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TRANSMISSION, IMITATION AND THE QUESTION OF EARLY AMERICAN LITERARY NATIONALISM

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ABSTRACT. ***Transmission, Imitation and the Question of Early American Literary Nationalism.*** This article seeks to revalue early American literature and concurrently to clarify to what extent one can talk about American literary nationalism during the formative post-revolutionary years. Although many anthologies of American literature as well as critical studies devoted to American literary historiography have underlined the national unity of American literature as a whole, they have consistently ignored this particular period in which the transmission and imitation of English models and their alteration or transformation by American booksellers and publishers, corroborated with generic instability and the absence of central publishing hubs, fail to attest to a homogenous—and, implicitly, wholly national—development of literature. In doing so, special attention will be paid to the early American novel as a site for probing the ideals of the early Republic, for appraising its historical accomplishments, and, ultimately, for lambasting its democratic failure. At the same time, despite the misleading name of "novel" attributed to various literary genres, and its hybrid form, the early American

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novel was instrumental in reflecting transnational concerns and cultural exchanges that were highly suggestive of the unstable cultural identity of America at the time.

Keywords: *the early American Republic, transatlantic exchanges, English imitations, generic instability, common property, the early American novel*

REZUMAT. *Transmitere, imitație și problema naționalismului literar american timpuriu*. Prezentul articol își propune să reevalueze literatura americană timpurie și, totodată, să clarifice în ce măsură putem vorbi despre un naționalism literar american în anii formatori postrevoluționari. Deși multe antologii de literatură americană, precum și studii critice dedicate istoriografiei literare americane au scos în evidență unitatea națională a literaturii americane în ansamblul ei, ele au ignorat în mod consecvent această perioadă în care transmiterea și imitarea modelelor engleze și alterarea sau transformarea lor de către vânzătorii de carte și editorii americani, coroborate cu instabilitatea genurilor literare și absența unor rețele principale de edituri nu atestă o dezvoltare omogenă și, implicit, eminamente națională a literaturii. Astfel, vom acorda o atenție specială romanului american timpuriu ca spațiu de validare a idealurilor Republicii timpurii, al evaluării realizărilor istorice ale acesteia și, în esență, al criticilor legate de eșecul democrației. Totodată, în ciuda denumirii înșelătoare de „roman" atribuită diverselor genuri literare și a formei sale hibride, romanul american timpuriu a jucat un rol crucial în reflectarea problemelor și schimburilor culturale transnaționale, ambele extrem de sugestive pentru instabilitatea identității culturale americane a acelor timpuri.

Cuvinte cheie: *Republica americană timpurie, schimburi transatlantice, imitații ale modelelor engleze, instabilitate generică, proprietate comună, romanul american timpuriu*

In an essay entitled "It would baffle the strength of a giant," James Fenimore Cooper deplores the ailing condition of American literature provoked by a broad swathe of English reprints that prevent American readers from exercising their literary taste:

> A capital American publisher has assured me that there are not a dozen writers in this country whose works he should feel confidence in publishing at all, while he reprints hundreds of English books without the least hesitation [...] The general taste of the reading world in this country is better than that of England. The fact is both proved and explained by the circumstances that thousands of works that are printed and read in the mother country are not printed and read here. (Cooper 1961, 3)

Concurrently, and paradoxically, he foregrounds the want of compelling materials that ought to become the subject matter of American literature, history and moral philosophy, acknowledging that the United States is still a nation in the making:

> The second obstacle against which American literature has to contend is in the poverty of materials. There is scarcely an ore which contributes to the wealth of the author that is found here in veins as rich as in Europe […] There are no annals for the historian; no follies (beyond the most vulgar and commonplace) for the satirist; no manners for the dramatist; no obscure fictions for the writer of romance; no gross and hardy offenses against decorum for the moralist; nor any of the rich artificial auxiliaries of poetry. (Cooper 1961, 4)

Although such remarks emphasize the urge to create an imaginative literature in the New World, they are not devoid of irony, since Cooper, one of the first well-established American novelists, was highly conversant with Walter Scott's novels and penned most of his novels while he was living in England. He was, therefore, deeply engaged in a "network of exchanges" (Tennenhouse 2006, 16), as was the early American novel which, before being neglected by many anthologies of American literature and contemporary American literary historiography, had already been completely dismissed by the American Romantic authors of the 1830s and 1840s, with Ralph Waldo Emerson as their main critical mouthpiece. Michael T. Gilmore (1994, 541) has convincingly shown that "until the 1980s, academic criticism accepted and elaborated this pejorative assessment of postrevolutionary culture" on the grounds that it lacked originality and individual expression, relied on English imitations and had a strikingly pedagogical function. This unanimous consent "concurred with the Emersonian judgment that *no* literary art existed in this country until the awakening of the Romantic spirit" (Gilmore 1994, 541; original emphasis).

In contemporary critical terms, Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky (1991, 9) has vehemently denied the existence of the early American novel, arguing that

> the America in the term 'the American novel' is a place, with hard outlines and a traceable landscape, but it is also, as it has been from the outset, an idea—often an ideal—imagined first in the minds of enlightened European thinkers, reimagined, and then shaped and configured, in the consciousness of Thomas Jefferson and the other founders of the Republic.

Notwithstanding the veracity of his statement, Rubin-Dorsky fails to consider the bidirectional exchange of cultural goods, insisting instead on America's sheer dependence on England, on the absence of any support for arts and

letters—"the American Dr Johnson did not exist" (Rubin-Dorsky 1991, 12)—which was also accountable for the New World's authors lack of experimentation and authenticity and, finally, on the instability of the novelistic genre that echoed the unsettled character of society. For Rubin-Dorsky (1991, 14), novels are neither "shapers of public opinion," nor "agents of the liberation of the democratic mind" because the socio-political background of the time was prone to ever-increasing factionalism fuelled by the rise of the press that was likely to be conducive to the waning of civil and religious authority or oppressive laws like the Alien and Sedition Acts passed in 1798, when America was preparing for war against France. The *status quo* of the postrevolutionary years allowed the English-American clergyman John Bristed (1818, 310) to observe that literature was far from being a financially satisfactory occupation in a country where "the means of subsistence are so abundant and so easy of attainment, and the sources of personal revenue so numerous, that nearly all the active talent in the nation is employed in prosecuting some commercial, or agricultural, or professional pursuit." Consequently, in such a culturally harsh climate, it was impossible for Americans to reject the English legacy only to proclaim their full independence and to refuse to accept that the British literary models were superior to their own. As Stephen Shapiro (2008, 99) has shown, "the political independence of the United States from Great Britain did not translate into actual increased autonomy due to the uninterrupted continuation of its economic subordination." Although my argument is informed by Henri Petter's suggestion that "what the new country inherited or borrowed from the older one could make up for the lack in America of features considered essential to a national literature," (1971, 10) in what follows I claim that such features were actually established and reinforced by transnational cultural exchanges and mobility of various authors on both sides of the Atlantic. Ultimately, it is this two-way circulation of books and authors that testifies to the heterogeneity of American culture and society whose national identity was still a desideratum.

In their seminal study *Transatlantic Literary Studies, 1660-1830*, Eve Tavor Bannet and Susan Manning (2011, 1) have highlighted the transnational significance of cultural exchanges, arguing that "transatlantic relations were so central to Britons' and Americans' everyday lives, literary imaginations, and histories, and that so much primary recovery work of sources and contacts remains to be done." The myth of America had already been ingrained in people's mind in the seventeenth century, when the English Puritans were the first to set foot in the Promised Land, and continued to be represented and reconfigured by both British and American politicians. On the one hand, in the eighteenth century, Americans travelled to England to deal with trade, get an education or act as permanent envoys of the New Republic whereas slaves were

brought to England by American or West Indian owners. On the other hand, English missionaries, politicians, seamen, soldiers, actors and servants either visited or spent time in America where, after 1790, the new waves of immigrants, such as Germans, Dutch, Irish and Scotch-Irish, settled in. Apart from being connected "by the ocean and its ships" or "by the letter post" (Bannet and Manning 2011, 2), Britons and Americans were linked by a highly productive print culture that primarily consisted of a variety of English imported genres. However, some American writers published their work in London, as was the case of Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*. Also, while Royall Tyler's captivity tales, James Fenimore Cooper's works about the American frontier and Washington Irving's *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon* were successfully reprinted in England, British iconic literary figures such as Robert Burns and Walter Scott were successfully reprinted in America. Such exchanges reveal that the literary independence of the former American colonies "was not so much a severing of ties as the renegotiation of a relationship" (Bannet and Manning 2011, 3) upheld by other authors, such as Susannah Rowson, Charlotte Lennox, Edward Bancroft, Olaudah Equiano, Tobias Smollett or John Davis, to mention just a few, whose experience lived either across the Atlantic or in Britain was cast in the mould of histories of fact.

In spite of the huge variety of travelling genres, the early Republic's lack of a centralised book industry made the development of a national literature impossible. With few exceptions, i.e. New York, Boston and Philadelphia, the unequal dissemination of print materials led to the creation of regional, or "imagined" (Anderson, 1983), communities which imposed their local culture and history as allegedly national. James Russell Lowell (qtd. in Kennedy and Person 2014, 2) decries the poor book production conditions as follows:

> Our capital city [Washington], unlike London or Paris, is not a great central heart, from which life and vigor radiate to the extremities, but resembles more an isolated umbilicus, stuck down as near as may be to the centre of the land, and seeming rather to tell a legend of former usefulness than to serve any present need.

As "an isolated umbilicus," Washington is synecdochally the expression of an incoherent and culturally immature nation deprived of printing hubs and reputed literary and critical magazines and journals meant to form and cultivate the reader's taste in much the same manner as Joseph Addison's *The Spectator* did in England. Yet, such an unpropitious cultural context was a fertile ground for experimenting with both fictional and non-fictional material, especially in what regards the later independent status of the American novel.

Similar to Bannet and Manning, J. Gerald Kennedy and Leland S. Person (2014, 3) write that "this provincialism paradoxically existed alongside a pervasive consciousness of transatlantic cultural currents and revolutionary events unfolding in Europe as well as elsewhere in the Americas." Undoubtedly, British literary models ruled supreme and were a consistent source of imitation in the early Republic, thus raising alarming questions not only about the advent of a national culture and literature, but also about an authentic literary tradition and literary language. Although in fierce competition with their British counterparts, American publishers were dependent on the reprinting of British or other European books for financial reasons at a time when there was no copyright law. Thus, publishers could popularize British authoritative writers without paying royalties, a fact which "placed American authors at some disadvantage in negotiating payments for original manuscripts" (Kennedy and Person 2014, 4). However, Bannet's reference to Robert Bell, a Scottish publisher and printer who moved to Philadelphia in 1768, enables her to question the practice of piracy, arguing in favour of national appropriation or what Bell called "native fabrication of books," since the transatlantic stories consumed by American readers were not simple reproductions of British or other European originals but texts that were "re-presented, re-told, re-interpreted, re-applied, re-cycled and reused" (Bannet 2011, 3). Under these circumstances, such adulterated productions were relocated in a new cultural context in which they were adapted in the process of reprinting. Importantly enough, American publishers and booksellers, along with printer-editors, acted as writers, interpreters and translators of the text, in that they "left traces of their readings, and records of their re-applications of their readings, in the text or paratext" (Bannet 2011, 7). These typical eighteenth-century writing practices speak volumes of the way in which texts were reshaped not only in terms of content, but also in terms of language and genre, since their different versions, much like their variations caused by multiple retellings, were read by ordinary Americans from different regions at different times. Yet again, this circumstance shows how fragmented and un-national American literature was in the post-revolutionary years.

Whether rewritten, reinterpreted, abridged, serialized or reused in various textual or paratextual combinations, transatlantic texts were circumscribed to a wide array of genres whereby Britons and Americans were able to share their different social, historical, economic, ethnic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Ranging from tales of ordinary or poor people, migration, the perils of the ocean, captivity, war, dislocation and relocation to sermons, psalm books, travel memoirs, letter manuals, diaries and novels, the genres that circulated on both sides of the Atlantic attest to British readers' fascination with the transatlantic world, on the one hand, and to Americans' desire to be updated

on British best-sellers, on the other. The nation was as fluid as genres whose fixed conventions were altered not only by semantic and socio-linguistic aspects deeply rooted in history, but also by geography and the common beliefs held by a particular community. For instance, Willian Rufus Chetwood's *Voyages and Adventures of Captain Boyle*, published in London in 1726, proves how the reception of texts changes over time and in various geographical regions. Intended as a response to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, the work is a collection of travel stories that was transplanted on American soil in the 1790s and, most notably, was completely detached from Defoe's novel so as to emphasize Americans' contemporary concern with, and critique of, captivity in Barbary. Its relevance was endorsed by Royall Tyler's *The Algerine Captive* (1797), a novel reprinted in London that "was read by British reviewers as a far more politically radical novel than we are inclined to think it today" (Bannet 2011, 6). The American captivity tale—an avatar of the early English Barbary captivity fiction—morphed into the genre of captivity romance which the hybrid form of the novel incorporated in Britain and America alike. Charlotte Lennox's celebrated novel *The Female Quixote* (1752) zooms in on Arabella, the female heroine who comically puts to test the marital norms prescribed by French romances until she is cured by a doctor, yet not before their reflective dialogue allows her to understand the epistemological problems raised by the genre she quixotically imitates in her daily life. The same theme is tackled by the American female novelist Tabitha Gilman Tenney in her 1801 novel entitled *Female Quixotism: Exhibited in the Romantic Opinions and Extravagant Adventures of Dorcasina Sheldon*. Although Tenney uses the Cervantean mode of parody to highlight Dorcasina's misinterpretation of reality, she satirically denounces women's inferiority and the injustice of slavery under Thomas Jefferson's administration. The socio-political undertones in Tenney's book show that the early Republic's ideals are mere quixotic fictions distilled by the discourse of the novel whose novelty actually stems from "its self-reflective engagement with its own fictionality" (Schweighauser 2021, 734). Read in this light, *Female Quixotism* is highly indicative of the early American novel "as a rhetorical site for the mediation of contrasting positions" (Giles 2011, 26) fomented by the revolutionary years.

Drama was a means of actuating ideas and experiences both in the Old and the New World. British performances staged colonial stories with American and West Indian characters whereas British and Irish actors and managers brought plays to the New Republic. Analogous to literary texts, the message of certain plays was altered in America because "they were performed and read by colonial collegians, cited in newspapers, or used as pseudonyms by patriot writers" while some British plays were "adapted *in situ* by their British-born

managers or actors to accommodate the political culture or values of the American audiences" (Bannet and Manning 2011, 6). Last but not least, poetry in the early Republic—particularly the literary club founded at Yale known as the Connecticut Wits, a name echoing the Augustan Wits—advocated the nation's literary creativity and independence, excoriating at the same time the morally and politically corrupt Old World. Therefore, these cultural exchanges aimed at problematizing contemporary topical issues and facilitating the understanding of literary artefacts produced in a foreign culture—be it British or American—which, however, used English as a vernacular language. Concurrently, they unravel the dynamicity and heterogeneity of transnational cultural perspectives that were employed to question the identity of the early American nation. But the predilect genre able to successfully complete this task was the novel which, in the words of Cathy Davidson (1986, vii), "constituted a definition of America different from the official one that was being worked out after the end of the Revolutionary War."

Fenimore Cooper's critique of the New Republic's reliance on British reprints and the scarcity of its literary materials seems to be refuted by the miscellaneous subject matter of the texts that flowed back and forth across the Atlantic. His position was in line with the spirit of American Romanticism that militated for imagination, originality, private self, personal merit and literary independence from Britain, which determined other authors such as Emerson to declare that there had been no literature before and, by extension, that all these transatlantic narratives "fell out of favor less for aesthetic reasons, than because they fit so poorly into later nationalist master-narratives and reminded us of experiences that we preferred to forget" (Bannet 2011, 1). Cooper, like Emerson, were ardent supporters of the establishment of a genuine American literary tradition capable of reflecting the idea of nationhood. Seen in this context, this tradition had to be contingent upon artistic imagination rather than didactic, religious, moral or civic values. Notwithstanding such drastic revisionism, I suggest that the early American novel managed to project, portray, question and even criticize both the nation's character and its achievements and failures at a time of political and cultural unrest. Walter Scott, for example, became a model for those American writers who wished to make America's past, myths, symbols and identity construction as meaningful as were "the Puritan past, the Indian wars, the American Revolution, and the exploration of the West" that "inspired fictions of American struggle and self-discovery" (Kennedy and Person 2014, 4). In fact, the early American novel imaginatively scrutinized the ups and downs of exceptionalism, since "the rise of the American novel was inextricably tied to critical and political fixations on American difference from the Old World, or a set of distinctly 'American' social, political,

and literary codes" (Hanlon 2014, 154). However, until this nationalist drive came true once with the advent of Romanticism, the early novel had weighed heavily on all of its facets in an effort to provide an answer, incoherent as it was, to what a homogenous national identity really meant.

Published for the first time after the Revolution, novels were new in a young culture that was trying to define and shape itself. Unlike most of the early American novelists, Cooper "was fortunate enough to begin his career right at a time when the book industry was undergoing the dramatic alternations that made his success possible and even, to a degree, predictable" (Davidson 1986, 17). Updike Underhill, the main character of Royall Tyler's *The Algerine Captive*, returns from captivity after seven years and is surprised to notice that American readers' taste for, and consumption of, novels is unprecedented:

> On his return from captivity, he found a surprising alteration in the public taste. In our inland towns of consequence, social libraries had been instituted, composed of books designed to amuse rather than to instruct; and country booksellers, fostering the new-born taste of the people, had filled the whole land with modern travels and novels almost as incredible. (Tyler 1802, vii)

As the critical mouthpiece of Tyler, Underhill stresses the pedagogical dimension of reading in the Republic, concurrently rejecting English imports, for, he says, "being the picture of the times, the New England reader is insensibly taught to admire the levity, and often the vices, of the parent country" (Tyler 1802, ix). Although he is an unstinting advocator of native fiction, Tylor subtly blends various genres, such as travel books, romances and captivity tales in a novel that inevitably points to its transnational theme. His cross-cultural perspective is strengthened by accounts of the inhuman practice of slavery in Barbary, dwelling at the same time on the political, religious and racial difference between Algerians and Americans. In doing so, he transgresses the borders of the American nation whose building—"BY UNITING WE STAND, BY DIVIDING WE FALL" (Tyler 1802, 228; original capitals)—is based on a cosmopolitan experience that may substantially contribute to the improvement of the isolationist policy enforced by Federalism during the John Adams government.

Even if, according to Romantic precepts, Underhill's voyage becomes a quest for self-fulfillment as an American citizen, Tyler's novel, just like all the others written between approximately 1790 and 1800, were regarded as public property, a Republican prerequisite which cultivated the common good rather than a subjective or individualistic experience and, along with it, people's access to public culture. William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* (1789)—generally considered the first American novel written in the manner of Samuel

Richardson—is a telling example. Based on real events, it is a seduction novel that deals with women's moral instruction, drawing attention to the deleterious effects of novel reading. The tragic love story between the influential Bostonian lawyer Perez Morton and his sister-in-law Fanny Apthorp, who commits suicide, was a well-known scandalous case when the novel was being written. Michael T. Gilmore (1994, 545) has interpreted this popular incident and others of this kind presented, for instance, in Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* (1797) as "public knowledge" or "common inheritance" which "firmly situated American novels in the social and political context of an agrarian republic still shaped largely by communitarian and civic humanist priorities." Also, the novelists' insistence on facts and truth was an imperative dictated by the Puritanical doctrine that abhorred "any fanciful embellishment" or "suspicion of fictionality" (Gilmore 1994, 545). Early literature's mission, therefore, was to teach moral values and, as a whole, to be a useful instrument for society.

Although the novel was the crucible in which multifarious fictional experiments and other generic conventions overlapped, its emergence in tandem with the founding of the Republic did anticipate the shaping of national consciousness. Nonetheless, it was a public threat because its powerful narrative was perceived to endanger the polity by transmitting a specific message, be it allegorically disguised or overtly formulated, against the contemporary state of affairs. According to Davidson (1986, 40), "had the novel not been deemed a potent proponent of certain threatening changes, there would have been little reason to attack it." On the other hand, the novel threatened the elites because, as a demotic genre, it not only portrayed low-class or disadvantaged personages that elicited the reader's sympathetic response, but also empowered the poor to make their voice heard in society. As Davidson (1986, 44) cogently explains,

> the emergence of the novel was part of a movement in the late eighteenth century toward a reassessment of the role of the 'average' American and a concomitant questioning of political, ministerial, legal, and even medical authorities on the part of the citizens of the new nation who, having already accepted the egalitarian rhetoric of the Revolution, increasingly believed that the Republic belonged as much to them as to the gentry.

"The egalitarian rhetoric of the Revolution" was perfectly reflected by writers too, since the communalism of the Republic prevented professional authorship. Some of them approached both poetry and fiction, as was the case of Phillip Freneau, an American polemicist who inveighed against George Washington's ruling system. Others were statesmen, judges or lawyers who posed as "versatile" (Gilmore 1994, 551) male or female authors. Finally, in an age when

the copyright law was non-existent, early eighteenth-century authors were driven by a civic humanist spirit which upheld their belief in collective property. This was the ultimate expression of literature understood in non-lucrative terms, as "native authors commonly produced one or perhaps two books and saw themselves as amateurs who were not dependent on their pens for money" (Gilmore 1994, 552).

Early novelists, and authors in general, continued to look beyond their national boundaries, despite the ideals of civic virtue and common good imposed by the Republicans. The nationalist master-narratives fail to tell us that only few traits of the early American novels "overtly fix them to a geographical location within North America" (Tennenhouse 2006, 10), but they do tell us that the vast corpus of early texts is only superficially treated or mentioned in passing either by anthologies or by American literary historiography which recommend Fenimore Cooper as the father of the American novel. Attempting to establish the early American novel as a literary-critical field, Leonard Tennenhouse extolls Cathy Davidson's monumental work *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (1986), written through the lens of Foucault's archive theory, but he cannot fail to notice that it is not on a par with Ian Watt's famous *Rise of the Novel* (1957), which "shows how certain narratives of individual development both accompanied and reflected the emergence and development of the genre, the readership, and ultimately Great Britain" (Tennenhouse 2006, 9). However, unlike Watt's Anglocentric and male-centred model, Davidson's analysis factors in women's history and the history of the poor and déclassé, let alone her minute accounts of book industry predicated on American reprints of British novelists, book production and buying. As she makes clear (1986, ix), "authors and books exist within historical moments, as junctures of ideas, controversies, and tensions in a society", and this is exactly what the early novel as well as other genres record in the New Republic. The "junctures of ideas" at the time stood for intersectional points between the Old and the New World as well as for the porosity of national boundaries. These junctures or cultural confluences clearly suggest that early American authors borrowed, shared among themselves and sought to crystallize motives, themes and genres, especially the novel, coming from Western Europe. Contrary to Cooper's harsh critique, these authors experimented with a breadth of literary materials, interrogating the *status quo* of the nation marked by socio-political tensions and disputes. Theirs was a different type of art which, in spite of being mostly imitative, evinced a typically eighteenth-century cosmopolitan nature which contemporary critics still tends to ignore, for they argue, in a reductionist way, the same old story that

> the new nation began in New England, consolidated its identity during the eighteenth century, sought political independence from Great Britain, and emerged from the Revolution with a richly diverse, yet somehow coherent national culture that developed strictly and uniquely within the specific geographical boundaries of the United States. (Tennenhouse 2006, 10)

Until creative uniqueness, subjectivity and individual talent became the hallmark of Romantic literature, one must understand that early American literature—often dismissed as "sub- or extraliterary" (Gilmore 1994, 557) even by the American Romantic generation primarily interested in aesthetic value—played a significant role in the formation of the American nation and the shaping of its cultural identity. Concurrently, one must not forget that imitation, compilation, alteration, reinterpretation, rewriting, reframing, recycling, etc., were techniques and practices that prevailed in the eighteenth century and they help us understand the ongoing dynamicity and mobility of texts and writers on both sides of the Atlantic. Ultimately, they make us understand why early American literature is a relevant chapter in the history of American culture and civilization, which should not be neglected merely for its lack of coherence and alleged artistic immaturity.

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