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**The Experts in the Room: Empowering Multilingual Students
with Performing International Plays Workshops in English
Schools**

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The Experts in the Room: Empowering Multilingual Students with *Performing International Plays* Workshops in English Schools

Introduction

This article explores the connections between my academic work on theatre translation cultures in Britain – and in Europe more widely – and the topic explored in this special issue, namely indigenous language reawakening through theatre with young people. I come to these themes from my positionality as a white, able-bodied continental European woman and a migrant academic living and working in the UK, using my second language to communicate with students, colleagues, and readers. The topic of preserving linguistic diversity through education is personal and political to me: through it, I reflect on the ideological underpinning of my own state education in Italy – where the curriculum included English, French as well as Latin and ancient Greek – and on my role as a minority-language parent trying to raise my young girls as bilingual, keeping a connection with their heritage language alive.

Exploring linguistic variations and practising multilingual skills has been a passion of mine for as long as I have memory of myself. Growing up as an ostensibly monolingual Italian in Milan, with family living in different regions, I always took pleasure in noticing the phonetic differences in regional Italian accents, vocabulary and grammar between the North and South of the country. I also experienced first-hand the gradual decline of regional dialects, which my grandparents spoke as their mother tongues alongside standard Italian, and which younger generations in my family no longer practise. In my formative years, I watched American films in the original language on VHS, read German literature classics in Italian translation as part of the curriculum, and watched international theatre productions visiting my local theatre performed in Japanese and Polish, as well as plays in Italian translated from English, French and Spanish. I had the privilege to study for a year abroad in Paris, under the EU’s flagship Erasmus student mobility scheme, where I was exposed to an even more international theatre scene than in Milan. Then, in 2005, I moved to London and, while linguistic variety had increased in social settings – with people speaking new geographical variations of English and many more migrant languages – this rich diversity was not reflected in the language spoken on stage. ‘Why is this the case?’ I kept asking myself ever since.

My work over the past fifteen years has therefore focused on understanding and challenging the monolingual paradigm that shapes both British theatre culture and the UK education system. As research highlights, only around 3% of plays staged annually in the UK are works originally written in other languages and translated into English¹, compared with 25–60% or more on average in many European repertoires.² The UK’s entrenched monolingualism is reinforced by policies and practices in theatre programming, publishing, and education, where international literature and drama in translation are often excluded from curricula and exam specifications.³ The result is a systemic devaluation of linguistic diversity and a missed opportunity for young people – who may or may not have migrant heritage – to cultivate intercultural understanding, multilingual competencies, and imaginative connections to global stories.

In 2021, I founded Performing International Plays (PIP) as a direct intervention into these structural inequalities in British theatre and education. Originally conceived as an online resource showcasing twenty contemporary international plays in English translation – each accompanied by teaching materials to support educators to adopt these texts in their classes – the project sought to widen the cultural horizons of English, Drama, and Modern Foreign

Languages classrooms, placing multilingualism at the centre of storytelling, creativity, and critical reflection. The PIP website brought together plays originally written in sixteen languages and explored topics including displacement, colonialism, history's impact on the present, and life beyond Earth.

However, it quickly became clear that online resources alone could not shift a deeply entrenched culture of entanglements between histories, traditions and professional practices. Teachers needed confidence; students needed embodied, practical, communal experiences of translation and multilingual theatre; and schools needed skilled facilitators of relevant heritage who could model an ethos that celebrated linguistic difference. For this reason, in 2023 PIP partnered with Foreign Affairs, a specialist theatre company committed to international work in translation, to co-design a suite of in-person workshops led by multilingual artist-facilitators.⁴ These workshops have since reached hundreds of pupils in London and Kent and were recognised with the Outstanding Drama Initiative prize at the UK's 2025 Music and Drama Education Awards.

PIP workshops take a variety of forms: some focus on theatre translation, where students collaboratively translate excerpts from plays in languages such as Ukrainian, Arabic, French, Italian, German, Mandarin, or Spanish; others use translated or multilingual scripts as the basis for devising, scene study, or cultural exploration. All workshops prioritise a pedagogy of 'translationality', understood as a playful disposition towards linguistic curiosity, negotiation, collective meaning-making, and an appreciation for how language embodies worldview, identity, and belonging. As my analysis of the British theatre system argues, such dispositions are largely absent from the wider cultural field, which tends to treat linguistic difference as an obstacle rather than an asset. PIP was therefore designed to model alternative practices that value linguistic diversity and create space for young people – especially those who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL) or whose family heritage is multilingual – to become experts in the room, rather than deficit-framed learners.

Connecting PIP to Indigenous Language Reawakening: A Theoretical Bridge

Although PIP is a UK-based project and not an Indigenous theatre initiative, it resonates strongly with global movements for language revitalisation, reawakening, and resurgence, especially where young people use theatre and performance to reclaim linguistic agency. Drawing a conceptual bridge to Indigenous contexts strengthens the relevance of this article to the special issue's thematic focus and, importantly, situates PIP within a broader transnational conversation about what it means to work with languages that have been marginalised, suppressed, or rendered invisible by dominant sociopolitical structures.

Scholars of Indigenous and minoritised language revitalisation emphasise several core principles that align with PIP's pedagogical commitments. Although PIP operates within a UK context and works primarily with migrant, heritage, and global languages, its pedagogical commitments resonate with a wider international movement to challenge the colonial language hierarchies embedded in education systems. Indigenous scholars such as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Linda Tuhiwai Smith argue that the suppression of minority languages – whether through formal bans, assimilationist schooling, or the naturalising of monolingual norms – is a form of epistemic violence that severs young people from cultural knowledge, relational ways of being, and alternative worldviews. Simpson's writing on resurgence emphasises that language reawakenings occur through 'everyday acts' of

collective creativity, while Smith’s decolonising methodologies highlight how education must redistribute authority back to communities whose languages have been marginalised.⁵

PIP’s work aligns with these principles insofar as it introduces students to practices that decentre English, elevate the linguistic knowledge of EAL pupils, and invites young people to engage in acts of micro-resurgence, translating and performing stories that originate outside the dominant linguistic paradigm, yet connect with the heritage of pupils and facilitators in the classroom. While the project does not involve Indigenous languages, PIP responds to similar structural conditions – namely, the devaluation of linguistic diversity and the systemic privileging of one language over others – and offers young people an embodied, performative method to reactivate their linguistic agency. This connection does not collapse the differences between Indigenous sovereignty struggles and the multilingual realities of UK classrooms; rather, it situates PIP within a broader global conversation about the role of theatre in resisting linguistic homogenisation and nurturing the survival of marginalised languages through youth-led creative practice.

The transcript presented below documents a public conversation between myself, ML, and DH, Head of English at a large London academy that partnered with PIP for a year-long programme of workshops and hosted repeated visits from our facilitators. The conversation highlights the transformative effects of multilingual drama pedagogy on students’ confidence, oracy, behaviour, intercultural understanding, and engagement with the curriculum. It also foregrounds the hunger among young people for stories and languages beyond the scope of the English National Curriculum. By framing this transcript within the broader concerns of language survival and revitalisation, this article asks: What can multilingual theatre spaces offer to efforts to reawaken and sustain linguistic diversity among young people? How might translation for performance create spaces of relationality, identity work, and cultural resurgence? What pedagogical principles from PIP might be adapted for Indigenous and community-based applied theatre contexts? With these questions in mind, the transcript that follows provides rich insights into how UK-based youth engage with linguistic and cultural diversity through embodied theatre practice and how their responses may inspire further exploration in Indigenous language contexts globally.

The conversation took place at the University of Southampton in June 2025 at the Arts and Humanities Research Council’s Impact Accelerator Account South-East Cluster Annual Conference.

Panel Discussion Transcript

ML: Hello. My name is Margherita Laera and I am a Senior Lecturer in Drama and Theatre at the University of Kent, in the UK, where I am also Deputy Head of the School of Arts and Architecture. I am here as the founder of Performing International Plays (PIP), a project bringing contemporary international drama to secondary schools.

DH: And I’m DH, Head of English and Classical Civilization at a large academy in London. I worked with PIP by inviting and hosting a series of workshops for our students.

ML: We’re here to talk about how PIP workshops had an impact on DH’s school. My work in the past fifteen years has been concerned with understanding the barriers that theatre in translation faces in the UK – and I can tell you there are a lot of cultural and systemic barriers to international plays in Britain. The UK is an outlier in Europe by having only about 3-4%

of all the plays performed in a year being plays originally written in other languages. My research is about understanding the reasons behind this disparity, and what we can do to change the status quo in the UK. I believe in the value of theatre as a place where we can learn about other cultures, other languages, other stories and points of view. I really love going to see plays in translation. I'm also a theatre translator myself, and I have learnt so much by translating plays. I also think international plays can have a really important role for young people in terms of diversifying the curriculum, but also in providing representation and validation for migrant, minoritized identities, bringing people together through stories and characters that come from other parts of the world. I think learning about international plays and characters, and learning hands-on through theatre translation practice, have a huge, untapped educational potential that currently doesn't have any space in the English national curriculum. So this is why I invented Performing International Plays.

It was originally devised as a website of teaching and learning resources at performinginternationalplays.com. Then, I partnered with the theatre company Foreign Affairs to offer in-person workshops in schools where we get pupils to really experience what it's like to engage with a play written in a different language, understand its cultural context, and then stage it. Sometimes we teach the plays in English, and sometimes we get the students to translate the plays, if they have the language skills. We created the PIP website to spotlight a number of plays that we read which were already published in English, so they could be easily used by teachers. There are very few plays from around the world published in English translation. But what is there is also quite interesting. We read most of international plays that had been published and picked the ones that were most appropriate for secondary schools and could be used in workshops. And we created pages for each such as, for instance, *Fireworks* by Palestinian writer Dalia Taha.

We created Education Packs for all of the plays to make it easier for educators to adopt them. And we created activities, we filmed scene extracts in different versions, we filmed interviews with casts and suggested activities and resources for teachers, but also for young people to look at. And as I said, we have about 20 plays to choose from. In 2023, we decided that the website wasn't enough and that we needed to really go into the schools and bring our plays and ethos and enthusiasm to them. Hence the partnership with Foreign Affairs theatre company, and hence us reaching out to DH and his school. We have a group of excellent facilitators who all speak different languages and are theatre makers, translators, directors, actors, teachers, etc. We offer workshops to schools, responding to the specific school context, working with who is in the room, to create an experience that will bring people together thinking about stories that come from around the world. On our website, you can find a couple of documentaries, one of which was filmed at DH's school.

[Link to online documentary: www.performinginternationalplays.com]

ML: DH, tell us a little bit about your school, and what it was like to work with PIP and Foreign Affairs. What it was like for your students?

DH: Sure, my school is a large academy in London. We're part of a huge Multi-Academy Trust that covers many London neighbours. And one thing that's really happening across all of our schools – and across the UK in general – is that Drama departments are falling by the wayside. There is just not enough funding for them anymore. We're lucky enough to have a Drama Teacher, but she doesn't actually teach Drama because she's head of one of our year groups, so it's a real shame. So when PIP got in touch, they became our Drama department,

which was absolutely incredible. So finally, the kids had Drama. We usually fill up their Drama lesson with dance taught by a PE teacher.

So when PIP came into our school, and became our Drama department, they worked with the same group across three days, with a selection of students in all year groups in Key Stage 3.⁶ And we were very particular about the fact that it had to be a mix of not just the well-behaved kids we want to display to external providers, but also the kids who maybe aren't the best behaved, but could benefit from this opportunity. So there was a whole collection. We didn't have any behavioural problems, the kids all jumped totally into it, a little bit because of what I say in the documentary [about the diversity that PIP provided]. Everything they learn at school is by 'dead white guys', and they are not that. We are a school that is 6% White British. So the National Curriculum is designed for 6% of the kids that are there. Finally, they started to read, see, hear and be taught by different voices, discovering plays that they thought did not exist.

They started thinking: 'There is a play from Poland. Poland does have a theatre'. Or: 'There is a play from Jamaica. Jamaica does have theatre', and all these questions started to come in about why, why we don't teach this? And we explained to them, we actually had a right moment about the national curriculum, and it actually forced us, it encouraged us to change our curriculum in English. So now we are teaching books that are not necessarily directly from PIP workshops, but inspired by the variety in them. What PIP did is it highlighted to us that these kids are hungry to hear about stuff happening outside of the English national curriculum.

ML: Thank you for that. Can I just ask you, have you seen any impact specifically on the students, in terms of their engagement, attainment and also confidence? We have seen them grow a bit, because the journey started with a pilot workshop in the Summer of 2023 and then we got Arts Council England funding and we started our programme in Autumn 2023. We worked for a whole year with the school, ending in June 2024. We brought nine workshops in total to three groups of students, with each group being offered three workshops on the same play, returning to the same group to delve deeper into a play. That was really important for us: not to just be parachuted into a school and then leave, but to really work with you and work with the same students over a longer period. So what have you seen in terms of responses that you could capture outside of the workshops themselves?

DH: What we noticed immediately was an uptick in the kids' oracy. We did very little in Years 7, 8 and 9 around oracy, as it's not hugely important to the English National Curriculum. In Year 10 [at the age of 15] they then have to do an English speaking and listening exam. And if in Year 7, 8 and 9 they have never been exposed to public speaking, let alone Drama, this speaking exam terrifies them. So what we actually saw is three of the Year 9s, who did the third PIP workshop, three of them chose that experience to use in their speech. So immediately it had an impact on them. And for a little while, after the workshop you did on the South African play, where they were taught that South African word, 'Awéh', by the workshop leader, we saw that word being shouted out across playgrounds when they were kicking balls and such. So they adapted it to their environment. But most definitely, it brought out this confidence in them, and we actually started to hear a little bit of South African inflections going across the playground. So in terms of their oracy, that's what we've seen. The main impact in terms of their behaviour – because we picked kids that ordinarily aren't allowed to see outside people, external providers – their behaviour for a little while did improve, because they thought: 'Oh, wait, hold on. We got to do something quite fun,

something quite exciting, something that spoke to us a little bit. And maybe if we continue, then that'll happen to us again'. It didn't pass with all of them, but if this was something that the school would fund regularly, then most definitely there would be a behaviour change.

ML: I remember you saying that you would expect them to have a certain behaviour within the workshops as well, and that you were surprised. Can you tell us about this?

DH: What PIP did exceptionally well is they tailored the facilitators coming in to speak to them. PIP brought in a diverse group of people to come talk to them. The students got to talk to people who would speak to them on a level, but also the facilitators were not necessarily teachers – they were professionals, artists and facilitators. So they were able to speak to them in a way that anyone in their communities would speak. So the response to the workshops and their behaviour towards them was incredible. There were two kids in particular in the year, a group that I thought was going to be a disaster, who were two of the most boisterous kids in the room, naturally, but they were two of the most engaged kids in the room as well. So it certainly taught us a school to give these kids more opportunities.

Q&A

Q1: Could you use a project like this to campaign to change the curriculum?

ML: That is the plan in the future, if we can make it work. We would like to start locally from the ground up with the workshops and the schools, really learn from the experience, get the partnerships going, and understand what the feedback is from the students, teachers, facilitators, theatre company partners, so we can consolidate our offer. And then, when we got an award last year at the Music and Drama Education Awards, Outstanding Drama Initiative, we realised we were onto something. This has allowed us to be invited at the Music and Drama Education Expo in February 2026. And the idea is to have that platform to start conversations about the Drama curriculum there. But changing the Drama curriculum in the UK is obviously not easy, and also it might not change the culture very much, because not very many schools actually do offer Drama in the UK, and not very many students take Drama qualifications. So what we would like to do is also work with Modern Foreign Languages and English teachers to diversify their curriculum, and this is what DH hinted at earlier. But that really requires a lot of time and a lot of funding, which we don't have. Arts Council England has funded us once, but they've rejected us many other times. So we're just regrouping and rethinking. But yes, that's really very much the plan.

DH: The things that really worked for the curriculum side of things at our school is that PIP have got so many resources, so in terms of changing Key Stage 3 curriculum, which we have a lot more power over, those resources really helped. But also, what happened was that PIP asked the kids what play they wanted to do, this was very important in your ethos and practice, so the kids picked the play for the PIP workshop, and once the kids learnt that this was possible, then all of a sudden, they now wanted to pick our new Year 8 text, and we agreed. So it's bringing in that sort of culture – empowering students.

Q2: Just following up on what DH said, it's desperately sad that you don't have a Drama teacher, so obviously you don't offer Drama GCSE qualifications. In terms of impact and lobbying teams within your school, and within your Academy Trust, it sounds like a really fruitful focus for impact policy, if you can push the re-adoption of Drama teaching by the school and by the Academy?

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DH: Hopefully, there will be more funding from government to schools, and the Multi-Academy Trust itself is quite financially viable. After seeing the sheer lack of acting ability that was there because there's no one coaching them – it was not just PIP, but it was also seeing the school musical that the Music department run this year – after seeing this, our principal started to rejig around our funding model, and we are now looking at hiring a part time Drama Teacher for the next academic year. It's not going to cover all year groups, but most definitely some. PIP has contributed to the impact of bringing in at least someone part time for us.

Q3: I was thinking about how what you're offering can intersect with regular subjects, I'm thinking about translation in particular, and how this can connect nicely with English. And so students can pick up a play in a language coming from their own heritage, and try to translate it, and then also perform it. I think it would sort of close the loop.

ML: Yes, absolutely. Thank you so much for this question, actually, because we haven't really discussed the translation element. So in DH's school, we did not really pursue that kind of workshop. But in many other workshops that we've run across England, we have an option to go into a Language classroom, rather than in a in a Drama or English classroom, or to at least be an interdisciplinary classroom, or a whole-day Languages & Drama workshop, and translation is very much our focus. For instance, we've gone into a school in Canterbury, and we worked with a group of Ukrainian refugees who were recent arrivals. We picked a Ukrainian play – actually, the students picked one out of three that we had in our catalogue, and we also added to the group – we had a dozen Ukrainians and a few more students who were doing GCSE Drama. We were keen to mix cultures and make sure that there were some students who really loved performing. We ran a two-day workshop, where we translated extracts from the Ukrainian play and then staged it. We had small groups work on one scene each. There were five scenes and five groups, each with some Ukrainians, some English as an Additional Language students (EALs) and some English as a First Language students. They were all collaborating and learning from one another. The Ukrainians were translating the first draft, and then the native speakers were trying to make it into a more fluent English. And this exchange was amazing and lovely. This is one of the types of workshops we offer.

We have also gone into really prestigious independent schools where the language provision allows us to translate really long extracts in a very short time, because the students are very proficient. But you know, however much you manage to do, including languages and translation for us is really important. One of my particular interests is in serving the EAL community. EALs are about 20% of all English and Welsh pupils in schools, and there's very little in the way of first or second language support for them. So they come with different abilities in English at different times in their lives and in their learning journeys in their first and second languages. And I believe translation for the stage can be a really useful tool to engage EALs with their second language, and allow us to centre their learning, going from their first language into their second language in a group experience with other speakers of English, so that they can scaffold the learning of their second language upon on their first language. All students can really benefit from peer-to-peer learning, whilst sharing cultural heritage with others. Our workshops flip the traditional hierarchy by displacing the primacy of English and framing multilingual students as the experts in the room.

Conclusion: Theatre Translation as a Tool for Linguistic Justice

The conversation documented in this transcript offers a vivid illustration of what can unfold when young people are invited to engage with linguistic and cultural diversity through theatre. Across the schools that PIP and Foreign Affairs have worked with, students have repeatedly demonstrated that multilingual performance and translation tasks provide opportunities not only for artistic experimentation but also for profound shifts in identity, confidence and interpersonal dynamics. These shifts position PIP's work within a wider landscape of applied theatre approaches that support language revitalisation and youth empowerment across global contexts. For example, PIP workshops with Ukrainian refugee pupils in Canterbury similarly highlighted the potential for multilingual theatre to support language development and identity affirmation. Students reported that the workshop 'helped my language and improved my vocabulary' and that 'my favourite thing was making me be myself,' while students from minoritised backgrounds said the project restored their desire to continue studying performing arts. Teachers observed Black and Global Majority students 'coming out of their shells', 'taking the lead', and 'communicating across languages'.⁷ These moments reflect a broader finding across applied theatre research: youth gain confidence when they experience themselves as meaning-makers in spaces that value their heritage languages and cultural knowledges.

PIP workshops, in partnership with Foreign Affairs, emerge from the belief that fostering multilingual spaces through theatre translation can be an act of linguistic empowerment and renewal, even when the languages involved are not Indigenous in the settler-colonial sense. In the same way that Indigenous scholars like Simpson and Smith emphasise the need to rebuild linguistic life through relational, embodied, youth-centred practice, PIP offers a model for how theatre can help young people reclaim agency over languages that have been diminished or erased by monolingual schooling. These resonances do not imply equivalence: Indigenous language revitalisation is grounded in land, kinship and generational continuity, whereas PIP addresses linguistic marginalisation produced by contemporary migration and the legacies of British colonialism. Yet the structures of harm, such as the suppression, erasure, or devaluing of 'foreign' languages, are comparable in important ways, and so are the creative practices of resistance.

PIP's workshops enact what Simpson might describe as everyday acts of resurgence: small but potent practices through which young people collectively reactivate linguistic relationships, imagine alternative cultural futures, and disturb the monolingual common sense of the classroom. Drawing on Smith's insistence that decolonising education requires redistributing authority, PIP's invitation for EAL and multilingual students to become the experts in the room – leading translation decisions, teaching vocabulary, shaping performance – reconfigures power dynamics and affirms the cultural knowledge these students carry. In this way, PIP participates in the global movement toward linguistic justice, offering a youth-centred model that foregrounds the transformative potential of collaborative theatre translation as a tool for cultural renewal and resistance.

¹ The latest figures come from the British Theatre Repertoire 2013 and 2014, but things have hardly improved since then, judging from early data shared by Rebellato (see the forthcoming British Theatre Repertoire 2023 report, publication details to be confirmed). See Dan Rebellato, David Edgar, David Brownlee, 'British Theatre Repertoire 2013: Report by the British Theatre Consortium, SOLT/UK Theatre, and BON Culture, supported by Arts Council England', published May 2015, available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/513c543ce4b0abff73bc0a82/t/55551653e4b0c8565f6fb1ff/1431639635706/British+Theatre+Repertoire+2013.pdf>, accessed 17 December 2024. I calculated the percentages based on the narrow data set presented by the authors of the report on pp. 10-12. See also Dan Rebellato, David Edgar, David Brownlee, 'British Theatre Repertoire 2014: Report by the British Theatre Consortium, SOLT/UK Theatre, and

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BON Culture, supported by Arts Council England’, published May 2016, available at:
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/513c543ce4b0abff73bc0a82/t/55551653e4b0c8565f6fb1ff/1431639635706/British+Theatre+Repertoire+2013.pdf>, accessed 17 December 2024.

² I have based this estimate on unpublished anecdotal evidence emerged in interviews of European theatre-makers which I conducted to support my publication, *Playwriting in Europe: Mapping Ecosystems and Practices with Fabulamundi* (London: Routledge, 2023).

³ See Margherita Laera, ‘The Theatre System’, in *Translationality: Literature Across Languages*, ed. Matthew Reynolds, Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

⁴ See www.foreignaffairs.org.uk.

⁵ Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017; Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence*, Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2011; Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, London: Zed Books, 2012.

⁶ Key stage 3 is equivalent to the first 3 years of Secondary School in the UK – Year 7, 8 and 9 – with kids aged between 11 and 14.

⁷ See Laera, ‘The Theatre System’, in *Translationality: Literature Across Languages*, forthcoming.



PIP Workshop, in partnership with Foreign Affairs, in a School in London, 2023. Photo Héctor Manchego Rodríguez.

456x304mm (300 x 300 DPI)



PIP Workshop, in partnership with Foreign Affairs, in a School in London, 2024. Photo Margherita Laera.

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