

How Should a Person Be (Transpersonal)?

Ben Lerner, Roberto Esposito, and the Biopolitics of the Future

Political Theory

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Abstract

This essay complements Roberto Esposito’s analysis of the political category of the person by outlining the role of literature, and especially the genre of the novel, in consolidating this category and allowing it to do its political and affective work. The essay shows how Ben Lerner’s 2014 novel *10:04* dismantles three central features of the traditional novel’s poetics of the person: its investment in the notion of literary character, its use of fictionality, and its structural reliance on the narrative future. Lerner’s novel, like Esposito’s biopolitical work, aims to overcome the hierarchical divisions within human life that are endemic to the category of the person and that have historically fostered biopolitical violence. Both projects intimate a less destructive politics—what Lerner calls “the transpersonal” and Esposito “the impersonal.”

Keywords

biopolitics, character, Esposito, Roberto, Lerner, Ben, person(hood)

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Introduction: Back to the Future

Ben Lerner's 2014 novel *10:04* is organized around two seemingly incongruous cultural references. The novel borrows its title from the climactic moment (at four minutes past ten) when lightning strikes the courthouse clock in the 1985 movie *Back to the Future*, a film it evokes textually as well as visually (through a reproduced still image);¹ at the same time, it also repeatedly alludes to Walter Benjamin's Angel of History. As is familiar enough, Benjamin launches his iconic Angel in the ninth of his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in which Paul Klee's painting "Angelus Novus" (which *10:04* also reproduces)² provides Benjamin with the image of an angel who "would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed." Yet the angel fails to achieve that integration, as he finds himself caught by a storm that "irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned."³ The Angel, in other words, has his *back to the future*. This fairly silly pun serves as a key to the novel in different ways: first, it is characteristic of the novel's sustained semiserious tone, as it presents the thoughts and feelings of its hyper-self-conscious, overanxious, and awkwardly oversharing narrator; second, the casual coupling of two decidedly distinct cultural realms epitomizes the novel's promiscuous range of cultural reference; and third, and most importantly, these two references foreground the novel's decidedly political concern with different ways of imagining and anticipating the future.

Such an explicit concern with the future is very different from customary invocations of Benjamin's Angel, who is usually cast as an icon of an ethically attuned, melancholic fidelity to the catastrophes of the past. Lerner's citation of the Angel shifts readers' attention from the past to the future; it announces that his novel is an attempt to imagine its way to a *different future* by neutralizing more customary ways of articulating present and future. At the novel's opening, the future projects anxieties and commitments that overwhelm its (at least) semiautobiographical narrator. He has just signed a contract for a novel on the basis of "an earnest if indefinite proposal";⁴ he is diagnosed with a heart condition that gives him "a statistically significant" chance of sudden death;⁵ his best friend Alex has engaged his services as a sperm donor, without really resolving the issue of his paternal involvement; and if that weren't enough, he is also a particularly self-conscious contributor to anthropogenic climate changes, who compulsively imagines the future "underwater" and "wrecked by dramatically changing weather patterns."⁶ At the outset of the novel, this surfeit of future assignments and responsibilities has a disabling effect on the narrator's composure, as he feels "[his] future collapsing in upon [him]."⁷ The simultaneously literary and political project

of *10:04*, then, is to redeem the present from a future that only diminishes it. As I show, Lerner's narrative deviates from the formal template of the traditional novel, with its reliance on character, plot, narrative, and fictionality—all elements that shape a particular apprehension of the future that goes at the expense of the significance of present experience. During a medical checkup near the beginning of the novel, Lerner's narrator notes his inability to "read the realistic fiction the world appears to be," and his failure, not unlike that of Benjamin's Angel, to integrate information "into a larger picture"; all he can do is "detect local texture variations."⁸ *10:04*'s nervous, intense, careful, hyper-self-conscious notation of feelings, thoughts, encounters, and events is a strategy to capture the significance of human life *without* making it dependent on narrative closure or literary transformation—which is to say, on a future that inevitably *postpones* the significance of present experience.

10:04 imagines a form of life that is not constrained by a particular account of human flourishing that, as the Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito has argued, pervades the cultural, legal, philosophical, and social domains. These domains have promoted human dignity and value through the notion of the person, and have in the process obliterated what *10:04* calls "transpersonal" dimensions of experience. In his books *Third Person*, *Persons and Things*, and *Two*, Esposito has analyzed the person as an organizing device in a tradition that can be traced back both to Christian religion and ancient Roman law;⁹ while it officially aimed to elevate human life—most notably in the Enlightenment and then again after the Second World War—the notion of the person has unwittingly become "an agent of depersonalization" endangering the very life it was called on to protect from external threats.¹⁰ If the notion of the person renders human life available for the ascription of rights that shield it from use and abuse, it only does so by introducing a separation *within* the human between "a natural, merely biological, corporeal element and another [transcendent] element."¹¹ Far from rendering human life inviolable and indivisible, Esposito writes, "it's precisely the category of the person that produces and widens the gap between rights and man to begin with."¹² The person, in other words, asserts the *separability* of human life; in this way, it ends up perpetuating the violence it officially aims to contain.

So how can we undo this endemic violence? How can we "sabotag[e] the dispositif of the person" that separates human life from itself?¹³ I argue that *10:04*'s effort to affirm the *inseparability* of human life and to cancel its dependence on the future can be understood as an attempt to move beyond the (bio)politics of the person and imagine a politics of what Esposito calls "the impersonal" and Lerner "the transpersonal." *10:04* complements Esposito's focus on philosophy, law, and the life sciences by underlining the political role of literature in making such a thing as an integrated person

apprehensible at all. In light of literature's role in reflecting and shaping the category of the person, it makes sense to read Lerner's *literary* project as also a (*bio*)political intervention that aims to imagine life as inseparable from itself. The crucial twist in *10:04*'s development is that the self-conscious notation of mundane experience that the narrator initially intends as a preparation for the novel he is contracted to write gradually comes to replace that planned novel; the scrapbook of provisional notes for a novel *is* the actual novel we are given to read; the virtual becomes actual, and life and writing become inseparable, and no longer dependent on future transformation and fulfillment.¹⁴

10:04 is not the only contemporary North American novel that mobilizes the powers of literary form to capture an indivisible present. In the last few years, young writers like Tao Lin, Sheila Heti, Michael W. Clune, and Lerner have begun to script new forms of life that do not imagine life as somehow requiring development or completion, but that instead explore strategies for affirming the sufficiency of life as it is noted down in their deliberately provisional works.¹⁵ Instead of plotting life as a historical trajectory depending on a future that redeems it, they aim to capture, in Lerner's words, "an actual present alive with multiple futures."¹⁶ Such works count as instances of life writing that operates "on the very edge of fiction";¹⁷ they present accounts of human life that refuse to subordinate the reality of the present to the promises of the future. In what follows, I will focus on the (bio)political stakes of Lerner's experiments with literary character, fictionality, and the future; on, that is, how they script human life as transpersonal rather than personal.

The Biopolitics of the Person

So what exactly is a person? While the notion also has a theatrical pedigree,¹⁸ it is most commonly traced back to Christian theology and to Roman law; as Joseph Slaughter has remarked, the term is vague enough to fit "often-contradictory political theories of law, history, and the subject."¹⁹ While Esposito's book *Two* traces the notion's implication in the tradition of political theology, his *Third Person* privileges its provenance in Roman law, which pictures social life as a set of relations between three categories: things, persons, and actions. By being recognized as persons, some instances of human life can become the carrier of rights and duties;²⁰ this recognition allows human life to transcend its biological contingency and enjoy protection by the law—as persons, human beings cannot be violated, used, or abused. The problem that will come to haunt the Roman distinction between person and thing is that human life is never only personal—it is, for one thing, also irrevocably corporeal, and the body remains out of the purview of Roman law, which only

extends rights to human beings *as persons*, and considers the body as merely a “particular genus of things.”²¹ The regime of the person, in other words, operates as “an artificial screen that separates human beings from their rights”;²² it introduces a split in human life—a “double separation”²³ both within and between human beings—that leaves room for one part of that life to violate and subjugate others. For Esposito, the capacity “for separation and selection” forms “the most important effect of the apparatus of the person itself.”²⁴ The person has thus played an enabling role in the history of biopolitical violence that Esposito has theorized and historicized in his philosophical trilogy *Bios, Communitas, and Immunitas*.

Roman law was fairly candid about the difference between the human and the person and about the imperfect overlap between human life and rights—it did not, for instance, recognize slaves as persons, and it carefully codified different processes (such as manumission and emancipation) through which humans could enter and exit the category of the person;²⁵ apart from the categories of the person and the nonperson, it developed “the intermediate stages of the almost-person, the semi-person, and the temporary person.”²⁶ Yet when modernity reached for the notion of the person in its efforts to “protect a world that is constitutively exposed to risk,”²⁷ it updated the notion only to elide the distinction between the person and the human. “The moment all human beings were considered to be bearers of a rational will,” Esposito writes, they were “for this very reason also considered to possess a legal personality.”²⁸ And “[w]hen the French Revolution went on to sanction the equality of all people,” the institution of human rights consecrated the person as the safeguard of human life.²⁹ “The difference between *homo* and *persona* that the Romans upheld,” Esposito notes, “no longer had a reason to exist.”³⁰ The Declaration of the Rights of Man of 1789, in other words, emblemized a process in which the person officially came to protect human life from use and abuse.

Except of course that we know that it hasn't. And, Esposito argues, nor could it have. By generalizing the notion of the person, the modern age has not, as it might have believed it had, abolished the split between person and thing; instead, it has merely generalized a separation that is endemic to the notion of the person, which by definition only exists in opposition to things, or in a dynamic that “keep[s], or push[es], other living individuals to the edge of thingness.”³¹ The person continuously needs to assert its superiority over things (by, for instance, possessing them) or human nonpersons (such as slaves).³² Importantly, the person is not just a vague and inconsequential conceptual abstraction, but plays a “performative role . . . a role productive of real effects.”³³ Once personhood is officially extended to all humans, this performative force is aimed even more radically at human life itself: “Far from

disappearing, the splitting action penetrated from the outside inside, dividing the human being into two areas: a biological body and a site of legal imputation, the first being subjected to the discretionary control of the second."³⁴

If the idea of the person is expected to unify the human individual as an indivisible and inviolable entity, it in fact locates a fateful split *within* human life that serves as a barrier between life worth living and life unworthy of protection; the person is "a unity consisting of two asymmetrical parts," which "are distinct but not separate, joined but not mingled."³⁵ This barrier operates both *within* the human being and *between* categories of human beings—it creates "internal division" as well as "external expropriation."³⁶ Abandoning parts of human life to the violence that is needed to assert the superiority of the person, the "ideology of the person"³⁷ is perfectly compatible with the violence it was historically called on to remedy. While the person spreads the illusion of "the inseparable relationship between body and soul in a single entity,"³⁸ it *in fact* perpetuates a split within human life that can at each moment morph into an assault by some parts of human life on others. For Esposito, this is what happened in Nazi biopolitics: when Nazism performed its "elimination from human life of any transcendence with respect to its immediate biological given,"³⁹ it merely capitalized on a separation within human life that the notion of the person secures. Because of this fateful complicity, Esposito holds that a politics of the future—what he calls "a biopolitics that is finally affirmative"⁴⁰—will have to "reverse" the category of the person "into the mode of *the impersonal*";⁴¹ it will have to undo the separations and exclusions that taint the logic of the person, in favor of "a way of being human" that "finally coincides with only itself."⁴² To the extent that the naturalization of the person has, as I argue, been a literary as well as a political project, contemporary innovative writing such as that of Lerner contributes to the imagining of such an undivided life.⁴³

The Novel and the Person: The Biopolitics of Character

One reason for the longevity and pervasiveness of the politics of the person is its flexibility; it carves up human life in ways that are variable and unstable, and it operates through the manipulation of "intermediate situations, zones of indistinction, and exceptions that regulate the movement, or the oscillation, from one status to another."⁴⁴ The zones of indistinction at the boundaries between different categories of life are subject to constant social disciplining, policing, and reimagining. Esposito himself is most interested in the historical role of philosophy, law, and the life sciences in negotiating the thresholds between different forms of life; yet a more comprehensive account

of the functioning of the person must also mention the role of literature, and especially of the novel genre, in naturalizing the idea of a continuous and coherent human person even while perpetuating a disavowed split within human life.⁴⁵

Literary scholars like Joseph Slaughter and John Frow have argued that the novel has not only reflected, but *actively shaped*, the dominant understanding of the person—as the unbreakable unity of outward action and inward deliberation, of psychological development and social integration. As John Frow remarks, “it is the novel that constructs . . . the affective and moral technologies of self-shaping inwardness that . . . inform much of our contemporary understanding of what it means to be a person.”⁴⁶ What is crucial here is the novel’s reliance on literary characters—those textual entities that generations of readers have, since the eighteenth century, learned to endow with agency and depth. If “the juridical conception of the person” assumes that “the self is a perduring identity responsible for all of its past states and able to make commitments with respect to its future states,”⁴⁷ it draws on a sense of biographical continuity that is codified in the form of the novel character—a subject of self-formation, of *Bildung*, that realizes itself through time.⁴⁸ In his study of the reciprocally constitutive trajectories of the novel genre and of the notion of human rights, Joseph Slaughter has remarked that naturalizing such a developmental and integrated notion of the person requires less the “coercive” force of law—which has only so much purchase on social developments—than the “consensual” work of culture—a culture that was, from the eighteenth century to fairly recently, heavily invested in the literary novel.⁴⁹

So what exactly is a literary character? And how can we explain its particular affective and political power? Literary critic Catherine Gallagher has underlined the co-implication of the eighteenth-century rise of the novel genre with the emergence of the category of fiction and the particular ontology of the character it enables. A novel character, Gallagher explains, is never simply an individual, but can instead refer to “a whole class of people in general” rather than to “persons in particular”;⁵⁰ she notes that what saved early novels from charges of libel was precisely their “nonreferentiality that could be seen as a greater referentiality”—as a reference to a whole category of people rather than an *actual* individual.⁵¹ A fictional character, Gallagher notes, is “at once utterly finished and also necessarily incomplete”: it is “utterly finished” in that it is fully determined by the “finite set of sentences” by which it is described (it has no existence outside of these sentences); yet because readers’ experience of the character is not exhaustively captured by that set, it is also “necessarily incomplete,” and so invites readers to imaginatively complete it.⁵² Having *neither actuality nor the potential for self-development*, characters depend on readers for their completion. This completion

is enabled by what Gallagher calls “the mutual implication of [characters’] unreal knowability and their apparent depth”:⁵³ unlike real people, literary characters grant us access to intimate thoughts, feelings, and motivations, and this unreal access allows readers to imagine a familiarity and intimacy that is unchecked by customary epistemological boundaries. This explains literary characters’ “peculiar affective force”;⁵⁴ it explains that readers engage with characters as more than just textual features—what John Frow calls “the excess of character over the formal means of its representation.”⁵⁵

When we confront Gallagher’s ontology of character with Esposito’s critique of the person, we see that the character’s official role in naturalizing a conception of an undivided subject more surreptitiously also conveys the *separability* of human life. Having neither actuality nor the potential for self-development (being “utterly finished”), and being intimately accessible to the reader (the character’s “unreal knowability”), the literary character, while seeming to be a fully integrated individual, is in fact *internally divided* between its own incomplete core and a potentiality for development that is granted to the reader; it is, in other words, subject to the manipulations, desires, and projections of other forms of life. Reading Gallagher with Esposito, we can appreciate how the novel genre cultivates a disposition to consider (some) human life to be available for rational and moral imputation; because of the character’s unreal knowability, fiction helps naturalize the disavowed split at the heart of personhood in ways that encounters with embodied, actual people resist.

This intimate affinity between the person, fictionality, and character explains why *10:04* neutralizes the ontology of fiction and of character; to that effect, it paradoxically presents its characters as undeniably actual, yet at the same time irreducibly potential. Take Lerner’s narrator-character himself: while he is clearly a partly fictional entity—if only because the novel includes a fiction-within-the-fiction, in which most of its characters appear distorted and with different names, to underscore the novel’s capacity for fictionalization—he is *also* identifiably the real Ben Lerner. If the references to the places where the real Ben Lerner grew up and lives, and to a successful first novel and a *New Yorker* story that quite clearly indicate Lerner’s *Leaving the Atocha Station* and “The Golden Vanity” only hint at the real-life Ben Lerner, the fact that “The Golden Vanity” is reprinted as *10:04*’s second part and attributed to the novel’s narrator makes it impossible *not* to identify the narrator with the author. The same goes for several of Lerner’s essays that are recycled in the novel as part of its narrator’s stream of consciousness. If traditional novel characters are, for Gallagher, “enticingly unoccupied” as they bracket reference to all too particular individuals,⁵⁶ Lerner’s narrator, we could say, is *annoyingly occupied* by the identity of the actual Ben Lerner,

without, however, fully coinciding with him—without, that is, fully surrendering his potentiality to *differ* in some, if not most, respects from the actual Ben Lerner. *10:04*'s narrator is paradoxically fully actual yet retains a measure of potentiality; indeed, his potentiality is inseparable from his actuality, as it is the autobiographical dimension of the novel that keeps this potentiality from being given over to the reader, from subjecting the narrator-character to the power of the reader. Lerner's narrator, then, is a "truly undivided individual" on whom the divisive logic of the person has no purchase.⁵⁷

The Politics of Metafiction: The Actuality of Possibility

If Lerner's writing is routinely described as metafiction, these metafictional elements—such as the proximity between author and narrator, the many explicit reflections on writing, and the inclusion of essays, stories, and parts of a long poem that Lerner earlier published under his own name—emphatically do *not* serve to expose fiction as pure artifice or expose reality as an imaginative construct;⁵⁸ instead, and in marked contrast to more familiar postmodern deployments of metafiction, they serve to assert the irreducible *actuality* of the reality that the novel describes. These metafictional twists qualify *10:04* as belonging to what critic Mitchum Huehls has recently identified as the genre of "post-theory theory novels": in these novels, metafictional devices do not emphasize "the word's inevitable mediation of the world" or "our insuperable alienation from the real," but rather "incorporate the word into the world, using language to build new, idiosyncratic notions of the real."⁵⁹ In the idiosyncratic reality that *10:04* shapes, actuality and virtuality coexist without one being subordinated to the other. Near the end of the novel, *10:04* reproduces a quaint booklet about dinosaurs that, Lerner notes in an interview, "is based on a book [he] co-wrote with a great kid [he] tutored."⁶⁰ Yet if the dinosaur book is fully actual (it exists outside of the world of the novel), Roberto, the character with whom the narrator collaborates on it, does not, Lerner adds, resemble the kid he tutored very much. The novel's metafictional elements, in other words, never detract from its actuality, but in fact serve to affirm the inseparability of actuality and virtuality; their inclusion in the novel grants the novel world the possibility of further variation and development, and saves it from being *merely* actual and finished.

For Esposito, it is ultimately "the founding distinction between possible and real" that makes human life "accessible to biopolitics"—and we have already seen how the ontology of character furtively promotes this separation.⁶¹ Esposito turns to Gilles Deleuze's work for exploring that distinction and for theorizing reality as no longer in opposition to potentiality, but as

always made up of both the virtual *and* the actual; within the real, Esposito notes, “there always remains a portion of the virtual that precedes or exceeds the full actualization”; the real always “retains a zone of virtuality,” and this zone can only be divorced from it through the violent imposition of a dispositif such as that of the person. Affirming the inseparability and reality of human life, then, means affirming a “perpetual tension” “between actual and virtual.”⁶² *10:04*’s position “on the very edge of fiction,” its status as “neither fiction nor nonfiction,” is a strategy to shape reality as inextricably both actual and virtual;⁶³ it does not require transformation, yet retains the capacity to change. In an interview, Lerner locates this concern with the reality of the virtual at the heart of his literary and political project. He remarks on “the idea that all empirical poems are in some sense the record of a poet’s failure to actualize the virtual capacity of the medium.”⁶⁴ Lerner, as I noted, presents *10:04* as a blueprint of a novel that does not get written, as a virtual creation that yet becomes an actual product; he thus deliberately uses this “literary technique for defeating actuality, for suspending it and keeping the [text] in touch with the virtual.”⁶⁵ The text of *10:04*, in other words, is undeniably actual, but it has not for all that exhausted its capacity for further change; instead, its reality is inescapably entwined with the (merely) virtual. By keeping faith “with the virtual possibilities of the medium,” literature opposes “the total triumph of the actual,” and testifies to “the power of artworks to allow us to experience a gap between the possible and the merely real.”⁶⁶

10:04 reimagines the novel as a place where “the distinction between fiction and nonfiction didn’t obtain”; in this place, “the correspondence between text and world [is] less important than . . . what possibilities of feeling [are] opened up in the present tense of reading.”⁶⁷ The text aims to present experiences, events, thoughts, and lives in their actuality while affirming their continued capacity to differ from themselves. *10:04* signals this ambition in its epigraph, which it borrows from Walter Benjamin:

The Hassidim tell a story about the world to come that says everything there will be just as it is here. Just as our room is now, so it will be in the world to come; where our baby sleeps now, there too will it sleep in the other world. And the clothes we wear in this world, these too we will wear there. Everything will be as it is now, just a little different.

This last sentence is repeated as a refrain through the book,⁶⁸ and it points to *10:04*’s project of rendering reality newly significant and indeterminate (an indeterminacy that the book marks by the repeated image of a “flicker”)⁶⁹ without detracting from its actuality. Faced with an approaching superstorm, the narrator perceives in his best friend “a difference in her appearance, an

unspecifiable radiance”; while shopping, “everything remaining on the shelves also struck [him] as a little changed, a little charged,” as “what normally felt like the only possible world became one among many, its meaning everywhere up for grabs, however briefly”; a container of instant coffee reveals its participation in “the mundane economy” as “the social relations that produced” it “began to glow within it . . . stirred inside their packaging, lending it a certain aura.”⁷⁰ *10:04* asserts the inseparability of the actual and the virtual through its particular mode of observation and notation (rather than transformation).

In *The Coming Community*, the book in which Lerner encountered Benjamin’s parable, Giorgio Agamben notes that the invisible change that Benjamin’s parable recounts consists in the introduction of “a possibility there where everything is perfect.”⁷¹ This seemingly paradoxical operation, for Agamben, resembles nothing so much as the function of halos in Christian theology: “The halo is this supplement added to perfection—something like the vibration of that which is perfect, the glow at its edges.”⁷² Through the halo, and, by analogy, through *10:04*’s literary and political operations, lives and things enter into what Agamben calls “a zone in which possibility and reality, potentiality and actuality, become indistinguishable.”⁷³ In this zone, living and writing are no separate realities; this is why Agamben talks about “a fusional act, insofar as specific form or nature is . . . mixed and dissolved in a new birth with no residue.”⁷⁴ Lerner’s novel neutralizes the regime of the person by granting human life a sufficiency that does not cancel its potentiality.

Complete yet unfinished, sufficient yet indeterminate: *10:04* also evokes this logic of minimal difference—“Everything will be as it is now, just a little different”—through the art project of the narrator’s girlfriend Alena, who creates an “Institute for Totaled Art.”⁷⁵ The idea is simple: Alena collects and displays works of art that have been damaged, and that insurance companies have declared to have “zero value.”⁷⁶ Objects are “formally demoted from art to mere objecthood” and preserved in that condition in the “strange limbo” of the Institute.⁷⁷ The remarkable thing is that this changed status is often invisible. Contemplating a seemingly unharmed Cartier-Bresson print, the narrator reflects how “it had transitioned from being a repository of immense financial value to being declared of zero value without undergoing what was to me any perceptible material transformation—it was the same, only totally different.”⁷⁸ If the traditional logic of the readymade, most commonly associated with Marcel Duchamp, elevates “an object of utility” through the signature of the artist, it merely ends up converting economic into cultural (and thus more economic) capital; the totaling of art, in contrast, fully liberates the object from the cash nexus: totaled art works are officially withdrawn from

circulation, and can never again acquire monetary value. If the artwork is normally a mere placeholder of future or potential gain, totaled art again becomes a contingent, material, vulnerable actuality that paradoxically possesses a broader range of potential futures: the narrator notes that “an art commodity that had been exorcised . . . of the fetishism of the market was to me a utopian readymade—an object for or from a future where there was some other regime of value than the tyranny of price.”⁷⁹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the verb “total” both as “complete” and as “damage beyond repair”—as indicating both full actualization and the possibility of a future that is not just a restoration of the past (it is “beyond” repair). As I show in the next section, such a genuinely indeterminate—as opposed to a pre-scripted—future is the future that is at stake in *10:04*’s biopolitical project.

The Present Perfect and the Transpersonal Future

The future to which *10:04* studiously turns its back is the one that figures in the narrative logic of the person. In this logic, the future serves as moment of closure that retroactively renders the present significant. The corollary of this is that present experience is considered as insufficiently meaningful in itself—the very position that *10:04* dismantles. In his work on narrative theory and the philosophy of time, Mark Currie has theorized narrative fiction as a device for training readers to think of the biographical present “as if it were the object of a future memory.”⁸⁰ Narrative fiction organizes human life as if it required the sanction of a significant closure in order to be recognized as meaningful, as making narrative sense. Apprehending the present as the object of a future memory makes it possible to enlist the present as part of a significant whole, yet it also empties it of intrinsic meaning; the result, for Currie, is “the depresentification of lived experience”—a diminishment that divorces lived experience from its meaning and demotes it to a provisional status.⁸¹ Even as the narrative logic underlying literary character has naturalized a particular understanding of what it means to be a person, it has also subjected human life to, in Currie’s words again, a “depresentification that makes us live life as if it weren’t present.”⁸² This logic ends up impoverishing the present: “it is possible,” Currie remarks, “that the reading of narrative fiction . . . robs us of the present in the sense that it encourages us to imagine looking back on it.”⁸³

Currie theorizes narrative fiction as a sustained exercise in apprehending the split between the present we read and the future on which this present depends for its significance. The lives we read in narrative fiction are constitutively split between an incomplete present and a postponed meaning. In

light of Esposito's critique of the person, Currie's focus on the future's diminishment of the present complements Gallagher's account of literary character; indeed, narrative fiction's structural dependence on the future and its investment in character, which are ostensibly dedicated to its imagining of an indivisible person, are two aspects of its naturalization of the separability of human life. Just as characters have an "unreal knowability" because they are "utterly finished," narrative futures deprive human life of a genuinely open future. As Currie notes, in the case of narrative fiction, the future at any moment in the story is only seemingly open, as it is in fact already written down to be discovered by the reader: "in life the future does not exist yet, but in narrative fiction, it does."⁸⁴ Because of "its determined and accessible future," narrative sculpts the person as a form of life that is officially free but in fact split between a present existence and a postponed meaning that overshadows the present.⁸⁵

10:04 dismantles this narrative logic by thinking it through to its quasi-absurd conclusion: if the status of present experiences as the objects of future memories is indeed what robs them of their significance, then only experiences that remain unremembered can claim the intensity and vitality that *10:04* wants to capture. The objects and people emitting "an unspecifiable radiance" at the prospect of the approaching superstorm can only preserve their splendor because the storm fails to materialize, which allows these experiences to persist in the realm of the counterfactual;⁸⁶ only when the future that was supposed to render them meaningful fails to arrive can these experiences be preserved as fully significant, rather than as the objects of a future memory. The narrator spells out this paradoxical logic:

It was as though the physical intimacy with Alex, just like the sociability with strangers or the aura around objects, wasn't just over, but retrospectively erased. Because these moments had been enabled by a future that had never arrived, they could not be remembered from this future that, at and as the present, had obtained; they'd faded from the photograph.⁸⁷

These experiences escape the anticipation of their own future remembrance, and so become fully meaningful in themselves.

10:04 elaborates another almost absurd consequence of the logic of the narrative future: if this logic robs events of their meaningfulness, this means that in customary narrative fiction, *nothing really happens*. *10:04* makes this clear at the end of its second part, the only part that presents itself as a conventional piece of fiction. Here, the (third-person) narrator *does* remember past intimacies, yet realizes that this remembrance means that these intimacies never really happened: "he realized: I do remember the drive, the view,

stroking Liza's hair, the incommunicable beauty destined to disappear. I remember it, which means it never happened."⁸⁸ Here the overtly fictional interlude breaks off, and the novel continues in its first-person mode—a mode that, it appears, is more adequate for presenting experiences as more than the diminished prospect of their future remembrance. If any “experience of presence depend[s] on its obliteration,” *10:04*'s notation remains strictly dedicated to the present.⁸⁹ Such experiences of presence are repeatedly ascribed to works of art on which *10:04* clearly models its own project: Alena's art is said to be “so powerfully located in the present tense that it was difficult to face,” and Donald Judd's memorial boxes are less interested in memory than in “the immediate, physical present, registering fluctuations of presence and light.”⁹⁰

I have been arguing that Lerner's undoing of the interlocking logics of character, fiction, and the narrative future are strategies for dismantling the political and affective regime of the person, and for imagining what Lerner calls “the transpersonal.” If Esposito's discussion of strategies for overcoming the person remains relatively tentative and open-ended, he makes clear that the non-personal is not simply *anti*-personal: instead, it is situated “at the confines of the personal; on the lines of resistance, to be exact, which cut through its territory, thus preventing, or at least opposing, the functioning of its exclusionary dispositif.”⁹¹ This reversal of the person, that is, affirms life as a reality that resists exclusion and separation—as “what does not allow—what contradicts at its roots—the hierarchical division” between “a rational subject” and “a bare material substrate.”⁹² *10:04*'s writing of the transpersonal opens up the regime of the personal to an engagement with a life that cannot be separated: by disrupting the separation between “the possible and the necessary”⁹³ and by, as I will show, implicating the reader in the community the novel enacts and interrupting the feedback loop between the individual and the collective and opening it up to a genuinely transpersonal community. Through its engagement with the reader, and through its affirmation of a virtuality that inheres in reality, *10:04* already *enacts*, and thus demonstrates the real possibility of, such a transpersonal community in the present—a present it captures “as it is now, just a little different.” In one of the novel's refrains, this is a “form of collectivity that can stand as a figure of its possibility”—a possibility it refuses to foreclose by determining it.⁹⁴

On the Verge: Collectivity and Possibility

The emphasis on the virtual dimension of reality and on the provisionality of writing allows *10:04* to implicate the reader—who is regularly directly addressed in the second person—in its imagining of a more vibrant reality. In

an interview, Lerner remarks on his literary ambition “to shift attention from the finished and polished artifact to the process of thinking and feeling in time—to let the struggle to express be expressive.”⁹⁵ *10:04* aims to imagine a continuity between the world it describes, the process of description, and its consumption by the reader. The narrator notes that he likes John Keats’s habit in his letters to “always describ[e] his bodily position at the time of writing, the conditions of his room.”⁹⁶ When describing his trip to Marfa at the beginning of the novel’s fourth part, the narrator himself collapses the distance between reality, writing, and reading: “I remember the address (you can drag the ‘pegman’ icon onto the Google map and walk around the neighborhood on Street View, floating above yourself like a ghost; I’m doing that in a separate window now).”⁹⁷ This is an instance of what is shortly after described as “the red-eye effect in the photographs of [the narrator’s] youth, the camera recording the light of its own flash, the camera inscribing itself in the image it captured.”⁹⁸ Moments such as these synchronize three activities: perception, remembrance, and the verbalization of thought. Literary critics Armen Avanesian and Anke Hennig see such synchronization as a key operation of what they call the present-tense novel. And even if *10:04* only intermittently adopts the present tense, its “asynchronic present” removes the present from its teleological subordination to the future and opens it up to alternative pasts and futures.⁹⁹

The ambition to “make [readers] experience the present as [they] read: this field, this minute” implicates readers in the reality *10:04* renders.¹⁰⁰ Lerner has remarked on “the instability and participatory nature of the form” he uses;¹⁰¹ this is not only reflected in the novel’s intermittent second-person addresses, but also in references to its audience as “a second person plural on the perennial verge of existence”¹⁰²—the “verge” where is it both irreducibly actual (as the very fact that this statement is read proves the reality of such an audience) and virtual (as it requires the intervention of *10:04* to make that audience apprehensible *as* a community, as a second person *plural*). In their discussion of the genre of the novel of commission, Rachel Sagner Buruma and Laura Heffernan note that a shift from product to procedure—which also occurs in *10:04*—circumvents the difficulty of making characters representative or exemplary; what serves as “the antidote to representativeness” is, they note, “relationality”¹⁰³—a shift from a novel *about* contemporary life, *about* New York, *about* climate change, or *about* masculinity to a process of writing that makes an affective and political intervention by *enacting* relation and community.

For Esposito, this shift from representativeness to relationality is a strategy for sabotaging the personal. As the regime of the person operates through separation, selection, and categorization, it relies on a logic in which lives are

identified through their participation in larger categories—categories that they instantiate and represent. Liberating lives from their reliance on *suprapersonal* categories confirms them as singular entities available for *transpersonal* connections that do not rely on shared characteristics. Drawing on the work of Simone Weil, Esposito notes that “the part of the person that should be rejected” is “the logical thread that ties individual self-consciousness to collective consciousness.”¹⁰⁴ Interestingly, Esposito (again following Weil) describes this logical thread in grammatical terms, as the relation between the first person singular and the first person plural—“the immune mechanism that introduces the ‘I’ into the simultaneously inclusive and exclusive circle of the ‘we.’”¹⁰⁵ Neutralizing that mechanism does not involve a radical break with the first person singular, but, as in the case of *10:04*, a sabotaging of the first person singular’s representativity by insisting on its irreducible singularity (as never not Ben Lerner). This, Esposito writes, “preserves the singular pronoun by protecting it from the simultaneously self-protective and self-destructive slide into the general.”¹⁰⁶ Lerner’s narrator, as I already noted, is simply too close to the author to stand for a larger category of lives (artists, writers, men, Americans); at the same time, his virtual noncoincidence with Lerner situates him, in Esposito’s terms, “at the point of intersection between no one and anyone”; he is a “non-personal person.”¹⁰⁷ Lerner has noted his novel’s concern with “the transpersonal”—the process in which “the personal starts to dissolve, get emptied out,” and what is revealed is a community that need not be fabricated, but that “is already there.”¹⁰⁸

Whitman’s Democratic Everyman

This concern with the transpersonal distortion of the logic of representativeness is reflected in the novel’s engagement with Walt Whitman. Lerner’s narrator is initially ambivalent about Whitman’s ambition “to be a democratic everyman,” to present his poetry as “a textual commons for the future into which he projects himself.”¹⁰⁹ As the narrator sees it, the (literary) problem with this ambition is that Whitman has to surrender his existence as “an empirical person” and become “nobody in particular” in order to figure as a bare “marker for democratic personhood.”¹¹⁰ The result is that Whitman’s idiosyncratic memoir *Specimen Days* is bizarrely bereft of “life’s particularities.”¹¹¹ *10:04*, of course, is full of such particularities, and it enacts a “textual commons” in the present without projecting it into the future. The problem, in other words, is that Whitman invests too much in a future that empties out the present. Still, *10:04* gradually comes to understand itself as a variation on Whitman’s program. Near the end of his residence in Marfa, the narrator makes “a kind of peace” with Whitman; he will live up to Whitman’s

democratic ambitions *not* by emptying out the present for a better future, but by writing “an actual present alive with multiple futures.”¹¹²

In a short essay on the “people’s mic”—a procedure, especially popular during the Occupy movement, in which “a group gathered around a speaker repeats back whatever the speaker says in order to amplify a voice without the equipment that would require a permit”—Lerner hails this process as an affirmation of “the transpersonal subject” that *10:04* also seeks to uncover; again, the point is less the content of this transmission than what “the form itself is saying”: that “there is a kind of corporate personhood distinct from the legal fiction that protects financial institutions’ pursuit of private gain . . . the people’s mic asserts the priority of the transpersonal subject it convenes.”¹¹³ Significantly, Lerner recognizes Whitman’s work as “a textual prototype of the people’s mic” (67)—as a precursor in the effort to mobilize literary form for the enactment of transpersonal community, and to shape “the transpersonality of prosody.”¹¹⁴

In its last two paragraphs, in the middle of an account of a walk through a blacked-out New York, *10:04* suddenly shifts to the future tense, as if to signal that it has now, on the strength of its book length enactment of transpersonal community, earned its way back to a different future. The two paragraphs continue to describe the walk in the future tense, and the remarkable thing is that, apart from this shift in grammatical tense (already prefigured a few pages before, which inadvertently shift from the past to the present—and back),¹¹⁵ nothing else changes: events are still described in great, seemingly trivial detail; indeed, the events are so mundane that, the narrator notes, they “would sound improbable in fiction.”¹¹⁶ The future, this suggests, is less the triumphant transformation of the present than a continuation of an already fully meaningful present—a present in which, we read, “faceless presences were flickering, every one disintegrated, yet part of the scheme.”¹¹⁷

In its very last lines, *10:04* yet seems to demote the walk through New York to the status of the object of future remembrance. Yet no sooner is this option raised than the text returns, one last time, to “the time of writing”—as a moment “of coeval readership” (93) that escapes the deterministic grammar of the person and that enables a mode of transpersonal relationality and address:

Sitting at a small table looking through our reflection in the window onto Flatbush Avenue, I will begin to remember our walk in the third person, as if I’d seen it from the Manhattan Bridge, but, at the time of writing, as I lean against the chain-link fence intended to stop jumpers, I am looking back at the totaled city in the second person plural. I know it’s hard to understand / I am with you, and I know how it is.¹¹⁸

It is significant that the passage imagines itself inhabiting “the time of writing” rather than the fictional distance signaled by the “as if”; the passage’s assertion of the continuity between life and writing affords a “totaled” perspective on the city—a city liberated by the blackout. The passage ends with a significantly truncated quotation from Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”: where Whitman’s original line reads “I project myself—also I return—I am with you, and know how it is,” *10:04* only adopts the affirmation of connectedness while it excises Whitman’s practice of projecting himself into a future that dislodges the present even if one can return from it. For *10:04*, transpersonal connection is enacted in the present, or not at all.

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Notes

1. Ben Lerner, *10:04* (London: Granta, 2014), 10.
2. *Ibid.*, 24.
3. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 257–58.
4. Lerner, *10:04*, 4.
5. *Ibid.*, 5.
6. *Ibid.*, 40 and 14.
7. *Ibid.*, 7; also 14, 40.
8. *Ibid.*, 6–7.
9. Roberto Esposito, *Two: The Machine of Political Theology and the Place of Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 6.
10. *Ibid.*, 7.
11. Roberto Esposito, *Third Person: Politics of Life and Philosophy of the Impersonal* (London: Polity, 2012), 97.
12. Roberto Esposito, *Terms of the Political: Community, Immunity, Biopolitics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 114.
13. Esposito, *Two*, 10.
14. Lerner’s narrator is less an accomplished novelist transforming experience into meaning than what Rachel Sagner Buruma and Laura Heffernan, commenting on Roland Barthes’s lecture course “The Preparation of the Novel,” have called “a note taker who knows that he or she is already living in a fully meaningful

- world already.” See Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan, “Notation after the ‘Reality Effect’: Remaking Reference with Roland Barthes and Sheila Heti,” *Representations* 152 (2014): 85.
15. Buurma and Heffernan focus on Lerner’s first novel *Leaving the Atocha Station* and especially Sheila Heti’s *How Should a Person Be?* Heti’s novel gradually overcomes the split between life and meaning, between experience and literature, which it most memorably evokes in its “Interlude for Fucking,” where the Heti character-narrator insists that she “do[es]n’t understand this reading business when there is so much fucking to be done” (121); later in the novel, she discovers the value of merely “recording” and “looking ... really looking” (298)—the value, that is, of the observations she has been recording all along even while she failed to write the play she was commissioned to write. A comparable commitment to the present animates Tao Lin’s *Taipei*, a novel whose provocatively affectless notation remains tied to a present that is rigorously disarticulated from any past or future that is more than a few seconds away. I am also thinking of Michael W. Clune’s heroin memoir *White Out: The Secret Life of Heroin*, which presents a carefully crafted phenomenology of addiction that insists on the paradoxically persistent novelty and freshness of “the power of dope” (5). Sheila Heti, *How Should a Person Be?* (London: Vintage, 2014); Tao Lin, *Taipei* (New York: Vintage, 2013); Michael W. Clune, *White Out: The Secret Life of Heroin* (Center City, Minnesota: Hazelden, 2013).
 16. Lerner, *10:04*, 194.
 17. *Ibid.*, 237.
 18. See Peter Goodrich, “The Theatre of Emblems: On the Optical Apparatus and the Investiture of Persons,” *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 8, no. 1 (2012): 47–67.
 19. Joseph Slaughter, *Human Rights Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 57.
 20. *Ibid.*, 17.
 21. Esposito, *Two*, 92.
 22. Esposito, *Third Person*, 83.
 23. Esposito, *Terms*, 117.
 24. *Ibid.*, 115.
 25. Esposito, *Third Person*, 10; *Two*, 89–94.
 26. Esposito, *Terms*, 117.
 27. Roberto Esposito, *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 55.
 28. Esposito, *Third Person*, 82.
 29. *Ibid.*
 30. *Ibid.*
 31. *Ibid.*, 10.
 32. Roberto Esposito, *Persons and Things: From the Body’s Point of View* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), 47–48.
 33. Esposito, *Third Person*, 9.

34. Ibid., 83.
35. Esposito, *Two*, 91 and 88.
36. Timothy Campbell, "'Enough of a self': Esposito's Impersonal Biopolitics," *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 8, no. 1 (2012): 44.
37. Esposito, *Third Person*, 5.
38. Ibid., 71.
39. Ibid., 8.
40. Esposito, *Bíos*, 157.
41. Esposito, *Third Person*, 101.
42. Esposito, *Terms*, 122.
43. Such an undivided life figures in Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* project, and especially in its last installment, *The Use of Bodies*, under the name of "form-of-life." "Form-of-life," for Agamben, is "a life that can never be separated from its form, a life in which it is never possible to isolate and keep distinct something like a bare life" (207). "Form-of-life," like Esposito's "impersonal" and Lerner's "transpersonal," allows for intimacy and contact that is "unmediated by any articulation or representation" (273). In this essay, I have opted for Esposito's analysis of the person over Agamben's categories because that notion more accurately captures the specific literary operations of Lerner's literary biopolitics. Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).
44. Esposito, *Terms*, 115.
45. Because of the vagueness and the flexibility of the category of the person, it is more accurate to associate the historical trajectory of the novel with the person than with the bourgeois individual, as is more commonly done. The robust individualism on display in, for instance, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, which is often credited as the first novel in English, offers only one version of personhood. In Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel*, the *locus classicus* of the linkage of the early novel and the individual, the category of the person to a large extent overlaps with that of the individual, which is appropriate for eighteenth-century England—for Watt, "a whole society mainly governed by the idea of every individual's intrinsic independence . . . from other individuals" (60)—but which fails to anticipate the nineteenth- and twentieth-century mutations of the novel, which is marked by more complex calibrations of the tensions between the drive for independence and the need for accommodation; shifting the critical vocabulary from the individual to the person foregrounds the historically flexible relations between the individual and the aggregate, and the shifting strategies through which the novel has mapped and policed the "zones of indistinction" along the borders of human life. Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (London: Pimlico, 2000); for the recalibration of the relation between individual and community in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century novel, see Nancy Armstrong, *How Novels Think: The Limits of British Individualism from 1719-1900* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European*

- Culture* (London: Verso, 1987); and Bruce Robbins, *Upward Mobility and the Common Good: Toward a Literary History of the Welfare State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).
46. John Frow, *Character and Person* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), x.
 47. *Ibid.*, 81.
 48. Slaughter, *Human Rights Inc.*, 51.
 49. *Ibid.*, 54–55.
 50. Catherine Gallagher, “The Rise of Fictionality,” in *The Novel, Volume 1*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 342.
 51. *Ibid.*
 52. *Ibid.*, 358.
 53. *Ibid.*, 356.
 54. *Ibid.*
 55. Frow, *Character and Person*, 17.
 56. Gallagher, “The Rise of Fictionality,” 351.
 57. Campbell, ““Enough of a self,”” 44.
 58. Lerner, *10:04*, 174–76 and 193–95.
 59. Mitchum Huehls, “The Post-Theory Theory Novel,” *Contemporary Literature* 56, no. 2 (2015): 288.
 60. Ben Lerner, “Interview with Tao Lin,” *The Believer* (2015): n.p.
 61. Esposito, *Third Person*, 148.
 62. *Ibid.*
 63. Lerner, *10:04*, 237 and 194.
 64. Ben Lerner, “Interview with Gayle Rogers,” *Contemporary Literature* 54, no. 2 (2013): 225. Lerner has elaborated this idea in Ben Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016).
 65. *Ibid.*, 226.
 66. *Ibid.*, 231.
 67. Lerner, *10:04*, 171.
 68. *Ibid.*, 19, 21, 54, and 239.
 69. *Ibid.*, 21, 28, 108, and 238.
 70. *Ibid.*, 18–19.
 71. Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 54.
 72. *Ibid.*, 55.
 73. *Ibid.*, 56.
 74. *Ibid.*
 75. The project is based on artist Elka Krajewska’s “Salvage Art Institute,” and *10:04*’s description of it in an essay Lerner wrote for *Harper’s Magazine*. Ben Lerner, “Damage Control: The Modern Art World’s Tyranny of Price,” *Harper’s Magazine* (Dec. 2013): 43–49.
 76. Lerner, *10:04*, 129.
 77. *Ibid.*, 130.
 78. *Ibid.*, 133.

79. Ibid., 134.
80. Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 10.
81. Ibid., 31.
82. Ibid., 86.
83. Ibid., 30.
84. Ibid., 18.
85. Ibid., 20.
86. Lerner, *10:04*, 18.
87. Ibid., 24.
88. Ibid., 81.
89. Ibid.
90. Ibid., 27 and 180.
91. Esposito, *Third Person*, 14.
92. Ibid., 147.
93. Ibid., 19.
94. Ibid., 239; also 116.
95. Lerner, "Interview with Gayle Rogers," 236.
96. Lerner, *10:04*, 212.
97. Ibid., 163.
98. Ibid., 166.
99. Armen Avenassian and Anke Hennig, eds., *Der Präsensroman* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 22 and 172. In an academic essay on John Ashbery's poetry, Lerner has himself noted how a reflexive attention to writing, far from alienating readers from a supposedly disenchanted world, can paradoxically generate a more intimate relation with readers. Ashbery's best poetry, Lerner argues, "makes us read about our reading in real time" (206). By reflecting their reading back to the reader, "Ashbery's poems allow [readers] to attend to [their] attention" (209); readers "experience mediacy immediately" (203), and so inhabit the present of reading. Ben Lerner, "The Future Continuous: Ashbery's Lyric Mediacy," *Boundary 2* 37, no. 1 (2010): 201–13.
100. Lerner, "The Future Continuous," 208.
101. Lerner, "Interview with Gayle Rogers," 236.
102. Lerner, *10:04*, 157.
103. Buurma and Heffernan, "Notation," 89.
104. Esposito, *Third Person*, 102.
105. Ibid.
106. Ibid.
107. Ibid., 107 and 106.
108. Lerner, "Interview with Tao Lin," n.p.
109. Lerner, *10:04*, 168.
110. Ibid.
111. Ibid.
112. Ibid., 194.

113. Ben Lerner, "A Note on the Human Microphone," *Critical Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (2012): 66–67.
114. Lerner, *10:04*, 113.
115. *Ibid.*, 233.
116. *Ibid.*, 239.
117. *Ibid.*, 238.
118. *Ibid.*, 240.

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