Eugene Barnett Talks About the Centralia Conspiracy: Oral History from an IWW Participant in the Events of November 11, 1919, in Centralia, Washington
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By William H. Friedland & Archie Green

EUGENE BARNETT was one of eight members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) convicted in 1920 of murder as a result of a 1919 Armistice Day raid on the Centralia, Washington, IWW hall by American Legionnaires. Jailed in 1920, he was released in 1931. A decade after his release, probably sometime in the first half of 1940, Barnett visited the San Francisco Bay area where he met Ben Légère, a Wobbly and One Big Union (the Canadian equivalent of the IWW) activist. At that time, Légère worked for one of the New Deal cultural relief organizations and had access to recording equipment.

Légère recorded Barnett's 34-minute account of the Centralia events. This may well be the earliest recording of a unionist discussing his involvement in a labor struggle. During the Centralia affair four members of the American Legion were killed and Wobbly Wesley Everest was lynched. Centralia became a prominent labor case equivalent to the turmoil over the Sacco and Vanzetti and Mooney-Billings cases.

Substantially different views existed during the trial and continue to the present day. Barnett's recording, what would nowadays be referred to as a recorded oral history or "vocumentary" (vocal documentary), represents Barnett's and the IWW's experiences and perceptions of the Centralia affair.

What follows is a partial transcription (approximately 50 percent) of the Barnett recording. This transcript focuses on Barnett's experiences in Centralia, at the trial of the Wobblies, in jail, and after his release from prison. Full transcriptions and cassettes of the recording are available at the library of the University of Washington, the Labadie Collection of the University of Michigan, the Walter P. Reuther Archive of Wayne State University, and Special Collections at the University of California, Santa Cruz and the Washington State Historical Society.

At the conclusion of the transcript is a report on the provenance of the recording and a follow-up interview with Barnett in Spokane on June 5, 1961.

EUGENE BARNETT'S CENTRALIA CONSPIRACY TRANSCRIPT

FRIENDS, I AM Eugene Barnett, one of the victims of the Centralia Conspiracy. The Centralia Conspiracy is an important case in labor history. It was a raid on a union hall, the Lumber Workers Industrial Union of the IWW, on November the 11th, 1919, by a group of vigilantes organized by the Southwest lumber barons of the state of Washington to break up the union there and drive it out the lumber trust had decided that the union was becoming too strong for them.
Barnett describes how he first encountered unionism when his father was recruited as a strikebreaker during the miners' strike of 1918 and was put to work as a boy in the mines. He explains how he became a strong union man before he moved west.

When I came on out there in 1910, I found that the loggers up in the state of Washington were working 11 hours a day. They were sleeping 40 men in the bunk-house, double-deck bunks on the wall. Just one little window just one sash not really a window, but just half a window, for a bunkhouse. You’d open the door and open the one sash and that’s all the ventilation you got. You worked all day in the rain, you came in at night and hung your soggy clothes up around the one stove in the center of the room with wires going out from it in all directions like a spider web, and they hung there and steamed all night. And you slept there in that steam. That’s the only bath you got. There was no other facilities for one; you got your steam bath there every night. There was no place to wash your clothes. If you wanted to wash up, the only thing you could do was go out and hunt up an old coal oil can on Sunday and boil up your clothes like a hobo down in the jungle.

There was no place to wash. No place to take care of it. If you moved from one camp to another you had to go with your roll of blankets on your back. You looked like a bunch of snails going down the highway. So when the loggers began organizing, trying to build an industrial union for to do away with those conditions, I was strong for it. And I did everything I could to further the union idea and help build it up.

In 1919 when the lumber barons in Centralia decided to run the union out of Centralia, I was secretary of the United Mine Workers local at Kopiah, 11 miles out of Centralia. And they held a meeting in the Elks Club there about three weeks prior to this raid and selected a committee that gave F. B. Hubbard, the president of the Southwest Washington Lumbermen's Association there, power to create a secret committee to devise ways and means of running this union out of town. And they were so sure of themselves that they went and published an item in the daily newspaper there telling of this, telling how he had been empowered to select his own committee for this purpose.

ON NOVEMBER 11TH, the day the raid occurred, I was in town that afternoon. Happened to go in by accident, I had even forgot that it was Armistice Day. I had been out coyote hunting, out there in the hills, the previous few days because we were on strike. The national coal strike of 1919. It began November the 1st and I was out on that, all the miners were on a strike at that time. So I hadn’t been taking much interest in what was going on and hadn’t been keeping track of the days. I was going out and having some fun with my hounds out in the woods, chasing coyotes, enjoying myself, enjoying a vacation which the worker seldom gets only when he is on a strike or something like that. Of course it was a vacation without pay, but nevertheless I was enjoying it.

So I went into town that day and was visiting with a friend in a hotel adjoining this hall when [several words indecipherable]. I saw the parade come up the opposite side of the street. I saw them park two armored trucks out there, which they planned to load the men they took out of the hall in, as they had done on a previous occasion some months before when they raided another hall about two blocks from there. They parked an army truck there and took the men out of the hall and they lifted them by their ears like they were loading hogs, and loaded them into this truck. Took them down [between] Centralia and Chehalis and forced them to run the gauntlet. Run between two lines of men armed with brass pipes and clubs and rubber hoses and whatever they had. If they had nothing else, they’d take a kick at them or plug them with their fist. Use whatever they had to beat them up and run them out. Told them to go on toward Chehalis and keep on a'going, not to I come back.

So they planned the same thing for this day. Before ever the trouble started, I saw men in the ranks of this parade with ropes and guns and gas pipes, so I knew what was coming. You could feel it in the air. You
didn't even have to see it. There was a tenacity there that you could absolutely feel. They marched on up to
the next corner above the hall and came back on the side next to it and were bunched up by Lieutenant Fred
Cormeer, the man there that ran a confectionery store down on Main Street. He was marshal of the day and
mounted on horseback. He gave the order, "Bunch up, men," and they halted in front of the place and
bunched up. The men in the front line of this contingent turned around and faced the hall. Some of them
stood in a crouched position like a runner waiting for the signal to make his start and were absolutely turned
around in rank.

AS THE MARSHAL of the day rode on back along the ranks giving orders, these fellows who had turned
around in ranks would make false starts. It wasn't the right order. They were waiting for a given order and
when it came, Fred Cormeer, the marshal of the day, blew a whistle and they converged on the door of that
hall from both ends of this contingent that had stopped there. Came in a wedge shape right for the door,
and they smashed the doors and windows, and the first man that stepped inside the hall was shot down.

When I saw them attack the place, I thought there was going to be a fight, I didn't know that anyone in the
hall had guns. I'd been in there a short time before and I hadn't seen any guns. There was only four or five
men in the hall. So it was as much a surprise to me as to anyone when the shooting started. When I saw
them make the attack I threw my coat, pulled it off and threw it on a sewing machine in the lobby of the
hotel and started for the door. But before I reached the door, the shooting started, so I turned around and
walked back over to where I threw my coat, I had intended to go out and take part in the fight, I figured
there'd be a fight and I was going to take my beating along with the rest of the boys. But before I got there
the shooting started.

Then they started coming into the hotel, going through into the back, to break through a partitioned door
back there, to come into the back of the hall, try to get in behind the boys and surround them. They was
coming in there with guns, one fellow had a hand ax. So they came in and they broke this door with the
hand ax....

While they were coming in, there was a man came in there who owned a grocery store there, Bill Scale. He
is dying with cancer up there now, got one eye eat out, and his ear off. I saw him not so long ago. And he
came in through there, and I was acquainted with him because I traded at his store at one time. He had a
grocery store there in town. So I told him to warn these fellows to be careful with the guns because the
proprietor's wife had gone into the back and the way they were coming in there, their mouth drawn like
horse hairs and everything, you could see that they were scared and I figured even if a chipmunk moved,
why, they'd be apt to shoot. So I told him to tell them to be careful with those guns. He looked at me but he
didn't make any reply. So the next fellow come in, a big strapping young fellow in sailor's uniform with a big
navy coat. I told him myself to be careful, that there was a lady back there. He looked at me and made no
reply but went on through.

So when they broke through in there, they found that the boys had ran out the back of the hall. Wesley
Everest, the man who had been shooting from inside the hall, was a returned soldier himself. He was
wearing his uniform that day and he was shooting with the gun that he had brought back from France. He'd
been cited for bravery over there and had been denied his medal because they'd found that he was a
radical. He told the boys that day, he said, "I fought for democracy in France and I am going to fight for it
here." He said, "The first man that comes in this hall, why, he's going to get it." So he made his stand right
in the middle of the floor that day.

After he ran out the back they chased him, shooting at him and him shooting back at them. They ran about
a quarter of a mile from there, ran down to the Skookumchuck River. And he started to wade the river but
for some reason or other he turned around and come back. Came back on the bank and he said, "If there is an officer in the bunch, I'll surrender; if there's not, lay off of me."

They attacked him and he killed Dale Hubbard down there, nephew of the president of the Southwest Washington Lumberman's Association, the man who had planned this raid. Then his gun jammed and they overpowered him. He started [hesitation] he threw his gun in the river when it jammed and started to fight with his fists but he was no match for eight or ten men. So they overpowered him, put a hair rope around his neck, tied it behind an automobile and drug him back into town behind an automobile. They drug him down within a half block of the city jail and hung him on a telephone pole. There was people there clawing at him,...jabbing him with bayonets, and no one in that crowd except one little woman that weighed about 90 pounds had nerve enough to say anything or do anything. Her daddy was a union man, a railroad man. So she slapped some of their faces, told them what a bunch of cowards they were, and pulled him down.

They took him and threw him in the corridor of the jail. He was unconscious from the beating and dragging and everything, and he lay there all afternoon. That night about eight o'clock, the mayor of the city turned the lights out all over the town, and while it was in darkness the mob went in and got him again. A man who is said to be a prominent doctor there used a razor on him, castrated him, like you would an alley cat, if you'd be that cruel. Then he washed his hands on the lawn of Timberman's, on Timberman's lawn there at a hydrant, and they went on down and hung him on a wagon bridge that crosses the Chehalis River about, oh, about a mile out of town.

Later in the night they came back, turned their headlights on the body, shot it full of holes, cut the rope, and let him fall in the river. Then they divided up the rope among themselves as souvenirs. I was back there a few years ago and they told me that some of the businessmen there still have their piece of rope. They show it around to special friends once in a while; piece of rope that Wesley Everest was hung with. Three days later the assistant attorney general came over there and he said, "We've got to get that body." He said, "If the unions get a hold of it, mutilated the way it is and get pictures of it in the Union Record and the other labor papers, why they'll have us pictured as a bunch of morons all over the United States." Says, "So we have got to get it." So they drug the river and got the body. Brought it up there and took some of his fellow workers out of the city jail there and forced them to bury him there out there along the railroad tracks.

That was the "unknown soldier's" grave he got for fighting for democracy here in his own land, fighting for the right of the workers to join a union of their own choice without the boss's permission, to do away with rotten conditions and long hours and low wages....

AFTER THAT, EVERY man in that community that was considered anywhere sympathetic to the organization at all was arrested and thrown into jail on one pretext or another. Mrs. McAllister, the proprietor's wife in whose hotel I was when this happened, was arrested and placed in jail, and she was kept there for 27 days trying to make her say that I wasn't in there. She was an old lady, born in Missouri. She was 60~odd years old, but still they kept her in jail 67 days trying to make her lie. [Discrepancy between 27 and 67 days.] But she was made out of too stern a stuff. When the trial came along, why she came up and told the truth....

So I was locked up and when the case was brought to trial I was charged with being the man who did the actual killing of Warren O. Grimm, the vigilante for whom we was tried. We was tried for one man, there was four men killed there that day of the vigilante group and we were tried for one of them, for Warren O. Grimm. The prosecution tried to place him down at the intersection of the street instead of in the doorway leading the raid where witnesses for the defense said that he was and where I saw him.
At this trial they had a special school for their witnesses, about a block from the courthouse, where they trained them to go through different pantomimes and different things to say certain things. For instance, one fellow there had got shot in the arm, just a superficial wound in the arm. When Grimm was shot, he had clutched his stomach and walked down around the corner and fell again down around the corner there. So this man's name was Fisher that was shot in the arm. So they schooled him to come up there and say that it was he that walked down around the corner there holding his wounded arm across his stomach. That, to get Grimm away from the door there where he was actually shot.

The prosecution at the beginning of the trial said they would stand or fall on the issue of whether the hall was raided. But in spite of all their tactics at keeping the evidence out and their prejudiced courts and everything else, we proved so conclusively that they did raid the hall that they backed down on that later on, denied saying it, and based their whole prosecution on the fact that some of the boys had fired shots from outside of the hall in trying to defend it.

The courtroom was packed with about 400 legionnaires during this trial. They were under salary for atmosphere, and they also brought down a company of National Guard from Camp Lewis and camped them on the courthouse lawn and maneuvered them so that they met the jury every time they went to lunch, going and coming. In that way, they secured a second degree verdict. The second degree verdict in the state of Washington calls for 10 to 20 years. When they brought in their verdict they also brought in a recommendation of leniency. The judge leaned as hard as he could to give a 25 to 40 years, a minimum sentence that was five years greater than the maximum that the law called for.

THROUGHOUT THIS entire trial there was a labor jury there which was composed of men from different labor councils in the Northwest, American Federation of Labor Councils and delegates from these unions. And they sat throughout the 13 weeks of the trial, just the same as the regular jury, heard the evidence and rendered their decision the same as the regular jury, except that they had nerve enough to stick to their verdict when they arrived at it, while the real jury compromised....

I want you to bear in mind that this labor jury was from an organization that was prejudiced against the lumber workers and that they were there proved how raw the whole thing had been. It was so raw that the Union Record, which was the American Federation of Labor newspaper in Seattle, had its doors padlocked because it told the truth about the trial and about the raid.

Eight of us were convicted of second degree murder and sentenced to 25 to 40 years in the state penitentiary at Walla Walla. I served 11 ½ years of that sentence, and came out of there in May 1931 to take care of a wife that was dying with a cancer.

They would go to my wife and to my mother and they would tell them the same thing, that if they'd come down there and get me to quit the union why I could be out. They'd say, "Gene's all right, but he got in bad company." But I told them that I was in the very best company I could get in. I was in there with union men and there's no better men on the face of the earth.

THE DAY THAT I was released from there the governor [Roland Hartley] was there. They called me on the carpet and he says, "Barnett," he said, "I am going to turn you loose to go out and take care of your wife. But, he said, don't you talk to any union man, don't you write anything for any union paper or have anything to do with any union because if you do it will be just too bad for you." I went in there a union man, and I come out a union man.
I came out and borrowed money and I took my wife to a sanatorium back in Savannah, Missouri, and when the six months' reprieve expired, due to the care that I had given her, she was still alive, so the governor sent me a parole.

The average prisoner, criminal, serves about a year on parole in the state of Washington, but being an extra bad man, being a union man and not guilty in the first place, I had to serve three years on parole. My wife died about nine months after I came out. I brought her back to Clarkston, Washington, and buried her there alongside her mother, and then I went back to work in the mines, but one of the first tasks I had when I came out of there was to help reorganize the local up there....

Centralia was not an isolated case. There's cases like this coming up every day. We are on the eve [1940] of another world war now, and there will be plenty of Centralias come up as this thing goes on and the struggle becomes more intense....

So hold your unions together and build them bigger and build them stronger. That is your one hope and your one salvation. Everything that we've got in the world today that is any good has been won by the union and has been won by a struggle and blood. Someone has had to pay for it. You don't get anything for nothing; if you do, it isn't worth having. So I say to you once more to fight for your union, be loyal to it and build it up.

REVISITING GENE BARNETT A REFLECTION by Archie Green

IN RETURNING AFTER four decades to an unfinished project, I am reminded painfully of my haphazard journey from waterfront shipwright and building-trades carpenter to academic folklorist and advocate for public cultural programs. While still at the trade in San Francisco I had collected books, sound recordings and related ephemera on labor history. In the 1950s I had corresponded with Bill Friedland in Detroit and Joe Glazer in Akron concerning their Labor Arts discs. Thus, when Bill arrived in Berkeley for graduate studies, we shared experiences and hopes.

Among the treasures Bill brought from Michigan, I particularly valued the "life-story" recording made by Eugene Barnett, a Centralia Massacre survivor. Like other history enthusiasts, I "knew" Centralia through the writings of John Dos Passos, Ralph Chaplin and Louis Adamic. Gene's voice on his "vocumentary" brought a tone of exciting authenticity to complement my reading.

WITH THE introduction of LP albums (1948-50), it became feasible to group and reissue 78-rpm recordings of labor songs. However, labor-education staffs and commercial producers alike sadly neglected oral histories and field documents by trade unionists. In 1956 Bill and I resolved to make a start with Barnett's narrative by releasing it in LP format.

What kept us from completing this task? In 1959 Bill traveled to Africa for field work and then on to Cornell's School of Industrial and Labor Relations. That same year I put my toolbox away and enrolled in library school at the University of Illinois.

By the time Bill returned to California (Santa Cruz), I had found work as a folklorist and moved about from Washington, D.C., to Austin, Texas, and points between. Retiring in 1982, I returned home and renewed visits with Bill. We had both been productive and involved in family and community life. Over the years we gave scant attention to the Barnett project.
In 1995 Bill queried me on the possibility of depositing copies of Barnett's "vocumentary" in several archives with a parallel account in a history journal. Of course, I agreed 40 years was long enough to be burdened by an unresolved effort. Immediately, we faced difficulty in reconstructing the genesis and chronology of the original discs. Neither Bill nor I had any knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the original 78-rpm records he had found at IWW headquarters a matter of potential concern to scholars.

Fortunately, I had donated my papers and field tapes to the Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina. Among these tapes I could retrieve two cassettes made from reel-to-reel tapes during a visit I had made to Eugene Barnett in Spokane on June 5-6, 1961. [Copies of the interview tapes, but not transcripts of same, have been archived in the libraries where the Barnett recording is available.] Literally, these tapes brought bittersweet feelings to the surface. Barnett, a life-long labor partisan, had paid "class-war dues" in Washington's penitentiary. He represented a platonic figure for labor activists: Blue Ridge Mountain native, Appalachian coal miner, Northwest logger, United Mine Workers rank-and-filer, Wobbly, Walla Walla prisoner, poet, cartoonist, craftsman, stubborn idealist, true believer.

Why had I neglected his story? How many similar tales remain buried in faulty memory and archive file? I cannot turn the clock back, but by joining Bill Friedland in salvaging a bit of Barnett's narrative, I touch a second mystery.

Barnett's wife, ill with cancer, had begged Washington's governor to grant her husband freedom. Out of jail, he turned to silver-fox farming. After Mrs. Barnett's death, Gene sought help from friends in the labor movement. On a trip to San Francisco in 1940, nominally to sell fox farm shares, he met a pioneer Wobbly, Ben Légère, himself a survivor of labor struggles in the East. During New Deal years, Ben, on relief, had access to a recording studio (either the State Relief Administration or the Works Project Administration). He persuaded Gene to go to the studio in "free time" (an evening or weekend) to record a life story.

MEMORY IS A sieve; many particles slip away, a few remain. About 1958 I met Ben Légère, probably in Berkeley. I do not recall a formal interview nor any details; however, he did tell me that, indeed, he had made the Barnett "vocumentary." Also, he gave me Gene's address in Idaho. Correspondence led me to Barnett, and, in time, a visit with him in Spokane, where he confirmed that Légère had made the 78-rpm discs and that he had received a set from Ben.

Barnett recalled for me that Légère had described his relief job as making records of past political speeches for the Library of Congress. Evidently, Ben held both elocutionary and technical recording skill. He may have left personal papers noting the nature and date, of his SRA or WPA work as well as his meeting with a Centralia "class war" veteran. As of the time of writing, I have been unable to establish Légère's work location. We suspect he may have made the recordings at a studio sponsored by the WPA, the Library of Congress and the University of California, Berkeley, Department of Music. This studio was involved in recording folk music in California between October 1938 and March 1940 and employed 35 workers. [See Sidney Robertson Cowell, "The Recording of Folk Music in California," California Folklore Quarterly, Vol. 1 (1942): 7-23.] Regardless, we are in Légère's debt for Barnett's story.

While seeking graphic art in Chicago's IWW headquarters, Bill Friedland chanced upon the Barnett discs. He guarded, re-recorded and transcribed the discs out of a sense of their utility within the labor movement. My meeting with Légère was fortuitous in that I had no prior knowledge of his relationship with Barnett. Ben gave me Gene's Idaho address. We corresponded; upon my first vacation at the University of Illinois, I tracked him to Spokane and made a few hours of tape detailing his life story beyond the facts and feelings of the studio session with Légère.
During my one meeting with Barnett he reflected that a man only lived after death when he had done something worthwhile in life. Viewing his prison years as unjust and vindictive incarceration by the state, he also saw his own role as exemplary for rebels. Gene's 1940 disc continues to testify to the beliefs of those fellow workers who sought a polity more humane than that dealt them by industrial capitalism.

Despite extensive empirical and ideological commentary on Centralia, its story will be told again and again, if only out of the need within a community to confront and revise a troubled past. Having given himself entirely to the aspirations of working people, Eugene Barnett now adds a few chips to the Centralia mosaic. Beyond the grave, his personal narrative contributes to public memory.

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Sidebar

PROVENANCE OF THE BARNETT RECORDING

By William H. Friedland

EUGENE BARNETT was a man of many facets; among other things, he was a miner, lumber worker, construction worker, craft worker and taxidermist, fox farmer, dictionary salesman, songwriter, poet, cartoonist and storyteller. He was also a member of the IWW and, between 1920 and 1931, a class war prisoner in Washington State Penitentiary at Walla Walla as a result of the Centralia events of Armistice Day 1919. Sometime in 1940 he made a recording of his experiences in the raid on the IWW hall in which four American Legionnaires were killed and Wesley Everest, an IWW member in the hall, was lynched. This addendum provides information on the discovery of the Barnett recording.

I found the original records at the headquarters of the IWW in Chicago, Illinois, around 1951-52. At that time Joe Glazer and I were recording our second album, Songs of the Wobblies, for Labor Arts, our self-created recording label. Joe was education director of the United Rubber Workers in Akron, Ohio, and I was working as an international representative of the United Automobile Workers in their research and Engineering Department in Detroit. We had been brought together by Bill Kemsley, the education director of the Michigan Congress of Industrial Organizations Council and a great aficionado of workers' culture and for whom I had previously worked as assistant education director for several years.

As we prepared to make out record, I happened to be in Chicago and dropped by the IWW headquarters with the hope that I might pick up some items such as silent agitators [these were gummed-label stickers that Wobblies could stick up on job sites urging fellow workers to join the IWW] to use in the program notes. My memory is that I talked to the general secretary of the IWW.

When I happened to mention recordings, the person I spoke to said that the Wobblies had some records. He searched and came up with a cardboard carton in which there were eight records. They were 78-rpm discs, obviously the product of a studio recording and not of a commercial character. I asked if I could borrow the records, promising to return them. He agreed and I carried them back to Detroit.
After I returned to Detroit I discovered that there were two identical copies of Barnett’s narration. The records were not in great shape. The UAW’s radio studio personnel edited the cleanest parts of each copy and made a single recording, which was put on a 33-rpm disk for me. This became my personal property. The original records were returned to IWW headquarters in Chicago along with the metal printer's cuts of silent agitators that I had borrowed to illustrate the program notes of the Wobbly album.

In 1956 I left Detroit for Berkeley to work on my doctoral degree and met Archie Green, who was living in San Francisco. Archie was working as a carpenter but was already heavily involved with his labor lore research. I played the Barnett recording for him, and we decided that this was the kind of story that should have wider circulation for labor historians. Archie later encountered Ben Légère, who had made the original recording.

The transcript of the recording was made at Cornell University when I was on my first academic appointment in the New York State School of Industrial and Labor relations. However, neither Archie nor I had done anything to move the recording into a public venue.

In May 1995 Archie and I were mulling over various aspects of labor history and agreed that, even if we could not move the Barnett recording into broader circulation, we would archive the recording and relevant materials in a number of libraries where they would be publicly accessible. The material now resides at the five depositories mentioned earlier, including WSHS.

The cassette now on file was made from two sources. I had the original record made for me by the UAW. Over the years the original disc developed a bubble in the first five minutes, which precluded copying. Fortunately, I had made at home an incomplete cassette recording of the tape's first 26 minutes. The cassette that has been archived was made from my original disc and my cassette copy. Although there is a discernable difference in the recording quality between the two sources, both are clearly audible.

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