

## Mental health, art, and deinstitutionalization: an aesthetic-poetic-theatrical account of the city's occupation

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**Abstract** *This study aimed to report the experience of an aesthetic, poetic, and theatrical production of the city's occupation from a device of the Psychosocial Care Network to offer space for sociability, production, and cultural intervention. This is an account of an experience from the Social and Cultural Center (CECCO) in Natal, Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil, within madness and mental health deinstitutionalization. The intervention "The Little Prince occupies the Ribeira" was inspired by the work of author Saint-Exupéry. The artistic and creative acts reported occurred in December 2019. We experienced in this intervention the reach of an aesthetic clinic that, when opened to the street and art, expanded and weaved in the territory, instrumentalized by theater, dance, poetry, percussion, crafts, and city's occupation. The movement led the community to "step down from the stage" to the streets and is connected with the twist of the asylum model and the production of the affection clinic that we seek to sustain in the daily service.*

**Key words** *Mental health, Art, Deinstitutionalization, Popular culture, Cities*

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## Introductory notes

The experience that we are going to report occurred from the Social and Cultural Center of Natal (CECCO – Natal, RN, Brazil), service of the municipal health network part of the Psychosocial Care Network, in partnership with the Extension Project “*Tons de Vida* (Life Tones) Group: artistic workshops, popular theater, and mental health in the city from the Social and Cultural Center of Natal (CECCO – Natal, RN, Brazil)”, the Nursing Department of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN), and supported by the Captaincy of the Arts Cultural Foundation (FUNCARTE).

Hybrid spaces between health, art, and culture, the Social and Cultural Centers emerged in Brazil as devices that underpin the Psychosocial Care Network (RAPS) to offer spaces for sociability, cultural production, and intervention in the city. Strategically, they were thought of as open services and not exclusively aimed at users of the RAPS<sup>1</sup>. Such services have been essential in health care networks to promote meetings and articulation of care with everyday life and its creation processes, aligned with the Psychiatric Reform paradigm<sup>2</sup>.

If in the psychiatric reform there is an aspect that has made little progress since 2001, the landmark of the enactment of the Paulo Delgado<sup>3</sup> Law, this would be the sociocultural dimension of deinstitutionalization in shifting the social meanings attributed to madness and difference to social life. Demystifying this place still marked by stigma and prejudice linked to notions of incapacity and dangerousness, which, for that very reason, produces affective territories depotentialized and generators of exclusion and psychological distress, continues to be a task for the Psychosocial Care Networks (RAPS).

The RAPS devices act as intermediaries between the subjects and the social world surrounding them, which excel in creative initiatives that consider the different ways of existing and living with severe psychological distress, connecting them with the community/city. The activities developed within the RAPS seek to develop the personal and social dimensions based on the different needs of users<sup>4</sup>.

We understand, therefore, that mental health policies cannot resign themselves to the confines of their health services in order to face and resist the reproduction of the asylum logic that insists on the key of exclusion and prejudice, not even

if it is enough in the tangles of their formal networks and private spaces of the clinic’s territory. However, they must expand vis-à-vis the city and culture<sup>5</sup>.

The Psychiatric Reform can be successful in the cultural space, as the change in the mental health care model and the fight against prejudice, stigma, and segregation historically dispensed to madness operates in the construction of new social places for the “loony”, in sustaining a social paradigm of leadership and citizenship for users and their family members<sup>6</sup>.

By ethically positioning ourselves, refusing the reproduction of exclusionary practices, and investing in the creation of strategies for the deinstitutionalization of madness and the affirmation of difference in the city, we point to the power of art in the anti-asylum clinic and its contribution to diversifying the experience of the encounters of RAPS users with and in the city<sup>7</sup>. In this sense, recent experiences have pointed to a detachment of art as a strictly therapeutic device and became a strategy for producing life projects and deinstitutionalization of madness in social life in a broad sense<sup>8</sup>. According to Pelbart<sup>9</sup>, we can conceive of art as an essential ingredient in the production of health and life for these subjects, since madness in its biopolitical force requires the construction of “multifaceted devices that are political, aesthetic, and clinical in reinventing coordinates for the enunciation of life”<sup>9</sup> (p. 37).

In this direction, we leave aside the term *users*, sometimes trivialized in the Unified Health System, and refer to CECCO attendees as “*hangouters*”, thus marking an attempt to shift their relationship with the Center and the team workers. Thus, the power of laterality is affirmed without neglecting the differences and singularities in roles and responsibilities. We are all *hangouters*, creating together ways of living together and inhabiting the city.

This movement takes place in different ways: through the participation or organization of fairs to exhibit the crafts produced in the workshops, events where artistic presentations are held (dance, percussion, vocal group, and theater), and the occupation of other spaces that appreciate the art produced by the *hangouters* and in its dissemination. This is the clinical-political action that CECCO has been developing in the city of Natal, strengthening the inclusion of *hangouters* in the city, encouraging the occupation of public spaces, and taking its artistic and cultural production beyond the service walls.

### The Social and Cultural Center of Natal/RN and its intersectoriality

Inaugurated in August 2017, CECCO in Natal has been consolidating itself in the city as an essential space for the Psychosocial Care Network, a place for meetings, reception, and access to artistic and cultural activities, with the target – but not exclusive – audience of RAPS users. This movement is supported by the articulation of different social actors, which gathers the team linked to the service and employees from other RAPS services, artists in the territory who perform volunteer work, students, and teachers who seek the service as a space for formation.

Several workshops are offered, including dance, percussion, poetry, guitar, handicraft, theater, vocal group, stretching, meditation, and programmed activities that seek to expand the occupation of spaces and inclusion of *hangouters* in the city. Such activities draw a changing routine of daily offerings, which are built according to the availability of the actors that underpin the community and the *hangouters*' desires. Besides the workshops, CECCO is experienced by its attendees as “a place to make friends” and “discover skills I didn't know I had” – expressions they often use.

The CECCO seeks to establish itself as a space of freedom where *hangouters* can attend as they desire and relate to activities uniquely and not as a need imposed by a treatment. More than using art for the treatment of mental health, we seek to explore the uselessness of art as a powerful force in creating a stylistic feature of existence, which faces the institutionalization of madness with its diagnostic and psychiatrist (or even psychologizing) captures<sup>10</sup>.

Thus, some people go there to carry out activities, and others do not conduct any workshops, such as the guest from the streets who sleeps on the sofa, or the one who will water the plants, feed the cats in the vicinity, or participate in the opening circle of activities and then leave, or even the one that stays more in the corridors or the games room.... there are multiple types of connection that each guest creates with the service.

In this work context, several cultural offerings were presented to the city over the three years of CECCO's existence, such as the theatrical production of *Auto de Natal* in 2018; the holding of the First *LeiloArte* in an art gallery, and the launch of *Cordel Poetas Convivas* in a traditional cultural space in the city, both in the week of celebration of the two years of CECCO's existence

in August 2019 and, more recently, the aesthetic-poetic-theatrical circuit “*O Pequeno Príncipe Ocupa a Ribeira*” (The Little Prince Occupies the Ribeira), held in December 2019 – an experience that we will seek to share through this writing.

By placing this experience within the field of deinstitutionalization of madness and mental health, we understand that madness and the field of mental health and its policies must be deinstitutionalized. That is, it is necessary to create and sustain a network of territorial care services that dispute the place and meanings of madness and difference in the city and RAPS should establish ways to connect with other knowledge, outside the field of mental health, opening and crossing the clinic for psychosocial care to operate the replacement, or better, the subversion of the asylum logic. Art and streets are strategic to this end, producing aesthetic fragments that do not reproduce as roadmaps and are unique and privileged moments between health and madness, extinguishing art and life and art and non-art<sup>11</sup> boundaries.

What makes an artistic manifestation a political act? What makes a Psychosocial Care service position itself clinically and politically in the dispute for social places socially attributed to madness and difference? Without intending to answer these questions, but letting them reverberate as a background for the experience report to be shared here, we argue that this transition takes place precisely in the occupation of public space, shifting from the clinic's private territory to the city's public space: “*it is when the block goes to the street...*”.

If asylum spaces and asylums operate the violence of pulling people out of their places of existence in the name of the watchword of treatment, deinstitutionalizing involves investing in the relationships with the different territories of people's lives and creating new territories that empower their lives. In this way, narrating this story, this experience report about this aesthetic intervention in the city summons the narrative about the territory where this occupation occurred.

### Territory and the narrative of a collective construction process

CECCO occupied Ribeira, a historic district in Natal, where the city began to develop, beside River Potengi. It is a territory of intense commercial and port activity, which received the investment of a city that wanted to modernize itself in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bars, cafes, luxury outlets,

and cabarets...“A modern, civilized and elegant Natal, who wanted to resemble the Paris of the *Belle Époque*”<sup>12</sup>.

From a privileged location to becoming a place of abandonment and disinvestment by the public power, we have a century of history we can feel when observing the facades of the countless heritage buildings, which mostly deteriorated over the years. The disinvestment of the Port of Natal, caused by the weakened river transport, seems to leave the neighborhood ‘in the lurch’, an exception for some cultural movements and spaces that still occupy this territory. This is the place that emerged for CECCO as a propitious place to carry out an action of occupying the city and deinstitutionalizing madness. After all, the fight against neglect and abandonment is, unfortunately, a known territory for bodies excluded by a normalized society.

### The provocation for a cultural encounter

In this same space in the city, based on the CECCO’s relationship with the Gallery called B-612, we received an invitation to participate in an event in honor of the work “*The Little Prince*” of Saint-Exupéry. We activated the Extension Project, which was already developing theater workshops in the service, and thus began the meeting of *hangouters* and the CECCO with this classic book that narrates the adventures and affections of a boy who dares to transcend his planet.

The approximation and the tension field with the classic work of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry occurred through groups of reading and discussion of the book, exhibition of a movie<sup>13</sup>, production of drawings and poetry. In this collective production process, we took ownership of this story and singularized it from the conversations, thoughts, and reflections that the encounter with the text of the *Little Prince* awakened: “- What if the Little Prince fell in the city of Natal?”; “- What if we made a medicalization country?”; “- But why did the Little Prince leave his planet abandoning the rose?”; “- Never abandon what you love”... these and other questions and other “what ifs (...)” occurred in this construction among *hangouters*.

Subsequently, all the service workshops turned to this cultural production, involving workshops on poetry, crafts, dance, percussion, transforming the daily life of the service and its *hangouters*. CECCO’s theater workshop was developed by a Nurse implementing the extension project mentioned above, affected by other scenic

experiences despite having several artist workshops. Undergraduate Nursing students who were supervised by him also collaborated with the support of the CECCO team. In the collective construction of this process, we realized that it was necessary to expand beyond our capabilities as health professionals and summon other actors directly linked to the performing arts.

With the arrival of a theater director, a worker from the Municipal Culture Secretariat, and a FUNCART employee, our proposal for producing a “play” gained new creative and imagery contours, and we began to explore the idea of aesthetic intervention in the city.

### Aesthetic intervention as a deinstitutionalization strategy: fragments of an urban occupation

If the CECCO had occupied a theater in the city and performed a show (*Auto de Natal*) in the previous year, in our experience reported here, the performing arts partner did not assume the traditional role of a theater director. However, it took us away from the initial idea of producing a script, lines, and a play and called us to produce interference in the city’s routine in a cultural circuit that went out to the street. Several actions were taking shape, and some gained strength and body while others did not materialize. It was essential to look at what would acquire a certain speed and what would or would not make sense to the *hangouters*.

We abandoned the traditional idea of the stage. The audience and actors are well separated and demarcated and started to build an urban artistic occupation, in which aesthetic effects are produced in unexpected and unusual city encounters.

However, since the *hangouters* wanted to act, we accepted this desire and produced some scenes with them (which will be described below in the text). Thus, we were composing our circuit between theatrical sketches, urban interventions, and everything else that CECCO had to express: dance, percussion, handicrafts, free radio, and wall painting... An explosion of expressive and artistic lines took the Ribeira streets, generating unusual encounters with passers-by and local businesses. We characterize the occupation as “urban intervention” from the meaning proposed by Lima<sup>11</sup> (p. 13):

*Located at the intersection between art and politics, urban intervention can be understood as a comprehensive and diversified form of language*

that manifests itself in public spaces, whose main characteristic is the use of the city itself and its pre-existing elements as a platform to carry out these interventions (...) In this way, urban intervention is understood as the most different types of interaction with elements that underlie the urban landscape, which considers the city as a large canvas that serves as support, motivation, and even character for its realization extrapolating the frontiers of art and political action.

The street was temporarily shut down, daily traffic was interrupted, and urban flows bifurcated. Our group of *hangouters* mingled with the public who followed the Circuit, besides passers-by who randomly came across this event on their daily journey in the city and stopped to see “our band passing by”, and some walked with us. Multicolored flowers and stars and flowers produced from medicine inserts were scattered throughout the circuit, strategically placed in unusual places so that maybe they could be rescued by someone some other time.

The urban occupation intervention carried out can also be characterized by the so-called street theater, which consists of the artistic and scenic productions invading the daily environment to interfere with routine, causing estrangement and the re-signification of the space the present population, and the already established culture. The street invasion allows a different audience to be reached, one that does not seek or does not have access to the theater and goes further: it allows this audience to dialogue with art, become part of the theater, and assign new meanings to what is before them. It is a socio-political manifestation that seeks to generate impact, sensitize the public, and cause concerns and reflections on the theme portrayed. In this way, the space and all the participants in this type of intervention, actors and spectators, are affected and transformed by it<sup>14-15</sup>.

We will present the experience of the Circuit in five acts, among countless that were produced collectively, seeking to revive times of experimentation of *hangouters* as readers (we had non-readers in the group, and the reading occurred collectively with readers lending their eyes and voices to non-readers), actors, dancers, screenwriters, and even directors.

#### **Allocations in the context of production and creation**

Dona Flor (fictitious name), one of the non-readers, black woman, mother of a guest,

took ownership of the work so much at heart that she entered the room at break time and began to recite on some day of rehearsals. She memorized every line from one of the book scenes. She also experienced herself as a screenwriter and narrated/created one of the scenes that took shape as “*Planeta das Mulheres Rendeiras*” (Planet of the Lacemaking Women).

We understand that this space for leadership and creation is, in itself, the foundation of the ethics of anti-asylum care that starts to work when we start to adopt and invest in the capacity of creation, in potency! In other words, the intervention is created so that the bodies there affirm their life potency as what a body is capable of in the relationship with others<sup>16</sup>.

In this context, in the intervention, we experienced the scope of an aesthetic-clinical dimension that expands and is weaved in the territory by opening up to the street and art. This type of clinic goes against the asylum structure, as it abandons the exclusive care of symptoms and promotes health broadly, boosting creativity and the ability to think and act. Based on it, we can see the health-disease process as a natural part of life, whose vulnerability is not an obstacle but the possibility of opening up to people and the world<sup>11</sup>.

In the proposition of this clinic-aesthetics dimension, we find ways to resist the psychiatrist captures in the encounter with art. When we adopt the creative power of the *hangouters*, we witness people shouting “Art resists here!” even in overly medicalized bodies. A guest inserted this phrase in the anti-asylum version inspired by the song *O Pulso* of Brazilian Rock group Titãs, which we invented in the process of building the Circuit and became one of the soundtracks of the aesthetic intervention:

Lithium, Haldol, Neuleptil, Schizophrenia /  
OCD, dullness, Depakote, catatonia / Biperiden,  
topiramate, agitation, hysteria / Risperidone,  
olanzapine, ampicilil, lethargy / And the mind  
still feels...Art resists here!

The stanza synthesizes the resistance to the reductionist, psychiatric, and medicalizing logic that bases the anti-asylum struggle in its ethical aesthetic-political guideline. More than that, it is the affirmation that the body is there, lives, sings, and dances. In short, it creates and expresses itself despite the anesthesia that often and historically silences the mad, the madness in social life. The version of the song, written by a RAPS worker (CECCO collaborator) and with the final line “Art resists here!” inserted by a guest, reveals

that, despite the flight of thought produced by the excess of medicines, the mind feels and art still resists as a pulsating affirmative force of living in the face of medicalization, the effect of a biopolitical regime of control of bodies and life through diagnoses and prescriptions, which is reproduced in the capitalistic social life in a broad sense<sup>9</sup>.

The song was recorded with the *hangouters*, most into the experience of being in a music studio for the first time. It was presented as a soundtrack for the aesthetic intervention, setting the tone for our anti-asylum 'version' of the classic story of the Little Prince.

### **Act one: The B-612 Art Gallery**

Rhythmically rocked by the pulse of the well-known Titãs music, we now invite the readers to imagine themselves wandering around Ribeira, the historic neighborhood of Natal, and coming across an Art Gallery. In the middle of old buildings and streets, the B-612 Gallery, named after Saint-Exupéry's work, invites you to meet diverse artistic expressions: painting, sculpture, architecture, highlighting works that refer to the history of Natal. Starting stage of the Circuit "*The Little Prince Occupies the Ribeira*", this Gallery was the first planet, our starting point. On arrival, the visitor would find four *hangouters* welcoming the public, inspired by the planets of Saint-Exupéry: an astronomer and her spyglass, a businessman and his briefcase, the queen and her royalty, and the geographer and her maps. Stepping on rugs made from boxes of psychotropic drugs, the visitor was welcomed and "stamped" with a bar code. This reception made us see and hear the experience of life medicalization in each one who arrived. Thus, in the heart of a historic district of the city, part of the history of the local madness could be undone a little and those usually labeled as "crazy" invited them to enter "another planet", the planet of socialization and culture for all and each one, and embark on a journey of problematizing the psychiatrist and medicalizing logic of life.

### **Act two: the meeting of the Little Prince and the Rose**

*- Rose, these people are very strange! They don't live without subjects, spend time doing calculations, describing everything in the world, but without really knowing, finding, affecting... Now, how could I describe, talk about you without having been capti-*

*vated before?* (Excerpt from the "The Little Prince Occupies the Ribeira" Circuit Script)

Our script started from where the book ended: the return of the Little Prince to asteroid B-612 (which in our case was the Gallery), where we present the scene of the reunion between Little Prince, coming from the most varied adventures in infinite space, and his Rose, who had been lonely all this time. The Rose was performed by a guest who lent her body for artistic expression through body painting, costumes, and props. It is withered at first – the guest's potential to use the marks of her life to express a rose's near-life without the prince causes a stir: a fetal body, colorless and wordless, blossoms, returning to life with the return of his friend, whom she hadn't seen for a long time. We thought of the traditional hegemonic clinic in its excess of classificatory descriptions and how this obsession with saying what it is, diagnosing, ends up neglecting the main thing that can happen in an encounter: the power to captivate (affect and be affected by the other).

### **Act three: the pill seller on the medicalization planet**

Our Little Prince comes across a woman, dressed head to toe with boxes of medicines, eyes symmetrically painted with a black stripe, accompanied by four companions, similarly dressed, carrying trays of small glasses. The group walks through the audience, convincing everyone in a directive and allegorical way: "Take your happiness pill!" To the sound of our anti-asylum soundtrack mentioned above, the scene keeps repeating until the Pill Seller offers the product to the Little Prince, and he is asked why everyone is taking that pill: "Gee, these people are strange. They even use a happiness pill!". The Prince makes fun of it, saying that the planet of Gallery B-612 is too small for all those people and "so much happiness". He invites us to leave the gallery and occupy the streets of Ribeira, carried by the percussive procession and the sound of the maracatu. Those present at the Gallery and passersby are guided along the street by wild birds (a reference to "The Little Prince") / drumming *hangouters* towards another artistic, cultural point of the city, Casa da Ribeira. Before the start of the circuit, a group of *hangouters* had left marks on posts and abandoned walls with stencils in the shape of roses and foxes. Along this path, during the procession, the curious and the participants of the encounter were faced with

these images and affected by the happiness that is also possible for crazy people, or even, which is perhaps only possible in the practices of liberation from the attempts at normalization carried out by the biopower. Several flowers were offered to passersby along the way, who were also impacted with a simple request: “- Draw a rose for me!”.

#### **Act four: drummers, wild birds of emotions**

When the Little Prince leaves the Gallery (Medicalization Planet) on his way to discover new places, at that very moment, he is taken by the new wild birds, our drummers. Just as in the text by Saint-Exupéry, in which the birds across the planets lead the Little Prince, the percussion guided this occupation through the streets of Ribeira in our Circuit. The drummers are the *hangouters* who participate in the percussion workshop and are always present at many CECCO events, whose captivating power in cultural and street music is highlighted. Sounds almost forgotten by society gain strength, form, and movement in the drummers’ hands – maracatu, samba-reggae, maculelê, and coco. In our aesthetic intervention, this power and vibration became an ascendant guide, and, as in Saint-Exupéry’s text, the Little Prince was guided by the birds across the planets; in our Circuit, percussion guided this occupation of Ribeira’s streets. Every beat of a wing pulsating to the beat of the drum, every chant of our scream in the streets, every vibration generated was our landing and our mark on the planets. Regardless of why the percussion was there, it was proof that we were alive and generating emotions. If there were a strength in the screams, there would be much more in the beats. If there were weeping for the fallen stars, there would be silence in our hands. Every drummer on the street was a bird that transmits and expresses emotion. The experience thus shows that everyone, whether crazy or healthy, diagnosed and undiagnosed, can learn, teach, captivate, and create together.

#### **Act five: the planet of lacemakers**

During the circuit, we are invited to stop in front of the Women’s Police Station. There, a guest kneeling on the floor, trying to glue stars on her lace, cries. She looks up at the sky, weeps, and screams for the stars “that are falling”, the forests that are being burned and destroyed, the women and young people, the minorities that are being

murdered and raped. She cries for realizing her impotence in the face of so many losses. In the scene, another lacemaker approaches and asks why so much sadness. After the explanation, she offers her help and other women to stitch together the stars in the sky with a “thread of affection”. The lacemakers then begin to chant: “Hey lace woman, hey lace woman, you teach me how to make lace, I’ll teach you how to fight”, while another guest plays the melody on his viola/fiddle. Thus, all the women present are moved by the scene, and the voices unite and multiply, echoing in the streets of Ribeira. The scene ends with delivering a vase of paper flowers, decorated at the CECCO’s craft workshop, by the artsy women to the delegate. And the walk continues until the Casa da Ribeira.

#### **What we can think of the experience: notes for deinstitutionalization work**

Carrying out the Circuit required efforts from the entire team and *hangouters* and changes in the daily service. The entire CECCO schedule was reorganized so that time and workshops were directed towards intervention: some workshops were paused during the implementation of the project; craft, crochet, and *fluxico* (hand-made flowers from fabric remnants) workshops focused on the production of sets and costumes; we had rehearsals of the performance’s choreographies and music in the dance and percussion workshops; the theater workshop started to occupy a more extended period of the day for writing scripts and rehearsals.

Moreover, we often took the project home, where we brought stars and roses from different materials, ideas for scenes, and donated clothes and fabrics. The Circuit occupied everyone’s routine and thoughts. Thus, this entire process was an intervention on the Center’s routine, as it changed the service’s operations, giving more autonomy and freedom to *hangouters* and staff to create, think, and express themselves.

Thus, the production of this aesthetic intervention in the city brought effects of deinstitutionalization in the service itself, which by disrupting its daily organization, its “workshop program schedule”, experienced the opening of a space for something different to be created. From this experience, we learned that deinstitutionalization does not happen without a certain willingness to get in touch with chaos, with the refusal to easily answer the question “What should one do?” set by several *hangouters*, and rephras-

ing the question as: “– What can we/do we want to create?”

The movement that the aesthetic intervention generated in the collective of “stepping down from the stage” towards the street connects with the twist of the clinic that we seek to sustain in the daily life of CECCO. From an asylum logic, which, by separating subjects from their contexts, invests in separating the disease from its produc-

tion processes and thus ends up ignoring color, gender, social class, life territories, placing itself in a transcendent and supposedly neutral stance, we seek distance to invent an anti-asylum clinic that, through the strength of groups, socialization, and art, connects with the city floor, building a clinic that takes place in the immanence of the *hangouters*’ territories of existence.

### **Collaborations**

JM Schenkel and GWS Silva participated in the conception, design, scripting, implementation of the artistic intervention, drafted the experience report, and approved the version to be published. AKMA Amorin, FAN Miranda, and JBL Carvalho participated in the artistic intervention, collaborated with the critical review, and approved the version to be published. SEA Ribeiro, ACP Almeida, and MM Silva participated in the design, scripting, and implementation of the artistic intervention, drafted the experience report, and approved the version to be published.

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