with tissues, like a psychologist (Cote et al 2006, p.108). He explains:

> When survivors cry during interviews, they are not necessarily reluctant to continue. They may have difficulty communicating, but they often want to tell their stories.

> Interrupting them may be experienced as patronising and denying an opportunity to testify (ibid).

Ochberg asserts that asking the survivor or victim if they wish to terminate the interview may itself constitute a re-victimisation of the subject. My research does not support this position. Instead it argues that any re-victimisation or re-traumatising will present itself in the recalling of memories in answering a journalist's questions, not a suggestion to have a break or halt the process.

This also points to the crucial role of journalism education in helping young journalists develop an appropriate 'moral compass'. Working more explicitly with concepts of empathy and compassion may help position the journalist and allow him or her to make those voluntary ethical decisions about their subjects in a less detached fashion. Empathy, and its place within journalism practice and education, is discussed rarely in Australia, except perhaps in the context of reporting on trauma and disaster.

The critical and the practical value of the notion of empathy has been seriously underestimated in journalism. Empathy is antithetical to the image of the objective reporter who 'remains emotionally detached even in the face of the most heart wrenching tragedy' (Fakazis 2003: 47) and it is a failure of journalism education that empathy is not taught (Fakazis 2003: 57). American academic Elizabeth Fakazis defines empathy as a 'deep understanding of a subject's emotional and psychological perspective' and argues that it has concrete pay offs for enhancing journalistic practice because it 'can help journalists deepen their understanding, allowing them to not only observe what their subjects do but also why they do it' (Fakazis 2003: 46).

In the long form non-fiction genre, transparent empathy is an effective and valid tool of the trade. It makes for better and more thorough, less detached and more honest, journalism and is particularly pertinent in dealing with stories of people who have suffered injustice meted out through violence, trauma or prejudice.

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During her interview for *Speaking Secrets*, Liz Mullinar became highly emotional and cried about the lack of bonding she formed with her two sons as a result of her childhood sexual abuse. From the manuscript:

> …when the conversation turns to the mothering of her sons her raw pain fills the room. I can almost taste it, mingling in with the Western Red Cedar scent. It is nearly overwhelming.
>
> She talks of relationships and how people who have been abused as children have very little trust in whatever remnant of emotion they have left – or

> anybody around them. She speaks of a deep loss regarding her sons, both of whom have been supportive of her journey.
> “Sadly I wasn’t a very emotionally connected mother and therefore we wouldn’t have as close a relationship as other mothers have with their children.
> “I think we do now. I work on it now. But if you don’t when your child is small, you really can’t – you’ve lost it ... you know...”
> Liz Mullinar cries. I think I hold my breath as she attempts to keep talking. “You can’t get that back,” she continues. “Any survivor of abuse who is honest will admit that they do not have a totally close relationship with their children. Because you can’t have – it’s got to have affected you. It must have affected you either emotionally or in some way so that you over-compensate, under-compensate or whatever you do, you do it. You don’t come from a functional base.
> “I don’t think I was capable of giving my children everything they needed ... because I think my childhood with my parents was, not consciously, but you know ... you have a good relationship but you can’t emotionally give. They’re lovely, nobody’s saying anything else, but I’m saying because now I know how good a parent can be and that could be fantastic. One really appreciates the closeness of relationships.
> “We very rarely talk on a really in-depth level to each other.”

Similarly, Russel Sykes appeared to dissociate several times whenever the topic of his mother’s rape, and his very existence, came up. Sykes was asked many times – more than any other subject in the manuscript – if he wanted to halt the process. He declined every time and just seemed to want to talk, in his own way and at his own pace.

> Talking to him is difficult. No, talking to him is not difficult at all. Talking to him on this subject is. He sits in my office on the fifth floor of the university’s Bon Marche Building. He is tall and rangy and his legs seem to take up all the spare space. He has dark brown, almost liquid brown eyes and looks me square in the face when he speaks – except when we talk about what I have asked him here to talk about.
> Sykes periodically zones off, staring out my window. Opposite are the chimneys from the old Carlton Brewery, and whenever a question gets too close, he just stares at them.
> There are many protracted silences before I ask him, several times, if he wishes to continue the interview. He does. And we do. Although I wonder why he has agreed to it, in the first place.
> I think the answer is a simple one. I asked.

Jan Ruff-O’Herne was clearly shaken by my questions, and like Sykes, dissociated after she related her memory of returning to her mother’s side in the Javanese internment camp, after being forced into a brothel for the Japanese military for three months.

> "I had cut all my hair to make myself look ugly. We didn't need to speak. But I will never forget that wonderful feeling of what a mother means. I lay down on the floor on a mattress that was totally worn out and dirty and smelly with sweat, and I just lay in the hole of her arm, I can see it now, with her arm around me and she just stroked my head and we just laid there and I felt this safety to be back in my mother's arms. It was just such an amazing feeling. You know, we just lay there, we never spoke. She never asked any questions."
> Jan Ruff-O'Herne closes her eyes tightly and I do not speak. She transports herself back to that night, to that moment, in her mother's arms. She strokes the air, as her mother stroked her hair, and I can almost see it and smell it. The moment is tangible.

Lyn Austin just seemed as bewildered at the time of the interview as she must have been at the age of ten when recounting her removal from her mother.

> The last Lyn Austin ever saw of her mother was as she was driven … hundreds of miles away, that day back in 1964.
> "It just happened so quickly, you know one minute Mum's telling me you're going and then that weekend I was gone.
> "And then there was this lady – I don't know if she was from the education department or welfare or where she was from. She just said we're taking you to this farm where there is other Aboriginal children and…Because they sort of felt that my mother wasn't equipped with looking after us.
> "We went in this old FJ Holden actually. I can remember that, the old black FJ Holden."
> Again, she stops talking and there is a quiet silence, saturated with meaning. When Austin answers my questions, she rarely looks me in the eye. She always looks a little away. But this time, putting her coffee cup down, she does look at me. She looks hard at me.
> "I can still hear my mother's voice – it was in her voice I could tell, you know, the sadness. You know the anguish, and that."
> Again, she stops, looking away. She seems to gather herself and takes a deep breath.
> She remembers, but it is as if the memory is never far away. As if it has nestled there, just below the surface of her consciousness all these years.
> "Yeah, yeah, they took me straight to the farm, and I always have that in me mind. I look back, I was looking out the window, like I was waving and you know Mum was crying and I always look back and I can see Mum standing on the roadside with her hands, you know, head in her hands crying.
> "I just – I don't know, I never ever got back to ask Mum why, you know in the years as I remained with the family I never, because it was too late. She'd already gone. So, I was never able to go back and ask her why she let me go and that. So..."

Child sexual abuse survivor Kate Richards[3] clearly became so distressed throughout her interview with me, she could not even begin to eat the meal in front of her.

> "For me, telling is really scary. But so far the people that have known have not reacted anything like I imagined. People actually get mad at him and don't get

3 not her real name

> mad at me – or they don't think I'm disgusting. Or people will even respond by saying something similar happened to them. Apparently it's common but I just thought I was the only one.
> "You can know something rationally but not believe. Like I know, I know in my rational lawyer head that it wasn't my fault; it is always an adult's fault if they do that to a child. A child does not have the capacity to want that or say no or get away. My intellectual head knows that but ...." She trails off.
> I look at her plate and realise she is merely fiddling with her food. Moving it around the plate. And I know she is unable to swallow. I should have remembered this – she has explained to me that when she is made to talk of her uncle, her body relives copious oral rapes – and she cannot swallow.
> I have a slight impression of trigger questions bombarding her brain with memories of her horror. Visual, bodily memories.
> I push my plate aside. I should have remembered. I feel even colder and wrap my multicoloured beach towel more firmly around my shoulders.

And psychologist and academic Jim Malcolm also cried throughout his interview when trying to talk about his father, and telling his own family of his sexual orientations.

> "Then there was my Dad.
> "We talked about it but it was extremely difficult – I was just choked – I felt like I was just letting him down but all I can really remember him saying is 'I love you'…"
> There are tears streaming down Malcolm's face as he tries to speak. As he remembers. Jim Malcolm needs a cigarette, so we venture outside. I leave the tape recorder behind in his office and we just chat – about the weather, uni, smoking – anything that isn't personal. It is raining lightly and the path smells steamy. There are just a few students nearby. It is mid-semester break, and all universities notch down a gear or two at these times – there simply seems to be more minutes in each hour.
> I wonder at the overwhelming emotions, nearly ten years after his father's death. There is no doubt about his love for this man, but it is deeper than that, linked imperceptibly to his sexuality.
> "I had an enormous amount of love and respect for him," he says, almost in response to my unspoken questions. "It was clear to me that somehow, at some really deep level, I feared not being the person I should be in his eyes… and I was very emotionally repressed and I think doing that programme was one way of just bringing everything out.
> He wonders out loud at his tears – wonders why he can't tell this story without them.
> "I suppose it says something about me and … the fact I told this story – I can't get it out without bursting into tears…it's just saying the words…"
> We go and make more coffee. Take another minute. He collects himself. I collect myself. We continue.

All six insisted they wanted to continue, despite offers of terminating the interview.

This partially confirms Frank Ochberg's assertion, however unlike Ochberg, I believe it is the right thing to continue to give the subject the choice – to always ask the question if they want to stop, or not, or have a break. Or to simply halt the interview process entirely. But every one of the subjects in the manuscript literally insisted on continuing, despite their reinvigorated pain.

Of all the subjects interviewed, the biggest ethical dilemma arose in relation to my interview with academic and clinical psychologist Jim Malcolm, and it eventuated not during the interview but well after.

My research followed on from my first book *She's my Wife; He's just Sex* (1997) which explored a certain type of sexual duality amongst married and de facto men. That research focussed less on their sexual behaviour, instead focussing on the lengths these men went to in order to maintain their secret. It was during the publicity for this book that I met Jim Malcolm. We were both interviewed by Kerri- Anne Kennerley for her national Midday Show on Channel 9 in Sydney.

Her researcher asked me to invite one of the men in my book to attend the interview. None of them agreed but suggested Jim Malcolm as he had had extensive prior media experience. Malcolm agreed to the interview despite his reservations about my book and its conclusions.

Unwittingly, I exposed Malcolm to a gruelling onslaught from Kennerley about his personal sexual life despite his requests that he not be asked about his own experience but rather focus on his work as a psychologist and scholar, having just completed a PhD on the exact same topic as my first book.

In light of this, Malcolm was not hostile but definitely not welcoming when approached for *Speaking Secrets*. However he did agree to the interview – but at the time, not necessarily to publication. Perhaps arrogantly, I proceeded on the basis that he would ultimately be persuaded.

His chapter in *Speaking Secrets* is perhaps one of the most powerful in the manuscript because of his prior relationship with the media. Malcolm is a man who was exploited on Four Corners in the early 1990s; then agreed to come onto a national and live television chat show where he was ambushed and his character virtually destroyed by the host. Yet he still agreed to be interviewed for *Speaking Secrets*, with a potential for publication.

However, having read his chapter, Malcolm did not give his permission[4] for it to be published. I tried to persuade him; I cajoled him; I almost begged him but then I heard myself and realised, his refusing permission for publication is exactly what the research was about – integrity and trust and ethics and empathy, as an intrinsic part of journalism practice. I stopped trying to convince him and just listened to him.

He explained that reading my chapter on him truly taught him something about his prior choices to expose himself in the media, and he decided it had to stop. He had to educate the world in other, less public ways.

Effectively, Malcolm managed to take back some of his power which the media had taken from him. It was all about choice and control, and he demonstrates that while the story is of the utmost importance to a journalist, the person is more important.

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Twenty years after Foucault wrote about the imperative to confess, already mentioned, University of Utah Professor Doug Birkhead appropriated this theory and inverted it, directly at the feet of journalists. He claims that journalism: 'reflects an impulse to bring events into a forum so that they may be publicly accounted for. The press traditionally has sought to make itself – and us – bear responsibility of being witnesses rather than merely onlookers' (Sims et al 1995, p.13).

Birkhead places journalists and the practice of journalism as public confessor – a position of immense responsibility, in the name of the public's right to know. Interestingly, as a symbolic Fourth Estate, that is exactly the forum that each of the subjects in *Speaking Secrets* initially sought out to tell their untellable stories. This eagerness to tell reflects a collective impetus for righting wrongs and creating a space for social and political recognition. Many of them were intent on informing the public about mainly unspoken or taboo topics – this seemed to be the common imperative in the subjects. The subjects in *Speaking Secrets* all individually took on an almost advocacy role in agreeing to the interviews and the themes they were attempting to portray. Walter Lippmann likens the press to the beam of a searchlight, 'bringing one episode and then another out of darkness into vision' (Cote et al 2006, p.100). As Cote and Simpson write:

> Better reporting about trauma can help readers and viewers gain empathy for the suffering of victims and enrich everyone's awareness of the powerful role that trauma plays in people's collective lives...if the ultimate benefit is greater awareness of how

[4] he did give permission for me to use his story in my final PhD submission and subsequent academic writings

> others suffer from trauma, the publics' renewed capacity to offer collective care and support will be the greatest public benefit (Cote et al 2006, p.8).

And this is what the subjects in *Speaking Secrets* collectively aspired to – educating the public and bringing taboo subjects 'out of the darkness'.

But possibly the most important issue in the current research is that each story is the victim's own story told in their own way. This does not mean that rigorous research and cross referencing is not necessary in order for the journalist to do their job properly. It just means that the subject needs to feel some control, at this stage. Empathy is of paramount importance not just during the interviewing process, but afterwards, at the computer screen, when that process is transposed onto the page. Cote and Simpson write:

> Trauma may leave a person feeling violated, angry, powerless. Many trauma victims feel their suffering had had some purpose if their story is told at the right time and in the right way. It can be a catharsis that releases some pain and gives their lives new dignity (Cote et al 2006, p.121).

They argue that this is a process that could help victims become survivors. Which is, at the end of the day, what I as a journalist need to believe.

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