JAMES BALDWIN'S *GIOVANNI'S ROOM* (1956) AS A TRANSGRESSIVE WHITE-LIFE NOVEL

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ABSTRACT. *James Baldwin's* Giovanni's Room *(1956) as a Transgressive White-Life Novel.* In the wake of the Second World War, American literature saw the rise of a type of novel that is little known today: the white-life novel. This type of novel is written by black writers but describes white characters acting in a mostly white milieu. While at the time African-American critics praised this new way of writing as a sign of maturity, many have since criticized it for being regressive by pandering to white tastes. This paper sets out to analyze the most famous of these novels, namely James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956). It is my contention that *Giovanni's Room* connects blackness and queerness through the use of visual metaphors in the novel, disrupting thus the post-war consensus on ideals of white masculinity. The novel, while seemingly abandoning black protagonists, enacts a subtle critique of white heteronormativity akin to Baldwin's own positioning within American thought of the post-war era.

Keywords: blackness, James Baldwin, post-war fiction, queer, white-life novel

REZUMAT. Giovanni's Room *(1956) de James Baldwin ca roman white-life transgresiv.* În perioada de după al Doilea Război Mondial, în literatura americană a apărut un nou tip de roman, puțin cunoscut astăzi: romanul white-life. Acest tip de roman, scris de autori de culoare, se diferenția de literatura Afro-Americană din acea perioadă prin protagoniștii săi albi. Mulți dintre intelectualii Afro-Americani din acea vreme au apreciat acest tip de literatură, văzându-l-l ca pe un semn al maturității culturale. Alți critici, mai ales cei de mai târziu, au criticat-o ca fiind regresivă, încercând să satisfacă gusturile populației albe. Acest studiu analizează cel mai cunoscut dintre aceste romane, anume romanul *Giovanni's Room* (1956) de James Baldwin, argumentând că acesta stabilește o conexiune între rasă și cultura queer prin metaforele vizuale folosite. Astfel, romanul pune sub semnul întrebării noțiunile legate de rasa albă și masculinitate

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din acea perioadă. Acest proces oglindeşte poziţia autorului în cultura americană, concretizându-se într-o critică subtilă a mentalităţii americane din a doua jumătate a secolului al XX-lea.

Cuvinte-cheie: *de culoare, James Baldwin, literatura americană post-1945, roman white-life*

Introduction

Giovanni's Room (1956), James Baldwin's seminal novel, stands out not only for its trailblazing depiction of queer characters, but also for being the most famous of a category of American post-war novels known as white-life novels. The white-life novel, a term coined by Robert Fikes Jr. in his "Escaping the Literary Ghetto: African American Authors of White Life Novels, 1946-*1994" (1995), refers to works written by African-American writers which primarily* center upon white characters. Some examples of such novels include Frank Yerby's *The Foxes of Harrow* (1946), Ann Petry's *Country Place* (1947), Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), Willard Motely's *Knock on Any Door* (1950), Chester Himes' *Cast the First Stone* (1952), Richard Wright's *Savage Holiday* (1954), and James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956).

While at the time of their publication white-life novels were seen as an important direction for African-American literature by some African-American intellectuals, others saw them as regressive. Langston Hughes, for example, lauded these novels, especially Yerby's, for venturing into unexplored territory: "[t]he most heartening thing for me, however, is to see Negroes writing works in the general American field, rather than dwelling on Negro themes only" (*Collected Works* 310). On the other hand, Richard Wright and Alain Locke denounced some of these novels for pandering to a white readership. For example, reviewing Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), Wright accuses the author of the novel for employing a "minstrel technique that makes the 'white folks' laugh." Wright himself, however, later delves into the genre with *Savage Holiday* (1954), a novel that seems to seek a departure from what Wright calls the "minstrel technique," depicting the troubled psyche of a set of white characters, in an attempt to produce a "non-racial" text (Wright qtd. in Li 9).

This lack of consensus regarding white-life novels has lasted to this day. In the 1970s, when Zora Neale Hurston was recovered by Alice Walker as an important African-American literary figure, Hurston's white-life novel was still seen as 'reactionary' (Walker XVI) and 'vacuous' (Washington qtd. in Li 32).

Others, however, have interpreted these novels as transgressive. In the *Soul of White Folk* (2013), Veronica T. Watson terms white-life novels literature of white estrangement, arguing that this kind of literature does the important work of exposing whiteness "as a mode of social organization that is shaped by skin-color privilege and that is inextricably enmeshed with other vectors of identity such as gender, class, sexual orientation, and the organization of space" (5). In the view of John C. Charles (2013), white-life novels allowed African-American writers access to a wider audience and gave them the opportunity to engage the full range of human subjectivity, something that was the exclusive privilege of white writers at that time (4-5). Indeed, the genre seemed to offer African-American writers the opportunity to tap into what Du Bois calls the 'double consciousness,' i.e. the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." As such, African-American authors, by writing white characters, offer a destabilizing depiction of whiteness, stemming from the experience of being constantly othered by the white gaze. In this regard, Stephanie Li notes that Du Bois "presents black subjectivity as a function of the gaze," characterizing whiteness "as a failure of vision" (Li 4), suggesting that white-life novels can give both a novel perspective on whiteness and the chance for African-American writers to temporarily inhabit a privileged position. This, however, as Li argues, depends on the particularities of each novel (6).

While most white-life novels slid into oblivion, never reaching wide-spread acclaim or popularity, this is not true in the case of Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*. This paper sets out to investigate what makes this particular novel different from other white-life novels: how does it depict whiteness? What does it say about the meaning of whiteness in post-war U.S.A.? The first part of the paper will describe the historical circumstances in which the novel was published, expounding on how African-Americans perceived white and black masculinity during the post-war period, and what Baldwin's intellectual place and stance were in this discussion. The second part of the paper will offer a reading of *Giovanni's Room* in which I contend that *Giovanni's Room* connects blackness and queerness through the juxtaposition and dichotomy of images of light-dark and white-black as opposite, disrupting thus a white and Western post-war consensus on ideals of white masculinity.

Black and white masculinity in post-war America

In the first half of the twentieth century, an important debate among African-American intellectuals centered on the relationship between African-American writing and the American literary canon. Starting in the 1920s and

continuing into the late 1940s, two sides of the debate became apparent. One side responded to racist claims that African-Americans were incapable of producing valuable literature by pointing out the sparsity of African-American published writing. For example, in 1922, James Weldon Johnson argued that "[t]he Negro in the United States is consuming all of his intellectual energy in this grueling race-struggle" (890). He pointed to the other forms of artistic expression by African-American writers that require the same kind of creative energy that could be interpreted as a tradition. On the other hand, he urged African-American writers to adhere to a set of standards in order to achieve what he saw as universal value. As such, he undertook collecting exemplary African-American works to be included in the American canon. Similarly, W.E.B. Du Bois, in 1926, speaks of universal values like 'Beauty,' 'Truth' or 'Right.' According to him, "until the art of black folk compels recognition, they will not be recognized as human" (784). Unlike Johnson, he sees the role of art as 'propaganda' to expand the standards by which works are admitted into the American canon. In this respect, his views are closer to the other side of the debate, which questioned the 'universality' of the (white) American canon.

'Propaganda,' denoting, in this context, African-American literature concerned with foregrounding race issues and bringing about social change, became the central point of the debate centered on the role of literary writing in the African-American community. Famously, Alain Locke's "Art or Propaganda?" (1928) expounds a somewhat different view, recognizing the necessity of at least adjusting the American canon. However, Locke says that "self-conviction must supplant self-justification and in the dignity of this attitude, a convinced minority must supplant a condescending majority." To him, self-conviction is art, whereas self-justification is 'propaganda.'

In the pre-war period, this debate culminated in the work of Richard Wright, who weighed in on it in his essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (1937). Here, he sees the urge of African-American writers to persuade their way into the mainstream as a sign of an inferiority complex that reinforces racism. Wright does not use the word 'propagandistic' as a means of disparaging art, but claims that it is merely a position assumed by the writer. Furthermore, he states that "anyone destitute of a theory and meaning, structure and direction of modern society is a lost victim of a world he cannot control" (1408). Ten years later, Wright's view was further complicated by claims such as Langston Hughes' that, in the Jim Crow era, African-American writers could not help but be 'social poets,' i.e. to write about race and class (212), as that was the reality available to them as a result of systemic racism.

Writing in the post-war period, Baldwin criticizes Wright in his essay "Everybody's Protest Novel" (1949), over ten years later. To him, the recipe that

Wright promoted "activate[d] oppression" ("Everybody's Protest Novel" 1700). While Baldwin praises *Native Son* (1940) and acknowledges its importance as he sees Bigger Thomas as a reflection of the hatred and anger felt by many in that day ("Many Thousands Gone" 38), he points to the issues of sentimentality and insurmountable categorization typical of Wright's brand of fiction. He argues that "[t]he failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of beauty, dread, power, in the insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended" (1705). To Baldwin, the so-called "protest novel" dehumanizes its subject by presenting blackness as a social problem instead of a human problem: "to think of him is to think of statistics, slums, rape, injustices, remote violence" ("Many Thousands Gone" 25). Baldwin thus pleads for nuance and complexity in fiction, which was read at that time as an endorsement of experimental Modernist fiction. Furthermore, as Matt Brim notes, novels such as *Giovanni's Room* also offer an "indictment of sexual and gender categories as constructed, confining, and impoverishing" (57) in their refusal to depict clear-cut social categories.

This debate regarding the role of African-American art within the American canon had high stakes at the time when the above-mentioned texts were written. As Gene Andrew Jarett points out in the "Introduction" to *African American Literature Beyond Race: An Alternative Reader* (2006), an anthology of white-life writing,

> the promotion of certain images and tropes through the canon belongs to a longstanding and anxious practice in African American letters - dating back to black intellectual critiques of blackface minstrelsy - to control representations of the race as much as possible, to shield them from stereotypes and other kinds of racist contamination. (3)

This policing the African-American canon largely led to the rejection of white-life novels, and, consequently only recently have they come into focus for their transgressive potential in relation to the representation of race.

In the background of the canon debate, sociological theories were being developed that attempted to uphold the heteronormative ideal of the white American family. For instance, Chicago school sociologist Robert Park saw a connection between modernization, in the form of migration, urbanization, and increasingly international trade relations, and what he considered social ills like prostitution and homosexuality (qtd. in Ferguson 32-33). To him, and others of his generation of sociologists, the "social disorganization" produced by the migration of workers from abroad and internal migration to the city could be mitigated by assimilation, i.e. integration into the white heteronormative family structure by African Americans (cf. Ferguson 32-35). Roderick Ferguson draws a

connection between this notion of the white heteronormative family and the ideology underpinning New Deal policies, arguing that Roosevelt's conception of the "melting pot" reflects a similar belief that American society would stabilize in a new ethnic type, which would be a result of heteronormative sexual reproduction (33). John C. Charles further argues that, in this context, it was American white manhood that was at stake: "there was serious concern that middle-class white men in particular were becoming weak, soft, passive, and feminized" (88). As such, homosexuality represented, in mainstream thought, a failure of not only masculinity but also a danger to American identity and citizenship.

When it came to the African-American community, Ferguson reports that a quarter of African-American households during the era of the New Deal were female-headed, so that social reformers "believed that African-Americans would be full-fledged heteropatriarchal subjects if not for the gendered and sexual transgressions of African-American culture" (37). In the post-war period, as late as the 1960s, studies of the African-American family, such as "The Moynihan Report," argued that slavery had forced African-Americans into a matriarchal family structure that made it unsuccessful in American culture (75). During and after the Second World War, European immigrants, even Eastern Europeans, who were not seen as completely white, were believed to possess the ability to become assimilated into U.S. American culture, i.e. they could become white, especially through marriage and heterosexual social reproduction. In these ripe conditions, the racial divisions in American society were reimagined, with many immigrants becoming "white […] via joining forces with native whites and the state in excluding people of color, especially, blacks, from full citizenship" (Charles 26-27). Regarding this state of affairs, Catherine Rothenberg remarks on the rising importance of the category 'ethnic' during this time, "which historically has not interfered with identifying as an American, whereas historically 'being black' has" (4). In this manner, blackness and nonheteronormativity became intertwined, barring individuals who were ascribed to either identity from full American citizenship.

James Baldwin was well aware of these shifts in American society following the Second World War. In "Many Thousands Gone," Baldwin writes that

> [t]he ways in which the Negro has affected the American psychology are betrayed in our popular culture and in our morality; in our estrangement from him is the depth of our estrangement from ourselves […] What we feel about him is involved with all we feel about everything, about everyone, about ourselves. […] The story of the Negro is the story of America. (24)

His use in this excerpt of the first person plural pronoun and his claim that American history is inauthentic if it fails to acknowledge African-American culture represent an attempt to lay claim to American identity and citizenship.

In a similar move, he pleads for the restructuring of American manhood, arguing that, unless queerness could be accepted, men would not be able to achieve full humanity as Americans would be estranged from themselves unless they acknowledged the role of African-American culture. In his 1954 essay, "The Male Prison," Baldwin also remarks on the notion of American manhood in the 1950s and its damaging role when it comes to men achieving full humanity as it places them both in an impossible relation both to women and to other men. He expands on this idea in a later essay ("Preservation of innocence"), claiming that American culture clung to a notion of innocence, which is the opposite of a maturity which would recognize the complexity of human being – a complexity which would include homosexuality.

The effect of this clinging is the creation of a monster, "whose masculinity is found in the most infantile and elementary externals and whose attitude towards women is the wedding of the most abysmal romanticism and the most implacable distrust" (597). In his critique of notions of masculinity, Baldwin wisely recognizes that the homophobia of the time denoted an anxiety with regards to failing heteronormative relations, which become "debased" as a result of the same "male prison" ("Preservation of innocence" 595). Furthermore, he notes the relation between homosexuality and race, saying that "[t]he sexual question and the racial question have always been entwined" (qtd. in Armengol 671). These essays reveal Baldwin's deep understanding of the demands of American citizenship in the post-war period, and the necessity of pushing for the inclusion of both queerness and blackness therein.

In both his approach to literature through his contribution to the discussion of "propaganda" in art discussed at the beginning of this subsection and through his rhetorical attempts at claiming American citizenship for African-Americans and the queer, Baldwin promotes the idea of complex humanity as an ideal. Geraldine Murphy terms this approach Baldwin's liberal-humanist aesthetic (1021). Baldwin's views were in tune with discourses of the day, such as those produced by New York Intellectuals like Arthur Schlesinger and Lionel Trilling, who, in their anti-Stalinist stance, also spoke of complexity as stemming from natural contradictions inherent in freedom (Murphy 1022-1023). The ideal cultural product enacting this kind of complexity was, to the New York Intellectuals, the Modernist text, which was "symbolistic, self-referential, formally innovative, and intellectually demanding" (Murphy 1023), as opposed to those following in line with a realist aesthetics. The realist aesthetics was associated not only with so-called "propaganda," i.e. socially engaged fiction written by left-leaning writers, but also with sentimentality, popular appeal, and feminization. As a consequence, by way of ideological co-occurrence in the political and cultural discourse of the day, homosexuality became entwined with the threat of communist infiltration during the Cold War (Charles 93). As part of

the new liberal elite, whose perspective became mainstream in the second half of the 20th century and arguably has remained so until today, Baldwin was in a relatively privileged position to critique the demands of American citizenship in its exclusion of both blackness and queerness.

In a sense, James Baldwin's mainstream position in American culture mirrors that of white-life novels. Laying claims to the mainstream culture, and seemingly abandoning the black protagonist, white-life novels are in a privileged position to expand notions of what it meant to be an American and the meaning of American citizenship during the post-war period. Another writer of white-life novels, Zora Neale Hurston, likewise presents, in 1950, the citizenship of African-Americans and other minorities as an issue of utmost importance to "national coherence," which, if ignored, would endanger "national welfare" ("What White Publishers"). Since this is an essay about the demands of the white publishing world and white-life novels, it is clear that Hurston draws a connection between white-life novels and citizenship. Baldwin and Hurston, whose white-life novels are perhaps the best known today, also expressed similar political positions vis-à-vis the literature of "propaganda" in their rejection of it.

Lately, several scholars have pointed to the transgressive potential of white-life novels, which is realized to different degrees in individual works. For example, John C. Charles (2013) argues that white-life novels in the post-war period allowed African-American authors access to sympathy and privacy, elements that had up to that point been reserved for whites. Similarly, Stephanie Li claims that white-life novels "offer crucial insight into how blackness and whiteness operate as social constructions that both limit and liberate the imaginative possibilities of African American writers" (11). One may, thus, I think, speak of a strategy of the white-life novel to reach the mainstream in order to enact a subtle critique of American society both in terms of race and in terms of gender. In what follows, I will show how *Giovanni's Room* performs this critique, especially through visual images to do with dualities like white-black, light-dark, purity-impurity, and innocence-guilt.

Giovanni's Room – a play of light and shadow

Giovanni's Room, first published in 1956, is James Baldwin second novel, coming in the wake of the success of his first novel, *Go Tell It to the Mountain* (1953). Like the author's first novel, *Giovanni's Room* employs flashback and tells the story of David, a white queer American man living in Paris. The story follows him as he is waiting for Hella, a woman to whom he had previously proposed marriage before she had gone to Spain to consider his proposal. Meanwhile, David meets Giovanni, an Italian bartender, in a gay bar in Paris. They immediately feel attracted to each other and start living together until

Hella's return. After a series of personal failures and after David leaves him, Giovanni murders his employer, Guillaume, and is sentenced to death.

At the beginning of the novel, David is alone in a "great house" in the South of France, looking out the window from the darkness within as the night falls. This particular night is the night before Giovanni's execution, which David calls "the night which is leading me to the most terrible morning of my life" (3). This juxtaposition of darkness and light play a pivotal role in the novel, creating a sort of narrative chiaroscuro effect, wherein the light is associated with the status quo and darkness with marginality and otherness, but also liberation. The house where David awaits Giovanni's death represents refuge in heteronormativity and the shelter that adhering to it offers. In that same house, the landlady, a proper married older woman, advises David to get married and have children as this, she exclaims, is the path to happiness in life. As she leaves, David watches her from the doorway, remarking that "[s]he steps out into the darkness. But there is light coming from my house and from her house across the road" (62). The two houses, which are meant to shelter families offer the hegemonic and heteronormative security needed to evade the darkness of what is judged by society as moral failure. The desire to be sheltered thus is David's main concern throughout the novel, as is evident when he states: "I wanted to be inside again, with the light and safety, with my manhood unquestioned" (93).

Darkness permeates several spaces associated with alternative lifestyles or spaces of otherness in the novel. For instance, speaking of the sexual habits of his older friends, Jacques and Guillaume, David describes them as "five dirty minutes in the dark" (49). Towards the end of the novel, he describes himself in a similar manner as he follows a sailor into a "dark hotel" (143). When depicting the prison where he imagines Giovanni is held, David says that "[e]verything is dark and cold, except for those patches of light, where authority stands" (100), reinforcing thus the connection between light and the status quo, represented in this case by authority and normativity. In the beginning of the novel, these dark spaces as loci outside the status quo are foreshadowed in the image of the cavern, a metaphor through which David describes his first homosexual sexual encounter: "[t]hat body [Joey's body] suddenly seemed the black opening of a cavern" (8). One may then read these spaces as symbols for both the black body, and for, as others have remarked (Charles 125), the feminine, or for "gay male anality" (Brim 64). In a mirror image, towards the end of the novel, the symbol of the cavern is reinforced in the image of the dark chasm as David imagines himself and Giovanni as mountain climbers on the precipice of one: "Those days after Giovanni had lost his job, we dawdled; dawdled as doomed mountain climbers may be said to dawdle above the chasm" (101).

The most significant spaces associated with darkness in the novel are, however, Hella's hotel room and Giovanni's room, an image which also gives the title of the novel. Upon returning from Spain, Hella leads David into her hotel

room, a scene which is described as follows: "Hella looked humorously into the darkness. 'I always wonder,' she said, 'if I dare go in.'" (117). Inside her room, "weak yellow light" (118) spills over them, symbolizing their failed attempts at leading a heteronormative life. This echoes an earlier scene in which David kisses Hella in the dark, fumbling "to find the light" (108). Not only does the light here represent David's desire to be sheltered by a heteronormative existence, it helps foreground Hella's role as a woman being jeopardized by her failure to marry. She, in fact, decides to marry because she is terrified that she will not be a woman otherwise: "[f]rom now on, I can have a wonderful time complaining about being a woman. But I won't be terrified I'm *not* one" (112). Hella, to whom David is initially attracted because of her gender-fluid traits, is equally disadvantaged by society's strict heteronormative injunctions, so that both she and David fail to establish meaningful human connections in spite of their striving for the "light" of marriage.

The central metaphor in the novel, Giovanni's room, is at once dark and equated with a prison. When the reader first becomes acquainted with Giovanni's room, it is described as dark: David and Giovanni pass through a "short, dark corridor" to get to the room, after which the stare at each other "in the gloom" (56), echoing the cave metaphor mentioned above. Later in the novel, the room is described as seeming to be "beneath the sea" (67) and "underwater" (76), suggesting a deep and subconscious darkness. Throughout the novel, Giovanni attempts to make the room as white as possible, but fails to do so convincingly, resulting in an inauthentic "light." As such, the widows of the room, though they are never open, are painted "in a heavy, white cleaning polish" (76), meant to provide and illuminate intimacy. One of the walls is described as a "dirty streaked white" (76), while another sports wallpaper on which "a lady in a hoop skirt and a man in knee breeches perpetually walked together" (76). The whiteness of the polish and the wall, along with the grotesque display of a heterosexual relationship on the wallpaper work to give the impression of something that imitates the status quo but, in doing so, it distorts the very thing it is meant to represent. Consequently, Giovanni's room is more akin to a prison than a love nest, which David constantly tries to evade. David's constant evasion of Giovanni's love for him reflects his belief in the impossibility of freedom outside the heteronormative status quo. This idea is reinforced by David's fear that he would be made to take on the role of a woman, the wife, in a relationship with David. He believes that his relationship with Giovanni would be a grotesque distortion, an imitation, of a heteronormative couple. Before their relationship sours, David takes on traditionally female chores, cleaning and reorganizing the room. Meanwhile, Giovanni assumes the role of the breadwinner, traditionally associate with males, pointing thus to the insurmountable connection in American culture between wealth and property and masculinity.

Upon their separation, David accuses Giovanni of wanting to emasculate him:

[Y]ou want me to stay here and wash the dishes and cook the food and clean this miserable closet of a room and kiss you when you come in through that door and lie with you at night and be your little *girl.* (126)

The darkness of Giovanni's room represents, then, David's perception of a distorted heteronormative state, which would dismantle his white manhood and cost him his power. Darkness, at the same time, in this case, is associated with a lack of meaning, or ambiguous meaning, in that the strict boundary between male and female is dismantled, engendering in David feelings of instability and loneliness. This perspective echoes Baldwin's views expressed in the essay "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood" (1985), in which he argues that, while androgyny is inherent in every human being, because of the strict policing by society of the male-female duality, it is also closely tied to loneliness (817). This loneliness, according to Baldwin, stems from the limitations placed on humanity, or human value, by the heteronormative gaze.

Light or whiteness is also associated with those in power in terms of class as well. In the opening scene, David remarks not only on the opposition between the night which engulfs him and the coming morning, but also on his own reflection in the window:

[M]y blonde 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 into a darker past. (3)

The devastation brought on by those occupying a hegemonic position is in this way acknowledged, while this position is associated with whiteness. At the same time, the conquered are associated with darkness. In other words, as Ernest L. Gibson III suggests, "Baldwin does not simply use America as a metaphor for a certain type of sexuality but also shows how the history of it as a geographic and colonial space also informs the limits of sexual expression." David is thus associated with an image of manhood as imperialist and aggressive.

Another character described in similar terms is Guillaume, the man Giovanni presumably murders. His hegemonic position is similarly acknowledged as he is described as entangled with "French history, French honor and French glory [...] a symbol of French manhood" (133). While Guillaume is by no means a heteronormative character, his wealth, whiteness, and ancestry obscure his queerness, so that he ends up upholding the status quo in a different way. Like David, his whiteness and wealth allow his to pass for someone in line with

heteronormative ideals. Ultimately, Giovanni is punished precisely because he attempts to destroy what Guillaume symbolizes.

Similarly, as a symbol of power, the police are associated with whiteness and light as well. As David imagines Giovanni in prison, he notes that the guards "are standing at far ends of the corridors, under the light" (100). Additionally, describing policemen on the street, David remarks on their "white, gleaming club" (107, 129). Whiteness and light, in this context, become means of control, wielded by those engaged in discipline those who do not conform, i.e. who do not fit the heteronormative white ideal.

The dichotomy of light and dark/ white and black is used to refer to bodies in the novel, too. Most significantly, all of David's lovers are described as dark-bodied. Joey, David's first sexual encounter, is described as "quick and dark" (5) and his body as "brown" (7), with his "curly hair darkening the pillow" (7). Hella, too, is described as "brown and confident" (140). Above all, Giovanni is described in several instances as "insolent and dark" (25). Progressively, however, their bodies turn white as David becomes disenchanted with them. Hella, for example, is said to have become "pale and watchful and uncertain" (140). Giovanni, similarly, begins to look "white and angry" (96), his body is described as "dead white" (128), as well as "weak and pale and unattractive" (135). Finally, at the very end of the novel, even David's body becomes "dull and white and dry" (148). All of these bodies become white at moments when relationships disintegrate. Consequently, becoming white can arguably be seen as the death of human connection and thus of humanity itself.

Such an interpretation can provide an explanation as to why whiteness is also associated with death in Giovanni's Room. The specter of David's deceased mother, who is described in the opening chapter as a "pale, blonde woman" (11), haunts the novel in the form of other characters as she haunts David's nightmares. For example, in a haunting scene in the novel, on the night David first meets Giovanni, he also encounters a drag queen who terrifies him. Resembling the horrifying image of his mother he had seen in his nightmares, the character is described as "a mummy or a zombie," "moving with a dead, horrifying lasciviousness" and with a face "white and thoroughly bloodless" (34). These decaying corpses are echoed in David's remark that his affair with Joey inhabits his mind "as awful as a decomposing corpse" (14). It is important to note that the characters associated with death are feminized, symbolizing David's fear of social death by not conforming to his assigned gender, or, as Brim notes, "[t]he homosexual - coded as a man turned woman - is a dead man." (64).

Paradoxically, whiteness is also associated with purity and innocence in the novel as is evident in the descriptions of the protagonist himself. From the very start, Jacques notes that "immaculate manhood" is David's "pride and joy" (27). At the end of the novel, Giovanni accuses David of valuing his so-called

purity more than anything else: "[y]ou love your purity, you love your mirror – you are just like a little virgin [...] You want to be clean." (125). These quotes echo Baldwin's view, which I have quoted above, that masculine innocence, so central in American culture, represents a failure to grasp the complexity of humanity. Baldwin calls this the "male prison" and it would seem that David, in insisting on his purity and innocence, i.e. on his heteronormative whiteness, is indeed in a prison that prevents him from achieving his full humanity.

Conclusion

As I have shown, James Baldwin's second novel, *Giovanni's Room* (1956), uses the opposition of light-darkness/ white-black to draw a parallel between heteronormativity, whiteness, and the upper classes, i.e. those at the top of the hegemonic order, and conversely between queerness, blackness, and the lower classes. David, the protagonist of the novel, is engaged in a struggle to conform to heteronormative whiteness, which causes him to fail to connect with other persons. Whereas he associates heteronormative whiteness with purity and safety, it ultimately proves that it engenders a type of social death as he fails to renounce what he perceives as (conceptual) purity and understand the complexity of humanity.

Giovanni's Room is a searing, nuanced critique of race relations in America. As a white-life novel, it centers on a white protagonist; but by deploying the above-mentioned pairs of opposites, it achieves not only a queer critique but a critique of race in post-war America as well. As such, Baldwin's novel lays bare the contradictions in mainstream thought in the United States during the Cold War period. In this manner, the novel parallels Baldwin's own interventions into the discourse of the era as someone who was at once part of mainstream thought and an able critic thereof.

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