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# **Gaze Upon My Shame: The Function of the Gaze on Marginalized Identities in *Giovanni's Room***

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**Gaze Upon My Shame: The Function of the Gaze on Marginalized Identities in *Giovanni's Room***

“Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within.”

-James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

James Baldwin, an observer of both political and personal life, writes of love as both a powerful connection between two people and as a human connection that is far too often at the mercy of society's power. While love may seem simple at first glance, love becomes more complicated due to social judgments. In 1956 James Baldwin published *Giovanni's Room*, a novel centering a first-person narrative of an American male falling in love with an Italian man in Paris. As a gay black man, Baldwin was well aware of the devastating impacts of racism and homophobia that was widespread in 1950s America. These prejudices towards gay relationships and issues of race appear within *Giovanni's Room* both from the side characters and from the main characters themselves. The first-person narrator, David, struggles throughout the novel to accept his sexuality, as he has internalized the social hatred directed towards him. The reader is also shown how Giovanni, David's lover, struggles to be accepted by French society due to his Italian background and lower-class status. The love that these two men have for one another is powerful in that they are able to see and appreciate one another for who they are. Yet their relationship falls apart and their lives become threatened due to outside influences and David's own self-doubts that he can both live and love as a gay man.

The threats and damage to Giovanni and David's relationship and lives comes not in the form of physical violence, but in the subtle, but deadly, form of social messaging that says they are deviants straying from the social norms. Giovanni and David are constantly being monitored for confirmation of their homosexuality or other marginalizing identities which makes them

susceptible to violence, both physical and verbal, or exploitation if their identities are discovered. They aren't only being monitored by the average heterosexual French citizens but also by members of their own community, the gay community. The stares only create more tension in that they cause the people being observed, David especially since it's apparent from his narration, to feel self-conscious and begin to monitor themselves and their actions. The stares, which I will also refer to as the gaze, operate as a way to judge David and Giovanni for straying from the norms of French society. This paper explores how the gaze spreads social messaging that negatively affects gay people, ethnic minorities, and other marginalized people in *Giovanni's Room* and creates a rift between them and French society that becomes deadlier the farther a person's identity is from the social norm.

The gaze originates from Laura Mulvey's cinematic analysis which specifically deals with the male gaze in movies that uphold "phallocentrism" or the hierarchy of the sexes (Sassatelli 124). In this paper, the gaze is defined as the spectating and resulting judgement of gay people and people of color/ethnic minorities by the dominant society. These people become ostracized under the gaze and are not allowed to fully participate in dominant society without having to compromise their identities. David and Giovanni in *Giovanni's Room* experience both the gaze and ostracization, yet Baldwin goes even further in showing how the most marginalized, people with intersecting identities, are easily used and thrown away by society. The contrasts in the treatment of David as a gay middle class white American man to Giovanni, a poor Italian immigrant, is indicative of the real-world problem of people with one marginalizing aspect of their identity simply being ostracized while people with multiple marginalizing aspects are treated as expendable.

Baldwin's life as a black gay man in America informs the connection between homophobia and ethnic prejudices that occur in *Giovanni's Room*. James Baldwin was born and raised in New York City where he was the son to a deeply religious and strict father (Chadwyck-Healey). Growing up in the 1930s and 40s as a young black male, Baldwin became aware of racism and violence and in his later years would incorporate the complexity of the issues in his writing. During his teenage years, Baldwin also became aware of his own sexuality as he realized that he was attracted to men, with *Giovanni's Room* being the first time he overtly addresses homosexuality in his novels (Chadwyck-Healey). James Baldwin's escape to Paris, France to explore his sexuality and identity as a black man in 1948 presents itself in the protagonist of *Giovanni's Room's* experiences in France.

Throughout his career, Baldwin didn't shy away from writing about issues that the black and gay communities faced, and instead used the opportunity to raise awareness about racism and homophobia in society. According to literary critic Douglas Field, "...Baldwin has arguably been the most visible gay African American writer since the Harlem Renaissance... [and is] an important—perhaps the most important—gay black writer of the twentieth century..." (457). The fact that James Baldwin didn't hide his sexuality or blackness is what makes him such a prolific writer, as being either black (or simply non-white) or gay involves being constantly under the scrutiny of the dominant white cis-heteropatriarchal society. Instead of hiding himself from the gaze of the masses and therefore separating himself from his identity, Baldwin champions the marginalized to claim their identities in the face of opposition in order to begin to achieve freedom from the gaze. In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin explains the importance of suffering for black people—though the message can be extended to other marginalized groups—to gain control of their identities and discover who they are.

That man who is forced each day to snatch his manhood, his identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it knows, if he survives his effort, and even if he does survive it, something about himself and human life that no school on earth—and indeed, no church—can teach. (Baldwin *The Fire Next Time* 99)

Baldwin aims to convey the struggle and triumph of marginalized people to proudly be their true selves, not the harsh characters society has created for them, in his work.

James Baldwin used his platform as a prominent gay black author to address racism and homophobia as not just affecting people of color and gay people, but as affecting everyone through the psyche. Racism and homophobia affect everyone by creating hatred and division that hinders the creation of love, community, and support.

*Giovanni's Room* centers on the life of an American expatriate, David, who struggles to accept his sexuality. The novel is told through David's perspective and begins with his childhood which provides context for his adult actions. His mother's portrait that stood on the mantelpiece in the living room is described as "[proof of] how her spirit dominated that air and controlled us all... [and] no matter what was happening in that room, my mother was watching it" (Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* 11,12). The dominating stare from his mother's portrait alludes to how cultural hegemony is enforced in the rest of the novel through the stares David and Giovanni receive. These stares are the labeling of an individual as either a part of the norm or a part of the deviant circles of society. Though it is not exactly clear why David has a negative emotion towards his mother's portrait, it can be inferred that perhaps he already knows that something is different about him. Whether or not he is aware of his sexuality at that point is unclear, but he feels uncertain about where he fits in the dominant white middle to upper-class heterosexual society.

Leaving him afraid of someone seeing his differentness and excluding him from dominant society.

The gaze continues to figure prominently throughout *Giovanni's Room* to determine dominance, by either establishing the person being gazed upon as one of the dominant members or one of the marginalized members of society. The understated power of the gaze comes from the normalization of gender and sexuality dynamics that are informed by power imbalances; to be a man is to be assertive and be the one who penetrates and to be a woman is to be submissive and penetrable. In an interview with noted cultural sociologist Roberta Sassatelli, Laura Mulvey remarks about how the male gaze and power imbalances between male and female are often replicated in understandings of gay and lesbian relationships (Sassatelli 130). Gay relationships are subjected to the heterosexual patriarchal understanding of relationship dynamics such as having a feminine submissive partner and a dominating masculine partner. Coupled with the common perception that gay men are effeminate, David continuously hides his sexuality and he feels uncomfortable in his relationships, because he doesn't want people to label him as effeminate and therefore marginalize him.

The fear of being under the gaze and therefore judged started in David's childhood and continues throughout his life. The effect of David's fear, and how it has affected his life becomes evident in his teenage years when he torments Joey, his first male lover, into leaving the school after they had sex. David is afraid of his feelings for Joey as they would confirm his sexual identity and possibly cause him to become ostracized from a large part of society including his own family and friends. David's sexuality furthers the distance between him and his father, which was already strained due to his father's macho tendencies and sexual liaisons with women, and David becomes uninterested in getting to know his father or his father getting to know him.

The societal pressures to behave a certain way as part of the norm causes marginalized people like David to reject parts of themselves and close themselves off. The rejection of their marginalizing identity/identities creates a distance between them and the people they care about to the point where love becomes difficult, if not impossible. At this point, David is unaware of how this distancing will affect his life, so he decides to join the military and saves his money to move to France where the story of *Giovanni's Room* unfolds.

Throughout the novel, David struggles with his sexuality but his struggles are primarily due to him wanting to hide his real self from people. His complicated views on love begin with his relationship with his father and later carry over to his romantic relationships. David's perspective on love, and those that are deserving of love, are people who don't have noticeable flaws. Relationships that are distant enough to where the other person isn't aware of those flaws are ideal to David. When speaking on his relationship with his father David says, "... the very harshness of this judgment, which broke my heart, revealed, ...how much I had loved him, how that love, along with my innocence, was dying" (Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* 16). David confesses that as he grew older and began to understand his father's actions, such as why he came home late at night and his connections with other women, he realized his father was a real person rather than an idealized father image David had previously imagined.

David's relationship with his father also acts as a metaphor for David's relationship with masculinity; David is afraid of being considered effeminate or being associated with femininity. Critic Harry Thomas analyzes the relationship between gender performance and the influence it has on the labels that are placed on an individual's sexuality, which Thomas refers to as "the older regime" (596). Thomas notes how, "under this older regime, men could have sex with men and remain 'normal' so long as they conformed to masculine codes of dress, styling, and bodily

comportment...” (597). Looking at sexual identity as an extension of gender performance in the way Thomas presents it, David would still be considered a masculine man under the gaze. There is no indication of him being effeminate, despite the connection David makes between homosexuality and effeminacy in the novel, and he hides his relationship with men behind his engagement to Hella. However, given David’s continued uncertainty of his position and frequent need to assert his masculinity, the belief that all men who sleep with men are effeminate is likely also a prevalent belief. The pressure of being deemed a straight masculine man and therefore a normative member of the dominant group is key to understanding those dynamics of internalized homophobia and contributes to Giovanni’s death.

David’s desire to be masculine, or at the very least not effeminate, causes him to distance himself from effeminacy. David describes the patrons of Guillaume’s bar as being either sex workers, men that buy the sex workers, or the flamboyant effeminate gay men; criminal, pathetic, or sub-humans (Thomas 607). None of those identities are acceptable for an upstanding masculine man to associate with because of how far they are from the norm. The most obvious display of David’s attempts to distance himself from femininity and other gay men includes his hate towards those flamboyantly dressed gay men. David compares the effeminate cross-dressing male patrons at Guillaume’s bar that would dress as women (it’s unsure their true gender identity as David always refers to them as men) to animals, specifically monkeys and peacocks: “People said that he was very nice, but I confess that his utter grotesqueness made me uneasy; perhaps in the same way that the sight of monkeys eating their own excrement turns some people’s stomachs” (Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room* 26). A part of David’s unwillingness to openly accept his sexuality is his fear of being lumped in with flamboyant gay men. As shown through David’s characterization of them, flamboyant effeminate gay men are dehumanized and considered lesser

than everyone else under the gaze. This dehumanization then causes them to become susceptible to discrimination and attacks because society doesn't see them as people equal to themselves, but rather more like delinquents who are getting the punishment they deserve. Also, in this instance, David is acting as the dominant one and imposing the gaze on the men at the bar, which is something he doesn't want others to do to him. David positions himself more with the dominant culture and props himself up by degrading the people that are more obviously deviant from the norm than him. Having grown up looking up to his father who was the picture-perfect image of masculinity (blonde, well built, charismatic, and a ladies' man) David saw how society valued those traits and continues to aspire to have that same position in society. As someone ingrained with the values of white middle-class gender politics, David has an internalized disgust for effeminate men.

While David tries to distance himself from the gay men at Guillaume's bar, much to his chagrin they are the same people that see through his façade and realize his attraction towards men. David realizes the people at the bar have caught on to him after he got drunk one night and started to flirt with a soldier.

But my face was known, and I had the feeling that people were taking bets about me. Or, it was as though they were the elders of some strange and austere holy order and were watching me in order to discover, by means of signs I made but which only they could read, whether or not I had a true vocation (Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* 27).

David is aware that the patrons of the bar have caught on to him and are already considering him as one of them whether he wants them to or not. The "signs" he made that only they could read are the subtle hints that David gives such as the way he acts which is not quite different from how they act. While David looks down at the young men at the bar who offer themselves up to

the rich older men at the bar, he is doing much of the same thing with Jacques. The reason David accompanies Jacques to the bar is because he needed money and he knew the Jacques was attracted to him and willing to spend money on David to not feel lonely (22). Though David is aware of the actions of the other patrons at the bar and that they are watching him, he doesn't seem to be self-aware of his own actions. He is so engaged in seeing himself as a dominant member of society and being the one to impose the gaze on others that he forgets to step back and take a look at himself and his actions. David judges the young men at the bar who sleep with the older men for money yet fails to realize that he's doing much of the same thing with Jacques except for actually sleeping with him.

Constantly David is reminded that the bar's patrons, along with Jacques and Guillaume are watching him and confirming what David doesn't want to be true; David is a gay man in love. At the bar, the night David meets Giovanni, David encounters an eccentrically dressed man who David described as "a mummy or zombie—this was the first, overwhelming impression—of something walking after it had been put to death" (Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* 37). The man represents the end of David "comfortably" masquerading as a typical straight man and David's feelings towards homosexuality as being a social death sentence. Harry Thomas reads David's interpretation of the man's effeminacy as David associating it with "an intense possibly dangerous power" (614). This power the man possesses is expressed in the intense reaction David has to him. The power of this one character is then extended to the man verbally confirming that all the patrons at the bar know that David is gay, which is David's fear, and that his ruse as a straight man is bound to fall soon.

David's own reservations about living and being a gay man is what leads to the downfall in the novel. David's ruse of appearing as the typical middle-class heterosexual white American

male is broken by his relationship with Giovanni, yet David still wants to hold onto it. The mummy-like man David meets at the bar tells David to proceed with caution if he's going to pursue Giovanni for that very reason. "*Il est dangereux, tu sais*. And for a boy like you—he is very dangerous" (Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* 39). The man and everyone else at the bar could tell that David and Giovanni had a natural connection, and they also knew that David's relationship with his sexuality, and ultimately his presentation as a "straight" white middle-class man, was fragile and bound to fall.

As the story of *Giovanni's Room* is told through David's perspective it becomes clear that David interprets homosexuality as a dark presence in his life which is further illustrated through David's sexual encounters with darker men. When describing Joey, the brown skinned boy he had his first sexual encounter with, David relates Joey's body to a "black opening of a cavern in which I would be tortured till madness came, in which I would lose my manhood," (Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* 8). Baldwin interconnects the relationship between blackness and homosexuality to illustrate how through homosexuality many white men begin to experience prejudice though black and brown people have experienced it their whole lives. Through David, the audience sees the resistance of white men from being "darkened" and cast out from the purity of ideal white manliness and brought closer to the level of the other marginalized people of society, mainly people of color.

While trying to maintain his image as a straight white man under the gaze of society, David also uses his white male privilege to use and throw away Hella and Giovanni at their expense. Though Giovanni is may be considered a white man like David, he is a poor Italian immigrant in France and it is clear that he does not entirely fit into society because of those statuses. Hella shares much of the same identities as David, but given that she's a woman under

the patriarchy she is considered less than David because of her gender. Harry Thomas—while discussing an analysis an American literary historian Trudier Harris made—mentions the historical connection between the way David treats Hella and Giovanni to the way slave masters would treat their slaves: “David behaves throughout the novel like a plantation master, . . . using the bodies of darker men (Giovanni is Italian and noticeably darker than David) . . . for pleasure in private without ever treating them as equals in public” (Thomas 608). The reader doesn’t get to see much of how David treats his lovers in public while they are in a relationship, but once they’re separated—or once he’s done with them—the reader sees how he disregards them in public. Just like how David mistreated Joey in public and pushes him away after their fling in high school, David continues that behavior with Giovanni and pushes him away and leaves him to fend for himself once Hella returns to France. Then when Hella finds him with another man at the bar he just shrugs her off and waits until they get home to talk to her about it and end the relationship. David has the privilege of having his feelings and wants come first and doesn’t lend much courtesy to the more marginalized people he has relationships with, because his status offers him protection from having to deal with the consequences from his actions.

However, unlike David, Giovanni isn’t afforded many privileges in society, and that includes the privilege of easily hiding from the gaze through simply hiding his sexuality. Instead Giovanni has to physically shut himself away from people or hide to escape the gaze because his otherness is more obvious compared to David. During the novel Giovanni is constantly having to hide to escape the gaze through physical means: “We, or rather Giovanni, kept the windows closed most of the time. To insure privacy, Giovanni had obscured the window panes with a heavy, white cleaning polish” (Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room* 85). The cleaning polish being white is significant in that it can be interpreted as establishing Giovanni as a non-white person, due to

his Italian heritage, who is using the paint as a façade of whiteness to conceal his racialized appearance. For Giovanni to be perceived as the norm or an average citizen under the gaze is for him to not be seen at all, because he has many marginalized identities and having even one of them realized under the gaze is enough to marginalize him. Therefore, it is easier for him to be who he is in public and hide from the view of others when he needs to, rather than having to conceal multiple identities and worry about having a single one of them be noticed by anyone. Being Giovanni, a poor Italian gay man, in a society that doesn't consider you valuable leads to being put into situations and positions that you don't want to be in and forces you to learn how to navigate those obstacles throughout life.

Giovanni's position in the novel as the very attractive foreign man that all the characters lust after is intrinsically tied to his Italian background and causes the characters to see him as a conquest under the gaze. Literary critic Suzanne Roszak states, "Baldwin assesses the same stereotype of Italian identity [as counterpoints to Americans that act as sexual liberators] ... in imagining how the Italian influence might free an Anglo American from the socio-sexual expectations of his home culture" (93). Roszak explains in her article that the role of the sexual liberator that Giovanni plays in his relationship with David isn't new but was a common trope of Italian characters acting as foreign Mediterranean lovers. Their foreignness does serve to marginalize them under the gaze, but in a sexual context marginalizes them as the sexual conquests of the dominant white members of society. Baldwin doesn't explicitly have David say that he's attracted to Giovanni being an Italian immigrant, but has Giovanni bring up nationality/ethnic differences by making statements about Italians like "we dance and sing and make love..." (Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* 36). Giovanni, in a way, willingly exoticizes himself and David seems to be attracted and excited by Giovanni's "otherness" as an Italian immigrant

living in Paris. Roszak throughout her article states that the role of the Italian lover for the American protagonists isn't entirely negative but creates a connection between America, France, and Italy. This is true but there are also power imbalances between those three countries and their representative characters that are made obvious throughout the novel, especially concerning Giovanni's position in the last half of the novel as a very visible outcast in French society.

The stark difference in Giovanni and David's class and nationalities becomes a lot more explicit and direr as the novel progresses as the hierarchies become more apparent. The differences are made clear when the reader is first introduced to Giovanni's room that pales in comparison to the "great house in the south of France" that David is staying in as explained in the first sentence of the novel (Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* 3). In comparison, Giovanni's room was "...not large enough for two...[and] the room only had two windows..." (85). The difference in the living situations of Giovanni and David serve as metaphors for the differences in their social status. Though David never mentions the power imbalances between him and Giovanni, Giovanni is well aware of them. When talking about his town in Italy, Giovanni also notes the stark contrasts between David's comfortable life in America and the working-class life Giovanni comes from in Italy. Giovanni remarks that had he stayed in Italy, he would still be poor and David would eventually visit "in the ugly, fat, American motor car which you will surely have by then...and tasting our wine and shiting on us with those empty smiles..." (139). Giovanni understands that David comes from a more privileged background as an American, so he's able to travel to different countries for his own amusement, while poor people like Giovanni immigrate for better opportunities. Giovanni can't ask for money from his family in Italy, like David does with his father and friends in America, so Giovanni has to try to find a way to survive in France.

While David's struggles with his identity are primarily internal, Giovanni's are a lot more visible and external. Because Giovanni's marginalizing identities and issues surrounding them are more internal, he has more experience with knowing how to navigate society as a deviant, or non-dominant member of society, compared to David who has no prior experience with being a deviant or marginalized person. Giovanni has less of a problem expressing his sexuality than David because he doesn't have much stake in the dominant social sphere, so he doesn't have as much to lose as David. Giovanni is an Italian man which throughout the novel people are able to tell of his ethnicity just by looking at him, therefore marking him as other. Literary critic Josep Armengol explains that prior to the 1950s Italians were considered nonwhite or black in Europe meaning Giovanni is coded as black and his class status furthers such coding (Armengol 678). Even without issues of sexuality Giovanni has a harder time in society compared to David because his classifications as Italian and poor aren't something that he can easily hide as people can easily hide his identities when they first meet him. The only job that Giovanni was able to get in France was at Guillaume's bar, most likely due to his status as an immigrant, and he is relegated to living in a small cramped room tucked away from the view of others. Giovanni is already being pushed to the farther sides of society just from being an immigrant, Italian, and poor so the backlash from being gay won't be entirely new to him.

Giovanni's social and economic position places him on the margins meaning that people are less likely to listen to his life stories and would consider them less credible than someone whose identity is closer to societal norms. Having the story told through David's perspective, and receiving Giovanni and his experiences through David's lens, means that the audience/readers may not be seeing the real Giovanni at all. During their time living together, David describes Giovanni as wanting to be the "man" in the relationship or the breadwinner while David is

supposed to play the role of the housewife. But when David finally vocalizes these concerns of being demasculinized and turned into a “girl” or “housewife” he realizes that he was projecting his own insecurities onto Giovanni: “I am not trying to make you a little girl. If I wanted a little girl, I would be *with* a little girl” (Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room* 141). The final confrontation between Giovanni and David makes it clear to the reader that throughout the story they only got to know Giovanni through David’s gaze and perception of him and possibly don’t know who Giovanni really is. David’s own perceptions are clouded by his insecurities with his masculinity so that the story we get from him, *Giovanni’s Room*, is based on David’s own unreliable perception of the events.

Masculinity, along with David and Giovanni’s perceptions of masculinity, is an important factor in why they got together and why their relationship fell apart. Literary critic, Douglas Taylor, explains Baldwin’s interpretation of American masculinity that is made up of the differences and connectedness of Black and White masculinity. Though Giovanni and David are of different nationalities and ethnicities, Taylor’s assertion applies to their situation:

Baldwin reveals American masculinity to be an endless hall of mirrors with white men desiring the masculinity of black men, and black men desiring the wealth, freedom, and culturally endorsed confidence that come[s] with white masculinity (Taylor 82-83).

Taylor describes masculinity as being defined by the other, be it women or men of another race/ethnicity, which creates a direct connection to the gaze and those who are affected by it. The gaze gives the dominant group the power to gaze upon those who are considered beneath them, but the gaze also creates a system of dependence, as the dominant group is defined by the oppressed and vice versa.

Because Giovanni is more marginalized than David combined with his striking—more easily noticed—appearance, he is more likely to become the object of the gaze. The gaze that is put upon Giovanni, namely by Jacques and Guillaume, is one of sexual interest and exoticism due to his physical appearance and the foreignness it indicates. The night that David and Giovanni meet, everyone in the bar is watching them both, watching Giovanni:

And then I watched their faces, watching him. And then I was afraid. I knew that they were watching, had been watching both of us. They knew they had witnessed a beginning and now they would not cease to watch until they saw the end. It had taken some time but the tables had been turned; now I was in the zoo, and they were watching. (Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* 37)

This point in the novel is very important in that it illustrates the shift in the novel from David dehumanizing and gazing upon the other gay men at the bar as animals, to David and Giovanni becoming the objects of the gaze that doesn't cease until Giovanni is in his grave.

While David hides his sexuality by appearing as the typical cis het man and engages in sexual/romantic relationships with women, Giovanni doesn't want to perform typical behaviors and hide his identity. The only times Giovanni hides in the novel is when he is physically hiding himself from the world around him, either by blocking out the windows in his room or evading capture after murdering Guillaume. Through the white plastered windows shut Giovanni off from the gaze, having people constantly spectate his actions, and passing judgement on his personal life and who he really is. The white paint he splatters on the windows to further block off the gaze are symbolic of whiteness and the power it has to create a sense of normalcy of an individual thus protecting them from the gaze. Instead of having to perform according to society's standards of the norm, Giovanni realizes there is better protection in physically hiding

from society as there is no way to impose the gaze on someone when you can't see them. In a way, this also allows Giovanni to remain true to his identity, as he doesn't compromise who he is to appease the dominant society..

Though Giovanni and David are both gay men, they serve as foils to one another in that they have different identities, but they are also at different places in accepting themselves and their sexuality. Through accepting oneself fully, and their identity fully, they open themselves up to becoming a part of a community and being able to give and receive love as Giovanni does with David. Professor and literary critic, Emmanuel Nelson, discusses the connection Baldwin bridges between community and self-acceptance as a theme in many of his fictional works, and that the importance is shown through the effect of self-denial on characters and the communities they belong to:

First, such a denial of an aspect of one's human nature amounts to a denial of a part of one's own humanity, and it robs that individual of any sense of genuine identity; second, it incapacitates that individual from fruitful and fulfilling interpersonal and communal experience (Nelson 27).

This quote by Nelson magnifies the effects self-acceptance, and the lack thereof, has on both David and Giovanni, which then contributes to their different responses to being under the gaze. However, Giovanni's status as a poor immigrant affects the way people view him, which then affects his abilities to build romantic/sexual relationships and community. But Giovanni does find a form of community with the people at a dinner in a seedier part of town because they too are outcasted from greater French society for various reasons, and they band together to support each other. Giovanni is able to build a community/relationship with people at the dinner he takes David, Guillaume, and Jacques to because they function in society the same way he does, as an

outcast, immigrant, and poor. They are able to see him as Giovanni and don't see him under the gaze of dominance as Guillaume and the other characters do, as the reader learns soon after meeting Giovanni that Guillaume was attracted to him and gave him the job at the bar as a way to get close to Giovanni and have sex with him. Guillaume sees Giovanni as another gay man, but Guillaume looks at him through the gaze of dominance and sees that Giovanni is poor immigrant. Instead of genuinely trying to help Giovanni and provide him with a supportive community, Guillaume sees an opportunity to sexually dominate and exploit his power as a wealthy older French man.

As a poor immigrant, when Giovanni has no money and is at the risk of becoming homeless, he is essentially forced to use his body and sexuality to make money. As a way to survive, Giovanni gets into a relationship with Jacques because he has the funds to take care of him. But like all the other young men Jacques had relationships with, he loses interest in Giovanni and disposes of him. David foreshadows this, during his own excursions with Jacques, by remarking on Jacques' pattern with treating poor young men as disposable: "I knew something else; that Jacques' vaunted affection for me was involved with desire, the desire, in fact to get rid of me, to be able, soon, to despise me as he now despised that army of boys who had come, without love, to his bed" (Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* 27). While Jacques is doing to Giovanni what he has already done to many other young men, the treatment of Giovanni is significant because Giovanni deals with being used and disposed of constantly during his time in Paris.

Guillaume, the wealthy bar owner and Giovanni's boss, hires Giovanni because he was attracted to his Italian background then uses stereotypical ideas about immigrants and Italians to dispose of Giovanni. After Giovanni rejects Guillaume's advances, Guillaume plays up his status as the wealthy French businessman and causes a scene at the bar to humiliate Giovanni.

Giovanni retells what happens to David and says, “He said I was a gangster and a thief and a dirty little street boy and the only reason I ran after him—I ran after *him*—was because I intended to rob him one night” (Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room* 104). Giovanni then tells that everyone at the bar automatically believed Guillaume because they felt they had always known those horrible details about Giovanni and felt glad they never gotten to know him personally (109). However, the bar patrons didn’t know Giovanni and his own individual character, but they did know the common rhetoric around immigrants, especially Italian immigrants, as being thieves and immoral. Guillaume uses this to his advantage along with his position as a native rich French man to take revenge on Giovanni and cast him as a thieving immigrant. After being fired from his bartending job and struggling to make ends meet, Giovanni later submits himself sexually to Guillaume to get his job back, because he has nowhere else to turn to. At this point in the novel, Giovanni’s sexual expression is less about own enjoyment/attraction but more about sex work and using his sexuality to survive financially.

Giovanni’s character in *Giovanni’s Room* is the farthest from the white heteronormative ideal in an American context and his character has the same tragic life and fate that most people at the bottom of that power structure seem to meet. Critic Abur-Rahman’s expresses that because Giovanni is darker, poorer, and tortured only to meet a tortuous fate he experiences the same classic dehumanization of not only gay people but African Americans (482). James Baldwin may not have put a black gay character in his book, as that may have caused pushed too many buttons on social issues, but he did create a character that occupies a similar space as someone like James Baldwin who has to navigate both sexual and racial/ethnic discrimination. Baldwin seems to use both David and Giovanni as stand ins for his experiences in Paris and the problems he felt arising while he was there. Baldwin considered the time he spent in Paris not as expatriation but as exile,

an exile that was the physical representation of the original historical and cultural alienation in his home country of America from being both black and gay (Tomlinson 136). This exile, or at least the feeling of being exiled, is the extension of the gaze and how it forces a separation between the marginalized person and dominant society. Like David, Baldwin goes to Paris to be able to fully express himself as a black gay man, but like Giovanni he leaves because his life in his home country has brought him agony.

The way the French media treats Giovanni during the trial for Guillaume's murder is very heinous and has everything to do with Giovanni being a poor Italian immigrant. The media is used as a gazing apparatus to extend the gaze and have all of French society actively look upon Giovanni and pass judgement. Not only did Giovanni have to deal with exploitation by Guillaume twice, by being accused of stealing in front of a crowd and then being sexually exploited, but he has to go through it all over again with the French media and judicial system. Abur-Rahman's article focuses on the power dynamics of nationality/race and homosexuality in Giovanni's Room and discusses the importance of including a character like Guillaume: "In casting Guillaume as both a sexual predator and as the symbol of national manhood, Baldwin links explicitly repressed sexuality, masculinity, and exploitation as fundamental characteristics of Western nationhood" (484). Baldwin expresses to the reader that by dehumanizing and casting out gay people from the large part of society they are left prey to people like Guillaume with no repercussions. The gaze is a very powerful tool for predators and abusers like Guillaume, in that the gaze already labels certain groups as useless to society. The abusers then know which people they can target for abuse, as they know society will take the abuser's word over the marginalized person's most of the time. Therefore, the removal of any mention of sexuality or sexual abuse from the trial and media allowed for Guillaume to be highly regarded and Giovanni to be

demonized. Even if Guillaume's sexual exploitation of Giovanni and other young boys were brought into the trial Giovanni probably wouldn't have fared any better when up against Guillaume's historic French roots.

Due to the binarism of French and western society, the glorification of Guillaume, because of his background of as a member of one of France's oldest families, leads to the further vilification of Giovanni because of his status as an Italian immigrant. David mentions that while the newspapers were reporting on Guillaume's murder there was a big difference between how Giovanni and Guillaume were being portrayed: "As though by some magnificently tacit agreement, with every day that he was at large, the press became more vituperative against him and more gentle towards Guillaume. Guillaume's name became fantastically entangled with French history, French honor, and French glory, and very nearly became indeed a symbol of French manhood" (Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* 149-150). The French media is more interested in what Guillaume represents, French nationality, than they are with learning about his true character, so they have to further vilify Giovanni as someone who represents a threat to not only the French people but France as a nation. This political and cultural grandstanding made by the media is not uncommon and is frequently seen throughout history being used to turn the dichotomies that are already present in society (those who are "civilized" and "normal" versus those who are "marginalized" and "uncivilized") as a tool to fight against any perceived outside threat. Ikechi Mgbeoji, an author on global politics, discusses the concepts of the civilized self and barbaric other is used in many global conflicts: "However, the history and relations between the 'civilized self' and the barbaric other' reveals a common and persistent pattern of domination of the 'barbaric', by the 'civilized', who nonetheless profess liberal ideals" (856). Though the French, Guillaume, and even David tried to put up a façade that they were morally upstanding

citizens, they did it all while dehumanizing and using other people whom they deemed lesser than to prop themselves up.

Even though David didn't go so far as tricking Giovanni to exploit him for sex like Guillaume did, David and Guillaume operate at much of the same level in society by being able to pass as normative men. Guillaume wasn't outed as a gay man by larger mainstream society so when he passed away, he was able to maintain the privileges of being perceived as a straight upstanding businessman, which is expected of someone from his privileged background. David, not being outed as a gay man either, is perceived as an American man, who is a veteran, and has money to live in foreign countries for months; meaning he is also afforded a great deal of privilege in society just not as much as Guillaume. Guillaume and David both have the power to pass as the model citizens in society and that power is often used to the detriment of the people who can't pass. The biggest indicator of how influential and important having the power to pass is, is that neither Guillaume nor David has to actively use their privilege in order to disadvantage others. Guillaume was dead and the French society used his privilege and status in society to disadvantage Giovanni and double down on the societal norms that continue to marginalize and disenfranchise people. The marginalized people's voices then become even more repressed and they are forced to deal with even more consequences for being the less than ideal citizen in a society that does not value them.

Giovanni's inability to speak the truth of what led him to kill Guillaume is an example of how underprivileged people become so beaten down by society that their truths do not matter. Giovanni would rather be painted as a petty criminal who murders for cash by French society than tell the truth that he was sexually taken advantage of and attacked Guillaume in a fit of rage, and have his truth become a victim to the gaze too. The reader is told that once Giovanni is

caught, the newspapers tell about how he cried and begged for mercy and revealed every detail of his crime except the motive, “why was too black for the newsprint to carry and too deep for Giovanni to tell” (Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room* 153). Had Giovanni told the truth the news reporters and even the people presiding over the trial most likely would not believe him, because he is already painted as an untrustworthy poor Italian immigrant, so why would they believe him about Guillaume being a predatory gay man when Guillaume worked so hard to keep it hidden. But as David mentions later on, “[Giovanni] could, indeed, have done with Guillaume anything at all—but he could not do anything about being Giovanni” (153). This belief is what causes Giovanni to plead guilty and take his punishment, because he is already seen as guilty under the gaze of the public for simply being a poor immigrant. Under the gaze Giovanni was dehumanized and rendered as being lesser than Guillaume and the average French citizen, so his death comes as no surprise, as it is taken as ridding France of the unwanted.

But can we trust what is being reported to us as the truth for what happened to Giovanni? Had he told the news reporter what really happened with Guillaume in the hopes that when it was reported many other underprivileged boys like him would also tell their stories about Guillaume’s true nature, only to have those chances dashed by a reporter with the power to rearrange the story? Or is David omitting details from the story and again imposing his vision of Giovanni as the narrator of the story? The reader is being told the story of the execution of a poor gay immigrant, but the reader isn’t getting the story from his perspective but from the perspective of someone that is more privileged, whose privilege entails being able to tell their own story and the stories of others. This also implicates the reader and audience in the power structures shown in the novel, in that they are reading and engaging with this story that is told through the perspective of David and not Giovanni.

In order to stop the horrible treatment of members of our society, we must learn from David's mistakes and allow people to be their true selves and learn to love each other in order to live in harmony. In a letter to his nephew, James Baldwin writes about what integration means and what exactly is required in order to incorporate everyone into society: "And if the word *integration* means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it" (*The Fire Next Time* 9). With *Giovanni's Room* Baldwin shows us how the absence of love and acceptance leads to power imbalances and the devastation of the most excluded members of society. The only solution is to bring love back into the equation and to extend that love to not only the people most intimate to us but to all the people we share this world with, as that is what leads to true acceptance.

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