

SETTING HIS HOUSE IN ORDER: THE CRISIS OF PATERNITY

IN JAMES BALDWIN'S *GIOVANNI'S ROOM*

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I argue that James Baldwin's critically neglected second novel, *Giovanni's Room* (1956), constitutes a necessary and proper addition to the literature that is recognized more widely as part of the author's personal canon. Perhaps the biggest area of scholarly research on Baldwin's writings is his mapping of paternity, yet critics consistently fail to realize the many ways in which *Giovanni's Room* contributes to this scholarly discussion. I argue that Baldwin consciously embeds a homoerotic subtext in the character of David's father, suggesting that the character is by no means as purely and uncomplicatedly straight as critics have read him heretofore, and that *Giovanni's Room*, while necessarily a product of its generally homophobic social moment, serves as a sustained critique of the ideological system that queer theorist Lee Edelman calls reproductive futurism. In this system, parenthood becomes the true marker of an individual's subjectivity and worth, and the figure of The Child (different from actual, individual children) becomes the ultimate symbol of societal value; I suggest that the mental, physical, and emotional crises of the novel's main and supporting characters are caused by their failure to fully participate in this system, which shapes the values of the world in which they live. I further suggest that the many autobiographical resonances present in the novel indicate that Baldwin might have looked on *Giovanni's Room* as a chance to continue working out in writing his complicated relationship with his late stepfather, David Baldwin, Sr. I contend that throughout the text, Baldwin employs literary strategies designed to call attention to the pronounced role that paternity plays in the novel, suggesting that in at least one key way, *Giovanni's Room* fits squarely within the traditions that shape Baldwin's canonical work.

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INTRODUCTION

“And in such a desolate place, which is where we all are, it seems to me, the difference between a heterosexual who was miserable with his life and destroys his children and some poor lost creature, thrown out into the outer darkness of our society, it seems to me they are almost—they match each other.” – James Baldwin, 1965

James Baldwin’s biographer and personal friend David Leeming claims on the first page of his biography of Baldwin that the writer’s early life and work, at least, “[were] concerned with a search for a father...for what an ideal father might have been for him—a source of self-esteem who would have supported and guided him” (3). It risks nothing, then, to declare the issue of paternity the trope that underlies Baldwin’s major works, both fictional and nonfictional. This is perhaps to be expected for Baldwin’s African American fathers and sons—such an engagement would reflect both Baldwin’s bent toward autobiography and the high profile afforded the troubled relationships between African American fathers and sons in the cultural imaginary—but, somewhat less expectedly, the point applies to Baldwin’s white characters, as well. *Giovanni’s Room* (1956) is no exception to this rule; in the novel, the white main character, David, struggles mightily against his father, whom he both hates and fears. The title character, too, is struggling with personal turmoil stemming from his status as a (failed) father figure. Yet surprisingly, critics have paid almost no attention to the issue of paternity¹ in the novel. Such discussion as there is tends to focus only on metaphorical constructions of paternity, largely ignoring or de-emphasizing the actual father-son relationship(s) within the novel. A few mentions of David’s resentment of his father’s somewhat over-the-top masculine posturing and

¹ In this paper, I use “paternity” to refer to both biological and social/constructed notions of fatherhood.

attempts to force David into similar behavior are usually made to satisfy readers on that point, while critics turn their attention more fully toward other aspects of the novel, such as the question of what it means to be a man—apparently failing to realize (or at least to articulate fully) that such a question is, for the characters in *Giovanni's Room* and, I think, also for Baldwin himself, intimately (if problematically) bound up in what it means to be a father. This critical oversight strikes me as detrimental to the understanding of the novel as a whole.

The egregious critical failure to engage with this aspect of *Giovanni's Room* becomes more understandable when considered in the context of the novel's general history of critical neglect. Although Baldwin always spoke of himself first as an author of fiction and only then as an essayist, during his lifetime, critical appreciation of his work tended in the opposite direction: justly lauded for the clarity and brilliance of his essays, Baldwin's fictional works were, if not dismissed altogether, certainly seen as secondary to his nonfiction. With his death in 1987, the critical trend began to reverse itself, but even now, Baldwin's novels still struggle against the reputation they accrued during his lifetime as being chiefly unworthy of serious critical attention. This has certainly been the case with *Giovanni's Room*, which, despite its seeming ubiquity as social referent for queer (and specifically) gay male activity, Sharon Patricia Holland has called "Baldwin's most maligned and forgotten novel" (274).²

Narrated retrospectively during a single night, *Giovanni's Room* tells the story of a young American man, David, who journeys to Paris and, while his fiancée Hella is traveling in Spain, becomes embroiled in an affair with a young Italian man, the eponymous Giovanni. Due to David's cowardice and refusal to love another person fully, the extended affair ends disastrously,

² This state of affairs is perhaps influenced by the fact that in the years after its initial printing, the novel was reprinted not in hardcover editions befitting a work of "literature" but in paperback editions that often used the cover illustrations to play up its "scandalous" content (Streitmatter 129). Susan Stryker even includes the novel as an example of "queer pulp" in her 2001 work on the subject.

resulting in the destruction of David and Hella's relationship and Giovanni's execution for murder. Though the novel garnered generally positive reviews upon publication,³ subsequent evaluations were less kind. In fact, during Baldwin's lifetime, the prevailing scholarly opinion on *Giovanni's Room* echoed that of critic Robert A. Bone, who in 1965 dismissed the work as "by far the weakest of Baldwin's novels" (38). "There is," he claimed, "a tentative, unfinished quality about the book, as if in merely broaching the subject of homosexuality Baldwin had exhausted his creative energy," finally decreeing, "[t]he characters are vague and disembodied, the themes half-digested, the colors bleached rather than vivified. We recognize in this sterile psychic landscape the unprocessed raw material of art" (38).⁴ Other critics were hardly more positive: in 1968, Irving Howe sneered at what he saw as Baldwin's tendency, when dealing with homosexuality, to descend into "whipped-cream sentimentalism" and "the clichés of soap opera" (100; 103), while Edward Margolies denied the novel any real depth, drily observing, with an almost audible roll of his eyes, "The best that one can say [of *Giovanni's Room*] is that this is a recognition novel—David discovers that he is a homosexual (something that the reader could have told him on page three), and that he feels sorry for himself that he has discovered this dreadful knowledge" (68). It may be Pearl K. Bell, however, who best exemplified the general critical opinion of the work, writing in 1979 that "*Giovanni's Room* was an act of bravura, not an interesting novel" (109).

The refusal of critics to engage with *Giovanni's Room* was for many years related to Baldwin's refusal to adhere solely to what were seen, at the time he was writing, as appropriate

³ Leeming mentions several: Granville Hicks said that Baldwin wrote "of these [sensitive] matters with...dignity and intensity"; Mark Schorer said the book was "nearly heroic"; and Nelson Algren praised it as "told with a driving intensity and horror sustained all the way" (qtd. in 128-129).

⁴ The language Bone uses in his evisceration of the novel is sadly typical of homophobic critical response to any work seen as "too gay." "Immature," "unformed," and "sterile"—Bone's choice—are words that show up repeatedly in criticism on works involving homosexual content.

topics for an African American writer. After the critical triumph of his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), Baldwin writes, “I realized that I was being corraled [*sic*] into another trap: now I was a writer, a *Negro* writer, and I was expected to write diminishing versions of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* forever. Which I refused to do” (“Notes for *The Amen Corner*,” xiv-xv). Simply put, *Giovanni’s Room* was seen as not “black enough” for a writer then ranked with Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison as one of the leading figures of the African American literary community, as Robert Reid-Pharr makes plain in *Black Gay Man* when he states:

One must remember that Baldwin is *the* black author, the paragon of the Black American intellect, the nation’s prophet of racial tolerance....This work, which is widely thought of as Baldwin’s anomaly, the work with no black characters, the work in which Baldwin stretches, some might say unsuccessfully, to demonstrate his grasp of the universal, has been neglected by students both of black and gay literature, many of whom assume Baldwin had first to retreat from his blackness in order to explore homosexuality and homophobia. (92; 125)

Indeed, for this very reason, Aliyyah I. Abur-Rahman goes so far as to claim that “[a]s a second novel, *Giovanni’s Room* was doomed to fail. Its white characters, explicit homosexual content, and Parisian setting did not make it a suitable follow-up to *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, which introduced Baldwin as the most promising black novelist to arrive on the American literary scene in the mid-twentieth century” (478). Whether or not the book was “doomed to fail” is debatable, but certainly the odds were not in favor of any truly appreciative response to the novel’s merits. Critics have thus been mostly content to think of *Giovanni’s Room* as a kind of Baldwinian side-project, as it were, consigning it to a position outside what is seen as Baldwin’s “proper” canon,⁵ which consists of those novels dealing more directly with the African American social condition in the United States.

⁵ In the past few decades, academia has troubled the very notion of canonicity, rightly critiquing the strictures that traditionally have set up only some forms of writing by members of certain pre-determined groups (usually white heterosexual males) as worthy of study. However, I cannot agree that the notion of a canon of literature is an inherently flawed one that must be eliminated. Here, I use “canon” to mean simply those works generally accepted by scholars as a given writer’s most central and important ones and which are often singled out for critical attention.

Given this legacy of critical neglect, it is not surprising that, even today, Baldwin scholars do not generally rank *Giovanni's Room* among Baldwin's best (or even better) works. Yet it may be that it will ultimately prove among the most important—if not necessarily from an artistic standpoint, then perhaps from a scholarly one, as a means by which to shed light on Baldwin's feelings about himself as a writer.⁶ Horace Porter, for instance, has argued that *Giovanni's Room* is central to the appreciation of Baldwin's other work; in a comparison with Baldwin's beloved Henry James, Porter claims, “[I]f *The American* reasserts itself throughout James's career, so *Giovanni's Room* has played a similar part in the complex and [at that time] continuing drama of Baldwin's life and work” (133), shedding crucial light on themes that would arise time and again throughout the rest of Baldwin's literary career. This is not to claim, however, that the novel's only value lies in its ability to help readers come to a better understanding of Baldwin's more critically or commercially successful works; to do so is to risk slipping back into the reductive opinions exemplified by Robert A. Bone, who suggests that the book is “less a novel in its own right than a first draft of *Another Country*” (38), another novel in which Baldwin directly addresses issues related to homosexuality. On the contrary, *Giovanni's Room* is a complex and moving novel that, while by no means perfect, largely succeeds on its own artistic merits, as more recent critical evaluations of the novel have increasingly recognized. Randall Kenan, for example, writing in 2009, declares its prose “poetic and rich” and calls it “a highlight of Baldwin's efforts as a writer of modernist fiction” (39). In a 1983 essay on *Giovanni's Room*, John T. Shawcross praises its careful plotting and excellent structure as key elements in a “fine novel” (109). And Claude J. Summers, evaluating the novel in 1990, admits

⁶ By this, I mean that in much the same way that the assorted works of E. M. Forster make more sense after reading *Maurice*, Forster's posthumously published novel in which a young man of the upper middle class finds lasting romantic love with a lower class gamekeeper, so too does reading *Giovanni's Room* help one to better understand the scope of Baldwin's literary project.

it to be flawed by a melodramatic plotline, but nevertheless deems the work “powerful and poignant....a beautifully written, searing, and unsentimental account of the tragic failure of integrity, a failure that is at once personal and social” (173-174).⁷

But certainly the novel is *most* successful when situated within the context of Baldwin’s larger literary project. This project is bound up in the working out of relationships between men—men as comrades, enemies, fathers, brothers, lovers. As I indicated earlier, the most important of these relationships, for Baldwin, is that of the father and son, and critics have long taken note of Baldwin’s profound engagement with such relationships throughout his oeuvre. A full treatment of the relationships between fathers and sons in Baldwin’s work is well beyond the scope of this essay, but it will suffice to note that the prototypical Baldwinian father and son—cold, critical, and unrelenting on the one hand, confused, angry, and love-starved on the other—show up in almost all of his major works, both fictional and nonfictional. The recurrence of this particular relationship has led critics such as Michel Fabre to write, “Since *Go Tell It on the Mountain* Baldwin has seemed determined to remain an Ishmael in search of a father” (138). “Without wishing to reduce the man to a sole relationship,” he adds, “[and] without trying to interpret too reductively a novel that casts light on all aspects of the world of religion, sexuality, and interracial relations, it seems to me impossible not to consider this father-son relationship as primary” (138). Fabre is speaking primarily of *Go Tell It* here, but the point holds true for the rest of Baldwin’s work, as well.

In this thesis, I argue that *Giovanni’s Room*—so often seen, because of its lack of African American characters⁸ and its seemingly exclusive focus on the romantic relationship between

⁷ Not coincidentally, these critical reappraisals coincide with the rise of gay and lesbian studies in the academy—though the novel still is neglected somewhat, as Reid-Pharr notes, even by students of queer literature (*Black Gay Man* 125).

David and Giovanni, as a deviation from Baldwin's "true" canon—actually fits squarely within the boundaries of what comprises Baldwin's more widely recognized and accepted literary project. My contention is that this novel is, contrary to what critics have previously recognized, hugely concerned with issues relating to paternity—that paternity is, in fact, one of the main concerns of the novel, and that a reading of *Giovanni's Room* that fails to recognize that the father-son relationships are as central in this work as they are in Baldwin's others leaves glaring gaps in the critical understanding of the novel (and, one might add, of the novelist). The character of David's father is particularly due for reconsideration, as the importance of his role and function in the novel far outstrips the weight critics have heretofore afforded him as a character. I suggest that by embedding a previously unrecognized homoerotic potential in the character of David's father, Baldwin foregrounds issues of paternity in *Giovanni's Room* in a way that opens up new possibilities for critical exploration within the text, pointing to the father-son relationship as the crux of the novel.

I will begin the body of this thesis by focusing on the character of David's father, a character largely unexplored in criticism on *Giovanni's Room*. Drawing on Baldwin's essays and other of his fictional works, I argue that Baldwin consciously underlies this seemingly minor character, read largely by both other characters and critics as purely and uncomplicatedly straight, with a strain of homoerotic potential that is intended to draw readers' attention to the main father-son relationship in a novel in which the father is physically absent and therefore runs the risk of critical dismissal. I then move into a discussion of how Baldwin critiques what queer

⁸ More recently, critics have begun to explore the ways in which Baldwin, in the words of Reid-Pharr, "produc[ed] a novel in which there are no black characters but...in which race is one of the central signifiers" (*Black Gay Man* 104), a constant underlying the novel, blackness always already present in its absence. Trudier Harris also addresses this issue in her essay "Slanting the Truth: Homosexuality, Manhood, and Race in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*," arguing that "David's race, his whiteness is at the center of the book" and that "[i]t is the very exaggeration of whiteness that gives David his power....In his whiteness is the center of his manhood, and that whiteness is the source of its perversity" (24; 27).

theorist Lee Edelman has called reproductive futurism and address the pattern of “paternal displacement” within the novel, demonstrating how the crises of the novel’s main and supporting characters are rooted in a kind of paternal paranoia caused by their failure to establish themselves as full members of society through successful heterosexual reproduction.⁹ I next address the many autobiographical resonances between the character of David’s father and Baldwin’s own father, suggesting that Baldwin might have used this novel as an opportunity to re-script imaginatively the possibilities for conversation with David Baldwin, Sr., and conclude by arguing that *Giovanni’s Room* constitutes a necessary and proper addition to what is thought of as Baldwin’s proper canon.

⁹ I will discuss Edelman’s theory in more detail in Chapter Two.

CHAPTER I

Like Son, Like Father: The Homoerotic Potential of David's Father

In his 1985 essay “The Price of the Ticket,” Baldwin looks back over his decades-long writing career, urging readers to borrow a practice from his formative childhood years spent as a boy preacher and “do [their] first works over” (841). In other words, he explains, they should “reexamine everything” so that they may “*know whence [they] came*” (841, original emphasis). In such a spirit of (re-)exploration and (re-)discovery, I think it necessary that any discussion of paternity in *Giovanni's Room* begin with a (re-)consideration of the character of David's father. For if *Giovanni's Room* is one of Baldwin's most critically ignored novels, as my review of the literature confirms, then David's father is certainly the most critically ignored character in that novel, garnering very little scholarly attention.

Baldwin introduces David's father early in *Giovanni's Room*, and although he is mostly absent from the actual narrative related to the audience, his figure looms large throughout the novel, casting a shadow over his son that stretches clear across the Atlantic Ocean. Indeed, the vast majority of the information readers receive about David's father comes within the first chapter of the novel, in the span of just a few pages. In very short order, we learn that he is a widower, though he seems hardly to mourn the death of his wife, of whom he speaks in curiously sexless terms: “My father rarely spoke of her and when he did he covered, by some mysterious means, his face; he spoke of her only as my mother and, in fact, as he spoke of her, he might have been speaking of his own” (14). We learn that David's father has spent his son's childhood moving his family—consisting of his son, his older, unmarried sister, Ellen, and himself—up and

down the coasts of the United States, fighting with Ellen all the way: “My father and my aunt got on very badly....[S]ometimes they talked together in friendly, teasing tones, but this was dangerous. Their banter nearly always ended in a fight” (11; 13). We learn that he is a heavy drinker—enough so that by age thirteen, David remembers “see[ing] him drunk many times” (14)—and that his generally mild manner occasionally gives way to extreme rages: “He was one of those people who, quick to laugh, are slow to anger; so that their anger, when it comes, is all the more impressive, seeming to leap from some unsuspected crevice like a fire that will bring the whole house down....[M]y father’s wrath [was] dangerous because it was so entirely unexpected” (12; 14). And we learn of his reputation as a serial womanizer: ““You’ve been with that girl, Beatrice,” said Ellen. “That’s where you always are....And don’t fool yourself,” she added, after a moment, in a voice thick with passion, ‘don’t fool yourself that [David] doesn’t know where you’re coming from, don’t think he doesn’t know about your women!’” (15-16).

Most relevant to this paper, we also learn that David’s father has trouble giving his son the emotional support that he needs. When David is very young, his father is distant almost to the point of coldness; David recalls looking into “the big living room in the house in San Francisco” and seeing his father “reading his newspaper, hidden from me behind his newspaper, so that, desperate to conquer his attention, I sometimes so annoyed him that our duel ended with me being carried from the room in tears” (11-12). As David grows older, however, his father prefers to treat David not as a son, with a degree of distance between them, but as a friend, which makes David profoundly uncomfortable and unhappy. The passage in which David reveals this is crucial to an understanding of paternity in the novel and is worth quoting at length here:

My father’s attitude [toward David’s rebellious behavior] was that this was but an inevitable phase of my growing up and he affected to take it lightly....[W]e took refuge in being hearty with each other. We were not like father and son, my father sometimes proudly said, we were like buddies. I think my father

sometimes actually believed this. I never did. I did not want to be his buddy; I wanted to be his son. What passed between us as masculine candor exhausted and appalled me. Fathers ought to avoid utter nakedness before their sons. I did not want to know – not, anyway, from his mouth – that his flesh was as unregenerate as my own. The knowledge did not make me feel more like his son – or buddy – it only made me feel like an interloper, and a frightened one at that. He thought we were alike. I did not want to think so. I did not want to think that my life would be like his, or that my mind would ever grow so pale, so without hard places and sharp, sheer drops. He wanted no distance between us; he wanted me to look on him as a man like myself. But I wanted the merciful distance of father and son, which would have permitted me to love him. (17-18)

David thus draws a picture of his father as drunken, promiscuous, and incapable of maintaining a proper paternal distance between himself and his son. Based on what David gives readers in the text, none of this is technically untrue; what I wish to interrogate, however, is the interpretation—or, rather, the astonishing *lack* of such interpretation—that critics have placed on the character.

In an otherwise exceptionally perceptive 1956 review of *Giovanni's Room*, William Esty sets the tone for future criticism of David's father, dismissing him as a man of both "gracelessness [and] sometimes oafishness," content to ignore his son's very real pain in favor of "vacuously mouthing [his] hand-me-down colloquialisms" (26). Kathleen N. Drowne confidently asserts that David's father's unquestioning acceptance of American social mores would cause him to "label [his son] 'deviant'" (79). Louis H. Pratt saves his harshest judgment for David's Aunt Ellen, but spares a moment to write disapprovingly of David's father's inability to allow his son to establish a "viable paternal relationship" with him (59). Justin A. Joyce and Dwight A. McBride point out the "fixity" associated with David's father, observing that in "[the character's] mind, if David is not being a man of action (and acting in accordance with a rather predetermined heteronormative script, at that), then he is wasting time, wandering" (127), and Shawcross notes the unintentional irony of David's father "uncomprehendingly and with

traditional expectations writ[ing] to his son as Butch” (105)—implying, of course, that the man himself must also be uncomprehendingly traditional, and a bit of a boor, to boot. Even Yasmin Y. DeGout, whose 1992 article on the contradictory portrayals of homoerotic love in the novel provides one of the fullest examinations of the character of David’s father to date, perceptively noting the exceptional emphasis Baldwin gives to this father-son relationship, ultimately judges David’s father as little more than a man “who hid[es] from responsibility [for his son’s psychological needs] behind newspapers, behind alcohol, and behind a buddy-to-buddy relationship with his son” (429).

Surveying the small body of criticism that addresses David’s father ultimately leaves one with the uncomfortable but inevitable conclusion that critics have been judging the character of David’s father based solely on David’s judgments of him. For a critic to judge a character based only on the judgment of another character may be regarded as poor critical practice at the best of times, but it is especially dangerous in this case, given that David is by no means a reliable narrator. He is, rather, an expert at self-deceit and at viewing the world in such a way as to ensure his own lack of culpability, and even though his long night of penance is ostensibly intended as a (failed?) attempt to be totally honest with himself, there is no real textual reason to suspect that he is able to eliminate his personal biases from his tale—especially when it comes to a man he admits that he hates and from whom he is only too eager to distance himself physically and emotionally.

On those rare occasions that David’s father *is* granted more than a brief mention in criticism, it is still only in terms of his influence on David. Such an approach is not, of course, inherently wrong. The impulse to focus almost solely on David is an understandable one, given the novel’s intensely solipsistic first-person narration: David is unquestionably the novel’s main

character, if not necessarily its protagonist,¹⁰ and because, as Kemp Williams notes, “the interest and intensity of *Giovanni’s Room* lie in David’s assessment of all these events” (24), it makes sense that scholarly exploration of other characters focuses primarily on their relationship to David. However, of all of the novel’s major secondary characters, David’s father is alone in being afforded *no* scholarly attention that does not view him merely as a lesser facet of David himself. Again, this is likely a reflection of David’s refusal, within the text, to separate himself from his father—or, more to the point, his refusal to allow his father any sort of internal life or concerns beyond those that directly affect his son; he defines his father only in relation to himself, and indeed, David’s first direct reference to his father specifically positions him as such: “I thought of my father, who had no one in the world but me” (9). Baldwin does not even give the character a name; he is only ever “my father” to David and “David’s father” to critics.¹¹

Let us return, then, to the textual description of David’s father. Like David, we may reiterate his character thus: He is a heavy drinker; he has numerous affairs with women; his non-sexual relationships with women are characterized by barely suppressed disdain; he is alternately

¹⁰ Bone, for example, calls Giovanni the novel’s real protagonist (40), and Summers elsewhere refers to David as more of an anti-hero than a straightforward protagonist (173-174).

¹¹ Shawcross notes that *Giovanni’s Room* heavily deploys onomastics, or the practice of using names to communicate information or ideas (108) – thus we have David and Giovanni, suggesting the storied love between the Biblical David and Jonathan, whose names mean “loving” and “God has given,” respectively, and whose love was said to be “wonderful, passing the love of women” (2 Samuel 1:26); David’s fiancée Hella Lincoln, whose name invokes both the descent into Hell and the possibility of freedom from bondage; and even David’s loathed Aunt Ellen, she of the “mouth redder than any blood” and “voice...like a razor blade on glass” (13), whose name (ironically meaning “light”) suggests the name of David’s future fiancée, establishing a link between the two. If we accept that David and Giovanni’s names are allusions by Baldwin to the Biblical David and Jonathan, then we could perhaps identify the father of Baldwin’s main character with Jesse, the father of the Biblical David. Jesse is referenced in the Old Testament as the ancestor of Jesus Christ: “And there shall come forth a Rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots. / And the spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him—the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD; / And shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the LORD: and he shall not judge after the sight of His eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of His ears” (Isaiah 11:1-3). The popular Christian art motif of the Tree of Jesse refers to this ancestor of Jesus, showing Jesse reclining with a tree growing out of his torso, Jesus at the top. This implies either an ironic reversal of the characters in Baldwin’s novel – unlike the Biblical Jesse and David, there will be no further branches of the family tree leading to the eventual birth of a savior; David will have to halt the growth of the family tree in order to save himself from a life of deceit – or an equally ironic adherence to it, as David may attempt to “save” himself by adopting an aggressively heterosexual lifestyle like his father’s.

emotionally distant or oppressively close with his son; and his temper, when pushed, shows itself in violent, frightening flashes of anger. In fact, in many ways, his character bears a striking resemblance to the figure that Baldwin's 1985 essay "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood"¹² identifies as underlying the "American *ideal*...of sexuality...rooted in the American ideal of masculinity"—the stereotypical, hard-boiled "tough guy" (815) of popular mid-twentieth-century fiction. This "paralytically infantile" ("Freaks" 815) figure was a subject of long-standing interest to Baldwin, who previously engaged the topic in his 1949 essay "Preservation of Innocence," one of Baldwin's first published writings to deal openly with what was then referred to as "the homosexual problem." Baldwin writes:

[O]ne of the major American ambitions is to shun this metamorphosis [from child to man and the acceptance of complexity it entails]. In the truly awesome attempt of the American to at once preserve his innocence and arrive at a man's estate [in Baldwin's mind, an impossible task], that mindless monster, the tough guy, has been created and perfected; 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. ("Preservation" 597)

Critics sometimes appear to recognize the resemblance between Baldwin's prototypical "tough guy" and the character of David's father, as Summers does when he writes of "[David's] hard-drinking father's conventional idea of American manhood" (178). Small wonder, then, that critics typically set up a diametric opposition between David's seemingly innately masculine father and David himself.¹³

¹² This essay, originally published in *Playboy* under the aforementioned title, was later re-named "Here Be Dragons" and is sometimes cited as such.

¹³ This seems as apt a place as any to state explicitly the insights gained from feminist and queer theorists that gender is inherently fictional: masculinity and femininity are learned sociocultural concepts. Baldwin's belief that all humans were androgynous to the extent that they contained both male and female aspects reflects this knowledge, to a degree, yet it must be said that Baldwin himself held some rather narrowly defined conceptions of gender-appropriate behavior. Furthermore, traditional notions of gender pervade the text of *Giovanni's Room* and are not always presented in such a way that we may feel certain that Baldwin was critiquing them.

Yet Baldwin also identifies another aspect of the “tough guy” figure, one which greatly problematizes the willingness of both critics and, to an extent, David himself to set up David’s father as a kind of flawlessly masculine anti-David. The violent impulses of the “tough guy,” Baldwin adds, the “brutality which rages unchecked...[as] part of the harvest of this unfulfillment [*sic*], strident and dreadful testimony to our renowned and cherished innocence....are compelled by a panic which is close to madness” – panic caused by fear of the social expression of “the ever-present danger of sexual activity between men” (“Preservation” 599). The figure of the “tough guy”—the American ideal of masculine sexuality—is, therefore, predicated on and underwritten by serious homoerotic tension and potential.

Critics make much of the teenaged David’s self-conscious (and largely unsuccessful) attempts, after experiencing the joy and terror of his first homosexual experience with his best friend Joey, to fashion himself after the typical masculine ideal: “I wearied of the motion, wearied of the joyless seas of alcohol, wearied of the blunt, bluff, hearty, and totally meaningless friendships, wearied of wandering through the forests of desperate women, wearied of the work, which fed me only in the most brutally literal sense” (22). Although many critics have noted the similarities in David’s behavior and that of his father, Magdalena J. Zaborowska articulates it best, writing, “David’s flight *to* Europe...is also a flight away from his father and the masculine prescriptions and prohibitions he embodies....Ironically, he takes on the only disguise that this father and larger American culture can accept: he follows in his old man’s footsteps by playing hard, drinking heavily, womanizing frequently, and, of course, going into the army” (123). David’s just-one-of-the-boys lifestyle, which so closely parallels his father’s actions, is the result of a decision “to allow no room in the universe for something which shamed and frightened me” (22)—an intentional set of actions he undertakes in order to suppress his knowledge of his own

homosexual inclinations. For David, then, his outwardly hyper-masculine persona is just a manifestation of the character's internal struggle with his inability to fit himself comfortably into the heteronormative culture of 1950s America. What, then, prevents us from reading the character of David's father in a similar way?

Because we receive only second-hand accounts of David's father's thoughts, feelings, and motivations, any exploration of the homoerotic subtext in the character of David's father must begin with the more objective measure of the character's actions. Critics usually focus on the character's womanizing as the key way in which he exemplifies the masculine ideal, since "[b]eing a real man in America, after all, means...displaying one's [sexual] prowess in a culture ruled by compulsory heterosexuality" (Zaborowska 123-124). Yet we never see the father's promiscuity first-hand, nor even, in fact, second-hand: David admits that he had no awareness of his father's alleged exploits at the time (16). All we get is an accusation from Ellen about her brother "interfering" with a great many women—an accusation that is never defined further (David fills in its probable meaning in his own mind) and which the father refuses to discuss, side-stepping the entire issue with an angry, nervous stammer (16). Only *after* this incident does David recognize any womanizing tendencies in his father. Ellen's words create a lens through which David retroactively views his father's supposed activities: "[F]rom that evening, I thought about them all the time. I could scarcely ever face a woman without wondering whether or not my father had, in Ellen's phrase, been 'interfering' with her" (16). The fact that David has no awareness of his father's behavior strikes me as important. David has many faults as a character, but a lack of observational skill is not one of them; he is a keen observer of people and their behavior. It therefore seems odd that, even as a thirteen-year-old, he should completely fail to notice what allegedly has been a serial pattern of promiscuity by his father. With this detail,

Baldwin gives us cause to question the seemingly straightforward heterosexuality of David's father.

Far from merely “emphasiz[ing] the heterosexuality of David's father,” as DeGout asserts (430), Baldwin takes pains to highlight the potential dual nature of David's father's behavior. Before the fight resulting from Ellen's accusations about her brother's sexual exploits, David's only awareness of his father's sexuality comes from his memories of the cocktail parties his father and aunt would sometimes throw: “Then was my father at his best, boyish and expansive, moving about through the crowded room with a glass in his hand, refilling people's drinks, laughing a lot, handling all the men as though they were his brothers, and flirting with the women. Or no, not flirting with them, strutting like a cock before them” (13). The last phrase is the most important; in this context, David's father's “strutting like a cock” suggests less the prototypical male competition for a mate than a high degree of self-consciousness in his father's display of virility—one which undercuts the alleged naturalness of his performance of masculine sexuality¹⁴—or even a more direct attempt to appeal to the men present at the parties.

Baldwin filters both this scenario and the one previously described through David's perception, but a comparison of the language used in describing the two scenarios underscores the differences between them. The thirteen-year-old David remembers perfectly the conversation between his father and Ellen, but his memory of his father's actual behavior is much less clear; he is able to say only, “I don't think I did know about [his women]” (16). This tentative, uncertain language suggests again that his knowledge of this time and its occurrence might have been shaped after the fact or influenced by someone else; he proves unable to remember definitively any example of his father exhibiting genuine, unforced interest in women.

¹⁴ The image of David's father “strutting like a cock” also brings to mind the transvestites in Guillaume's bar, who David describes as “look[ing] like a peacock garden and sound[ing] like a barnyard” (29), further suggesting a denaturalized quality in the gender performance of David's father.

In contrast, his much earlier memory of his father “strutting like a cock before [his female cocktail party guests]” (13) is concrete and specific; he remembers perfectly the artificial, self-conscious nature of his father’s interactions with women. Of course, it goes almost without saying that even if David’s father does exhibit the kinds of promiscuous heterosexual behavior that Ellen, and later David, attribute to him, that does not necessarily mean that his character is free of homoerotic potential; after all, David is also heterosexually promiscuous. But Baldwin seems here to suggest a degree of complexity in David’s father’s sexuality at odds with the usual reading of the character as uncomplicatedly and traditionally straight.

Baldwin further hints at the latent homoerotic potential found in David’s father through his habit of textually invoking the character during David’s moments of sexual crisis. The novel’s first mention of David’s father comes after David awakens in bed next to his friend Joey, with whom he has just shared his first homosexual experience, and almost immediately begins to panic. David’s fear and shame after this encounter are directly and specifically linked to his father—not, interestingly, to his father’s potential reaction to the knowledge of his son’s affair, but, much more ambiguously, to the mere suggestion of his father: “Then I thought of my father, who had no one in the world but me, my mother having died when I was little. A cavern opened in my mind, black, full of rumor, suggestion, of half-heard, half-forgotten, half-understood stories, full of dirty words. I thought I saw my future in that cavern” (9-10). It is significant that it is the thought of David’s father, not of his own actions, that causes David to put words (barely articulated though they may be) to the threat against his manhood and the very fabric of society that he fears. By causing the figure of David’s father to call to mind the “half-heard, half-forgotten, half-understood stories” (9) about homosexuals that David remembers hearing, Baldwin implies that David’s father may have been the subject of some of those stories himself.

Other instances of Baldwin bringing David's father into David's moments of sexual crisis, less overt but no less significant, appear throughout the novel. One such moment occurs the morning after David meets Giovanni in Guillaume's bar, when David, Giovanni, Guillaume, and Jacques have breakfast together in Les Halles. As David internally struggles over whether he should allow himself to spend more time with Giovanni, a path that is clearly going to lead to a sexual relationship, David and Jacques observe the predatory Guillaume attempting to pick up a young boy in the bar. David, watching the old man buy the younger a drink, jokes, "Things my father never told me," to which Jacques replies, much more seriously, "*Somebody*...your father or mine, should have told us that not many people have ever died of love. But multitudes have perished, and are perishing every hour – and in the oddest places! – for the lack of it" (63). Later in the novel, after David and Giovanni have been involved for some time, David receives a letter from his father imploring him to return home to America, settle down, and start a family. After reading the letter, David watches a young, handsome sailor stroll down the avenue before realizing with embarrassment that the sailor has noticed David's appreciative gaze and is repelled by it. This paragon of masculine beauty, whom David regards with "envy and desire" (100), prompts David to wonder about himself and, somewhat oddly, his father: "I was staring at [the sailor], though I did not know it, and wishing I were he....He wore his masculinity as unequivocally as he wore his skin....I wondered if my father had ever been like that, if I had ever been like that – though it was hard to imagine, for this boy, striding across the avenue like light itself, any antecedents, any connections at all" (99-100). What is most telling about these instances is that each is an example of Baldwin effectively shoehorning, for lack of a better word, David's father into a moment where he has no real cause to be. By raising the spectre of David's father during scenes in which there is no narrative reason for his character to appear,

Baldwin links David's father to key moments of homoerotic sexual crisis in the novel, suggesting that his character, too, contains homoerotic potential. In fact, David's very act of remembrance, the entire reason for the dark night of the soul that frames the novel, is evoked in terms that call to mind David's memories of his father. Just as David opens the novel "watch[ing his] reflection in the darkening gleam of the window pane" (3) and ends it still "watching, in the window pane, [his] reflection, which steadily becomes more faint" until it "seem[s] to be fading away before [his] eyes" (182), he recalls being a child and watching his father engage in significantly similar behavior: "I remember him sitting bent forward, his elbows on his knees, staring towards the great window which held back the inky night. I used to wonder what he was thinking" (12). David may be left wondering, but Baldwin provides readers with many clues.

Furthermore, Baldwin's use of parallel imagery to describe David's father and Giovanni suggests that he intends that David's father be read as a potentially homoerotic character. The disregard that David's father exhibits toward Ellen's opinions and feelings ("If you think – if you *think* – that I'm going to stand – stand – stand here – and argue with *you* about my private life – *my* private life! if you think I'm going to argue with *you* about it, why, you're out of your mind," he rages [15-16]) finds an echo in Giovanni's later casual and unquestioning misogyny ("[T]hese absurd women running around today, full of ideas and nonsense, and thinking themselves equal to men – *quelle rigolade!* – they need to be beaten half to death so that they can find out who rules the world" [86]), reflecting perhaps the assumed hatred of women assigned to homosexual men at the time. Before David describes Giovanni's body as "glow[ing] in the light" (157) or mentions seeing "all of the light of that gloomy tunnel trapped around his head" (47), he recalls the childhood image of "my father washed in the gold light which spilled down

on him from the tall lamp which stood beside his easy chair” (12). Even the rooms with which David most associates them evoke one another. Of Giovanni’s room, Baldwin writes:

[O]n this wall a lady in a hoop skirt and a man in knee breeches perpetually walked together, hemmed in by roses....And I stared at the room with the same, nervous, calculating extension of the intelligence and of all one’s forces which occurs when gauging a mortal and unavoidable danger: at the silent walls of the room with its distant, archaic lovers trapped in an interminable rose garden. (93; 95)

Compare that description to David’s early memory of his father’s living room:

I remember when I was very young how, in the big living room of the house in San Francisco, my mother’s photograph, which stood all by itself on the mantelpiece, seemed to rule the room. It was as though her photograph proved how her spirit dominated that air and controlled us all. I remember the shadows gathering in the dark corners of that room, in which I never felt at home... (11-12)

Both rooms seem ruled over by an imposed heteronormativity which traps, stifles, and threatens, suggesting similarities between the rooms’ inhabitants. Perhaps the most telling link between Giovanni and David’s father, however, takes place off of the page, in the reader’s mind; near the end of the novel, as David prepares to leave Giovanni behind for good, he looks back at his lover and thinks, “Then something opened in my brain, a secret, noiseless door swung open, frightening me: it had not occurred to me until that instant that, in fleeing from his body, I confirmed and perpetuated his body’s power over me” (157-158). As David faces this terrifying prospect, readers perhaps inevitably recall the last person from whom David took similar flight: his father, whose at least partial power over David’s physical and mental state throughout the novel is rarely in question.

Clearly, then, Baldwin offers us the potential for a homoerotic reading of the character of David’s father. In and of itself, this potential, while interesting, is not necessarily significant. Where it *does* prove significant, however, is in the new light it sheds on the novel’s father-son

relationship(s), as well as in the greater thematic weight it lends to them. Hinting at David's father's potential homosexuality troubles the traditional associations that have accompanied the character; no longer can we read him as metonymically identical to the single-faceted concepts that David associates with "America" and "home." This homoerotic potential thereby problematizes the entire schematic by which critics have read and responded to *Giovanni's Room*. David does not hate his father because of his oppressively American values; he hates him because of his failures *as a father*, and these failures are, I argue, related directly to the undercurrent of homoeroticism in his character.¹⁵

There are two defining moments in the evolution of David's relationship with his father, both of which develop out of the homoerotic potential found in David's father. The first occurs the night the thirteen-year-old David overhears Ellen and his father arguing about his father's drunkenness and promiscuity. After Ellen accuses David's father of flaunting his sexual relationships in his young son's face—and asks him, with more than a touch of (justifiable) fury, "Do you really think...that you're the kind of man he ought to be when he grows up?" (15)¹⁶—David's father responds by angrily telling her exactly what his priorities for David are: "And

¹⁵ This distinction relates to what I see as a downfall in much criticism of *Giovanni's Room*—its failure to distinguish among the qualities that David admires in general, the qualities that David sees in himself, and the qualities that David wants in a *father*, specifically. The critics I cite earlier emphasize how David feels threatened by the "typical" masculinity they ascribe to his father, but in truth David is far more admiring of masculinity than he is threatened by it. He finds "pure" masculinity comforting; it reassures him of the way that he feels the world should be. He is threatened by masculinity only in what he sees as its "corrupted" forms. In the aforementioned interaction when David watches the sailor stroll by and thinks of his father, he feels threatened not by the sight of the man himself, who "wore his masculinity as unequivocally as he wore his skin" (99), but by the man *looking back at him*—back at David, who already feels he is a failure as a man: "[A]s though he had seen some all-revealing panic in my eyes, he gave me a look contemptuously lewd and knowing....I was certain that there would erupt into speech...some brutal variation of *Look, baby, I know you*" (100). In the same way that David is bothered not by masculinity but by *failed* masculinity, he is bothered not by his father's all-American values—which he actually shares and supports—but by the fact that his father cannot live up to them, that he cannot be the flawless father figure that David wants.

¹⁶ It is possible to read Ellen here as suspecting homoerotic tendencies in her brother. Such a reading would account for the nervousness she exhibits at the family cocktail parties as she "watch[es] him as though she were afraid he would do something awful" (13), as well as reinforce the parallels between Ellen and Hella, who later laments to David, after finding him in a gay bar, "But I *knew*...I knew. This is what makes me so ashamed. I knew it every time you looked at me. I knew it every time we went to bed. If only you had told me the truth *then*" (179).

listen,' said my father suddenly, from the middle of the staircase, in a voice which frightened me, 'all I want for David is that he grow up to be a man. And when I say a man, Ellen, I don't mean a Sunday school teacher'" (16). David dates his hatred of his father to this moment. Although he claims not to know why his father's statement made him feel such strong loathing, David clearly takes this declaration as an indication that his father feels there is something wrong with him—that he is somehow deficient or lacking as a man, too like a stereotypically soft-spoken, mild-mannered Sunday school teacher, to ever develop into a real, red-blooded American man—and critics have agreed. I suggest an alternative meaning in the words of David's father, a meaning that David, ignorant of his father's pain, misinterprets: that what we see in this moment is David's father recognizing in his son the same kind of inner turmoil from which he suffers, and that his wish for David to "grow up to be a man" is a wish for his son to avoid the pain he himself has known, the "internal terror [he tries to escape] by recourse to alcohol" (Summers 178).

And suffer he does, as is made plain in the other defining moment in the relationship between David and his father, which occurs after David gets drunk at a party and crashes a car in which he and several other people are traveling.¹⁷ This crash occurs after David has spent an unspecified but presumably prolonged period of time attempting to drown out the fear awakened by his sexual experience with his friend Joey, a fear which manifests itself in "very nasty" (10) behavior toward Joey and "secretive and cruel" (17) behavior toward his father. David wakes up, bruised and battered, in a hospital bed to find his father standing over him, and as his frightened father reprimands him, David begins to cry: "And my father's face changed. It became terribly old and at the same time absolutely, helplessly young. I remember being

¹⁷ Although David says simply that "something weird happened to all my reactions, and the car sprang suddenly out of my control," the implication is that he intentionally crashes the car in a failed attempt at suicide spurred on by his intense unhappiness (19).

absolutely astonished, at the still, cold center of the storm which was occurring in me, to realize that my father had been suffering, was suffering still” (20).

Scholarly evaluations of this passage have been bafflingly few, especially given the novel’s epigraph—“I am the man, I suffered, I was there,” by Walt Whitman—and the generally recognized role that suffering plays in the novel as a key element to discovering one’s identity. Focusing instead on David’s father’s repeated requests for absolution –““There’s nothing wrong, is there? I haven’t done anything wrong, have I?...You got nothing against me, have you? Tell me if you have?”” (20-21) –critics rightly read the scene as an attempt by David’s father to avoid responsibility for his son’s dangerous rebellion. Where I differ from them is in the motivation I ascribe to his attempts at evasion. The language of this passage foreshadows Baldwin’s 1961 essay “Notes for a Hypothetical Novel,” in which he writes, “[I]n the beginning I thought that the white world was very different from the world I was moving out of and I turned out to be entirely wrong” (226-227). “It seemed different,” he adds, “...[b]ut I didn’t meet anyone in that world who didn’t suffer from the very same affliction that all the people I had fled from suffered from and that was that they didn’t know who they were. They wanted to be something that they were not” (“Hypothetical” 226-227).

This suggests the need for a much more complicated reading of David’s father in this moment than the one critics usually afford him. Here, they see a man willfully blind to his son’s pain, while I see a man all *too* conscious of his son’s pain—in fact, sharing a similar pain—but unable to bear the burden of guilt that would come with admitting his own culpability. David says as much, in one of his rare moments of charity toward his father: “He was unable to believe that there could be anything seriously wrong between us...[H]e would then have had to face the knowledge that he had left something, somewhere, undone, something of the utmost

importance...[But] neither of us had any idea of what this so significant omission could have been” (17-18). In other words, David and his father suffer from the same relationship imbalance that will later afflict David and Giovanni—the refusal of one man honestly and emotionally to open himself to the other.

In a passage from his late essay “Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood,” Baldwin suggests a process of ego-building that resonates strongly with the main father-son relationship in *Giovanni’s Room*:

[W]e all exist, after all, and crucially, in the eye of the beholder. We all react to and, to whatever extent, become what that eye sees. This judgment begins in the eyes of one’s parents (the crucial, the definitive, the all-but-everlasting judgment), and so we move, in the vast and claustrophobic gallery of Others, on up or down the line, to the eye of one’s enemy or one’s friend or one’s lover. It is virtually impossible to trust one’s human value without the collaboration or corroboration of that eye – which is to say that no one can live without it. One can, of course, instruct that eye as to what to see, but this effort, which is nothing less than ruthless intimidation, is wounding and exhausting: While it can keep humiliation at bay, it confirms the fact that humiliation is the central danger of one’s life. And since one cannot risk love without risking humiliation, love becomes impossible. (816-817)

The relationship between David and his father exemplifies the “wounding and exhausting” aspects of this model. David’s father, desperate to shore up his own flawed masculinity, attempts to “instruct” his son on how to see himself and the world. The young, impressionable David sees only the façade of the flawlessly masculine man he can never be, a man who has failed to fulfill his fatherly duties, and as a result, David grows to hate him. In a tragic irony, however, David repeats the same pattern in his relationship with Giovanni. Mae G. Henderson argues that “[a]s the relationship develops, both David and Giovanni act out the roles of lovers and family surrogates, each drawing a sense of self from the other” (318), but such a circumstance is at best temporary and perhaps never the case at all. By the time the two men meet, it is already too late for David; he has learned his father’s lessons all too well. In his mania

to make himself fit into the heteronormative social models of his country and time, David refuses to allow the world to see him as anything other than masculine and pure, untainted by any vestige of homoerotic desire,¹⁸ and so the love between him and Giovanni becomes impossible. The breakdown of the novel's primary father-son relationship thus sets the stage for the collapse of the novel's central relationship, pointing to the failure of paternity—and the potentially disastrous consequences of that failure—as one of the main concerns of *Giovanni's Room*.

¹⁸ Most of the world, at any rate, since he does eventually allow *le milieu* to witness his relationship with Giovanni, though he is decidedly unhappy about it even then: "I watched [Giovanni] as he moved. 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 that 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" (42).

CHAPTER II

Teach Them Well and Let Them Lead the Way: Baldwin's Critique of Reproductive Futurism

Baldwin's treatment of David's father is symptomatic of the text's much broader engagement with issues relating to paternity, which can best be understood by reading *Giovanni's Room* through the lens of what queer theorist Lee Edelman, in his foundational *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), terms reproductive futurism. Edelman's work interrogates the cultural emphasis placed on "a set of values widely thought of as extrapolitical...that focus on the protection of children" (1). There is, he says, a "social consensus that such an appeal is impossible to refuse" (2), a consensus that he claims is nevertheless necessarily "political insofar as the fantasy subtending the image of the Child invariably shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought" (Edelman 2). In such a system, the Child ensures that "the absolute privilege of heteronormativity [is preserved] by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations" (Edelman 2). This entire system of communal relations is therefore constructed in order to appease the imaginary needs of this imaginary Child, who "remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic [*sic*] beneficiary of every political intervention" (Edelman 3). Edelman, careful to distinguish the figure of the Child from "the lived experience of any historical children" (11), critiques this image as being created "for the satisfaction of adults" (21) who want to "prescribe what will *count* as political discourse—by compelling such discourse to accede in advance to the reality of a collective future whose figurative status we are never permitted to acknowledge or

address” (11). In a culture of reproductive futurism, to refuse the imperative of reproduction for *any* reason is in effect to refuse to participate fully in society, but to refuse exclusively heterogenital sexuality is to threaten the very fabric *of* that society: “*queerness* names the side of those *not* ‘fighting for the children,’ the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism....[T]he queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure...the negativity opposed to every form of social viability” (Edelman 3; 9).

Building on Edelman’s work, Noreen Giffney further notes that “[r]eproductive futurism is a more specific term than [its close cousin] heteronormativity in that it describes the process through which heterosexuality becomes heteronormative. Heteronormativity is thus a term to describe a conglomerate of *effects* while reproductive futurism signifies the *process* through which such effects are wrought” (64, emphasis added). Because culture “fixates on the future as fetish” (Giffney 72), the figure of the Child thus “becomes a means to an end; a prosthetic conduit through which access to the future can be achieved” (Giffney 72). Reproductive futurism, then, is both “‘heterocycloptic,’ bound up with the desiring gaze and the setting-out of a developmental trajectory of ‘progress’ moving endlessly towards a ‘better’ future, in the process imposing a panopticon-like self-surveillance,” as well as “‘hetero-prophetic’ in that it tries to set out programmatically what will transpire in the future: a future ‘endlessly postponed’ ([Edelman] 13), thus holding the present to ransom” (Giffney 64; 65). Under such a system, individuals are caught up in this ‘endlessly postponed’ sense of the world, creating of the future an inexhaustible site of identity renewal and allowing society to bury its collective head in the sand in regards to the necessity of change in the present.

Although written decades before the advent of queer theory and nearly half a century before Edelman first used the phrase “reproductive futurism,” *Giovanni’s Room* enacts a critique

of the failings of that system of ideology.¹⁹ The characters in Baldwin's novel demonstrate the failings of a society so focused on the desire for an eternally perfectible (because eternally yet-to-be) future, personified in the figure of the Child who will never grow up and who represents "[societal] identification with an always-about-to-be-realized identity" (Edelman 13), that it permits—in fact, all but demands—that individuals either ignore or flatly deny the more pressing needs and desires of the present. Indeed, one of the main tragedies of *Giovanni's Room* is that its characters are held hostage by the relentless tyranny of always looking toward or living for the future instead of focusing on the *now*. To put a finer point on the matter, the characters in the novel are so focused on accessing the heteronormative, identity-making future through heterogenital reproduction that they find themselves incapable of accepting a present that differs in any way from the vision of the world that reproductive futurism, "all-encompassing [and] operating at the level of ideology" (Giffney 64), insists is and must be true.

Obviously David is the character in the novel most concerned with paternity, both in general and, more particularly, in his own paternal potential. This fixation, especially noticeable whenever David is about to have a significant homosexual encounter, seems at least partially provoked by his constant feeling that he lives in a kind of paternal void, absent any sense of true filial direction. His teenaged sexual experience with Joey occurs at Joey's house when Joey's

¹⁹ In making such a claim, I do not mean to deny the very real ways in which the novel remains a product of its historical moment and, to some degree, reifies the very stereotypes it purports to challenge. DeGout, for instance, usefully outlines how *Giovanni's Room* creates contradictory portraits of homosexual love as both a beautiful, enlightening experience and a pathological condition created by personal trauma (426). More recently, Keith Mitchell has examined how *Giovanni's Room* is steeped in what Julia Kristeva calls the abject, or that which "disturbs identity, system, order" (Kristeva 4) and must be rejected or Othered in order for one to retain the fiction of subjective wholeness. Mitchell discusses Baldwin's corpse/cadaver imagery, "the ultimate symbol of abjection for Kristeva" (263), as well as his repeated contrasting of the cleanliness of heterosexual masculinity with the dirty, inhuman filth of feminized homosexual behavior, and ultimately concludes that "[I]nstead of showing the possibilities of desire outside of the trap of compulsory heterosexuality, the novel delineates nonheteronormative people and women as not only lack but also as pathological. Moreover, 'femininity'...is repeatedly positioned in *Giovanni's Room* as monstrous and abject in order to promote heteronormative notions of (black) masculinity. As such, Baldwin falls into the very trap of masculine, patriarchal oppression from which he tries to extricate himself and the rest of American society" (270-271).

parents are out of town; they spend the evening before “walking down the dark, tropical Brooklyn streets [together],” where David describes seeing what seemed like “all the world’s grownups” sitting helplessly by, “shrill and disheveled on the stoops” while “all the world’s children [were out] on the sidewalks or in the gutters or hanging from fire escapes” (7). Before he and Giovanni make love for the first time, he becomes “frightened” by the sense that he is only “a wanderer, an adventurer, rocking through the world, unanchored” (68) and recalls “ach[ing] abruptly, intolerably, with a longing to go home...to those...people which I would always, helplessly, and in whatever bitterness of spirit, love above all else” (67-68), his father presumably first among them. In contrast, David’s main sexual encounters with women are bookended by a sense of more direct paternal influence: he callously seduces the young, lonely Sue after being upset by a letter he receives from his father, and the sex he shares with Hella after her return from Spain is preceded by a discussion of their mutual desire for children—“‘Hell, I want to be knocked up. I want to start having babies. In a way, it’s all I’m really good for.’ There was silence again. ‘Is that what you want?’ [she asked.] ‘Yes,’ I said, ‘I’ve always wanted that’” (134)—and followed by David writing to his father, formally announcing his and Hella’s engagement.

As early as the novel’s opening paragraph, Baldwin emphasizes the importance of paternity to David, who begins the night before Giovanni’s execution ruminating on how his physical body is inscribed with his family history: “I watch my reflection in the darkening gleam of the window pane. My reflection is tall, perhaps rather like an arrow, my blond 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). That David introduces himself to readers through an immediate, self-

conscious situating of himself in relation to his ancestry is significant; aside from priming the audience to consider how issues of paternity play out throughout the rest of David's narrative, it also suggests a hyper-awareness of his as-yet tenuous position in his family's history. Unlike his ancestors, who subdued whole continents in the name of progress, David has conquered nothing. He cannot establish himself as a man, as a father, or as an individual through his own accomplishments because he has none; although "pushing thirty" (98) at the time of the events of *Giovanni's Room*, David is a perpetual drifter through his life so far, lacking family, career, and any real ambition or goals. His only real claim to personal identity is as a member of that unbroken ancestral chain of history; he attempts to relate himself to their accomplishments because he has none of his own of which to boast. He has, in fact, effectively *reversed* their accomplishments—not merely by his failure to procreate and carry on the family name,²⁰ but also by his fleeing from America back to Europe, essentially un-making his ancestors' voyage west. David's intense, even obsessive desire to become a father is therefore reflective of what Elias Canetti has said about "the human subject's investment in futurity: '[He] not only want[s] to exist for always, but to exist when others are no longer there. He wants to live longer than everyone else, and to *know* it; and when he is no longer there himself, his name must continue'" (qtd. in Edelman 34). David's very existence serves as the most basic form of validation for his ancestors, of his father and his father's father before him, and his failure to validate similarly his own existence torments him.

²⁰ In fact, none of the main characters except David's fiancé, Hella Lincoln, have last or "family" names, suggesting a profound disconnect between these individuals and their respective places in their family histories. As mentioned earlier, Hella's last name carries ironic overtones of the freedom that, for David, she definitely does not represent, but it is also worth noting that (if we follow the critical practice of sometimes reading characters as people and not solely as characters) her last name is effectively meaningless, as it would presumably be changing upon her marriage to David or some other man.

Thus, regardless of whether David exhibits heterosexual or homosexual behavior²¹ at any given time, we may safely say that he is always, in a sense, behaving heteronormatively. Reproductive futurism, as an ideological system that operates to ascribe meaning, “sets limits on, not just what we think or do, but also on what and how we desire” (Giffney 64). For all that David seems to live primarily in the subjunctive mood, navigating a complex web of possible outcomes for every action—even, at times, mentally re-casting these imaginings as objective reality²²—he exhibits a consistent inability to imagine any kind of life for himself other than the one he has always been told that he should want: “Yet it was true, I recalled, turning away from the river down the long street home, 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” (113). David does not merely reject the possibility of a life with Giovanni; rather, he literally cannot conceive (pardon the pun) of how such a possibility could even exist. Even as Giovanni falls to pieces in the face of David’s abandonment, David clings to his belief that what Giovanni really wants is not a relationship with David but a traditional, heterosexual marriage²³:

“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

²¹ The precise nature of David’s sexuality is the subject of some scholarly contention; critics have referred to him alternatively as homosexual, bisexual, and a variety of other descriptors. Such attempts at rigid categorization seem to me, however, to be positively anti-Baldwinian in spirit, and so whenever possible I have referred not to “David’s sexuality,” an amorphous quality that even Baldwin himself seems not to be sure of, but rather to the more objectively categorizable measure of David’s sexual *behavior*.

²² Jurgen E. Grandt’s recent article on cultural authenticity in *Giovanni’s Room* usefully addresses this issue when talking about David imagining how Giovanni comes to murder Guillaume: “It is important to note that the maudlin melodrama David puts before us is a product of his creative, perhaps even revisionist, *imagination*: rather than a flaw of Baldwin’s narration as many critics have asserted, it is a necessary element of David’s character,” one which “allows him to position himself” entirely outside the circumstances that lead to the murder, thus exonerating himself from any real guilt for the crime (285).

²³ Even after Giovanni murders Guillaume and faces execution for the crime, David continues to believe that Giovanni really wanted to be with a woman; after he and Jacques discuss Giovanni’s crime and Jacques reflects that “[n]obody can stay in the garden of Eden,” David thinks, “[I]t’s true that nobody stays in the garden of Eden. Jacques’ garden was not the same as Giovanni’s, of course. Jacques’ garden was involved with football players and Giovanni’s was involved with maidens” (27).

and lie with you at night and be your little *girl*. That's what you want...[T]hat's *all* you mean when you say you love me."

"I am not trying to make you a little girl. If I wanted a little girl, I would be *with* a little girl."

"Why aren't you? Isn't it just that you're afraid? And you take *me* because you haven't got the guts to go after a woman, which is what you *really* want?" (155)

This precise issue forces David's final break with Giovanni; as they fight, David asks his distraught lover, "What kind of life can we have in this room? – this filthy little room. What kind of life can two men have together, anyway?...I'm a man...a man! What do you think can *happen* between us?" (155-156)

When David speaks of his desire for a wife and children, as he repeatedly does, one is left with the very real sense that, in David's mind, the wife is subordinate to the children, almost an afterthought. For David, the real difference between Giovanni and Hella has less to do with the fact that one is a man and one a woman than with the fact that only one of those couplings will allow him the chance to become a father, which is his ultimate aim. Giovanni appears to recognize this; when David despairs of their ability to "have a life" together, Giovanni says, "But you can have a life with Hella. With that moon-faced little girl who thinks babies come out of cabbages – or Frigidaires, I am not acquainted with the mythology of your country. You can have a life with her," to which David replies simply, "Yes...I can have a life with her" (155). The men's speech here operates on two levels, both of which are significant to my argument. The surface meaning is that David feels that he and Giovanni cannot "have a life" in the sense that a romantic and/or sexual relationship between men (or, more broadly, any non-heteronormative relationship) is untenable in a heteronormative environment. But Baldwin also draws on the *other* meaning inherent in the phrase "have a life," inviting readers to consider the less immediately obvious but more technically precise meaning: because David and Giovanni are

both men, they cannot produce a child together. They quite literally cannot “have a life” in the same way that David and Hella (or David and almost any woman) can.

For the paternity-obsessed David, this biological fact outweighs all other concerns. Children exist, for David, not merely as “[utopian] site[s] of almost limitless potential” (Bruhm and Hurley xiii) through which he can shape a new future that will prove he is unquestionably masculine, straight, and normal, but also essentially to re-create the past, to demonstrate by their very existence that he was *always* that sort of man. David sees children as redemptive figures, which accounts for his sense that his sexual history with men is excusable as long as he eventually goes on to father children: “It would be something that had happened to me once – it would be something that had happened to many men once” (102). Although he is not, strictly speaking, uninterested in women, when he does express desire for them, it is usually in some way related to their reproductive potential. Even when he speaks of “want[ing] a woman to be for me a steady ground...where I could always be renewed,” he does so in the context of envisioning a future that involves children who will serve as proof of his masculine identity, who will allow his “manhood [to remain] unquestioned” (113).

David’s renewal, in other words, would be the product not of any (heterosexual) sex he might have with his wife, but of the children that such sexual activity could possibly produce. In fact, throughout the novel, David appears to set up a dichotomy not between homosexual behavior and heterosexual behavior, as might be expected, but rather between homosexual behavior and paternity. Whatever his primary inclination, David consistently exhibits bisexual behavior, and at no point in the novel does he seem seriously to think that his desire for men will simply go away if he has sex with enough women; indeed, he pointedly reminds readers time and again that it does not. Even after he “decide[s] to allow no room in the universe for something

[desire for men] which shame[s] and frighten[s him]” and spends time “wandering through the forests of desperate women” before he leaves for France, he still experiences “a number of [homosexual encounters], all drunken, all sordid, [including] one very frightening such drop while I was in the Army which involved a fairy who was later court-martialed out” (22). This pattern continues in Europe: on the night he first meets Giovanni and begins to realize the inevitability of what their relationship will be, David thinks, “I wished...that I had been able to find in myself the force to turn and walk out – to have gone over to Montparnasse perhaps and picked up a girl. Any girl. I could not do it...And this was partly because I knew that it did not really matter anymore” – because he recognizes that proving himself capable of sex with a woman will do nothing to change “[his] awakening, [his] insistent possibilities” for erotic attraction to men (46). His seduction of Sue, though motivated by the desire “to find a girl, any girl at all,” ends with his recognition that “what [he] had been afraid of had nothing to do with [his] body” (103; 109). Tellingly, the only time David *does* engage in such magical thinking is with Hella, the woman with whom he hopes seriously to have children (“I hoped to burn out, through Hella, my image of Giovanni and the reality of his touch – I hoped to drive out fire with fire” [133]), and even then, he vacillates wildly about consummating their relationship – until, that is, Hella brings up her desire to have children, at which point they immediately go to bed.

For David, then, it is not heterosexual sexual behavior as such but rather the potential outcome of such behavior—children—that acts as the diametric opposite of homosexual desire.²⁴

Given that David never stops wishing that he could be rid of his homoerotic urges—witness his

²⁴ Given the long-standing societal view of queerness as sterility, this makes sense. Giffney reminds us that “[w]hile the Child is understood as the apotheosis of life, the Queer is set up as the epitome of death. Indeed, same-sex desire has become synonymous with death in the homophobic imagination; death understood as the foreclosure of reproduction in sexual acts performed by same-sex couples, the death of civilisation [*sic*] as a consequence of the ‘ills’ of ‘the homosexual lifestyle’” (64). In a culture of reproductive futurism, non-heteroreproductive relationships are deemed pathetic and unacceptable because of the assumed cultural link “between practices of gay sexuality and the undoing of futurity” – in other words, because “nonregenerative sexual enjoyment...[is] empty, substitutive, [and] pathological” (Edelman 19; 12).

last-page confession that he “must believe...that the heavy grace of God, which has brought [him] to this place, is all that can carry [him] out of it” (185)—in that sense, the text actually constructs *children* as David’s desired erotic objects. Kevin Ohi explicates James Kincaid’s theory of “erotic innocence” in a way that seems tailor-made for an exploration of this aspect of *Giovanni’s Room*: “the thoroughgoing eroticization of children in our culture proceeds, [Kincaid] suggests, by way of their emphatic de-eroticization, a cultural doublespeak that allows us the pleasures of imagining and perpetuating the victimization of children while [simultaneously] praising ourselves for protecting them” (82). After sleeping with Sue, David wanders along the Seine, despairing of his situation with Giovanni and Hella, and begins to imagine the lives of the people, particularly the children, living in the houses he sees:

Behind the walls of the houses I passed, the French nation was clearing away the dishes, putting little Jean Pierre and Marie to bed, scowling over the eternal problems of the sou, the shop, the church, the unsteady State. Those walls, those shuttered windows held them in and protected them against the darkness and the long moan of this long night. Ten years hence, little Jean Pierre or Marie might find themselves out here beside the river and wonder, like me, how they have fallen out of the web of safety. What a long way, I thought, I’ve come – to be destroyed!

Yet it was true, I recalled, turning away from the river down the long street home, I wanted children. (113)

In this passage, David romanticizes the innocence of the imagined children in a manner that reflects what Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley have identified as the “dominant narrative about children: [that they] are (and should stay) innocent of sexual desires and intentions” (ix). David laments the children’s presumptive passage from innocence into experience, the loss of the kind of “safety” that he feels has led him toward destruction and will, one day, do the same for them. Yet despite his avowed sadness over the “fall” he imagines will happen to them someday, David actually *precipitates* that fall, imaginatively projecting the invented children into those roles in his own mind; to mourn the children’s loss of innocence—a loss presumably at least somewhat

sexual in nature—is necessarily to first imagine the means by which to effect that loss, thereby casting the children into his sexual fantasies in a way that the very existence of those children (children that he, by mentally creating them, essentially fathers) was supposed to make impossible.

The redemptive power of paternity—or, more precisely, the damning power of non-reproduction—is on display throughout *Giovanni's Room*. By depicting not only what Cyraina Johnson-Rouiller called “the homosexual actuality that lives...on the silent fringes of heterosexual society” but also “the other, silent (and silenced) side of the heterosexual actuality of marriage and children” (144), Baldwin reveals a larger pattern of what I will term “paternal displacement” within the novel’s homoerotic relationships, a pattern in which the novel’s main characters seek to (re-)create themselves by projecting or displacing their feelings of paternal rage and guilt onto others.²⁵ In brief, as David’s father displaces his feelings of shame about his imperfect masculinity and manhood onto his son, so David in turn displaces his own feelings of

²⁵ Recognizing how this pattern of paternal displacement and Kincaid’s cultural doublespeak of erotic innocence underlie *Giovanni's Room* also helps to make sense of the disturbing undertone of pedophilia that runs throughout the novel. Most obvious in Jacques and Guillaume’s sexual exploitation of the hungry young street boys, these tendencies also show themselves in David’s relationships with his male lovers. The morning after his first homosexual experience, David awakes and gazes on the body of his lover, describing it as beautiful in its childishness: “I awoke while Joey was still sleeping, curled like a baby on his side, toward me. He looked like a baby, his mouth half open, his cheek flushed, his curly hair darkening the pillow...Joey’s body was...the most beautiful creation I had ever seen till then” (9). He becomes disgusted by Joey’s body only after he sees its maturity: “But, above all, I was suddenly afraid. It was borne in on me: *But Joey is a boy*. I saw suddenly the power in his thighs, in his arms, and in his loosely curled fists” (9). This pattern repeats itself in David’s relationship with Giovanni. During the couple’s happier days, David tellingly describes their love as “newborn every day” (81), and Claude J. Summers notes David’s habit of referring to Giovanni as “‘baby,’ an epithet that reflects his own need to believe in Giovanni’s essentially childlike innocence” (182-183), as well as recurrent slang term of Baldwin’s. In essence, David fetishizes Giovanni’s childishness. In the Jean Pierre and Marie scene, Baldwin again plays on the double meanings in David’s speech: similar to his desire to “have a life,” David’s “want[ing] children” suggests not merely his wish to be a father, but also the possibility that his desire for children blurs the line between paternal and pedophilic urges. Psychiatrist Robert Stoller, who began studying gender identity and sexual desire in the years immediately surrounding the publication of *Giovanni's Room*, theorizes what he calls a sexual script, or a “condensed story representing an individual’s sexual desire” (Straayer 189). According to Stoller’s theory, “a person fantasizes or acts out a sexual script in order to revisit and revenge childhood trauma. The foundation of sexual excitement therefore is hostility against one’s parents” (Straayer 189). David’s borderline-pedophilic attraction to the childishness of his male lovers can therefore be read as an outgrowth of his own failed parent/child relationship. While unsettling to current readers, Baldwin’s portrayal of David’s sexuality is in keeping with mid-twentieth-century models of homosexual development and must be contextualized as such.

sexual guilt and panic onto his lover Giovanni—who, abandoned by David and unable to displace or deal with his own feelings of guilt over his son’s stillbirth back in Italy, commits murder and is executed. As David’s father fails at being the father that David so longs for, so David fails “in the role of life-giver” (Drowne 81) that Giovanni so desperately needs; his obsession with proving his own heterosexual manhood leads him to refuse to “destroy this room and give to Giovanni a new and better life” (95). And Giovanni himself has already failed at being a father even before he meets David: “I had just buried my baby in the churchyard where my father and my father’s fathers were and I had left my girl screaming in my mother’s house. Yes, I had made a baby but it was born dead” (152).

That this displacement is explicitly linked to feelings of *paternal* guilt, rather than more general feelings of shame about the failure to embody successfully the conventional masculine ideal, is suggested by the language David uses to describe the moments of crisis for the characters in the novel, as well as by range of characters implicated by it. In the relationships that Jacques and Guillaume have with the street boys they seduce, the two men are referred to as “uncles,” suggesting a kind of failed or perverted paternal urge in the desire they feel for the young men; moments before Jacques exercises a genuinely paternal urge toward David, encouraging him to pursue a relationship with Giovanni that “can give [each of you] something which will make you better – forever” (62), David observes that “Jacques would shortly offer one of the boys a drink but, for the moment, he wished to play uncle to me” (59). Jacques later laments that his father never told him “that not many people have ever died of love” but that many have died “for lack of it” (63), a failure that he seems to feel lies at the heart of his “despicable” (60)—because loveless—life.²⁶ Even more directly, the anger that leads Guillaume

²⁶ Somewhat surprisingly, Jacques is perhaps the best adjusted of the characters in *Giovanni’s Room*; he is, in fact, the only character who seems to recognize exactly what has caused his problems, even if he feels powerless to

to fire Giovanni, thus setting in motion a series of events that will eventually lead to the deaths of both men, is precipitated by Guillaume “remember[ing] that he is a member of one of the best and oldest families in France,” but that, because he has not reproduced, “his name is going to die with him” (116). And David’s father flatly acknowledges his fear that David’s many problems—the teenage rebellion, the car crash/suicide attempt, the prolonged and mysterious stay in Europe—are caused by his own failure to do his fatherly duty and “raise [David] right” (21).

Although Giovanni’s whole-hearted yearning for a genuine relationship with David would seem to suggest that he has mentally freed himself from the strictures of a society steeped in the ideological constraints of reproductive futurism, in truth he too suffers from deep guilt about his failure to become a father—or, as Robert Reid-Pharr puts it, about his failure “to produce a child, the marker of both husband and wife’s authenticity in a patriarchal economy” (*Black Gay Man* 127). Giovanni’s self-imposed exile from his hometown in Italy after the stillbirth of his son and his wish that the day he buried his son “had been the day of [his] death” (152) point to his inability to truly imagine a life for himself other than that of a husband and father; rather, he “struggles throughout [the novel]...to produce a new identity” (*Black Gay Man* 127). His attempt to re-create himself through a relationship with David is tenuous at best, threatened both by David’s reticence and his own inability to move on from his son’s stillbirth: when he hears children playing outside his room, “Giovanni...would stiffen like a hunting dog and remain perfectly silent until whatever seemed to threaten our safety had moved away” (93). Even as his relationship with David begins to fall apart, he still recognizes the day of his son’s

change them at his age (which Baldwin places somewhere around fifty): “ ‘Love him,’ said Jacques, with vehemence, ‘love him and let him love you....You play it safe long enough,’ he said, in a different tone, ‘and you’ll end up trapped forever in your own dirty body, forever and forever and forever – like me’” (62). Brett Beemyn even goes so far as to claim that Jacques is “the most direct voice of Baldwin in the novel” (63).

death as the beginning of the end for himself: “Then, looking up at me, [Giovanni said,] ‘...The worst thing [the death of his son] happened to me long ago and my life has been awful since that day’” (119). Tellingly, although David asks him about “the worst thing that ever happened *to you*” (119, emphasis added), Giovanni’s response mentions only “[t]he worst thing,” as though it is a purely objective quality, the worst thing that *could* possibly occur.

Thus, the crises of the novel’s main and supporting characters appear to be rooted not simply in their failure to meet the masculine ideal, but rather in their failure to meet the demands of heterosexual reproduction in a culture of reproductive futurism that holds up parenthood as the benchmark for establishing oneself as a full and legitimate member of society. Baldwin, however, goes still one step further. He returns again to the character of David’s father, using him to disprove the validity of the very *idea* of reproductive futurism. David foolishly convinces himself that he need only father children to save himself from the kind of life that he fears waits for him. But in the character of David’s father, Baldwin very clearly shows readers someone who already has a child, someone who has bought into the system not just through belief but through action, but for whom that system has failed completely. Just as David did not save his father from his father’s personal demons, so any children David might have would not save him from his.

It feels almost gratuitous to point out that, through his adoptive father, Baldwin had firsthand knowledge of the failings of reproductive futurism. David Baldwin, Sr., did not look on his “son” as a site of limitless potential or a blessing of any kind; despite Baldwin’s memories of some tenderness between them in his early childhood, for much of his life, their relationship was marked by anger and tension on both sides. Baldwin, Sr., made no secret that he favored his sons from a previous marriage; Baldwin even told Leeming stories about “countless desperate

letters from the father [to his older son Sam, who had left home and would not return],[which were] dictated to the despised stepson” (7). The very qualities that made Baldwin successful, his intelligence and sensitivity, were an affront to his father, who valued only the spiritual riches found through arduous and self-denying service to the church. Their fractured relationship provided Baldwin with his earliest example of paternal displacement. His father, embittered by racism, his failures with his older sons, and the demands of an ever-growing family, could not forgive Baldwin for his illegitimacy, taking his anger out on Jimmy. Jimmy, in turn, spent the rest of his life in a constant search for the kind of love that he felt only a viable father figure could give him. In the next chapter of this thesis, I will explore the autobiographical connections in the novel more fully.

CHAPTER III

Talk that Talk: Re-Scripting the Possibilities for Conversation Between Father and Son

One of the major difficulties of critically examining the father-son relationships found in Baldwin's novels is that, in the emphasis placed on these fictional relationships, one inevitably senses the echo of Baldwin's strained relationship with his own (step-)father, a man whose harsh, demanding personality and near-total lack of emotional engagement with his young son made Baldwin grow to hate him. It would be at best simplistic and at worst deeply reductive to insist on the novels as straightforward (or even very thinly veiled) autobiography, but nevertheless, it is nearly impossible for a reader with any knowledge of Baldwin's personal life to ignore the parallels between Baldwin's fictional fathers and sons and his own troubled relationship with the man who adopted him legally but never came truly to value him as a son. Nor, I think, would Baldwin expect or even necessarily want us to—this is, after all, a writer who declared in his early essay "Autobiographical Notes" that "[o]ne writes out of one thing only – one's own experience. Everything depends on how relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give. This is the only real concern of the artist, to recreate of the disorder of life that which is art" (8). One would have to be a very determined New Critic indeed not to find in such a frank authorial admission a sanction, of sorts, for autobiographical readings of his work.

Yet *Giovanni's Room* largely escapes such criticism. Critics often note the autobiographical resonances in the novel,²⁷ but their work usually focuses more on the

²⁷ For example, Leeming writes that "[a]s in the case of all Baldwin novels, there is a recognizable and specific autobiographical dimension to *Giovanni's Room*... [It] is a direct product of the ten years following his leaving

correlation between the relationship of David and Giovanni with that of Baldwin and his lover Lucien Happersberger, the young Swiss man to whom the novel is dedicated, with whom Baldwin carried on a periodic affair throughout his life and who, according to Leeming, Baldwin regarded as the true love of his life (74-75). In contrast, the autobiographical parallels in *Giovanni's Room's* primary father-son relationship garner little to no attention. Given the focus that the text places on David's troubled relationship with his father, this seems strange. Shawcross astutely observes that David's father is a less colorful (literally and figuratively) version of Gabriel Grimes, the father character in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (105), and in a very real way, *Giovanni's Room* continues the autobiographical work Baldwin began in his earlier novel; having already done much to "[confront] the historical sources of his stepfather's hostility," this novel allowed Baldwin to continue the task of "assimilating [his father] emotionally" (Leeming 91). Even more than that, I would argue that *Giovanni's Room*, upper middle class white characters and all, serves as a site through which Baldwin works out—or at least attempts to work out—some of the remaining anger and confusion with which his father's death some years previously had left him.

In his famous essay "Notes of a Native Son," Baldwin writes, "I had inclined to be contemptuous of my father for the conditions of his life, for the conditions of our lives. When his life had ended I began to wonder about that life and also, in a new way, to be apprehensive about my own" (63). This sense of wonder about his father's life and apprehension about how it might affect his own does not simply disappear between his first novel and the second, as some critics would have it; for although he is less concerned with the specific historical causes of his

home...Specifically it reflects his own wrestling with sexual ambivalence" (127). Shawcross, while generally dismissive of autobiographical readings of Baldwin's work, nevertheless admits that he "do[es] not doubt that...David present[s] an essence of the struggles of Baldwin himself in coming to grips with being...homosexual" (105). A notable exception is Summers, who scorns the suggestions of fellow critics that David could be "a disguised self-portrait of the artist," instead stating firmly that "the work is hardly autobiographical" (173).

father's frustration with him than he was in his earlier novel, in *Giovanni's Room* Baldwin is clearly still interested in exploring the effects such sustained frustration might have had on the internal life of both father and son. Just as clear autobiographical parallels exist between the character of David and Baldwin himself, so too are there parallels between David's father and Baldwin's. Though not so pronounced as in *Go Tell It*, the magnitude of these similarities certainly seems to suggest that Baldwin was consciously drawing on his father's life in order to create the character of David's father.²⁸

Baldwin wrote "Notes of a Native Son" in 1955, around the same time that he was writing *Giovanni's Room*, and the portrait that he paints of his father in the essay resonates strongly with the father character in the novel. David's father's primary relationship, other than the one with his son, is with his older sister, Ellen, with whom he shares a fraught connection characterized by mutual, barely concealed anger. Their interactions in the novel mimic the relationship that Baldwin wrote of between his father and his father's older sister. Like Ellen, who is older than her brother, whose "face and figure [were] beginning to harden," and who "frighten[s]" David (12; 13), Baldwin's unnamed aunt has "the face of an old woman... fallen in, the eyes... sunken and lightless," and she inspires in her nephew "pity and revulsion and fear" ("Notes" 75). Despite "g[etting] on very badly" (11), David's father and Ellen live together in an unhappy, codependent relationship until her death, and Baldwin describes his father's relationship with his aunt similarly: "Chief among the mourners [at his father's funeral] was my aunt, who had quarreled with my father all his life; by which I do not mean to suggest that her mourning was insincere or that she had not loved him. I suppose that she was one of the few

²⁸ By arguing this, I do not mean to imply either that David Baldwin, Sr. was homosexual or that Baldwin thought he was, though of course either speculation very well may be true. It is interesting to note, however, that when Baldwin draws on his father's life for fiction but strips him of the characteristic that most defined him socially—his race—that Baldwin instead imbues the character with pain stemming from another socially abjected role, one with which Baldwin himself was intimately familiar.

people in the world who had” (“Notes” 77). In fact, for Baldwin, the tension in their relationship is the very quality that makes it so important: “[T]heir incessant quarreling proved precisely the strength of the tie that bound them” (“Notes” 77).²⁹

Furthermore, the feelings that David’s father inspires in his son—love and hate, desperately comingled—evoke what we know to have been similar feelings on Baldwin’s behalf. Baldwin depicts his father thus: “He could be...indescribably cruel in his personal life and he was certainly the most bitter man I have ever met; yet it must be said that there was something else in him, buried in him, which lent him his tremendous power and, even, a rather crushing charm” (“Notes” 64). “There was something in him,” he adds, “...groping and tentative, which was never expressed and which was buried with him” (“Notes” 65). This portrayal calls to mind David’s description of his own father’s personality as both charismatic and punishing, “one of those people who, quick to laugh, are slow to anger; so that their anger, when it comes, is all the more impressive, seeming to leap from some unsuspected crevice like a fire which will bring the whole house down” (12). In an oft-quoted description from “Notes,” Baldwin also writes that his own father “had lived and died in an intolerable bitterness of spirit” (65), wording he directly echoes in *Giovanni’s Room* when David speaks of wishing to return home to “those people which I would always, helplessly, and in whatever *bitterness of spirit*, love above all else” (67-68, emphasis added).

Two other autobiographical parallels, somewhat less straightforward than those mentioned above, strike me as particularly worth exploring here, as they lie at the heart of what

²⁹ This points toward a contradiction in the way that critics have read David’s relationship with his father and how Baldwin relentlessly urges the need to confront one’s genealogy, as it were. The assumption seems to be that David should wholeheartedly spurn his father and the way of life his father represents. But this is not what Baldwin advocates at all. David’s relationship with his father is not doomed to failure because they fight; it is doomed to failure because they do not. It is marred by their mutual refusal, or inability, to confront one another honestly. Leaving his father behind does not free David from the psychic repercussions of their troubled relationship. Physical escape does not provide mental escape.

Baldwin is trying to do with paternity in the novel. The first seems to be modeled on a section in “Notes of a Native Son” in which Baldwin remembers “the one time in all our [his father and his] life together when we had really spoken to each other” (79). Of this occasion, Baldwin writes, “My father asked me abruptly, ‘You’d rather write than preach, wouldn’t you?’ I was astonished at his question—because it was a real question. I answered, ‘Yes.’ That was all we said. It was awful to remember that that was all we had *ever* said” (“Notes” 80). This passage recalls a similar one in *Giovanni’s Room*, in which David’s sense that any kind of genuine communication with his father is impossible culminates in his hospital-bed realization that he must never allow his father to know him at all:

“You got nothing against me, have you? Tell me if you have?” [my father asked.]

My tears began to dry, on my face and in my breast. “No,” I said, “no. Nothing. Honest.” . . .

For I understood, at the bottom of my heart, that we had never talked, that now we never would. I understood that he must never know this. . . . Once I was out of the house of course, it became much easier to deal with him and he never had any reason to feel shut out of my life for I was always able, when talking about it, to tell him what he wished to hear. And we got on quite well, really, for the vision I gave my father of my life was exactly the vision in which I myself most desperately needed to believe. (21)

Following this incident, David grows even more estranged from his father and remains that way throughout the years covered by the rest of the novel, never really succeeding in genuinely talking with his father. Nor, clearly, did Baldwin. If David is relatively content with this arrangement, however, Baldwin was not—at least not by the time he had begun his career as a writer—and *Giovanni’s Room* attests to his continued attempts to come to terms with his father.

Fittingly, given his family background and history in the church, Baldwin often found scriptural precedent for his troubled paternal relationship. He particularly seemed to relate to the Biblical story of Noah and Ham, in which Ham sees his father, Noah, lying drunk and naked in a

tent, and tells his brothers of his father's shame, for which sin Ham's son Canaan is cursed by God to be a servant to his brethren (Genesis 9:20-27). Baldwin directly engages with this story in a famous passage from *Go Tell It on the Mountain* in which the Baldwin figure, John Grimes, locked in the throes of a half-messianic, half-apocalyptic vision, recalls his sin of having seen his father naked:

Sometimes, leaning over the cracked, 'tattle-tale gray' bathtub, he scrubbed his father's back; and looked, as the accursed son of Noah had looked, on his father's hideous nakedness. It was secret, like sin, and slimy, like the serpent, and heavy, like the rod. Then he hated his father, and longed for the power to cut his father down.

Was this why he lay here, thrust out from all human or heavenly help tonight? This, and not that other, his deadly sin, having looked on his father's nakedness and mocked and cursed him in his heart? Ah, that son of Noah's had been cursed, down to the present groaning generation: *A servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.*

....How could John be cursed for having seen in a bathtub what another man—if that other man had ever lived—had seen ten thousand years ago, lying in an open tent? Could a curse come down so many ages? Did it live in time, or in the moment?

....Then John knew that a curse was renewed from moment to moment, from father to son. Time was indifferent, like snow and ice; but the heart, crazed wanderer in the driving waste, carried the curse forever. (256-257)

Baldwin clearly felt that this "curse" lay at the heart of his fractured relationship with his stepfather, who punished Baldwin for the sin of his illegitimacy—a "sin" that, like that of the cursed Canaan, was not of Baldwin's own doing. It is significant, then, that Baldwin again makes reference to the story of Ham and Noah in *Giovanni's Room*, when David describes the nature of his relationship with his own father: "[W]e took refuge in being hearty with each other....[but] I did not want to be his buddy; I wanted to be his son. What passed between us as masculine candor exhausted and appalled me. *Fathers ought to avoid utter nakedness before their sons.* I did not want to know—not, anyway, from his mouth—that his flesh was as unregenerate as my own" (18, emphasis added). While less overt than in his previous novel, this

reference reinforces the link between the relationships of David and his father and that of John and Gabriel Grimes—and, therefore, that of Baldwin and Baldwin, Sr., suggesting that in *Giovanni's Room* Baldwin was continuing to grapple with the same kinds of autobiographical issues regarding paternity that he engaged in *Go Tell It*.

Baldwin's efforts to find a common language, as it were, that would have allowed his father and him to speak to one another also help explain the reasoning behind the somewhat puzzling structure of *Giovanni's Room*, especially the framing device of the night of penance that David undergoes throughout the novel. In *Go Tell It*, John Grimes tells readers that his father's favorite Biblical text is 2 Kings 20:1, "Set thine house in order" (33). This, we know, was also Baldwin, Sr.'s favorite Bible verse, as well as the text that Baldwin himself chose to preach on for his last sermon as a boy preacher, as his own crisis of faith drove him away from the clergy and the church (Leeming 31). It comes up time and again in *Go Tell It* as Gabriel Grimes, the textual analogue to Baldwin, Sr., struggles both to accept and overcome his lot in life and as John Grimes tries desperately to forge a connection with the father he both hates and loves. What has not been recognized, however, is that Baldwin draws on this text in *Giovanni's Room*, as well. The long night of penance that frames the novel is, for David, an agonizing effort simultaneously to assume and to evade responsibility for the damages wrought by his cavalier and immoral way of life. And at this moment of absolute crisis, as David's metaphorical and Giovanni's literal lives hang in the balance, Baldwin takes a page from his father's book and has his main character quite literally set his house in order: as David reminisces about his life with Giovanni, he cleans the house that he rented of the debris that accumulated during his stay.³⁰

³⁰ David's cleaning echoes that of John Grimes in the opening of *Go Tell It*, who spends the Saturday morning of his birthday futilely attempting to clean his own home, which is "narrow and dirty; nothing could alter its dimensions, no labor could ever make it clean....John thought with shame and horror, yet in angry hardness of heart: *He who is filthy, let him be filthy still*" (18). For John, whose last name is synonymous with dirt and filth, the task of

Giovanni's Room is, essentially, a novel of recollection, with David's act of remembrance functioning as a kind of confessional between David, the penitent, and the reader, who fulfills the role of priest, left to judge whether or not David deserves forgiveness. In that sense, just as David literally cleanses the house he has rented, David's recounting of his story can be read as a metaphorical cleansing of sin. The night of penance that he undergoes in *Giovanni's Room* serves as a less literal counterpart to that of John Grimes in *Go Tell It*, with both protagonists staying up through the night, wrestling with their guilt and fear in a way that lets them effectively bear witness to readers—to share, sermon-like, the pain (and the causes of that pain) that each man has endured in his search for absolution, and to try to move forward from that point, cleansed and renewed.³¹

In *Giovanni's Room*, the night and the novel culminate in a long passage in which David experiences a kind of messianic vision that parallels that of John Grimes in *Go Tell It*. The visions each protagonist endures are, if not identical, at least fraternal twins: John on the threshing-floor, “invaded, set at naught, possessed,” “something mov[ing] in [his] body which

cleaning the home is an impossible one, and he despairs of ever accomplishing it: “[H]e gritted his teeth, already on edge because of the dust that filled his mouth, and nearly wept to think that so much labor brought so little reward” (25).

³¹ Baldwin engages directly with what it means to be a witness in his 1969 essay about playwright Lorraine Hansberry, “Sweet Lorraine,” which served as an introduction to Hansberry's autobiography *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*. In the essay, Baldwin describes seeing Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* at its 1959 premiere and being struck by the reaction of black audiences to the play:

But, in *Raisin*, black people recognized that house and all the people in it...and supplied the play with an interpretative element which could not be present in the minds of white people: a kind of claustrophobic terror, created not only by their knowledge of the house but by their knowledge of the streets....It was not, for [Lorraine], a matter of being admired. She was being corroborated and confirmed. She was wise enough and honest enough to recognize that black American artists are a very special case. One is not merely an artist and one is not judged merely as an artist: the black people crowding around Lorraine, whether or not they considered her an artist, assuredly considered her a witness. (xii-xiii)

For Baldwin, to be a witness is not simply to express truth, but to have that truth acknowledged—to confirm and potentially transform oneself and others through its expression and recognition. Whether or not one believes that David ultimately accepts responsibility for his crimes, the act of remembering his pain and at least trying to learn from it certainly places him within the tradition of the Baldwinian narrator-witness.

was not [him]” (*Go Tell It* 251) finds his counterpart in David wondering “what moves in [his] body, what this body is searching” and feeling that he lacks control over himself, “[t]he body in the mirror forc[ing] him to turn and face it” (*Giovanni’s* 184). David examines his naked body in the mirror, lamenting “that nakedness which [he] must hold sacred, though it be never so vile” and clinging to the belief “that the heavy grace of God, which has brought [him] to this place, is all that can carry [him] out of it” (185). The language in this passage tends toward the overtly religious, referencing “incarnation,” “revelation,” and “salvation” (184)—language that, while typical of Baldwin and fitting for the deeply religious Grimes family, does not make sense for David, a decidedly WASP-ish character whose religious beliefs, if any, are largely absent from the novel. This ending, which strikes a false note from a characterological perspective, is nevertheless crucial for the authorial project Baldwin undertakes in the novel. As David tries to set in order a house that both literally and figuratively does not belong to him, ending with his impassioned cries to God for mercy, so Baldwin tries to use the space of *Giovanni’s Room* to “set in order” some of the issues that he felt separated him from his father. In that sense, we can regard the novel as an attempt by Baldwin to effect an imaginative re-scripting of the unrealized possibilities for conversation with Baldwin, Sr. —to “talk” to his father as he wanted to do but never could.

Baldwin concludes “Notes of a Native Son” by reflecting on the lessons his father’s life taught him, writing, “[N]ow that my father was irrecoverable, I wished that he had been beside me so that I could have searched his face for the answers which only the future would give me now” (84). Baldwin’s search for those answers birthed his writings, both fictional and nonfictional, which frequently chronicle his search for someone to fulfill the fatherly role that

David Baldwin, Sr., either could not or did not want to.³² Yet despite his literary obsession with fatherhood, and despite some early romantic and sexual relationship with women, including at least one that included talk of marriage (Leeming 45), Baldwin never fathered children of his own. However, at various points throughout his life, he was to play a paternal role, assuming the status of figurative father not only to the legions of devoted readers who revered him as a prophet and spokesman for the black race, but also to his own younger siblings—particularly his youngest sister, Paula, who was born the same day that his father died. After his father’s death, Baldwin for a time became the family’s main breadwinner, but he could not force himself into complacent acceptance of such daily drudgeries. Feeling trapped by the prospect of a life that seemed doomed to repeat his father’s miseries and recognizing that “[i]f he stayed to support his family he would simply end up resenting them” (Leeming 43), he struck out from the family abode in Harlem, determined that the life he would save would be his own. Baldwin eventually came to “enjoy...[his] role as paterfamilias” (Leeming 82), but he always felt that that aspect of his life came second to his calling as a writer. Indeed, he thought of his novels as his “children,” confiding to his mother in 1953 that “giving birth to novels was like giving birth to children. As both mother and father of his ‘children,’ he watched them with anxiety as they went out ‘into the

³² A number of these alternative fathers played a part in Baldwin’s life. The poet Countee Cullen, who taught at Baldwin’s junior high school, was among the earliest, a man who served as “living proof...that a black man could be a writer” and who “was everything that Jimmy’s stepfather was not” (Leeming 22). During his teen years, Baldwin found another father of sorts in the celebrated female preacher Mother Horn, whom he describes in masculinized terms as “an extremely proud and handsome woman” (*The Fire Next Time* 28); when she introduces herself by asking “‘Whose little boy are you?’”, Baldwin, “unquestionably want[ing] to be *somebody’s* little boy...[felt his] heart repl[y] at once, ‘Why, yours’” (*Fire* 28-29). Later in his life, he connected with the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam movement; Baldwin describes their meeting by saying, “[He] carried me back nearly twenty-four years, to that moment when the pastor had smiled at me and said, ‘Whose little boy are you?’...I was drawn toward his peculiar authority, how his smile promised to take the burden of my life off my shoulders” (*Fire* 63-64). Baldwin even adds, “He made me think of my father and me as we might have been if we had been friends” (*Fire* 64). However, the most important of these alternative fathers was unquestionably Beauford Delaney, a painter whom Baldwin met when he was fifteen years old and “on a continuing search for a sympathetic spirit who could understand what made him what he was, someone who could teach him the way a father teaches a son” (Leeming 33). Delaney became a lifelong friend to and influence on Baldwin, serving, in Leeming’s words, “as a father in art” (33).

world” (Leeming 96). They were his personal brand of reproductive futurism, his way of ensuring that his name lived on. As much as he loved his family, Baldwin’s “children”—his writings—were his true legacy.

CONCLUSION

Robert Reid-Pharr claims in his recent book *Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual* that “the crisis of the intellectual, Negro or otherwise, always takes place at the point at which the desires of the individual conflict with the presumed needs of the community. Or to turn the matter on its head, Black American intellectualism might be understood simply as that incessant mapping of the conflict between personal and communal desire” (28). Not explicitly stated in Reid-Pharr’s argument, but certainly heavily implied, is that the conflict he identifies between “the desires of the individual...[and] the presumed needs of the community” also strikes at the heart of much of the historical response to queer literature, as well as to the larger queer community, in a way that makes it doubly applicable to Baldwin’s work: one of the author’s main concerns is the mapping of his dual identities as a black American and as a man who loved other men, sexually and romantically, and how those identities affected every aspect of his life.

In her 1980 essay “The Point of View: Universal or Particular?” French feminist theorist Monique Wittig writes:

All minority writers (who are conscious of being so) enter into literature obliquely, if I may say so. The important problems in literature which preoccupy their contemporaries are framed by their perspective....Writing a text which has homosexuality among its themes is a gamble. It is taking the risk that at every turn the formal element which is the theme will overdetermine the meaning, monopolize the whole meaning, against the intention of the author who wants above all to create a literary work. Thus the text which adopts such a theme sees one of its parts taken for the whole, one of the constituent elements of the text taken for the whole text, and the book becomes a symbol, a manifesto. When this happens, the text ceases to operate at the literary level; it is subjected to disregard, in the sense of ceasing to be regarded in relation to equivalent texts. It becomes a committed text with a

social theme and it attracts attention to a social problem....In fact, by reason of its theme it is dismissed from that textual reality...it can no longer operate as a text in relationship to other past or contemporary texts. It is interesting only to homosexuals. (62-63)

So it has been with *Giovanni's Room*, which, as I alluded to in the introduction to this thesis, has been regarded for much of its history as at best an interesting experiment and at worst an utter failure. The explicit homosexual content (and all-white cast) of *Giovanni's Room* have led critics to think of the novel as a Baldwinian side-project, as it were, and to consign it to a position outside what is seen as Baldwin's "proper" canon³³—a canon limited to those works dealing more directly with the African American social condition in the United States. Those who wish to study "the black author" (92), as Robert Reid-Pharr has named him, find themselves directed toward the early essays, or to *Go Tell It on the Mountain, Another Country*, and a handful of the short stories, if fiction is more appealing. Very occasionally, a play will make the cut—*Blues for Mr. Charlie* (1964) seems to be the favorite, though *The Amen Corner* (1954) is not without its fans—but *Giovanni's Room* is still read mostly as an oddity, when it is read at all. Writing in 2009, Justin A. Joyce and Dwight A. McBride put a finer point on the matter, astutely observing, "As a novel with no African American characters, written by an African American, gay writer, *Giovanni's Room* itself challenges dominant understandings of what constitutes African American literature, the work that proceeds under the rubric of African American literary criticism, and the forms of analysis that would come to have congress under the institutional forms of African American studies" (130).

³³ This is the fate of much gay writing; again, I think especially of Forster's *Maurice*, a novel which in its particulars, both intra- and extratextual, has much in common with *Giovanni's Room*. My research turned up no published work explicitly addressing the similarities between the two novels, but such a study could prove illuminating for students of gay literature, particularly those interested in reception history and issues of canonicity. Indeed, many reviews of *Maurice* feel as if they might have been lifted directly from scholarly evaluations of *Giovanni's Room*.

Wittig's assertion that work dealing with homosexuality becomes so forced into one main theme that it "can no longer operate as a text in relationship to other past or contemporary texts" (63) raises particularly interesting questions about the response to *Giovanni's Room*. In this thesis, I have attempted to demonstrate that in at least one crucial way—engagement with issues of paternity and what it means to be a father—the novel remains firmly committed to an examination of the same concerns that Baldwin wrote about in his earlier works and would continue to explore throughout the rest of his career. The fact that paternity, usually an area of such interest in Baldwin criticism, has garnered not just little but practically *no* commentary in *Giovanni's Room* frankly borders on the ludicrous. Without wishing to disparage my fellow critics, it seems to me that there must be an element of willful blindness to blame for this lack, as though a book atypical of Baldwin in one way (its entirely white cast) must necessarily be atypical of him in all others. Indeed, in some ways, criticism of this novel misses the metaphorical forest for the trees, trying so hard to make it fit into a predetermined schematic of what critics feel the novel *should* be that they fail to fully engage with what is actually present. Sharon Patricia Holland offers a useful critique of what might lead to such an occurrence, noting that "critics approach Baldwin's work with often ambivalent feelings toward his gay characters or endeavor to place Baldwin in a tradition of black struggle that completely decontextualizes the importance of his portrayal of sexuality" (269). As Baldwin scholarship looks forward, however, it is paramount that we begin to engage completely with the intersectionality that informs his every work. Only after we have begun to do so will the full textures of his writing reveal themselves to us.

Baldwin once wrote "that any writer... finds that the things which hurt him and the things which helped him cannot be divorced from each other; he could be helped in a certain way only

because he was hurt in a certain way” (“Autobiographical Notes” 6). It is not too great a risk to assert that, at the time he was writing and perhaps for much longer, the central hurt of Baldwin’s life was the rejection he felt from his father; and yet, as he suggests, this paternal hurt proved to be a great help to his art, providing a well of inspiration from which he would continue to draw throughout his career. Very early in *Giovanni’s Room*, David reflects on the unbearable quality of true freedom and expresses the longing for a “mooring post” (5), someone he can tether himself to in order to make a life. He tries to find a such a person in Hella, but the experiment fails miserably: “But people can’t, unhappily, invent their mooring posts, their lovers and their friends,” he opines, before adding, significantly, “*anymore than they can invent their parents*” (5, emphasis added). “Life gives these,” he says, “and also takes them away and the great difficulty is to say Yes to life” (5). Baldwin emphasizes the need to “say Yes to life” throughout his body of work, but he rarely links the ability to do so as explicitly to paternity as he does here. This line serves, for Baldwin, as the thesis of the whole novel—that one’s outlook on life, the ability (or inability) to face the world and accept it as it is, is rooted in the relationship shared between parent and child, and that the consequences of failure in that relationship can be dire for all involved.

In her evaluation of Baldwin’s work as a novelist, Charlotte Alexander begins with the central question of *Another Country*—“Do you love me?”—and proposes two corresponding questions she defines as equally important to Baldwin’s characters: “*Will ‘you’ love me if and when I lose my innocence...*; and, conversely, *can I love you when in my widening vision you appear corrupt or faithless?*” (85) “The ‘you,’” she adds, “is any adult-parent-authority figure originally esteemed” (85). Thus for Alexander, as for many Baldwin scholars, explorations of the relationships between parents and children—and more particularly, between fathers and

sons—occupy a central place in criticism of his work. Traditionally, this has not been the case with *Giovanni's Room*, yet the work once tellingly titled *One for My Baby* and *A Fable for Our Children* contains at its heart an array of paternal relationships, both literal and metaphorical, as rich and complex as almost any Baldwin ever wrote. Far from a mere side-project, the novel in fact represents a necessary stage in his evolution as a writer, allowing him to develop further the autobiographical influences that would always be a part of his work while simultaneously offering the chance for a more sustained imaginative project. *Giovanni's Room* may not be the strongest novel in the canon, but with its rich prose, vivid characterization, and crucial development of some of Baldwin's most personal themes, there can be no doubt that the canon is where it belongs.

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