**Education for Liberation: A Critical Look into How Power and Community Manifest in the Work of Student Organizers**

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#### **Abstract**

*The modern day university touts itself as a bastion of liberal education, and in recent decades has been considered a necessary step towards a successful and self-fulfilling life in an ostensibly credential society. Yet critical research has continuously demonstrated the promised link between a university degree and individual social and economic success is but a tenuous connection and, in fact, primarily benefits and favors the elite classes of society.[[1]](#footnote-0) A long-standing lineage of student-led movements on college campuses has continued to directly challenge and resist the institutional workings of higher education. At the University of Chicago, UC United’s #EthnicStudiesNow campaign has been organizing towards an Ethnic Studies department[[2]](#footnote-1) rooted in the histories of past student organizers and centering an abolitionist framework.[[3]](#footnote-2) Given the importance of their radical work for liberatory education, we ask, “Why do students of color join and stay in the struggle and movement for ethnic studies at the University of Chicago?” Much prior literature surrounding the field of ethnic studies has neither centered the knowledge produced by student organizers who lead the movement for ethnic studies in higher education nor rigorously studied the process and motivations of students joining this important fight. To answer our question, we conducted six semi-structured interviews, of approximately 15 to 30 minutes in duration, with six students of color involved in the campaign for #EthnicStudiesNow (ESN). We then conducted thematic analysis to identify major themes across interviews. Our interviews show that authentic, nurturing communities exist and thrive even within environments of harm. We further find a cyclical process at play, wherein power is found in communities, and communities build power.*

#### **Introduction**

What does it mean to “k(no)w history, k(no)w self?” A slogan for the decades-long ethnic studies movement in the U.S. that has been regaining momentum in the recent years in both secondary and higher education, as exemplified by the efforts of the Tucson Unified School District,[[4]](#footnote-3) Harvard’s Ethnic Studies Coalition,[[5]](#footnote-4) UChicago United’s #EthnicStudiesNow campaign,[[6]](#footnote-5) and many more, it serves as a call for action for those continuing to fight for ethnic studies programs and resources at their respective institutions. Recently especially, the murder of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin on May 25, 2020 and the resulting waves of protests and demonstrations generated heightened interest in nationwide conversations around racial justice and have contributed to increased attention to demands for reforms in the American educational system, including the implementation of mandatory ethnic studies curricula,[[7]](#footnote-6) and student organizing efforts at college campuses in general.

In a time when many are beginning to critically rethink the power structures shaping contemporary American society, we insist critical analyses of the modern American university and the limitations of its institutional framework must be highlighted, as well. The modern university touts itself as a bastion of liberal education, and in recent decades has been considered a necessary step towards a successful and self-fulfilling life in an ostensibly credential society. Yet critical research has continuously demonstrated the promised link between a university degree and individual social and economic success is but a tenuous connection and, in fact, primarily benefits and favors the elite class of society, i.e. white, heteronormative, male, and middle or high-income populations.[[8]](#footnote-7) [[9]](#footnote-8) Further, the institution of higher education often obscures its explicit history and continued relationship with systems of white supremacy, settler-colonialism, and racial capitalism and genocide.[[10]](#footnote-9) The University of Chicago is no exception, from its intentional concealment of its legacy of slavery with its first endowment from slaveholder Stephen A. Douglas[[11]](#footnote-10), to its persistent role in hyper-policing the lives of Black and Brown residents in the South Side community.[[12]](#footnote-11)

Yet despite the modern American university’s attempts to obscure its embeddedness in and continuous profiting off of the carceral, imperial, colonial, and capitalist structure of American society,[[13]](#footnote-12) the long-standing lineage of student-led movements on college campuses continues to not only shed light on, but directly challenge the institutional workings of higher education. At UChicago, UC United is an on-campus organizing group led by students of color to generate a new model for the university, one that champions community, safety, care, and collective liberation through education. In the last four years, UC United’s #EthnicStudiesNow campaign has been organizing towards establishing an Ethnic Studies department[[14]](#footnote-13) rooted in the histories of past student organizers and centering an abolitionist framework.[[15]](#footnote-14) Relentlessly confronting the University administration to implement their vision and demands, these students generate valuable – if not crucial – knowledge and experience while occupying the standoff position “in but not of” the university.[[16]](#footnote-15) Given the importance of their radical work for liberatory education and our deep personal investment in understanding and uplifting the work of student of color organizers, the central question of our research is, “Why do students of color join and stay in the struggle and movement for ethnic studies at the University of Chicago?”

Much prior literature and critical scholarship surrounding the field of ethnic studies has neither centered the knowledge produced by student organizers who have led and continue to lead the movement for ethnic studies in higher education nor rigorously studied the process and motivations of students joining this important fight. Our study aims to bridge these gaps in scholarship by interviewing student organizers of UC United’s #EthnicStudiesNow campaign and highlight why they choose to take up the fight for an Ethnic Studies Department at UChicago. Underlining the motivations behind their joining the campaign allows for us to analyze the forces that sustain this long-standing movement and uplift the critical importance of both ethnic studies and student organizing on college campuses. Therefore, the primary goals of our study are to push the boundaries of what we imagine higher education to be, uplift student-led movements, and give recognition to students of colors who organize and challenge power structures inherent to higher education at UChicago. We show that student organizing is a powerful and necessary part of addressing the physical, moral, and psychological harm that the university wreaks on its community members. We argue the horizontal, liberatory practices of building community and collective power in student organizing serve as a radical alternative to the hegemonic workings of the university.

#### **Literature Review**

The University of Chicago is a prime example of a modern university that has crafted a meticulous image of rational objectivity and empiricism. It emphasizes an education that encourages “the habits of critical reflection, rigorous discussion, and uninhibited debate about ideas as a way of life.”[[17]](#footnote-16) This focus on the rational mode of thought is damaging because it serves to detach the individual from the source material, and further entrenches individualism and neoliberalism in a university setting.

In contrast, ethnic studies and critical race studies subverts these ‘traditional’ modes of learning by drawing on anti-oppressive educational frameworks grounded in lived experiences and personal narratives.[[18]](#footnote-17) Ethnic studies was born out of the student movements of the 60s and 70s, demonstrating an explicit link between work of organizing, community education, and radical possibilities. In their demands documents, radical multiracial student coalitions in the 1960s, such as the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) and the Lumumba-Zapata Coalition at University of California, San Diego, condemned the American university for upholding “a system which thrives on military technology and imperialist profit” and demanded that the university “radically depart from its usual role as the ideological backbone of the social system” and instead “subject every part of the system to ruthless criticism.”[[19]](#footnote-18) More than fifty years later, we continue to see student organizers shedding light on the sinister workings of the university[[20]](#footnote-19) and its entanglement with oppressive systems of policing,[[21]](#footnote-20) gentrification, and racial capitalism.[[22]](#footnote-21) Students in the TWLF and Lumumba-Zapata Coalition demanded radical change and transformation of the American university, calling for structure and securing of “self-government,” “power,” and “control.”[[23]](#footnote-22) [[24]](#footnote-23)

Previous scholarship concerning ethnic studies and critical university studies investigates the colonial, oppressive foundation of the university, and pushes against the ideals of neoliberal multiculturalism and reformist narratives.[[25]](#footnote-24) [[26]](#footnote-25) [[27]](#footnote-26) [[28]](#footnote-27) Such critique is supported by much of the existing literature in critical university studies and critical pedagogy, as scholars in these fields have also highlighted the need for reevaluating knowledge and teaching practices in schools.[[29]](#footnote-28)

We build on this prior body of literature by offering UChicago student organizers an opportunity to share their personal experiences regarding the movement. In line with thework of researchers exploring the intersection of higher education and institutional change, we define institutions, specifically *knowledge* institutions, as sites of “socially prescribed patterns of correlated behavior”[[30]](#footnote-29) that describe “the nature of industrial societies with fundamental implications for the future shape and role of higher education.”[[31]](#footnote-30) Knowledge institutions are characterized by the creation and maintenance of knowledge societies, “where knowledge, information and knowledge production have become defining features of relationships within and among societies, organisations, industrial production, and human lives.”[[32]](#footnote-31) Further, institutional change at its most basic includes the “supplanting of the old model of production with a new one” and the transformation of “the value structure of the institution.”[[33]](#footnote-32) In our study, we take a close look at how student organizers of color at UChicago seek to uproot the current processes for knowledge production in order to reimagine education and push for institutional change—change that they conceptualize through a discussion of what community and power mean to them. We will elaborate on the students’ definitions of these central concepts in the subsequent sections.

It is necessary to examine the alternative narratives and analyses of UChicago in order to reveal the fuller picture of its oppressive structure. This means that the liberatory knowledge, theory, and practice that is produced on the ground by student organizers who have organized against the university and created their own understanding of its workings and power--the knowledge that is not often included in published scholarship nor treated as legitimate, critically nuanced analysis of the university--must not only be uplifted, but made central to any meaningful, rigorous examination of the university. This gap in knowledge informs our approach to our project, as we focus specifically on student organizers of color as legitimate producers of knowledge about the university.

#### **Methods**

Our study incorporates an exploratory approach with the intent of understanding why students of color decide to join the #EthnicStudiesNow campaign at UChicago, which was established to demand the creation of a fully-funded, student- and community-led Ethnic Studies department. In this way, we set out to uncover the distinct factors that informed this decision-making process and that have shaped the experience of students of color at UChicago working to transform the university and challenge the very values on which it was founded. To answer our question, we conducted six semi-structured interviews—lasting from 15 to 30 minutes—with six students of color involved in the campaign for #EthnicStudiesNow (ESN). All interviews were conducted over Zoom, and participants consented to being interviewed anonymously. Any identifiable information has been either redacted or replaced with pseudonyms. As we deeply value and seek to center horizontal, community- and care-centered knowledge production, we emphasize and highlight both our own subjectivities and intentions behind the project, as well as the organizers’ feelings, reflections, and experiences as legitimate, critical, and meaningful sources of knowledge. Building on Tribal Critical Race Theory,[[34]](#footnote-33) we recognize “objectivity” as a primarily Western, white, male perspective and, thus, reject the notion of “objective” research. Instead, we zero in on the particular experiences and ideas shared by the six students and uplift and build from their knowledge. These students have a particular positionality in the university, given their own racialized, marginalized identities, and involvement in student organizing for Ethnic Studies.

Moreover, we chose to conduct interviews for the express purpose of exploring why, in their own words, ESN student organizers came to be involved in the campaign and the motives that drive their organizing work. The interviews thus provide valuable insight for the students’ own self-actualization and knowledge production processes, as well as their personal reflections on their work to push for institutional change at UChicago. We obtained our interviewees through voluntary response sampling, whereby student organizers in ESN responded to an interview volunteer form. We understand that this method is subject to a higher risk of sampling bias because not all individuals are equally inclined or able to participate for various reasons. Given this limitation, our interviews are not meant to produce generalizable knowledge. We nonetheless conclude that, for the purposes of our research, this method is appropriate for an initial exploration of how students of color within ESN understand their own positionality and power to create institutional change at UChicago. We conducted thematic analysis to identify the major themes present across all interviews and to understand how such themes were exemplified according to the experiences of each interviewee.

#### **Findings/Results**

Through our interviews, we found that the main forces that motivated these students of color to join and stay in #EthnicStudiesNow are notions of community, power, and the intersection between the two. We elaborate on these themes in their respective sections below.

***Community***

For all of the interview participants, the theme of community was heavily prevalent in our conversations. However, it took on various angles, starting from a comparative look between the normative UChicago university community and the ESN organizing community, to the dimensions of care and collective growth present in ESN.

To begin, participants noted that the general academic climate at UChicago reinforced feelings of isolation, inadequacy, and exhaustion. Oreo spoke specifically about how in the, “classroom setting, I barely participate because I don’t feel like my knowledge has value,” and that the university cultivated a, “very restricting space, very limiting space.” In addition, prior to joining ESN, several participants noted feeling either “directionless” (Naruto), or as though the bonds they had built with people were simply, “due to proximity,” and, “being in close quarters with each other,” rather than building robust, genuine relationships (Tanaka). In contrast, the community observed and experienced in ESN was carved out of the deeper connections that all of the interviewees craved upon initial entry into college. Therefore, pre-existing social bonds were an essential factor in facilitating both entry and continued participation in campaign work, which we will expand upon later in the “Intersection of Community and Power”.

In addition to the heavy emphasis on the interpersonal, the community found within ESN was significant for offering a space centering care and interconnectivity. Because organizing is embedded in relational work, prioritizing relationships allowed for interviewees feel as though they were, “able to grow with [my] fellow organizers and [understand] where they come from, and how we can be there for one another,” (Min). Naruto felt that having the room to breathe, grow, and learn from each other and with one another made it so that interviewees felt that ESN was, “liberatory and empowering,” tying into a later theme concerning power. As well, Oreo spoke to feeling inspired and hopeful in the organizing environment, something that was starkly absent in non-organizing circles at UChicago.

Community also represented a continual process for the interviewees. Many of our conversations revolved around how defining community meant purposefully navigating how to be with people and be with physical space. Naruto in particular discussed how, “you know you’re in community with someone when you can hold them accountable.” Importantly, community meant holding a set of shared values between all members to ensure that both the active negotiation around who and what community is, and the accountability processes, were truly generative and redemptive.

***Power***

Similar to the theme of community, our interviewees’ discussion and conceptualization of power in its various forms was central to their reflections as student organizers of color and their interactions with the university. We begin by sharing our interview participants’ definition of power. Next, we present the two kinds of power that our interview participants collectively identified and which inform their experience as students organizing within ESN: 1) power as maintained by or situated within institutions and 2) power as exemplified by individuals and their self-interest. Finally, through their discussion of these, our participants also make distinctions between ‘positive’ power vs. ‘negative power’.

First, our interviewees generally defined power as the ability to make decisions and create change in one’s best interest and placed great emphasis on power being generated, or manifested, as supposed to earned. Naruto expands on both these thoughts:

I feel like power is the ability to assert yourself instead of relying on other people telling you what to do, if that makes sense…..It’s where people are asserting their power and saying 'no this is the power that I have' instead of relying on external structures to bestow power onto other people.

Naruto notes that power is not exclusively present at the individual level, an idea that we will return to in the following paragraphs. They place special emphasis on the ways power is traditionally conceptualized. These ideas of self-determination at both the institutional and the individual level are of great importance for the discussion of power.

The student organizers identified power on an institutional level as it manifests within the classroom setting at The University of Chicago. Based on their experiences, the students consider that institutional power within the classroom is distributed hierarchically. Oreo described this particular phenomenon in their interview, stating that professors are framed as “someone in a hierarchy who has more knowledge than you” and therefore, they have the power to “dictate how the class is structured, how it functions, and how it’s taught and [this] is...an extension of the university structure.” In this way, our participants discuss how the power to structure education manifests itself top-down. In this case, professors have power over how knowledge is produced in class. This power is granted to them by The University of Chicago as an institution of higher education and is one that students do not have access to within this particular context.

Additionally, our interviewees identified a lack of institutional support, and thus a lack of institutional power, for the Critical Race and Ethnic Studies (CRES) major at the university—a fact that informed their decision to join ESN. In their interview, Tanaka spoke about their concerns surrounding the lack of information about CRES among the student body as a first-year in the College. After joining ESN, they came to the realization that CRES is “so severely, like underfunded, under resourced..and they're just..kind of treated as an afterthought.” To Tanaka, this fact speaks to The University of Chicago’s unwillingness to invest in CRES, thereby depriving it of institutional power presented in the form of money and resources. Students recognize this as a negative occurrence of institutional power. Moreover, this statement by Tanaka also illuminates how, on the other hand, the ESN campaign has played a critical role in introducing a more comprehensive power analysis of the university to students of color majoring in CRES—specifically those students seeking to understand how institutional power, or lack thereof, impacts their experiences on campus.

In contrast, our interview participants believe that power at the individual level is not inherently bad. Oreo shares that their understanding of power had initially been limited to the idea that “villains are the ones holding the power”, whereas now they understand power to be “something that means you have the ability to make change”. Therefore, power at the individual level now conjures up thoughts of self-empowerment and self-actualization. Most importantly, Tsukki’s discussion of power further elaborates on the nature of power as neither bad nor good in what is essentially a destigmatization of power as self-interest:

I think power much more closely aligns with..personal self interest...I think in the past, I thought of power as like, bad because it was like...all these bad people [are] like hoarding power... But if you think of power as like self interest, then we all have our own self interest, right? So power is not bad, because our self interest will always align with like, wanting more power to..have agency, I guess, as a person and decision making power and all that.

Altogether, the student organizers of color we interviewed conceptualize power to be an expression of self-interest that can be used to uphold or challenge oppressive power structures within institutions as well as for the purposes of self-actualization and creating change at the individual level.

***Intersection of Community and Power***

Building off the interview participants’ discussions of notions of power and community in separation, we ultimately noticed they expressed significant overlap and entanglement of the two concepts, as well. In fact, all interviewees highlighted interpersonal relationships as the entrypoint into #EthnicStudiesNow and student organizing, in general, and connected this to the development of positive feelings of self-empowerment and a critical analysis of hierarchical institutional power. While student organizations and programs, such as ChicagoBound, PanAsia Solidarity Coalition, UC United, and the CRES major, were mentioned as groups that facilitated the introduction to organizing spaces, the main method of being brought into the #EthnicStudiesNow campaign consistently was the presence of interpersonal relationships. On the importance of those initial relationships that brought them into student organizing, Oreo says:

*...the mentors in my life and the people who have taught me so much about life, like, were [found] through [ChicagoBound]*, and like, we all still have relationships with each other, so it’s been, like, just incredibly meaningful, and it’s been four years since that, and I still think *that’s one of the most important things that have happened to me in the past, you know, couple of years. And it’s because of ChicagoBound that I got involved in organizing, because of all these mentors*…

Tsukki’s reflection further illuminates the onboarding process into the movement, highlighting the role of that initial connection in pushing past the limitations of the classroom and encouraging thinking about organizing as a legitimate space of learning as well. For Tsukki, the “traditional classroom structure with… professors at UChicago” is different from the learning process she had with her ChicagoBound leader, who taught them “organizing theory” and with whom they practiced “really struggling through questions that you live through every day.” Sasuke echoes similar ideas around specifically the #EthnicStudiesNow campaign as an educational space, as they suggest that “CRES is more of that learning, theoretical space for [them], whereas ESN is more like that in practice, and it's there that [they] can really learn more about, and also engage in abolition work … [and] have done a lot of learning as well [...] with other people*.*” This emphasis on the process of personal learning through and in the student organizing community is consistently juxtaposed with the more hierarchical educational setting of the traditional classroom, as discussed in the section “Power,” pointing to an important perceived difference between the two spaces of learning.

Furthermore, as mentioned in the section “Community,” participants strongly associated positive feelings of personal growth and self-empowerment with their organizing home as opposed to non-organizing spaces at the university. Building off those positive feelings, many highlighted the role of horizontal power dynamics, combined with community-building practices, within #EthnicStudiesNow in fostering “radical imagination” (Min), which allowed for visions of change that previously seemed impossible to become a “reality” or “possibility” (Oreo) that can be acted upon through and within their organizing community. In this excerpt, Tanaka expands on the role of #EthnicStudiesNow in even reimagining the meaning of community itself, a sentiment that was found in Min, Oreo, Sasuke, and Tsukki’s reflections as well:

I was really narrow minded in my critical thinking and my power analysis for a lot of my relationship to the university, my relationship to the Hyde Park community, and my relationship to the world at-large… But *being involved with ESN helped me to… further understand, like this difference between, like, theory and what we learned in class, and like practices, right, and like practicing, like actual, like, ways of like relating to other people.*

In fact, we found that while reflecting on ideas of community and power, a lot of the participants equated the two concepts to each other. Speaking on what community means to them, Naruto suggested that community fundamentally is “empowering to the individual” and that “the community as a whole is creating that [power].” And perhaps Oreo’s reflection best summarizes the idea of community as power, and power as vested in community:

...I no longer see myself as just an individual, but like very much connected to so many different people, like in this huge web of relationships that will build-- Like, *that is power, the relationships are the power*… *the thing that build most power is how we relate to one another*… I didn’t understand that until I was organizing, and I was like, “Wow, everyone has something they can do. Everyone is very powerful. Everyone has the ability to do something.” …*When we’re all together, it’s unstoppable.*

This conflation of notions of community and power speaks to the interviewees’ understanding of the two concepts as deeply interconnected and cyclical, as their organizing community builds collective power and, in turn, enables individual self-empowerment, which results in more collective growth. This understanding fueled their commitment to the cause.

#### **Discussion**

The interview participants’ reflections on the manifestations of community, power, and the overlap of the two concepts in the work of student organizing largely expands on existing critical literature on the workings of the neoliberal, colonial, racial capitalist American university. The students’ understanding of their fight for transformative change in the academy and personal analysis of the university’s oppressive structures reflect arguments put forward by scholars such as Dylan Rodriguez (2012) and Micere Keels (2020) in their respective works on education’s neliberal epistemologies of violence[[35]](#footnote-34) and institutional failings to truly empower and build community for marginalized students.[[36]](#footnote-35) The students’ personal assessment of the Eurocentric epistemological foundation of the university (as evident in the general lack of mandatory or optional race-centered course offerings and the lack of rigorous critical race theoretical frameworks even in CRES-listed courses) further parallels critical scholarship emphasizing the Westerncentric, colonial foundations of higher education.[[37]](#footnote-36)

On the other hand, their organizing home and the “radical creativity… from the standoff position”[[38]](#footnote-37) allowed for them to build real community through centering care and enabling collective growth while simultaneously practicing radical imagination and transforming their previous conceptions of institutional and personal power. The radical creativity within the unique positionality of those “in but not of” the university has been largely expanded on by scholars who self-identify as abolitionist or subversive agents in the academy, pointing to the potential of the “undercommons” as a space of abolition and liberation.[[39]](#footnote-38) Emphasis on interpersonal relationships as the onboarding vehicle into #EthnicStudiesNow also further supports analytical research on movement recruitment methods, as research has shown that some of the initial reasons for students’ joining the campaign were largely connected to their personal investment in or “sympathy” for the cause, as well as subjective dissatisfaction, feelings of self-doubt and biographical availability as college students.[[40]](#footnote-39) For instance, some students recognized the potential of CRES to challenge and destabilize oppressive power structures, so the decision to join #EthnicStudiesNow was partly influenced by personal dissatisfaction with CRES and its lack of institutional support from the university.

Yet what we found to be the primary force that encouraged the student organizers to stay in the movement and fight for transformative change was the fundamental understanding and realization of the power within their community. While pushing the boundaries of what we imagine higher education to be and grappling with questions of “What is community? What is power?”, the young organizers of color found that in fact, community *is* power, and power is in community, pointing to a cyclical mechanism where students find personal empowerment in organizing community, and the community, in turn, builds more collective power. As personal reflections on self-transformation and personal *and* collective growth are rarely spotlighted in published scholarship or theory of organizational change, the notion of liberatory praxis within student organizing as the alternative to hierarchical, hegemonic structures of the traditional classroom and university structure is overlooked. The student organizers’ understanding of their interconnectivity--and the power found in such interconnectivity--fundamentally challenges the logics of the neliberal, colonial, capitalist university and generates an alternative space of imagining and enacting horizontal, liberatory education.

#### **Conclusion**

We have described above the destructive patterns of the modern day university: how the institution of higher education was originated from, and continues to feed into, the interlocking systems of racial-capitalism, settler-colonialism, heteronormativity, and patriarchy. Yet, our interviews show that authentic, nurturing communities exist and thrive even within environments of harm. This is made possible by working with intentionality, and as Naruto says, by “putting away the individual for a second, or the ego.”

Organizing is not a space meant to obtain individual power, money, or status. The work of organizing exists because communities identify an issue, and work together to tackle it. The student organizers we interviewed consistently invest their own time, energy, and resources into ESN because they recognize that a revolutionary future means working with one another and supporting each other. By analyzing this interview data, we further found that there is a cyclical process wherein power is found in communities, and communities build power. This understanding of community runs counter to how the traditional university inculcates a culture of individualism, stress, and insecurity.

Although our research was limited in its scope and sampling bias, we still resonate powerfully with the words of our participants. For future research we would find it helpful to incorporate a comparative study and analysis into student organizers at different university campuses, to discover how many of these themes may be comparable, or where they may diverge. We are grateful to have left with a more nuanced interpretation of what genuine community and collective power looks and feels like. In a world where our minds, bodies, and souls are over-policed and hyper-surveilled, we encourage you to also reflect and consider: What does community feel like to you? What does power feel like to you? We hope that this study has similarly offered valuable insight into the necessary work of student organizing, and the radical possibilities of liberatory education.

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