

DEFINING SPACES: *GIOVANNI'S ROOM* AND THE JOURNEY TO IDENTITY

A Thesis by

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in English.

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## DEDICATION

For Brad, my best friend and anchor in all of my defining spaces.

Though we do not wholly believe it yet, the interior life is a real life, and the intangible dreams of people have a tangible effect on the world.

James Baldwin  
“The Discovery of What it Means to be an American”

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## ABSTRACT

James Baldwin argues throughout his work that identity and an honest sense of self can only be attained through a personal journey that involves more than just movement from one point to another; it must also lead to a change within and an acceptance of self. In *Giovanni's Room*, the main character David travels a journey devoid of personal growth and acceptance. A white, homosexual man, David finds himself trapped in a white, straight, masculine, American ideal which does not define him. He spends the novel trying to outrun and reject his past and aspects of his identity which he wishes to ignore. Through David's struggles, Baldwin shows a connection between internal and external spaces, and establishes a link between choice and acceptance when creating a personal identity. Baldwin establishes self-reflection to be the only means of creating a personal identity that is able to balance acceptance with self-invention. He explores this self-reflection in terms of internal/external and choice/acceptance throughout the novel, showing the struggle to be both personal and shared with the community to which one attempts to belong. In this essay I examine the connection between internal/external and choice/acceptance in light of Baldwin's belief that every American must undertake an honest journey of self-discovery in order to establish an inclusive rather than exclusive personal and national identity. I link that journey of identity to David's perpetual movement through the inner and outer spaces of the novel, a movement which reflects that of his ancestors and many Americans before him. I also explore American views of masculinity and homosexuality, and how Baldwin shows these views to affect David (and all Americans) in his search for self and home.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. ARGUMENT	3
BIBLIOGRAPHY	34



## Defining Spaces: *Giovanni's Room* and the Journey to Identity

James Baldwin opens his 1956 novel *Giovanni's Room* with a reflection on notions of space and belonging. David, the main character, studies his reflection in the window as he contemplates a kind of ancestral movement through space, mentioning that his ancestors “conquered a continent, pushing across death-laden plains, until they came to an ocean which faced away from Europe and into a darker past” (Baldwin 3). However, despite their attempts to move away from their own histories, American immigrants found themselves merely staring into the “darker” past as David now stares at his fading reflection in the darkening window pane. This darker past is that of a country in which identities are lost and denied: lost as immigrants have left their homelands in an attempt to start a new life, and denied as the roar of the majority silences the voice of the minority. Yet identities are also created as these new Americans attempt to carve a space for themselves through self-invention, a concept that would become a hallmark of their new country. The roar of the American majority is answered by the voice of Baldwin, who as both a black and gay man, truly embodies the struggle of the minority to understand itself and to find its place. Despite taking an active role in the American civil rights movement, Baldwin ignores issues of African Americanness in *Giovanni's Room*, taking up the topic of personal identity instead. While avoiding overt commentary on black-white race relations, he deftly illustrates that notions of equality are linked with those of identity. The two are intertwined because, as Baldwin frequently notes, you must know and accept who you are before you can exercise or fight for your rights as a human being. His treatment of identity and equality is still relevant today: words penned fifty years ago in response to the fight for racial

equality evoke feelings of frustration and hope that resonate in the current struggle to achieve equal rights for homosexuals. Yet both race and homosexuality are traits that cannot be changed, and as such, must be accepted before one can move forward in life.

Baldwin argues throughout his work that identity and an honest sense of self can only be attained through a personal journey that involves more than just movement from one point to another; it must also lead to a change within and an acceptance of self. Since he emphasizes the growth which results from the journey and not merely the destination, Baldwin creates a novel that is a journey in itself. He leads the reader through David's physical and emotional spaces to a final truth: inner spaces (that which is within) must be faced and accepted in order for one to find and claim one's place in the world. While critical opinion, including that of Trudier Harris, Kathleen Drowne, Luminita Dragulescu, and Kemp Williams, has acknowledged Baldwin's many spatial references in *Giovanni's Room*, it has not examined the function that both space and movement *through* space serve in the novel. For Baldwin, personal turmoil and identity confusion fade away in the growth fostered by honest personal exploration. Baldwin uses David to show what happens when that journey of exploration is false: David spends the novel trying to outrun and reject his past and aspects of his identity which he wishes to ignore, instead of stopping to face and accept that identity. He believes that he is free to choose every aspect of his identity, and so his movement through outer spaces does not equate to inner change.

Starting with his mention of David's ancestors, Baldwin highlights this dichotomy of acceptance and choice, showing it to be a distinctly American struggle. The struggle

began with the framers of the Constitution, for they wrote the document which would shape America by *choosing* the rights and traits which they wished to claim for their country. The notion of choice is also reflected in the nation's immigration laws. America's first naturalization law in 1790 limited citizenship to "free white persons." Matthew Jacobson notes that this law was challenged with the "massive influx of highly undesirable but nonetheless 'white' persons from Ireland," and so "whiteness was subject to new interpretations" (Jacobson 7). This law clearly brought about a self-invention in terms of race, with notions of whiteness being open to reflection and consideration. The concept of self-invention is even more evident in America's Naturalization Act of 1802, which made immigrants "free to change their nationality," and so, as Arthur Mann points out, Americans became "a bundle of rights, freely chosen" (Mann 82, 46). These "freely chosen" rights stem from those that the framers set forth in the Constitution, and are inaccessible for some even to this day. Baldwin deals with the problem of chosen versus accepted identity throughout *Giovanni's Room*. He discusses self-invention in his essay "In Search of a Majority," saying that "everybody was suddenly here in the melting pot ... without any intention of being melted. They were here because they had wanted to leave wherever they had been and they were here to make their lives, and achieve their futures, and to establish a new identity" (*Essays* 217). Yet Baldwin recognizes that this new future must somehow reconcile the "darker past." David's ancestors found it "their necessity to make themselves over in the image of their new and unformed country," and though that image was dark and exclusive, they continued to "push" their way through space in their search for a place ("In Search of a Majority," *Essays* 217). Their movement is futile, however, in that their

attempts to establish a new identity are hindered by their inability to truly divorce themselves from their roots, which cannot be chosen.

Baldwin believes that in order to find a balance between choice and acceptance, Americans must be honest with themselves about both personal and national identities, for “before we can do very much in the way of clear thinking, we must first crack the American image and find out and deal with what it hides” (“In Search of a Majority,” *Essays* 218). Benedict Anderson's definition of nation is helpful in “cracking” this American image. In his book *Imagined Communities*, Anderson defines a “nation” as “an imagined political community ... imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 15). Therefore, members of any community are connected in their emotional inner space in addition to existing in a shared outer space, “beyond which lie[s] other nations” (Anderson 16). The community members are “in,” while others are left on the outside. This view of the community could be extended to include more than a simple connection through the media or common current events: community members also share a profound emotional connection. Baldwin corroborates this view of the nation as a community linked by emotion when describing his countrymen, saying that “a multitude is ... an anonymous group of people bound or driven together by fears ... and hopes and needs which no individual member could face or articulate alone” (“The Price of the Ticket,” *Essays* 841).

In *Giovanni's Room*, the prevailing American fear is that masculinity (and subsequently nationality) will be lost to homosexuality, and David initially responds to

this fear by attempting to embrace an ideal in order to earn a place on the inside of this “imagined” community. According to Baldwin, America began as a set of colonies, separate and outside of their mother country, both part of and yet detached from the “majority” group. It simultaneously held both insider and outsider status, struggling with its roots in the “dark past” of Europe all while ignoring the somewhat darker histories being written on this continent. The same is true for David, as he is a part of the “in” group as a white American, but part of the “out” group as a homosexual male. David's response to his own mother reflects Baldwin's notion that white American masculinity is partially built on a fear of non-whiteness and femininity. It is with his mother that this prevailing American fear begins to take root in David, for he feels the loss of his masculinity in what he sees as her oppressive presence. He describes her in vivid detail, even though she died when he was young: “... she figured in my nightmares ... straining to press me against her body; the body so putrescent, so sickening soft, that it opened ... into a breach so enormous as to swallow me alive” (Baldwin 10-11). Later his mother's presence is so strong in both internal and external space that David feels he cannot escape her. Her portrait, “which stood all by itself on the mantelpiece, seemed to rule the room. It was as though her photograph proved how her spirit dominated that air and controlled us all” (Baldwin 11). There is something both formidable and controlling in his mother's ethereal presence, and even David's father seems to be emasculated by the very thought of her: “My father rarely spoke of her, and when he did he covered, by some mysterious means, his face; he spoke of her only as my mother and ... he might have been speaking of his own” (Baldwin 13). David, too, feels inadequate in her “presence,” saying that he “had no right to be the son of such a

mother” (Baldwin 13). Just as his ancestors ran from their mother countries, David flees his mother (both physically and emotionally) by leaving his parents' home and attempting to preserve the image of himself as a heterosexual man. Yet he doesn't truly escape, for the notion of the virile American man has been instilled in him from a very early age, and “to be openly homosexual is, in David's mind, the ultimate transformation into the despised Other” (Harris 25). He longs to be on the inside but, feeling no connection with his home and roots and seeing no way to embrace his sexuality, he can't seem to carve a space for himself there.

Through his battle between choice and acceptance, David functions as a microcosm for what Baldwin defines as the American habits of self-invention and adherence to an American masculine ideal. David's efforts to “make himself over” to fit this ideal and find a place within his imagined community lead to his physical flight, and he believes that this perpetual motion will lead him to find himself. He realizes the oddity of the notion of being able to find yourself, as it “betrays a nagging suspicion that something has been misplaced” (Baldwin 21). David comes from a people who, at some point in the past, have been “misplaced” and disconnected from their ancestral spaces. These misplaced people adopt the American mentality of self-invention, of which Giovanni says to David, “To Choose! ... Ah, you are really an American” (Baldwin 35). David embraces the notion of choice because he believes that the creation of identity is a matter of decision rather than acceptance. He decides to “allow no room in the universe for something that shamed and frightened” him (Baldwin 20), yet he continues to struggle with the paradigm of American identity: a white, straight, masculine ideal. David madly adheres to this ideal, building a false identity in which

“the vision I gave my father of my life was exactly the vision in which I myself most desperately needed to believe” (Baldwin 20). But David becomes trapped in his adherence to a definition of the American male that doesn't fit his true self. His efforts to fit into the American mainstream control his responses to the spaces he encounters, to America and to Europe, to men and women, and to his own sexuality. White, straight, and masculine are entwined for David and cannot be separated, so to admit to himself that he is gay is to admit to being an inferior American. Baldwin's experience as a black American in Europe is reflected in David's experience in the novel: though each “may leave the group that produced him—he may be forced to ... nothing will efface his origins, the marks of which he carries with him everywhere” (“The Discovery of What it Means to Be an American,” *Essays* 141). Baldwin writes that he was astonished to discover that his experience in Europe was similar to “Negroes and whites, writers and non-writers ... Like me, they had been divorced from their origins, and it turned out to make very little difference that the origins of white Americans were European and mine were African—they were no more at home in Europe than I was” (“The Discovery of What it Means to Be an American,” *Essays* 137).

David's (and Baldwin's) movement corresponds to an emotional search for home, but home is the place where the self resides, and as David either doesn't recognize or can't accept his identity, he remains homeless. Baldwin separates David's experience of space into categories of internal space (the emotional and psychological space within the characters) and external space (that in which the characters physically interact), showing the notion of home to be present in both. At one point during his search for “self,” David notes that “perhaps home is not a place, but simply an irrevocable

condition” (Baldwin 92). Kathleen Drowne asserts that with this statement, David finally recognizes the “interior, emotional side of home—a condition—as opposed to a simply external, geographical reality” (73). If home is a condition, then it follows that the notion of home somehow crosses the line of demarcation between internal and external space: home is a physical place as well as an emotional state. Yet these two notions of home are incompatible for David, because his physical home is in a country that condemns his homosexuality, smothering his emotional well-being. David flees America and his sexuality, but *home* is “irrevocable”: it “cannot be revoked, repealed, annulled, or undone” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). So the American notion of choice falls flat, for some things cannot be chosen and must simply be accepted. David mistakenly defines his “irrevocable” home as his Americanness, when it is his sexuality that is truly unchangeable. He wishes home to be “the place where questions are not asked” because you are among family, those who understand and are similar to you (“A Question of Identity,” *Essays* 95). Yet David is caught between two conflicting notions of home, for while he expresses an interest in returning “home across the ocean, to things and people I knew and understood,” he also fears that home is the place from whence questions will come that he is not yet ready to answer, and so he remains homeless (Baldwin 62).

David's emotional homelessness is a result of his perpetual physical movement and simultaneous emotional stagnation. His identity confusion begins in his relationship with his father: “I was in full flight from him. I did not *want* him to know me. I did not want anyone to know me” (Baldwin 16). As a young man, he aimlessly wanders “through the forests of desperate women,” and eventually, in an act of emotional



recoiling from his father, he flees to Paris. There he meets Hella and Giovanni, who serve as reminders of the things in his inner space which David cannot face. In his emotional confusion regarding his relationship with Giovanni, he feels his fear “driving me to Montparnasse. I wanted to find a girl, any girl at all” (Baldwin 95). Later David is living with Giovanni, and the loss of his lover's job in Guillaume's bar is the catalyst for the downward spiral of their relationship, poverty becoming the match that ignites the tension between them. In the days following the loss of the job, David finds himself in another barren space, an abyss into whose darkness he will inevitably fall: “we dawdled as doomed mountain climbers may be said to dawdle above the chasm, held only by a snapping rope” (Baldwin 114). David fails to take any definitive action towards saving or ending their relationship, and Baldwin likens this dawdling behavior in physical space to the emotional tension and turmoil which David experiences in his inner space.

David's movement through physical spaces has led him to become lost in an emotional labyrinth, at the center of which is an American identity and a national community formed of insiders and outsiders. The very concepts of *identity* and *belonging* imply a relationship with space, as you either belong to the *in* group or you are an *outcast*. In Baldwin's novel, this concept of belonging is intricately tied to that of American national identity, and it becomes clear that, like America, Giovanni's room itself is meant to be a haven for outcasts, at least on the surface. David's struggle to define this room encompasses both physical and emotional terms, just as America struggles to establish a single national identity from the varied histories of its citizens. Both are home to people who are displaced and attempting to carve a place and an identity for themselves within the “howling inner space” (“Freaks and the American Ideal

of Manhood," *Essays* 827). The position of both places in outer space sets them apart, physically separating them from the rest of the world. Baldwin notes that America is separated from the Old World by a vast ocean, and on ancient maps of the world, "concerning the void where America was waiting to be discovered," there is nothing but the words "HERE BE DRAGONS" ("Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood," *Essays* 816). For David, there are certainly "dragons" to face in Giovanni's room, which like America, is placed on the outskirts of external space. The room is located "near a zoo," where it is physically removed from mainstream society (Baldwin 30). In fact, it is so far out, "It is almost not in Paris" (Baldwin 46). Both the zoo near Giovanni's room and the untamed wilderness poised on the edge of colonial America are locations that suggest "outsider" status. Just as the slaying of dragons was the standard against which the virility of knights was measured in the courtly tradition, David and America both have "dragons" against which their masculine identity will be defined. Colonial Americans created that identity by conquering the untamed wilderness, while David defines his masculinity against the homosexual Others of America. For both, alternate identities cannot be created without an Other against which to measure one's status.

Holding the dual position of insider/outcast leads David to search for a way to reconcile his outsider status while planting himself firmly within the community of the in group, but David's search only leads to further inner disorder. This reconciliation cannot occur because David distrusts his instincts and his identity. Baldwin notes that "the person who distrusts himself has no touchstone for reality—for this touchstone can be only oneself. Such a person interposes between himself and reality nothing less than a labyrinth of attitudes" ("Down at the Cross," *Essays* 312). David is in just such a

labyrinth, for his only touchstone is an American masculine identity that does not match his reality as a gay man. The labyrinth leads to a sense of disorder, and David becomes more utterly lost with each false turn. David's first homosexual experience occurs when he is a teenager, staying the night with his friend Joey. When he tries to face the confusion that this encounter elicits, he finds himself in "a maze of false signals and abruptly locking doors," too disordered to make sense of the experience (Baldwin 10). Later, David finds himself once again facing the confusion of his sexuality, and the "frightening disorder" of Giovanni's room reflects the disorder of his own internal space (Baldwin 87). David's futile journey through the labyrinth is continued in his external space in the rental house in the south of France. While awaiting Giovanni's execution, David flees Paris and finds a tenuous sanctuary in this house. Yet "the disorder that suffused Giovanni's room and came to define it" has become the defining characteristic of his bedroom in the rental house (Drowne 83).

David must find his place within American national identity in order to find a way out of this labyrinth, and Hella represents his strongest (yet final) attempt to do so, as he fights to create a space and an identity with her that will stake his place within the accepted American community. At the height of his sexual identity crisis, David says that he "wanted to be inside again, with light and safety, with my manhood unquestioned, watching my woman put my children to bed" (Baldwin 104). David's vision of masculinity is indicative of the time in which he lives: he wishes to conform to the 1950s ideal of the white, middle-class family with a working father, stay-at-home mother, and a house in the suburbs. He wishes something more than just living up to this image however, for he goes on to refer to his search for a more meaningful place,

stating that he wants a “woman to be for me steady ground, like the earth itself” (Baldwin 104). David tries to make Hella into his “steady ground,” and when she returns to him after a long absence, he remarks that he had hoped, upon seeing her, that something would happen “to make me know where I should be and where I was” (Baldwin 119). Hella is a space in and of herself, a place in which David wishes to take up residence, claiming it in the name of his manhood and personal identity. In an effort to remain on the safe ground of heterosexual, virile, American masculinity, he asks Hella to marry him, seeking in her “the possibility of legitimate surrender” (Baldwin 120). But during their first night together after being reunited, he realizes that he is “trying to find my way in her again, as though she were a familiar, darkened room in which I fumbled to find the light” (Baldwin 121). Through Hella, David continues to adhere to the American masculine ideal: he wants to leave the dark and filth of homosexuality behind by taking up residence in the light of a heterosexual relationship. Hella eventually becomes a space as sinister as that held by David's mother, and he reacts to her with the same feelings of emasculation that his father feels towards his mother: her underclothes “began to seem unaesthetic and unclean ... and when I entered her I began to feel that I would never get out alive” (Baldwin 158).

David's relationship with Hella and his eventual recoiling from Giovanni reflect his constant attempt to adhere to what Baldwin refers to as the “Puritan” ideals of cleanliness and whiteness that Baldwin believes the American masculine identity to spring from. The association of homosexuality with filth begins in childhood for David, whose father instills in him the notion of a white, heterosexual, masculine male from the start. David's father wants his son (whom he addresses as “Butch”) to “grow up to be a

man” and not “a Sunday school teacher” (Baldwin 90, 15). The “teacher” to which his father refers is almost surely a woman, and true to the notion that masculinity is threatened by femininity, he wishes only a life of “butch” manliness for his son. This notion surfaces years later for David, for on the morning after the encounter with Joey, his reaction to the bed shifts from perceiving it as “sweet disorder” to believing that it “testified to vileness” (Baldwin 9). His inner landscape recoils with violence from David's momentary embrace of his sexual identity: “voices deep within me boomed, For shame! For shame! that I should be abruptly, so hideously entangled with a boy” (Baldwin 62). These voices echo the same Puritan ideals which created the correlation between homosexuality and filth within which David must operate. Trudier Harris alludes to David's self-confining adherence to history and the American ideal, pointing out that David is trapped by the opposing dichotomies of the virile American man (insider) and the homosexual American man (outsider): “David's culture has carefully outlined the parameters of his manhood; thus, there can be no equivocation about how he, a clean-cut, blond, former football star, should behave” (Harris 25). But David, unable to face the truth within himself, is left with the perpetual search for his place within a national image in which he doesn't fit. Baldwin alludes to this national self image in “In Search of a Majority,” saying that it is “an image which suggests hard work and good clean fun and chastity and piety and success” (*Essays* 218). This is the image that David wishes to live up to (or at least to live within), and so his entrapment continues, for he is locked within the “Puritan dicta” that “still inhibit the American body and soul”: in America, “joy and sin have been synonyms” for generations (“Color,” *Essays* 673). E. Anthony Rotundo extends this notion of Puritan dicta, saying that the larger “history of manhood”

in America begins with the “northern middle class, a small proportion of the American population who used their vast economic wealth and cultural power to imprint their values on the nation” (Rotundo 2). Giovanni quarrels with David over this very issue, saying that David behaves “as though we were accomplices to a crime. We have not committed any crime” (Baldwin 81). David argues from the American perspective of homosexuality that began with the Puritans and was sustained by the “northern middle class,” asserting that “people have very dirty words for—for this situation ... Besides, it *is* a crime—in my country and, after all, I didn't grow up here, I grew up *there*” (Baldwin 81).

With this blind adherence to the American masculine ideal, David finds himself inhabiting spaces that are increasingly filthy and sinister, reflecting his vision of homosexuality as the realm of the dirty and despised Other. The association of filth with homosexuality is evident in the numerous images of the contrast between dirt and cleanliness in the external spaces of the novel, from the living quarters the characters inhabit to the bars they frequent. Yet this imagery seems most prevalent in relation to the inner spaces of the novel, particularly homosexual inner spaces. Giovanni wants to escape “this dirty world, this dirty body,” indicating that he feels that both his external space (the world) and his internal space (his own body) are in some way sullied. The flamboyantly homosexual Jacques accuses David of being uncomfortable in his own inner space because he places a high value on “that *immaculate* manhood which is [his] pride and joy” (Baldwin 30). Just as David often projects his own inner confusion onto exterior spaces, he projects the “metaphorical ‘dirt’ of sexuality, particularly homosexual sex” (Drowne 78), onto the outside world, which appears more sullied in response. On

his first morning with Giovanni, David feels the taint of this “metaphorical sexual dirt,” for he is moving down a path toward a sexual identity that he is not willing to accept. When he and Giovanni are in the shared outer space of the restaurant with several other patrons, David notes that the waiter's white coat “gleamed like snow” (Baldwin 50). But once David moves to a space containing only himself and Giovanni (in this case, the dining room), he begins to feel the filth of his sexuality and projects it onto the waiter's jacket, which is “less spotless, seen in closeup, than it had seemed from a distance” (Baldwin 59). In contrast, David projects images of cleanliness onto his view of America. His perception of his countrymen in the American Express office in Paris is unsullied, for the men “smelled of soap, which seemed indeed to be their preservative against the dangers and exigencies of any more intimate odor” (Baldwin 89-90). According to David, these American men are clean in a way that he himself longs to be, for he wants to be part of the “in” group. But, as the French critic Georges-Michel Sarotte notes in his book *Like a Brother, Like a Lover*, “psychologically, the average homosexual exists on the outskirts of society,” and this is exactly where David finds himself, in both America and Paris, inner and outer space (Sarotte 173). The Americans whom David encounters in Paris are “a unit,” an imagined community sharing some unidentifiable quality that “made them Americans” (Baldwin 89). For David, that unidentifiable quality is an ideal which he is unable to attain, and thus he feels less “American” by comparison.

The correlation between the American male and cleanliness rules David's inner space, leading to a disconnect between what he views as his sullied inner identity and the spotless outer image he fights to maintain. Kemp Williams simplifies this

disconnect, drawing a distinct line between internal and external spaces. He argues that Baldwin merely utilizes a “metaphor pervasive in Western Culture ... the body as a container for the emotions” (Williams 27). Williams asserts that Baldwin acknowledges this metaphor “by placing emphasis on things happening *in* David as opposed to *to* David” (Williams 28). This is certainly evident in his homosexual experience with Joey, after which David struggles with emotions in his inner space: “I could have cried, cried for shame and terror, cried for not understanding how this could have happened to me, how this could have happened *in* me” (Baldwin 9). Yet the body is more than just a physical container: it is also the vehicle through which inner space, that in which the “self” resides, interacts with external physical space. David sees Joey's body as “the black opening of a cavern in which [he] would be tortured until madness came” (Baldwin 9), and he understands the effect which physical interaction with that space will have on his sense of self (and on the self which he projects to the world). Physical contact between himself and Joey joins David's internal (homosexual) self with his external space in a very tangible way, and David believes that by remaining physically “clean” he can avoid the metaphorical dirt of homosexuality. This mentality is continued in his relationship with Giovanni, who eventually becomes frustrated with David's American tendency to associate homosexuality with sin and filth. He believes that David will never give his purity to anyone, “ ... man *or* woman. You want to be *clean*. You think you came [to Europe] covered with soap and you think you will go out covered with soap—and you do not want to *stink*, not even for five minutes, in the meantime” (Baldwin 141). Baldwin believes that “to be sensual ... is to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be *present* in all that one does ...” (“Down at the Cross,”



*Essays* 311). David's attempt to remain physically clean fails as he engages in sexual activity with Giovanni. In an attempt to maintain the disconnect between his internal and external spaces, David participates in sexual activity with the notion that "it is only the body" which is involved in the act, so he fails to be both physically and emotionally present (Baldwin 88). He must be present with both "body and soul," internal and external identities, and his inability to do so in his interactions with Joey and Giovanni leads to his absence in inner space as well, resulting in the loss of himself in his denial of his sexuality.

David feels this loss of internal self in terms of external suffocation, perceiving his physical locations as crowded, confining, and claustrophobic. These descriptors demonstrate that his futile search for identity through the outer spaces of the novel leads only to physical locations where he becomes further lost in the labyrinth of self-deception. David describes Guillame's bar as "a noisy, crowded, ill-lit sort of tunnel" (Baldwin 26), and he escapes from the suffocating air of the bar only to climb into an "unpleasantly crowded" taxi (Baldwin 45). In an attempt to avoid his confusing feelings towards Giovanni, David orchestrates a sexual encounter with his friend Sue, whose apartment is described as "dark and full of furniture" (Baldwin 98). After receiving a letter from Hella accepting his marriage proposal, David projects the confusion of his inner space onto his outer environment: "I stared at absurd Paris, which was as cluttered now ... as the landscape of my heart" (Baldwin 94). While David becomes more lost with each change of location, his sense of entrapment is most clearly evident in his physical and emotional imprisonment in Giovanni's room. David conveniently meets Giovanni on the day he gets "turned out" of his hotel room in Paris, and his need

for physical space drives him to move into Giovanni's rented room. The room is small and cluttered, the air inside "sweet and heavy," and since David's internal space is ruled by his inability to accept his homosexuality, the room feels like a "mortal and unavoidable danger" (Baldwin 87). He feels that "the walls of the room were closing in on [him]," trapping him in external space as his relationship with Giovanni traps him in internal space, forcing him to face his sexuality (Baldwin 105). The courtyard outside Giovanni's room is unsure of its "self" just as David is: it "malevolently" presses against the windows of the room, "as though it had confused itself with a jungle" (Baldwin 85).

The courtyard is wild but enclosed, one of the novel's many images of caged spaces that symbolize not only David's confusion, but also his imprisonment in the labyrinth of his own chaotic inner space. His sense of entrapment is echoed in the nearby presence of the zoo outside the room, as well as in the painting of a heterosexual couple inside the room in which a man and woman "perpetually walked together, hemmed in by roses" (Baldwin 86). David perceives these lovers as being trapped in the thorny cage of "an interminable rose garden," confined in space without belonging in it (Baldwin 87). His inner confusion is all-encompassing, lending the same feeling of claustrophobia and entrapment to Giovanni's body as well. When they first meet, David becomes aware that others in the bar are watching their interactions as if they were "in the zoo" (Baldwin 38). David feels that he is "in a box" and can not escape Giovanni without facing the truth about his own sexuality (Baldwin 47). When David unexpectedly encounters Giovanni while out with Hella, he tries to escape the situation as though he were "backing out of a cage" (Baldwin 130). Harris echoes this notion of entrapment, referring to Giovanni's room as "the prison house of David's

sexuality as well as the true reflection of what he is: a man who loves men but cannot afford, for the sake of his fragile masculine ego and his familial, societal ties, to admit that truth” (Harris 22).

In addition to images of suffocation, David's inner and outer spaces are also associated with darkness, while the people in his life are shown to be in the light. David notes the lack of light in the living spaces of Guillame, Sue, and even Hella, who once looks “humorously into the blackness” of her apartment building and wonders aloud if she “*dare* go in” (Baldwin 132). But it is the living space which David shares with Giovanni that proves to be most dark. The windows, the room's only natural light source, are obscured with “heavy, white cleaning polish” (Baldwin 85). It is ironic that “an item intended only to cleanse” is used as a means of further soiling and darkening the space (Drowne 82), but it also serves to divide the room's internal (homosexual) space from the space of the external (heterosexual) world. When the “strange shapes” of people outside the room appear against the windows, Giovanni “would stiffen like a hunting dog and remain perfectly silent until whatever seemed to threaten our safety had moved away” (Baldwin 86). The room's artificial light source is just as ominous as the opaque windows, hanging from the ceiling “like a diseased and undefinable sex” (Baldwin 88). David's inner feelings are evident in this description of the light, for it is “undefinable” in the same way that David's sexuality doesn't fit his definition of American manhood. Harris echoes this notion of the darkness of homosexuality in her reading of the light, believing it to be a sinister warning to “sinners who dare to lurk overly long in the yellow glare of sex instead of escaping into the pure light of traditional manhood and acceptability” (Harris 23). Where the inner and outer spaces of the novel are shrouded

in darkness and confusion, David consistently associates the people in his life with light, for they are the signposts by which David might find his way out of his confusion. Hella leaves David after she learns of his homosexual affair with a sailor in Nice, and as he pictures her on her way back to America, he sees her “surrounded by the light which fills the salon of the ocean liner” (Baldwin 5). When David sees Giovanni for the first time, he describes him sitting in Guillame’s bar with “all of the light of that gloomy tunnel trapped around his head (Baldwin 43). Yet while surrounded by light in person, both Giovanni and Hella are in the dark of David’s confusion about himself. The one person in the novel who is enlightened is Joey, who briefly sees the real David. The closest David comes to embracing his homosexuality is with Joey, and before confusion about the encounter enters his internal space, he feels that they “gave each other joy that night.” During their night together David feels that “the light in the room was very bright and hot” (Baldwin 8). It is only when the “cavern opened in [his] mind, black, full of rumor, suggestion, of half-heard, half-forgotten, half-understood stories, full of dirty words,” that the darkness comes crashing in on David’s inner and outer spaces, trapping him in the labyrinth once again (Baldwin 9).

David's personal confinement is symptomatic of the larger trap of adherence to history for the price of self-deception. Yet this trap of history seems to be distinctly American. Giovanni is tormented by the guilt of his past, and to him the room is a disordered, cluttered, and sometimes suffocating projection of his “punishment and grief” (Baldwin 87). Giovanni struggles with his masculinity after the death of his child, “a little boy” who “would have been a wonderful, strong man” (Baldwin 139). However, he escapes self-deception by leaving his wife behind and embracing his homosexuality.

The history to which Giovanni adheres is his own personal history, and though tormented by it, he doesn't ignore it. David, on the other hand, is trapped by his adherence to an ideal that says homosexuality is dirty and wrong. He feels he must escape Giovanni's room in external space in order to avoid being emotionally trapped there in his internal space, where he will be uncomfortably alone with his homosexuality. So his self-deception continues, for he ignores his past and his sexual identity. Baldwin writes of white Americans as being "trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it" ("My Dungeon Shook," *Essays* 294). He believes these people cannot face the truth about their history because it comes from a "darker past." David's confusion and subsequent loss of his self confirms that he is merely perpetuating the entrapment of his ancestors in his own personal confinement.

David's tendency to describe his spaces as dirty, dark, and confining perhaps stems from the contemporary image of unacknowledged homosexuality: the closet. Closets are by their very nature small, dark, and dirty spaces. The first printed use of the closet image being linked with homosexuality did not occur until 1963 (*Oxford English Dictionary*), and although this is seven years after the publication of *Giovanni's Room*, it seems possible that Baldwin was at least aware of the slang notion of a "closet homosexual." Perhaps Giovanni's "hideous room" was a precursor to the notion of being emotionally trapped by one's struggles with sexuality. Luminita Dragulescu explores the link between confinement and homosexuality, tying Giovanni's room to the image of the closet. Dragulescu views the room as "'the closet' objectified," saying that it "stands not only for the recognition of David's homosexual identity, but also for the

social and political oppression that comes with it.” David certainly echoes the idea of being trapped in the room as if it were a closet, saying that “if I do not open the door at once and get out of here, I am lost” (Baldwin 64). This statement has a double meaning for David when viewed in light of “the closet” of homosexuality. If David doesn’t escape Giovanni’s room in the physical sense, he feels he will be lost to homosexuality. Yet it seems the only way to truly escape both the metaphorical closet and his false identity is to remain in the room. By staying with Giovanni, David “comes out” of the closet, rejecting his false identity and his adherence to the American ideal and embracing his true self instead.

Unfortunately, David is simply unable to break free of the American masculine ideal against which he measures his identity, for he sees himself through the collective “mirror” of America and defines himself by the definitions which others impose upon him. It is David's attempt to align his outer reflection (what others see/expect) with his self reflection (what he knows to be true within himself) that marks his perpetual false motion in the novel, a motion intended to move him toward the ideal. Baldwin notes that “we all react to and, to whatever extent, become” what the collective “eye” sees (“Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood,” *Essays* 817). We start life being judged by our parents and then move through a “vast and claustrophobic gallery of Others” that add their reflections to the mix (“Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood,” *Essays* 817 817). What David fails to understand is that the struggle for home and identity is within. This struggle has little to do with the perceptions of others; rather, it is about an emotional coming to terms with the labels that others place on us. So his constant motion and fervent attempts to make himself over in the image of the American male fail

to bring true happiness to his inner space.

Baldwin believes that the only way to end this false motion and begin a true journey forward is to “go back to where you started, or as far back as you can, examine all of it, travel your road again and tell the truth about it,” pointing to the American habit of self-reflection (“The Price of the Ticket,” *Essays* 841). If any group has the ability to reexamine and tell the truth about their history, it is Americans, who are “not tied together by an 'instinctive patriotism' like the peoples of Europe, but by a 'patriotism of reflection'” (Mann 46). This reflection is evident in the immigration laws which left nationality open for choice and interpretation, and Baldwin alludes to the American habit of self-invention with his use of reflection imagery throughout *Giovanni's Room*. The action of the novel is told through a series of flashbacks as David reflects on his life and Giovanni's fate over the course of an evening. The story is framed with reflections of David, opening with him studying his own reflection in the window, noting that his “blond hair gleams” in true, American football-star fashion (Baldwin 3), and ending with him moving away from his image the mirror and his efforts to define himself. Each time David is confronted by an aspect of his self which he refuses to accept, he is also faced with his own reflection. On the morning David meets Giovanni, Jacques tells him that he “should see [himself] tonight ... should see [himself] now” (Baldwin 54). During his first meal with Giovanni he stares down at the table, where “deep below, trapped in the metal, the outline of my own face looked upward hopelessly at me” (Baldwin 56). His reflection tells him nothing because David is unable to reconcile what he sees with what he wants to see. It is worth noting the use of the word “trapped” here as well, for reflections are always trapped within a mirror, windowpane, or other reflective surface.

David's trapped reflection appears multiple times, indicating that his view of himself is confined within the American view of what a man should be. The night before Giovanni's execution, David's struggle of self-invention comes to a head, and he notices his reflection numerous times in the windows and mirrors of the house. Finally, he realizes that his reflection in the window pane "steadily becomes more faint. I seem to be fading away before my eyes" (Baldwin 166). David is "torn between what [he is] and what [he believes he] ought to be," and as he loses this battle in internal space, his reflection (and his "self") fades in external space until he is only a shadow of what he could be (Harris 18). In the end, he becomes "terribly aware of the mirror" but is unable to face himself, and so the body within which he is imprisoned becomes "trapped in [the] mirror as it is trapped in time" (Baldwin 167-168).

It is significant that the novel begins with the appearance of David's reflection in a window pane rather than a mirror, for unlike a mirror which reflects only the surface, a window indicates an ability to see *through*, demonstrating Baldwin's belief that the only way to overcome this failure of self-invention is to look through the layers of self to the truth beyond. David, like all Americans in Baldwin's world, loses his "self" in his attempt to create an identity, for the creation of that identity requires of him an exclusion of the parts of himself that don't fit within the national image. Baldwin himself views the image of American masculinity as a hall of mirrors: "I knew I was in the hall and present at this company [of gay men] ... but the mirrors threw back only brief and distorted fragments of myself" ("Freaks and the America Ideal of Manhood," *Essays* 823). David sees these distorted fragments of himself as well, but is unable to sort them into a cohesive and honest identity. Baldwin promotes "reexamining everything" and accepting one's past,



rather than trying to ignore it, yet this is precisely what David and “the generality of white Americans cannot afford to do. They do not know how to do it ...” (“The Price of the Ticket,” *Essays* 841). They can't accept their pasts because those pasts are born of the dark history of America, and for David, his past is imbued with the mentality that homosexuality is wrong. David is desperately trying to become what the “gallery of Others” sees him to be, but he doesn't know how to face the truth about himself. So like his ancestors who came through Ellis Island and “with a painless change of name” became “white Americans,” David struggles with the ache of his “missing identity” (“The Price of the Ticket,” *Essays* 841). Baldwin believes that “one can neither assess nor overcome the storm of the middle passage,” and this “storm” causes David to feel his missing identity two-fold, for in order to truly identify with the American masculine ideal, he must forsake his identity as a homosexual male (“The Price of the Ticket,” *Essays* 841).

The “middle passage” makes a sort of baptismal font of the ocean, and it seems that David and his ancestors see the journey from shore to shore as a rebirth. David runs from one shore and his ancestors from the other, each believing they would find what they were seeking on the other side, and each failing to understand that they were actually running *away from* rather than *to* something. Baldwin references this notion of baptism and rebirth, saying that “something very sinister happens to the people of a country when they begin to distrust their own reactions as deeply as they do here [in America] ... It is this individual uncertainty ... this inability to renew themselves at the fountain of their own lives, that makes the discussion of ... any reality so supremely difficult” (“Down at the Cross,” *Essays* 312). The image of a baptismal font is repeated

in the novel, for the lewd and often unpleasant Jacques and Guillaume struggle with a sullied inner space that is likened to “a fountain of black water,” perpetuating the American notion that filth is synonymous with homosexuality. David worries that he will sully himself by association, but Giovanni assures him that they “should not be distressed that their dirty water splashed—we would have no trouble washing it away” (Baldwin 45). Before crossing the baptismal waters of the ocean, however, David reacts differently to this notion of renewal, for had anyone confronted he and Joey about their behavior, “the ocean would not have been deep enough to drown our shame and terror” (Baldwin 6). David alludes to the notion of baptism via middle passage later in the novel, telling Giovanni that “the ocean is very wide” and so Americans have “led different lives than [Europeans]; things have happened to us [in America] which have never happened here. Surely you can understand that this would make us a different people?” (Baldwin 33). Yet David eventually admits that he has not actually changed, but simply become more lost. Unable to assume the role of homosexual American male, he confesses that “if I had any intimation that the self I was going to find would turn out to be only the same self from which I had spent so much time in flight, I would have stayed home” (Baldwin 21). In the introduction to *Nobody Knows My Name*, Baldwin acknowledges that flight from the self solves nothing, stating that in his own life's journey, “the question of who I was was not solved because I had removed myself from the social forces which menaced me—anyway, these forces became interior, and I had dragged them across the ocean with me” (*Essays* 135). So Baldwin, like David, believed his trip across the ocean would be a baptism into a new identity, failing to understand that a change without doesn't necessarily equate a change within.

The baptism of the middle passage certainly has an effect on the people who experience it, but rather than an act of renewal, it turns out to be one of stasis. A baptism is only meaningful if the ritual cleansing of external space reflects a true change in internal space, and Baldwin believes that as long as Americans (or David) continue to deny parts of their selves and their history, inner change is not possible and the baptismal waters become stagnant. Thinking of his father's home, David is reminded of "the sediment at the bottom of a stagnant pond" (Baldwin 22), yet he ends up in Giovanni's room, where life remains motionless and "seemed to be occurring beneath the sea" (Baldwin 75). Baptismal images of sea and water are repeated several times in reference to Giovanni or the room, likening David's inner turmoil with being tossed about on the stormy sea of his own middle passage. When David first meets Giovanni, he says "it was as though his station were a promontory and [I was] the sea" (Baldwin 28). David seems to realize to some extent that he is floundering, and he first views Giovanni as a possible mooring post. But David believes that "people can't, unhappily, invent their mooring posts, their lovers and their friends, anymore than they can invent their parents. Life gives these and also takes them away and the great difficulty is to say Yes to life" (Baldwin 5). Yet inventing "mooring posts," along with inventing selves, is exactly what David's ancestors tried to do. David's problem is that he sees his sexuality as a part of himself that he can ignore: it must be either "a quagmire or a haven," and he is stuck in the quagmire while attempting to find the haven (Harris 18). David is simply unable to "say yes to life," and as a result, his baptismal journey across the ocean leads not to a rebirth but to a state of perpetual homelessness. He views himself as "a wanderer, an adventurer, rocking through the world unanchored" (Baldwin

62). Yet when faced with the one person who has a chance of providing the anchor that could lead him to accept himself and his sexuality, David instead feels himself “being led by Giovanni into deep and dangerous water” (Baldwin 37).

What David fails to see is that “saying yes” to life means riding out the storm on the seas of his inner space: his search for a mooring post will be fruitless as long as he is adrift in the seas of confusion. Sheltering in a false harbor is exactly what Baldwin warns against in the introduction to *Nobody Knows My Name*. He cautions that there are those who wish to move forward, but are “afraid of the rigors of the journey: and, of course, before you embark on a journey the terrors of whatever may overtake you on that journey live in the imagination and paralyze you” (*Essays* 215). This is exactly David's problem: he is paralyzed by the fear that his homosexuality will “overtake” him on his journey of self-discovery, and so he settles into a false harbor in an attempt to shelter himself. The simple choice to “say yes to life” is what David is unable to come to terms with, and his solution is simply to run away from the decision. While beneath the sea of Giovanni's room, David is in a false haven and feels no need for an anchor. Things are calm underwater, if stagnant. David exists for a short time in the underwater escape provided by the room, but he soon begins to feel the need for the false sense of motion he gets from physically running from himself. Baldwin says that “to accept one's past—one's history—is not the same as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it” (“Down at the Cross,” *Essays* 333), but David simply cannot do this. He feels that Giovanni is dragging him “to the bottom of the sea,” and his fear is causing him to “drown” in his sexuality (Baldwin 114). He views staying with Giovanni as a suicide rather than as a means to accept and immerse himself in his sexuality, thus “saying yes”

to life as a homosexual man.

The fact that David is a homosexual man, albeit one who has yet to embrace that label, frees Baldwin from dealing with issues of race relations and allows him to grapple with sexuality instead, showing his main character to be lost in a cycle of perpetual flight from his true identity. David's false motion continues in his desperate attempt to avoid his sexuality, and he becomes further lost as the novel goes on. He admits that when he made the decision to ignore the part of himself that "shamed and frightened" him, he succeeded only "by not looking at the universe, by not looking at myself, by remaining, in effect, in constant motion" (Baldwin 20). Yet on the morning that David meets Giovanni, Jacques prophetically warns him of the dangers of perpetual false motion: "You play it safe long enough ... and you'll end up trapped in your own dirty body" (Baldwin 57). This warning rings true for David in that he constantly runs yet is unable to escape from himself. While his outer location changes from his father's home to Giovanni's room to Hella's room to the rental house in the South of France, he always returns internally to the same place. The stagnation that he is so afraid of exists within himself as he is unable to come to terms with his homosexuality. Homosexual Americans are certainly not the only group to experience this stagnation, however; the black American also knows what it's like to be held back and put in one's place. Baldwin points to the function of race for the white American, saying that "the Negro tells us where the bottom is: *because he is there*, and *where* he is, beneath us, we know where the limits are and how far we must not fall" ("In Search of a Majority," *Essays* 219). It seems that it is helpful to mark the boundaries of outer space, for identifying the outcasts makes it possible to avoid becoming one. Baldwin goes on to speak as a

white American, saying that “if the Negro were not here, we might be forced to deal within ourselves and our own personalities, with all those vices, all those conundrums, and all those mysteries with which we have invested the Negro Race” (“In Search of a Majority,” *Essays* 219). But the “Negro” is not present in Giovanni's room, so homosexuals are the group left showing us “where the bottom is.” The American ideal of the white, masculine, heterosexual man only holds meaning when held in contrast with that which is not ideal: the homosexual, emasculated, non-white male. Harris argues that “as long as black people exist in their historical relation to white people in the United States, there can be no inferiority for white people,” but I would extend that argument to include homosexuals and women as well (Harris 24). Where race is a dividing factor, so too is sexuality. Baldwin himself experienced this division, for while his race often led him to feel an outsider in America, his homosexuality caused him to be “excluded, to his anger, from the roster of speakers” who addressed the crowd at the March on Washington in 1963 (Kenan 93). David's mental linking of his sexuality with filth demonstrates that as long as homosexuals (and blacks/females) exist as the despised Other, the white, straight, masculine man will be able to maintain his superiority.

Baldwin refers to himself as a “haven-dweller,” a term he would certainly apply to David and his ancestors as well, for David constantly moves to locations that feel safer and will allow him to continue the process of self-delusion and the creation of identity as he wishes to be seen. Baldwin faced this dilemma in creating his own identity, for as an expatriate in Paris, he “dawdled in the European haven for so long” that he finally realized that “the question of who I was had at last become a personal question, and the

answer was to be found in me” (*Essays* 135). So the haven that David thinks he has found in Europe, like that his ancestors believed to be in America, is a false one because what he is truly running from exists within himself rather than in the external space which he left behind. Baldwin states that “the price exacted of a haven-dweller is that he contrive to delude himself into believing that he has found a haven,” but this delusion leads only to a false sense of motion and a constant battle to avoid facing one's reflection (*Essays* 135). David acknowledges in the end that his search for home and self is fruitless because he doesn't stop to deal with the things within himself which caused this flight: “People who believe they are strong-willed and masters of their identity can only continue to believe this by becoming specialists in self-deception” (Baldwin 20). So while David's flight doesn't end with him finding himself, his journey does show him a possible escape from the cycle.

Baldwin knows exactly how to escape: we must “look grim facts in the face” and learn to accept our history, background, and selves or “we can never hope to change them” (“In Search of a Majority,” *Essays* 216). Unfortunately, David seems unable to do this, and he continues to search for his place in the world and within himself without ever truly moving forward. His movement is static and meaningless, far from Baldwin's vision of life as “a journey toward something I do not understand, which in the going toward, makes me better” (“In Search of a Majority,” *Essays* 220). Since David's movement leads nowhere, he is unable to grow and change, and fails to get any “better.” He is never able to come to the conclusion which Baldwin himself was able to reach: that “if I was still in need of havens, my journey had been for nothing” (Introduction to *Nobody Knows My Name*, *Essays* 135). In the end, David turns away

from the reflection of himself which he has been studying in the mirror and leaves the rental house (and presumably the part of his life associated with Giovanni) behind him. But even if this departure is his attempt to break out of the cyclical pattern of non-movement in which he has been trapped, the cycle is perpetuated once again in the novel's final sentence. David tears up Jacques' letter, which informs him of the date of Giovanni's execution, and throws away the pieces in a gesture of forward movement, but as he turns to walk away, "the wind blows some of [the pieces] back" on him, indicating that David has yet to break completely free of the chains which bind him in his inner space.

Yet the end of the novel is not without hope: David's failure to take action pushes the responsibility for honest self-analysis onto the reader. Though David's future seems hopeless, through his floundering Baldwin shows the reader a clear path to identity: face the truth about yourself in order to diminish the power which that truth has over you. While the change brought about by such self-honesty is small in that it is internal, the external effects of such change are just what Baldwin champions. He encourages Americans to engage in open self-reflection as a means of moving the country toward a future which includes and "deals with" its dark and haunting past. The shift of the moral zeitgeist of American is what Baldwin hopes one day to see, but that shift begins with the individual. As an American, David must "*know whence [he] came,*" but he must also know whence he is going in order to blaze a path for himself through the obstacles of American masculinity and sexual identity that others have placed in his way ("The Price of the Ticket," *Essays* 841). He must define a space for himself by creating an identity that accepts the truths and reject the ideals that do not define him, but the only way to



do so is to stop running, face his reflection and all that it means, and heed Baldwin's advice on defining one's space: "The world is before you, and you need not take it or leave it as it was when you came in" ("In Search of a Majority," *Essays* 221).

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