A Room Without A View:

The Concept of Space in James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room.*

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“In the beginning, because the motives that led me to Giovanni’s room were so mixed, had so little to do with his hopes and desires, and were so deeply a part of my own desperation, I invented in myself a kind of pleasure in playing the housewife after Giovanni had gone to work. […] But I am not a housewife. Men can never be housewives”

* *James Baldwin, Giovanni’s Room*

**Abstract**

James Baldwin is considered one of the greats when it comes to American novelists. His novels often concerned issues of race, sexuality and class, which a lot of previous research touches upon. This essay examines how the internalized homophobia and fear of emasculation of the main character shapes his surroundings in his novel *Giovanni’s Room* from 1956. By drawing from theories of performativity, ideology and space I explore the question of whether there is a safe space for the main characters to exist in the novel. By analyzing the role of the identity, the nation and the room I found that there is none, the reason for this being that the American notions of masculinity and the ideology that the main character brings with him ultimately makes the space unsafe. Table of Contents

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Introduction

James Baldwin has asserted himself as one of the greats when it comes to American novelists. He wrote during a time when the themes of his novels and essays were very controversial. His novels often concerned issues of race, sexuality and class. At the time of their publication, his essays and novels were met with praise as well as criticism.

 This essay examines Baldwin’s second novel, *Giovanni’s Room*, which he published in 1956. The novel follows the life of David, an American who moves to France where he lives with an Italian man named Giovanni. The two start a relationship and the book deals with David’s struggle to accept Giovanni and consequently come to terms with his own homosexuality.

Previous research about *Giovanni’s Room* touches upon homosexuality, masculinity, race and space. In *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death & (Black) Subjectivity* (2000), Sharon Patricia Holland explores the concept of “the absent black gay man” (Holland, 103) in *Giovanni’s Room*. She does this by focusing on the intersectionality of sexuality and race in the novel. Literary critics had previously approached Baldwin’s work through a tradition of either black struggle or homosexuality, but not both. (Holland, 113). In *Queering, gazing and containment in Giovanni's Room* (2015), James D. Bloom analyses the novel from a feminist perspective by looking at how Baldwin writes about the male gaze. (Bloom, 35).

In her work *Spaces of Feeling: Affect and Awareness in Modernist Literature* (2017), Marta Figlerowicz, whose work I draw from in this essay, explores the main character David’s affects and his relation to the space of the bedroom. She focuses on the unconscious reactions of the characters in a social setting compared to a private space. These reactions are called affects. She shows how the characters reach insights about themselves that are only possible to maintain while in the privacy of the bedroom. As soon as the characters rejoin society these insights, emotions and affects are lost (Figlerowicz, 2017, p. 71). Much of the previous research, including Holland’s and Bloom’s, focuses on the author Baldwin. Since many of his other works are autobiographical it is not difficult to analyze *Giovanni’s Room* or any of his works from what Baldwin himself thought. However, I have chosen to do a close reading of the material, in which the focus lies in examining how David’s internalized homophobia and fear of emasculation shapes his surroundings.

By exploring David’s relationship to America and relating it to concepts of space, I hope to show how masculinity and sexuality play key roles in David’s way of relating to his surroundings. Through Butler’s theory on performativity I explore David’s struggle to maintain a male identity while being in a relationship with another man. I link this performance to Althusser’s ideas on ideology by exploring what David considers an American identity. I argue that David brings with him an American ideology and American societal notions of masculinity and sexuality which prevent him from viewing Giovanni’s room as the safe space it is intended to be. Figlerowicz reaches the conclusion that these characters are only able to express their true affects in the space of the bedroom. However, I argue that because of the notions David brings with him from America there is no safe space for these characters to truly exist.

The need for a safe space was vital during the 1950s when *Giovanni’s Room* was published. In 1952, homosexuality had been classified as a psychological disorder by the American Psychiatric Association, and the condition was believed to stem from childhood trauma. Prior to this, homosexuality had been viewed as a kind of sexual inversion where gender roles were switched, and people who were anatomically one gender were believed to feel like the opposite gender (Barounis, 395). Since homosexuality was in either case viewed as a type of deviancy there was a need for homosexual men to live closeted lives.

The rhetoric used at the time was one of binaries. It was during the height of the Cold War and one could be either “soft” or “hard” in one’s stance on Communism. This was a language and sentiments that originated from politics but soon became prevalent everywhere as it permeated the mindset of Americans. It was a gendered language where to be “hard” meant being masculine and tough, while “soft” denoted femininity and weakness (Cuordileone, 516).

France was the first European country to legalize sodomy, as homosexuality was then referred to, as early as 1791. Scott Gunther claims in his book *The Elastic Closet: A History of Homosexuality in France 1942-present* that it was through secularism, keeping the public and private spheres separate, liberalism and universalism that France managed to protect its homosexual citizens against homophobia. The strong separation between the public sphere and the private sphere would mean that punishing consensual acts done in private would be seen as “an unjustifiable invasion of privacy” (Gunther, 2). Because of this, unlike the US, there were no legal repercussions for homosexual men during the mid-1900s. These acts were victimless crimes and there was no need for anyone to be punished. (Gunther, 2). This mentality was still prevalent in the 1950s when Baldwin wrote his novel.

David’s move from a 1950s America to France gives him new opportunities to explore his identity. However, it is the way David’s internalized notions of sexuality intrude on these characters that makes it impossible for them to exist truthfully outside of Giovanni’s room. Because David has internalized these notions of homosexuality and masculinity and brings them into the room with him, I intend to explore if the safe space of Giovanni’s bedroom ever exists.

Theories

Space

France and Giovanni’s room are spaces that could allow a kind of freedom for David that is not possible in America. However, these spaces are never allowed to become space of freedom. David insteadshapes the space of the room into something hostile by imposing his own ideals and values of masculinity and heterosexuality. The space in turn cements these notions in David. He refuses to accept the space as a place of freedom and instead sees it as a prison.

 This relation to space is reflected in the way modern researchers of geography view space. They see space as something that is continually produced and shaped by societies and human interaction. Modern geographers say that we impose our own societal notions onto space and ascribe space with meaning and significance, but space also affects and influences people back (Wegner, p. 13).

 Space is created by societies with certain groups in mind. In the book *Norms and Space: Understanding Public Space Regulation in the Tourist City* Lucas Konzen (2013) shows how it has become common among urban sociologists to believe that space is produced to also exclude certain groups and their actions (Konzen, 27). This can be seen within the study of geographies of sexuality, as it is now widely perceived that “space is produced as heterosexual” (De Craene, 262). This means that the expression of space is different for different people as the same physical space takes on new meaning depending on who occupies it. As seen in David’s case space can express a threat to people because of their sexuality and gender. Society is a threat to both David and Giovanni who are unable to express their affection for each other in public spaces. Public space poses a threat to their safety.

 Much like what modern geographers say about space affecting people and vice versa, geographers of sexualities understand space to be affected by society and society to be affected by space. In their collection *Geographies of Sexualities: Theory, Practices and Politics,* Browne, Lim and Brown (2007) explain how spaces are governed by unspoken societal understandings that are enforced by authorities, such as police, as well as every-day people through looks and words (Browne, 2). Space is created based on societal norms of gender and sexuality. This means that there are expectations about what to do and how to act in a given place (Browne, 4). As space is created with sexuality in mind, the practices and actions that are performed in these spaces are sexualized as well.

Ideology

The identity of the main character is shaped and perpetuated by American notions of heterosexuality and masculinity. It is this that hinders David from being with Giovanni. By looking at how these notions continue to dictate the actions of the character outside of America we can see the extent of how ideology keeps confining David in a space that would otherwise be freeing.

Althusser claims that everyone is a subject to ideology, and that people are born into ideology. Like space, ideology is also a product of society while at the same time, also like space, it produces society. It is an endless circle of production and reproduction. He also claims that ideology is timeless and exists regardless of circumstances but that it is perpetuated by those in power. The ideology of those in power is what shapes society, which in turn shapes the subject and the individual. Althusser provides a vision of society as consisting of two state apparatuses: the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). The RSA is made up of the institutions of the state that use repression as a tool to make people subject to them. The ISA is the cultural, educational, family etc. institutions that use ideology to shape people (Althusser, 17). We are all products of our ideology. This is shown through the convictions that David brings with him to France. David’s American notions of masculinity and sexuality hinders him from fully embracing the freedom that France could mean to him. Ideology hinders David from seeing how the space of Giovanni’s room can become a safe space.

 Althusser further claims that people have to *act* according to their ideology. There are certain actions that are presumed or adopted as one acts according to one’s ideas. These actions then become practices that are governed by rituals within the ideological apparatus. The ideas of the ideology are reflected and expressed through one’s actions and practices (Althusser, 2008, p. 42).

Althusser also brings up the notion of “the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (Althusser, 39). This means that people imagine their relationship to the space that is represented, and that the Real is merely that: represented and interpreted. Ideology is our interpretation of the system we live in and our imagined relationship to real relations. We act according to these imagined social conditions.

 Ideology dictates the way people express themselves. It provides the guidelines that decide what is appropriate and correct in a society. Since societies are different from one another, there are different ruling ideologies. These different ideologies and spaces lend themselves to the expression of new opportunities. However, although David has moved to France and is exposed to a new space with a new ruling ideology, he still imposes the American ideology he grew up with onto the space. This makes the space unsafe. He feels a societal pressure to conform and comply to American ways of behaving even in France. He has to marry his fiancée because it is what is presumed of him as an American man.

In his book, Konzen writes that public space is regulated by norms. (Konzen, 28). Norms are social and behavioral cues that tell us how to act and what to do in any given situation. These are socially reproduced and recreated by groups in society. In order for it to be a norm, the individual needs to feel a societal pressure to comply with these cues. (Konzen, 78-79). Ideological norms are norms that are shared by such a large group of people that they become hegemonic (Shahidi, 88). While ideology is the theory, it is expressed in society through norms. This means that the ideology of the majority is what designates and decides what becomes the norm in a society.

The Identity

As mentioned in the introduction the language framework of 1950s America was made up of binaries. During the age of the Cold War, the political rhetoric was a language inflated by manly bravado and a scorn for femininity. The liberals were described as feminine, weak and soft, while the conservatives were masculine, strong and hard. A person who doubted their masculinity was seen as a threat to the nation. Cuordileone (2015) explains how these sentiments and this language stemmed from men’s fear of feminization and the increase of women asserting themselves in society. Men felt a need for redrawn and clearly defined gender lines. Attributes that had previously been seen as needing to be repressed were now being viewed as virtues. These attributes were passion, strength and aggression. The fear of Communism was equaled by the fear of “the feminization of American men” (Cuordileone, 523).

According to Cuordileone (2015), the fear of feminization soon gave birth to the notion that if you doubted your male self, your manhood or masculinity, you might become homosexual. For a man to fail to conform and adapt to the modern life of the forties and fifties meant that he was not masculine, strong or hard. Instead he would be perceived to have the attributes of a woman. Behind this potential failure lay the implication that these men might abandon heterosexuality, as they had already abandoned masculinity (Cuordileone, 531).

In the novel this seems to be a sentiment that is shared by David’s father: “All I want for David is that he grow up to be a man” (15). It is never stated that David tells his father about his sexuality since he barely acknowledges it himself, so his father’s statement seems to be based solely on David’s personality and way of expression. From when David is a young age, his father seems to be able to tell that David will have trouble fitting into American society and that he will have difficulties conforming to the masculine ideals and societal expectations of the time.

This pressure, stemming from the Repressive State Apparatus as well as the Ideological State Apparatus, is put on him at a very young and impressionable age. The fear of feminization and the longing for masculinity can clearly be seen in David’s reluctance to accept his and Giovanni’s feelings for each other:

What kind of life can we have in this room? – this filthy little room. What kind of life can two men have together, anyway? All this love you talk about – isn’t it just that you want to be made to feel strong? You want to go out and be the big laborer and bring home the money, and you 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*. That’s what you want. That’s what you mean and that’s *all* you mean when you say you love me (142).

To David, the role he plays in their relationship is a performance. It is not real. He believes that the love between two men is a substitute for a relationship between a man and a woman, and that therefore one of them has to perform the role of the woman. David believes that this is all Giovanni wants from him: to perform the identity of the housewife.

 Much like what Althusser said about our social conditions being imagined, Judith Butler claims that so is our gender. In Butler’s work *Gender Trouble* (1999), she shows how gender is socially constructed and how it is really a performance of identity (Butler, 33). This performance is one of binaries, as femininity and masculinity are placed on two ends of a spectrum and in opposition to one another. All attributes that are considered female have a counterpart and an opposite in the male. Butler challenges this gender binary in Imitation and Gender Insubordination (1993), where she claims that people strive to perform and impersonate the gender identity that is expected of them. This is seen in David’s conviction that he has to conform to and perform what he considers to be the identity of the masculine American man. Butler goes on to show that these attributes are socially constructed rather than innate or essential to humans and states that there is no identity behind the acts that are performed to express gender. There is no innate gender. Instead it is through the practice of performance that an imaginary gender identity is born (Butler, 313).

David believes that there can never be any love between two men because in his mind such a relationship calls for a certain identity to be performed. He also believes that gender identities are essential meaning that there are certain aspects and attributes that are innate in order for a person to be a man, which means that for him there is a “right” way of being a man. Even though he enjoys acting as the housewife and performing what he considers feminine chores, he is unable to fully embrace such a role (88). To David, an identity lies in the acts one performs and so the actions he carries out in the room are reflective of his gender identity. By performing these actions he loses his manhood.

This connects with what Althusser claims about the effect of ideology and its practices. If one does not conform or fails to conform to the ideas of the ideology one subscribes to, one is regarded as wicked. Ideology assumes that the ideas of a human should be expressed through their actions. If a person’s actions do not express the ideology he subscribes to, it “lends him other ideas corresponding to the actions (however perverse) that he does perform” (Althusser, 42). This means that it is people’s actions, practices and performance that reflects their ideology and ideas. If their actions change, so does their ideology.

David makes love to Giovanni and does the chores in the room while simultaneously condemning them. He performs these actions but refuses to accept the change they would mean to his ideology. He hates himself, Giovanni and the room. Only by clinging to his ideology is he able to see Giovanni’s actions as deviant and detestable while keeping himself free from blame. Their intercourse he constructs as something that is done to him by Giovanni. (p. 88). By seeing the homosexual act as deviant, and therefore seeing his relationship with Giovanni as impossible, David is perpetuating the ideas and ideology of America. In this way he is able to convince himself that he will be able to return to America when the time comes. He has maintained his ideology even though his actions do not express it, since he knows that what ultimately matters is that he performs the right action in the end by getting married to his fiancé. Performativity is about repeating what we know, and performing the identity of the masculine American is what David intends to do.

David desperately wants what he considers a masculine identity. He has a very set notion about what it means to be masculine, and it is his own inability to accept anything but this that is his and Giovanni’s undoing. The perception of gender roles as binary that he brings with him into the room is what ultimately makes it an unsafe space for him. He can not stay in this place and he claims that it is killing him, killing his manhood and identity. The American notion of masculinity is what he strives for, and leaving France, leaving the room and leaving Giovanni is the only way he can achieve this:

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. It had been so once; it had almost been so once. I could make it so again, I could make it real. It only demanded a short, hard strength for me to become myself again (104).

Being with Giovanni means that he has lost himself and his manhood, and the only way he can become himself, become a man again, is by marrying a woman and having children. The heteronormative way of living, which is the one that is accepted by society, is the only possibility David sees of him claiming an identity in America. He needs a woman in order to reaffirm his masculinity and role in the world. With Giovanni, David is untethered and sees no chance of any kind of life. The version of himself that David has become during his stay in Paris is not what he considers the true him.

Starting a family with a woman would mean that David is conforming to the heteronormative space of society. This is what he wants, to rejoin society, reclaim his identity as a man and go back to America with his manhood unquestioned. These are the practices that are expected of the ideology that David has been raised in.

The Nation

In *Space, Place and Sex: Geographies of Sexualities,* Johnston and Longhurst (2010) explain that a nation is a community of people who share a history and a culture, and who are tied together by a shared sense that they are different from other nations. It is assumed that most individuals define themselves first and foremost by the nation they belong to. But as Johnston and Longhurst point out, nations are not natural but socially created. They are also imagined. There is a sense of kinship and community between all individuals from the same nation. Since not everyone from the same nation is ever able to meet, this sense of community is imagined (Johnston & Longhurst, 113).

Daivd certainly defines himself by the nation one belongs to. Being American is one of the most defining aspects of his character, especially when he resides in Paris surrounded by people from Europe. He is referred to as “the American” on multiple occasions:

When Giovanni wanted me to know that he was displeased with me, he said I was a *‘vrai américain’*; conversely, when delighted, he said that I was not an American at all; and on both occasions he was striking, deep in me, a nerve which did not throb in him. And I resented this: resented being called an American (and resented resenting it) because it seemed to make me nothing more than that, whatever that was; and I resented being called not an American because it seemed to make me nothing (89).

Without the identity of “the American”, David feels as if he is nothing, but when “American” is the only defining aspect of his identity, it feels to him as if it is all he ever was and all he ever will be. He is not certain of his identity or where he belongs in the world. He wishes to be more than his nation, to have an identity that is separate from his home country. At the same time, defining himself through his country is all he has, it is all he knows. The traits, actions and feelings of Americans is something he understands, and it is the basis of his identification (62). To him, being an American means not having to question his masculinity.

Not only is David’s identity defined by America, but so is his own perception of his body: “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). David thus defines himself – even his physical appearance – as being of those who conquered a nation. He defines himself and his body through America and the violent conquest of his forefathers. America’s history is written on his body. To him, it’s a history of manifest destiny, of territorial expansion and exploration.

In her article Making time for national identity: theoretical concept and empirical glance on the temporal performance of national identity*,* Liron Lavi (2013) shows how Butler’s theory of gender performativity can be applied to national identity. Lavi points to the fact that political scientists claim that national identity is performed and, as Butler claims about gender, has no origin (Lavi, 698). This means that national identity is continually constructed through the acts of individuals. As Althusser claimed, it is through the practices of the subject that ideology becomes endlessly perpetuated (Althusser, 42). Lavi points to the same concept when suggesting that national identity is not something you have and rather something you do (Lavi, 699).

National identity is achieved when individuals perform the normative practices that are expected of them as citizens of a particular nation. By applying Butler’s theory of gender imitation on nationality, we can see how, like gender, nationality is continually produced and reproduced. Since nationality has no origin, there is no true or perfect version that one can achieve. Instead the performance is rather an attempt to recreate an “imagined national identity” (Lavi, 699). This means that there is the possibility that a performance can fail which will lead to the next performance.

David has failed at the practices that are expected of him as an American, which is why he leaves the country. This is also the reason why he can not go back until he is able to fulfill these expectations by a better performance. The imagined national identity that David strives to recreate becomes clear to the reader when he goes to an American Express office to pick up letters from his fiancé and father. He spots a sailor coming across the road towards him and projects onto him all that it means to be an American: “He seemed – somehow – 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” (Baldwin, 92). It is clear that David would disagree with Althusser about ideology being socially produced (Althusser, 19). David believes that nationality and home, like gender, is innate and essential. It is something one has as opposed to something one does.

It is striking that the irrevocable condition of home – of America – that David refers to is masculinity. To him there is no separating America and masculinity, they are one and the same. Just by looking at the man, David knows him: he knows his habits, his actions and his reactions. They are the actions of every other white American male who is certain of their place in the world. This reflects what Longhurst and Johnston (2010) said about how people from the same nation imagine themselves to share a connection, to be a part of the same community (Johnston & Longhurst, 113). David feels a connection to this man that is different from the connection he has with other people in Paris.

Meeting the sailor seems to make David realize that being masculine is what it means to be American. Questioning his masculinity therefore also means that he questions his Americanness. This is one of the main reasons why he is afraid of Giovanni and the person he is becoming in his presence. As I have said elsewhere, being with Giovanni has, in David’s mind, made him the wife of Giovanni. This not only means that David is a lesser man, but also that he is a lesser American. Accepting Giovanni would to David mean never being able to return to America.

One of the letters David receives at the post office is from his father, asking if he is with a woman and if so to come home with her. The other one is from his American fiancé, Hella, stating that she is coming to Paris. It is significant that immediately after running into the sailor and receiving these letters, David goes to find a woman to have sex with. This is obviously an act of desperation, a way to prove to himself that he can be with a woman and will be able to return to Hella, but also to America and heteronormative society. He has internalized these norms and sees this act as a way of proving to himself that he can still reclaim his manhood. He approaches the woman without lust or pleasure, as if she were just a job to be done. The only emotion he feels is a deep hatred for himself. (Baldwin, 1956, p. 100).

Not only does accepting life with Giovanni mean that David would be unable to return to America, but it would also mean that he would become a criminal according to American law. Konzen (2013) states that since legal norms differ from place to place, an awareness of this makes people willing to change their perception about what is proper behavior inviting them to change and expand their understanding of their social norms. (Konzen, 25).

Reconciling the norms, rules and laws of America with those in France is impossible for David. Although he is presented with a chance of freedom and an opportunity to pursue his desires by moving to France, letting go of the norms of his upbringing and the laws of his country is not something he is able to do: “Besides it is a crime – in my country and, after all I didn’t grow up here, I grew up *there*” (p. 81). David’s reaction is an example of what Althusser calls the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) at work. The controlling of the public domain through repressive means is a huge part of the production (and reproduction) of ideology. According to Althusser is the ruling class that enforces the ideology of the RSA, which in turn creates the ideology of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA): the cultural, educational and family institutions (Althusser, 19-20). These apparatuses are what shape the individual.

David brings with him the ideology and mindset of 1950s America, where being homosexual is a crime and masculinity is required of a man. Although the RSA of America is no longer there to enforce its ideology through repression, the thought of it doing so is enough for it to still work on David. The ideology of American society is so deeply rooted in his mind that although the city of Paris has different norms and rules, he still imposes American values and laws on his and Giovanni’s relationship. He has completely internalized the ideology of hiw own state. This is the work of the Repressive State Apparatus and the Ideological State Apparatus. To David, there is no way for him and Giovanni to be together without it being viewed as a crime. There is also no way for them to be together and for him to face his father. This is why David is intent on going back to America and marrying his fiancé. His plan is to restore order to his life by marrying Hella and to go home having reclaimed his masculinity and his American identity in the process.

This mindset is not specific to David only, as his acquaintance Jacques points out. David disappears from Giovanni’s room without a word after Hella comes back. When they eventually run into Jacques he informs David that Giovanni has been worried sick and wanted to drag the river for him: “But I assured him that he did not know Americans as well as I and that you had not drowned yourself. You had only disappeared in order – to think.” (127). This is clearly not the first time Jacques has seen American boys arrive in Paris looking to escape their home country for a while. They come to France, spend time with boys and then, when their girl returns, they start conforming to the heteronormative society of America once more. There is an understanding that they can not stay in Paris forever and that sooner or later, they have to go back.

The Room

As Browne states in *Geographies of Sexualities*, spaces are sexualized and created with sexuality and gender norms in mind. Since spaces are created in this way there is a notion of what is expected of those who occupy a particular space, of what is acceptable behavior as well as unacceptable behavior. (Browne, et al., 2) These notions are societal and most of these spaces are public rather than private areas. David, however, projects these gendered and sexualized notions onto Giovanni’s room. This is clear as he does not allow himself to express a liking for what he perceives as feminine chores.

Although the heteronormative society exists outside the room, its rules and norms are still enforced on the characters within it. Society and ideology shape the awareness of the characters, their understanding of themselves and where they fit in, and the restrictions that exist for them in larger spaces in society follow them into smaller, private spaces.

Gilly Hartal writes in her article “Fragile Subjectivities: Constructing Queer Spaces”, that LGBT space is imagined to be safe for LGBT individuals as it is devoid of sexism, violence and LGBT-phobia. However, she also claims that some LGBT spaces reproduce the power relations of heteronormative space which “recreates hierarchies and exclusion” (Hartal, 1056). A safe space is supposed to make the individual feel protected and secure, both physically, psychologically and socially.

In Baldwin’s novel we can clearly see how the ideology and norms of the space of the outside are constantly threatening to infringe upon Giovanni’s and David’s safe space. In order to keep society out, they never invite people over and Giovanni even paints over the windows so no one can see in. However the space then becomes a prison to David. Instead of feeling safe, as intended, he feels trapped. He feels trapped in the room, the relationship and the role he is forced to perform. This is obviously because he recreates the hierarchies of heteronormative society in what would otherwise be a safe space, thus making it unsafe. He feels that the role of the housewife is expected of him, and the chores he performs are a product of a notion he has of how he is supposed to act when in the room.

In *Spaces of Feeling* (2017) Figlerowicz devotes a chapter to the bedroom in *Giovanni’s Room*. In this she writes about how the “insights we reach in solitude don’t always do well in the context of the social space around us” (Figlerowicz, 85). Since David recreates the heteronormative space of society inside their room the insights Figlerowicz mentions are never allowed to be reached. At instances when he is close to reaching some insights or revelations about himself, he invariably suppresses them. This is shown at the end of the novel when Giovanni confronts David about his reasons for leaving him: “‘You want to get away from me. […] And do you know *why* you want to get away from me?’ Inside me something locked.” (Baldwin, 141). This action of locking away emotions that he can not allow himself to feel, shows how even the space created for just Giovanni and him is unsafe for David. There is no space for him to have the fundamental revelation that he loves Giovanni.

As shown elsewhere, the actions of the body are a different matter. Even if he never quite reaches an insight, the room does become a space where David can express and performs action that there is no space for anywhere else. There is however, no space for the emotions that come with these actions. They are something that he allows Giovanni to do to him, but never takes part in himself. David distances himself from Giovanni both emotionally and physically when claiming that he does not play an active part in their intercourse: “Sometimes when he was not near me, I thought, I will never let him touch me again. Then, when he touched me, I thought, it doesn’t matter. It is only the body, it will be over soon.” (88).

These actions can be done to him, but he never sees himself as an active participant. But as I have stated before, these actions are not reflective of who he really is: they are merely the actions of the role of the housewife that he performs. This is the role that he presumes Giovanni wants him to play. This role is not reflective of who David thinks he actually is: a heterosexual, American man with a fiancé. The space that should be liberating becomes a space of deviancy to David, where unacceptable actions take place in a kind of vacuum. What happens there will never be able to happen anywhere else.

David describes the room as “Giovanni’s regurgitated life” (Baldwin, 1956, p. 87), and his account of the room is that it seems like a garbage dump. The room is a reflection of Giovanni’s life and soul, meaning that David sees Giovanni’s life as depraved. David’s perception of the room as deviant is reflected in his vivid account of the depravity of the room, where the chaos is overwhelming. What frightens David is not the disorder as such, though, but the fact that he believes that the reason for this disorder is that it is a way for Giovanni to punish himself (86).

[I stared] at the silent walls of the room, with its distant, archaic lovers trapped in an interminable rose garden, and the staring windows, staring like two great eyes of ice and fire, and the ceiling which lowered like those clouds out of which fiends have sometimes spoken […] (87–88).

In this description it is not what exists within the room – what Giovanni has brought into the room – but what makes up the room itself that is threatening and hostile. As stated before, people affect the space just as the space affects people. Because David views the actions they perform in the room as deviant the space also becomes threatening and deviant.

The walls, the windows and ceiling are all oppressive to David, but what he fails to notice is that these things are not products of Giovanni’s doing. This is David’s own interpretation of the room. What is threatening is not the outside and the rest of society, but the prospect of staying in this room. The couple in the painting seems to reflect David and Giovanni: they are trapped in that interminable garden and will never be dusted off and shown to the world. He can not understand why Giovanni has decided to stay in that room:

‘I’m talking about that room, that hideous room. Why have you buried yourself there so long?’

‘Buried myself? Forgive me, *mon cher Américain*, but Paris is not like New York; it is not full of palaces for boys like me. Do you think I should be living in Versailles instead?’

‘There must – there must’, I said, ‘be other rooms’ (117).

This passage seems to reflect what Althusser says about people’s imagined relationship to reality: the stories we tell ourselves about what is real, are what in the end become real. Here, David sees the room as hideous, filthy and a prison, and he cannot comprehend how Giovanni can interpret the room in any other way, since he has imposed his own internalized ideology onto the room and in the process made it uninhabitable.

 It is clear however that Giovanni does not see the room in the same light as David, who believes that the room is shameful, and that Giovanni has the opportunity to live somewhere else but has chosen to live in derelict conditions as a way to punish himself. There is a class difference between David and Giovanni that becomes very apparent here. David sees his American heritage and his own background as superior to that of Giovanni’s Italian one.

 David’s perception of the room as shameful is colored by his perception of Giovanni, of the shame he believes Giovanni feels, when in fact, that shame is David’s own. It is the notions and ideology that David brings with him that makes the room threatening, it is his perspective of the room that makes it hostile. He creates and affects the space, and the space creates and affects him back. Because of this, it is possible to suggest that no matter what kind of room they would have occupied, David would still have perceived it as hostile.

Space is influenced by people just as much as people are influenced by space, meaning that David produces the space around him just as much as the space produces and influences him. He imposes societal notions on the space and the space imposes and reflects these values back to him. The room becomes a space of deviancy because David sees the actions in the room as deviant.

Conclusion

In this essay I have explored how the main character’s notions of masculinity and sexuality affect the spaces he occupies and vice versa. By applying theories of space, ideology and performativity I have analyzed the character’s relation to his own identity and his nation as well as the room he inhabits. David sees gender and sexuality as innate and to him there exist attributes and actions that are attached to one’s gender. In order to be a man there are certain acts that one has to perform, and what David wants is to be able to live up to the American notion of masculinity, which means getting married to a woman and having children. These acts stem from an American ideology where, if individuals are unable to behave accordingly, they will have failed their nation. Failing to perform these acts would thus not only mean the loss of David’s manhood but also his American identity.

Space is defined by individuals and societies just as much as individuals and societies are affected by space. This becomes clear in *Giovanni’s Room*, as David’s move to Paris takes him away from the immediate pressure of American norms and its societal expectations. However, he has internalized the ideology of America and brings this with him, which leads him to impose American values and ideas on the spaces he occupies. His ideology and the practices that come with it, are too instilled in him for him to truly embrace the freedom that Paris and Giovanni’s room could offer him, and as a consequence, the spaces he occupies become unsafe to him.

By analyzing the concepts of gender and sexuality through the lens of space, I hope to have shown how these complicate each other. It is clear that no space David occupies can ever be considered safe. His ingrained fear of feminization, his fear of losing his manhood and his internalized homophobia all hinder him from finding a safe space.

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