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"My Books *are* My Relation to Society": Transition and Transformation for the Arts and Humanities in an Open Access Future

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Abstract

This article contextualises the transition to an open access publishing future and sets it against the background of the current state of decline in arts and humanities research funding in the US and UK. It outlines the problems which have stymied and slowed the move towards open research and it highlights those issues which particularly pertain to the field of arts and humanities. It considers the demands of research assesement and to quantify value and the opportunities that open access publishing might afford to those who research in the arts and humanities.

What are the humanities anyway?

When Catriona Crowe, formerly of the National Archives in Ireland, was asked by the Irish Humanities Alliance to contribute to their regular feature *The Humanities and Me*, she said that the humanities allow us to answer the question: "How do we know what we know?" (Crowe, 2023). A recent article in *Inside Higher Ed* described the humanities as the study of things humans make, "helping us understand who we are, what we do, how we do it, why and with what consequences" (Wilson, 2023).

The definition of what constitutes the humanities and what the study of arts and humanities means for both the individual and society at large has become an increasingly pertinent subject in recent years – in particular, in higher education environments in Anglophone countries. 2023 has seen this conversation move into a more mainstream sphere: an impassioned article in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* in July decried "the real-time dismantling and destruction of the infrastructure that afforded scholars […] a top-notch humanities education and secure

employment," while *The Guardian* newspaper in the UK regularly featured Irish and Irish-based writers such as Kit de Waal and Thomas Morris explaining how the appreciation and popular support for the arts and humanities is still (for the moment) thriving in Ireland, in contrast to the situation in Britain (Sánchez Prado, 2023; Murray, 2023; Cummins, 2023).

An existential crisis: communicating value

Support, in this case, is, in essence, a question of funding. Across the US and the UK we have seen multiple high profile cuts in arts and humanities faculties in 2023. However, it is not merely a crisis of funding, but also one of perception and communication. It is lamentable that a discipline so closely associated with language and the expression of innermost thought should have such a problem articulating its own value and importance. Sánchez Prado implores humanities scholars to "take ownership of the public conversation regarding the humanities." Few who *are* having those conversations, he says, both within and outside educational institutions, "can accurately describe the everyday work of teaching and research that we do. Only we can change this" (Sánchez Prado, 2023). This is, as the president of the MLA has identified, a result of a "nearly nonexistent humanities research infrastructure." The absence of the material conditions in which "to conduct and circulate research results at the scale established by the most prominent academic disciplines, nearly all of them in STEM" allows the humanities to fade into the background, becoming a nice-to-have but not a necessity (Newfield, 2022). In other words, an inability on the part of the arts and humanities in academia to communicate their value to society is a flaw of the research infrastructure that underpins higher level education across the globe.

Scholarly societies and associations have responded to the decline in funding and estimation for the arts and humanities with panicked anxiety. Multiple documents such as statements, public responses, policies, strategies, guidelines and papers have been published in recent years. The Royal Historical Society put out a statement in June 2023 lamenting the "state of unprecedented turbulence and uncertainty" that history departments in UK institutions were experiencing; and the following month, the Arts and Humanities Alliance responded to the UK Government's proposals to clamp down on so-called "low value" degree programmes in English universities, with a statement claiming that such a policy would be socially regressive and would ultimately have an "impoverishing" effect on society (RHS, 2023; AHA, 2023).

Many of the responses attempt to put an economic or career value on the arts and humanities, such as the British Academy's *Qualified for the Future. Quantifying demand for arts, humanities and social science skills* (2020) or Oxford University's *The Value of the Humanities: Understanding the Career Destinations of Oxford Humanities Graduates* (Robson et al., 2023). Other responses, such as the Modern Language Association's *Guidelines for Evaluating Publicly Engaged Humanities Scholarship in Language and Literature Programs*" (2022) attempt to engage with the communication element of the crisis: to paraphrase Catriona Crowe (2023): "how do we know what we know", and how do we convey the importance of knowing it?

In order to communicate the value of research to those who fund it, the research must be assessed and quantified. Wilson (2023) advocates expanding the definition of the humanities to include law, economics and government, as a quick fix to increase the possibilities for funding by including subjects with more easily quantifiable research outputs. In Europe, CHANSE (Collaboration of Humanities and Social Sciences in Europe) and HERA (Humanities in the European Research Area) announced a call for more research into "the perceived crisis in the humanities" with a focus on diversity in research (HERA, n.d.). This echoes the May 2023 response by the Royal Irish Academy to the Irish government's proposed *Research and Innovation Bill*. There had been nervous chatter on social media about the absence of mention of "arts" and "humanities" in the published documents and the RIA document suggested that side-by-side ambitions of "building national research capacity across the arts, humanities, and social sciences (AHSS) and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) continuum" and "building a diverse and inclusive research system" be considered in the bill (RIA, 2023). Similarly, the Irish Humanities Alliance response paper suggested that explicit agreement "between the government and the academic community that the Bill [...] serve the interests of sciences and humanities, and promote research in all its forms and disciplines, and in every sector of knowledge" be included, as well as the phrase "to promote parity of esteem" (2023).

Commodification and quantification

Achieving parity of esteem for the arts and humanities is a matter of assessment, measurement and communication of research value. In the present situation, this often requires engaging in systems which are opposed to, and which often actively contradict, the nature of research in this area. An article in *Harvard Magazine* (Engell, 2023) condemns the treatment of students in higher education institutions as both consumers and product and the commodification of all education, most especially in the humanities. There are numerous examples in the literature of the growing interest in looking at arts and humanities research "from an evaluation and indicators perspective" (Donovan and Gulbrandsen, 2018, p. 285). In an appraisal of the REF (the Research Excellence Framework: the UK's system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions), Knöchelmann (2023) writes that "the structural incentive to publish inherent to research assessment in the UK shapes a research culture focused on output and monologue at the expense of an engaged public dialogue." The publish-or-perish model, when applied to arts and humanities research, falls short of accurately assessing their value and even contributes to the suppression of important discourse. At its heart, the REF is dependent on an effective "marketing strategy," as Knöchelmann puts it, on the part of the humanities researcher and that "against their nature, they have to perform for profit." The framing of research in terms of economic profit and of humanities graduates as "national assets" (Bulaitis, 2020, p. 215) has a pressurising effect on researchers and ensures the advancement of privatisation and commodification in higher level education. The consequence of a failure to engage, however, is that universities will continue to undervalue humanities researchers "because of their inability to bring in external funding" (Siddique, 2023).

The Hidden REF's *5% Manifesto* encourages higher education institutions in the UK which are subject to the REF to ensure that at least 5% of their submission is comprised of non-traditional research outputs – in other words, research that consists of outputs other than journal articles, books or book chapters for which an impact factor can be measured. At just 5%, however, this target is unambitiously low. Combine this with recent research which shows that altmetrics (alternative calculations of impact which include social media reception and impact) replicate imbalances in research assessment along gender lines – and the limitations of social media engagement in a post-Musk landscape – and the current model looks set to stay with us for the foreseeable future (Meibauer et al., 2023).

If we accept that this model is unlikely to substantially change in the short term and taking into account all the other benefits that go along with making research openly available to find, access and reuse, then open access research and publishing is crucial to future arts and humanities research funding. Open access publishing can go some way towards aiding visibility and quantification but there are, however, some perceived incompatibilities between the ways in which arts and humanities research is conducted and disseminated, and the principles that open access publishing espouses. Martin Paul Eve observed in back 2014, that the humanities "still trail behind the sciences in open publishing" and this situation persists in 2023.

The transition to open access publishing is now widely accepted as being essential to a research assessment future that is diverse, collaborative and sustainable. However, the transition to open, as mentioned above, has been slower than many would wish, stymied as it is by reliance on traditional publishing models, legacy publishers, and a system which rewards quantity and frequency of publication. Indeed, open access publishing "may be evolving more slowly than crises in academia are emerging" (Mackinlay, 2023). The vision of an open access future for academia as a whole is also vulnerable to lip service by actors with an incentive to preserve the status quo. Most large publishers now offer, and even publicise, open access options to authors but administer hefty APCs (article processing charges) and BPCs (book processing charges) to facilitate this. This is known as the Gold open access model and its persistence allows a facade of open access to smother efforts to move towards Green (self-archiving) or Diamond (no cost to author or reader) models.

Diversity and disadvantage: whose research is published?

In general, the virtues of open access publishing lie in its "democratizing [sic] possibilities" and in its fulfilment of the principle of public service that citizens legitimately believe lies behind research funding (Tenopir et al., 2017, p. 825). However, the promise of diversity and a plurality of voices must be considered against the potentially "homogenizing" effects of open access publishing (Gilby et al, 2022). Despite being open access, a large proportion of journals from the Global South are not indexed on traditional bibliometric databases such as Web of Science and Scopus (Khanna et al, 2022). Similar findings from Ma et al. (2023) showed that the gold open access model disadvantages researchers in lower-income countries, those outside prestigious institutions and others in vulnerable or precarious positions

and that the persistence of high APCs and BPCs "perpetuates the monoculture of knowledge production." High APCs in the transition to open access publishing also "hinder research equity and careers" (Williams et al., 2023). Citations are seen as "currency" in the academic environment, attracting funding and resources to individuals and institutions (Oransky et al., 2023). A model which relies on current bibliometric systems to translate or transform research outputs into palatable and useable numbers is neither sustainable nor equitable; it simply tweaks the system, rather than overhauls it.

The conversation about the death of the humanities intersects with this aspect of an open access publishing future at the point where privilege is considered: those who lament the loudest the demise of humanities research are often, themselves, insulated from faculty cuts and department closures by tenure, race, a prestigious institution, or merely location in the Global North (Herlihy-Mera, 2023). Those who will suffer most from a utilitarian approach to higher education funding are those students and scholars who come from "non-traditional backgrounds" (AHA, 2023). The crises in both research publishing and the humanities boil down to "questions of memory: What do we remember, and what do we forget? Whose stories can endure, and what experiences disappear? Which voices matter?" (Herlihy-Mera, 2023). Voices are important: what is being said is only part of the story; who is speaking and how they are expressing it are equally important elements in a diverse research landscape.

Entrenchment and prestige

There are, also, some problems with open access publishing which are unique to the arts and humanities. First among these is an entrenched adherence to the current scholarly research model for reasons which are ossified into career paths. The attachment to legacy publishers and traditional models of disseminating research is borne of genuine concern, given that it has real effects on tenure and promotion (Scott and Shelley, 2022; Coonin and Younce, 2009). "Ingrained habits and institutional culture" are understood to form the basis of this attachment, with little motivation to change the system (Rodriguez, 2014). While publish-or-perish is the dominant research assessment across all academic disciplines, in the arts and humanities in particular, *where* you publish is as relevant as *what*. This then manifests itself as a reluctance to engage with open access publishing options and in fact, Eve goes further and claims the existence of an "extremely vocal opposition to implementations of open access" in the arts and humanities (2014).

Arts and humanities researchers also have different and often more positive relationships with traditional publishers, many of whom tend to be scholarly societies (Gilby et al., 2022). The reputation of the individuals who make up the editorial board of a particular journal can be more important to the arts and humanities researcher than any other considerations (Rowley et al., 2017). The American Council of Learned Societies published a statement in relation to open access publishing in 2023, acknowledging that a move to an open access future is inevitable but that the transitionary period, "this crucial moment of change", will necessitate disruption in every area, including "perceptions of prestige" (ACLS, 2023). Similarly, the Irish

Humanities Alliance in 2021 confirmed the centrality of scholarly societies and associations "within the humanities research ecosystem" and accepted that the move to open access publishing "may undermine the existence of these associations" (IHA, 2021).

Cultural opposition

Inherent in any resistance or opposition to open access publishing is an acceptance that there is a strict binary in academic research: STEM and not STEM. Many arts and humanities departments have also begun to use the terms Open Research or Open Access in preference to Open Science, indicating that the latter is exclusionary and even, perhaps, confusing. The arts and humanities have, in the past, defined themselves in opposition to STEM and an open access movement that continues to utilise the term Open Science to encompass all there is about facilitating access to knowledge reaffirms that an exclusion exists. An insistence on terminology that alienates and does not encompass diverse research behaviour is likely to lead "to the design of solutions that do not meet the needs of qualitative research" (Tumelty, 2023).

Moves have been made recently to package the arts and humanities in ways that are more palatable, more marketable, and better able to compete for funding. The proliferation of the term SHAPE (Social Sciences, Humanities, and the Arts for People and the Economy) is becoming increasingly common. The British Academy's Connected Knowledge Project states that "STEM and SHAPE are two sides of the same coin" (n.d.) and Oxford University Press groups journals under the category SHAPE (OUP, 2023). Trinity College Dublin has also adopted the term, using it in its SHAPE-ID project which attempts to improve "inter- and transdisciplinary cooperation between the arts and humanities and STEM" (SHAPE-ID, n.d.). Efforts such as these, however, still seek to define the arts and humanities in terms which are better applied to STEM and with value that is quantifiable. As Sánchez Prado (2023) points out: "The humanities do not claim scientific accuracy as a specific outcome, so arguing for a scientific method, as the structuralists of yore sought to do, is folly."

The fixed views that some aspects of open access publishing are designed for the sciences and just do not work for the arts and humanities are explained by Eve (2014) as, "after all, the humanities often operate on an entirely different basis to their scientific counterparts, exemplified in the fact that most work is unfunded and rests upon institutional support." Donovan and Gulbrandsen (2018) put it that the humanities "have run ahead of whatever contemporary approaches to measuring research quality might be and so elude meaningful measurement." This is dangerously close to saying that quantification is a method of research assessment that is not as relevant to the arts and humanities as it is to STEM; such a view fails to acknowledge that funding is dependent on proving the value of the research being funded, as well as basic funding for teaching functions. One cannot exclude the possibility that STEM and the arts and humanities are pitted against one another to distract from the broken third-level funding model in most EU countries. Nonetheless, there are, admittedly, basic differences between how STEM and arts and humanities research is funded. To begin with, much arts and humanities research is simply not

funded or meagrely-funded. It very often is born of the researcher with an idea, rather than a funded project seeking a researcher. An Irish Humanities alliance position paper on open access publishing in the arts and humanities explained that "many researchers in the humanities develop work on an individual basis, rather than working as members of funded research teams" (IHA, 2021). One obvious way in which this might affect the use of open access publishing routes for arts and humanities researchers is in the administration of APCs – article processing charges, or a fee paid, generally by the researcher themselves, in order to facilitate the immediate open access availability of a journal article. As Gross and Ryan (2015) pointed out, there is simply more capacity to pay an APC in STEM than in arts and humanities research.

There is often, too, a concurrent lack of knowledge of what open access publishing is and how it may benefit the arts and humanities scholar. The 2022 report of the University of Cambridge's Working Group on Open Research in the Humanities advised that "in the immediate and short term, [arts and humanities] colleagues require institutional support to understand and get to grips with the current routes to open access within academic publishing" (Gilby et al., 2022). And as Tenopir et al. (2017) point out, even where there is awareness of open access publishing routes, this "does not always equate to understanding or acceptance." This lack of knowledge is slowly but surely being addressed in individual institutions however, and a tacit acknowledgment that researchers in arts and humanities departments will not be able to avoid engaging with open access publishing in the future is not evident in, for example, University College Dublin's webpage specifically tailoring open access information for those researching in this area (UCD Library, 2023). In the UK, new public funding guidelines will require all researchers in receipt of public funds to produce open access publications of their research within twelve months of the end of their project from January 2024, a policy which is explicitly inclusive of monographs, book chapters and edited collections (UKRI, 2023).

Open books and monographs

The form that published research takes in the arts and humanities emphasises longevity over urgency: even critical research takes a long time to produce, and the impact is often longer lasting. What the arts and humanities researcher produces for publication traditionally tends to be longer texts: books (monographs, edited collections) are expected on a regular basis (Dalton et al., 2020). These projects have a longer "shelf life" (Scott and Shelley, 2022, p. 150) compared to the urgency and frequency of journal article publication in the sciences.

Some of the logic of the open access publishing model applies better to articles than to longform texts, and therefore is better suited to meeting the needs of researchers in STEM than in the arts and humanities: "researchers need to know quickly what is happening in their microspecialization, partly to build on it in their own work and partly to avoid being scooped" (Suber, 2017). A 2020 study claimed that less than 25 percent of papers published in the humanities are open access (Olejniczac et al., 2020). The origin of this reticence is, again, an unwillingness or an inability to separate from the traditional publishing model. The 2022 Ithaka S+R report on the profitability of open access monographs identified "pockets of cultural resistance

among humanists" (Brown et al, p. 2) to open access publishing due to worries that not having a print monograph would be viewed unfavourably in the tenure process (Brown et al., 2023). A related worry about the quality of open access books was identified by Brundy et al. (2023). And critically, still, citation-based metrics "do not work as well for books as they do for journal articles" (Snijder, 2023).

The Ithaka S+R report also identifies that "open access book publishing remains on the fringe of most university press book programs [sic]" (Brown et al, p. 2). However, transformation is on the way. As mentioned previously, from 2024, the open access monograph will become one of the conditions for public funding of research projects in the arts and humanities in the UK (UKRI, 2023). And in Europe, the two-year PALOMERA project (n.d.) attempts to ask why so few open access funder policies include books. The position paper on open access publishing by the Irish Humanities Alliance urged funders to recognise that the monograph remains "the main currency for career development within most fields in the humanities" and to also acknowledge that this text form "requires a significant editorial and publishing infrastructure [and] poses unique challenges in relation to open access" (IHA, 2021).

The writing *is* the data

One further factor in this reluctance to either give up the monograph or to move to an open access version of it is that for many in the field of arts and humanities, the writing is not merely *how* data are conveyed to the public: the writing is part of the research process, it *is* the data. In 1949, the Irish novelist, essayist, and academic Elizabeth Bowen attempted to articulate how she connected with the world; how her thoughts and feelings were transmitted through the printed word. She described her books as a "substitute" for "a so-called normal relation to society" (Bowen et al., 1948, p. 23). In expressing the personal, Bowen also captured the universal experience of the literary writer and of the academic. The lines between researcher and writer are often blurred, as they are between what constitutes primary and secondary material in a field where academics and critics themselves become the subject of research.

Many in the arts and humanities may feel as though they are caught in this tension between being a writer and being an academic or a researcher. How data are expressed in words is itself a research output. Add to this the reliance on correct pagination and verbatim quotations that is a feature of writing and research in the arts and humanities, and control of the final version of a paper is imperative. The Cambridge Working Group articulated this as an anxiety about the existence of multiple versions (submitted, accepted, published) of the same piece of research circulating, citing it as a reason for reluctance to use institutional repositories. This multiplicity might affect the integrity of the work, and compromise the process of editing, it is claimed. Differing publisher rules about embargoes, which version of a paper may be circulated open access, and even the perceived necessity to negotiate complicated publisher agreements so as to locate this information, means that the entire process is anxiety-inducing. Many researchers are uncomfortable with the suggested solution of Green open access publishing (self-archiving on personal websites or institutional repositories) due to the possibility of multiple versions of the paper being available. In fact, the figure for humanities papers being made available in this way is less than 10 percent (Olejniczak et al., 2020).

Copyright, too, is seen as a problem for open access publishing in the arts and humanities. The Cambridge Working Group use the acronym CORE to describe the nature of data in this area: Collected, Organised, Recontextualised, Explained. They use this as a replacement for FAIR data principles (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable). CORE data is understood as "information used for reference and analysis" (Gilby et al., 2022) and does not usually belong to the researcher, consisting, as it may, of texts, music, images, fabrics, objects, installations, performances, etc. The financial or legal burden involved in gaining copyright and secondary publishing permissions for publishing research data of this type may be prohibitive to the researcher (Cantrell and Swanson, 2020). Suber in 2017 claimed that it is for this reason that art history will continue to lag behind all other subjects in the transition to open access publication, anticipating continuing hefty fees for reproduction rights.

So, where to from here?

There are both positives and negatives on the horizon for the arts and humanities in an open access future. The transition to open access, it is now acknowledged, will require more consideration of individual subject nuances than a blanket approach, that there is "no single solution" to achieving the democratic possibility that open access publishing seems to promise (Schwamm, 2023).

It is also clear that there needs to be a shift in many of what are considered baseline fundamentals of research assessment, as tied to career progression and academic success. This shift is frustratingly slow and the movement progressing an open access future is fragmented: libraries which advocate and advise on open access scholarly publishing are themselves competing for funding within the institution as a whole and may be invested in working within the current bibliometrics landscape; individual researchers may find that they are virtually alone in sticking their heads above the parapet if they work in areas within the arts and humanities; and together – libraries, researchers and institutions – are trapped in a cycle of paying for access to the catalogues of large academic publishing companies, with little left over to fund open access initiatives. Within institutions (libraries in particular), those who seek to progress open access publishing progammes are usually unpaid.

It is also becoming clear that (for better or worse) the relevance of the print monograph is in decline, due to low usage or competing financial pressures on libraries to purchase expensive access to scientific journals (Crossick, 2016). The Ithaka S+R 2021 faculty survey found that even among those in the arts and humanities, an increasing proportion indicated that electronic monographs, as opposed to print copies, were of importance to their teaching and research (Blankstein, 2022). A push to research and support the ecosystem around open access monographs and longform texts is also increasing with groups and resources such as the OAPEN Foundation, Open Book Collective, Open Access Book Network, as well as SPARC Europe's recent commitment to Diamond open access. Similarly, the Ithaka S+R report suggests that open access and print versions of monographs can coexist and have a reciprocal effect on each other's revenue (Brown et al, 2023). Crossick highlights the potential inherent in online open

access publication for monographs to become “a more living intellectual document” that promotes community engagement. UCD Library’s guide to open access in the humanities points out that open access publishing can render discoverable that most invisible of publications, the book chapter, and the new open access fund announced by Edinburgh University Press shows what can be achieved when action is aligned to overall institutional strategy and commitment to open research (Anderson, 2023).

There is disagreement, however, over who needs to compromise most in this transition: researchers, institutions, funders, or publishers. Nick Lindsay, Director of Journals and Open Access at the MIT Press, identifies academics as the crux for change, arguing that funding for publishing follows researchers, rather than the other way around. He suggests that the momentum of “unsustainable level of profit-taking by commercial publishers” may accelerate the move by individuals towards an open access future, where they “[choose] to give their time (as editors, authors, and reviewers) to well-governed non-profit publishing venues” (Mackinlay, 2023). If we accept that the onus is on the author-researcher alone, then the arts and humanities scholar may have to balance short-term career progression against future-proofing and may therefore not be as motivated to agitate for an open access model. We need the cooperation of arts and humanities scholars to choose to pursue publication in fully open access journals, with publishers who do not exact an APC, and to change the structures and systems of career progression which rely on traditional scholarship routes.

There are likely to be increased expectations of transition and momentum as funding bodies create the conditions to make research available on an open access basis. However, assuming that this momentum can be maintained without broad support from all stakeholders is naive and relies on publishers who are currently reaping huge profits (recent research indicates more than $1 billion was paid over four years to the five largest academic publishers for open access alone) to benevolently go against their own interests (Ansede, 2023). Momentum must be seized and harnessed, rather than merely observed. The assumption of a continuing momentum towards an inevitable open access future is paralleled in the thread of exceptionalism running though some of the discourse around the arts and humanities; an assumption that their value to wider society is known and accepted and respected.

Conclusions

Solutions on the detail-level are proposed to almost every obstacle that occurs in relation to open access publishing in the arts and humanities. Libraries and research departments have created guides and toolkits to lead researchers through the murky waters of acronyms and legal responsibilities. Solutions, ideas, and support – as well as bravery – at the institutional and funding level are what will tip the balance towards an open access future (Sanderson, 2023; Tumelty, 2023). In the humanities, transition will require a translation of value and an ability to communicate the data without transmuting the data itself.

In Ireland, there is a growing feeling of awareness of the precarity of arts and humanities funding and of the necessity to embrace new methods of research assessment and dissemination in order to prove value and impact. The Irish

Humanities Alliance strategy document for 2020-2030 explicitly connects open access publishing to educational and societal impact, the UN SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) and public research funding (IHA, 2019). However, Gibson and Hazelkorn's 2017 study showed that almost all third-level institutions in Ireland "have identified research in the arts and humanities as areas of strategic interest." The transition to open access in the arts and humanities must cease to be a fragmented one and must bring funders, institutions (and, importantly, the institutional library) together with researchers to extend the reach or their work out into society and to convey the value and impact of arts and humanities research in new and exciting ways.

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