

“Young Black Joe” to *The Harlem Hellfighters*:

America’s Imperfect Portrayals of World War One Hero Henry Johnson

by Sophie Katz

On May 15, 1918, Henry Johnson, a private in the all-black 369<sup>th</sup> United States Infantry Regiment, armed with only a knife, protected both himself and a wounded comrade from a German attack on the Western Front of World War I. On June 2, 2015, nearly eighty-six years after Johnson’s death, President Barack Obama awarded him the Medal of Honor (“Medal of Honor: Sergeant Henry Johnson”). This award raises two questions: why was Johnson, the first American to receive the French Croix de Guerre (Nelson 107), not given military honors by his own country sooner? And, if he was not recognized for his valor when he was alive, how did his story survive to come to the President’s attention a century later? After a review of how Johnson has been portrayed by American sources, including the immediate World War One-era media and propaganda response and twenty-first-century portrayals like Max Brooks’ graphic novel *The Harlem Hellfighters*, it becomes clear that the American government and black American communities have both attempted to take control of how Henry Johnson’s story is portrayed, using Johnson as a symbol of racial equality, of black American manhood, or of American wartime heroism. These symbolic portrayals have done figurative battle with each other, with the facts of the actual battle, and with the desires of Johnson himself to form the portrayal that survived to be recognized in the present – one that is incomplete, inadequate, and inaccurate.

Henry Johnson was nineteen years old when he took part in the ambush that launched the fight over his legacy (Nelson 93). He and fellow Private Needham Roberts were stationed at a listening post deep in No Man’s Land, and at about two-thirty in the morning they came under attack by German troops (Nelson 96). The exact number of soldiers they faced is unclear.

Different sources refer to “at least 12 soldiers” (“Medal of Honor: Sergeant Henry Johnson”), “more than a score” (Harden 152), or “a minimum of twenty-four” Germans (Nelson 102). What is known is that at the end of the battle, four Germans were dead by Johnson’s hand, the rest of the attack party had fled, and both Johnson and Roberts were alive, though critically wounded (Keene 234). Johnson would eventually be promoted to sergeant (Harlin A04), and on May 16<sup>th</sup>, the day immediately after, he received a citation for the Croix de Guerre, a high French military award, for being a “magnificent example of courage and energy” (Harden 153). He received this award while in the hospital for his twenty-one wounds, which would permanently disable him and end his military career (Nelson 101). This was not, however, the end of Johnson’s story, which was about to hit the American press.

Colonel Hayward, the 369<sup>th</sup> Regiment’s leader and unofficial “public relations agent,” had arranged for several American news reporters to come to the front and publicize the work of his regiment. By sheer coincidence, these reporters, including *Saturday Evening Post* writer Irvin Cobb and *New York World* writer Lincoln Eyre, arrived at the front the day after Johnson and Roberts’ battle (Nelson 104). The reporters were taken to the listening post at which the battle had been held and shown the bloodstains and grenade holes that stood as proof of the conflict (106). A few days later, Eyre’s article about what he had nicknamed “The Battle of Henry Johnson” was on the front page of the *New York World*, and the story only spread from there (107). Irvin Cobb’s account of the battle, titled “Young Black Joe,” was published in magazines all over the United States that August. For the first time in American history, the experience of a black soldier was in the spotlight of American media (104). Cobb portrayed Johnson as brave, heroic, and disciplined, contradicting the common anti-black stereotypes of the time (108). In his article, Cobb portrayed the story of Johnson and Roberts as a pro-racial-equality legend. “If ever

proof were needed,” he wrote, “which it is not, that the color of a man’s skin has nothing to do with the color of his soul, this twain then and there offered it in abundance...hereafter n-i-g-g-e-r will merely be another way of spelling the word American” (Nelson 108-9). It was not long before “Young Black Joe” was being reprinted in black presses as well (109). Both white and black Americans had this story of a heroic black soldier in their hands, and soon the story was being used in the media not only as news entertainment, but also as war propaganda.

During World War I, the United States government reached out to black communities to aid the war effort by supporting troops and buying war bonds. The government both created propaganda of its own and encouraged black newspapers to take part in rallying their communities. While the government wanted the support of black Americans, black Americans wanted something for themselves: they hoped that the war would provide a chance to move the civil rights movement forward by showing the nation that black Americans were just as valuable and patriotic as white Americans (Keene 207). Consequently, alongside the official wartime propaganda campaign from the government, a private poster campaign portraying black soldiers in a particularly positive, valorous light was born (208). E.G. Renesch, a producer in this private poster campaign, published a lithograph called “Our Colored Heroes” not long after the story of the Battle of Henry Johnson hit the American press (“Medal of Honor: Sergeant Henry Johnson”). The lithograph depicts Johnson and Roberts fending off about twenty German soldiers, with a caption mentioning the Croix de Guerre award and stating, “Colored man is eager to show his mettle and do his bit” (Renesch). It is worth noting that “Our Colored Heroes” portrays the Western Front in an incredibly romanticized light. Instead of muddy trenches, grenade holes, and a chaotic conflict in the dark, the lithograph shows a clearly moonlit battle on green grass near the edge of a picturesque forest. There is no sign of Johnson’s wounds; the only

blood comes from a small wound on the chest of a soldier Johnson is in the process of stabbing. In the background, troops run to the rescue while carrying a large American flag (Renesch).

This cleaner portrayal of the front ignores the horrors of war and shows Johnson as the mainstream kind of American military hero. It is a “pastoral scene” that allows viewers to associate Johnson with heroics and patriotism instead of challenging anyone’s ideas about war (Keene 234). The implication here, supported by the prominent flag, is that black American soldiers are as American as their white comrades. The message of the lithograph caption, that the depicted event is an example of a black man simply doing “his bit” in the war effort, makes this scenario seem accessible to the black American viewer, as if to say, “Any one of you can do this, and it is the right thing to do.” The civil rights movement clearly saw the war as a tool for racial equality, and this lithograph shows that Johnson’s story had become a tool for black Americans to encourage each other to join the war effort and successfully prove to their nation that they were brave and capable. In this kind of propaganda, Johnson was used as a symbol of black courage and manhood as well as the road to racial equality. Johnson himself, however, would have a different opinion of both the battle that had given him fame and the war’s ability to equalize the races.

After the war, Johnson and the 369<sup>th</sup> Infantry were welcomed home with parades and celebrations in towns all over New York (Nelson 211). The crowds greeting them were well-mixed: old friends and family members of the soldiers stood alongside strangers, and plenty of white people came to cheer as well, eager to shake hands with these soldiers who had been honored in France (216-7). Johnson himself had his own open-top car in these parades and was presented with flowers and applause wherever he went (231-2). His recognition as an American war hero was widespread through the nation: former President Theodore Roosevelt called him

“one of the five bravest American soldiers in the war” (“Medal of Honor: Sergeant Henry Johnson”).

But the whole celebration was bittersweet for Johnson and his comrades. For all the applause and acclaim, Johnson had yet to receive any official awards from the United States government. In fact, while black soldiers in other American regiments had received Distinguished Service Crosses, only one member of the 369<sup>th</sup> received any award at all: Lieutenant George Robb, who was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for four injuries at Sechault (Nelson 213). While speeches were made at these celebrations about the heroics of the colored regiments, their actual accomplishments were downplayed as lucky or fortunate. Speakers ignored how many of them had died in combat, and rarely mentioned any black soldiers by name (212-3). For a while, Johnson was the exception to this de-emphasis on black soldiers' contributions to the war effort. He was called for interviews for national magazines and newspapers run by both black Americans and white Americans, pushed to act as a kind of “spokesman for his race” (233). He was expected to be the epitome of a patriotic American soldier, happy to tell the story of his now-famous battle over and over (237). He was once again a propaganda tool, and this time adopted as such by the United States government. For example, posters for Liberty Loans held slogans like, “Henry Johnson Licked Twenty Germans – How Many War Bond Stamps Can You Lick?” (234). Now that he was home from the war, his country was not only using his story and image as a symbol, but using Johnson himself. The War Department was especially eager to use him as a symbol of not only American wartime heroics but also of racial equality in the United States military.

But Johnson evidently thought otherwise. His battle had not been thrilling and heroic, as everyone seemed to think, but traumatic. His goals were to stay alive and to protect his comrade

Roberts, not to be a hero. And in regards to racial equality in the military, Johnson was well aware that the 369<sup>th</sup> had faced racism every step of the way during the war. So in March 1919, at a celebration for black soldiers in St. Louis at which Johnson had been invited by the War Department to speak as a part of his Liberty Bonds tour, Johnson attempted to break away from his symbolic statuses. After several speakers before him at the event spoke about how the races had come together in harmony to defeat Germany, Johnson stood up and refuted all of it (Nelson 238). He told of how white soldiers had refused to fight beside black soldiers, and how black soldiers had not been properly recognized for the large part they had played in the war effort. “If I was a white man,” he said, “I would be the next governor of New York” (239). Johnson’s loyalty to the truth of his experience overrode any desire he might have had to stick to the narrative that his nation was using him for, which is remarkable given that he was now completely dependent on the money he received from the tours and interviews; he had been permanently disabled by his war wounds, and had no work experience or training besides being a train station porter before the war (233).

While the crowd loved his speech, the War Department had no use for a man who refused to be their symbol. Rejecting Johnson’s deviation from the accepted narrative, they immediately put a stop to funding any more Henry Johnson tours or speeches. After that, Johnson no longer received any support or calls for interviews. White people certainly did not want to hear him talk about how poorly black people had been treated, and the black American community either did not have the means to support him or lost interest in him once he had rejected the idea that his battle had been heroic. Due to his disabilities, Johnson was unable to find work back home in Albany. He died ten years later, a divorced, impoverished alcoholic (239).

In the decades after his unauthorized speech and subsequent death, Johnson nearly vanished from American media and historical documents. He was buried in Arlington National Cemetery, but his family was not notified. All who knew and loved him would believe that he had been put in an unmarked pauper's grave near the hospital he died in until his actual grave was located in 2001 (Nelson 239). It is difficult to find any mention of Henry Johnson or the 369<sup>th</sup> Infantry in news or scholarly articles throughout the 1900s. What little there is belongs to a small group of people interested in preserving black American history which continues to use Johnson as a symbol instead of addressing the facts of his life and opinions. A 1944 article of the *Negro History Bulletin* tells the story of the 369<sup>th</sup> from its inception as the 15<sup>th</sup> New York Infantry, mentioning Johnson along the way, and credits it as a major part of the civil rights movement which helped better "conditions for the colored man the country over" (Harden 153). The article adopts a similar patriotic attitude to the "Our Colored Heroes" lithograph, saying that the 369<sup>th</sup> "sustained the tradition" of black soldiers' wartime bravery and equating the celebratory parade reception that the regiment received upon returning to the United States after World War I to the reception that New York citizens will give to the "Old 15<sup>th</sup>" the next time they return home from abroad (152). The article uses Johnson and his comrades' story as a symbol of black pride, quoting Colonel Hayward of the 369<sup>th</sup> as claiming there to be "no better soldier material in the world" than his men (151). It is reassuring to see Johnson mentioned nearly two decades after his death, but this could hardly be called a mainstream article. The writers and researchers for the New York-based *Negro History Bulletin* unsurprisingly have a vested interest in remembering black New York soldiers.

Another attempt to commemorate Johnson and the 369<sup>th</sup> by someone with an equally vested interest in black American history was William Miles' 1977 documentary, *Men of Bronze*.

Miles, an Academy Award-nominated filmmaker who dedicated his career to telling the stories of black Americans, was inspired to make the film after stumbling upon “a dusty storage room containing flags, helmets, photographs, and other relics from the 369<sup>th</sup>” (Weber). He used those relics, film footage from the National Archives, and interviews with elderly people he found on the streets of Harlem to create his film, which portrays Johnson and his fellow soldiers as “fiercely patriotic and courageous” (Weber). This film, however, seems to have received little recognition since; there is a notable lack of reviews or responses to be found in online databases. It is possible that even among people interested in black American history, this film was their main resource and reason for being aware of the soldiers of the 369<sup>th</sup> at all. Congressman Charles B. Rangel, a Korean war veteran who represented the congressional district of New York that includes Harlem and who would later play a large part in the twenty-first-century campaign to get Johnson posthumously honored, is a fan of Miles’ work and later credited him with playing “a huge role in raising the awareness of Sgt. Johnson’s heroism” (“Rangel Honors Harlem Hellfighter”). In 1999, *The New Crisis* published an article about the regiment, which includes an anecdote about the Battle of Henry Johnson, and uses the phrase “Men of Bronze” in its title, though it does not otherwise mention Miles’ documentary (“The Men of Bronze in World War I” 44). This article provides a scathing review of American racism and mixed sentiments about Henry Johnson: “For his willingness to die for a country that treated him unequally at home, some would call him foolish, some would say that it made him all the more valiant” (45). Despite including the possibility that Johnson was “foolish,” this article nonetheless uses him as a symbol of heroism, regardless of the reader’s opinion of his impact on racial relations in the United States. None of these sources make any mention of Johnson’s resistance to such symbolism after the war, and this trend of focusing on Johnson’s patriotic wartime heroics

instead of his rebellious post-war speeches and experience continued into the twenty-first century.

A twenty-first-century portrayal of Henry Johnson appears in Max Brooks' 2014 graphic novel *The Harlem Hellfighters*, illustrated by Caanan White. While the narrative primarily follows fictional characters, focusing on a young soldier named Mark, historical figures such as Johnson play a part in the story. Johnson first appears very early in the novel, stepping up to enlist in the 15<sup>th</sup> New York Infantry. He is characterized as a cheerful, eager young man, at least a head shorter than everyone around him and still wearing his porter's uniform. In response to another character introducing him as having come "all the way from Albany to trade his red cap for a tin hat," he chimes in, "And one ah them medal a' honors!" (Brooks 16). The Johnson of *Harlem Hellfighters* is presented right from the start as amiable and ambitious, having rushed to enlist without even changing his clothing, eager to become the kind of hero that his nation's government would recognize. This early appearance also provides a set-up for the reader viewing his later actions as exceptional and heroic, showing Johnson as small compared to his comrades and therefore presumably incapable of fending off several German troops. This height difference, though likely factually accurate given that Johnson was only five feet four inches tall (Harlin A04), was the artist's choice to emphasize by placing him right next to Desmond, the tallest character in the scene.

After this scene, Johnson disappears until the middle of the novel, when the Battle of Henry Johnson becomes a major part of the narrative. He is shown giving cigarettes to a French colonial soldier in exchange for a knife. The caption of the panels showing the trade, providing Mark's narration, reads, "Neither of us spoke much French. But trade, I've always found, is the best way to communicate. And the best way to make friends" (104). When coupled with the art

on the page, this line does not appear to be about the black American soldiers making friends with the colonial troops, as would be assumed from the text alone. The phrase “and the best way to make friends” is juxtaposed with an image of Johnson admiring his knife, sharp and glinting in the sunlight, with no other characters in sight. The implication here is that the knife, a weapon, was Johnson’s true friend. This page associates Johnson with the battle he has yet to fight, instead of with his camaraderie with his fellow soldiers, continuing to portray him as the eager would-be hero instead of someone concerned with social issues.

The May 11, 1918 battle itself is portrayed as a series of action shots juxtaposed with the “color of a man’s skin has nothing to do with the color of his soul” quote from Irvin Cobb’s “Young Black Joe” article (124). Unlike “Our Colored Heroes,” the Battle of Henry Johnson is portrayed in the muddy, grimy trenches of No Man’s Land, with an abundance of wounds and spilled blood. That blood, however, is all coming from the German soldiers that Johnson is shooting and stabbing instead of from him and Roberts, with the exception of one panel showing Johnson running to attack, unhindered by the two bullets piercing his body (Brooks 127). While Johnson is shown in the hospital afterwards, his arms bandaged, the severity of his wounds is never addressed (131). In that hospital scene, Johnson is shown complaining about how an American newspaper drew a picture of him that makes him look “like a gorilla” (130). Ironically, Brooks and White have not done a much better job of making Johnson appear human in their illustrations of his battle. They portray Johnson as an unstoppable war machine, slaughtering the Germans around him with point-blank range rifle shots and, at one point, launching himself through the air at the Germans trying to carry Roberts away, becoming a terrifying pitch-black figure silhouetted against the moon with a knife held high over his head (126). When the rest of the 369<sup>th</sup> arrives to rescue Johnson and Roberts, they respond to the sight of the dead Germans

with shock and admiration (128). Johnson's comrades thank him for making them famous and give him the credit for the Germans nicknaming their regiment "the Harlem Hellfighters," further elevating him to heroic status (131). All that Johnson has to say about the incident in this portrayal is, "Ya think it'll be enough to get me my medal a' honor?" (131). He then receives the Croix de Guerre and disappears from the novel (132). There is no trauma or stress for this portrayal of Henry Johnson. He is an eager, happy war hero.

*The Harlem Hellfighters* does confront issues of racism in the United States military. It portrays the abuse the 369<sup>th</sup> received from white Americans at their training camps (43) and the American command's attempts to keep black soldiers from interacting with French civilians and getting "notions of equality" (163). However, by associating Johnson's battle with Cobb's racial equality message, the graphic novel uses Johnson as a symbol of the racial equality that was not actually in practice in American society during World War I, just like Cobb used him in "Young Black Joe" and the War Department tried to use him after the war. By focusing on Johnson's war success and portraying him as an ambitious hero instead of a real human being affected by war trauma who would eventually grow sick of being forced to act like an eager, patriotic hero, Brooks and White use Johnson as a symbol of American wartime heroism. The novel ends on an optimistic note, claiming that the black soldiers' efforts were worth something as long as they are not "forgotten" (Brooks 236). Henry Johnson is certainly remembered in this graphic novel, but he is remembered as the mainstream kind of American war hero that the War Department wanted him to be. In this portrayal, the man that Johnson chose to portray himself as after the war is forgotten. Instead of addressing the erasure of Johnson's honesty and rebellion, *The Harlem Hellfighters* contributes to it by propagating the symbolic war hero version of Johnson, resulting in an inaccurate portrayal. *The Harlem Hellfighters* reads less like a depiction of Johnson as he

actually was and more like a piece of propaganda in a campaign to have Johnson posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. This loyal American war hero version of Johnson is the one that reached the twenty-first century, and the one that would finally receive the Medal of Honor that Brooks and White claim he wanted from the very beginning.

While the French military immediately honored Johnson's war effort with the Croix de Guerre, it took nearly a century, and active petitioning from Johnson's fans, for similar awards to come from the United States. In 1995, New York veterans, historians, and politicians came together in a campaign to have Johnson's courage and military accomplishments formally recognized with military decorations. This campaign led to Johnson being posthumously awarded a Purple Heart for his war wounds in 1996 and the Distinguished Service Cross, "the second-highest award for outstanding acts of heroism against an armed enemy," in 2002 (Lee 27). The focus of this campaign was on Johnson as a war hero, and specifically a black war hero. Johnson's son, Herman, a member of the Tuskegee Airmen of World War II, played a large part in this campaign, pushing until his death in 2004 to have his father awarded the Medal of Honor. "I really think he deserves the cross, and Negro history deserves it," Herman Johnson said in a 2003 interview (Harlin A04). "Young blacks and African-Americans need to know we've been doing great things for years. It's important. And if we let these things die, people will never know about them" (A04). This campaign is motivated by Johnson as a symbol of racial equality, but in a different way than how the War Department tried to make him such a symbol. The War Department wanted Johnson to say that his valor and success meant that there was no racism in the American military. This late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century campaign to get Johnson military honors put Johnson on a pedestal as proof that black soldiers were just as important and significant as white soldiers. This campaign acknowledged the racism of the

military, but nonetheless played into the mainstream American narrative, uniting under the “Johnson who was a brave war hero” narrative and not under the “Johnson who spoke out against racism and romanticizing of war” narrative.

The more rebellious narrative had been long forgotten. As shown already, between the end of World War I and this campaign, Johnson was only portrayed as a war hero, so this is the narrative that this campaign had to work with, and likely the only one that the United States government would have agreed to award with military honors at all. In 2011, United States Senator Charles E. Schumer announced that he and his staff had found “game-changing evidence” that would prove Johnson deserved a posthumous Medal of Honor, submitted an over one thousand page reconsideration request to the War Department, and started an online petition to get support from the public for Johnson’s receiving the award (“Schumer Urges NY National Guard...”). In 2013 and 2014, Schumer put pressure on the United States Army Secretary and Secretary of Defense to expedite the Medal of Honor consideration process and even pushed legislation through the United States House and Senate to waive the time restriction on receiving the Medal of Honor to make Johnson posthumously eligible. According to Schumer, Johnson deserved the Medal of Honor because if not for his bravery and “total disregard for his own life, his fellow soldiers would have been captured, a cache of weapons and supplies would not have been acquired by the allies, and valuable intelligence would have gone to the enemy” (“Schumer Announces”). Schumer’s and the rest of the campaign’s efforts finally paid off. On June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015, President Barack Obama awarded Henry Johnson the Medal of Honor (“Medal of Honor: Sergeant Henry Johnson”).

Other factors that likely contributed to finally pushing the Medal of Honor award process to its completion were popular fiction works like *The Harlem Hellfighters* which fostered public

awareness of Johnson, the Black Lives Matter movement which took off in 2012 and fostered in the American public an emphasis on recognizing black American contributions to the nation (“About the Black Lives Matter Network”), and the 2015 centennial celebration of World War I which included a national effort “to honor the heroism and sacrifice of those Americans who served” in the war (“Introduction”). It is also likely that having a black President contributed to an administration more interested in recognizing black soldiers. Throughout the awards process and ceremony, Johnson was again and again portrayed as the symbolic American war hero. On the day President Obama presented the award to the New York Infantry on behalf of Johnson, Congressman Rangel released a statement saying that “Sergeant Henry Johnson epitomizes what it means to be a great American Hero and patriot” (“Rangel Honors Harlem Hellfighter Henry Johnson”). The official citation for Johnson’s Medal of Honor reception emphasizes Johnson’s military heroics and credits him with “conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty...in keeping with the highest traditions of military service and reflect great credit upon himself, his unit and the United States Army” (“Medal of Honor: Sergeant Henry Johnson”). It is clear that in these quotes Johnson is pedestalized as a symbol of what the United States government wants the public to think it means to be a soldier in the United States military: patriotism, bravery, and selflessness. Once again, there is no mention of Johnson’s rebellious speech after World War I, nor is any explanation provided as to why Johnson, if he was such a patriotic figure, both lost government support and dropped out of public interest immediately after the war. It is ironic that the way in which Henry Johnson was truly selfless and went above and beyond the call of duty – giving up a cushy future of being paid to give speeches by telling the truth about racism in the military and the horrors of war, so

that Americans might not stop trying to reform society – is not what he was given the Medal of Honor for.

In his June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015 statement about Henry Johnson posthumously receiving the Medal of Honor, Congressman Rangel said, “With our nation’s highest honor of valor bestowed upon Sgt. Johnson, his legacy will be enduring and highlighted in the annals of history... We are exceedingly proud to see that Sgt. Henry Johnson has finally received the proper recognition he has duly earned” (“Rangel Honors Harlem Hellfighter Henry Johnson”). But while the efforts to recognize the contributions of a previously neglected black soldier to American history are commendable, Johnson has not received the recognition he deserves because the portrayal of Johnson that survived to be recognized in the twenty-first century is not a comprehensive portrayal. Johnson was often unable to speak for himself, while he was recovering from his war wounds, when the War Department cut off funding for his tours, and after he died. And when he was unable to speak, a portion of the nation spoke for him, picking and choosing the parts of his life, actions, and personality that would fit the narrative they wanted to popularize. Instead of a man, Johnson has been treated as a symbol: of American courage and patriotism, of the end of racism, of the path to proving the equality of black people to white people, and of war heroism. The portrayal that Johnson himself chose to act upon, that of an honest man who had grown tired of pretending that war was exciting and racism was over, has been largely erased. It is unlikely that the American government would have ever given military honors to the Johnson who spoke out against the agreed-upon war narrative, since that unpatriotic version of Johnson is not a useful piece of war propaganda. But that version of Johnson does have use to members of minorities in the United States who often are put under pressure to go along with the false narrative that there is no oppression here and that all actions done in the service of America are

good and harmless, so it is unfortunate that that part of Johnson's life has been forgotten. It is undeniably important for Americans to remember the soldiers who heroically fought and sacrificed for the United States, especially minority soldiers whose contributions are often ignored by the white majority. But it is also important for Americans to remember the people who heroically spoke out against injustice instead of going along with the accepted narrative. In Johnson's case, both kinds of hero existed in one man.

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