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Journal

Paroles gelées, 26(1)

ISSN

1094-7264

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Publication Date

2010

DOI

10.5070/PG7261003195

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“Under a Foreign Sky:”

Place and Displacement in James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*

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And these nights were being acted out under a foreign sky, with no one to watch, no penalties attached.¹

James Baldwin
Giovanni’s Room

Unlike the largely autobiographical *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, the novel which ushered James Baldwin into fame, in *Giovanni’s Room*, the I who introduces himself to the reader in the first paragraph immediately reveals his representativeness of white masculinity, with ancestors that “conquered a continent”(3). Consequently, critical readings of the novel have largely been focused on what is considered its displacement of blackness unto whiteness, and stage a sort of lynching party to—nevertheless convincingly—search out and expose to the critical gaze the “absent black man” in the text (Reid-Pharr; Holland). Others have completely ignored the novel as a blip on the screen of the obviously *black* writer’s career preoccupation with racial themes in the rest of his oeuvre. Andrew Shin and Barbara Judson go as far as to say that Baldwin “ventriloquizes his story through a white protagonist” (3). A few critics have attempted more compelling readings of the metonym of whiteness in *Giovanni’s Room*: Marlon B. Ross, for example, suggests that through David, Baldwin “posits the white man as a problem” (25), since “the fire next time cannot merely be a fire that sears the racial existence of Americans but also must be one that disrupts their sexual psychology” (19). Only a few recent readings (Tomlinson, Méral), beyond biographical surveys of expatriate writers, have considered expatriation and exile outside of Baldwin’s biography and essays, and particularly in *Giovanni’s Room*, or seriously attempted to locate exile as a key theme and strategy in his

fiction. As Jean Méral has pointed out, Paris is “closely linked with the first fictional attempts to deal with the subject of homosexuality” (223), a list which includes *Giovanni’s Room*. There must, then, be something about the city which is ripe as a setting for exploration of homosexual themes.

In an attempt to address this lacuna, and to unite Baldwin’s biographical and fictional interest in the productive functions of expatriation, this article examines the symbolic function of the places and displacements in *Giovanni’s Room* through the prism of the *décalage* afforded by Parisian exile. I argue that, through the depiction of the Parisian spaces—the city itself, the gay bars, and Giovanni’s room—and their contrast with American, homely spaces, Baldwin shows the function of exile and otherness in not only evading, but producing and reinforcing (sexual) identities. With the freedom afforded “under a foreign sky” to ‘find oneself’—and the white American’s self-discovery is precisely at the heart of Baldwin’s critique of the narrator—David explores, then excises and exorcises, his hidden, “dirty,” “dark,” gay self in the figure of the guillotined Giovanni. As such, David reproduces heteronormativity through, literally, torturous means, highlighting the contortions required to maintain the heteronormative status quo, as well as white American identity.

Parisian Fictions

Americans have been enthralled with France and its capital ever since the first Americans went on the Grand Tour of Europe and reported back about the wonder of the City of Lights; from *aventuriers*, to America’s founding fathers such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson—whose dialectic relationship with the city and their nation resulted in the mutual influence of the French Revolution and the American Declaration of Independence, both founded on similar principles of universal humanity and equality, and the fundamental right to freedom. Notions of Paris as a libertine city spread with the arrival of bohemian American writers and artists in self-imposed exile, singularly from the 1880s, but in groups and fad-like droves from the 1920s or the interwar period onwards,

where the likes of Ernest Hemingway and Gertrude Stein—between whom the label the ‘Lost Generation’ was coined as the epitaph of the bohemians of the era and their lifestyle—played physical hosts, literary inspiration and Paris-myth-makers to those who would come later: Sylvia Plath, Sylvia Beach, Richard Wright, James Baldwin (Carpenter). Indeed, as Méral’s book-length study on Paris in American literature reveals, writings about Paris not only documented the experiences of Americans living in the European city over the centuries, but also formed the perception of Paris as a space of freedom from the puritanical values and restrictive codes of behavior that existed in American society, and one that, according to Robert Tomlinson, “signified for the sensitive American artist a return to the locus of Western civilization” (135).

While the quest for origins and an enthrallment with the Paris of lore might have motivated the white Americans clustered in the American colony of the Left Bank and cloistered in the garrets of the Latin Quarter (Carpenter), for Africans, Afro-Caribbeans and African-Americans in the narrow, hilly streets of Montmartre who arrived during and after the second World War, the City of Lights signified a space free from the racist and racialized constructions that dehumanized them in their ‘home’ countries (Edwards; Méral). What (theoretically) united the various groups is not only the “encounters on the Seine” (Baldwin, *Price*), in the bars of Montparnasse or the halls of the Sorbonne, but the shared experience forged through exile of being alienated from home, “distanced physically and emotionally from America, yet not fully integrated into French society” (Tomlinson 137), a sensation that diasporic blacks already knew too well.

Baldwin’s own French exile was likewise a flight from a space in which he felt alienated, perhaps doubly so, as a black man and a homosexual, although the catalyst he cites is a racial one. In addition to the shocking suicide of a close friend, Eugene, fictionalized in the opening chapter of Baldwin’s third novel *Another Country*, his self-imposed exile came “because [he] doubted [his] ability to survive the fury of the color problem [in the U.S.].... [He] wanted

to prevent [him]self from becoming merely a Negro” (Price, 217). In the two decades he spent in France, with sojourns in other parts of Europe and Asia and brief stints in the U.S., Baldwin wrote and published most of his novels and essays, works which not only fixedly deal with profoundly American themes—“what it means to be American” in general, and a black homosexual American in particular—but also which return almost obsessively to the expatriation experience, particularly for Americans in France.

In his political and autobiographical essays, collected in *The Price of the Ticket*, Baldwin returns to his experience in France, a country he considers free from the constricting racial and sexual identity categories that plagued postwar America. In his essay “The Discovery of What it Means to Be American,” he contrasts the lived racial experience in the two places:

I was born in New York, but have lived only in pockets of it. In Paris I lived in all parts of the city—on the Right Bank and on the Left, among the bourgeoisie and among les *misérables*, and knew all kinds of people, from the pimps and prostitutes in Pigalle to Egyptian bankers in Neuilly. ... This perpetual dealing with people very different from myself caused a shattering in me of preconceptions I scarcely knew I held. (174)

I want to equate this experience with the concept of *décalage*, which Brent Hayes Edwards theorizes in *The Practice of Diaspora*, his book-length exploration of the transnational connections that were enabled among Africans, Afro-Caribbeans and African-Americans in Paris in the interwar period. *Décalage* “can be translated as ‘gap,’ ‘discrepancy,’ ‘time-lag,’ or ‘interval’; it is also the term [for] ‘jet lag.’ In other words, a *décalage* is either a difference or gap in time ... or in space.” (13) Edwards further defines the term as “the kernel of... the received biases that refuse to pass over when one crosses the water... [It is] what resists or escapes translation” (15). The shattering of Baldwin’s preconcep-

tions—preconceptions, which reveal themselves through *décalage*, preconceptions which “resist... translation” across the Atlantic—would be an important step in his formation as a writer, and the conceptualization of France as a discursive ‘void’ which allowed him the positioning vis-à-vis the U.S. to “recuperat[e] his own intensely American past” (Tomlinson, 137). The irony, if not the uniqueness, of the experience of expatriation—of the displacements inherent in *décalage*—is summed up in Baldwin’s realization that “if [the expatriate] has been preparing himself for anything in Europe, he has been preparing for himself—for America. In short, the freedom that the American writer finds in Europe brings him, full circle, back to himself” (*Price*, 175).

This revelation in Baldwin’s essays about the self-reflexive function of expatriation is also a recurring theme in Baldwin’s novels. In *Another Country* for instance, Baldwin not only creates in France a pastoral idyll for his (white) homosexual expatriate American, Eric, and his young gay French lover, Yves, France also functions as a kind of rehabilitative center for Eric as well as for the reader: the French section is the novel’s formal center and a well-needed reprieve from the narrative shock of the suicide of Rufus, the narrator, in the very first chapter, and the ensuing struggle between Rufus’s best friend Vivaldo, and sister, Ida to have an emotionally honest interracial relationship in a racially toxic New York City. Eric’s flight to France occurs after a failed relationship with Rufus, but he is able, through a healthy and restorative relationship with Yves, to return to the U.S. in the wake of Rufus’s death as a healed and self-assured young man (236). Not only has he come to terms with himself, he is now able to heal the other characters: his affair with Cass restores her to herself, and a solitary sexual encounter with Vivaldo reconnects the latter to his fears and allows him to face his feelings for Rufus, the characters in his novel, and Ida. Through the figure of the returned expatriate homosexual, then, Baldwin demonstrates his faith in the necessary and healing function of both exile and engagement with the homosexual—which he again unites in his last novel, *Just Above my Head*, in the figure of Julia, a victim of

incest whose journey to Africa in search of herself, and consensual sex with her gay friend Crunch, “make[s][her] well” (244). In addition, it is in *Another Country* that Baldwin first explicitly articulates exile as literary paradigm, describing love as “a country he knew nothing about” (296), a lover’s face as “a stranger’s face” (172), and showing expatriation as a key to successfully navigating the hostile waters of homosexual desire and love in 1950s.

The same cannot be said of Baldwin’s first novel to explicitly deal with homosexuality, and the subject of expatriation. In *Giovanni’s Room* Baldwin disorients the reader through the eyes of David, a white middle-class American, who goes to Paris “to find [him]self” (6), a process which involves a homosexual encounter with and eventual sacrifice of Giovanni, a young dark Italian. David’s life in France not only is initiated by but also consists of a series of self-evasions, particularly from fears of his homosexuality, and unlike the novel which follows it, there is significantly no return of a restored “ex-expatriate” to his home country (*Another Country*, 240). Instead of an honest engagement with self that normally attends the first-person narrative construction employed in the novel, David’s project is one of *décalage* or perpetual exile from self, mirroring the attitudes of André Gide in *Madeleine*, whom Baldwin criticizes in “The Male Prison” and who is conceivably the inspiration for the novel. Concerned as he is with human honesty with self and other, Baldwin expresses disgust with Gide’s attitudes towards his sexual desire: “his homosexuality...was his own affair which he ought to have kept hidden from us, or... if he were going to talk about homosexuality at all, he ought, in a word, to have sounded a little less disturbed” (*Price*, 102). David’s oscillation between heterosexuality in the form of Hella, and homosexuality in the form of Giovanni, echoes Gide’s wrestling with homosexual desire, which the latter sublimates by a thoroughly heterosexual marriage, piety and an imprisoning masculinity (*Price*, 105). But the important difference is that, in *Giovanni’s Room*, “these nights were being acted out under a foreign sky, with no one to watch, no penalties attached” (6), a statement by David which suggests an important connection

between the state of being in exile and the negotiation of sexual identity.

Moored to a Fiction

I suppose this was why I asked her to marry me: to give myself something to be moored to. ... But people can't, unhappily, invent their mooring posts, their lovers and their friends, anymore than they can invent their parents.²

James Baldwin
Giovanni's Room

Although the novel begins and ends with David standing by the window of a house in the South of France, the first section of the novel takes us, in his memory, back to the U.S. of his childhood and adolescence, and his motives for expatriation to France. Immediately before this transition, he not only imagines the trip by train to Paris, he also muses on the circumstances that have led to his fiancée Hella's currently being “on the high seas. And Giovanni ... about to perish, somewhere between this night and this morning on the guillotine” (5). His suggestion that he proposed to Hella “to give [him] self something to be moored to” is interesting in his construction of the function of not only home, but heterosexuality as a “mooring post” from which he cannot escape. Like the imaginary train ride, the employment of the metaphor of a ship in relation to its home harbor functions as a simulation of motion in a novel where David rarely moves, except from one window or mirror to another. More importantly, in equating mooring with home and heterosexuality, the rest of the novel, in its exploration of homosexuality “under a foreign sky” becomes an (imaginary) exploration of unmooring, exile and homosexuality.

The early pages of the novel, then, reconstruct for the reader, the mooring posts from which David attempts to flee to France, and his subsequent relationship with Giovanni. These mooring posts, interestingly, are located in his first homosexual encounter with the

“dark” Joey, and the primal scenes of his home, and are reexamined, on the twilight of Giovanni’s beheading, through the prism of psychoanalytic and religious perspectives on sexuality.

In a scene that later gets reworked in *Another Country* as the Chartres idyll between Eric and Yves (183-227), David recalls his encounter with Joey, his then best friend who lived in a less well-off neighborhood of Brooklyn, as the two enjoyed a day at the beach, then a walk through the “tropical Brooklyn streets with heat coming up from the pavements and banging from the walls of houses with enough force to kill a man, with all the world’s grown-ups, it seemed, sitting shrill and disheveled on the stoops and all the world’s children on the sidewalks or in the gutters or hanging from fire escapes, with [his] arm around Joey’s shoulder” (7). That torrid and very American, very urban counter-pastoral is shattered, however, when David is faced with “the black opening of a cavern in which [he] would be tortured until madness came, in which [he] would lose [his] manhood” (9). Immediately, David deploys a host of heteronormative, if not homophobic, mooring posts from which to flee the consequences and possibilities of “the mystery.” He commences to feel “shame and terror,” to see all around him the evidence of “vileness” (9). His ensuing mental torment reveals the powerful impact of normalizing discourses, which Kwame Anthony Appiah has elsewhere called “scripts” (qtd. in Halley, 42)—“half-heard, half-forgotten, half-understood stories, full of dirty words” (Baldwin, *Giovanni’s*, 9), words supposedly like ‘faggot,’ with which David has no interest in being identified. Instead, he accepts the idea of what he shared with Joey as “dirty,” as evidence of “a horrible taint” within himself (6). Consequently, David sacrifices Joey’s feelings, in a prefiguring of his later fatal sacrificing of Giovanni. Not only that, but he, at that young age, begins “the flight which has brought [him] to this darkening window” (10).

It is important to note that the scripts to which David moors himself, are a product of an internalization of Judeo-Christian rhetoric which later also inexplicably turns up as he fantasizes about Giovanni’s execution, and the ideologies about sexual identity

and masculinity in circulation in postwar America. In Michael L. Cobbs’s exploration of Baldwin’s use of religious words to create “queer counterintimacies,” the author writes that, “The carnal man of the flesh has, in Baldwin’s imaginary, queer flesh, and this flesh is deemed through religious belief to be quintessentially sinful and historical” (291). I would go further to say that religious views of homosexuality operate as another script to which David is moored. In addition to the Biblical injunction against homosexuality in Leviticus 21 which have been used to both criminalize and dehumanize acts of sodomy in the U.S., sexual and gender non-conformists were subject to the ideological constructions of sexuality and gender in an America that was characterized by surveillance, forced secrecy and self-containment in the face of the Red Scare of the McCarthy era (Powers). Baldwin describes the New York sexual culture which he left behind in the ’40s in “Here Be Dragons”: a society of rigid sexual categories, with a premium on masculinity and a media-distributed tough guy image that aimed to counteract the image of the communist and the homosexual in like effeminate terms in the media. While much of Baldwin’s own experience of Paris during the ’40s to ’60s is useful in analyzing the function of the city in his work in general, and in *Giovanni’s Room* in particular, David’s whiteness invalidates much of the would-be parallels between the author’s and the character’s motivations for exile: while Baldwin left the U.S to find a racial and sexual haven, David’s reasons for fleeing the U.S are for sexual, not racial reasons—encapsulated in a mere “decision” to flee, and put in speedy motion in the immediate renunciation of any further relations with Joey, or other “boys” for that matter.

In the other American space described in the novel, David also demonstrates a subscription to normalizing discourses which not only contribute to his attitudes towards his homosexual desire, but which, here, seem to explain it, using the very characteristics forwarded by the American Psychological Association in its classification of homosexuality as a pathology (DeGout, 3). The primary mooring post in the novel is David’s home, the apartment of his

childhood and adolescence in the U.S. which is dominated by the “spirit” of his dead mother, who constantly “figured in [his] nightmares” (10). Here home is both *mater* and “putrescent” matter, both womb and tomb; the “sickening soft” maternal body “that ... opened ... into a breach so enormous as to swallow [him] alive” (10-11). Here then, is the “cavern” that animates his fears, which reveals itself in a regression to the site of the womb, as the source of his disgust with the dark opening of Joey’s body. If the Oedipus Complex is the formative heteronormative dynamic, the stage at which desire for the mother resolves itself into castrating the father and marrying the mother, or a mother-like object, then David is signaling to us the reason he cannot desire women. His abhorrence of the cavern is the abhorrence of death, and the *flesh* of death, and we recall the “impossible paternity” that animates African-American rejection of homosexuality as a viable paradigm for black nationhood (Ross, 31). At the same time, David’s father attempts, and fails, miserably, at instilling some sense of masculinity and manhood in his son—in-effectual simulations of “man talk,” incomprehensible locutions on what it means to be a man: “all I want for David is that he grow up to be a man. And when I say a man, Ellen, I don’t mean a Sunday school teacher;” to which Ellen retorts, “A man... is not the same thing as a bull” (15). Where David’s father fails spectacularly in David’s eyes, is in his own performance of his understanding of masculinity as promiscuity. Consequently, once David learns about his father’s affairs, he “could scarcely ever face a woman without wondering whether or not [his] father had, in Ellen’s phrase, been ‘interfering’ with her” (15). In effect, both his parents have closed off the possibility of heterosexual desire for David, but importantly, as we see with the return of the cavern with Joey, his parents have also foreclosed the real possibility of homosexual desire as well.

As a consequence of the malfunction of the Oedipal paradigm in David’s family, and the powerful scripts that construct homosexuality as depravity, the David that flees to France is doomed to ambivalence towards sexuality, simultaneously fleeing from and clinging to inoperable mooring posts. The flight from home and self

in the novel is not only thematized in a first-person narrator who admits to self-deception and whose interiority is inaccessible, but whose displaced or *décalé* interiority is reproduced in mirrors and other characters. The novel thematizes the exile’s experience of displacement or *décalage*, suggesting that the way in which the subject “finds himself” is in relation to his displaced self or origin—his mirror image. Salman Rushdie has suggested that the exiled or expatriate writer, writing about his homeland “is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost” (11), while Baldwin has referred to the sexual culture of the Village in the 1940s as “a hall of mirrors” (*Price*, 688).

Throughout the novel, we only come to know David’s face, and in several instances, he only comes to know his own feelings, through the faces of others reflecting his own back to him as if a mirror. While the novel begins with him facing away from a “darker past” and the early admission, “I am too various to be trusted” (5), he later suggests that if he were to search for the truth of himself, “one [would find] oneself pressing, in great pain, through a maze of false signals and abruptly locking doors” (10). Indeed, David’s real feelings and interiority are “locked in that reflection... in the window,” and are “yet more foreign to [him] than those foreign hills outside” (10). In fleeing from Joey, and by extension, home and homosexual desire, he begins a life characterized by “not looking at the universe, by not looking at [him]self” (20), a life of perpetual *décalage* from self.

However, in a pivotal scene, David notices a Melchizedechian sailor on the boulevard Montparnasse, without antecedents or connections, at whom he stares, as at a fantasy of himself:

He seemed ... younger than I had ever been, and blonder and more beautiful, and he wore his masculinity as unequivocally as he wore his skin. He made me think of home—perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition. ... We came abreast and, as though he had seen some all-revealing panic in my eyes, he gave me a look

contemptuously lewd and knowing...[What he had seen] was something else and I would never... dare to see it. It would be like looking at the naked sun... I knew that what the sailor had seen in my unguarded eyes was envy and desire. (92)

In this passage and through the “stranger’s face” of the sailor, David reveals more of himself than anywhere else in the novel. Not only is it evident here that home figures for him as unequivocal heterosexual masculinity, he also reveals his self-love, for the “envy and desire” that the sailor reflects back to David is the “envy and desire” for the image of himself that he has seen—a trope for homosexuality or love of the same, and a version of narcissism, if we take Lacan’s mirror stage theory seriously. It is an apt symbol for the experience of expatriation, which affords one the opportunity to see the self from outside of it. Hence, the narrator could not be black; the author’s African-American subjectivity is *décalé* in the object of David’s gaze (his mirror image), not David himself, but in Joey and Giovanni, whose darkness Robert F. Reid-Pharr and Sharon Patricia Holland have cogently argued for as symbolizing blackness in the novel.

Moreover, this passage reveals that the masculinist scripts from home continue to exert a heteronormative pressure on David’s psyche, even in France, and we see this a few paragraphs earlier, in the letter that David receives from his father. The letter serves as a reinforcement of the norm of home and heterosexuality—David is referred to as “Butch” and the unspoken question that the letter incites is “*Is it a woman, David? ...Bring her on home and I’ll help you get set up*” (91), and as David realizes, serves to both proscribe heterosexuality and ward off homosexuality. And with its attached promise of financial security, it further serves to cast the financially-constrained life of the homosexual milieu in Paris as patently undesirable.

It seems then, that David’s admission that although he never loved Hella, marriage to her presented itself as “something to be unmoored to” (6), is not only another attempt at flight from himself,

from home and from Joeys, but a conscious flight to Paris for the counteractive script that it affords, which he admits when he says :

Perhaps, as we say in America, I wanted to find myself ... an interesting phrase ... [that] betrays a nagging suspicion that something has been misplaced. 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... exactly what I was doing when I got on that boat for France. (21)

“Under a Foreign Sky”

David’s echoing, in the above quotation, of the notion that we saw earlier in Baldwin’s essays that expatriation is an experience of *décalage* that brings us face to face with self and home suggests quite powerfully that part of David’s project of self-imposed exile in France is to indulge in those very homosexual desires which he repudiated as dirty. In fleeing *from* homosexuality he was also fleeing *to* it; however it also suggests that the ambivalent attitudes about both home—America, heterosexuality—and homosexuality, here nationalized as French, will follow him wherever he goes. Not only that, but the experience of exile, in its act of *misplacing* things, will work to produce or *place* identity.

The language of the novel constantly pits the old world decay, poverty and ‘queerness’ of Paris against the newness and financial security of America. In an early conversation, Giovanni and David compare Paris and New York. The latter, David says is “very high and new and electric—exciting... It’s hard to describe. It’s very twentieth century” (33). When Giovanni asks about Paris, David replies: “Paris is old... You feel, in Paris, all the time gone by” (33). Later, Giovanni describes the city as cold and unfriendly, decrepit, “falling to pieces, measure by measure, before their eyes” (36), and as an “old whore” (45). Nowhere here are the glorious scenes of

James and Hemingway. Even the river is “swollen,” “yellow” and motionless beside “dreadful corkscrew alleys and dead-end streets” (45), choked with rats, traffic and the homeless. It is difficult not to associate this view of Paris as a decaying world of “dead-ends” with the dead-end of the mother’s body (Shin) and the dead-end of the dark cavern; the death of the feminine is ultimately connected with the “unproductive sexuality,” the dead-end of homosexuality, and pictured here, through Paris, as the hallmark of the decay of civilization. Thus, having fled self and home, the space that David finds only serves as an echo of his repressed fears.

In addition, where Paris is defined by otherness, foreignness and homosexuality, New York as the familiar and homely exerts a heteronormative pressure that David has internalized and still carries with him—a script that he acts out, even “under a foreign sky” with his relationship with Hella, and with his continued repression of homosexuality. Although Paris is primarily constructed as the space to “act out” homosexual desires—with all the connotations of performance and disconnection from reality and interiority—despite the freedom in Paris from criminalization and persecution of homosexuality, David uses it as a space where displacement is practiced, and where identity is constructed and produced.

In France, sexual acts between men have been decriminalized since 1791, although under the Vichy government, pederasty—sexual relations with a person of the same sex who is under the age of twenty-one—attracted criminal penalties, and its legacy still remains with the *courant* term for ‘homosexual’ remaining ‘p.d’ (*péderaste*: pedophile). Méral describes the Paris of the time of the novel as “a haven of tolerance where homosexuality is an accepted part of literary and artistic life” (225), yet, in the novel, homosexuality is confined to and contained in dark, sinister spaces of the *demi-monde*, “a Parisian subculture of dubious reputation” (225); spaces such as the gay bar, Les Halles, and Giovanni’s room.

Among the spaces that operate as a locus for homosexual activity in the novel is Guillaume’s bar, “whose atmosphere of semi-clandestinity suits the theme of homosexuality in the 1950s.

Here we are on the fringes of the underworld... weighed down by the feeling of decline and loss characteristic of the Fourth Republic and exemplified in the character of Guillaume” (Méral, 227). Like the bars of Les Halles, Guillaume’s bar is described as “a noisy, crowded, ill-lit sort of tunnel, of dubious—or perhaps not dubious at all, of rather too emphatic—reputation.” (Baldwin, *Giovanni’s*, 26) Interestingly enough, David goes on to tell us that Guillaume invites the occasional police raid, albeit after warning certain customers to stay away. Here the police threat is not, ostensibly, to *contrôler* sexual behavior, but to ensure that patrons have the correct “identification papers” (26). Thus, the staging of these raids operates, not only as an uncanny foreshadowing of Stonewall, but also as a means of simultaneously proclaiming and producing the “too emphatic... reputation” of normativity (26).

Baldwin takes pleasure in the depiction of the scene of “chic Parisian ladies... with their gigolos,” “the usual, knife-blade lean, tight-trousered boys” and “of course, *les folles*” (26). These latter, who David find laughable and obscenely frightening—which become patently clear in a later scene when he has a species of a terror (to misquote Baldwin, elsewhere) at the approach of one particularly “horrifying,” zombie-like *folle*—connect the Parisian gay bar scene with the *Cages aux Folles*, a series of “queer” French comedies about cross-dressing, the milieu, and the ironic, unconscious homophobia of the French bourgeoisie. David’s revulsion to not only Jacques, who solicits Foucauldian ‘furtive pleasures’ from “boys” in the city’s dark alleys, and Guillaume whose loose flesh reminds David of his mother, but particularly to the *folles*, in their very legible incarnation of the unmanly, “queer” homosexual, overshadows his perception of the bar scene, and his relationship with Giovanni, a waiter there, whom he meets that night. Even up to the point of meeting and almost immediately becoming involved with Giovanni, David insists on and persists in his notion that he is not of *le milieu*, that he “could not possibly have... flirt[ed] with a soldier” even drunk, even if the other patrons are interested in “discover[ing], by means of signs [he] made but which only they

could read, whether or not [he] had a true vocation” (27).

Part of the depiction of the bar as well is bound up in Giovanni’s experiences there as a “boy... for sale” (28), looked on as “a valuable racehorse or a rare bit of china” (32), and for whom David staked his claim by laying on the table the incredible sum of “ten thousand franc[s]” (32). It is a transactional and performative world into which David, wittingly or unwittingly, enters. Although attempting to resist being legible as one of them, especially “unpleasantly crowded together” in a taxi with Giovanni and the two older “unpleasantly” gay men as Jacques attempts in vain to regain his footing as the young man’s sexual patron, by the end of the night David’s body seemingly conspires to betray him into a Foucauldian, if not Freudian, “confession;” first in Giovanni’s “misreading” of his intentions in the taxi, then later, in Giovanni’s room, when David’s internal, ideological “shame” at being “so hideously entangled with a boy” (62) is belied by his physical, bodily consent and submission (64).

Like the homosexual relationship in Mediterranean France in *Another Country*, Giovanni’s room is at the heart of the novel that bears its name, though not of Paris—the neighborhood of Nation is on the margins of the city. The room can be read as not only a literalization of the cavern (Shin 4), but as a microcosm of the Paris of David’s mind, as well as a trope for homosexuality—a closet, as it were, in which David attempts to contain his homosexual desire for Giovanni. This exilic function of the room is signaled in David’s musing that he “underwent a sea change there” (85), a room that exists outside of time (75). It echoes the dead-end, dark cavern in its surrealist juxtaposition of all things dysfunctional, unproductive and unsuitable for life: its windows are obscured; its air is toxic with the fumes of paint, turpentine, and spilt red wine; a violin with a “wrapped, cracked case,” “yellowing newspapers,” “empty bottles,” and “a single brown and wrinkled potato in which even the sprouting eyes were rotten” (87). Its function as a trope for homosexuality is further reinforced by images of “dirty laundry” (86) and “the yellow light which hung like a diseased and indefinable sex,” or a

“blunted arrow” (88). The fact that they do emerge from the room occasionally and enjoy relative freedom is signaled by their childish “jostling each other” in public, yet David eschews visible homosexuality and recreates instead a closeted relationship with Giovanni, which speaks to his inability to flee the heteronormative scripts of U.S. culture.

That the novel draws its title from the room suggests that David’s entire project of exile, of narrating this moment in his life, is precisely the cloistering of the experience of his relationship with Giovanni, the containing of his homosexual desire. He imagines that “the courtyard malevolently pressed [in], encroaching day by day” (85), and employs images of hunting to suggest threats to their safety. Yet, it seems that the real problem of the room is internal—inside David in the form of “another me” (83), and a self-imposed “punishment and grief” which transmuted Giovanni’s face into that of a stranger; and the painting or mural on which “a lady in a hoop skirt and a man in knee breeches perpetually walked together, hemmed in by roses” (86), echoing the garden of Eden imagery in the early parts of the novel, and operating as a heteronormative script that David would later deploy as his reasons for wanting to escape from, if not destroy the room.

Unable to recognize the “two grown men” that he and Giovanni represent in the edenic representation, David concludes that “men can never be housewives” (88). Later, walking along the Quai de la Seine, he imagines, without visual corroboration a perfectly nuclear familiar scene, and then concludes: “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. . . . I wanted a woman to be for me a steady ground, like the earth itself, where I could always be renewed” (104). And he wants this, even if it means forcing himself to produce an interior self—and behaviors—consonant with those normalizing fictions, whose production he undertakes, first by using an American girl, Sue’s maternal and material body to displace his desire for Giovanni unto Hella, then by deserting Giovanni for Hella when the latter returns from her own

sojourn in Spain—a double expatriation—in order to find *herself*, to produce in *herself* the image of femininity that she supposes David wants. David's conclusion suggests that despite—and indeed, *because of*—his exilic relationship with Giovanni, “life” means babies and lineage, revealed in his asking Giovanni, “What kind of life can we have in this room?—this filthy little room. What kind of life can two men have together?” (142). But David's real problem is in his position in the relationship as Giovanni's “little *girl*,” which does not conform to any script of masculinity with which he is familiar.

In one of his last conversations with Giovanni, the latter issues a chilling diagnosis of David, as well as an uncanny prediction of the extent to which David will go to moor himself to untenable posts: “You never have loved anyone, I am sure you never will! You love your purity, you love your mirror... You want to leave Giovanni because he makes you stink... You want to *kill* him in the name of all your lying little moralities” (141). The image of David trapped in his mirror and his moralities links the room to the final, present tense settings of the novel: the “great house” and Giovanni's prison cell where the latter awaits execution for murdering Guillaume. We recall that the entire novel occurs in the space of the memories of one evening, as David stands before his mirror contemplating his naked “corrupt” flesh, and imaginatively recreating Giovanni's execution. Having exteriorized the struggling self within as the novel progressed, David now symbolically merges with the condemned Giovanni, alternating between “I” and “he,” and even merging with the “someone” whom he fantasizes will offer Giovanni sexual comfort on his last night.

His resorting to religious rhetoric in these scenes operates as another script to which David inexplicably and unconvincingly clings, which he seems to animate to justify his symbolic lynching of Giovanni, and with it, attempts to castrate his own “corrupt flesh.” It is motivated by the reencounter with his mother in the form of the Italian mother—and again his mirror-connection to Giovanni is suggested in the merged role of the old woman: “I want *her* to forgive me. But I do not know how to state my crime. ... It is ter-

rible how naked she makes me feel, like a half-grown boy, naked before his mother” (70). The awakened need for repentance closes the novel, as, with Giovanni’s death, David’s mirror image begins to fade and he is able to “move at last from the mirror” (169). There is the suggestion that he now has “hope” in the “grace of God,” having paid his penance in “putting away childish things” in order to “become a man” (168). And if the “childish things” refer to Giovanni and homosexuality, referred to throughout the novel in terms of boyishness, then this holds powerful meaning for what David has accomplished.

The vilifying of Giovanni, the foreigner, the production of Guillaume as a model citizen, a symbol of “French history, French honor, and French glory,” and the arrests of people of “peculiar tastes,” which, though not criminals, “are nevertheless regarded with extreme disapprobation by the bulk of the populace” (150) suggest that like the U.S., France is still a space where myths of identity and nationhood must be deployed, and certain kinds of otherness must be bracketed off, even guillotined. Today, a huge Egyptian phallic stele marks the spot in the Place de la Concorde in the heart of Paris where the guillotine, or “the Madame,” stood from 1791-1981—and, as phallic symbols go, despite its feminine appellation, worked in its own way to produce ideas of masculinity by emasculating (beheading, lynching, crucifying) threats to itself. Similarly, David’s entire project throughout the novel, as the novel’s ending at the guillotine suggests, is to crucify/lynch his homosexual self/other or mirror image: Giovanni, the dark gay boy.

Further, David’s suspicion, ever since his encounter with the dark Joey, that inside the body the shameful lay hidden, that his desire “was proof of some horrifying taint *in* [him]” (6), connects David’s project of excising non-normativity and otherness, through the figure of Giovanni, to the “darker past” of American nationhood where the one-drop rule motivated internal and external hunts for the hidden ‘stain.’ The novel, then, in showing the tragedy of David’s internalization of heteronormative identity, and the psychological contortions required to produce that identity, including excising the

dark/gay self, reveals Baldwin's project in the novel to not only be a critique of such normalizing discourses, but to thematize the intersections between race and sexuality. Baldwin thus critiques, through a series of displacements worked out in David, the white American's refusal to "pay dues," and his denial of more than his "darker past": the darkness within.

Conclusion: No Discovery of What it Means to Be American

With David's projections of his self-loathing onto the city, and his attempts to remain moored to untenable scripts about sexuality, Paris does not operate as it might—as a space to come to terms with self in order to return to the real world of home as a healed and healing person, like Eric of *Another Country*. David's homosexual experience in exile is tragic, not healing. The difference in the formal and spatial centers of the two novels—the Mediterranean in one, and the dead-end room in the other, where David ends up, having already left the potentially pastoral setting where he encountered Joey—is a key indicator of a refusal to engage with a self that he never reconciles, even in exile. David is content to remain forever in exile, forever *décalé* from himself.

Rather than seeing *Giovanni's Room* as failing to do what *Another Country* does much better, as some critics argue, it seems to me more appropriate to see David as refusing the perspective that the *décalage* of expatriation allows, and refusing to recognize as fictions the scripts to which he has subscribed. David has never experienced what Baldwin did through expatriation: the "shattering... of preconceptions I scarcely knew I held." (*Price*, 174) Vivaldo's words in *Another Country* might well apply to David: "Love was a country he knew nothing about" (296).

Notes

¹ James Baldwin. *Giovanni's Room*. 1956. New York: Delta, 2000. 6.

² James Baldwin. *Giovanni's Room*. 1956. New York: Delta, 2000. 5.

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