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## In the Dark Room: Homosexuality and/as Blackness in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*

The sexual question and the racial question have always been entwined.  
—James Baldwin (1989, 178)

**D**espite the success of his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), James Baldwin had great difficulty in finding a publisher for *Giovanni's Room*, his second major fictional text. Alfred A. Knopf had published *Go Tell It on the Mountain* but rejected *Giovanni's Room* due to its explicit homosexual content, warning the writer that such a book “would ruin his reputation . . . and he was advised to burn the manuscript” (Weatherby 1989, 119). Even though Dial Press finally accepted the novel in 1956, Baldwin's text was initially ignored or dismissed as a deviation in both sexual and racial terms. Published in mid-1950s America, when the country was dominated by the Cold War discourse against both communists and homosexuals, the critical reception of a homosexual novel was predictable enough. One of the book's early reviews was titled “The Faerie Queenes” (Ivy 1957, 123), and another critic hoped that “Mr. Baldwin [would] return to . . . American themes” (West 1956, 220). In addition to criticizing its overt homosexual content, some scholars complained that the novel, centered on a white homosexual couple, was not sufficiently focused on the black experience. Nathan A. Scott Jr., for example, argued that whereas *Go Tell It on the Mountain* represented Baldwin's “passionate gesture of identification with his people,” *Giovanni's Room* might be read “as a deflection, as a kind of detour” (Scott 1967, 27–28), lamenting that Baldwin's second novel moved away from his African American culture and heritage. If many reviewers in the mainstream press described Baldwin's new novel as sexually deviant, African American critics saw it as racially deviant as well.<sup>1</sup> Several writers, partic-

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, Dial Press decided to exclude Baldwin's photograph from the text, which, as James Campbell (1991, 106) has argued, suggests that part of the publisher's fear was in having a black man associated with an “all-white” novel—especially one about homosexuality.

ularly black nationalists, went even further, linking Baldwin's sexual "perversions" with racial ones. For example, following the publication of Norman Mailer's influential text *The White Negro* (1957), wherein he celebrates black masculine sexual superiority, Eldridge Cleaver published his now infamous *Soul on Ice* (1968), which continued to equate blackness with heterosexual virility, thereby diminishing black homosexuality in general, and Baldwin's homosexuality in particular, which Cleaver described as a "racial death-wish" (Cleaver 1968, 103) typical of the black bourgeoisie.<sup>2</sup> In Cleaver's own words: "Many Negro homosexuals, acquiescing in this racial death-wish, are outraged and frustrated because in their sickness they are unable to have a baby by a white man. The cross they have to bear is that, already bending over and touching their toes for the white man, the fruit of their miscegenation is not the little half-white offspring of their dreams but an increase in the unwinding of their nerves—though they redouble their efforts and intake of the white man's sperm" (103).

According to Cleaver, then, black homosexual desire is ultimately desire for whiteness, desire to abandon black masculinity for the traditionally submissive position of the white female. If Mailer and white liberalism idealized blackness as the epitome of masculinity, Baldwin was, nevertheless, accused by Cleaver and other black radicals of lacking in masculinity and, therefore, blackness. Thus, Baldwin's position in the politics and culture of the sixties was particularly complex and contradictory. While playing a key role in the Civil Rights struggle, he was also considered dangerous and subversive by many of its leaders, who distrusted his sexuality. Though a potential candidate for hypermasculinization by virtue of his race, he was, paradoxically enough, diminished by fellow blacks "for not being black (read *masculine*) enough" (Shin and Judson 1998, 250).<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, then, Baldwin became associated with both sexual and racial deviance.

While Baldwin was thus accused of not being black enough, criticism has since worked to correct such traditional assumptions, redefining his oeuvre as "a progressive, consistent thinking through, . . . an intentionally

<sup>2</sup> Similarly, both Richard Wright and Martin Luther King Jr. disparaged Baldwin because of his homosexuality (Campbell 1991, 71, 175).

<sup>3</sup> Even Langston Hughes, another black gay writer, saw Baldwin's overt treatment of homosexuality as a threat to traditional black values. Hughes, who considered it necessary to sublimate homosexual desire (at least in his novels) for the sake of racial harmony and wholeness, associated Baldwin's representations of interracial homo- or bisexuality, particularly in *Another Country*, with integration, and integration with the loss of traditional black values (Ross 1999, 34).

politicized engagement rather than a whimsical detour” (Ross 1999, 19). In Baldwin’s early work, in which overt homosexuality appears to be mostly associated with whiteness, a reader already uncomfortable with sexual variance may avoid at least some discomfort by segregating blackness from same-sex desire. Baldwin responded to both the racist sexualization of African Americans by the white community and the homophobia of the African American community by removing (at least from the surface) the subject of race from much of his early fiction. Baldwin himself commented in a later interview on *Giovanni’s Room* that including homosexuality, the “Negro problem,” and a Paris setting in the same novel in 1950s America “would have been quite beyond my powers” (Baldwin 1984a, 59). Overall, the “blackening” of Baldwin’s novels has been described as “progressive” and “consistent” (Ross 1999, 19).<sup>4</sup> Yet his early works usually continue to be regarded as “raceless” (Bone 1965, 238) and, therefore, studied in sexual rather than racial terms, in (white) gay studies rather than African American studies. Nevertheless, following the example set by critics such as Robert F. Reid-Pharr (2001), Marlon B. Ross (1999), William A. Cohen (1991), and Robert A. Bone (1965), among others, my own article will be centrally concerned with race-ing Baldwin’s early fiction, showing the centrality of race in general, and of whiteness in particular, to *Giovanni’s Room*, as well as the novel’s dependence on other hegemonic categories, especially masculinity and heterosexuality. More specifically, I will argue that in *Giovanni’s Room*, as in *Another Country* (Baldwin [1962] 1993), race is deflected onto sexuality with the result that whiteness is transvalued as heterosexuality, just as homosexuality becomes associated with blackness, both literally and metaphorically. Borrowing from recent work on the symbolism of whiteness and/as color by scholars such as Richard Dyer (2007), Eric Lott (1993), and Mason Stokes (2001), among others, I will show how the white-versus-black dichotomy plays a very meaning-full role in Baldwin’s novel, revealing both descriptive and symbolic (sexual) meanings. By exploring the color-full associations that Baldwin establishes between whiteness and heterosexuality, on the one hand, and homosexuality and blackness, on

<sup>4</sup> In contrast to the (white) homosexual relationships engaged in by characters such as Eric and Yves in *Another Country* (Baldwin [1962] 1993) or David and Giovanni in *Giovanni’s Room*, it is not until 1968, with the publication of *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone*, that Baldwin explores overt sexual relations between two black men in a novel, and not until 1979, with *Just Above My Head*, his last novel, that he focuses on love between two black men, both of whom are exclusively homosexual (as opposed to bisexual characters such as Rufus Scott in *Another Country* or Leo Proudhammer in *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone*).

the other, we will see how in *Giovanni's Room* the discourses of race and (homo)sexuality are inseparable from each other. Moreover, Baldwin not only depicts the binary oppositions that shape the dominant sexual and racial discourse but also ends up deconstructing them from subversive and innovative perspectives. While whiteness has traditionally been opposed to blackness, and even as heterosexuality has usually been constructed in opposition to homosexuality, *Giovanni's Room* undermines such false oppositions by revealing, as we shall see, their interrelatedness and mutual dependence.

### **Race-ing sexuality in *Giovanni's Room***

Although *Giovanni's Room* has traditionally been defined as raceless, a number of scholars have recently set out to “race” the novel in different ways. For instance, Reid-Pharr, analyzing the “very apparent absence” of race in the novel, has shown how Baldwin’s novel is in reality “a race novel” since Giovanni’s “ghost-like nonpresence, his nonsubjectivity,” reflects the absence of blackness from Western notions of rationality and humanity (Reid-Pharr 2001, 126). Similarly, Myriam J. A. Chancy (1997) has explored the race component of the novel by comparing *Giovanni's Room* to Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, just as Horace A. Porter (1989) has connected Baldwin’s novel to Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, suggesting that “Baldwin . . . smuggles into *Giovanni's Room*, a place where we least expect them, *Native Son*’s central themes, images and symbols” (151). If scholarship has thus begun to challenge the traditional view of *Giovanni's Room* as raceless, I will be arguing that race and sexuality in Baldwin are not simply interrelated but virtually interchangeable so that homosexuality becomes, literally and metaphorically, associated with blackness at the same time that heterosexuality is, as we shall see, indissolubly linked to whiteness. Some scholars, perhaps most notably Kemp Williams (2000) and Philip Auger (2000), have already explored the metaphorical construction of sexuality and/or race in the text. Williams (2000), for example, illustrates Baldwin’s use of spaces and objects—such as the body, mirrors and windows, and Giovanni’s room itself—as metaphors for David’s repressed homosexuality. Auger, for his part, goes even further, arguing for the deflection of race onto sexuality in the novel. Even though David is not a black man, the problems he faces, according to Auger (2000), are best defined in terms that would equally fit a black man: “‘no place’—except closeted, contained places—exists for him either” (17). While some scholars have thus explored the novel’s sexual and/or racial displacements, which appear to place black souls in white bodies, much less attention

seems to have been paid to the meanings, both literal and metaphorical, of color in the text, particularly in relation to sexuality. Traditionally, color has been taken as a surface matter in *Giovanni's Room* and has thus been regarded as a matter of mere description rather than as a meaning-full symbol. However, if one concurs with Ross (1999, 25–26) that Baldwin refers to color as a way of locating the cultural situation, both racial and sexual, of his characters, then it should be possible to read Baldwin's novel in a new light, exploring the connections that the writer both draws and undermines between blackness and homosexuality, on the one hand, and whiteness and heterosexuality, on the other. As Ross himself elaborates:

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 color 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 1999, 26)

Crucially, then, Ross not only underlines, as several other critics have, the connections between sexual and racial identity in Baldwin but also draws attention to another important fact that is usually overlooked—namely, the influence of color on same-sex attraction in *Giovanni's Room*, “where the color dilemma is mapped onto the question of same-sex desire” (Ross 1999, 33). In Baldwin's second novel, sexuality, both homosexual and heterosexual, does indeed seem to be inextricably bound to color, particularly the white-versus-black dichotomy, whose occurrence is both physical and symbolic. As we shall see, *Giovanni's Room* suggests a parallel between the heterosexual and white (with its metaphorical associations with light, cleanness, purity, rationality, transparency, goodness, innocence, etc.), on the one hand, and the homosexual and black (with its symbolic meanings of darkness, dirt, sin, emotionality, obscurity, evil, guilt, and so on), on the other, a parallel that Baldwin simultaneously reinscribes and problematizes.

In *White* (2007), his pathbreaking analysis of whiteness in Western society and culture, Richard Dyer has demonstrated the centrality of notions of color to white representation. As he explains, there are three

senses of whiteness as color (Dyer 2007, 45–46). First of all, white is a category of color or hue, just like red or green. Second, white is a category of skin color. Third, white, like any other hue, has symbolic connotations. In this last respect, Dyer suggests that, despite some national and historical variation, the basic symbolic connotation of white is fairly clear, its most familiar form being the moral opposition of white = good and black = bad. Exploring how questions of color become entangled with questions of morality, Dyer demonstrates that dark-haired characters tend to be more wicked and sensual than fair-haired and light-complexioned ones. To be white is to be at once of the white race and “honorable” and “square dealing,” whereas to be black is just the opposite. In Dyer’s words, “a white person who is bad is failing to be ‘white,’ whereas a black person who is good is a surprise, and one who is bad merely fulfils expectations” (63). Elaborating on the symbolic meanings of whiteness, Dyer shows how, in Western tradition, lists of the moral connotations of white as symbol are remarkably similar: spirituality, transcendence, innocence, cleanliness, simplicity, and so on. Since to be white is to be clean, blackness is, by contrast, associated with dirt, the dark color of feces reinforcing the connotation of blackness with badness. In Dyer’s own words, “to be white is to have expunged all dirt, faecal or otherwise, from oneself: to look white is to look clean” (76).

Because of the association of whiteness with cleanliness, and its metaphorical connotations of chastity and purity, sexual desire has traditionally been defined as itself dark. “Darkness,” as Lynne Segal (1990) puts it, has “always been entangled—in Western consciousness—with sex. . . . Black is the colour of the ‘dirty’ secrets of sex” (176). While white men have traditionally identified white women with the model of the Virgin Mary, whose purity is unsullied by the dark drives of sexuality, they have also projected their sexuality onto dark races as a means of representing their own desires while keeping those desires at a distance. In a way, then, sexuality has been culturally defined as a disturbance of racial purity. As Dyer writes, “the very thing that makes us white endangers the reproduction of whiteness” (Dyer 2007, 27).

Yet even as both white men and women have tried to dissociate themselves from sexual desire, representing it as dark, white people need, nonetheless, to have sex in order to ensure the survival of the race. Moreover, not to be sexually driven can call into question a man’s masculinity. Thus, white men insure both their whiteness and masculinity by channeling their sexual desire into heterosexual marriage and reproduction. Ultimately, then, heterosexuality, as Dyer himself concludes, constitutes “the cradle of whiteness” (2007, 140). Indeed, whiteness, as Stokes demonstrates in

*The Color of Sex: Whiteness, Heterosexuality, and the Fictions of White Supremacy* (2001), appears to work “best—in fact, it works only—when it attaches itself to other abstractions,” particularly heterosexuality, “becoming yet another invisible strand in the larger web of unseen yet powerful cultural forces” (13). Analyzing its location within a larger system of oppressive and regulatory structures, Stokes shows how whiteness remains inseparable from heterosexuality, since each depends on the other to promote its own invisibility and normalizing power. As Stokes concludes, “heterosexuality gives birth to whiteness. . . . It nurtures whiteness, attending to its needs and soothing away its anxieties” (21) so that “the study of whiteness . . . gives us a new and richer way of thinking about . . . gender and sexuality” (192).

In *Giovanni's Room*, it is David who embodies the ideal of whiteness. Tall and blond-haired, he identifies himself from the start as the descendant of white colonizers: “I watch my reflection in the darkening gleam of the window pane. My reflection is tall . . . 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” (Baldwin [1956] 1964, 7). While much of *Giovanni's Room* focuses on the homosexual relationship between David and Giovanni, David's personality is clearly shaped by both white and heterosexual ideals, which in Baldwin's novel are bound up with each other. After all, David, despite his attraction to the Italian Giovanni, finally abandons him for his white American girlfriend, Hella, to whom he is engaged. As Reid-Pharr (2007) puts it, “David . . . struggles with the erotic and social implications of choosing either ‘the white woman,’ Hella, or ‘the colored man,’ Giovanni” (110).

If heterosexuality is thus related to whiteness, with all its symbolic connotations of purity and virtue, homosexuality is linked to blackness and darkness. For instance, David describes Joey, his first homosexual date, as “dark” (Baldwin [1956] 1964, 11), insisting that “Joey's body was brown” (14) and that he had “dark eyes” (13) and “curly hair,” which “darken[ed] the pillow” (14). Similarly, he introduces his lover Giovanni as “dark and leonine” (39) as well as “black-haired” (82). Moreover, Giovanni is linked to most of the ethnic stereotypes associated with Italians. If the French believe that “the Italians are too fluid, too volatile, have no sense of measure,” Giovanni himself defines his Italianness against the coldness of the French: “In Italy we are friendly, we dance and sing and make love—but these people, . . . they are cold, I do not understand them” (50). When David's fiancée suggests that Giovanni is “very intense,” David responds that “Italians are theatrical” (174), concluding



that “these people have another style from us” and are “much more demonstrative” (177). That Giovanni’s ethnicity is coded as black becomes apparent in at least two different ways. First, David himself refers to Giovanni’s enthusiasm as “a blacker brand” (49). Second, Italians began to be considered white only upon their arrival in the United States. As James R. Barrett and David Roediger (1997) note, it was in part through organized labor activity that previously nonwhite groups became white. They contend that Greeks and Italians participated in an important strike of the Western Federation of Miners in 1912, and the category of white worker expanded after that event (404). In the early twentieth century, Italians immigrating to the United States, like all others arriving on America’s shores, were asked to fill out a standardized immigration form. In the box for race, they were given two choices: North Italian or South Italian. By World War II, however, the only option they had for the race question was “white.” This identification, as Thomas Guglielmo (2003) argues in *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890–1945*, is suggestive of the ways in which Italians acquired white status and privilege in the United States. In this context, then, Giovanni, as an Italian in Europe, may be considered nonwhite or black. As Chancy notes, “in the European context, it might be said that Giovanni is marked as ‘black’ just as Italian immigrants to the United States were, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, raced as nonwhite if not as people of ‘black’ origin” (Chancy 1997, 169). Last but not least, Giovanni’s class also defines him as colored. While David belongs to the American middle-upper class, Giovanni comes from a poor village in southern Italy, and his precarious job as a bartender allows him to survive on subsistence wages in Paris. As Dyer has shown, whites may also be hue-differentiated according to class. Since to be darker, though racially white, is to be inferior, working-class and peasant whites tend to be seen as darker than middle-class and aristocratic whites (Dyer 2007, 57).<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, then, Giovanni’s class also makes him darker.

Both Joey and Giovanni are thus portrayed as dark. Actually, David establishes numerous associations between homoeroticism and blackness throughout the novel, which derive not only from his fear and hatred of homosexuality but also from his inheritance as a white American male.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See also Hoch (1979, 49–50).

<sup>6</sup> In associating homosexuality with blackness, I am consciously questioning the views held by both Dyer (2007) and Stokes (2001), who see homosexuality as the most evident expression of whiteness. Dyer (2007, 219–20), for example, argues that homosexuality remains obstinately white in popular representations since it is linked to death, given its double

Indeed, it is my contention that David's homophobia and fear of himself are indissolubly linked to his racially white heritage, as I hope to demonstrate. As Joel Kovel (1971) argued in his classic study *White Racism: A Psychobiography*, the splits our civilization makes between white and black, light and dark, good and evil, clean and dirty, and so forth, are inseparable from the similar split it makes between genital and anal sexuality. Since the anal zone is one of the most erotically sensitive areas of the body, the repression of its erotic function leads to a sexual restlessness that is often dealt with by projecting the forbidden desires outward, onto black and dark people generally. According to Kovel (1971, 86–90), one of the most recurrent white fantasies of race is that blacks differ from whites in being dirty, which is seen as a sign of their inferiority. In his view, the association of blackness with dirt rests, in turn, upon the act of defecation, since the central symbol of dirt throughout the world is feces. Moreover, when contrasted with the light color of the body of the white person, the dark color of feces reinforces, from the infancy of the individual in the Western world, the association of blackness with badness. As Kovel elaborates: “[White racism is] grounded somehow in a bodily fantasy about dirt, which rests in turn upon the equation of dirt with excrement: the inside of the body turned out and threatening to return within. And 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 action between the races beyond any need of awareness” (89–90).<sup>7</sup>

If, as it seems, there exists a psychological correlation between antiblack racism and our aversion to the anus, particularly feces, then one could also hypothesize a parallel connection between homophobia and scopophobia, since homosexuality has usually been represented as one of the most hidden, darkest, and dirtiest sexual desires. Not only are David's boyfriends racialized as black, as we have already seen, but he also describes

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association with AIDS and a nonreproductive form of sexuality. Similarly, Stokes (2001) contends that to reproduce whiteness sexually is to risk contamination, and so heterosexuality poses a challenge to whiteness, “one that can only be avoided if that heterosexuality is less important than the homosociality that it facilitates” (18). As he elaborates, “Homoeroticism becomes, paradoxically, the only structure of desire that can keep whiteness white” (18). Unlike these scholars, however, I will be arguing not only that heterosexuality may be made “respectable” and channeled into whiteness through heterosexual marriage but also that homosexuality, at least in Baldwin's text, is assimilated into blackness, rather than whiteness, as a mode of difference.

<sup>7</sup> At a structural rather than individual level, Africa has also been depicted as the Dark Continent itself, “cloaca of the West” (Kovel 1971, 171).

his own homosexual desire as literally “black,” which connotes darkness, dirt, stink, and corruption.

David’s sexual desire for Joey, his first homosexual partner, is already connected to disturbing images of blackness. As a white, Protestant, heterosexual male, David seems scared and ashamed of his homosexual desire from the start. Terrified of “losing his manhood,” he describes Joey’s body as “the black opening of a cavern,” insisting that “a cavern opened in my mind, *black* . . . full of *dirty* words” (Baldwin [1956] 1964, 15; emphasis added). Significantly, then, David establishes a literal association between homosexuality and blackness, which stands for the anus and the racialized body, both of which, in turn, he connects to “dirty words.” Obviously, David’s unconscious association derives from his specific racial, religious, and gender background, which defines interracial homosexuality as doubly immoral, shameful, and dirty. As Cora Kaplan (1996) argues, “The interracial component of his desire for a ‘boy’ who is small and brown, and the subliminal racism and imperialism of his subsequent revulsion and abandonment of him, emphasize the boundaries and taboos crossed by homosexual desire by doubling its logistics” (40).

Like his liaison with Joey, which he associates with putrefaction as it remained “at the bottom . . . of my mind, as still and as awful as a decomposing corpse” (Baldwin [1956] 1964, 24), David sees his homosexual relationship with Giovanni as equally dark, dirty, and stinking.<sup>8</sup> Since David and Giovanni spend most of their time together in Giovanni’s room, the room itself becomes a metaphor for their relationship, as most critics have noted. Predictably, then, David describes the room (and, by implication, their homosexual love) as claustrophobic and “dark,” noting that “life in that room seemed to be occurring beneath the sea” (99) or “underwater” (112). He explains that the windows remained “closed most of the time” and that, to secure privacy, Giovanni had “obscured” the window panes “with a heavy, white cleaning polish” (112–13). Significantly, whiteness in Giovanni’s room is transmuted into darkness. Even

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, David’s dream about his mother is also associated with putrefaction: “I scarcely remember her at all, yet she figured in my nightmares, blind with worms, her hair as dry as metal and brittle as a twig, straining to press me against her body; that body so putrescent, so sickening soft, that it opened, as I clawed and cried, into a breach so enormous as to swallow me alive” (Baldwin [1956] 1964, 12–13). Thus, David also links putrefaction to the female body and fears, as he does with Joey, being engulfed by it. In other words, David is repelled by both male and female bodies, for any kind of sexual desire, as psychoanalysis has shown, threatens to loosen, even dissolve, the identity boundaries of the rigid male body (Beneke 1997, 73–112). See also Kaplan (1996) on the representation of the feminine in Baldwin’s novel.

the white of one of the walls appears “dirty, streaked” (113) to David, who thus reinforces, once again, the linkage between dirt and homosexual space. On different occasions, David keeps insisting on this association, noting, for instance, that the room was “dusty” (113), “stinking and dirty” (179), the container of “all of the garbage of this city” (114).

When, at novel’s end, Giovanni is taken to prison for murdering his employer Guillaume, David also imagines Giovanni’s cell as “dark,” “damp,” and “cold,” with the prison guards dressed in black (Baldwin [1956] 1964, 149).<sup>9</sup> The death corridor he envisions as “dark” (223), and the door at its end as Giovanni’s “gateway . . . out of this dirty world, this dirty body” (222). Similarly, he describes Giovanni’s execution as his “journey to the grave” (223), which, by definition, is a place of death and corruption, as well as of absolute darkness. Clearly, then, David keeps connecting homosexuality, symbolized mainly by Giovanni’s room, to blackness, which, symbolically, stands for corruption and dirt. Such associations derive, at least in part, from David’s specific racial, religious, and national background, as he himself acknowledges: “It [homosexuality] *is* a crime—in my country and, after all, I didn’t grow up here, I grew up *there*” (107).<sup>10</sup>

It would seem, then, that David, with his roots in white racism, cannot avoid thinking of Giovanni’s room as dark, dirty, and stinking. As a result, he sees it as forever in need of cleaning—that is, “whitening and/or normalizing” (Mengay 1993, 62). Indeed, for much of the novel, David is obsessed with cleaning the room, throwing out the paper, the bottles, “the fantastic accumulation of trash,” and disposing of “the innumerable boxes and suitcases” (Baldwin [1956] 1964, 116). Obviously, in cleaning the room, David is metaphorically trying to clean and purify himself. He is, in other words, struggling to divorce himself from the blackness and the dirt he associates with Giovanni’s room and the homosexual space. Ultimately, his obsession with cleaning the room derives from his deeper obsession with protecting his “immaculate manhood,” which his friend Jacques defines as his “pride and joy” (43).

While most of David’s explicit associations between homosexuality and blackness are related to Giovanni and his room, he also describes as dark

<sup>9</sup> David also informs us that the Parisian newspapers reported the murder of Guillaume, although they did not mention the (sexual) circumstances explicitly, since “why was too *black* for the newsprint to carry” (Baldwin [1956] 1964, 202–3; emphasis added).

<sup>10</sup> As Reid-Pharr (2001) has argued, America in Baldwin’s novel “refers not simply to a geographical location . . . but also to a patriarchal economy that produces maleness as the lack of lack” (131).

the homosexual demimonde of Paris in general and its inhabitants in particular. For instance, when Jacques, one of his homosexual acquaintances, decides to take him to a gay bar in Paris, he describes it as an “ill-lit sort of tunnel” (Baldwin [1956] 1964, 37). David’s homophobia becomes apparent once again when he acknowledges that the grotesqueness of one of the homosexuals in the bar, who wears makeup and earrings, unsettles him, “perhaps in the same way that the sight of monkeys eating their own excrement turns some people’s stomachs” (38, 39). Significantly, then, he associates homosexuality not only with blackness but, once more, with dirt, here symbolized by feces, which, as we have seen, reinforces the traditional association of blackness with badness (Kovel 1971, 89–90; Hoch 1979, 161; Dyer 2007, 76). Likewise, David defines Guillaume’s bar, usually crowded with homosexuals, as dark and gloomy, an “airless tunnel” (Baldwin [1956] 1964, 53, 59); one of its clients as “a receptacle of all the world’s dirt and disease” (73); and Guillaume himself, along with his friend Jacques, as “dirty old men” whose (dirty) thoughts “bubbled upward out of them like fountain of *black* water” (61; emphasis added). It seems clear, then, that David tries to affirm his heterosexuality by projecting his own repressed homosexuality onto the homosexual demimonde of Paris, which he sees as dirty and dark. As Reid-Pharr (2001) notes, “heterosexual identity . . . is formed through concurrent acts of repression and projection. The homosexual non-subjects of the *milieu* . . . reflect David’s own subjectivity, creating him as a real man” (130).

Because David’s homophobia leads him to link his own homosexuality to blackness and dirt, he idealizes heterosexuality, by contrast, as the site of cleanliness, whiteness, and light. While sexually attracted to Giovanni, David longs to go back to Hella, his fiancée, whom he idealizes as the epitome of (white) purity and light. In his own words, “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 [1956] 1964, 137; emphasis added). Linking heterosexuality to reproduction, David thus establishes an explicit association of the nuclear heterosexual family with both “the light” and an “unquestioned” (read: white or immaculate) manhood, as opposed to a dark or questionable (read: homosexual) one. Such association between (white) heterosexuality and light is reinforced later on when he makes love to Hella, whose eyes are “like lights” and her body like a “room in which I fumbled to find the *light*” (161; emphasis added). In finally abandoning Giovanni (read: homosexuality) for Hella (read: heterosexuality), David seeks not only to leave behind blackness and dirt but also to recover the privileges of white-

ness and heterosexuality and, in so doing, preserve his manhood. As Giovanni skillfully notes:

You love your purity, you love your mirror—you are just like a little 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 [1956] 1964, 186–87; emphasis added)

Giovanni captures here David's central dilemma—namely, his (white Protestant) obsession with purity. If the black man represents the body, the white man, as Segal (1990, 180) reminds us, represents the mind. Thus, in fleeing from Giovanni, from the black homosexual man, David is fleeing from the body and sexuality too. David is obsessed with both diamonds (clear symbols of transparency and translucency) and cleanliness (an obvious metaphor for purity, virginity, and chastity). Ultimately, then, he wants to remain “covered with soap,” which is symbolically white, again representing cleanliness and purity, and avoid the “stink” (i.e., blackness and dirt) of Giovanni, who, as we have seen, symbolizes homosexuality and moral darkness. Little wonder, then, at novel's end, as Giovanni awaits his execution, and David is about to abandon the house in France and return to America, that David remains obsessed with cleanliness, “clean[ing] the house” and “chang[ing] my clothes” (Baldwin [1956] 1964, 220), which will “cover the nakedness which I must hold sacred” (223).

### **Sub-versions of white heterosexual masculinity in *Giovanni's Room***

Even if, as it seems, David is obsessed with heterosexuality as a means of preserving his “*immaculate* manhood,” of keeping his whiteness intact, the relationship between whiteness and heterosexuality is never stable and fixed. Rather, it is unstable, multiple, fractured, and even incoherent. While it is true that heterosexuality is “the cradle of whiteness,” parent-child relationships, to continue the metaphor, are never easy. As Stokes (2001) insists, “envy, jealousy, anxiety, selfishness, overinvestment, underinvestment, abuse—this is also the stuff of the cradle, a cradle that

heterosexuality can rock with a vengeance” (21). Despite his obsessive attempts to remain white and heterosexual, then, David cannot avoid being “contaminated” by Giovanni and therefore by both blackness and homosexuality. Even though he attempts throughout to maintain a “clean” masculinity, to maintain his sense of moral respectability, David, as Reid-Pharr (2001, 129) skillfully notes, is pulled ever more deeply into the dirty muck. If, as poststructuralism has taught us, there can be no difference without mixture, then it should come as no surprise that David is finally revealed as black (i.e., homosexual) despite his surface appearance of whiteness. In other words, Baldwin’s character, despite his (failed) racial and sexual performance, must finally remove the mask of both normative heterosexuality and whiteness.

I am using the word “mask” on purpose, for I am reminded here of Eric Lott’s *Love and Theft* (1993), the seminal study on blackface minstrelsy and the American working class. Lott defines blackface minstrelsy as an established nineteenth-century theatrical practice, principally of the urban North, in which white men caricatured blacks for both sport and profit (3). Central to Lott’s thesis is his argument about the contradictory nature of blackface theater. For, even though it arose from a white obsession with black male bodies that has since been central to racism, it also became the first public acknowledgment by whites of black culture, in which “whites are touched by the blacks they would lampoon and are in the process told on, revealed” (4). While minstrelsy has traditionally been associated with white racism and racial domination, Lott demonstrates how it also provided a channel for the black cultural “contamination” of the dominant culture. Ultimately, then, the minstrel show both enforced and remapped the dominant racial order (7). Interestingly, Lott explains, blackface minstrelsy entailed not only racial but also gender cross-dressing or impersonation, since the show was exclusively conducted by white male performers (there were very rarely female performers in the antebellum minstrel show). Blackface minstrel shows, then, were centrally concerned with presenting, and representing, both race and gender/sexual conflicts. In Lott’s words: “The minstrel show was an entertainment form that called . . . on a variety of elements: folklore, dance, jokes, songs, instrumental tunes, skits, mock oratory, satire, and racial and gender-crossing or impersonation. From a variety of locales, including city, backwoods, small town, and frontier, it impinged on a history of intense . . . racial, national, and gender formation” (9).

Drawing on Lott’s already classic study, I will proceed to argue that what *Giovanni’s Room* offers is another turn of the screw, a further reversal in blackface minstrelsy. In Baldwin’s novel, David is not a white man trying

to pass as black but rather a “black” man trying to pass as white. Unlike minstrel shows, where white men wore black masks and parodied black people and their culture, David is wearing a white mask, playing the traditional racial and heterosexual roles of white patriarchal culture, although he is finally revealed to be both black and homosexual, which Baldwin saw as interchangeable identities. Baldwin’s aim in this reversal is to reveal the black gay man beneath the white (ostensibly heterosexual) male and, in so doing, question not only traditionally fixed sexual and racial distinctions, such as heterosexuality/homosexuality and whiteness/blackness but also the division between sexuality and race itself. As Chancy (1997) notes, “he undermines the manner in which racial differentiation has been historically established through the creation of sexual stereotypes” (159).

Interestingly, David’s failure to assume the mask of both whiteness and normative heterosexuality is revealed, as Chancy (1997, 181) elaborates, through a complex inversion of whites and darks. Even though David strives to identify himself as white, emphasizing from the start his height and blond hair as well as his white colonial ancestry (Baldwin [1956] 1964, 7), whiteness is always haunted by misgiving, even anxiety, since its ideal forms are impossible. Whiteness, really white whiteness, is unattainable, not only because skin can never be truly white but because ideally whiteness is absence: “To be really, absolutely white is to be nothing” (Dyer 2007, 78). Admittedly, whites can always turn to the figure of the nonwhite person to feel what being, physicality, presence, might be like, while also dissociating themselves from the nonwhiteness of such things. However, the problem is that, in so doing, white people are also reminded of what they really are not and that being nothing, having no life, is a condition of whiteness. Paradoxically, then, the purity of whiteness may ultimately result, as Dyer has warned, in “the absence of being” (80).<sup>11</sup> That indeed appears to be David’s case in *Giovanni’s Room*. For, in trying to remain pure white, David becomes painfully aware of his absence and nonexistence. On one occasion, for example, while looking at his own reflection in the window pane, he sees it disappear. As he says, “I pour myself a very little drink, watching, in the window pane, my reflection, which steadily becomes more faint. I seem to be fading away before my eyes” (Baldwin [1956] 1964, 220). Significantly, then, David’s obsession with staying white may lead to his own self-destruction and disappearance. Furthermore, whiteness as absence is not only impossible but also undesirable. To relinquish dirt and stains, corporeality and phys-

<sup>11</sup> Kovel (1971, 239–42) holds a similar view.



icality, is also to relinquish both sexual pleasure and the reproduction upon which whiteness as racial domination relies. As Dyer (2007) elaborates, “To be nothing is to be dead, something in some circumstances devoutly to be wished . . . but also, especially in a secular age, dreaded” (81). While attempting to pass as both white and heterosexual, David identifies with his body as a source of privilege. However, as his self-perception begins to fail, he ultimately edges toward self-destruction. In order to avoid his own death and disappearance, then, he will attempt to retain that illusory, fictive body as the source of his identity, using both Hella and Giovanni to try to reaffirm his whiteness and heterosexuality. However, it is precisely David’s frustrated attempt to ground his own sense of selfhood in an/other that will reveal the inevitably black and gay components of his ostensibly white, heterosexual identity.

As the novel advances and his self-perception and integrity begin to fail, David’s heterosexuality appears to be increasingly tinged with, or “contaminated” by, homosexuality and/as blackness. If, as we have seen, David’s relationship with Hella, his white American girlfriend, is initially associated with whiteness and light, it becomes ever more blackened by David’s darker (homo)sexual desire. In his seminal *Black Gay Man* (2001), Reid-Pharr has shown how whiteness is an ideological structure that is not so much in contradistinction to blackness as in intimate relation to it. More specifically, he argues that stereotypes of black bodies and desire affect white sexuality, suggesting that blackness is always already lurking behind white consciousness. And this reality, what Reid-Pharr calls “the blackness of whiteness” (88), has been denied because whiteness has been rendered transparent. In his own words, “the tendency to insist upon the innocence of our sex, the transparency of desire . . . is itself part of the complex ideological process by which whiteness is rendered invisible, unremarkable except in the presence of a spectacularized blackness” (88–89). Nevertheless, sexuality is one of the primary means by which this “process of blackness into whiteness” (88) occurs. Even as it is true that white masculinity has been traditionally shaped and defined in opposition to black masculinity, there is always the danger that the most fixed boundaries between self and other might be crossed, that the man inside might cease to exist as a distinct entity and become instead an amalgamation of self and other. Crucially, Reid-Pharr has shown how sexuality is always inflected by race (and racism), suggesting that even and especially in those most normative moments of sexual (hetero)normativity (white dominant male on white submissive female), “the specter of the black beast is omnipresent” (91, 96).

In *Giovanni’s Room*, then, David’s heterosexual desire for Hella might

also be seen as progressively shadowed, both literally and symbolically, by the specter of black beast. Indeed, while blackness is, as we have seen, initially associated with homosexuality, it is increasingly related to heterosexuality as well. Ultimately, then, Baldwin's novel crosses both sexual and racial barriers, showing the interconnections between heterosexuality and homosexuality, on the one hand, and whiteness and blackness, on the other. David's blackening of Hella becomes particularly apparent at the novel's end. Even though he has already abandoned Giovanni, David acknowledges that Giovanni's influence and power over him remain stronger than ever: "In fleeing from his body, I confirmed and perpetuated his body's power over me" (Baldwin [1956] 1964, 191). Given Giovanni's increased influence over David, it is no wonder that his heterosexual desire for Hella becomes contaminated by blackness, which in the novel is mostly synonymous with the Italian bartender. Significantly, David begins to consider Hella's body as "uninteresting," "unaesthetic," and "unclean," insisting that "all that had once delighted me seemed to have turned sour on my stomach" (209). If Hella was once equated with whiteness and/as purity, she is finally described as dirty and connected to physicality, which has traditionally been regarded as nonwhite (Dyer 2007, 78–81). Similarly, David's sexual experience with Sue, one of his few heterosexual partners, is equally associated with darkness. If Sue's apartment is "dark" (Baldwin [1956] 1964, 131) and "a prison house" (134), like Giovanni's room, David has sex with Sue in "a dark place," thinking that "what I did with Giovanni could not possibly be more immoral than what I was about to do with Sue" (132). Ultimately, then, David's heterosexual relations illustrate what Reid-Pharr has described as the "blackness of whiteness," exemplifying the process by which blackness (read: homosexuality) is brought into whiteness (read: heterosexuality). In using white women to try to reaffirm both his whiteness and heterosexuality, David ends up, paradoxically enough, getting closer than ever to the blackness and homosexuality that Giovanni represents. Ultimately, Baldwin moves beyond limited and limiting racial and sexual divisions, trying to unify the binary oppositions that tend to result in the demise of the other, represented in the novel by Giovanni's gay (and black) self. Thus, "what we are forced to read between the lines of Baldwin's seemingly universal text of the (white) gay experience," as Chancy (1997, 164) insists, "is the subtext of the Black gay experience."

If, as it seems, David's sexual (ab)use of white women ultimately fails to reaffirm his white, heterosexual masculinity, his projection of homosexuality and/as blackness onto Giovanni is equally doomed to failure, as may be illustrated, once again, through Baldwin's meaning-full inversion

of whites and darks. First of all, David himself recognizes the interconnections between darkness and brightness, noting for example that “everyone . . . goes the same dark road—and the road has a trick of being most dark . . . when it seems most bright” (Baldwin [1956] 1964, 36). Moreover, even as David associates Giovanni with a black imagery, Giovanni is also linked to brightness, whiteness, and lightness. First, Giovanni, like David, is bisexual. He was married in Italy, and he even had a son, although the child was born dead. If homosexuality and heterosexuality in *Giovanni’s Room* are associated with blackness and whiteness, respectively, then Giovanni’s bisexuality makes him partly black and partly white (just as David’s bisexuality finally makes him racially amalgamated, too, as we shall see). Actually, Giovanni seems to circulate throughout the novel as a “pseudo Christ-like figure” (Chancy 1997, 182), a halo of bright light protecting his spirit until the very moment of his “crucifixion” on the guillotine. For instance, when David meets Giovanni at Guillaume’s gay bar, which is described as a dark and airless tunnel, he sees the Italian with “all of the light of that gloomy tunnel trapped around his head” (Baldwin [1956] 1964, 59). Similarly, in the final pages of the novel, where David turns to his mirror for an affirmation of his white, heterosexual male identity, he finds his own image replaced by the “dark light” (221) of Giovanni. It is at this point that the racial and sexual process of identification is most clearly reversed, given David’s symbolic proximity to Giovanni, his racial and sexual other. As David tells us: “I begin to undress. There is a mirror in this room. I am terribly aware of the mirror. Giovanni’s face swings before me like an unexpected lantern on a dark, dark night. His eyes—his eyes, they glow like a tiger’s eyes” (221).

Negations, as psychoanalysis has shown, usually affirm their repressed positive contradictions. Thus, an intense repulsion, sexual or racial, often points to the negation of its contradictory desire—to recover what is hated or lost. As Kovel (1971) elaborates, “hatred affirms love, disgust affirms the lost desire for incorporation, aversion affirms lost body narcissism” (195). It follows, then, that what is held by desire in the mind cannot be erased. It may be denied, repressed, or projected, but a trace always remains in the unconscious as a forbidden blackness desired by the white (201). Seen in this light, the mirror scene from Baldwin’s text would seem to suggest Giovanni’s pervasive influence on David’s unconscious. Even though David attempts to exorcise Giovanni from his mind, associating him with darkness and dirt, the Italian continues to haunt his deeper thoughts, surfacing “like an unexpected lantern” (Baldwin [1956] 1964, 221) from the dark dungeons of the unconscious. The dark energy of the unconscious may be hidden, but, as Kovel (1971, 237) reminds us, it

remains tied to “the mental direction of whiteness.” In transmuting into Giovanni’s reflection, then, David cannot but realize the presence of the other within the/his self. It is true that much of Baldwin’s novel concerns itself with David’s (ab)use of Giovanni as a reaffirmation of his white, heterosexual identity. By linking Giovanni to homosexuality and/as blackness, he attempts to reassure himself of his own heterosexuality and whiteness. In this way, David transforms Giovanni into the/his other. As Chancy (1997) says, “Giovanni comes to occupy that Otherness that lies in the face of David’s gaze” (182). At novel’s end, however, David comes to realize that the hybrid and the dark are, inevitably, a fundamental part of his own identity. David sees, in other words, that the other is an integral part of the I, just as blackness is inextricably bound to whiteness, and homosexuality to heterosexuality. Despite their apparent separation, blackness and whiteness, homosexuality and heterosexuality remain one in the unconscious realm. Rather than absolute or congruent, current racial and sexual polarities are nothing but refractive surfaces of a deeper unity. As Reid-Pharr (2001) notes, “David’s consideration of his reflection demonstrates . . . Baldwin’s fascination with the relationship of the Object to the Inverse, the One to the Other” (126). I disagree with critics like Chancy (1997, 185), who have argued that David finally “becomes” the/his other, Giovanni himself.<sup>12</sup> However, I do think that he has finally learned to see “the blackness of whiteness” (Reid-Pharr 2001, 88) as well as the queerness of heterosexuality. Moreover, in recognizing the interdependence of racial and sexual categories, David also realizes their constructedness and artificiality. For, if whiteness always contains blackness, and if homosexuality is part of heterosexuality already, then perhaps neither race nor sex really exists as an absolute identity category. Baldwin himself often emphasized the constructed and artificial nature of racial and sexual divisions. In one of his essays, he suggested, for example, that “there is, in fact, no white community” (Baldwin 1984b, 90); in another he argued that “Negroes do not strictly, or legally exist in any other [country]” (Baldwin 1963, 342).

While here the always prophetic Baldwin may be seen to be advancing poststructuralist and postmodern arguments about the artificiality and

<sup>12</sup> After all, at novel’s end, David seems determined to leave Giovanni (and, therefore, racial and sexual difference) behind; only the wind blows it back on him, reminding him of the futility of his intentions. As David tells us, “I take the blue envelope which Jacques has sent me [and that contains the date and hour of Giovanni’s execution] and tear it slowly into many pieces, watching them dance in the wind, watching the wind carry them away. Yet, as I turn and begin walking toward the waiting people, the wind blows some of them back on me” (Baldwin [1956] 1964, 224).

instability of identity categories, it must be stressed that he never lost sight of the entrenched if shifting racial and sexual relations that work, however ambivalently, to privilege white, heterosexual men and masculinities over blacks and homosexuals. Indeed, most of Baldwin's essays and fictional works illustrate the oppressive power of dominant racial and sexual categories, which he sees as indissolubly linked to the hegemonic model of (American) masculinity. In "Here Be Dragons" (1985), for example, Baldwin asserts not only that sexuality is a central component of one's identity but also that the American ideal of heterosexuality is indissolubly linked to the American ideal of masculinity. He goes on: "The American *ideal*, then, of sexuality appears to be rooted in the American ideal of masculinity. This ideal has created cowboys and Indians, good guys and bad guys, punks and studs, tough guys and softies, butch and faggot, black and white. It is an idea so paralytically infantile that it is virtually forbidden—as an unpatriotic act—that the American boy evolve into the complexity of manhood" (678).

As we have seen, Baldwin's first novel illustrates particularly well the detrimental effect of the American ideal of masculinity on homosexuality. On the one hand, Baldwin's protagonist becomes an obvious victim of the dominant model of American masculinity, which has long regarded homosexuality as dirty or immoral. As Giovanni tells David, "I want to escape . . . this dirty world, this dirty body. I never wish to make love again with anything more than the body" (Baldwin [1956] 1964, 35). Clearly, then, Giovanni becomes the scapegoat of America's sexual phobias, wishing to make love again only with his body, a body onto which others will no longer project notions of filth and bestiality. While Baldwin's protagonist thus remains the main sacrificial victim of the novel, the American ideal of masculinity and sexuality seems to have a (self-)destructive effect on David, too. Indeed, his (mis)representation of homosexuality as dirty and dark is nothing but the product of his biased views and, above all, his fears of homosexuals. As Jacques warns David, "if you think of them as dirty, then they *will* be dirty" (77). While Giovanni's body becomes the receptacle of David's homophobia for the greater part of the novel, David will ultimately begin to realize the distorting and limiting role played by homophobia in his own life and affective relationships, eventually turning to his own body as the road to his salvation. As he tells it, "I look at my sex, my troubling sex, and wonder how it can be redeemed. . . . The key to my salvation . . . is hidden in my flesh" (223). Because David's fear of himself is inextricably linked to the fear of his own body, he finally sees that his salvation will depend on his ability to eradicate the fear of his own flesh and his (homo)sexuality. Finally, David

comes to realize, and so problematize, the negative influence of the American ideal of masculinity on his own life and sexuality, thereby discovering the secret hidden in his flesh.

### Conclusion

If, as Baldwin appears to suggest, sexuality derives from masculinity, then it follows that rethinking the normative heterosexual order will entail rethinking the normative ideals of masculinity, too. Moreover, if, as he also notes, the masculinity ideal has created not only the “butch” and “faggot” but also the “black and white” dichotomies (Baldwin 1985, 678), then challenging masculinity may help to challenge not only heterosexism and homophobia but racism as well. In this sense, then, Baldwin’s second novel seems to provide a particularly harsh critique of both racism and homophobia. Through the love story between David and Giovanni, Baldwin illustrates how dominant models of (white, heterosexual) masculinity both produce and are produced by a kind of aberrant racialized homosexuality. Even more important, perhaps, the novel shows how questioning racism will inevitably imply questioning white masculinity as well, especially white masculine fantasies of black (homo)sexuality. Moreover, in deconstructing white images of black masculinity and (homo)sexuality, Baldwin not only questions the traditional construction of white manhood but, ultimately, offers an affirmation of black gayness, too. After all, Giovanni’s fate, like the story of Christ’s death, ends up reinforcing a philosophy in which the innocent and the powerless die to save the powerful and corrupt and, in so doing, prove themselves more powerful than those they save (Tompkins 1986, 127–28). That *Giovanni’s Room* is, in essence, an explicit manifesto of Baldwin’s own identity as both a black and a gay man is only confirmed by his dedication of the novel to his then-lover Lucien Happersberger, followed immediately by a quote attributed to Walt Whitman: “I am the man, I suffered, I was there” (Baldwin [1956] 1964).

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