Undoing Dominance: Depicting the Intersections of Race, Gender, and Sexuality in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*

Nancy Sanchez

University of California, Merced

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Abstract

My paper attempts to critically analyze James Baldwin's Giovanni's Room and depict the correlations of race, gender and sexuality within the novel. I found it interesting that James Baldwin, a gay African American writer, whose writings focused and critiqued the African American experience, writes his second novel with mostly white characters. James Baldwin depicts David (the main character) as masculine, even though he engages with same sex desires. Many novels often times depict characters like David to be feminine just because they are attracted to men, but Giovanni's Room does not do that. Although some have argued that the novel is an African American novel that discusses racial issues, they fail to recognize the bisexual nature of the novel and label it as a gay novel. In doing this, the characters are restricted to a binary that is limited to 2 sexualities, heterosexuality and homosexuality. My paper explores the ties of sexuality, race, and gender performance and how David uses his bisexuality to create a dual identity that allows him to access masculinity and ascertain his whiteness through heteronormative behavior.

James Baldwin, an African American activist and acclaimed essayist of "Notes of a Native Son" receives negative backlash for his second novel, *Giovanni's Room* due to its explicit homoerotic content in 1956. Although it is majorly recognized as a white gay novel, *Giovanni's Room* subtly depicts racial issues in America through the novel's manifestation of bisexuality. David's inability to accept his same sex desires push him to pursue and maintain traditional masculinity as well as upholding his racial status as a form of power. The hierarchical structure of the gender binary that perceives masculinity to be superior in comparison to femininity, is similar to the hierarchy of races, in which white is perceived to be the dominant race in comparison to black/non-white races. As a result, race inherently mimics gender through a similar binary structure that allows David to use both race and the performance of gender as an act of power. Thus, whiteness and masculinity become interchangeable, at least for David. Consequently, whiteness is then performed through masculinity and blackness/non-white is performed through femininity, and vice versa.

Not only is the notion of power linked to gender and sexuality, but it also ties into sexuality. As discussed in Joseph M. Amengol's "In the Dark Room: Homosexuality and/as Blackness in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*", homosexuality as a literal and metaphorical symbol for blackness. Meaning that, sexuality and race become interchangeable as well. Whiteness is associated with heteropatriarchy, while blackness/non-white is associated with homophobia. Although Amengol discusses the link between sexuality and race, they fail to explore the character's bisexual nature by restricting the characters to a homosexual identity. In doing this, Amengol creates a strict binary for sexuality, in which characters can only be heterosexual or homosexual. This thus creates an unjustly representation of the character's sexuality and changes the correlation of race and sexuality within the novel. Also, *Giovanni's*

*Room'*s depiction of bisexuality creates a duality of identity that allows David to access masculinity, at least perform masculinity and ascertain his whiteness and "power" through heteronormative behavior.

David, the narrator of *Giovanni's Room*, is a young white American living in Paris and who is attracted to both women and men. His attraction for men causes David much turmoil, for he is unable to accept and celebrate his sexuality and therefore represses it and views it as a "phase". This creates a rampant homophobic perception of sexuality that David projects on non-conforming, gender fluid men, and at times imposes on himself. For example, while hanging in a notorious queer bar, David begins to criticize people who do not follow the heteronormative performance of gender and sexuality in noting a boy who worked all day in the post office "who came out at night wearing a makeup and earrings and with his heavy blond hair piled high. Sometimes he actually wore a skirt and high heels…people said that he was very nice, but [he] confess that his utter grotesqueness made [him] uneasy; perhaps in the same way that the sight of monkeys eating their own excrement turns some people's stomachs" (Baldwin 27). In detailing his disgust for the postal office boy's after hour activities, David illustrates his unwillingness to accept gender and sexual fluidity. Not only does David's inability to accept his sexuality enable his homophobic tendencies, but his transphobic tendencies as well. A man performing femininity through the act of dressing up as a woman challenges David's perception of masculinity and its correlation to sex, for men can only be masculine and women can only be feminine. In doing this, David is not only limiting others from gender and sexual expression, but he is also limiting himself to fixed notions of gender and sexuality, which causes him to deny his attraction to men and run away from his same sex desires.

In addition, David others himself from nonconforming behaviors that oppose heteronormativity, while promoting the notion of heteropatriarchy that depicts heterosexual/normative men as the dominant group in society. To further illustrate, David continues to explain his disgust and even lack of understanding for the postal office boy and other transwomen in the bar by mentioning that they were "les folles [the crazy] [who] always dresses in the most improbable combinations screaming like parrots the details of their latest love affair" and that "they looked like a peacock garden and sounded like a barnyard" (Baldwin 26-27). In comparing them to parrots and peacocks, David separates himself from the people in the bar, and clearly makes the distinctions of "them" and "me". For instance, parrots and peacocks are very colorful and extravagant birds that are not frequently associated with masculinity, but are often referred to as beautiful and pretty birds that lead people to associate them as feminine. Thus, David uses the peacock and parrot comparison to symbolize these men's femininity and clearly makes the distinction between him and them. In David's eyes, if someone were to engage with a man sexually, they must at least maintain their masculinity because of the fact that they were born as a biological male.

Moreover, David creates a dynamic that places him as superior to everyone else around him because he is not overtly queer by maintaining his masculinity. He views transgender people in the bar as inferior, at least inferior in comparison to him because they are engaging in a non-heteronormative gender performance. Here, David believes he is performing the appropriate and "natural" gender performance of masculinity because he is male, and as a result, he believes that he is superior to the men in the bar, who are feminine. Also, in claiming that he "always found it difficult to believe they [office boy and transwomen] ever went to bed with anybody" (Baldwin 27), David continues to build a hierarchical chain that places him, a masculine male on the top

and people who perform multiple genders on the bottom. Interestingly enough, David considers homosexuality to be better than being transgender for "a man who wanted a man would certainly not want one of them" (Baldwin 27). As a result, David limits the homosexual identity to one that is defined through heteronormativity that forces biological males to be masculine. To David, they are not just less than him, they are less than homosexuals, for their performance of gender is deviant and unnatural. The problem then becomes about gender performance and not sexuality. David has a problem with feminine males and expects them to maintain their masculinity identity if they are going to engage in homoerotic behavior.

Due to the fact that David maintains his power through his performance of masculinity to hide the fact that he is attracted to men, he is also relies on the power attained through race. As David states in the first paragraph of the novel, "My ancestors conquered a continent, pushing across death-laden plains, until they came to an ocean which faded away from Europe into a darker past" (Baldwin 3), display his obsession with power and its correlation to race. The very act in noting his European features and ancestral line of colonizers on the worst morning of his life, the very morning Giovanni, his lover, was to be executed conveys his obsession to reaffirm his whiteness and therefore power as a superior individual. When David describes his physical features, he says, "My reflection is tall, perhaps rather like an arrow, my blond hair gleams. My face is like a face you have seen many times" (Baldwin 3). In comparing his height to that of an arrow, David shows his power, the same way a weapon holds power to threaten and kill. It contributes to the idea of colonial power that propels Eurocentric beauty and ideas as superior to that from other races. Also, in mentioning that his blond hair "gleams", David creates a god-like image that is attributed to Eurocentric features that expresses their divinity and likeness to God, an almighty force. Moreover, David follows the notion of dominance, colonialization and

superiority by indicating that his face is the face that people have seen many times because it is "the face" of the dominant ideology. However, in stating that "[he] watched [his] reflection in the darkening gleam of the window pane", David demonstrates the negative effect homoerotic behavior has caused his demeanor. David saw his reflection through the darkening gleam instead of looking at his reflection through the crystal-clear glass of the window, which indicates the idea of being tainted by same-sex desires. As a result, David finds his white identity to be tainted and "darkened" because of his relationship with Giovanni.

Additionally, the tie between sexuality and race are closely connected by the idea of power conceived through the notion of masculinity. For example, when David recounts his first same-sex encounter he reminisces about Joey who "was a very nice boy, too, very quick and dark, and always laughing. For a while [Joey] was [David's] best friend. Later, the idea that such a person could have been [his] best friend was proof of some horrifying taint in [David]" (Baldwin 6). In describing Joey as a "dark" boy, David conveys homosexuality as something that is inferior and wrong, especially when he claims that their friendship was proof that he was tainted. Here, David notes the progression of homosocial relationships to homosexual relationships as something that is disgusting and unacceptable, for they do not follow heteronormative values. For instance, after a long day of having fun, David and Joey come back to the apartment where they get undressed and fall asleep, but when they wake up, David "touched Joey [and] something happened in him and in [David] which made this touch different from any touch either of [them] had ever known…[they] gave each other joy that night. It seemed, then, that a lifetime would not be long enough for [David] to act with Joey the act of love (Baldwin 8). Under hetero-patriarchal ideology, David and Joey engaged in homoerotic behavior that is unbecoming of a heterosexual young men and therefore engaged in deviant

behavior that only those who are inferior engage in. Moreover, David also reveals that he lied to Giovanni about Joey and about ever having sex with another boy, for he had decided to never do it again (Baldwin 6). The fact that David felt that he had to lie to Giovanni, his lover, about having had sex with other boys convey the idea of purity, masculinity and power. David's conscious decision to never engage in homoerotic behavior show's his attempts to recover his place, his status in the dominant group by following heteronormativity. Thus, David is attempting to upkeep his appearances as a "normal" heteronormative man that has been compromised because of his attraction of men. Therefore, as Armengol states in his essay, "if heterosexuality is thus related to whiteness, with all its symbolic connotations of purity and virtue, homosexuality is linked to blackness and darkness" (Armengol 677).

Not only does David's denial of same-sex desires prevent him from escaping heteronormative norms that restrict him to a masculine, heterosexual identity, but his bisexual nature traps him as well. Before becoming Giovanni's lover, David was engaged to a woman named Hella. When David met Hella, he describes her as "very elegant, tense, and glittering, surrounded by light" (Baldwin 4). This description is very different to the way in which David describes his first encounter with Giovanni, who "stood, insolent and dark and leonine, his elbow leaning on the cash register, his fingers playing with his chin, looking out at the crowd" (Baldwin 28). The differences in David's descriptions of his lover indicate that one was superior to the other. Hella is "surrounded by light" and "elegant", for she is a white American like David, while Giovanni is an "insolent", "leonine", "dark" Italian man. In depicting Giovanni as "leonine", David is able to other Giovanni as inferior and savage, the same way he othered the men in the bar, for lions are not greater than men and are primitive in nature. The fact that David considered going back to Hella exhibit his rejection of same-sex desires, for his attraction to men

becomes irrelevant because no one would ever suspect that he has homoerotic desires if he chooses to be with a woman. The fact that Hella is a white woman, would allow David to maintain his whiteness along with his masculinity and heterosexuality. Thus, David uses his bisexuality to remain shackled to the heteropatriarchy that favor traditional gender roles and heterosexuality, rather than accepting his sexual fluidity to explore his sexual, gender, and racial identity outside of the confines of the dominant ideology. As Brett Beemyn explains in "'To Say Yes to Life': Sexual and Gender Fluidity in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room"*, "David's own struggle is to confront that "darker past" and not be confined by his whiteness, specifically the white American myth of innocence, which Baldwin considered one of the greatest impediments to whites being able to understand themselves" that has allowed him to "[internalize] the homophobic attitudes of the dominant society (62).

The heteropatriarchy is not only oppressive to David, in which his sexual and gender identity are restricted to a masculine, heterosexual identity, but it also oppresses other characters within the novel, such as Hella. When Hella returns from Spain to reconnect with David, she begs him, "'David, please let me be a woman. I don't care what you do to me. I don't care what it cost. I'll wear my hair long, I'll give up cigarettes, I'll throw away the books'…'Just let me be a woman, take me. It's what I want. It's all I want. I don't care about anything else'" (Baldwin 161). Here, Hella is willing to compromise with David on her hair, her smoking habits, and her education in order to be with David. She is a victim to heteropatriarchy, which teaches her that she is a not woman unless she is with a man. Hella is willing to sacrifice herself, for David, something that he is not willing to do for her. Likewise, Hella continues to demonstrate the destructive nature of heteropatriarchy by mentioning that "[she] knew. This is what makes [her] ashamed. [She] knew every time [he] looked at [her]…if only [he] had told [her] the truth then.

[Didn't he] see how unjust it was to wait for [her] to find out? To put all the burden on [her]?" (Baldwin 164). Not only does the heteropatriarchy restrict her self-worth to men, but it also allows her to express homophobic sentiments, in which she views David's sexuality to be a burden to her as if he was intently trying to embarrass her with his relationship with Giovanni. Furthermore, heteropatriarchy is not only harmful to sexual and gender fluid individuals, but people who fall under heteronormative standards, such as Hella.

Ultimately, James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* is not only a white gay novel, but also a novel that works on different levels in regards to race, sexuality, and gender. *Giovanni's Room* manages to depict the intersections of race, sexuality and gender, rather than treating them as lone symptoms. The hierarchal structures of these social constructs have placed some people in the place of privilege. People like David, who are in a place of power, is due to their following of certain heteronormative standards, such as being masculine. But David, is able to assert his masculinity due to his bisexuality. He knows that he is attracted to women, which keeps him from fully accepting the fact that he likes men as well. His bisexuality then allows him to perform masculinity and ascertain his whiteness and power. It allows him to view himself as morally and racially superior to others because he is "the face" of the dominant ideology that is a white hetero-patriarchal society.

References

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