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White Like Me: Race and Identity Through Majority Eyes

TIM WISE

> "How else except by becoming a Negro could a white man hope to learn the truth. . . . The best way to find out if we had second-class citizens, and what their plight was, would be to become one of them . . ."

THOUSANDS OF HIGH school students read these words every year, having been assigned the classic from which they come: *Black Like Me* by John Howard Griffin. Teachers are especially quick to assign the book to white students, in the hopes that it may get them to think seriously about the issue of race in America. Black students, who by then pretty well understand what it means to be perceived as the racial "other," are less likely to require such an instructional. But for us whites—only 12 percent of whom, according to surveys, will have significant interac-

tions with African Americans while growing up—this reality-based novel is often our first exposure to a real discussion of racism and its consequences.

As the reader of *Black Like Me* learns, its author took skin-darkening medication and traveled throughout the Jim Crow South in 1959 to learn first hand the viciousness of our nation's apartheid system. His descriptions of the crushing weight of racial oppression were stark, and caused a minor furor when first published nearly forty years ago.

Yet I can't help but find it interesting that America has taken so well to Griffin's words while largely ignoring the most obvious irony of his work: namely, that for whites to take seriously the words of a black man writing about his experiences, those words had to be written not by a black man at all, but rather a white man only posing as black until the drugs wore off.

Though plenty of flesh-and-blood black men—not to mention more than a few black women—could have enlightened us as to "whether we had second-class citizens, and what their plight was," it was Griffin to whom white America turned for the bad news. Though the work of Baldwin, Wright, Ellison, Hurston, Hughes, and dozens of others were available then and still are today to help whites learn "the truth," it is rare that we digest the words of such folks, no matter how eloquent. We are much more comfortable listening to one of our own describe the reality of others. It's more believable, one suspects, coming from family.

Perhaps even more important, *Black Like Me* is based on the premise that whites can only learn what racism does to its victims by reflecting on what it means to be one of them—to be black, for example, which we can never fully accomplish in any event—as opposed to what it means to be exactly what we are: white, in a system established by people like us for people like us.

I would imagine it far more meaningful for young whites to read a book entitled *White Like Me*, since it is as whites in this culture that said readers must live. Fully understanding one's own position in society is perhaps the clearest way to truly appreciate the position of others. But of course neither *Black Like Me* nor any other book on the typical student's reading list encourages whites to think about what it means to be

a member of the dominant racial group, or indeed, to think of race as his or her issue at all.

This unfortunate tendency to think of race as merely a black or brown issue is at the root of much of the white condition today: one that renders us largely impotent when discussing issues of race, identity, and our place in a white supremacist system. Indeed, it is our inability to conceive of race as fundamentally about *us* that makes it impossible for most whites to even comprehend that the system is, in fact, white supremacist. We think of white supremacy as something preached by the Klan, skinheads, or neo-Nazis, rather than as the default position of American institutions since day one. And when it comes to our own complicity with the maintenance of said system—well, it is there that the discussion falls apart altogether.

Yet I wouldn't want to give the impression that I have always understood this matter: for indeed, there was a time, not all that long ago, when I most certainly did not.

It seems like only yesterday, though in fact it has been over ten years now: the third day of a hunger strike intended to persuade the trustees of Tulane University in New Orleans to divest from companies still doing business in what was then white-ruled, apartheid South Africa.

There I was, one of two representatives from the campus anti-apartheid organization, debating two defenders of continued investments in South Africa who claimed that blacks there would be harmed by a corporate exodus.

The debate itself was no real challenge: my colleague and I had little trouble convincing the audience that Tulane was financially and symbolically on the side of white racist rule. Events like this always had the effect of stroking my ego and enhancing my reputation as the school's primary "campus radical," and this was to have been no exception.

No exception, that is, until the closing minutes of the question-and-answer period, after the formal debate had ended. It was then that a young African American woman rose from the audience to speak. She began by noting that she was a freshman at Xavier University: the nation's only historically black Catholic institution of higher learning, located about a mile away. Further, she was appalled that Tulane still

invested in apartheid-complicit firms, and as a New Orleanian she said she was embarrassed by that fact.

Sensing a friendly, softball kind of question on the way, I smiled, nodded, and basked in confidence about what I assumed would come next. And this, as it turns out, was a terrible mistake. For it was then that she turned to me, and asked something for which I was not the least bit prepared. After inquiring as to how long I had lived in New Orleans, and hearing my reply—four years—she asked, as if she already knew the answer (and indeed she probably did), "Tim, in the four years that you have lived in this city, *what one thing have you done to address and ultimately eliminate de facto apartheid here in New Orleans? Especially since, being white, you have benefited from that apartheid?*"

I cannot adequately describe the feeling that came over me at that moment, but it was not unlike the feeling one gets upon noticing the flashing blue lights in the rearview mirror. The lights that say, you *thought* you were going to get away with that move you just pulled, speeding through here like no one would notice, but now we've *got you*, so pull your ass over and start explaining.

And just like the motorist caught speeding on radar, I was busted. And just like the last time I actually got a ticket for speeding, I spent a few panicked seconds trying to figure out what clever answer I could offer that might allow me to escape the trouble into which I had stepped.

And just like the last lame excuse I gave to a traffic cop, my response to this young woman was so pitiful I can barely stand to repeat it. After stumbling around for a few seconds, I found myself saying something to the effect of, "Well, you know, we all pick our battles." This was an answer that, even as it escaped my lungs—before that, in fact, as the syntax formed in my brain—I knew was beyond bullshit. I had been called out, and I knew it. What's more, about three hundred other people knew it too. Until that moment, I had given no thought to what now seemed obvious: namely, that I had done exactly nothing to address the evil in my backyard—an evil that was linked to the one half a globe away in South Africa, and from which I did indeed prosper, but which I had largely ignored, despite the obvious connections.

I can't remember how the rest of the night went. I only recall leaving the debate, returning to the shantytown we had built in front of the

administration building, and trying not to deal with what had just happened. But as days became weeks (and the hunger strike mercifully ended), I was faced with a reality I had never anticipated. I began to realize that despite my activism, despite my good intentions, despite how "down" I perceived myself to be with the cause of justice, I was still part of the problem. I was actively receiving the perks of whiteness, and collaborating with the system of white supremacy, whether I liked it or not. Every day in which I had attended class in this white school, set up by plantation owners for the children of plantation owners, in the midst of this black city, and remained silent about the myriad injustices taking place all around me, I had been implicated in them. And graduation would not release me, for that implication was only manifested most recently at Tulane. In actuality it was far more interwoven into the tapestry of my life than I had realized.

To take inventory of one's life is not an easy thing, and I'm sure I have forgotten ten times more than I actually can recall. Nonetheless, when I finally sat down to take stock—something I felt I had to do now that the veil had been snatched from over my eyes—I was stunned by how many things began to come back to me; how many examples of privilege flooded my consciousness; how many times I could remember collaborating with racism.

Privilege. It had been waiting for me, even before I had entered the world, to be handed down by a family that was not wealthy, to be sure, but had obtained significant advantages: parents who attended segregated schools, in the best parts of town, where only they could live; a grandfather who had graduated from an elite university in 1942, at a time when blacks could only hope to sweep the floors there; another grandfather who, upon retiring from active military duty, was able to climb the ranks of the civil service at a time when people of color—even veterans—were routinely relegated to menial positions; families that had been able to obtain property that was strictly off limits to those with dark skin.

It had been there on my third day of life, when we moved into an apartment complex in an upper-middle-class area of our hometown: a complex from which, we would learn, blacks were excluded—legally at first, and then, after the Fair Housing Act went into effect, by custom and subterfuge.

It had been there when one of my black classmates and I disrupted a reading lesson the first week of first grade, and only he was punished, though I had been the primary instigator of the morning's chaos.

It had been there in the repeated placement of me and virtually all the white students on the advanced track, and the parallel placement of most of the black kids on the remedial track: a placement that would follow us throughout our school years, no matter our promise or potential.

It had been there in middle school, when the drama club—of which I was an integral part—put on play after play with no black characters, thereby forcing blacks interested in drama either to work the lights, pull the curtains, build the sets, or more likely just receive the message that theatre was not for them: one more option foreclosed.

It had been there in the afternoons of sixth grade, when our English teacher would signal to those of us in the "honors" program, and we would quietly yet conspicuously rise and leave the previously mixed-race class. We would depart like a receding tide of pink skin, disrupting the learning of those left behind, as we made tracks for the enriched educational experience that was waiting down the hall for us, the chosen few.

It had been there throughout high school as this process of tracking and sorting continued, to my benefit, no matter how lousy my grades were; no matter that I cheated—that's right, cheated—my way through four years, *and got caught repeatedly*, but suffered no punishment as a result.

It had been there in the curriculum: literature, history, civics, economics. No matter the subject, the lesson was clear: everything wonderful, everything good, everything worth knowing about had emerged from the foreheads of those who were *white like me*. Even the discussions of racism, to the extent they existed, mostly concerned noble whites who had rushed in to save blacks, either individually or collectively: the fictional Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, or Huck Finn "rescuing" Jim, or Abe Lincoln "freeing the slaves," who, one would gather from reading the approved texts, did almost nothing to liberate themselves. And, of course, there was *Black Like Me*.

Privilege had been there when I got my first job at a local grocery, extended to me because my grandmother put in a good word with the

store owner: a man who would openly discuss not wishing to hire too many blacks, or to accept food stamps, because doing so might attract "those people."

It had been there when parties I attended in white neighborhoods were broken up by police because of noise complaints, and yet those same officers would overlook the flagrant underage drinking and drug use in ways they surely would not have done had we been black.

It had been there when I was caught skipping school the month before graduation—a violation that could have resulted in my suspension and jeopardized my college plans—yet was cut slack by a vice-principal who knew I was lying to him about why I wasn't in class, but who, with a wink and a nod, simply told me not to let it happen again.

It had been there when recruiters from Tulane had seen fit to travel 540 miles to pluck me out of Nashville and bring me to their school, but couldn't seem to find the time to walk two blocks from campus to Fortier High and recruit black children, whose parents were apparently good for cleaning Tulane toilets, and cooking Tulane food, and cutting Tulane grass, and collecting Tulane garbage, but not for raising Tulane graduates.

Indeed, it had been there even in my activism: the quickness with which local media and school administrators fixed on me as the "leader" of the antiapartheid movement, even though when we had started our coalition had been mostly made up of black students. And it was there when the movement—which had initially linked divestment to other issues such as enhancing affirmative action and resurrecting the Black Studies Department—became focused solely on South Africa, thereby emphasizing the issue with which whites, including myself, were probably more comfortable. (And to think I had been perplexed about why the black students drifted away from the movement!)

And it had been there in the cavalier attitudes we white activists expressed about potentially getting arrested for our protests if need be, and going on hunger strike: two things that didn't appear so romantic to black students. After all, in New Orleans going to jail if you were black was a very different experience, and you couldn't as readily count on parents to come and bail you out. And voluntary hunger was just plain stupid: the choice of someone whose privilege could be counted on to tide them over to the next meal.

And it wasn't just the privileges and advantages that I remembered, but the silences as well; the times I had sat back and said nothing despite knowing that I was surrounded by racial injustice—injustice that was operating to my benefit.

As I had been settling into my freshman dorm, acclimating to a life of privileged academia, down the road in neighboring Jefferson Parish, Sheriff Harry Lee—a Chinese American loved by whites for his aggressively antiblack attitude—had been issuing orders to his deputies to stop and search cars driven by black males who appeared "out of place." This was in 1986, before the term "racial profiling" was part of the American lexicon, and Lee was openly admitting his plans to harass black motorists. At one point, he even proposed to erect barricades between the two parishes to keep blacks out.

Yet amid the obvious turmoil and racial division that beset the community where I now lived, I had looked on most of it with morbid curiosity and little more. I had not seen the fight against even such blatant racism in my backyard as my fight, as something to which I needed to lend my voice. I had not seen the flipside of Harry Lee's call for vehicular apartheid: namely, that I would be on the winning end of that equation, able to traverse the border between Orleans and Jefferson Parishes without fear or trepidation. That I was, indeed, welcome into whichever part of the metropolitan area I felt like visiting.

And I had remained quiet during freshman orientation, when school officials went to great lengths to warn incoming freshmen about the "dangerous" parts of the city, which, of course, were all black and poor areas, though the whiter spaces might have been considered dangerous for students of color. Our school certainly didn't warn African Americans about Harry Lee, nor the New Orleans police, who, as I would come to know in my time there, were among the most brutal of any in the nation toward black citizens.

And I had remained quiet, even when I overheard another white student—the head of Tulane's Volunteer Literacy program, which operated in black elementary schools—remark in class that the kids he was working with were cute while they were young, but that in a few years they would become "niggers." That silence has haunted me ever since, as it should. As it should haunt any white person who has taken a pass

or rain check on challenging even the most blatant bigotry, or responded to it with nervous laughter, hoping that the moment would pass.

While reflecting on these things, as well as others, I found myself wondering how I could have been so blind, so quiet. After all, I had always prided myself on being different from other white folks. Hadn't my mother intentionally enrolled me in a mostly black preschool? And hadn't that made me more sensitive to these issues? Hadn't I been the white kid whose friends for the first six years of school were mostly black? Wasn't I the white child who had received snide looks and comments from white teachers, appalled by my close association with African Americans, and the way I would "code switch" between "standard" and "black" English? Wasn't I the white child whose mom had helped remove a racist teacher from her position after she made a comment about black children being "monkeys" and "savages"? Wasn't I the one verbally attacked as a "nigger lover" by angry white kids when my mostly black baseball team showed up in their rural community to play a scrimmage? And hadn't that experience bound me to people of color in a way that would prevent me from ever collaborating with their oppression?

The answers, as it turns out, were both yes and no. Yes, I was all of those things. But despite that upbringing; despite the values with which I had been raised; despite the experiences that had often placed me on the nonwhite side of the color line in the eyes of many in my own community; despite all this, I had been, in myriad ways, no different or better than any other white person. My "color-blindness," if you will, had rendered me, in a strange and fascinating way, blind to the consequences of color, especially my own. I was one of those whites who could say they had black friends—and in my case even mean it—and yet was mostly oblivious to the ways in which I was being conditioned and played by the system to accept, without even noticing, the perquisites of my racial identity.

I can proudly say that my mother had that racist teacher removed so she would never poison the minds of young children again, and yet must also recognize that the classes to which I returned after her removal, by virtue of preferring those who were white like me, had the effect of teaching the same lesson as that racist educator: namely, that

black and brown children were lesser; that I was better; that they were "savages." The institution could impart that lesson—and did so with unparalleled efficiency—with or without the help of Mrs. Crownover.

And make no mistake: by junior high, all of my black friends—the ones with whom I had been closest for the previous six grades—had gotten the message, even if I had not. The perennial mistreatment in the schools we shared laid the groundwork for the substantial pulling away that was to follow; a separation that would last throughout high school as old friends were reduced to formalistic and largely meaningless gestures of recognition as we passed in the halls: a nod of the head, a monotone "what's up," but rarely more. And it wasn't my fault, nor was it theirs. It was the inevitable result of institutional inequity; it was the logical outcome of being treated so differently by the same institutions that we no longer shared the same experiences, no longer thought about the same things in the same way.

And it was seeing how racism actually ripped apart my close friendships and distorted my connections to other human beings that led me to realize that racism and white supremacy carry a cost: mostly for the victims, of course, but also for the perpetrators and collaborators. That is to say, in accepting the bargain of institutional privilege, whites set in motion a process that ultimately harms us as well. And frankly, this is something about which anyone should be outraged.

Because outrage is the only proper response to the realization that a system set up by someone else has cost you some of the dearest friends you ever had. It is the only proper response when you realize that you have occasionally waded into the pool of racism yourself, like when you do what *all white people have done* (or will eventually do) when they find themselves in a black neighborhood—that is, check to see if the car door is locked, and if it isn't, try and lock it without anyone noticing you. And you have done this not because you are an evil bigot, but because you have been fed a steady diet of manipulated images, and have picked up the things society threw at you, the way two pieces of Velcro fit together.

Outrage is the only proper response to the recognition that we have been cheated by those who thought they were doing us a favor by offering that head start: cheated in that too many of us now find ourselves unable to engage in serious and meaningful discussions with people of

color, because beneath the surface we *know* what has gone down and, more to the point, we know that *they* know it far better than we do.

Outrage is the only logical emotion in the face of a society that encourages you to cut yourself off from a sense of a common humanity and instead live a lie. Because living that lie does truly horrible things to those living it, things they often don't realize until it is too late.

In my own family I have seen this play out more clearly than I could have ever imagined. I can see what the lie of whiteness did to my Jewish great-grandfather, who came to the United States from Russia in 1910 to start a new life for his family. Little did he know that the "price of the ticket," as James Baldwin might put it, would be the sloughing off of most of the meaningful traditions that had kept that same family alive, all for the sake of assimilation and upward mobility.

To become American had meant, for him and so many other Jews, Italians, Irish, and other despised European ethnics, to become white: to give up what one was in order to become what one was not, but yet had to be in order to gain acceptance. So when my grandfather—his son—was in the final week of his life, trying desperately to conjure up some story, some seminal event handed down to him by his family, some tale of what it meant to be Jewish, Russian, an immigrant, he could think of nothing to say. For that silence is what he had been given. To get along, to move up, to succeed, one had to put away the old ways, speak differently, act differently, fit in, and make others comfortable. And that is what so many Jews, my family included, did. Surely the proper response to this assimilation, which did in fact provide Jews with so much privilege, is not guilt at having undergone it, but outrage at having been forced to take the bait.

And this thing called racism has done some other strange things to white people, or at least the notion of white supremacy has. For one, it leads us to regularly sacrifice our own well being on the altar of a truly bizarre form of racial bonding.

Like the way the elderly Jewish woman told me, without even the slightest hesitation, that she would be voting for David Duke—the lifelong neo-Nazi—for U.S. Senate, because, after all, he would "get rid of all the *schvartzes*."

Like the way whites of Italian and Irish descent made Duke a regular attraction in their parades in New Orleans and nearby Metairie,

despite the fact that both groups had faced vicious ethnic oppression in this land and, in fact, were often lynched, beaten, and killed by folks with Duke's ideology, precisely because they were viewed as white "niggers." That Duke had once said Sicilians—who make up the majority of Italians in the region—were intellectually inferior to Northern Europeans was of little consequence to his supporters, so long as he was promising to get tough with blacks.

Like the way whites with barely a pot to piss in defended their much wealthier Caucasian brethren in New Orleans when a black city councilwoman insisted the elite Mardi Gras Krewes' continued racial segregation was illegal, given the city's substantial subsidizing of carnival. That these Krewes would no more invite the trailer and tin-roof crowd to join their precious clubs than they would a person of color hardly mattered, as the minions of the white working class lined the streets of parade after parade, holding signs demanding "Hands Off Mardi Gras," and inviting the councilwoman—Dorothy Mae Taylor—to take a slow boat back to the Motherland.

Like the way Southern whites from the lowest rungs of the economic ladder are the ones most likely to fly the Confederate flag from the back of their vehicles or insist on the legitimacy of the flag as a symbol of Southern heritage; this despite the fact that it represents an army of a government that thought little of the interests of such "white trash." After all, poor whites were forced to go fight and die while the wealthy could skip out of service if they owned enough slaves. And the Southern elite whipped the white working class into war frenzy over the perceived threat of eventual emancipation and the possibility of blacks becoming free labor. This despite the fact that so long as blacks could be forced to work for nothing, the wages of those same white workers were obviously being held down and their own labor undercut. They had no interest in common with the slave owners who wanted and needed secession: no interest, that is, except the common bond of skin.

For, as DuBois and others have noted, there was and is a "psychological wage" to whiteness that allows whites to overlook the very real harms that stem from our continued fealty to white supremacy, so long as we can content ourselves with the notion that we are better than someone else: that there is someone or some group below us.

This is why, time after time, white workers have turned against workers of color for ostensibly "taking our jobs" instead of joining with them to improve wages and work conditions for all. It is why whites are willing to build more and more prisons to warehouse black and brown bodies—mostly for nonviolent offenses—even if it means less money is available to educate their own children. It is why whites will vote against improving public transportation service between the cities and suburbs, so as to limit people of color's access to our communities, even though by doing so we consign ourselves to longer work commutes and much higher gas and car maintenance bills.

But perhaps most disturbing of all, to be white in the United States is to be privileged yet largely unaware of just how broad one's choices are—including the choice of turning against the system that bestows privileges in the first place. Whites have done this in the past, but this is not widely discussed either in history books or in the personal family histories handed down from generation to generation, and that's a shame, for the stories are worth telling.

Whites could, after all, choose to follow the example of Ellsberry Ambrose, a yeoman farmer from North Carolina who agitated against the Confederacy and told farmers they should oppose secession and the war because only the elite would benefit.

We could follow the lead of the small yet vocal group of whites in Georgia who opposed slavery on moral grounds and petitioned the King as early as 1738 to ban the institution.

We could follow the example of white abolitionists across the new nation, like Angelina Grimke and John Brown.

We could carry the banner of modern-day white antiracists who demonstrated that there was more than one way to live in this skin: folks like Bob Zellner, the first white field secretary of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee; or Carolyn Daniels, a Georgia beautician who housed SNCC workers at great risk to her own safety; or Anne Braden, whose fight against American apartheid has spanned the better part of the last half century and is chronicled in part in her classic book *The Wall Between*; or Will Campbell, the unassuming preacher and theologian who has bravely stood against the system of white privilege and the epidemic of white denial through some of the darkest days of reactionary racist violence.

That we don't know most of these names, or those of the others I could list, is an indication of just how little our people venerate their real heroes, or for that matter understand heroism at all. More to the point, our ignorance in this matter is an indication of what little regard the dominant culture has for those who challenge the prerogatives of dominance itself.

Of course, it makes perfect sense that whites would rather not think about our unflattering history: surely most persons of European descent would rather not discuss their families' role in the slave trade, or Indian genocide, or any number of other untoward historical episodes. But more than that, I have found, at least in my own family's history—on my mother's side in particular—a marked tendency to limit even the conception of what qualifies as *flattering* history: the kind all families like to tell.

It has never ceased to amaze me how white folks will go to any lengths to show their direct lineage to some obscure King or Queen of England or some largely irrelevant Scottish Count. No matter how tenuous the connection, no matter what the royalty in question actually stood for, or how they governed, it is as if simply being related to such persons makes one better, smarter, more honorable, and worthy of respect.

In the history of my mother's father's family—the McLeans—the pattern has been amply repeated, to a point that would be laughable were it not so sad. Any association with famous people, even no more direct than one of our ancestors having sat in a room with someone who knew someone who once played cards with Davy Crockett—manages to find its way into the narrative of the family history. The McLeans are lauded for their large landholdings, their great courage in warfare (has one *ever* heard a tale of one's cowardice in wartime?), and their supposedly benevolent ownership of other human beings. And of course, in the case of these latter family members—or rather property—their stories remain untold by the "Clan McLean," being considered no more relevant than the story behind any other possession, like, say, the family footstool.

Yet also missing is the description of one of the maverick family members: a nineteenth-century abolitionist who was able to convince her parents to free their slaves because, she explained, the institution

was evil. Why would such a person's story be left out? A brief biographical sketch of the woman in question does indeed appear in a recently compiled family history, yet somehow this minor detail remained on the cutting room floor, so to speak. It seems that to some, remembering trivial details and romanticizing life "down on the farm" is more important than honoring a person so brave as to stand up to her family and the institution of slavery at the same time. Perhaps it is feared that by honoring such dissidents, the rest of the family is cast into a particularly dim light. Nonetheless, if such stories are never told, how are young whites to ever get the sense that they have a real choice? How are they to know that they can opt for a different kind of identity? How might they come to realize that being "white" does not require one to think, feel, or behave in a certain way?

Of course, the answer is that they won't. And in the long run, that might be exactly why those stories don't get told. To tell them would be anything but functional for the extant system, those who have benefited from that system, and those who continue to do so. To valorize dissent, rebellion, and equality would be to cast aspersions on those who have conformed, remained loyal to injustice, and collaborated with the maintenance of inequality.

Now the irony here is that even the best white person in this kind of system is in fact both of these: at times a dissident, and at other moments a collaborator; at once a rebel and yet also a loyal soldier. And unless we root out the social conditioning that forces us so often into the latter of these twin roles, we will continue to undermine our best efforts at real change and an end to white supremacy.

It is time that we faced what it means to be white, what it means for those who are not members of the club, and what we intend to do about it: what we intend to do to create a new identity that is not based on privilege and position, what we intend to do to make resistance more common and lasting than collaboration. For surely we should know by now what the cost of our continued silence will be.

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