"Simply a Menaced Boy": Analogizing Color, Undoing Dominance in James Baldwin's "Giovanni's Room"

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“Simply a Menaced Boy”: Analogizing Color, Undoing Dominance in James Baldwin’s Giovanni’s Room

The year 2007 marks the twentieth anniversary of the death of novelist, essayist, political spokesperson, philosopher James Baldwin. The significance of Baldwin’s contribution to 20th-century American letters and politics cannot be overstated. It was Baldwin who spent 40 years examining and employing the intersection of race and sexuality as a conceptual framework for understanding how identity is created, consolidated, and codified in the United States. It was Baldwin who gave African Americans the words “unlivable” and “unanswerable” as the terms that most approximate (while always admitting the incapacity ever truly to describe) the experience of being a black person in the US at any point in its history. Finally, it was Baldwin who realized and persistently proclaimed that the African American, the woman, and the (so-called) sexual deviant are doomed symbols of the US cultural imagination, where the fears, fetishes, and fantasies of the straight, white, bourgeois mainstream are deposited, and that the key to all human redemption is to recognize in these figures their own innate and complicated humanity—and to let them live.

I dare say that this essay borrows its focus from Baldwin’s life work—“the discovery of what it means to be an American” and the conviction that the most effective path to realizing the potential of US democracy is to undo those sinister dichotomies, those maliciously mapped boundaries, between black and white, citizen and alien, heterosexual and homosexual on which American identity so assiduously relies. Not only because Baldwin was himself “a transatlantic commuter” or because he had to flee the US to survive it, but also because in his imaginative works so many of his characters must do the same, the journey from prescriptive, predetermined identity to self-possessed and self-determined selfhood for Baldwin occurs on the internal geography of the human psyche and heart and on the spatial geography of our world. Baldwin’s project was nationalistic in scope and process. Believing that concepts of home and nation exert critical influence on the development of individual identity, Baldwin’s life project was to locate, or if necessary to forge, a place for the black, the impoverished, the artist, the gay—the oppressed and weary “outsider”—in his own country.

In the essay, “Words of a Native Son,” Baldwin declares, “We must make great effort to realize that there is no Negro problem—but simply a menaced boy. If we could do this, we could save this country, we could save the world” (Price 401). Anatomizing this claim, this essay reads Baldwin’s depictions of besieged masculinity and male homoeroticism as both critique of and analogue for the position of African Americans as both racial...
and sexual others in the US. I take as my principal focus Giovanni’s Room, recovering the underlying racial antagonisms of the putatively white characters to argue additionally that American identity is solidified, most directly experienced, but also transformed—if not reformed—through the experience of expatriation. I open my analysis of Giovanni’s Room by first explicating the demands of racial protest fiction relative to depictions of personal desire in mid-20th-century African American literature. I proceed to trace the history of criticism about Giovanni’s Room to reveal that label “homosexual novel” and the critical obsession with the novel’s white characters have obscured many of the novels underlying critiques of the machinations of power. It is my contention, finally, that for Baldwin the experience of exile, of living as a stranger in an unfamiliar country, powerfully parallels—and analogizes—the social alienation and psychic fragmentation that African Americans and/as sexual outsiders experience at home in the United States.¹

As a second novel, Giovanni’s Room was doomed to fail. Its white characters, explicit homosexual content, and Parisian setting did not make it a suitable follow-up to Go Tell It on the Mountain, which introduced Baldwin as the most promising black novelist to arrive on the American literary scene in the mid-twentieth century. Baldwin was warned that his second novel might not withstand accusations of indecency and associations with pornography, and Giovanni’s Room was initially rejected by a number of New York presses and dismissed as a novel of little literary value. Baldwin was even told by his editors to “burn the manuscript.”² Of course, Baldwin felt that in spite of the explicit love affair of the two central characters, David and Giovanni, the many thematic preoccupations of the novel—including migration, failed romance, poverty, and crimes of passion—would appeal to readers of all racial and sexual identifications. But more important, Giovanni’s Room provided Baldwin the opportunity to represent unsanctioned personal desire and to contemplate questions of identity and national belonging outside of the traditional parameters of black protest fiction.³ In Giovanni’s Room, Baldwin found an opportunity both to depict the basic human struggle toward self-love and communal acceptance and to represent sexual alterity without abandoning his commitment to critiquing social asymmetries in the arenas of race and class.

The policing of representations of racial blackness—particularly in terms of sexuality, family, and domesticity—is a longstanding practice in the African American literary tradition. Early black novelists endeavored to refigure blackness as (hetero)normative so that black Americans could enter the cultural mainstream and enjoy the full benefits of unqualified citizenship. The persistence of racism and the concomitant threat of African Americans’ (literal and psychic) annihilation kept the commitment to black social advancement and positive racial representation foremost in African American expressive culture of the mid-twentieth century.⁴ While there is much that is empowering about the insistence that black literature do manifest political work, this injunction has led to prescriptive modes of representation and the emergence of cultural standards that devalue black literary texts that do not highlight the material impacts of racism or promote explicitly black racial uplift. This injunction has led, moreover, to the pervasive suppression of desire in mid-20th-century African American literary production.⁵ And by desire I mean the deeply internal, the individually human, and the personally fulfilling. Desire here, then, both comprises and exceeds the yearning for social equity in the psychological, economic, and political realms.

The disciplining of desire in black literature has resulted in the censure of those texts that are not overtly political and the suspicion that they lack both cultural value and racial authenticity. Speaking of black canon formation through-

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out much of the twentieth century, Claudia Tate argues, “Scholars and readers all seemed tacitly to agree that such works, which focus on the inner worlds of black characters without making the world entirely dependent on the material and psychological consequences of a racist society, were not black enough, and they cast them aside” (4). The imperative of racial authenticity and the imposition of racial standards create an artificial divide within the black community that banishes those with unsanctioned personal desires, philosophical commitments, and aesthetic practices to the periphery of black identity. In other words, the consequence of racial standards, of the very possibility that one’s self or one’s art may fail to be “black enough,” is the normalization of blackness in a way that mimics the sanctioned, dominant order and the group exclusions that such normalization necessarily entails.6 In the final analysis, those who fail to figure or to matter in the determination of who and/or what qualifies as authentically black have been relegated to the fringes of the black-culture-making machine.

And more often than not, those so exiled have been women and queers of color, for subtending qualifying standards of authentic blackness are phallocentricism and compulsory heterosexuality. As Dwight McBride argues, “underlying much of race discourse [and, I would add, its imaginative counterpart: social protest fiction] is the implication that all ‘real’ black subjects are male and heterosexual” (“Queen Speak” 371). It is not surprising, of course, that the struggle for black social advancement has been historically a simultaneous struggle to reconfigure black masculinity and to normalize (hetero-)patriarchy in African American culture. As Phillip Brian Harper brilliantly elucidates, “subscription to black identity bespeaks a masculine status because the . . . courage to claim social autonomy is precisely what constitutes conventional manhood, no matter what the racial context” (68). In other words, the concepts that underwrite unimpeded cultural and political access or, more simply, full citizenship in the US are the same concepts that delineate the masculine subject.7

Nonetheless, racial standardization produced under the rubric of a central black male positionality risks the occlusion of intraracial differences. For example, Kendall Thomas warns, “In the name of imagined unity, the politics of racial authenticity has given rise to an aggressive, antidemocratic impulse. This politics has obscured the inflections of, and antagonisms within, racial identity produced by differences of ethnicity, class, gender, religion, sexuality, and the like” (129). The “antidemocratic impulse” obtaining in racial proscriptions may be understood as a final endorsement of heterosexuality and of patriarchy because, most often, the black people who come under suspicion of lacking authenticity are those whose bodies and desires are not in keeping with the cultural (read: national) standard.

The principal reason, then, for the banishment of Giovanni’s Room from the black literary canon is its emphasis on desire, its dramatization of Baldwin’s own queerness, and the novel’s risky attempt at racial transcendence. In the 50 years since its publication, critics have had an ambivalent, if not manifestly hostile, reaction to the novel. Robert Bone, for example, wrote in 1965: “Giovanni’s Room is by far the weakest of Baldwin’s novels . . . . The characters are vague and disembodied, the themes half-digested, the colors bleached rather than vivified” (qtd. in Holland 105). Bone’s criticisms are themselves racially-coded. The terms “bleached” and “disembodied” refer to the white characters in the novel and implicitly to Baldwin himself for choosing to depict homoeroticism at all, particularly in the imaginative space of whiteness.

In a recent reading of Giovanni’s Room, Mae G. Henderson posits that “the characters [in Giovanni’s Room] perform in racial drag” (299). Henderson’s postulation is not only astute but also critically paramount in that it insinuates a cri-
tique of racial authenticity by bringing to bear considerations of gender disruption and homoeroticism. Henderson agrees with Sharon Patricia Holland’s assessment of the characters in *Giovanni’s Room*: “basically, these are black characters in whiteface” (105). While my own analysis of the novel builds on the important work of both Henderson and Holland, I take care not to dismiss the whiteness of the characters to access their putative blackness. My concern is to avoid reiterating—or assigning to Baldwin—the logic that in the realm of properly performed, authentic blackness, homosexuality is a “white thing.” In other

Baldwin depicts sexual alterity and the human struggle for self-love and communal acceptance without abandoning his commitment to a critique of social asymmetries of race and class.

words, I wish to resist the assumption that Baldwin believed his representation of homoeroticism necessitated a transfiguring of race because of a prevailing belief in African American communities that the proper locale for same-sex desiring is among whites. What I would prefer to emphasize, instead, is the complicated rendering of power hierarchies that both include and exceed racial difference in *Giovanni’s Room*. In other words, my focus is on Baldwin’s critique of whiteness, specifically through his subtle allusions to the racializing effects of queerness.

Despite its French setting and European characters, *Giovanni’s Room* centralizes issues of race and racial hierarchy within a capitalist economy and stratified social sphere. As Baldwin biographer David Leeming writes, Baldwin “merges the question of race with the question of self-identity, which had always been his concern and which had been most fully treated in the context of homosexuality in *Giovanni’s Room*” (117). As I discuss below, that none of the central characters in the text are of French descent but all live in relative poverty and obscurity in France suggests that questions of lineage, of privilege, and of national belonging—all factors of social and racial identity but none quite reducible to race—are pursued in the novel as well. By establishing the whiteness of the protagonist David as his first authorial act in this novel, Baldwin sets up race, though not explicitly African American identity, as a primary concern of his narrative. In the opening passage of *Giovanni’s Room*, David stands at the window, glaring at his own reflection, and declares: “I watch my reflection in the darkening gleam of the window pane. My reflection is tall, perhaps rather like an arrow, my blond hair gleams. My face is like a face you have seen many times. My ancestors conquered a continent, pushing across death-laden plains, until they came to an ocean which faced away from Europe’s darker past” (221). David’s whiteness, particularly in its typicality (“like a face that you have seen many times”) and its contrast with the known black racial identity of the author, suggests that Baldwin’s imaginative endeavor in *Giovanni’s Room* is to interrogate subjective development in the social context of fixed racial positionalities. David’s invocation of the “darker past” of Europe indicates David’s dawning, subtle identification with color and, thereby, begins Baldwin’s work in the text of undoing whiteness. Moreover, David’s acknowledgement that his identity as a white American man is borne of European imperialism and domination establishes a crucial link between Europe and the United States that allows Europe to serve as a suitable setting for Baldwin’s interrogation of US ethos and rampant inequalities.
In spite of the generic quality of David’s whiteness, its conformity to cultural standards of attractiveness registers anxiety about the placement of white bodies in the economies of sex and romance, particularly in a male homosexual context. David associates his stature with “an arrow,” registering a “straight” sexual orientation that is belied by his same-sex wanting and behavior. As David studies his reflection in the “darkening gleam of the window pane,” his initial declaration of whiteness is undermined by the perceptual darkness framing his visage, framing his view of himself. Even as David claims whiteness at the beginning of a narrative that is simultaneously its end, he has endured the grittiness of life and lust that, once repressed and repudiated, becomes the material of blackness. In other words, as he constantly violates heteronormative codes and as sexual variance is perceived as the property of the socially ousted black (or dark) figure, David undergoes a progressive “racialization” throughout Giovanni’s Room that throws his avowed whiteness into question.

Even before David gets to Paris and begins a love affair with Giovanni, he makes love with a “brown” boy named Joey. This, his first homoerotic act, terrifies him. He describes the morning after his and Joey’s lovemaking:

We were both naked and the sheet that we had used as a cover was tangled around our feet. Joey’s body was brown, was sweaty, the most beautiful creation I had seen until then. I would have touched him to wake him but something stopped me. I was suddenly afraid.

. . . . My own body suddenly seemed gross and crushing and the desire which was rising in me suddenly seemed monstrous. But, above all, I was afraid. (225-26)

The monstrous desire that is budding in David is both homoerotic and cross-racial. David’s experience of panic is a result, then, of his participation in two outlawed sexual behaviors that threaten his claim to uncontaminated whiteness. In the hierarchy of debased sexualities, interracial love is the more socially deplored and, thus, the more threatening to David’s white identity. This greater threat is evident in David’s registering Joey’s racial difference before he notices their anatomical male sameness. That the heterosexual basis of David’s masculine identity has become undone occurs to him only after he has begun to confront the meaning of his interracial desire. He finally realizes that Joey is “a boy.” David narrates:

I saw suddenly the power in his thighs, in his arms, in his loosely curled fists. The power and the promise of that body made me suddenly afraid. That body suddenly seemed the black opening of a cavern in which I would be tortured till madness came, in which I would lose my manhood. . . . The very bed, in its sweet disorder testified to its vulgarity. . . . A cavern opened in my mind, black, full of rumor, suggestion, of half-heard, half-forgotten, half-understood stories, full of dirty words. I thought I saw my future in that cavern. I was afraid . . . for not understanding how this could have happened to me, how this could have happened in me. (226)

David describes his desire for the male body as being drawn into a dark cavern—an obvious reference to the anus he wants to enter/has entered. As a metaphor for fallen masculinity, the cavern sucks him in only to castrate and then to characterize him. Moreover, even though David finds Joey beautiful, Joey’s body is the very opening of the cavern. A number of words that David uses to describe same-sex desire have racial connotations: black, half-forgotten, madness, half-understood, dirty. It is Joey’s brownness then—his being raced—that is both pollutant and contagion to David, so that David imagines his desire for Joey makes him a monster. Both David’s proximity to and desire for Joey’s brown body undermine his claims to heteronormativity, to masculinity, and to whiteness, as David’s descent into intra-gender sexuality is simultaneously a decent into racial blackness. Notably, David attempts to recover his white masculinity by comparing the smallness of Joey’s body to the largeness of his own and by thinking of the fulfillment of his desire as dominance. In other words,
David momentarily forgets Joey’s consent to their sexual exchange and refigures it as an act of racial aggression, the history of which so strongly grounds white male identity. Thus, even before Giovanni enters the action of the novel, it is clear that for his investment in whiteness and dominant masculinity, David will abandon his darker-skinned Italian lover—who operates in the novel as both the figure of the black and the figure of the homosexual.

In the superficially all-white context of the novel, both national identity and skin color stand in for racial difference and illustrate how sexual behaviors and class locations are implicated within racial ideologies. Baldwin color-codes desire to uncover the ways that whiteness itself depends on heterosexuality to perpetuate its own myth of normalcy and its status as the universal standard. Analyzing Baldwin’s use of ethnic types and skin complexion to signify racial and sexual differences in *Giovanni’s Room*, Marlon Ross writes:

Baldwin . . . refers to color and racial characteristics as a way of locating the cultural situation of the characters. But by taking these cues seriously rather than merely as uncritical, descriptive details for establishing the “look” of his characters, we might argue that in *Giovanni’s Room*, Baldwin examines how desire becomes encoded and enacted among a particular group of men whose racial heritage shapes attitudes towards sex, romance, love and friendship. . . . In this reading, it is not only each character’s sexual identity that makes him representative or unique but also/instead his racial identity, coded as ethnic and sexual identity. (26)

In the text, Giovanni, David’s darker, poorer, abused, and finally executed Italian lover, undergoes the classic experiences of the degraded figure of both the African American and the homosexual. In terms of race, Giovanni’s dislocation in Paris, his failure to belong, and the extreme poverty he faces emblematize the alienation that African Americans experience wherever they are on the globe, including in the country of their births and citizenship. In terms of sexuality, Giovanni’s failed masculinity and inability to function within the heterosexual matrix is evidenced even before he arrives in Paris. After his child is stillborn, he abandons his wife in Italy. When in Paris, he works as a bartender in a bar frequented by older and wealthier gay Parisian men. Like the black female concubine or prostitute, Giovanni is the constant object of lust and commercial exchange. The men who frequent the bar in which Giovanni works look at him as “a valuable race horse or a rare bit of china” (245). According to Robert Reid-Pharr, “One might argue, in fact, that Giovanni becomes simply a creature of his body, a creature of sex and desire, by which other men are able to gauge their own humanity” (388). Giovanni is the dark figure in the novel who serves as a repository for the longings and the anxieties of the white characters. It is against him that they define and measure both their humanity and their whiteness.

David internalizes his native country’s homophobia, and this homophobia in turn characterizes him as a white American man. As he conceives of his intimacy with Joey as “dirty,” so David thinks of his love affair with Giovanni. Speaking of their romance, their cohabitation, and their sex acts, David tells Giovanni, “People have dirty words for—for the situation.” For David, homosexuality is not only degenerate, it is criminal. He adds that “it is a crime—in my country, and, after all, I didn’t grow up here, I grew up there” (286). In citing his country of origin to justify his inability to embrace homoerotic romance wholeheartedly, David admits the extent to which he has imbibed American sexual mores. These mores ground his masculinity and lend coherence to his felt sense of national identity.

Baldwin illustrates this point through an account of David’s upbringing. After David’s mother dies when he is five, David is raised by his father and his aunt, Ellen. Ellen is overbearing, David’s father is infantilized, and their relationship is sexually tense. Although they are siblings, Ellen acts like a wife to David’s father, staying up late to wait for him and chiding him for his alco-
holism and promiscuity. In their household, Ellen fills the space vacated by her
dead sister-in-law. Her behavior conforms to the 19th-century ideal of woman-
hood that made women responsible for the sexual behaviors of men; expected to
exert a moral and “civilizing” influence, women’s role mandated their policing
male sexual appetites and activities. In an argument one night, David’s father
tells Ellen that he wants David to “grow up to be a man. And when I say man,
Ellen, I don’t mean a Sunday school teacher” (231). The office of the Sunday
school teacher is presumably Ellen’s, as she is herself implicated not only by
being directly addressed but also by being directly named in David’s father’s
exhortation. David’s father wants him to develop a strong, straight sexual
appetite. To develop otherwise is to become feminized.

The gender expectation that women function as regulators and disciplinari-
ans in men’s sexual lives dates back to 19th-century ideals of true womanhood. It
assumes that women have no sexual appetites of their own and, moreover, it
covers up male sexual practices. In other words, with women figuring foremost
as the society’s sexually repressed, in turn (white) men as sexual repressors
— as do David and his father—engage in excessive and even predatory sexual-
behavior without ever having to accept responsibility for it. David recognizes
this dynamic within his family. Lack of responsibility for their sexuality keeps
men in a state of perpetual immaturity, insincerity, and seeming innocence.
David describes his father as “boyish and expansive,” while Ellen is depicted as
aged and domineering. Even David’s mother, who looks out on the household
from a photograph, is depicted as a haunting authorial presence. After Ellen has
died, David’s father speaks of both women in terms more applicable to one’s
mother than one’s spouse or sister. David recognizes, and Baldwin depicts, this
psychosexual familial drama as a national one. White American men are depict-
ed in the novel as a horde that “seemed incapable of age,” who “smelled of soap,
which seemed indeed to be their preservative against the dangers and exigencies
of any more intimate odor” (293). For Baldwin, then, it is the men who—despite
engaging in exploitation and exploring vice—retain the innocence that is puta-
tively so fundamentally American.9

The linkage of sexual repression and sexual exploitation is tied in Giovanni’s
Room both to national identity and to class privilege. Sexual exploitation proli-
erates when men fail to own or are not held responsible for their own sexual pro-
clivities and practices. David’s father’s womanizing and David’s callous and
neglectful handling of both his male and female lovers exemplify male sexual
exploitation in the US context. Baldwin’s portrayal of decadent, aging, gay
Frenchmen reveals the substantial connection between sexual exploitation, labor,
and global poverty.

On the face of it, the characters Jacques and Guillaume seem to support a
reading of homosexuality as pathology in Giovanni’s Room. This strand of
the argument is put forth by literary critic Yasmin DeGout. DeGout argues that
homosexuality is depicted in dual, counterposed modes in the novel. On the one
hand, it is constructed as innocent, natural, and curative for the novel’s male
characters; and, on the other hand, she argues, it is constructed as “deviant
behavior that proceeds from psychological and socioeconomic depravity” (426).
Citing the character of Giovanni, DeGout suggests that failed relationships with
women and severe poverty lead men into homoerotic entanglements and that
Baldwin himself condemns the “tragic failure of society that produces deviant
[as in homosexual] behavior” (426). On initial examination, DeGout’s claims
seem tenable. Baldwin does in fact indict societal failures that lead individuals
into pathological enactments of despair. For example, desperate poverty leads to
tragic consequences for Giovanni, most notably in that he ends up providing
sexual favors to both Jacques and Guillaume in exchange for food and a place to
stay. Eventually, Giovanni kills Guillaume, who is said to look “like a receptacle

ANALOGIZING COLOR, UNDOING DOMINANCE IN JAMES BALDWIN’S GIOVANNI’S ROOM

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of all the world’s dirt and disease,” for which Giovanni is promptly executed (264). What needs clarification here is exactly who or what qualifies as depraved and why.

Baldwin neither proclaimed nor represented homosexuality to be deviance or depravity *per se*. Even the grotesque figure of the homosexual who accosts David at the bar one night is the figure of abjection, David’s own repressed and expurgated insides materialized before him. Homosexuality is *not* pathology in *Giovanni’s Room*. Giovanni exacts revenge on Guillaume for utilizing him sexually and then refusing to grant him respectable employment after Giovanni’s sexual use has been exhausted. Giovanni is starved, abandoned, and desperate, but he is not depraved. More to the point, his problem is neither caused nor manifested by his homosexual desiring. Instead, the problem, as Baldwin puts it forth, lies in the economic ordering of society that places on sale emaciated, foreign boys to be purchased and in every way (ab)used by wealthy, sexually rapacious, closeted natives. Jacques and Guillaume go about town buying sexual favors from young boys who are quite literally starved and then cast the boys back into the streets once the old men have been satiated. Not the boys’ bodies but their hunger acquires to the demands imposed by Jacques and Guillaume’s lust. Baldwin depicts Jacques and Guillaume as pathetic, deplorable old men not because they undo the heterosexuality of young foreigners but because they rob these boys of their own volition and love. In other words, Baldwin indicted social systems that grant protection and prestige to wealthy, powerful men in society without regard for the detriment they cause to those who exist on society’s fringes, and without regard for the conditions within which the severely impoverished and politically disenfranchised are forced to live.

Furthermore, Baldwin blast the media and the mainstream public for their collusion. As he reconstructs for the reader the events that lead Giovanni to commit murder, David points out with scathing sarcasm the classist, nativist, homophobic assumptions that resonate within news reportage and that reflect dominant opinion. No longer familiar with the intimate details of Giovanni’s daily life and whereabouts, David follows the reports in the daily presses. The newspapers malign Giovanni as a foreigner, a pauper “a criminal . . . of the dullest kind” (346) while Guillaume is memorialized in the press as “a good-hearted, a perhaps somewhat erratic philanthropist who had had the bad judgment to befriend the hardened and ungrateful adventurer, Giovanni” (349-50). Significantly, the designation “adventurer” registers nativist, economic, and sexual anxieties about Giovanni. David notes:

> It was remembered that there perished with Guillaume one of the oldest names in France. Sunday supplements were run on the history of the family; and his old, aristocratic mother, who did not survive the murder trial of his murderer, testified to the sterling qualities of her son and regretted that corruption had become so vast in France that such a crime could go unpunished. With this sentiment the populace was, of course, more than ready to agree. . . . Guillaume’s name became fantastically entangled with French history, French honor, and French glory, and very nearly became, indeed, a symbol for French manhood. (344)

In casting Guillaume as both a sexual predator and as the symbol of national manhood, Baldwin links explicitly repressed sexuality, masculinity, and exploitation as fundamental characteristics of Western nationhood. Although moneyed, aged, decadent Frenchmen are those most associated with debauchery and class exploitation in *Giovanni’s Room*, Baldwin does not represent these social ills as especially French national characteristics. He depicts them, instead, as characteristic of the West. David, the privileged white American traveler, is implicated in the traffic in exploitative sex that the novel condemns. David, too, takes an impoverished, vulnerable boy as a lover and then tosses him out rather
than have his queer desires exposed. Even before David and Giovanni become lovers, Jacques points out the similarity between himself and David, particularly their clandestine sexual activities. He warns David that “that poor boy ... doesn't know that when he looks at you the way he does, he is simply putting his head in the lion's mouth” (265). David acts out his homosexuality in the hidden closet of Giovanni's room, far from the gaze of his family and national community. David, Jacques, and Guillaume are linked finally as a “disgusting band of fairies” because they treat their lovers as prostitutes or turn them into such (335). The depiction of male prostitution is central to Baldwin's social critique. For example, his next novel, Another Country, opens with a depiction of the prostitution of its central black male character, Rufus, within the urban landscape of America's most notorious city: New York. For Baldwin, male prostitution in a racialized context is not only about dire poverty, class hierarchy, and severe sexual exploitation; it is also about historic, widespread, insidious racism. As Baldwin often stated, “White people invented black people to give white people identity” (Baldwin and Giovanni 88-89). Male prostitution signifies for Baldwin the material, ideological, and psychic denigration of an entire population of raced and (or as) sexual others for the development and preservation of whiteness and, more specifically, for the maintenance of white privilege and the attainment of white pleasure.

Although Giovanni's Room has not received the critical acclaim it merits, this neglected second novel by Baldwin matters because it offers some of the most stunning, subtle, and astute observations of US ethos in the period between the end of World War II and the 20th-century Civil Rights movement. Baldwin understood that African American people were under siege in the US, were in every way vulnerable to the individual and systemic assaults of race hatred and racial domination. He also understood the sexual component of racism, writing of southern black men in Go Tell it on the Mountain, “which of them had not been made to bend down and drink some white man's muddy water?” Baldwin knew that the moment of sexual interlocking was laden with individual and collective histories, but he also knew that it contained tremendous opportunity for individual correction and for cultural renovation. Giovanni's Room matters because it initiates Baldwin's deployment of transgressive sexualities to locate desire both within and in the spaces between polarized identity categories. It is with Giovanni's Room that Baldwin begins the imaginative project that would span his entire lifetime: that is, the dismantling of dominant theories of race, of masculinity, and of sexuality to reconceptualize and creatively reconstruct a more fundamentally egalitarian US.

Aliyah I. Abdur-Rahman wishes to thank the reviewers at AAR for valuable feedback on earlier drafts of this essay.

1. By alienation, I refer to the historic difficulty of African Americans to establish and locate themselves in the social milieu of US society. By fragmentation, I refer to the Du Boisian concept of double-consciousness, wherein racial interpellation bifurcates the subjectivity of the black person, making it dual.

2. Weatherby gives a detailed account of the initial reception of Giovanni's Room by New York publishers (117-19). After being published first in London, the novel was finally picked up and published by Dell.

3. Posnock writes that Baldwin's “homosexuality intensified his differential vision, making him acutely sensitive to the artifact of bounded identity” (231). Baldwin's felt sense of difference as a queer person within the black community heightened his awareness of individual existence beyond fixed identity categories, racial or otherwise.

4. I cannot make this claim forthright without complicating it. After all, black expressive culture in the late twentieth century is often associated with hip hop culture: with urban musical forms, clothing
styles, speech patterns, and even a recent proliferation of novels (published independently or by small publishing houses) that purportedly depict life in the inner-city. These books have found a wide readership among young African American urbanites. I use the barely tenable notion of “high” expressive culture to designate those works of art and fiction by African Americans that have made notable inroads in the academy.

5. Naylor convincingly argues that over the 20th-century black women writers, more than black male writers, depicted romantic, sexual, and familial relations that depart from socially sanctioned norms. One notable exception for her is Baldwin: “James Baldwin is the only established male voice in the literary tradition to dare to explore black sexuality, and in all its forms. He gave us the black family. He gave us men in love with men and with women, black and white. He gave us women in love with men, white and black” (24).

6. Thomas examines this issue when he writes, “In the retreat to a heterosexist conception of black identity, the jargon of racial authenticity does not repudiate but instead reveals its reliance on the white supremacist logic from which it purports to declare its independence” (Lubiano, ed. 131).

7. Feminist scholars have made this observation as well. hooks, for example, writes in “Reflections on Race and Sex.” “The discourse of black resistance has almost always equated freedom with manhood, the economic and material domination of black men with castration, emasculation. Accepting these sexual metaphors forged a bond between oppressed black men and their white male oppressors. They shared the patriarchal belief that revolutionary struggle was really about the erect phallus” (58).

8. The corollary between the experience of expatriation and African Americans’ felt sense of alienation in the US is treated lucidly and in depth by Tomlinson.

9. In “Shuckin Off the African-American Native Other,” Lubiano argues convincingly that political innocence masks and preserves the privileges of the dominant group(s) in society.

Works Cited