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When Opportunity Moves Off-Shore: Multiculturalism and the French Banlieue

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In this paper I take up the question of French republicanism, recent multiculturalist responses to it, and the difficulties these issues appear to pose in France. I move from France to the United States and back again, a shift motivated by an overlay of images born out of the particular context of American race struggles onto the recent “post-colonial turn” in France. Working from a specific ethnographic detail – the interest, on the part of some students, teachers, and activists in a suburb north of Paris, in American civil rights history and the black American experience – I seek to inquire into the more widespread interest in multiculturalism and its effects that has taken hold in France in recent years and the way this relates to the long-simmering problem of the country’s troubled *banlieue*. Contrary to what many hold, I argue that this confluence should not be read purely as a long overdue awakening of France to repressed racial troubles. Rather, it seems to me this shift signals something else, an effort to grasp at the sure sense of justice that the civil rights story has to tell, at a moment when appropriate responses to various forms of social inequality are anything but clear. Current multicultural debates in France, more than purely, or primarily, a reaction to a republican tradition that has pushed difference underground, signal a form of reaction to global economic and geopolitical transformations that have both undercut the potential of the French republican project to manage social inequalities, and rendered “difference” a meaningful term.

Multiculturalism was not, for a long time, a term regularly applied to France. Since roughly the beginning of this new century, however, and especially since the riots that flared up in the country’s troubled suburbs in 2005, concerns related to the expression and

recognition of difference have taken a new precedence, and “diversity” has become a key word. New commemorations, museums, and polemics of the past decade have generated frequently heated debate on the politics of memory that have called up, tentatively, some of the darker moments of the nation’s colonial past. In 2008 a controversial proposal to allow the collection and use of “ethnic statistics” as a means for measuring French society and its discontents was launched and ultimately struck down, but not without first laying out for public consideration the potential interest of thinking in ethno-cultural terms. No less significantly, this same period has seen a rush to embrace, in certain academic circles, post-colonial and sub-altern studies, marked by the recent translations of such key texts as Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* in 2005, Gayatri Spivak’s *Can the Subaltern Speak?* in 2006, and Paul Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic* in 2009.¹

For many, the lag demonstrated by France in coming to this debate reflects both the difficulty posed by the French republican model to recognize and accommodate difference and more, a deep aversion to looking problems of race and discrimination in the eye. In a recent article, Ann Laura Stoler states that the French, or at least the French insofar as we can know them through their public institutions and manifestations, suffer a form of aphasia, “a difficulty generating a vocabulary that associates appropriate words and concepts with appropriate things” (2011:125). This has to do, she argues, with the country’s apparent inability to examine social issues through a racial lens, to recognize, as Cornel West has so succinctly put it, that “race matters.” “What has been persistently unaddressed,” Stoler writes, “is why one of the global heartlands of critical social theory and the philosophies of difference has so rarely turned its acute analytic tools to the deep structural coordinates of race in France” (2011:129). By refusing to utter, much less think about racial matters, she argues, France has become “disabled,” blind to its own racializing tendencies, and stuck, as Achille

¹ See, among others, Blanchard (2001), Cohen *et al.* (2007), Fassin & Fassin (2006), Peer & Sabbagh (2008), Roitman (2011), Tin (2008).

Mdembe has stated, in a “postcolonial languor” from which it is only now “slowly emerging” (2011: 91).

To be sure, France offers an oblique rejoinder to post-structuralist analyses that insist on the primacy of difference and identity as keys to understanding ongoing forms of structural inequality. In France, identity concerns are postulated as non-vital components of social life that are not to intrude on the quotidian challenge of building a cohesive social fabric. To the evident frustration of Stoler and others who hold that such a positioning cripples France’s ability to address various forms of social injustice, this orientation is regularly advanced at the level of official discourse and in numerous iterations of daily life as the most effective means to fight multiple social ills. Staunchly defended as the form of social organization best suited to ensure against various racial and cultural essentialisms, French republicanism is seen by its proponents not as an obstacle to, but rather as a force for combating the problems of minority disenfranchisement.

The tenacity of this social model against a more explicit differentialist reading of daily life makes the relatively new expression of identity concerns that has arisen in France these past few years all the more noteworthy. Rather than breathe a collective sigh of relief that at last, some people in France have seen the multicultural light, it seems to me that this shift should push us to ask, turning Stoler’s formulation around, what it is that makes thinking in racial terms “appropriate” in France at the current time. These are, to be sure, pressing issues in contemporary France, particularly as they relate to the heavily minority-populated and disadvantaged suburbs from which so many of these problems seem to rise. There, difficulties related to long-term unemployment, police harassment, youth disaffection, rising extremisms and more, have generated more generalized anxieties that the French integration project no longer works.² But is this a consequence of a long-standing difficulty with

² Much has been made of the recent investigation led by Gilles Kepel on the growing “islamization” of the suburbs, which he ties to the long-term social and economic degradation of these areas (Kepel *et al.* 2011).

“difference,” as many contend? Or are these rather a response to and product of deeper structural transformations that have been fashioning French society for the past 40 years?

Will Kymlicka (2012) has argued that in the post-civil rights, post-colonial era, older forms of ethnic and racial hierarchies are no longer compatible with contemporary liberal democracies and the human-rights agendas they seek to embrace. This is undoubtedly true. It is also important to consider, however, the extent to which, in the 50 years since these hierarchies were up-ended, the categories upon which they were built have themselves been questioned and revised. It is here that the French case can be instructive, as it allows inquiry into a social model wherein ethno-racial categories are considered secondary to and constitutive of the higher order project of fashioning a collective whole. In the French *banlieue*, efforts to build an integrated social fabric have given way to neighborhoods cut off from the promise of upward mobility that informed their creation. There, the economic transformations of the past forty years have created a class of dispossessed that the post-War language of social mobility – implicit to the suburbs’ construction -- can no longer contain (Wacquant 2008). Rather than see the new discourses of difference emerging there as evidence of a long-suppressed racial hierarchy, we might consider how they serve to designate inequalities that are otherwise hard to name.

For the past two years I have worked with American college students, French junior high school students, and an assortment of French schoolteachers, artists, and actors on a series of projects intended to allow the Americans a deeper glimpse into French society, the French students to reflect on issues pertinent to their lives as young people growing up in a troubled suburb outside of Paris, and the teachers and artist-activists to break out of the confines of the regular school curriculum and pursue the educational benefits of experimentation in art and literature. Specifically, the past two years have been devoted to

Defending a more conservative view, Dominique Schnapper (2006) contends that integration worked better in the past when no-one thought to question its premises.

theatrical considerations of excerpts from Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*. The project has been rich with multi-layered encounters. What interests me for my purposes here, however, is the evident fascination on the part of the teachers and artist-activists involved in the project with the black American experience and the inspiration they have found in American civil rights history. What, I want to know, makes this history relevant to this time and place, and more, what can this overlay of Toni Morrison, Rosa Parks, and Birmingham against the landscape of a post-industrial French suburb reveal about problems of difference and dispossession more broadly? The French *banlieue* does not, I maintain, resemble the segregated South, a distinction that is important to keep in mind.

Toni Morrison in the Banlieue

“The white and black question, it's very disturbing,” Annick, a French woman with blond hair and a Polish grandmother who has lived and worked in this town for over a decade, told me. An actress by training, she and her husband are the founders of an artist collective that has launched numerous projects locally: theatre, multi-media performance art, a magazine devoted to local and oral histories. In the mid-1990s a group of teen-agers approached Annick to help them produce a “rap opera.” She has continued to collaborate with young people and their schoolteachers every year since. Many, if not most, of her projects have had to do with the “white and black question,” as she puts it, from exploring colonial memory and the complexities of being young and “of color” in contemporary France, to her most recent investigations into Toni Morrison's work. The African-American theme has been recurrent. A few years ago she and a group of teachers and students put on a “Civil Rights Ball.” Students researched and related the stories of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott, of Martin Luther King's rise to leadership, and of Malcolm X's radical awareness. At intervals between their presentations they invited spectators to join them to dance to a montage of

music of African American origin, from the Charleston to blues to soul. Annick told me that it was the students' attraction to rap and hip hop that first got her interested in African American music and dance. Reading Morrison for the first time, she said, was a "revelation."

Like many suburbs north of Paris, the town where Annick and her husband work is poor. Unemployment hovers around 18%, closer to 30% for young adults under 25; nearly a third of the population is uneducated and unskilled (INSEE 2011). In 2007, the town tragically broke into the spotlight when two boys from the town were killed in a motorbike collision with the police, precipitating an outbreak of rage. Whereas the riots that had engulfed the French *banlieue* in 2005 made international headline news both for their duration and national scope – over 250 towns across the country got caught up in the unrest for a period of three weeks – the violence that shook this singular Paris suburb some two years later was noted in particular for its intensity: for the first time, the young people who took to the streets made a protracted use of firearms. The apparent escalation of urban violence denoted by these events was met in kind with a high profile round-up of suspected participants that many read as a harbinger of things to come under the then-new Sarkozy administration, and only further evidence, if any was needed, that in France, the *banlieue* are especially implicated in processes of social breakdown.

Two large housing projects in the town are classified as *zones urbaines sensibles*, or ZUS, indicating a particularly elevated level of social and economic hardship. The junior high school where Annick has launched her projects is right across the street from one of these projects – a moderate-sized district of low-rise apartment buildings that are looking rather worn. The old village, with its 12th century church and a plaque marking a gallo-roman well unearthed by the local archaeological society, is just down the street. The school, built in the late 1990s, is, by contrast, modern, full of light, and impeccably clean. Its name is the Martin Luther King Jr. Junior High School. A bright and beautiful mural of King dominates

the exterior wall across from the projects. The mural was paid for, in part, with funds from the American Embassy.

One can easily imagine what it is about Morrison's novel that transposes so well to this poor and at times dreary suburb north of Paris. The story of a young black girl growing up in 1940s Ohio, the novel features a protagonist who internalizes the sorrow and racism she sees around her to lose her own sense of worth. It's a powerful story to recount to these 14 and 15 year old French teen-agers, most if not all of whom have black or brown skin, are either immigrants themselves or the sons and daughters of immigrants, and whose circumstances oblige them to grapple with their own sense of destiny and the place they hold in French society.

In France, however, this story is being laid onto a terrain of a very different order than that of legal segregation from which the US civil rights struggles sprung. Against the seemingly clear sense of distinction on which American black-white relations were, and arguably still are, largely based, the French model by contrast stands in ardent defense of universal values. At the same time, it seems to insist on the transmission of particular forms of Frenchness, a tension which has moved many people of my acquaintance in France – usually of immigrant origin – to qualify the French as “hypocrites,” and which observers of the French republican model have consistently sought to sort through (Beriss 2004, Keaton 2006, Scott 2007). The anthropologist Mayanthi Fernando argues that it is this duality that creates the promise of the integration project: difference, she states, “even as it must be overcome in order to fulfil the universal promise of republican citizenship, cannot, in fact, ever be overcome: the universality of republican citizenship depends on that moment of transition, which depends in turn on the simultaneous existence of two poles of difference and non-difference” (2009:390). Aggressive integration practices seem both to mark and

obliterate difference at the same time; others are marked as different the better that they may, over time, be integrated and “made French.”

Against these ambiguities the American case has the advantage of seeming enticingly clear. The American framework allows an opportunity to discuss these matters in ways that are not otherwise available in France, by providing a language and experience of race, difference, and discrimination that can otherwise seem so elusive. As this version of it is told, the American story is harnessed not to the forging of a heightened, and particular, racial consciousness, but to a universal tale of triumph and uplift: segregation is overcome, Barack Obama is elected President, and Toni Morrison goes on to win the Nobel Prize.³

And yet of course in America too these matters demand closer inspection: is it ever, in the end, appropriate to think in racial terms? Even as it allows an oblique lens through which to view issues of race and discrimination in France, the civil rights story also muddies the perspective: as James Baldwin so astutely reminds us, even in the segregated South, the line between “whites” and “coloreds” was not as unambiguous as it might have seemed. “It was not in the Southland that one could hope to keep a secret!” he wrote in his essay *Take Me to the Water*. “Girls the color of honey, men nearly the color of chalk, hair like silk, hair like cotton, hair like wire, eyes blue, gray, green, hazel, black, like the gypsy’s, brown like the Arab’s, narrow nostrils, thick, wide lips, thin lips, every conceivable variation struck along incredible gamuts” (1972:402). From Baldwin’s perspective, it was the deep and shameful repression of this “sexual amalgamation” as he put it, that put the lie to the rigidity of the racial terminology in use. This was an amalgamation that the necessarily stringent notions of black and white served only to obscure.

³ This triumphant telling of the American civil rights movement has also found echo in other recent manifestations in France. The CRAN, or Conseil Représentatif des Associations Noires, for example, created in 2005 following the riots in the suburbs to serve as a national umbrella organization for groups working on and around minority issues in France, frequently cites the American civil rights movement as a source of inspiration. See also Durpaire (2006), Durpaire et al. (2009), N’Diaye (2008).

Integration in Reverse

In France, the suburban projects that are now cause for such despair were not, at least at the moment of their inception, built with segregation in mind. To the contrary, and against what is frequently assumed, the new housing developments were not meant to “warehouse” immigrants but to function, rather, as crucibles of social advancement for people of modest means. Erected quickly during the boom years of the 1950s and ‘60s, they were to help speed the social integration and mobility of millions of people living in sub-standard conditions after World War II. Most important, the new districts were to stave off the deleterious consequences of “ghettoization” by encouraging the mixing of people of different class backgrounds in contiguous residential spaces where together they would be able to fashion their collective lives. Reflecting a distinct concern with *social*, as opposed to ethnic, forms of distinction, this policy of *mixité sociale* -- the creation of communities of mixed social class -- continues to be pursued in the interest of avoiding the residential concentration of people of low socio-economic status on the assumption that it will help dilute the social problems presumed to accompany economic stress. The *banlieue* of the past 50 years thus reflects not a history of separation and division, but of integration gone awry. If there is now an increase in what the French would call “communitariste,” or ethno-cultural, sentiment, it must be seen in relation to this history.

Starting in the late 1960s, various mechanisms were employed to discourage the formation of ethnic communities and ensure the incorporation of immigrant laborers, recruited in the post-War period as a part of the greater economic boom, into the country’s urban and suburban “mix.” Housing for these workers, many of them from the colonies, was woefully inadequate: thousands lived in vast shantytowns, and others in overcrowded workers’ barracks. Efforts to integrate these workers into the interstices of French life accelerated in the 1970s when France officially closed its doors to immigration and many

immigrants chose to settle, sending for their families to join them. The advantages of the “mixed” suburbs were vaunted, then as now, with the idea that they would facilitate immigrants’ access to the loci of daily life, help them adapt to French life and norms and in that way “become French.” This would offset the potentially deleterious consequences of the segmentation of French cities and towns into distinctive “ethnic enclaves,” where it was feared people would follow the dictates of their particularistic concerns, to end in ethnic conflict.⁴

Critics of this orientation have been numerous. Many argue that French forms of integration “squash difference,”⁵ while more recent scholarship, most of it focusing on the continuities and contradictions of the French republican project in the colonies, examines the way French republicanism interpolates fluid notions of sameness and difference over time and in particular contexts.⁶ This work is especially pertinent to the history I seek to tell, in particular as it relates to the ambiguous status of colonial migrant workers who in the post-War period inhabited a particular form of ‘Frenchness’ and/or citizenship (Spire 2003). The important point for my purposes here, however, is that “mixed” and “balanced” spatial arrangements – conceived both in class and ethnic terms – are and have been actively promoted in France as the best means for people of various origins to live together and gain access to various political, cultural, educational, and economic resources.⁷ The assumption was that whatever their status, these new suburban dwellers would eventually see their prospects rise.

⁴ On the history of the *banlieue*, including the eventual settlement of immigrant populations, see Fourcaut (2004), Fourcaut & Pacquot (2002), Gaspard (1995), Lallaoui (1993), MacMaster (1991), Pétonnet (1979), Pinçon (1981), Schain (1985), Voldman (1990). On the notion that “ghettoization” leads to conflict, the example of the US is often cited, held up as a country where people live in segregated ethnic enclaves and where the free-wheeling, free-market flourishing of multicultural ideas and practices is held to be socially divisive, as the LA or Crown Heights riots would attest.

⁵ See, for example, de Laforcade (2006), Hargreaves & McKinney (1997), Scott (2007), Silverman (1992).

⁶ See, among others, Conklin (1998), Saada (2007), Shepard (2006), Wilder (2005).

⁷ For more on the political uses of “balance” and “mixing” and debates on how best to regulate the problems of the *banlieue* see Epstein (2011, 2012) and Tissot (2005, 2007).

Over the past 30 years, this vision of the *banlieue* as crucibles for new upwardly-mobile residents of France has come undone. By the late 1970s, these formerly rural areas, rapidly transformed during the *trentes glorieuses* into sprawling zones of shopping centers, mixed-income apartment complexes, and industrial zones, began suffering the consequences of overly-rapid growth. In the industrial suburbs north of Paris that I describe, plant closings gave way to high and sustained rates of unemployment that have yet to subside. In the town where I have been working, some 25 small manufacturing and related businesses closed between 1970 and 1985 (source). The opportunities for service, skilled and semi-skilled jobs at the nearby Charles de Gaulle airport has only partially picked up the slack (INSEE 2001). The resultant social problems associated with economic stress – delinquency, dependency, poor educational achievement, broken homes – are of course those that now define the dominant image of the fractious *banlieue*.

This history, of course, is not unknown. One has to wonder, however, what the *banlieue* would have become had it not been for the economic plunge. If the Keynesian vision of economic progress had been sustained, would “mixing” have achieved its ends? A study by French sociologists Stéphane Beaud and Olivier Masclet (2006) provides at least a partial response. They show what they argue is a marked distinction between two generations of immigrant-origin youth, the “*génération des beurs*” -- in reference to the youth of north African origin who organized the celebrated *marche des beurs* in 1983, largely considered the first important manifestation of immigrant solidarity – and the “*génération des cités*,” the perpetrators of the riots in 2005. The bleak prospects experienced by the latter, they argue, are all the more stark when compared to the sense of promise that animated the marchers in 1983, when the “second generation” sought both to honor and surpass the labors of their fathers, spurred by the hope of a more equitable future.

What we see going on in the *banlieue* is thus of a very different order than the struggles that made Montgomery and Birmingham familiar names even in such far-away places as this town to the north of Paris. Many in the suburbs despair that “mixing” is breaking down. Most important, these transformations put the very premise (and promise) of the French republican contract in jeopardy. The problem is not just that there are no jobs, but that there being no jobs renders the rest – the give and take of rights and responsibilities upon which the republican project is built, the laudatory promises of participatory citizenship that it upholds – largely hollow. Inhabitants of these troubled zones are continuously exhorted to join the collective, to “be responsible,” to believe, still, in the promise of engaged social action, while the returns, at least as far as jobs and material gain are concerned, are unsatisfactory at best. Of particular importance is what the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman qualifies as “one of the most bewildering paradoxes revealed in our times.” While people necessarily live and act in local spaces, they must find solutions for “*globally conceived and gestated problems*.” This is a task, Bauman contends, “which by no stretch of imagination can they fulfill” (2007: 83, emphasis in the original), and which renders the relations between people on the ground – between those looking for responses to their needs and those who, at least according to their title and function should have responses to give – particularly charged.

I would argue then that the contemporary *banlieue* is in trouble not only because of the sustained economic crisis that since the 1980s has hit it particularly hard, but because of this larger sense of disjunction between what was promised and what was delivered, between expectations and opportunities that are in short supply, and perhaps most important, between these local and global levels of influence. This is a problem that James Ferguson takes up in his study of mineworkers in Zambia. There, he argues, new processes of dispossession – what Ferguson calls “abjection” – are at work. Abjection, Ferguson argues, is the story of modernization in reverse, the process experienced by people who are “com[ing] of age in a

world where the modernist certainties their parents grew up with have been turned upside down, a world where life expectancies and incomes shrink instead of grow... [of people who feel they are] being pushed back across a boundary that they had been led to believe they might successfully cross” (2002: 137, 140). To be sure, thanks in large part to the stabilizing effects of the European social welfare net, the French *banlieue* is not Zambia, nor even, as Loïc Wacquant has pointed out, Chicago’s South Side (Wacquant 1992, 2008). And yet for the young people currently living – and rebelling – in the French *banlieue*, short-term, precarious employment, if one can find employment at all, is, ironically, just about the only thing about which they can be sure. Like Ferguson’s Copperbelt miners, they too must contend with the swift and oftentimes devastating consequences of decisions made worlds away even as they have been led to believe – or at least their fathers had been led to believe – that if they worked hard and played the game right, they too would be able to make it to the other side.

Natural Home

Still to be addressed is why in France at this time identity discourses are coming to the fore. Indeed, it has always struck me that one of the advantages of the French republican project is that in not first assuming primordial ethnic attachments, it opens a discursive space for people to think of themselves in terms that are more nuanced, multiple, and overlapping than those allowed by a strictly ethno-cultural view.⁸ The consequences of “social mixing,” moreover, which continues to be one of the central objectives of contemporary (sub)urban policy, have not been without effect: suburban districts, even as they have been touched especially hard by the economic downturn, are nonetheless notable for their cultural plurality. The school where the projects I describe above took place, for instance, draws a mix of

⁸ This I would argue is especially true in relation to the US, where racialized concerns lead often to polarized divisions between distinctly defined racial groups, obscuring the histories of mixing and *métissage* that have been so strongly constitutive of American society. See DaCosta (2007).

students of French, other European, Caribbean, south Asian, and north and west African origin. The teachers and activists involved in these projects likewise draw from a multitude of backgrounds (Moroccan, Algerian, French provincial, Korean, Chadian, etc.). Even as individuals of particular “ethnic groups” might join together to form civic organizations, to offer specialized language classes, to celebrate and/or pass on their traditions and heritages to others, policies of “social mixing” have nonetheless given way to cities and neighborhoods where people of a variety of backgrounds regularly meet and work through their differences – or at least, that is the idea -- in an effort to find solutions to common problems. This is not, to be sure, always an easy, comfortable, or equitable process, but it nonetheless begs the question of what is to be gained by thinking through this experience in ethno-cultural terms, and why this turn is happening now.

It is here where thinking against the context of the civil rights period can be helpful. In an era when underlying causes of dispossession are so diffuse, the “white and black question,” as Annick put it, can provide ready answers. Bauman writes about what he calls the “sound and fury” of our “era of identity” (2001:129), that reveal efforts to grapple with what he and others contend are the heightened insecurities of a world in which social and economic conditions seem forever to be determined on some further shore. Global shifts, engendering zones of the under- and precariously employed, have made the once stable promise of social integration give way instead to enduring fluctuation. It is this sense of dispossession, Bauman argues, that renders the allure of “identity” – “that allegedly ‘natural home’” as he puts it (2001:128) – so strong. Such claims provide an anchor – or at least the illusion of one – in these “liquid times” when futures remain so unsure. I wonder then to what extent recent racialized debates about discriminatory forces in French society and history, which seek to lay bare contradictions in the French republican project, are not also reflections of efforts to locate solid causes for more elusive forms of disenfranchisement. The difficulty,

however, even in places where racial distinctions are as clearly delineated as in the segregated South, is that such identity claims are inherently unstable, even as they are evoked as if transparently clear.

Conclusion

The recent ‘post-colonial turn’ in France, and the concomitant concern for various forms of identity politics that would seem to be accompanying it, signal a significant shift within a social order that has historically been built on an ideal of transcending difference. Much of this movement is concentrated in and on the troubled French suburbs, which for the past two decades have become both the focus and source of considerable amounts of anxiety about the state of health of French society generally and the republican social contract in particular. Should we consider this relatively new racial surge, as many have suggested, as a return of the repressed? If so, then how are we to square such phenomena with arguments about the inherent indeterminateness of identity in these “liquid times”? Discourses of race and difference, especially in places as ethnically mixed as the French *banlieue*, need to be considered not as end-points but as the starting point for inquiry. I have argued here that these debates need to be considered rather within the context of a rapidly shifting global economy that has both diffused the potential for social integration promised by the French republican contract at the same time that it has contributed to the shaping of “difference” as a meaningful category. They reflect efforts to grasp at readily identifiable sources of inequality and disenfranchisement when the deeper and far less comprehensible reasons for lack of opportunity have moved, literally, off-shore, swept up in transformations that have radically altered the meaning of local life and politics, and left places like the French *banlieue* gasping for air.

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