

**Destinations Out: Towards a Jazz-Inflected Model for Community-Based Learning**  
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**Keynote talk for “Key Changes: Transitions in Our Students, Our Classrooms, Ourselves,” Association of Atlantic Universities Teaching Showcase Conference, University of Prince Edward Island, September 24-25, 2010.**

### **1. Introduction**

When Duke Ellington, in a 1957 issue of *Down Beat*, was quoted as saying that he was not interested in educating people, fellow jazz composer and improviser Sun Ra, in the liner notes to one of his earliest recordings released that same year, responded by declaring, “I want to go on record as stating that I am.” In this talk, I’ll suggest that Ra’s pronouncement has a valuable, if unsuspected, role to play for critical practice and research in pedagogy, and that the questions it opens up can reinvigorate our understanding of the very places where we look for knowledge.

Now, I admit, Ra might seem somewhat out-of-place in a paper (and a conference) on pedagogy. After all, throughout his time on this planet, Ra insisted that he was—well, yes—from another planet, that he hailed from outer space. But it’s precisely Ra’s out-ness (and he may well be the most out-cat in the history of the music) that commands our respectful attention. I’ve argued elsewhere that outer space functions for Ra as a metaphor for possibility (or perhaps for performing the impossible), for alternatives to dominant systems of knowledge production, and that this was particularly important for aggrieved populations sounding off against systems of oppression and racist constraint. “If you find earth boring, just the same old same thing,” Ra liked to declare, “then come on and sign up for Outer Spaceways Incorporated.” Or, in a piece entitled “Imagination,” Ra asked us, “If we came from nowhere here, why can’t we go somewhere there?” The full lyric, reprinted in Ra’s book of poetry and prose, *The Immeasurable Equation*, reads, “Imagination is a magic carpet / Upon which we may soar / To distant lands and climes / And even go beyond the moon / To any planet in the sky / If we came from nowhere here / Why can’t we go somewhere there?” (206).

Now, all this might seem like flippant rhetoric and offhand space-age futurism from an eccentric and marginalized figure in jazz history. In a recent article, I’ve argued, however, that it is anything but (see Heble, “Somewhere There”). Despite being marginalized and summarily dismissed in dominant narratives of the music and all but forgotten in most institutionalized accounts of jazz history, Ra, to my mind, remains a hugely influential and pioneering improvising artist. Think, for instance, of his reinvention of musical and conceptual categories, of his profound and salutary commitment to enabling aggrieved peoples to become subjects of their own histories and futures. Indeed, “nowhere here,” for Ra, was an apt and deadly serious descriptor for the earth-bound dead-end life-

situations in which African Americans repeatedly found themselves, a world of systematized and institutionalized forms of violence, oppression, and racist constraint.

As Ra once wrote, “We need to get off this planet as fast as possible. We’d better be out there when here blows up” (*Immeasurable Equation* 461). “Somewhere There,” and “Outer Spaceways Incorporated,” by contrast, offer a place of hope and possibility, a place of black social mobility.

Herein, I’d like to suggest, lies a tale about the resilience, force, and impact of improvisatory performance practices. If, as bell hooks has argued, “African American performance has been a site for the imagination of future possibilities” (“Performance Practice” 220), and if, as another theorist suggests, “the emergence of a radical future . . . is almost always necessarily defined by its very otherness from the world as is” (Shukaitis 112), then Ra’s out-ness, his fondness for blasting off into what other African American improvising artists might have called “destinations out,” needs to be seen and heard as a kind of (social and sonic) expression of black mobility. Ra’s performances, often featuring a quasi-theatrical improvised romp through the history of African American music from the early forms of swing (remember that Ra played with Fletcher Henderson) to bebop, free jazz, and—well, yes—far far beyond into the outer space noisiness of who-knows-where, were themselves statements about a mobility of practice, expressions both of unspoken, erased, or whitewashed black histories and of unwritten, unscripted futures. The “somewhere there” of improvisation was, for Ra, part of black music’s resistance to capture and fixity, its noisiness and clamorousness part of a refusal to give in to the kind of culture of acquiescence or non-participation which resigns itself to the way things are because (or so we are too often told), no other future is possible.

In today’s talk, I’d like to turn up the volume on some of those earlier arguments to suggest that Ra’s interest in educating people might have much to tell us about the kinds of transitions in education that are at the heart of this year’s conference theme. In particular, I’d like, by way of the objectives and principles articulated in the Plan of Action for the United Nations Decade of Human Rights Education (1995-2004), and the follow up World Program for Human Rights Education, and with reference to work associated with the SSHRC MCRI project, *Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice*, to suggest that for education to be a purposeful site for critical activism, one of our key challenges, as teachers and educators, will be to create structures in our classrooms (as well as within the larger institutions in which we work) that encourage broader forms of community-based learning and involvement. And this will mean reaching outside the walls of the classroom, as it has traditionally been defined. It will also mean producing new criteria of judgment and response (new grading mechanisms, new structures of reward and placement), as well as a broadening of our sense of intellectual purpose. In short, it will mean (and this, indeed, is where I take my cue from Ra’s *Astro Black jazz philosophizing*) thinking anew about what we do, and about how

and why we do it. This notion of reaching outside the classroom or what bell hooks calls “teaching community,” I will suggest, ought to occupy a central place in any serious attempt to reflect on what it means to make teaching and learning more socially and ethically responsible.

## **2. Looking Beyond the Classroom**

“Introducing or improving human rights education,” the Plan of Action for the United Nations World Program of Human Rights Education tells us, “requires adopting a holistic approach to teaching and learning, by integrating programme objectives and content, resources, methodologies, assessment and evaluation; by looking beyond the classroom, and by building partnerships between different members of the school community” (paragraph D18). In the context of working towards such a holistic approach, this notion of “looking beyond the classroom,” or of “teaching community,” ought to be central to our attempt to reflect on the key transitions (and, indeed, the most pressing and contentious matters) currently animating the theory and practice of education. At an institutional moment when complacency and careerism are the orders of the day, we urgently “need a new breed of citizen scholars who can identify not only with the institution and discipline but also with community,” as Cary Nelson and Stephen Watt argue (37). Indeed, when my students reflect on their own experiences with forms of community-based learning, so many of them come back again and again to how refreshing it is when our classroom work invites us (students and teachers alike) to think rigorously about the relation between theory and practice, especially when so much of what we do in the university “tends to be about career advancement and competition” (their words), and when so much of what we do in our classes is (again, in the words of my students) “about saying things that we don’t necessarily mean or that don’t have much relevance to people’s lives.” Students firmly believe that what they can gain from community-based educational practices, from pedagogy that looks “beyond the classroom,” differs markedly from the knowledge they derive from more familiar models of education. In contrast to the passive, compartmentalized, and decontextualized brand of learning that gets promoted by rote exercises that call for memorization and regurgitation (only to be forgotten when term tests and exams are over), community-based learning is very much in keeping with key principles articulated in the Plan of Action for the UN Decade of Human Rights Education, specifically that education “shall be shaped in such a way as to be relevant to the daily lives of learners, and shall seek to engage learners in a dialogue about the ways and means of transforming human rights from the expression of abstract norms to the reality of their social, economic, cultural, and political conditions” (par 6). “Looking beyond the classroom,” in short, seems to me to be one of the fundamental principles and strategies that ought to define a pedagogy that’s mindful of ethics and social responsibility. In times when we’re increasingly being called to account for what we do, and when, in fact, we need to find purposeful ways to respond to the anxiety, in particular, that surrounds current debates about the relevance (and future) of humanities research and teaching (an area too often viewed as having little or no social instrumentality), community-based education for human rights not only

offers a resonant opportunity for teachers and students to be explicit in articulating the public relevance of the work we do in our classes, but also productively and purposefully reminds us that learning is an ongoing process of inquiry that is linked in complex ways to notions of democratic citizenship.

Now lest I be misunderstood, let me make it clear that when I talk about community-based education I have in mind here something rather different from the kinds of narrowly defined notions of civic volunteerism that are frequently offered in response to questions about (and demands for) public accountability. Indeed, rhetoric linking global citizenship to traditional notions of volunteerism too often gets bandied about these days in the service of a marketplace model of education. And as Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne point out in their survey of the field, attempts to strengthen democracy and citizen participation through civic education and service learning programs vary wildly in their underlying beliefs and assumptions, with many of these programs having at their core a decidedly conservative character. “What political and ideological interests,” they encourage us to ask, “are embedded in or easily attached to various conceptions of citizenship?” (21). The critical force of many of the concepts currently in fashion in educational debates—from “learner-centeredness” to “experiential learning” to “citizenship education”—indeed runs the risk of being dissipated unless a commitment to human rights and social justice is central to our efforts and policies. As Howard Solomon writes in an essay analyzing “the intellectual activist challenge to conservative notions of merit within the university” (180), “Liberal advocates of public service typically imagine a traditional, narrowly defined model of volunteerism that is perceived to be rightly separate from, and less worthy than, the university’s real business of teaching and scholarship” (184). Like Solomon, I want to argue that we need to challenge assumptions about what constitutes the university’s “real business” and to put critical pressure on received categories used to measure and to reward academic production. Solomon suggests that the concept of the “intellectual activist” calls into question neat definitions of ‘volunteer’ and ‘community service,’ and it problematizes the relationships between university and society. It also problematizes the relationships among the three categories ‘service,’ ‘teaching,’ and ‘scholarship’ within the university itself” (185).

With Solomon, I’d like to ask, what happens when commitments to activist struggles in the community are understood to be very much a part of the “real business” of teaching and research? What risks do we take when we feel compelled (as I so often do) to transform the classroom into a theatre of political issues? What happens when, as teachers, scholars, and citizens, we insist that through our educational efforts we are participating in (and, indeed, building) vital social purpose enterprises in our communities? And given that some of the most compelling thinking about activism has been suspicious of the enormous distance between the elite interpretive frameworks that academic discourse tends to impose on our understanding of activist endeavor, and the situated knowledges of aggrieved peoples, what relationship should our pedagogy have to those knowledges? How can we, as privileged thinkers working within elitist institutions,

best express our commitment to, and affiliation with, those outside the academy who are struggling for access to rights and representation? It's unlikely that rightless peoples have much to learn from academics about human rights; the question, I think, is how best can we learn to convey the urgency and the complexities of their struggles.

These sorts of questions mandate fresh new ways of thinking about education, and they demand a willingness, on the part of educators, to take risks, to resist orthodoxy (including orthodox assumptions about matters of intellectual prestige), and to trouble settled habits of response and judgement. The point here is that if the exercise of human rights becomes meaningful not only through the existence of covenants and treaties, but also as a result of the broader cultures of consciousness and obligation that might help transform those rules into acknowledgement and action, then a radical reorganization of our priorities as educators seems very much to be in order. My talk today seeks to advance an argument and an agenda for a pedagogy that is grounded in the struggle for human rights and social justice. While such an agenda is in keeping with the Plan of Action for the recently concluded United Nations Decade of Human Rights Education, as well as with the objectives articulated in the follow-up UN World Programme for Human Rights Education, it remains at odds with so many of the reigning assumptions in current educational practice, particularly those that frame teaching and scholarship within the context of corporate logics and priorities.

Such an agenda, I must confess, is also at odds with so much of what passes for engaged scholarship and teaching in my own discipline of the humanities. Lennard Davis, for instance, has expressed concern about how the very act of reading (and, by implication, teaching) novels inhibits social change because we allow our consideration and analysis of the transformations that characters undergo (from blindness to insight, from self-deception to self-revelation, and so forth) to become a kind of surrogate for any form of external change. Do texts in an English class, Davis's work invites us to ask, become "sites of resistance" or arenas for dialogue, such that we don't bother to act in the real world? Is there a danger that criticism functions only in the classroom, that it doesn't purposefully get extended to those in the broader public arena who are engaged in struggles for human rights and social justice? Does theory (as it has become axiomatic in many humanities classrooms) run the risk of becoming so highly specialized that it may have very little to say to those who don't, by profession, belong to the intellectual class? Such concerns, unfortunately, ring true, and furthermore, we too often pride ourselves on the fraudulent and misguided belief that an attention to matters of race, gender, class, sexuality and diversity in texts offers us sufficient purchase on the urgent ethicopolitical struggles being waged in the public arena. But I'm not ready just yet to give up on the work that I do: after all, I'm still teaching, I'm still professing literature. Of course, I'm frequently tempted to ask, how precisely will the work we do in our classrooms result in improvements in people's lives, in policy changes, in more just institutional structures, in alterations in the distribution of power, in prevention of human rights abuses? True, these sorts of changes can (and have) sometimes come about because of the work of teachers

and students, and they have occasionally, sometimes profoundly, been sparked (in the case of fictional texts such as Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* or Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper," among others) by the work of creative artists. But perhaps these are not quite the right questions. Better, perhaps, to try to understand how research and pedagogy might bear witness to suffering and atrocities. Better to recognize how they give testimony and sounding to issues ignored in the mainstream press, and raise questions about positions which too often get institutionalized as unworthy of public attention. Better to understand, as Aruna Srivastava has argued, that the "disciplines and isolation of institutional life make those of us who have complicated investments in academe, those of us who are subjected to the domination of institutional norms, histories, and denials, forget that it is working across these boundaries and borders, in coalition (as fractious as these may be) that allows us to mount the most effective resistance" (125). Better to remember the words of Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, who tell us that "the organization and self-education of groups in the community . . . and their networking and activism, continue to be the fundamental elements in steps toward the democratization of our social life and meaningful social change (307). Better, that is, to focus on the hope and the opportunities for change that our teaching and research might enable.

If, as educators, we aim not simply to transmit knowledge (via what Paulo Freire famously calls the banking method of pedagogy) but instead to encourage the activation of knowledge, we will, perforce, reach new audiences, invite broader forms of public participation and critical inquiry, generate new structures of hope and momentum. And this kind of work, as bell hooks importantly insists, "can serve to expand all our communities of resistance so that they are not just composed of college teachers, students, or well-educated politicians" (*Teaching Community* xii). With hooks, I share the strong belief that hope resides in our ability as teachers to find innovative ways to make the world our classroom, to create classrooms without boundaries. "The most exciting aspect of teaching outside conventional structures and/or college classrooms," writes hooks, "has been the sharing of the theory we write in academia with non-academic audiences and, most importantly, seeing their hunger to learn new ways of knowing, their desire to use this knowledge in meaningful ways to enrich their daily lives" (xi). With hooks, I locate a powerful sense of hope in the growing recognition among some educators that human rights education necessitates a commitment to taking teaching and learning outside the walls of the structured and formal classroom setting, a recognition--in keeping, I would suggest, with Sun Ra's insistence that we take him seriously as a kind of educator--of the extent to which activist practices might be understood as powerful sites of pedagogical intervention.

### **3. Class Action: Towards a Pedagogy of Hope**

Indeed, over the last several years, my own teaching and research have become increasingly committed to making links between what we do in the classroom (in my case

as an English professor, with the “business we do with texts”) and broader struggles (for equality, for rights, for access to representation, for democratization) in the public sphere. I’ve sought to develop pedagogical strategies that foster connections between what students learn or do at university and how they come to understand themselves as socially responsible citizens. To that end, I’ve tried, whenever possible, to design my university courses at all levels (from first year classes to graduate seminars) to require various forms of community-based learning and research. I’ve encouraged my students to become aware of pressing issues in their communities and to develop a sense of ethical responsibility for seeking to address these issues, and to recognize the connections between our classroom texts and struggles taking place outside the academy. Such pedagogical priorities are in keeping not only with the Plan of Action for the UN Decade of Human Right Education, which, you’ll recall, seeks to shape educational practices “in such a way as to be relevant to the daily lives of learners” but also with bell hooks’s argument in her book *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. “Teachers who have a vision of democratic education,” hooks writes,

assume that learning is never confined solely to an institutionalized classroom. Rather than embodying the conventional false assumption that the university setting is not the ‘real world’ and teaching accordingly, the democratic educator breaks through the false construction of the corporate university as set apart from real life and seeks to re-envision schooling as always a part of our real world experience, and our real life. Embracing the concept of a democratic education we see teaching and learning as taking place constantly. We share the knowledge gleaned in classrooms beyond those settings thereby working to challenge the construction of certain forms of knowledge as always and only available to the elite. (41)

As part of my effort to re-envision schooling as always a part of our real world experience, the final “assignment” in my courses often takes the form of a “pro-active, community-facing intervention.” I challenge my students to move beyond the walls of the classroom in an effort to make interventions in the broader community. I ask also that they use these “assignments” as an opportunity to activate their knowledge and their education, to take the initiative to “do something” about struggles for social justice. They’re told, too, that they should feel free to draw on (and to work in partnership with) local resources and social justice organizations (Amnesty International, Campus Radio Stations, Public Interest Research Groups, International Resource Centres, etc) in the community. They’re required, by way of an in-progress report, to discuss their preliminary findings (as well as any obstacles) to the class in a seminar presentation, to “pitch” their projects at an early stage before a panel of outside “experts,” and to submit (to me and to all members of the class) a bibliography of relevant sources and resources. At the end of the semester, I ask them to submit a written account of the work they’ve done in the course, and, in particular, to reflect on how that work has encouraged them to rethink their understanding of the places where we look for knowledge, to think anew about what constitutes research. I tell them that the written account should be understood

as an opportunity to think through the rationale for the community projects in which they've been engaged, as well as to consider both the anticipated benefits and limitations of their work. To what extent, I ask, have the teaching methods and strategies employed during their projects been successful?

And there's one more critical thing about this assignment: I insist that their interventions take the form of a collaborative project. I give several reasons for this insistence. One of the challenges facing any organization working for human rights, I remind my students, is to learn how to work effectively as a collective. Doing community-based social justice work can be difficult enough at the best of times, but these difficulties can often be confounded by various factors (coordination of schedules, interpersonal relations, issues of trust and leadership, feelings of helplessness, etc.). I ask my students to work collaboratively so they can begin to recognize and negotiate these sorts of challenges. Furthermore, in an era when our very frames of reference are massively shaped by taken-for-granted assumptions about the primacy of the individual, it's particularly vital, I believe, for students to recognize the importance (and indeed the urgency) of social organization and collective action. Such a recognition can purposefully unsettle institutionalized understandings of history that teach us primarily to canonize the contributions of individual people. Furthermore, as George Lipsitz writes, "Powerful corporations try to convince us that our only important identities are as individual consumers, not as members of cultural communities. Dominant political institutions encourage us to think of ourselves as atomized citizen-subjects, not as the beneficiaries of collective social movements from the past or as generators of new ones in the future. The pervasive nature of therapeutic advice we receive from newspaper columnists, talk-show hosts, authors of self-help books, and from trained therapeutic professionals themselves generally encourages us to seek self-improvement rather than social connection as our most important life project." (xviii). My insistence that students work as a collective is part of a larger effort to put critical pressure on such hegemonic social constructions of individualism.

Lipsitz, indeed, is forthright on the need for such efforts:

Intellectuals and artists today often live disconnected from active social movements. . . . They work within hierarchical institutions and confront reward structures that privilege individual distinction over collective social change. The painful contradictions confronting socially conscious artists and intellectuals in our society are most often experienced individually, but they stem from the systematic and structural imperatives that give cultural workers contradictory social roles. By their very nature, creative and critical endeavors allow and encourage identification with others. Intellectuals often work in solitude, but rarely in isolation. Empathy emerges within artistic and intellectual work as a critical way of knowing, as a tool for understanding things outside our own experience. In times of tumult and change, artists and intellectuals can often experience their connections to others as both an honor and a responsibility. On the other hand, the routine conditions of

training, employment, and evaluation in jobs that rely on “mind work” encourage a competitive individualism rooted in the imperative to distinguish oneself from others and to surpass others in accomplishment and status. Artists and intellectuals who have never experienced directly the power of social movements in transforming social relations can easily become isolated in their own consciousness and activity, unable to distinguish between their own abstract desires for social change and actual social movements. (277)

My own insistence on collaborative work, then, also has much to do with a deep feeling of unease with institutionalized (and, again, taken-for-granted) assumptions about what Lipsitz here calls “mind work,” and, in particular, with the kind of “routine conditions” associated with classroom practices and priorities. As Kenneth Bruffee writes in his book *Collaborative Learning*, “there is no recognized, validly institutionalized, productive relationship among students” (66) in university classrooms. Students talk to their teacher, they write to their teacher, and they determine their fate in relation to their teacher, individually. Moreover, Bruffee reminds us, “traditional teaching assumes and maintains a negative competitive relationship among students.” Most teaching, indeed, fails to recognize collaboration as being educationally valid. I’ve long been noting that the most purposeful and the most engaged learning in my classes occurs through classroom dialogue and discussion, and not through what Paulo Freire has famously labeled the “banking method” of pedagogy. It’s always seemed somehow unfortunate to me that after such tremendously inspiring and exciting in-class discussions and shared inquiry throughout the semester, students are required, at the end of term, to abandon this sense of “social connection” (to borrow from Lipsitz) and to retreat into the privacy of their individual consciousnesses in order to write standardized term papers and final examinations. Precisely because so much classroom learning remains rooted in these sorts of individual processes, I’ve been trying to find innovative ways to move towards what Freire calls dialogic or problem-posing education, to disrupt hegemonic ways of doing things in the classroom. In an effort to challenge these orthodoxies and to put critical pressure on notions of individualism, then, I ask my students to work as a collective (with all the attendant problems that come with collective work). I also try to discourage competitiveness by having students work towards a group grade (a grade which I’ve often asked the students to assign to themselves).

The response—especially from students--has been overwhelmingly positive. And what’s particularly encouraging is that many of the students from these courses have gone on to develop (and to deepen their commitment to) their projects well beyond the frame of the classroom, to encourage replication of their efforts, and to spark new social justice related initiatives. Some have organized conferences emerging out of the work they’ve done in our classes, others have edited a special journal issue on pedagogy and social change, while others still have made a documentary film that’s been picked up by the National Film Board of Canada and screened nationwide in Canada at various conferences and in a

range of educational communities. Much of this work, indeed, has attracted the attention and praise of journalists, activists, educators, and several community-based human rights organizations. Needless to say, these sorts of achievements are a tremendous source of pride for me as their teacher: they speak very powerfully to the ways in which university level work can establish a genuine foundation for vital forms of civic engagement. And herein lies a message of hope.

#### **4. Playing the Changes: Learning from Jazz and Improvisation**

The key transition that I've chosen as the focus for my talk today has been the need to create structures in our classrooms (as well as within the larger institutions in which we work) that encourage broader forms of community-based learning and involvement. This transition, of course, touches on all three of the conference sub-themes (our students, our classrooms, ourselves). In an essay on civic engagement, community-based learning and the humanities, David Cooper puts it this way: "No longer directing from the sidelines or articulating abstractions from behind a podium," we, as community-based educators now find ourselves engaged in "a pedagogy that demands a great deal of preparation and planning, but at the same time requires spontaneity and flexibility. We [have] to give up some expectations about what should happen in a college [or university] classroom. In the process, we [find] new ways of thinking about those questions that all of us in higher education ponder: Where does the learning take place, and what do I want my students to take away with them?" (15). Although he isn't referencing jazz or music, Cooper is, in effect, making a case about the community-based educator as a skilled improviser. Think back to what I suggested earlier: that the questions needing to be asked about education, the transitions I'm pointing to, mandate fresh new ways of thinking: they demand a willingness to take risks, to resist orthodoxy, to trouble settled habits of response and judgment. And these, indeed, are lessons we can learn from jazz and improvised music, from artists and creative practitioners like Sun Ra, who have developed and manifest enormous capacities of resilience. What new theoretical and organizational models and practices might be developed, then, for the development of theories of education that embed improvisation itself as a methodology? This is one of the research questions we'll be taking up in future work with the Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice project. Cooper's question about where learning takes place is, in addition, precisely what Sun Ra's response to Duke Ellington (his insistence that he be taken seriously as an educator) asks us to consider. Indeed, I began today's talk with Ra's response to Ellington precisely because it issues something of a challenge to the institutionalization of knowledge, because it, like bell hooks's argument about the urgent need for democratic educators to break out of the confines of the institutionalized classroom, asks us to reflect on what it might mean to educate people not through conventional academic institutions or in traditional educational settings. What Ra has taught us, in other words, is that the *outside* can function as a place of hope and possibility. Ra's example points to the ways in which the locations where jazz maintains its most salient innovations may well reside *somewhere there*, outside conventional spaces, places, and institutional practices of

legitimation, This, it seems to me, offers a vital and enduring lesson for all of us as teachers and learners.

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