

APPLICATION FORM FREDERICK BAUMANN PRIZE

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For the purposes of this contest, an essay may be defined as a prose discourse on a well-defined subject that presents in a stimulating, entertaining, as well as informative way the personal view of the author. Essays can be based on course work or independent study but should not be work previously submitted in connection with a course. Essays should not exceed more than 15 to 20 double-spaced pages.

Please write a short abstract of your essay on this form and attach it to your essay.

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Essay Title: Assaying Our Western Inheritance: Enlightenment Ideals and the Case of Haiti

ABSTRACT

This paper presupposes that the French Revolution and its outgrowth the Haitian Revolution were, to some extent, inspired by the ideals of the "Age of Enlightenment." I attempt to weigh the force and efficacy of these Enlightenment ideals by considering French responses to the uprisings on Saint-Domingue, which we today term the Haitian Revolution. I consider in particular the free black class of Saint-Domingue and its interactions with the Societe des Amis des Noires, a French abolitionist society whose rhetoric becomes increasingly moderate under economic and political pressure in France. My paper aims to demonstrate the limitations of Enlightenment ideals when issues of race and racial equality become a major part of the philosophical discourse.

Introduction: Assaying the Enlightenment

Several years ago, the esteemed novelist and literary critic Martin Amis rather controversially remarked on a British talk show that the Islamic world desperately needed to experience a cultural transformation parallel to that which had taken place in the West, namely a religious reformation and an age of Enlightenment by which reason would become firmly entrenched in their world view.

For better and often times for worse, the "Age of Enlightenment" persists in historical and cultural memory as Western society's greatest inheritance from the eighteenth century. This broad European intellectual movement valorized reason where previously superstition and religious authority had dominated. The new emphasis on reason supposedly served to break down old, established hierarchical orders, helping to bestow rights on a mass of individuals previously held under the yoke of monarchical and church authority.

Cultural historians point to the revolutions in the final years of the eighteenth century as a testament to the power and importance of Enlightenment ideals. And certainly the cases of France and the United States to some extent attest to the pungency of Enlightenment ideals of rationalism and political equality. However, a revolution on the French colony of Saint-Domingue, today known as Haiti, occurred in the same years and in many ways grew out of the French Revolution. A study of goings-on within Haiti and the French reaction to this revolution offers a strong rebuttal to any easy praise for Enlightenment ideals and Enlightenment thinkers. A consideration of the Haitian Revolution reveals the political and economic limitations of Enlightenment discourse on human equality, as well as the limitations of Enlightenment thinkers to act on their

espoused doctrines.

The Haitian Revolution and the French Response

The conflicts within the Haitian Revolution, a decade-long struggle on the French colony of Saint Domingue that unfolded during the same period as the French Revolution, involved more than a strict polarization between whites and blacks. Although at times the two sides of a given battle could demonstrate strong racial divisions, one must recall that a free black class, designated during the period as "free colored," represented an important middle ground in the debates over slavery and the future of Saint Domingue, particularly in the early stages of the colonial struggle. This free black class itself owned slaves, and profited greatly by their labor. CLR James, in his classic text *The Black Jacobins* explains that the mulattoes, as he chooses to refer to them, "being so rich, they imitated the style of the whites and sought to drown all traces of their origins."¹ Free blacks largely sought to protect the institution of slavery and maintain the slave trade, while also demanding their own genuine political equality with a resentful and fearful white planter class. As French debates over the continuation of slavery progressed, the radical intellectuals who condemned the slave trade and voiced strong desires for abolition gradually shifted their support towards specifically the free black population of Saint Domingue. By doing so, they significantly limited the threat which their rhetoric posed to the French and colonial economic orders, while in the process compromising, placing caveats on proclaimed notions of universalism and egalitarianism.

Political and economic pressures deeply affected the way thinkers like

¹ CLR James, *The Black Jacobins* (New York: Random House Vintage, 1963), 38.

Gregoire and Condorcet shaped and constructed their arguments against slavery and the slave trade. The Amis des Noires, founded in 1788 by Jacques-Pierre Brissot, served as the mouthpiece for the anti-slavery movement in revolutionary France.² Haitian scholar Louis Sala-Molins quite pointedly explains the common misinterpretation of the Amis des Noires: "The Friends of the Blacks are the friends of all blacks and are the nice guys of history. The others are the scoundrels. Matter settled."³ But as Sala-Molins implies, the matter is indeed far from settled. Historians rarely critically examine what the Society, as a group of social actors and not merely as authorial voices, as vessels for ideas, truly contributed to the discourse on race equality and slavery in Revolutionary France. This paper considers the Society's shifting vision of social justice through what historians have examined—some of their basic relationships with the free colored class of Saint Domingue—as well as the Society's pamphlets and decree, which have received minimal critical attention. Such a study reveals the human flaws of some 'Enlightenment' thinkers, when considered as social actors and not simply as synecdoches for their philosophical and literary thought. The Amis des Noires' contributions in the Constituent Assembly to the debate on the continued existence of slavery and the slave trade, and their eventual alignment with the 'free colored' class of Saint Domingue highlight the compromises and failures of some radical Enlightenment thinkers in enacting meaningful social change in the colonies.

The tensions on Saint Domingue arguably began with the French National Assembly's approval of "The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen," in late

² David Geggus, "Racial Equality, Slavery, and Colonial Secession during the Constituent Assembly," *The American Historical Review* 94, no. 5 (1989): 1291.

³ Louis Sala-Molins, *Dark Side of the Light: Slavery and the French Enlightenment*, trans. John Conteh-Morgan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 127.

August of 1789. Franklin Knight notes sharp divisions between different colonial classes' interpretation of the 'Rights of Man.' The 'grand blancs,' the dominant white planter class of Saint Domingue, viewed the 'Rights of Man' as applicable exclusively to the bourgeois as a defining set of privileges, and they deeply resented and in some cases feared the 'free colored' class interpretation of the 'Rights,' which focused on a desire for the inclusion of free, propertied blacks in the political life of Saint Domingue.⁴

The free black population of Saint Domingue represents a key faction in what would become the Haitian Revolution. Their military and political mobilization forced an alliance between the grand blancs and petit blancs—between the rich and poor whites of Saint Domingue—in a concerted effort to assure continued white domination of colonial politics.⁵ The free black population of Saint Domingue grew rapidly during the late eighteenth century, and they could legitimate their importance and prominence on the basis of a high degree of wealth.⁶ Indeed, much of the free black population owned slaves, and as fighting erupted with the grand blancs, they deployed these slaves as soldiers against the white planters' slaves.⁷

Free blacks on Saint Domingue had exposure to revolutionary, egalitarian ideals before they began calling for their political rights on the basis of "The Declaration of the Rights of Man." In an earlier attempt to gain social standing among their white economic peers, free blacks in overwhelming numbers joined a colonial militia deployed in the Georgia colony in 1779 as part of the French effort in support of the American Revolution. LeNoir de Rouvray, the commanding officer of the non-white portion of the

⁴ Franklin W. Knight, "The Haitian Revolution," *The American Historical Review* 105, no 1 (2000): 110.

⁵ Ibid, 112.

⁶ James, *The Black Jacobins*, 68-9.

⁷ Knight, "The Haitian Revolution," 114.

colonial militia expressed a desire to "make the whites blush for the scorn they have heaped on me in my civil status" and further to "prove to them that as a soldier I am capable of at least as much honor and courage and of even more loyalty."⁸ Garrigus, in his study of the involvement of free blacks in the Battle of Savannah, posits that their experiences in Georgia offered a model for revolutionary struggle.⁹ They witnessed precisely the type of aggressive, violent action that the attainment of political freedom at times required. Of course, they would apply that model a decade later after another ten years of failed attempts to demolish any of the social and prejudicial barriers separating them from the white planter elites in Saint Domingue.

An increasingly politically empowered free black class mobilized in France around 1784. In that year Julien Raimond, perhaps the leading voice for free black political rights in the colonies, arrived in Paris on family business. An attorney by profession, he traveled to the metropole initially to settle affairs concerning a family estate, but in 1786 began a series of political writings on the importance of the free black population in Saint Domingue. He dispelled notions circulating among white colonial elites that the free black population, primarily of mixed racial heritage, somehow embodied the worst attributes of both Africans and Europeans.¹⁰ According to Moreau de Saint-Mery, a French colonist who wrote extensively on the social dynamics of pre-revolutionary Saint Domingue, "the mulatto man loves pleasure. It is his only master."¹¹ His memoir documents a litany of other stereotyped notions of the danger of mulattoes in

⁸ David Garrigus, "Catalyst or Catastrophe? Saint-Domingue's Free Men of Color and the Battle of Savannah, 1779-1782," *Review Interamericana* 22, no. 1 (1992): 116-117.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 124

¹⁰ David Garrigus, "The Free Colored Elite of Saint-Domingue: The Case of Julien Raimond, 1744-1801," <<<http://users.ju.edu/jgarrig>>> (26 April 2007) 23.

¹¹ Mederic-Louis-Elie Moreau de Saint-Mery, *A Civilization that Perished: The Last Years of White Colonial Rule in Haiti*, trans. Ivor D. Spencer (Lanham: University Press of America, 1985), 78.

the colonies—notions which Raimond worked diligently to dispel.

Far from ending colonial racism—the systematic oppression of blacks in the Caribbean—Raimond argued for the elevation of a select caste of mixed-race, “free colored” citizens with wealth, education, and a very light skin tone, to equal political status with whites.¹² He also detailed the ways in which his class, the wealthy free blacks, functioned as a barrier between white planters and slave insurrection. He attempted thus, with little success, to demonstrate to white planters the importance of supporting and collaborating with the free black elite.¹³

Of course, while Raimond represented the most powerful political bloc for Saint Domingue’s free blacks, others of his social class, most notably Vincent Oge, spoke out much more forcefully for the end of the slave trade. Oge, himself a prominent landowner on Saint Domingue, broadened his political message to include not only increased rights for free blacks, but also a gradual emancipation of slaves and a halt to international slave trading.¹⁴ He perceived a strong correlation between the brutalities of slavery and white planters’ hatred for free blacks, because slavery “perpetuated hateful distinctions between the whites and themselves [free blacks].”¹⁵ Ultimately, Oge represented a minority opinion among his social class. He eventually abandoned the free black constituency in Paris to direct a failed revolt from his plantation in a northern province of Saint Domingue and as a result faced execution.¹⁶

Julien Raimond’s, and not Vincent Oge’s, political activism embodies the

¹² Garrigus, “The Free Colored Elite of Saint-Domingue: The Case of Julien Raimond, 1744-1801,” 26.

¹³ Ibid, 24.

¹⁴ Robert Forster, “The French Revolution, people of color, and slavery,” *The Global Ramifications of the French Revolution*, ed. Joseph Klags and Michael H. Haltzel (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1994), 94.

¹⁵ Ibid, 96

¹⁶ Garrigus, “The Free Colored Elite of Saint-Domingue: The Case of Julien Raimond, 1744-1801,” 29.

majority opinion of the free black class of Saint Domingue as they mobilized in Paris in the 1780's. For Raimond and his constituents, whatever "enlightened" ideals existed in "The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen" applied only to those persons with the requisite legal and physical freedom and substantial wealth to command political freedom. The intellectuals who constituted the Societe des Amis des Noirs, in aligning with this class of free blacks, and therefore against those blacks still living in slavery, demonstrated the limits of their own ideals and principles.

The Societe des Amis des Noirs officially formed in February of 1788, upon the release of a pamphlet entitled "Discourse on the Necessity of Establishing in Paris a Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade and of Negro Slavery." The pamphlet's title suggests the definitive stance of the Society. They reject notions of gradual emancipation—quite an important stance in light of their changing rhetoric over the following two years—criticizing "the error of those who wish to enlighten men living in servitude but without destroying it."¹⁷ The French thinkers founded their society on this definitive stance against slavery, but they would fail to responsibly maintain that stance.

Beginning in late 1789, the free black constituency, lobbying for political rights before the National Assembly in Paris, enjoyed strong support from the Societe des Amis des Noirs. In fact, the official spokesman for the free black assembly in Paris, the attorney DeJoly, also belonged to the Amis des Noirs. With the help of the French abolitionist society, the plight of the free blacks of Saint Domingue became an increasingly important part of political discussion in Paris. Jacques-Pierre Brissot printed news stories on Raimond's movement in his notable journal *Le Patriote Francais* and

¹⁷ Societe des Amis des Noirs, "Discourse on the Necessity of Establishing in Paris a Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade and of Negro Slavery," in *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Boston: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 59.

Abbe Gregoire, an influential pamphleteer, inserted stories of colonial prejudice into his widely-read political pamphlets.¹⁸ Gregoire also chaired a Credentials Committee in the Constituent Assembly which determined rules for colonial representation in the Assembly. From this position, he lobbied fiercely, but ultimately with little success, for the inclusion of free blacks in the colonial delegation in Paris.¹⁹

The events of early 1790 explain at least in part the partnership between the Amis des Noirs and the free black assembly. On March 8, 1790, the National Assembly granted the colonies autonomy over internal governance. By way of supporting this decree, the French government banned any speech or activity that possessed the potential to incite unrest in the colonies.²⁰ The March 8th decree essentially silenced the Amis des Noirs on the issue of the abolition of the slave trade. The Society faced additional pressures however, in the form of incendiary propaganda. A group called the Club Messiac, consisting of concerned white planters from Saint Domingue who traveled to Paris after the release of the "Declaration of the Rights of Man," collaborated with officials from key French port cities to spread falsehoods about the intentions and affiliations of the abolitionists. The Club Messiac suggested to the French public that the abolitionist society involved themselves in secret pacts with the British to compromise and weaken French merchant capitalism.²¹ These colonial planters enjoyed tremendous success in defaming the abolitionist movement, thanks largely to the mercantile interests of French port cities who understood, like the planters themselves, that the end of the slave trade, and the eventual end of slavery as an institution, gravely threatened future mercantile

¹⁸ Garrigus, "The Free Colored Elite of Saint-Domingue," 28.

¹⁹ Geggus, "Racial Equality, Slavery, and Colonial Secession during the Constituent Assembly," 1300.

²⁰ Ibid, 1295.

²¹ Ibid, 1293-4.

profits.

As pressures mounted against the Amis des Noirs in late 1789, their political tactics shifted, and the appeals which the Society produced in pamphlets and presented to the National Assembly increasingly echoed those of Julien Raimond and the free blacks of Saint Domingue. Abbe Gregoire wrote a pamphlet in the fall of 1789 entitled *A Memoir in Favor of the People of Color or Mixed-Race of Saint Domingue* in which he advocated specifically for the free black class of Saint-Domingue. Gregoire argued for their political rights in ways quite similar to Raimond's own tactics. He explained that white planters would benefit from empowering free blacks politically because “

One rigorous consequence of what proceeds is that the rejection of the people of color threatens the state with an unsettling shock; if on the contrary you fill in the gap that separates them from whites, if by bringing minds together you cement the mutual attachment of these two classes, their reunion will create a mass of forces that is more effective for containing the slaves.”²²

Much like Raimond's arguments from the mid-1780's, Gregoire emphasized the concern for securing one's property, connecting the political empowerment of free blacks—who, to recall, owned slaves themselves—with increased stability in the colonial social order. By serving the interests of free blacks, white planters protected their own interests as well.

The abolitionist society's shift in focus to the political empowerment of the free blacks signaled an end to any strong calls for the abolition of slavery. In February of 1790, only a month before the March decree that called for silence on the colonial slavery

²² Abbe Gregoire, “Memoir in Favor of the People of Color or Mixed-Race of Saint-Domingue, 1789,” *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution* <http://chnmu.gmu.edu/revolution/d/341/> (26 April 2007).

debates, the Societe des Amis des Noirs produced a pamphlet that addressed the pressures mounting against them and presented a statement of the society's extremely moderate goals for social change. The Society requested in the pamphlet a new limitation on the brutalities committed on colonial slaves, that planters "cease the prostitution, the profaning of the French name, used to authorize these thefts, these atrocious murders."²³ They hoped that by ending the brutal treatment of the slaves of Saint Domingue, mortality rates would decrease and thus the planters of the Caribbean could gradually end their participation in the Atlantic slave trade. The Society made clear the distinction between calling for an end to participation in the slave trade and the actual abolition of slavery. They indeed recognized that the "immediate emancipation of the blacks would be a fatal operation for the colonies,"²⁴ both in terms of the economic costs to planters as well as the social strife involved in bestowing freedom on a cruelly enslaved population.

Although abolitionist discourse in revolutionary France appears highly compromised, some earlier writings by French philosophes took a much stronger, definitive stance against slavery. In the 1770's Abbe Raynal voiced strong opposition to the institution of slavery in his *Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies*. Originally published anonymously, Raynal with the help of several collaborators, compiled an exhaustive collection of data and facts on European colonization and the slave trade.²⁵ Raynal attacked contemporary notions that suggested Africans possessed a biological or some other form of inherent

²³ Societe des Amis des Noirs, "Address to the National Assembly in Favor of the Abolition of the Slave Trade," *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution* <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/290/> (26 May 2007).

²⁴ Ibid, "Address to the National Assembly."

²⁵ Hunt, Lynn, introduction to "The Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies," in *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Boston: St. Martin's Press: 1996), 51.

disposition towards enslavement. He explained that "the only advantage we [Europeans] have over the Negroes is, that we can break one chain to put on another."²⁶ Raynal refers to the potential for enslavement by institutions of government and within a hierarchical economic and labor structure. He alludes then to the corruptive influence provoked by economic interest: "these enlightened ages of prosperity wherefore must there be an unfortunate race, to whom even the comfortable and honourable [sic] name of freeman is denied."²⁷ Egalitarian principles, in Raynal's mind, remained inextricably linked with, and tempered by, economic realities. He also refuted the type of moral justifications which the Marquis de Condorcet would later rely upon in his *Reflections on Negro Slavery*, namely the idea that slaves might somehow benefit from their enslavement by exposure to European civilization. As Raynal quite presciently explained, "Your slaves stand in no need either of your generosity or your counsels, in order to break the sacrilegious yoke of their oppression...the Negroes only want a chief."²⁸ Justifications for slavery based upon the supposed civilizing influence of slaves' contact with the Europeans carried little weight in Raynal's mind, and the Haitian Revolution would later demonstrate that the slaves of Saint Domingue perceived no benefit from their relations with the white, European planters who enslaved them.

French philosophical writings of the early 1780's demonstrate, in some cases, quite forceful rhetorical attacks upon the institution of slavery as well. The Marquis de Condorcet in 1781 anonymously published a political pamphlet entitled *Reflections on Negro Slavery* which at certain points strongly criticizes slavery on the basis of

²⁶ Abbe Raynal, "The Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies," in *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Boston: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 53.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

immorality:

"Nature formed you [in reference to colonial slaves] with the same spirit, the same reason, the same virtues as whites...Reducing a man to slavery, buying him, selling him, keeping him in servitude: these are truly crimes, and crimes worse than theft."²⁹

Condorcet rejects, at least in this particular piece of writing, notions of essential biological differences between races, and further questions the moral grounding for enslaving fellow human beings, endowed with the same attributes as whites. Condorcet's indictment of planter immorality includes noticeably antagonistic language. He asserts that "the sovereign owes no compensation for the master of the slaves just as he owes none to a thief who a court judgment has deprived of the possession of a stolen good."³⁰ This statement in particular helps to explain why colonial planters might feel their economic livelihood threatened by the intellectuals' philanthropic efforts.

If planters felt threatened by Condorcet's assertions, they likely only felt a mild threat, as elsewhere in *Reflections on Negro Slavery* Condorcet's proposals for social change appear far more moderate and attuned to economic interest. In the same pamphlet which deplores planter immorality, Condorcet also proposed a gradual emancipation process which eased the financial burden for planters: "

We propose therefore not to free the Negroes the moment they are born, but to grant their masters the right to raise and use them as slaves on the condition they are freed at the age of thirty five... What is proposed here is to let the masters enjoy their slaves for a period long enough to offset the costs incurred in buying and training them."³¹

Ever the aspiring humanitarian, Condorcet explained the benefit of a gradual rather than immediate emancipation program as creating a space of time in which slaveholders might

²⁹ Marquis de Condorcet, "Reflections on Negro Slavery," in *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Boston: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 56.

³⁰ Ibid, 58.

³¹ Marquis de Condorcet, "Reflections on Negro Slavery," in *The Dark Side of the Light: Slavery and the French Enlightenment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 13-5.

bestow upon their slaves lessons in civilization and humanity.³² Condorcet's writings suggest that long before any outside pressures, like those of the Club Messiac, might have forced the abolitionists into a compromised position of support for the free blacks, the Society already demonstrated a propensity for compromise, at the cost of an entire generation of enslaved colonial blacks.

French abolitionist efforts during the late 1780's and the 1790's receive criticism not only for a compromised philosophical basis, but also for their rather lackluster efforts at substantial political mobilization. The Amis des Noires suffered from the weakness of a very limited membership, with only an estimated 140 members, due in large part to the self-imposed exclusivity of the group, based on a costly admittance fee for meetings and a demand for "character references."³³ The group survives in historiography primarily as a smattering of philosophical voices and short tracts precisely because the Society failed to create a strong urban base in revolutionary Paris.

Beginning in 1792, a number of colonial factions fought for control of Saint Domingue. These factions included the petit and grand blancs, the free blacks, slaves, and French, Spanish and English troops. Under the leadership of the formerly enslaved Toussaint L'Ouverture, the slaves of Haiti became the dominant faction in Saint Domingue beginning in 1793.³⁴ Haiti would not become an independent nation until 1804, but during the long interval between slave victory and full independence L'Ouverture gradually constructed a democratic constitution and suppressed the free black faction that aimed at asserting itself as the dominant class in Haitian society.³⁵

³² Sala-Molins, *The Dark Side of the Light: Slavery and the French Enlightenment*, 19.

³³ Daniel P. Resnick, "The Societe de Amis des Noirs and the Abolition of Slavery," *French Historical Studies* 7, no. 4 (1972): 562.

³⁴ Franklin W. Knight, "The Haitian Revolution," 110.

The class that the French abolitionists supported—the landed, wealthy free blacks of Saint Domingue who sought political equality with whites—failed to become the dominant class of Saint Domingue in the decade-long struggle for what would become Haiti. They lost that war to slaves, some of whom the free blacks had forcibly enlisted to fight as their soldiers against the white planters. Given a dearth of documents that might attest to the ideological forces which shaped the slaves' decision to revolt as a faction of their own, Carolyn Fick suggests that "when news of the French Revolution reached the colony, slaves heard talk of liberty and equality, and they interpreted these ideals in their own way."³⁶ Whether slaves appropriated revolutionary ideals for their own purposes, or perhaps instead they pragmatically staged revolts in a period of already great conflict between whites and free blacks, the documentary evidence suggests that the French abolitionists debating issues of slavery and the slave trade failed to support slaves in any meaningful way. They instead committed their resources and energies to supporting a class of free blacks who, while themselves oppressed, employed what resources they enjoyed to profiting from the ownership and labor of slaves. Prominent members of the *Societe des Amis des Noires* live on in historical and intellectual study as the undying voices of grand ideas, survived by their printed page, but the documentary evidence also clearly suggests that their physical voices could falter and change in the face of economic and political pressures and threats to their bodies and reputations.

³⁵ Ibid, 112.

³⁶ Carolyn Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 86.

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