

Reading Race, Homosexuality and Body in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*

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Abstract

Queer theory stems from LGBT and feministic studies and draws its origin from critical inquiries on sexuality and gender. Since the nineteenth century, it has been contesting and problematising the norms established by the society that challenge sexual (heterosexual/homosexual), racial (white/non-white), class (rich/broke), and gender (male/female) classifications. Like feminists, who perceive gender as a socially constructed public and political affair, queer theorists also argue queerness to be a communally created public and radical issue alongside sexuality and gender expression. A general meaning, credited to the word, circles around non-conformity to the socially accepted norms of gender and sexuality, therefore adding to the enigmatic concept of queer. Henceforth, a queer method to sexual impartiality confuses the identity-based LGBT support, as queer ideology conveys a backbreaking and effortless viewpoint. This paper attempts to study and understand David and Giovanni's relationships and the predicament of homosexuality in *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin. The research focuses on analysing the internal conflicts of David and reading Giovanni's character rendered through David's perception. Under the lens of Queer theory, the study attempts to know why and how the characters resist their feelings and try to conform to the definition of normal people.

Keywords: Black body; Homosexuality; Queer; Sexual deviance; Whiteness.

Racial, gender, and sexual immorality are common accusations levelled against African-Americans by racists who refer to them as "unethical." In the light of such recent racist incidents, they must do everything in their power to defend their honour; however, the sad reality lies in the fact that the representations of "Black Community" as a whole also isolate

those who identify themselves with bisexual, gay, or nonconformists to heterosexual norms of gender. When Essex Hemphill published the essay "Loyalty" in 1992, he addressed how African American leaders concealed the history of gay men in order to portray their people as invincible and heterosexual. In the 1980s, black lesbian and gay writers discussed the dangers and reality of black shamelessness through various narratives that focused upon the depiction of queer lives. A common experience that may be maintained and endured- rather than an invitation to a violation that must be ignored and condemned- is their oft-presented issue of vulnerability in their work. Following the morality of pride and (sexual) dignity that characterised African American writing in the 1960s and 1970s, "Loyalty" investigates black shamelessness as an alternative to that sense of susceptibility in their works. The notion of vulnerability, as a source of nutrition, expresses people's mutual need and desire for one another's care. People with a sense of blackness, as a matter of shamelessness, also regard the ego of both individuals and groups as deliberate distortions of the truth that it is vulnerability, not pride, that fosters meaningful human connections within and between communities.

Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire by queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick focuses on "the immanence of men's same-sex bonds and their prohibitive structuration, to male-female bonds in nineteenth-century English literature." She further opines that male-to-male attraction can be beneficial if it is motivated by a fictitious desire for a female. Eve Kosofsky explores the devastating effects of this social system on both women and men. "Male homosocial desire" (Sedgwick 3, 4), according to Sedgwick's theory, is the root of all male relationships. She rejected the verbal and theoretical alternatives to the idea that homosexual men, hetero- and bi-sexual men, and their encounters could transform. Sedgwick thought that some people might not be ready to separate the three groups, because what could be called "erotic" depends on an "unpredictable, ever-changing array of local factors" (5). She thought that some people might not be ready to separate the three groups.

The queer philosophy rejects labels such as homosexual and straight, pointing to individualism that transcends accepted norms and community regulations. Sedgwick and her partners cited Michel Foucault, a French philosopher and queer theorist with his roots in the late twentieth-century homosexual and lesbian studies, and established literary academics, as a source of inspiration for their discussion on the communal understandings of sexuality. When the defining characteristics of anyone's gender or sexuality are not made (or cannot be made) to imply monolithically,

the term “queer,” in Sedgwick’s words, is “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps,” “dissonances and resonances,” “lapses and excesses of meaning.” (Sedgwick 8)

Although it may seem counter-intuitive and even counter-productive, embracing one’s queerness and its accompanying sensitivity may be beneficial to anti-racist efforts. Many African American leaders in the 1980s thought they could not afford to deal directly with the realities of black LGBT people, since they were already seen as queer in the context of white hetero-normative domesticity. According to various studies, numerous qualities of black homosexual and bisexual men’s personalities have been shown to increase the group’s overall resiliency. People with a strong sense of belonging to a racial or ethnic group, multiple identities (such as ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, and religion), and the ability to use active coping methods have been shown to be more resilient.

Giovanni’s Room was written by James Baldwin in 1956. It was difficult for him to find a publisher for *Giovanni’s Room* even after publishing his first book, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953). With its unfiltered gay content, the novel’s publication was repeatedly thwarted by publishers, fearful that it would damage the writer’s reputation and endanger his or her future as an author. As a departure from traditional uses of racial and sexual terminology, the book was initially shunned upon its first release in 1956. As a result of its ability to bring difficult events and challenges to light- including homosexuality and bisexuality, which were shown to mostly creative and supportive audience, the book was received with success.

Baldwin’s use of non-normative storytelling techniques is a defining characteristic of *Giovanni’s Room*. The reader is first introduced to David in the current day at the beginning of the novel. The presence of our narrator in the room immediately conveys a feeling of gloom and sorrow as he or she reminisces about the past. Since David is speaking from the present while travelling back in time, it seems that he is describing his experiences as a result of a life-altering event. The dialogue between himself and his mirror image serves as a kind of comparison of his “before and after” situation in life. This conversation has been described as an organisational level in the tongue:

I am---or I was---one of those people who pride themselves on their will-power... People who believe that they are strong-willed and the masters of their destiny can only continue to believe this by becoming specialists in self-deception. (Baldwin 17)

The book is divided into two sections. Narrated by David, Giovanni's friend and lover, the story flips back and forth between the present day, the night that precedes the day that Giovanni is about to be executed, and various flashbacks. The tale of David's life is told in a narrative monologue. His friend, Giovanni, has been condemned to death, and David is by the fact because he holds him responsible for the death sentence. His bedroom window is open a few nights after the city of Paris was rocked by a sensational murder, leaving him to ponder over what went wrong.

As one of the key themes in *Giovanni's Room*, shame plays a significant role. Nonetheless, the whole story is a kind of an anatomy of shame: its origins, the beliefs that sustain it, and the devastation it brings. The book provides evidence of Giovanni's seeming immunity to shame, or at least to the kind that plagues David and to any assertion that shame is some inherent characteristic of queerness, which is what drives David's misery. The story also provides evidence of the novel's arbitrary nature. Freedom allows him to be open to the joys of life and love that, in the end, he realises cannot be fulfilled in a homosexual relation. From that point of view, the book's saving grace was the way it showed the tragedy as something other than inevitable as the result of David's, a flawed person, actions and not as the result of same-sex attraction.

Colour has traditionally been used as a superficial matter and hence, it has not been regarded as a significant signifier. Instead, it is being treated as if it is just a description of something else/other/different. According to the critic Marlon B. Ross, Baldwin uses colour to convey the cultural context of his character. In terms of race and sexuality, anybody may read Baldwin's work and learn the author's disapproval of the connection between blackness and homosexuality as well as whiteness and heterosexuality, in the United States. Ross himself explains:

Baldwin examines how desire becomes coded and enacted among a particular group of men whose racial heritage shapes attitudes toward sex, romance, love, and friendship. This reading of the novel gives depth to what otherwise must remain on the surface: the colour casting (stereotyping even) of the characters' personalities... It is not only each character's sexual identity that makes him representative or unique, but also/instead his racial difference, coded as ethnic and sexual identity. Without the ethnic difference between Giovanni, the impulsive Italian, and David, the methodical Teuton, it would be impossible for the novel to script its story of tortured same-sex desire. (Ross 26)

Racism and sexuality are intertwined in *Giovanni's Room* such that even when homosexuality becomes physically and metaphorically connected with blackness, white people are still assumed to be heterosexual. As a result, in Baldwin's writings, race and sexuality are not simply linked but are interchangeable. The metaphorical and physical white-versus-black dichotomy seems to be inextricably related to sexuality for both homosexual and straight people. To begin with, white colour connotes a sense of simplicity, holiness, and transcendence. As opposed to this, both Giovanni and Joey are shown as having dark skin. A combination of David's antipathy towards homosexuality and his background as a white American guy informs his exploration of the relationship between homoeroticism and blackness throughout the book. Joel Kovel claimed in his classic book, *White Racism: A Psychohistory* that it is our society that draws lines between light and dark, virtuous and sinful, white and black, clean and dirty, and so forth:

[White racism is] grounded somehow in a bodily fantasy about dirt, which rests in turn on the equation of dirt with excrement: the inside of the body turned out and threatening to return within. Moreover, within this nuclear fantasy, black people have come to be represented as the personification of dirt, an equation that stays locked in the deeper recesses of the unconscious and so pervades the course of social activities between the races beyond any need for awareness. (Kovel 89-90).

By using the term "black" to describe David's sexual desire, the story suggests dirt, odour, darkness, and bribes that is also indicative of the colour black. David's affection for Joey, his first gay friend, is analogous to the frightening and awful visions of darkness and its related blackness. He is a white Protestant and heterosexual guy, and his fear and humiliation of his urges are evident from the beginning of the story. He views Joey's body as "the black opening of a cavern," and asserts that "a cavern opened in my mind, black, full of rumour, suggestion, of half-heard, half-forgotten, half-understood stories, full of dirty words." He is afraid of "losing his manhood." (Baldwin 8).

When it comes to homosexuality, David's whiteness, and religious and gendered socio-cultural training teach him that it's a wicked and sinful practise. The novel's symbolism of race and sexuality has previously been recognised by certain experts like Kemp William (2000) who opines on how Baldwin uses locations and items as emblems of David's latent homosexuality, including the body, mirrors, windows, and the bedroom. He describes David's attitude towards anything that can conjure up images

of blackness in the mind of a white person as filthy. Therefore, in David's view, homosexuality and blackness are linked to the anus and his coloured body, which is expressed in "dirty words," implying a connection. Scholar Philip Auger (2000) further argues that this blending of race and sexuality does exist within the work. Although David is a white man, the issues he experienced, as per Auger (2000), are pretty well-explained in relations that might similarly suit a black man, "no place'-except closeted, contained places- exists for him either" (Baldwin 17).

David likens his homoerotic yearning for Giovanni to Joey's connection with Joey, which he likens to foulness since it is "at the bottom... of my mind, as still and as awful as a decomposing corpse" (Baldwin 14). Critics have pointed out that Giovanni's room, in which David and Giovanni spend their most time together, is an emblem of their relationship. Because of these restrained urges, David says that the area is oppressive and gloomy, as if "life in that room seemed to be occurring underwater," or "underwent a sea". A thick, white cleaning polish is applied to the window panes to ensure that they are completely covered by the door's closed status. A single white wall in Giovanni's room progressively becomes "dirty, streaked" to David as the light slips into darkness, reinforcing the relationship between filth and homosexuality (76). David frequently emphasises the idea that space is "stinking and dirty," and the container for "all the garbage of this city" (120, 77).

When Giovanni is imprisoned for Guillaume's murder, the jail cell is "dark, damp, and cold, with the prison guards dressed in black". It is so because he sees the death hallway as "dark", and he views the top of the stairwell as Giovanni's "gateway out of this dirty world, this dirty body." Similarly, Giovanni's execution is his "journey to the grave" – a location characterised and connected with death, bribe, and total darkness, with gloomy silence and deadly stillness. In the same chamber, corruption and filth are symbolised by Giovanni's darkness (Baldwin 149). Queer theorists like Ian Bernard have argued that whiteness is always delineated in terms of something else (gayness) or against something else (blackness). As he acknowledges, such relationships are partially the child of David's whiteness and his ideologies, "It [homosexuality] may be a crime – in my country and, after all, I did not grow up here, I grew up there" (72).

Seeing Giovanni's room as depressing, unclean, and putrid smelling is impossible for David, since he is steeped in racial racism. The necessity for hygiene is thus a recurring theme in his life. By cleaning and sanitising "the fantastic accumulation of trash", David is being portrayed enthusi-

astic throughout the bulk of the narrative about eliminating “the innumerable boxes and suitcases” inside the four walls. David is attempting to wipe away his homosexuality while he cleans the place (Baldwin 78). A strong desire to separate himself from the personification of blackness and Giovanni’s room from his own homosexuality pervades his thoughts and actions. Even while he washes himself to remove the filth of desire from his “immaculate manhood”, it is an expression of his profound desire to defend what he regards as his “pride and joy,” (27).

Because of Giovanni and his bedroom being the most obvious link between homosexuality and blackness, David characterises the gay social class in Paris as murky. With Jacques, another same-sex co-worker, David goes to a homosexual motel and finds it to be an example of another physical area that seemed like an “ill-lit sort of tunnel”. In the pub, David’s homophobia resurfaces as he sees a grotesquely adorned man dressed in jewellery and cosmetics. This, in turn, makes him feel uneasy, “perhaps in the same way that the sight of monkeys eating their own excrement” (Baldwin 23, 24).

Aside from its apparent association with evil, homosexuality also symbolises dirt for David (represented here by faeces); Guillaume’s tavern is characterised by David as an “airless tunnel”, since it is commonly frequented by homosexual men (Baldwin 33); another customer there is described as “a receptacle of all the world’s dirt and disease”, while Guillaume and his friend (both described as “dirty old men”) have “bubbled upward out of them like a fountain of black water” (47, 43, 39). David hides his real self as a gay and shows his fake self, of a heterosexual white man, by hating and avoiding gay people in Paris. He does this to fit into the accepted ideas of what a normal man should be like.

Because of David’s anti-homosexual prejudice, he sees heterosexuality as a symbol of order, purity, and purity alone. In spite of his attraction to a black guy, he longs to be with his fiancée, Hella, the embodiment of (white) brightness and innocence. Critics like bell hooks have argued several times that the experience of sexual identity and sexuality has been very different for whites and blacks; because he worries his masculinity and manhood would be questioned by society and his image in society would be splattered in mud, he is obsessed with associating purity with his fiancée, as opposed to the feeling of being defiled in the company of Giovanni. For him, Hella represents the prospect of having children and thus, it becomes the driving impulse for David to want her as a wife. He says, “I wanted children. I wanted to be inside again, with the light and

safety, with my manhood unquestioned, watching my woman put my children to bed" (Baldwin 93).

David's self-loathing hatred of homosexuality is given a horrific voice in the novel. When David first meets Giovanni, he witnesses a gathering of effeminate homosexual males. This is a very hard phase for David. He also uses animal analogies to represent them as parrots, and peacocks, on a farm. *Giovanni's Room* often depicts homosexuality with racial overtones. "Brown" and "dark" are frequent descriptors used to characterise David's high school classmate Joey, with whom he had a passionate night. Giovanni is described, in this moment, as "dark and leonine," and he is shown as if he were "on an auction block" as well (Baldwin 25). In America, Italians and other southern Europeans were considered non-white, not long before *Giovanni's Room*. Thus, Race here becomes an imagined categorization under the ongoing negotiation.

When the "heterosexual nuclear family" and "the light" and "unquestioned" masculinity become indistinguishable, David perceives them as being, opposingly, as doubtful or dark. (Baldwin 93). Even as they are making love to one another, the hue of their skin accentuates the purity and social acceptability of their relationship and strengthens their feelings of love for each other as well. Hella, with eyes "like lights," personifies, through her body, "a room in which I fumbled to find the light" (108). As part of his effort to regain the advantages of heterosexuality and whiteness, David abandons Giovanni to Hella in order to free himself of dirt and blackness. Giovanni cleverly says:

You love your purity; you love your mirror—you are just like a bit of a virgin, you walk around with your hands in front of you as though you had some precious metal, gold, silver, rubies, maybe diamonds, down there between your legs! You want to be clean. You think you came here 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, ... You want to leave Giovanni because he makes you stink. You want to leave Giovanni because he is not afraid of the stink of love. (Baldwin 125)

A white Protestant concern about cleanliness is shown in Giovanni's portrayal of David's dilemma. If black men represent the body, white men represent the intellect. By fleeing from Giovanni, his black homosexual boyfriend, David is denying his sexuality and body. David is fascinated by the symbolism of diamonds (clear and honest) and cleanliness (prominent for integrity, purity, and virginity). Eventually, he aspires to remain

“covered with soap”, which is symbolically white (Baldwin 125). It is also associated with cleanliness and sanitation, used to avoid the “stink” (i.e., filth and blackness) of Giovanni, who represents homosexuality and moral obscurity. Baldwin describes him as “cleaned the house” and “change my clothes” to “cover the nakedness which I must hold sacred.” (147, 149). At the conclusion of the tale, David decides to leave France and travel to the United States, the country of whites, despite the fact that Giovanni is awaiting his death.

After all, no matter how hard David tries to keep from being “contaminated” by Giovanni, he can’t avoid the temptation to become gay and black. In spite of his best efforts, David is driven further into the cesspool of depravity and moral decay. Assuming that there can be no change without mixing, it shouldn’t be a surprise if David is eventually shown to be black (homosexual). No matter how many times he tries (and fails) to put on a show of race and sexuality, Baldwin’s character inevitably reveals his true identity as a black man.

It may be a misconception to label *Giovanni’s Room* as a homosexual fiction. In many respects, the book blurs the lines between its many subgenres. Both Giovanni and David have sexual and emotional interactions with both men and women. Several LGBT characters in American literature published in the mid-20th century had tragic destinies similar to this story’s tragic climax. *Giovanni’s Room* isn’t a product of its time, because it doesn’t follow popular ideas of gay love; instead, it has stood the test of time because of this tragic end.

Overwhelming images of white heterosexual masculinity establish a pathologically racialized homosexuality via the interaction between David and Giovanni. More importantly, *Giovanni’s Room* novel has the potential to explain how studying racism, invariably leads to challenging notions of white masculinity, in particular, white male ideas of black (homo)sexuality. As a result of Baldwin’s critique of white portrayals of black manliness and (homosexuality), he advises a declaration of black homosexuality as well. Despite all of this, Giovanni’s death serves as a metaphor for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, in which the innocent and defenceless die in order to protect the powerful, dishonest, and influential and therefore, prove themselves to be more successful than all those they guarded. That *Giovanni’s Room* is, at its core, a particular philosophy of Baldwin’s individuality as both a black, and a homosexual man, is established with his devotedness in the novel to his then-lover Lucien Happers Berger, and is immediately followed by a quote attributed to Walt Whitman: “I am the man I suffered I was there” (Whitman 32).

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