

Into the Room and Out of the Closet: (Homo)Sexuality and Commodification in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*

By Luminita M. Dragulescu, West Virginia University, USA

Abstract:

David, the narrator protagonist of Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, is teetering on the brink of yielding to his homosexuality when, as an American tourist in the Paris of the fifties, he meets the tragic Italian immigrant, Giovanni. The circle of acquaintances that the raconteur frequents spins to propel him to one location that would challenge his self-representation: Giovanni's room - the metonym of his newly appropriated sexual identity. Once David enters Giovanni's dilapidated room, he virtually enters a realm of no return, a social inferno, yet also a heaven and haven of unrepressed sexuality. When the protagonist leaves his lover's lair, he escapes the closet he has inhabited, consciously or not, for most of his life and accepts the truth of his sexuality. Furthermore, "the closet" objectified, Giovanni's room stands not only for the recognition of David's homosexual identity, but also for the social and political oppression that comes with it, being that the closet, as theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick evinces, "is the defining structure for gay oppression in this century" (71).

1 David, the narrator protagonist of Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, is teetering on the brink of yielding to his homosexuality when, as an American tourist in the Paris of the fifties, he meets the tragic Italian immigrant, Giovanni. The circle of acquaintances that the raconteur frequents spins to propel him to one location that would challenge his self-representation: Giovanni's room - the metonym of his newly appropriated sexual identity. Once David enters Giovanni's dilapidated room, he virtually enters a realm of no return, a social inferno (who else but an Italian could have been a better guide through the gates outside which one leaves any hope?), yet also a heaven and haven of unrepressed sexuality. When the protagonist leaves his lover's lair, he escapes the closet he has inhabited, consciously or not, for most of his life and accepts the truth of his sexuality. As such, Giovanni's chaotic room is the one threshold to David's surrender to his homosexuality longings, "with everything in [him] screaming *No!* yet the sum of [him] sigh[ing] *Yes*" (64). Furthermore, "the closet" objectified, Giovanni's room stands not only for the recognition of David's homosexual identity, but also for the social and political oppression that comes with it, being that the closet, as theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick evinces, "is the defining structure for gay oppression in this century" (71).

2 The narrative by which *Giovanni's Room* unfolds is in actuality David's stream of consciousness prompted by his former lover's (Giovanni) imprisonment and execution as punishment for having killed his employer - a word invested with double connotation in Baldwin's novel. David reconstructs and ponders over this violent act for which he arguably

feels responsible, as he believes himself to be the catalyst which has led to his lover's self-destruction. His tale vacillates between two interwoven time frames, one which refers to the narrative present and the other which is actually a mixture of recollections and reenactments that situate the raconteur and his reader in relation to the past. Always already, his account poses the usual question of the storyteller's reliability and invites skepticism. David's lack of interest in a beautified self-representation, however, argues for his sincerity and hence, for his relative commitment to the truth.¹ The narrator suggests, through the first image of the novel - a depiction of his self-reflection in the window - to reproduce accurately, photographically even, the events that create his story. David's focus is not as much on the tragedy of his former lover, as it is on the introspection of his own sexual coming of age, his self portrait in the window's glass. Ultimately, the narrative is the Bildungsroman of David's homosexuality, the one occurrence from which the entire tale, thus the drama, erupts and gives meaning to his existence. The life that David must decipher for himself aligns essentially along and beyond the threshold of Giovanni's room and hence his getting out of the closet, an understanding that the narrator acquires in retrospective: "I understood why Giovanni had wanted me and had brought me to his retreat. I was to destroy this room and give to Giovanni a new and better life. This life could only be my own, which, in order to transform Giovanni's, must first become a part of Giovanni's room" (88). The nest that David shares with his lover is his classroom of sexual initiation; it represents the avenue that separates ignorance from knowledge in lieu of sexuality. Referring to texts similar in nature with *Giovanni's Room*,² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains in *Epistemology of the Closet* that

[t]he subject - the thematics - of knowledge and ignorance themselves, of innocence and initiations, of secrecy and disclosure, become not contingently, but integrally infused with one particular object of cognition: no longer sexuality as a whole [as envisioned by Foucault's *History of Sexuality, Volume I*], but even more specifically, now, the homosexual topic. (74)

Baldwin's narrative is in fact an exploration of the homosexuality in its complexity, highlighting the landmarks of one's struggling with one's own sexual identity, from mental self investigation to physical initiation, from the denial of homosexual self identification to ultimately surrendering and embracing it.

3 As part of David's vacillation regarding his admitting to his homosexual identity, his

¹ Baldwin's discreet dedication on the publisher's page, "FOR LUCIEN I am the man who suffered, I suffered, I was there. -Whitman," suggests a certain identification of the author with his character or at least with his characters' turmoil. This et in Arcadia ego, opens the possibility for *Giovanni's Room* to be an account of a rather meta-fictional than fictional nature.

² The two texts on which Sedgwick focuses are Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The similarity to which I refer consists of stories essentially revolving around the themes of homoerotic desire, formation of sexual identity, etc.

flashbacked acquiescence that, "[t]he beast which Giovanni has awakened in [him] would never go to sleep again" (84), testifies for a homosexuality which is complicated by the preference for promiscuity, or sordidness, rather than for a stable relationship. The raconteur's "beast" is not in fact his homosexuality, but this predilection towards wantonness - a drive which urges him towards a commodification of his sexuality, either as a payer or, more likely, as a buyer. David anticipates the outcome of this drive when he wonders, "[...] one day I would not be with Giovanni anymore. And would I then, like all the others, find myself turning and following all kinds of boys down God knows what dark avenue, into what dark place?" (84). Indeed, towards the end of the narrative, David performs the very acts with which he was concerned during the time of his affair with Giovanni, and even earlier, after his brief homosexual affair with young Joey. The later sexual encounter with the sailor (of a commercial nature or not - the author is not explicit) embodies David's "beast." Yet at this point it is hard to tell whether the protagonist performs (in Judith Butler's definition³) a role he himself prophesized, thereby hurrying to fulfill his own prediction. I argue that under the excuse that, "I was very drunk" (162), David rushes headfirst into the mire he loathed in others but which he considers his inevitable end. There is no other apparent reason why he should resort to casual, squalid sex with strangers, regardless of his drunkenness, while still in the prime of his youth and physical appeal. Nevertheless, he could already be wholeheartedly down the path of the promiscuity that he has once seen in Jacques and Guillaume and has also foreseen, in the "beast," for himself. The room in which Giovanni invited David, in actuality interrupts the centrifugal "constant motion" which has distanced him from his homosexuality. Giovanni's room represents the very locus of "something which shamed and frightened [David]," but which he has always desired although not allowing in his life (20). In his own words,

I think now that if I had 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 at home. But, again, I think I knew, at the very bottom of my heart, exactly what I was doing when I took the boat to France. (21)

The raconteur's thus conveys the struggle within himself to self identify as a heterosexual, a battle which he knows he is bound to lose to homosexuality and to which, admittedly, he is rather eager to surrender. Although cloaked in discourse of silence at first, the homosexual desire (and homosexual acts) that the protagonist experiences posits him inside the closet. Eve

³ I refer here to Butler's definition of performativity as "the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (2) in *Bodies that Matter*. Appropriately, David performs the role that reiterates a certain model ("norm," paradoxically) he saw (and detested) in Guillaume and Jacques, "citing" their behavior, thus reproducing, *difference* considered, the archetype of the male pimp/male prostitute. Thus, David reproduces a mannerism that he has earlier observed in others.

Kosofsky Sedgwick asserts in "Axiomatic" that "'[c]losetedness' itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of silence - not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularly by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it" (69). By the same token, David's "closetedness" reveals itself as a significant silence when he exchanges letters with his father, with his fiancée, Hella, and altogether with anyone who is outside the queer circle he inhabits in Paris. Nevertheless, once the narrator accepts his sexual identity after passing through Giovanni's room, he is able to "get out of the closet" and appropriate the counter-discourse in relation to what Sedgwick called the discourse "that surrounds and differentially constitutes it."

4 David's story, that of an American in Paris, records happenings in a time and space which attempt to clarify his sexuality, explicate his identity and, possibly, his reasons. The narrator's life revolves around one landmark of paramount importance, Giovanni's room, while tying his existence with markers of lesser importance, such as Hella (his fragile anchor in heterosexuality), Jacques (David's queer acquaintance), the American past and the Parisian present. The protagonist, in evoking or recreating episodes from his Parisian life, hints to certain determinism; there is always someone who predicts or reads his future in his body, or there is David himself, exercising the right and power of the narrator, who claims premonition. In David's recollection, the queer circle had the perception of his sexual identity even before he admits it to himself, from the overly made up "fairy" in Guillaume's bar, who sees David's "fire" and predicts that he "will be very unhappy" (40), to Jacques, who prophesizes that "this is a very important day for you" (54). All this explicit inevitability, which the narrator flaunts, serves as an implicit disclaimer meant to assuage his sense of guilt in regards to both his contribution to his Giovanni's downfall, but also to his succumbing to homoerotic desire.⁴ The reenactments that are intertwined with David's recollections display as much the omniscience and the simulated omnipresence of the raconteur, as well as they testify - again - for disguised determinism. When David recreates the episodes of the confrontation between Giovanni and Guillaume and the ensuing murder, or scenes from Giovanni's imprisonment and later his execution, he implies that there is only this way that these occurrences unfurl, that they were determined to happen, hence predictable.

5 A number of people contribute to David's self-identification (and self-representation) as a homosexual; nonetheless, it is Giovanni who performs the function of a mentor more than

⁴ Guilt is indeed a recurrent theme in the narrative, although at times David emphasizes his immunity to it; "It would help if I were able to feel guilty. But the end of innocence is also the end of guilt," he claims (112). David, I argue, uses the self-creating subjectivity of the Nietzschean disclaimer: "thus I willed" in his "eternal recurrence" of Giovanni's room.

any other character with whom the teller interacts and not necessarily due to the sexual nature of their relationship. Donald H. Mengay, in his critique of Giovanni's Room, sees the "difference [which] surfaces [in the novel] as the culprit of psychic and social dis-ease" (59). He explains his assertion by employing an analysis of the "identificatory nexus gender/race/sexuality in both David and Giovanni" (60), which leads to the characters' position as metonymic for those of a WASP American vs. the "black/gay/male" (60). The critic evinces that Baldwin, from the position of the African American writer, constructed Giovanni's race dimension according to historical reality which recalls "American slavery, the repoliticized African-American identity of the 1950s, and an African genealogy"(60).⁵ Consequently, Mengay sees the failed relationship between David and Giovanni as stemming from the irreconcilable positions the two characters represent in terms of race. As such, Giovanni's room stands for the messy, dirty realm of the colonial and racial other; hence, in David's "bourgeois racism" (Mengay 62), it needs "cleaning (read whitening and/or normalizing)" (idem). Though focused on the racial signifier, Mengay identifies the trope which "also critiques structures of alterity in the gay subculture that reduce individuals to commodity status" (61). He further contends that "[t]his representation of trade in human bodies, both black and homosexual, of objectification and bestialization, persists too in reference to Giovanni as 'valuable racehorse'" (61). Though valid and credible enough, Mengay's critique does not cover the entire spectrum of difference between David and Giovanni that works both towards their being united and also separated in the end. I have my concerns in regards to the two characters' implied racial divide. Baldwin, although most likely apprehensive about issues of representations of his own race and racial oppression, nevertheless equally succeeds in creating a credible and authentic enough argument for xenophobia in France in the fifties; obviously a result of his first hand observation of the phenomenon.⁶ At a time when Italy was struggling with poverty, social and political reorganization, the Italian immigrant was all but welcome in the richer France. Also, tolerant - up to a point - towards people with "*les goûts particuliers*" (Baldwin 150), the French prove not as tolerant when this peculiar taste is complicated by a foreign nationality and citizenship.

⁵ Mengay supports his claim evoking David's characterization of Giovanni as "insolent and dark and leonine," by which "he links him metonymically with all three cultural spheres," in other words, proud, black and of African origin (60). The critic further demonstrates this analogy when he cites instances in the novel sending back to slave auctions, such as David linking the atmosphere in Guillaume's bar with a slave market, when remarking that Giovanni could win any "bidder," should he keep his posture of "arrogance on the auction block," etc. (Mengay 61).

⁶ James Baldwin spent almost ten years in Europe, especially France, between 1948-1957 before he returned to New York and got involved in the Civil Rights Movement. The writer chose to spend most of the remainder of his life, after 1968, in France. In 1986, the French government made him a commander of the Legion of Honor, France's highest civilian award. He died at his home, at St. Paul de Vence, in France, on November 30, 1987, at the age of 63.

In fact, the xenophobic discourse employed in the journals concerning Giovanni's crime, is intent on picturing him as monstrous, an echo of the colonial discourse defined by Homi Bhabha:

The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction... Disciplinary power is exercised through indirection on the basis of knowledge of the subject-races as 'abnormal.' (154-5)

"Tainted" by his nationality and his precarious economical and political status, Giovanni is always already the degenerate "other," who comes to infect the virtuous native population with his lack of morality and decorum. Guillaume, his "victim," equally, is purged of any sins and elevated to the status of a martyr by the same xenophobic discourse, simply because he happens to be French.

6 Taking on Judith Butler, who "contest[s] that sexual difference is more primary or more fundamentally than other kinds of differences, including racial difference" (181), I intend to explore further the function and dialectics of difference in establishing one's identity - sexuality included. Correspondingly, ethnic, class, and age differences - among others - in which the protagonist is involved or which he witnesses work towards constructing his self awareness and ultimately, self-identification. David learns that working in juxtaposition with the "dangerous" other, even "a disgusting old fairy" (150) like Guillaume becomes "fantastically entangled with French history, French honor, and French glory, and very nearly became, indeed, a symbol of French manhood" (150) in the xenophobic media, when compared with the worthless, drug addicted Italian criminal. The play on ethnical difference leads towards deconstructing a certain hierarchy of importance in regards to the characters' identities. Accordingly, French nationality precedes, if not veils, whatever deviance from the (sexual and ethical) norm Guillaume demonstrates throughout his life. In the same line of reasoning, David acts not only as the WASP American opposed to the gay black male in Mengay's reading, but also as the representative of the arrogant, rich (although simulated), nonchalant American against the proud but poor Italian. The ethnic difference generates, as far as Giovanni is concerned, magnetism ("I knew that Giovanni had been attracted to me partly because of it [the "common quality" shared by all Americans]" (89), David recalls), but also spawns repulsion towards the arrogant indifference of the stereotypical American tourist always wearing an "empty smile" (138). David, in his turn, is as attracted by his lover's Italian beauty as he is exasperated with his dramatic nature ("Italians are theatrical" (132), in his assertion) and his muddled, dirty appearance, which is insulting his own tidy background.

7 In reifying his claim to masculinity, David reads the dynamics of difference to his disadvantage when interacting with Giovanni, for whom he does not want to perform the role of a feminized partner. At this point the protagonist is still self identifying as a "normal," heterosexual man who, once again, tasted - but not acknowledged - the existence of a closeted homosexual within himself. He is not yet ready to yield to a homosexual identity; he has not, in his words, "found himself" (21). Moreover, David's "beast" is constantly in need of reestablishing its masculine active role and rejecting the passive, housewife - like position with which, he believes, Giovanni would be likely to invest him:

You want to go out and be the big laborer and bring home the money, and want me to stay here and wash the dishes and cook the food and clean this miserable closet of a room and kiss you when you come in through that door and lie with you at night and be your little *girl*. (142)

Still in the process of initiation, David identifies the homosexual relationship with gender normative bias, as superimposed on the gender roles assumed by heterosexual couples. Hence, if Giovanni is the provider, David fears that he would be necessarily the domesticated partner, the housekeeper. In the economy of Giovanni's room, Giovanni would represent the masculine while David automatically assumes he should perform the feminine.

8 However, throughout his remembrance, David belabors his masculine status, "[b]ut I am not a housewife - men never can be housewives" (88). If Giovanni challenges David's claim to masculinity to a certain extent, Jacques, and even Guillaume, dismantle and provoke in their own ways David's sexual identity. Jacques is the first to look in disbelief at David's trumpeted relationship with Hella, David's "fiancée." If the protagonist himself deems his heterosexuality, or bisexuality at most, as real, Jacques calls David's buried homosexuality to finally reveal itself: "[c]ome out, come out, wherever you are!" (57). The aging American businessman is not only the herald of David's secreted sexual orientation, but, in the same dialectics of difference, is the representative of the "dirty old men" who "at least [...] could *pay*" (49) in opposition to the alluring young male who offers himself for money. Jacques (just as Guillaume) is the homosexual who needs to buy sex; he is the embodiment of the decrepit "fairy" whose only chance for a relationship depends on his purchasing power. In the economy of sex, he is a payer; although not yet selling himself, in the same economy David (and Giovanni, too) is the commodity who gets paid for sexual "service". David, in the pre-Giovanni phase of his life already starts performing - or simulating, rather - the position of a kept Ganymede, "pretending that Jacques and I were friends [...] forcing Jacques, on pain of humiliation, to pretend this" (28). Moreover, David does not carry out the charade only for the audience in Guillaume's gay bar, but to tease Jacques, too, "I pretended not to see, although I

exploited it, the lust not quite sleeping in his bright, bitter eyes and, by means of the rough, male candor with which I conveyed to him the case was hopeless, I compelled him, endlessly, to hope" (28). Nevertheless, the dynamics of difference has a fragile equilibrium as it is time sensitive. In fact, both Jacques and Guillaume are also the crystal ball in which David predicts his future once his "beast" has been released in Giovanni's room.⁷

9 David's position towards women is not less complicated than it is towards men. The narrator, admittedly, is intent on a stable, "normal" relationship with a woman, but only as a result of social pressure. Whenever he feels too endangered by his affair with Giovanni, the narrator turns almost desperately to Hella or casual heterosexual sex to reestablish a traditionally masculine identity he feels to be threatened in Giovanni's company (room): "[m]y real fear was buried and was driving me to Montparnasse. I wanted to find a girl, any girl at all" (95). Sue, the wealthy American girl with whom David has a "one night stand," is for David in painful contrast with Giovanni's sexual appeal on their first encounter, when the narrator recalls he could "do anything but moan" (64). She is "[d]isquietingly fluid - fluid without being able to flow" (99); a creature whom he despises, not for her body or herself, but for what she stands for: the other sex which he now finds bland, if not downright repulsive. If bisexuality has worked for David up to a point, after passing through Giovanni's room and submitting to homoerotic desire, the sexual allure of the female body fades increasingly only to turn into utter disgust. The feminine body, even Hella's, becomes devoid of any magnetism: "It seemed to happen all at once - I suppose that only means that it had been happening for a long time. I trace it to something as fleeting as the tips of her breast lightly touching my forearm as she leaned over me to serve my supper. I felt my flesh recoil" (158). From this point on, bisexuality is no longer a desirable option for David, regardless of his longing for a "normal," family life.

10 In his resistance to homosexuality, David's rationale is as much related to social appropriateness - to have children and watch his woman put his children to bed (104) - as it is linked to his intimate panic, "I wanted to be [...] with my manhood unquestioned" (idem). Being that he fails with the former, he is likely to believe in the failure of the latter as well when he confesses, "What a long way, I thought, I've come - to be destroyed!" (104). Despite the appearance of a more fixed identity that David exhibits at the end (and the beginning) of his narrative, we are bound to give credit to Butler's take on the changeable nature of identity

⁷ In fact, Giovanni himself equates David with the likes of Jacques and Guillaume when he sardonically recalls his stillborn son: "It was a little boy, it would have been a wonderful, strong man, perhaps even the kind of man *you* and Jacques and Guillaume and all your disgusting band of fairies spend all your years and nights looking for, and dreaming of..." (140).

and thus appreciate the narrator's complexity in all its protean nature:

What remains outside [the] subject set outside by the act of foreclosure⁸ which founds the subject, persists as a kind of defining negativity. The subject is, as a result, never coherent and never self-identical precisely because it is founded and, indeed, continually refounded, through a set of defining foreclosures and repressions that constitute the discontinuity and incompleteness of the subject. (190)

11 In negotiating between the private and the public, the narrator's quest for his sexual identity and stability, problematic as it proves, must be thus understood not only in relationship with the others, but also in relationship with himself. In order to comprehend the morphing sexuality that the raconteur experienced throughout the narrative, we have to acquiesce the protagonist's deconstruction in the Derridian sense: the *I* of the narrator differs and defers from the *I* of the David who has an affair with Giovanni, or the *I* of the David who engages in promiscuous sex with sailors. Surely, the trace is visible all throughout David's avatars; his homosexuality is briefly entertained, then repressed, denied, later indulged - yet under the pretense of bisexuality - to be fully surrendered to in the end. In other words, as critic Donald E. Hall assesses, the text is "about the tension between fixity and fluidity in sexuality" (156), more than its being exclusively an exploration of a case of repressed homosexuality. In Tzvetan Todorov's definition, David's story has left a state of (relative) equilibrium, passing through disruptive stages, to achieve a new state of (altered) equilibrium that is here to stay.⁹ As such, it is difficult to say whether the narrator finds a stable, fixed identity, sexually speaking; however, after wanderings and hesitations, David, I argue, has reached the stage he anticipated at the beginning of his narrative - confession, an equilibrium that, unless other rooms are in store, is bound to last.

⁸ Butler, citing Slavoj Žižek, elucidates that "the 'subject' is produced in language by the act of foreclosure (*Verwerfung*). What is refused or repudiated in the formation of the subject continues to determine that subject" (190).

⁹ Todorov, in *Theories of the Symbol*, theorizes that the canonical story has five elements: a state of equilibrium, one of disruption of that equilibrium, a state of recognition, another which constitutes the action to restore and, finally, the new state of equilibrium, the disrupted or altered equilibrium.

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