A Call to Arms

A Multi-Sited Approach to Remembering

Women's Work in WWII

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A CALL TO ARMS: A MULTI-SITED APPROACH TO REMEMBERING WOMEN’S WORK IN WWII

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**ABSTRACT**

During the Second World War, women flocked from their hometowns to join the workforce in armaments factories and other war production industries. Their presence in the factories was recorded by national photography campaigns, now part of the holdings of Library and Archives Canada. Today, the stories of their work are told through museum exhibition content at the Canadian War Museum, newspaper interviews, and heritage designation of former factories. Although these collections and sites tell parts of the story, they remain isolated from each other. This paper suggests that multi-disciplinary and multi-sited approaches are best suited to make the connections between sites and larger cultural frameworks. By making connections between sites, pieces of the puzzle are put together, presenting a more comprehensive narrative of women working in war industries.

**Keywords**

Second World War, women’s work, multi-sited, Canadian
The telling of a historical narrative requires many pieces to be put in place. Much like a puzzle, these individual pieces must be connected to illustrate a larger picture. Each piece of the puzzle, though it might contain a full picture in its own right, is only a small part of a much larger narrative. I wish to explore the presence of this metaphor as it relates to the story of women’s work in the Canadian industries of the Second World War, as it is found in museums, heritage buildings, and other sites. The study of women in the industrial workforce during the Second World War contains a wide array of the components necessary to preserve the memory of women’s contributions in this sector of the war effort. The Canadian War Museum (CWM) provides exhibition material describing women’s work on the home front in industries contributing to the war effort. It borrows images from the Library and Archives Canada (LAC) collection of the “Wartime Information Board and Photography” which contains thousands of archival photographs taken during the war, many which depict women at work in factories. Outside of Ottawa, physical sites, such as the former Small Arms factory in Mississauga Ontario, have been preserved and commemorated as designated heritage buildings. Finally, veterans of the war are still present to share their stories and create valuable oral history records.

Yet even with all these elements in place, there is a disjuncture between the sites that help to preserve and commemorate these stories. Through an exploration of existing sources informing women’s history during the Second World War, I will question the isolation of the sources from each other, and suggest that their connections to each other and also to broader cultural frameworks of gender, power and knowledge, can be demonstrated with a multi-sited approach. A multi-sited methodology looks at how a theme, phenomenon or narrative takes place “in and across multiple locales
This heuristic approach allows the research to illuminate the story of women’s work in WWII as it unfolds in various places, and also points out “unities across difference”, combating the disjuncture. I also draw on frameworks from the field of information sciences, as they relate the document (site) to the semiotic process of establishing signs, and how this is encountered in the museum setting.

This paper will first elaborate on the multi-sited approach and discuss the importance of recognizing place and making perceptible connections between historical sites. Following that, it will describe a selection of sites important to telling the story of women’s work during the Second World War, specifically focusing on those related to the Small Arms Ltd. armaments plant formerly of Long Branch, Ontario. Next, it will outline the connections that can be made between these sites and broader cultural frameworks, suggesting that through this approach a more comprehensive narrative can be formed. Finally, this research addresses the challenges and opportunities for putting a multi-sited approach into practice.

A Multi-sited Approach to Place-based Stories

George E. Marcus’s multi-sited approach specifically relates to the discipline of anthropology. In his challenge to the traditional single-site modes of ethnographic study, he advocates the move away from single sites towards multiple sites that examine the “circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space”. Marcus suggests that the connections made in a multi-sited approach attempt to break down dichotomies of “local” and “global”, the

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2 Ibid, 180
“lifeworld” (‘everyday human experience’) and the “system”. In a multi-sited approach, comparisons can be made to other narratives because of the multiplicity and movable nature of the sites: in essence, comparisons can be made between ethnographic studies that might have once seemed “worlds apart”. In his explanations of a multi-sited approach, Marcus suggests that ethnographic anthropology take on characteristics of cultural history, which does not problematize the “fragmentary, reconstructive nature of historical method”. While Marcus suggests that ethnographic anthropology might learn from the discipline of history, I suggest that the reverse is also possible. Historical research must learn from anthropology’s ethnographic approaches and broaden them to multiple sites. Yet both approaches must do so beyond the written word.

Dolores Hayden, in her study of urban history in Los Angeles through her organization called “The Power of Place”, suggests that preserving components of the urban landscape, such as the factory, tenement, or union hall, has tremendous importance in nurturing the public memory of marginalized groups and reclaiming their place in the urban territory. Hayden’s approach is multi-sited in its own right, suggesting that preserving a single site of importance to women or ethnic communities is not enough to ensure that their stories are heard. This challenges the historian or ethnographer to step outside their traditional roles and the bounds of written academia to preserve multiple sites, which must be physically mapped in order to illustrate the connections between communities in the urban environment.

It is the physical, or at least perceptible connections between multiple sites that I wish to draw attention to in this paper: the connections that can be accessed by people at the sites and through

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4 Ibid, 95.
5 Ibid, 102.
6 Marcus, 100.
8 Ibid, 8.
reading about them. The connections between sites telling the story of women’s work in Long Branch exist, but I wish to give them more than a tertiary role in the story.

**Identifying Physical Sites and Sites of Knowledge**

In order to present exhibition material at museums or to justify sites of historic significance, it is necessary to establish a sound research base. Some scholars problematize this, arguing that archival sources pertaining to women’s history are often obliterated (or never created). Bonnie Smith suggests that the rise of history as a discipline coincided with the professionalization of archivists – and in order to legitimize each other, they excluded female archival practitioners in favour of men who “ignored…the real life in families, farms, factories and local community, and the stories and experiences of women…in favour of national politics, administration, diplomacy, war, and the experience of men in power”.

However, the stories of women’s work during the Second World War are situated in an interesting position: they deal with women, factories, families and local community, but are inextricable from the more often preserved themes of national politics, war, and men in power. During the war, over 400,000 women composed a valuable and necessary workforce, filling the spaces of men who had flocked overseas to fight in the war. Due to the overarching nationalistic, patriarchal structures associated with war, women’s work in this era was documented in newspaper and magazine articles, and through photographic collections. During the war, women’s efforts were praised and photographs and reports of their work were used to bolster support and enthusiasm for the war. Newspaper interviews in *The Star* and *The Etobicoke Guardian* with former

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industrial workers have, in recent decades, helped to commemorate their stories and keep the memory alive.

There are two kinds of sites this research will draw from that are essential to telling the narrative of women working in the war. The first are physical sites, such as the remains of the factory, the CWM, and LAC. There are also what I will refer to as sites of knowledge, such as photographs and oral testimonies. Oral histories or life histories, according to Michael J.M. Fischer, “are particularly useful as sites of access to constellations of (1) cultural models, (2) discourse/critical apparatuses, and (3) new self-fashionings”. Fischer’s phrase “sites of access” accurately describes the direct connections that oral histories and other sites of knowledge make to physical sites, but also to larger frameworks that help to explain the existence, roles, and cultural behaviours associated with particular physical sites. It can be suggested that Fischer’s ideas can be further extended to apply to physical sites, such as buildings, that when studied in detail and within their surrounding context, may also act as sites of access to cultural models and discourses. Sites can be both physical sites and sites of knowledge, exemplified by the CWM, whose physical location contains a collection of sites of knowledge: research facts, historic photographs and oral histories. I will first provide a description of these sites, and then discuss the connections that can be made between them.

The CWM presents the narrative of women working during the Second World War at the beginning of their exhibition space on “The Home Front”. The space contains wartime posters illustrating the need for support on the home front (labour and victory bonds), as well as a booth with audio clips of women who worked during the war, and text quotations of men and women workers. Visual images of women at work supplement the other material. The pictures,

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12 “Forged in a Fire: The Home Front” The Canadian War Museum. 1 Vimy Place, Ottawa ON, K1A 0M8. March 2012.
audio clips and text are all geared towards a relatively short period of contact with the visitor, as are many of the exhibits (a realistic tactic, considering the size of the museum and the breadth of their content).

The second site I wish to draw attention to is Library and Archives Canada, more specifically focusing on the sites of knowledge within its collections. The *War Records Manufacturing* series, taken by the Wartime Information Board, was photographed between 1939 and 1945. These images depict Canadians contributing to the war effort in factories, laboratories, shipyards and logging camps. They also depict social gatherings outside the work setting, or family scenes. The images are excellent documentation of the mass employment of women throughout the war in various sectors.

Through the photographs, a testimony of their presence is preserved and available online for public viewing. These images not only allow the viewer to see the settings of industrial work and the various tasks women performed, but also the performative aspects of their work.

This is exemplified in photographs of particularly attractive women, like Veronica Foster, the ‘Bren Gun Girl’, whose feminine image in an industrial setting helped to reinforce the societal norms of gender, making industrial work appealing and acceptable for women. Part of the collection, in fact, focuses on life outside the factory setting, conveying messages of light-heartedness even in times of turmoil.

The other physical site explored in this paper is the former Small Arms factory, located in present-day Mississauga (formerly Long Branch) at the foot of Dixie Road, on the south side of Lakeshore Road East. Constructed between 1940 and 1941, the factory produced Lee Enfield and Sten Mark II guns. The factory predominantly hired young, single women or women with children. Recruiters traveled the country and placed advertisements in newspapers offering work in the factory. During the course of

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14 “Forged in a Fire: The Home Front”
operation, over 16,000 women worked at the plant. In addition to factory line work, women were trained on drills, milling machines, turret lathes and surface grinders. A dormitory was constructed nearby to house the over 400 women, and councillors were appointed to help ease the transition to working life. The dormitory still stands and is presently a car dealership. The only remaining part of the factory is the Inspection Building, which was designated under the *Ontario Heritage Act* in 2009. The statement of significance for the building acknowledges it as a site that is representative of the influx of working women during the World War II.

Directly connected to the physical site of the factory are sites of knowledge in the form of oral history. Women who once worked at the Small Arms factory have shared their stories in newspaper interviews with the Star and the Etobicoke Guardian. Oral histories are also found in the War Museum. The interviews and oral testimonies recall where they came from, how they obtained jobs and what their lives were like while they worked in the factories. Kay Wadner Rylco remembers being attracted to the work via newspaper advertisements that called girls to the factories in southwestern Ontario. Rylco thought that “this is a good opportunity to take ... it was the Depression time and (my family) thought, well, if you get a job somewhere, it's good.”

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Mary Hanson stated “It was hard work”. Another worker, Olive Purdy, recalls, “we met a lot of young people and we had fun, you know”. The stories of these women provide first hand accounts and a voice to history that, in many cases, lives within books, plaques and panels.

**Putting the Puzzle Together**

Each of the aforementioned sites is important in its own right for contributing a piece to the narrative of women’s work in the war industry. However, the individual sites of knowledge and physical sites point to each other to create a more comprehensive picture. The connections to other sites exist, but in some cases are not made explicit. For instance, the War Museum uses images from the Wartime Information Board collection from Library and Archives Canada. The images provide a reference number, but there is no explanation of the source itself (here or in other areas where the content differs). The images are interpreted in terms of their content, but no mention is made to the entire collection. The visitor is not told where the images come from, who took them, or why they were taken. Furthermore, there is no way for the visitor to know, upon looking at these examples of the collection, how many additional images there are in the collection that depict women at work. The exhibit on women’s contribution to the wartime presents images, text and audio related to the topic but leaves several questions open-ended for the visitor, such as: where were the factories that women worked in? Where did women come from to work in these places? Were all the jobs women did directly related to the war effort (e.g. the production of arms and munitions), or were women employed in other settings? Though there are hints at the answers to some of these questions, none thoroughly address the importance of place in grounding the stories.

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20 Benzie, Idem.

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More important than the basic facts and additional depictions of women at work are the other connections that could be made here, within the War Museum. Additional images, or even the mention of them, would provide further connections to the examples of rifles located near the exhibit of women at work. These rifles, the Lee Enfield No. 4 Mark I and the Sten Mark II, were manufactured at the Long Branch Small Arms Ltd. plant, previously mentioned. The *War Records-Manufacturing* series includes at least 34 images that depict women working in the rifle manufacturing plant. Even one of these images might have been used to illustrate the direct connection between the worker (and in fact, a majority of the workforce), the workplace, and the product. Interestingly, one of the images included in the exhibit depicts Veronica Foster, known as the “Bren Gun Girl”, whose image represented femininity and sensuality even within the harsh industrial setting. The image shows Foster posing seductively with a rifle (Figure 1). One of those very rifles sits behind a glass case, just meters away, yet there is no caption near the image that directly draws the visitor to the connection between the two. This is not to suggest that it would be impossible for visitors to make the connection themselves without additional interpretive material. However, given the size of the museum and the amount of competing content, one cannot expect the visitor to linger at every site and remember what they have previously seen. In this light, more explicit, direct connections between the existing material help to connect the larger themes to smaller details of the story.

The content at the museum, utilizing LAC images, has the opportunity to connect to physical sites like the existing remains of the Small Arms factory. Unlike the John Inglis Co. building, demolished in 2009, part of the Small Arms factory still remains, designated as a heritage building.

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21 Chen, “Forged in a Fire: *The Home Front*”
22 “Forged in a Fire: *The Home Front*”
A direct link could be made between the photographic references and the rifle artefacts themselves, pointing to the still-standing physical reminder of women’s work in the arms production industry. Reference to the fact that the building still stands is an important factor in reinforcing the significance of women in the workforce, and their home-front contribution to the war effort. It suggests that contemporary society still recognizes the importance of the site, its workforce, and the larger meanings attached to it, and that by designating the remaining building and protecting its physical form, the message and its values are something to be passed on to future generations.

There are additional connections to be made between the Small Arms plant and other sites. Recollections from former workers in the plant found in *The Star* and *The Etobicoke Guardian* lend personal presence to the site. Honoured at a ceremony in March 2010 for International Women’s Day, veteran worker Mary Hanson told the newspaper that she relocated from her family’s Winnipeg area farm to work in the factory. Kay Waldner Rylko similarly tells of moving from her family’s farm outside of Saskatoon. Other women, like Bernice Glowe, Olive Purdy and Violet Dricoll came from 100 kilometers outside of the Toronto area. The women recall not only their working lives, but their social lives as well, “It was tiring, but we still were able to go dancing Saturday nights in the city – in different places, the Palais Royale and way out on the Danforth sometimes” says Purdy. These women, whose stories have been collected by the newspaper, signify the thousands of other women who might have come from other locations, relocating to take work to help their families and their country. Their stories, as sites of knowledge, point to other spatial locations that connect larger themes: the need for a job in tough economic times, a desire to help their country, and the thrill of independence.
A report compiled by Heritage Mississauga alludes to other sites that could be connected to the story, including the large number of workers housing and infrastructure that was constructed alongside the factory. When initially built, the site surrounding the Small Arms plant was removed from Toronto and had no major infrastructure.\textsuperscript{25} The influx of workers to the plant prompted the Department of Munitions and Supply to contact Wartime Housing Ltd. to construct housing for factory employees in the nearby areas of Lakeview, Port Credit, Long Branch, Alderwood, New Toronto and Mimico. Workers commuted to the factory via newly constructed temporary streetcar routes.\textsuperscript{26} This part of the narrative has the potential to open up to wider themes of wartime housing, and the resulting trends that were entrenched for future suburban, prefabricated homebuilding in Canada.

Referring back to Fisher’s description of “sites of access”, we may address the potential of all sites (oral histories, other sites of knowledge and physical sites) to connect to larger themes and more abstract processes of cultural models and discourses. The image of Veronica Foster and the accompanying text in the CWM, as previously mentioned, points to the discourses of femininity within the factory setting. Images of a similar style are found in the collections photographs of female employees at the Long Branch Small Arms plant (Figure 2). This also points to other industries which, in turn, capitalized on this discourse by advertising beauty products and fashions that kept women’s bodies and appearance up to feminine standards after the factory shift ended.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{25} Chen
\textsuperscript{26} Chen
\textsuperscript{27} Michelle Denise Smith, “‘Hello Canada! It’s fine to have you here’: Canadian Nationhood, Women and Popular Fiction during the Second World War” \textit{Journal of Commonwealth Literature} 44 (2009) 5-22, 10.
This reflects the larger cultural models at work during the time, which suggested that even while thousands of women were employed throughout the duration of the war, especially in venues they previously had little access to, “this work was often constructed as a series of traditionally feminine tasks that had been inflated with patriotism and accorded a new-found importance because they were a part of national defence”. Even in industrial settings, women’s work was classified within the cultural model of ‘the woman as nurturer’. Smith’s work exemplifies this by including a Second World War poster that depicts a young woman walking to her new factory job in her blue work pants (Figure 3). The poster lauds women’s “delicate touch” in the factory, and the caption below images of women on the production line reads “Brave men shall not die because I faltered”, signifying the assumed self-sacrificing nature of women.

Smith’s work addresses the necessity of a critical gaze when making connections between sites. We must be critical choosing the sites we preserve and in articulating the representations that become attached to them. In suggesting that we preserve and make connections to sites like the Small Arms factory (or any other factory site) and the images of its workers, we must remember that these are but one form of representation. These ideas illustrate other forms of discourse or cultural models that are connected with the site, though were not chosen as the primary reasons for its preservation or display.

The issue of representation is important. Each of the sites discussed are arbitrary on their own and given meaning only through a semiotic process. Kiersten Latham discusses this by using the theoretical framework of Michael Buckland and applying the framework to a museum setting, which produces documents (forms of information) that visitors respond to as part of a semiotic system. Latham cites Buckland’s definition of “document” as follows:

28 Ibid, 9.
29 Idem, 11,12.
I use “document” in an [sic] broad sense of any “thing” that is regarded as signifying: books, records, data, speech, signs, symbolic objects […] Information is not, in itself, important, only in its relationship to what people do or might know. We are thereby, concerned with the creation, dissemination, and utilization of knowledge. I take documents, in that broad sense, to be the anchor of our field.\(^{30}\)

Buckland refers to the field of information science specifically, but his theory, as demonstrated by Latham, is applicable to history and museum studies. Latham suggests that the document, as Buckland describes it, is part of the semiotic triangle, where the document (representation/sign vehicle) is interconnected with the user (interpretant) and the object (meaning). The resultant interaction of these three things is the semiotic sign.\(^{31}\) Yet the dangers are that these signs, especially in the museum context, can be taken as invariable, neutral, or true. To bring this back to the multi-sited framework, more sites (or documents) available allows for multiple opportunities to engage within the semiotic process, where the potential for meaning expands based on the connections made between sites (or documents). Therefore, the more we are able to make connections between the various signs (of all kinds), the better chance we have of escaping (or questioning) their being regarded as true, neutral or invariable.


\(^{31}\) Ibid, 62.
The Multi-sited Approach: Challenges and Opportunities

It is clear that the individual sites mentioned have a strong reliance on each other: museum and heritage sites rely on archives and oral history; oral history gives sense of place to built space; the stories are given ‘authenticity’ through museum context. The connections already existing, and others I have discussed, have the potential to broaden the story of women’s work during the Second World War. Making the connections, of course, is a massive task to ask of the individual sites. The CWM is already full to bursting with interpretive content. Sites like the former Small Arms plant may be marked with a plaque to discuss their values and reasons for designation, and the surrounding park site may contain some interpretive material relating to the history of the area and of women in the workforce, but certainly plaques cannot contain all available information or links to possible sites. Furthermore, it is impractical, even impossible, to think in terms of all. Latham, again drawing from Buckland, suggests that “when we interpret evidence, we are translating, summarizing, or reducing the original into something potentially more accessible…something is always lost in translation”. 32 Therefore even when connections are attempted, pieces of the puzzle will always be missing.

However, this does not mean that we cannot attempt to make connections amongst multiple sites. The centralized locations of some of them provide ample opportunity to do this. Even if the physical space at the site itself is limited, there is the opportunity to make connections and illustrate the multi-sited approach through online venues. Styliani et al suggest that internet-based three-dimensional tools can help museums engage and educate visitors, translating “the inaccessible and unfamiliar into the familiar and accessible”. 33 They suggest that the internet and virtual museum

32 Idem, 50.

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spaces are excellent alternatives to space and budgetary constraints. Since these alternative methods are rooted in a virtual setting, they take up no real space or place, helping establish a balance so that one physical site does not take precedence over another. Many of the features of a virtual space for the story of women’s work already exist. The War Manufacturing Records series of photographs can be found on the Library and Archives Canada website, and in addition to the search function for images, there is a small write-up and a selection of the highlights of the collection as part of a virtual exhibit. The War Museum also hosts online exhibitions. All that remains is for the connection between the identified sites to be made. This allows one to obtain a more comprehensive story from various access points, without having to physically be present at any of them. To present connections to different sites to visitors who are physically present, sites could utilize quick response (QR) code technology. Styliani et al suggest that this arrangement allows for knowledge to be presented “in a context-oriented, rather than object oriented way.”

The act of representation is a monstrous task. Even a multi-sited approach, which provides a more comprehensive narrative, cannot paint the whole picture; nor can it escape reducing a complex reality to signs and symbols. However, the multi-sited methodology traces how a sign makes its way to the common understanding. Thus, it becomes a more honest representation, where the public can recognize that the story told of women’s work is not complete, but they may come to understand the essence of the narrative, connected through its various places and in its various forms.

There is an advantage to thinking about breaking down historical narratives to reflect smaller, more localized ethnographic studies – in this case the story of women working in the Long Branch Small Arms Plant – which the multi-sites approach can blend together and allow the themes to play out across space and time.

34 Ibid, 520.
35 Idem, 521.
This approach localizes the story (limiting it in breadth) yet focuses on the importance of multiple spaces and connections. For example, by focusing on the narrative of women working at the Long Branch Small Arms plant, we are able to make detailed observations and connections to multiple places that contribute to the story. This creates a microcosm of the larger story of women working in war industries. The methodologies and the sites discussed above have the potential to provide a more comprehensive narrative of women’s labour during the Second World War to scholars and the public alike, deepening our understanding and critical approaches to the subject.

Figures

Figure 1: Veronica Foster, an employee of John Inglis Co. Ltd. and known as "The Bren Gun Girl" posing with a finished Bren gun in the John Inglis Co. Ltd. Bren gun plant. 10 May 1941.
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National Film Board of Canada. Photothèque / Library and Archives Canada
PA-119766

Figure 2: Female worker Madeline Solotwinski checks the wooden holster/emergency butt on a Chinese pistol, converting it into a sub-machine gun; Small Arms Ltd. plant. April 1944
Ronny Jaques / National Film Board of Canada. Photothèque / Library and Archives Canada / PA-179690
"Would you like to know why I wear trousers like this one when I go about the country? Women are doing a man's job for the country's sake.

"My trousers are my working clothes. I was chosen for the job. They are made like a man's trousers in the fancy and I am not a woman.

"I am on a mission. Every day of the week I have to produce clothes to keep the Navy and the Army from our clothes."

On this mission, on the men's team in the shops of our Government offices, I am one among many women. I'm doing men's work under their watchful eye. They do the work of the men who have served this country. The women do the same work as men, and we are doing it to the best of our ability. Today, we are proving that we are just as capable as men.

"Leave men shall not die because I faltered."

This message is issued by the Department of Finances and Supply for Canada.

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**Figure 3:** “Please Don’t Stare at My Pants” from Smith, Michelle Denise. “‘Hello Canada! It’s fine to have you here’: Canadian Nationhood, Women and Popular Fiction during the Second World War” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 44,1 (2009) 5-22.

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