

# THE TROPE OF AFRICANISM TO ADDRESS HOMOSEXUALITY IN *GIOVANNI'S ROOM* BY JAMES BALDWIN

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## ABSTRACT

In the Preamble to the Declaration of Independence, “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness” are presented as “unalienable Rights” and constitute, still today, the core principles of the American national ethos: the American Dream. Nevertheless, as we can already gather from the Preamble’s opening statement, throughout the years certain groups of people have been denied full access to ‘the Dream.’ The Declaration’s democratic foundation has incrementally revealed the flaws of its own pronouncement in the light of the country’s historical record of discrimination and exclusivity, here contrasting with the rhetoric of inclusivity and equality the Declaration actually wished and wishes to foster. In the US especially, the notion of liberty has been historically flexed to suit many socially constructed categories, notably race, religious belief, gender, and sexual orientation. Therefore, one can posit that the pursuit of happiness of any US citizen has been shaped and reshaped by the social relevance ascribed to each of these categorizations across decades of change. This despicable state of things has had such a profound impact on the life and works of many authors—especially those who came face to face with systemic structures of power due to their ethnicity and sexuality—that in their work they publicly condemned how suffocating and hypocritical American society still was in the 20th century. Among them stands James Baldwin, an influential African American writer, whose work represents and conveys the internal struggle of the American individual, labeled both African American and homosexual by the hypochondriac white society of the US. In his second novel, *Giovanni's Room* (1956), Baldwin deeply explored the theme of the ‘quest for self-identity’ in connection with sexual orientation. The aim of this essay is to investigate how and why Baldwin makes use of Africanist, or Africanlike, characters (e.g., the Italian immigrant Giovanni) to explore topics that would have otherwise remained taboo in the American society of the 1950s. In particular, my analysis will enlist the seminal work carried out by Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992).

**Keywords:** homosexuality; queer; Africanism; self-identity; liberty.

## THE IDEA OF AMERICAN AFRICANISM IN TONI MORRISON’S *PLAYING IN THE DARK: WHITENESS AND THE LITERARY IMAGINATION*

In 1990, Toni Morrison delivered her “William E. Massey Sr. Lectures in American Studies” at Harvard University, a collection of lectures better known to the academic world today as a small book entitled *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1993). This piece of literary criticism offered scholars a completely revolutionary perspective on the history of American Literature to the point that, thanks

to the book's publication, the interdependence of national history, racial and ethnic policies, gender stereotypes, and literature has become more and more transparent.

By questioning a great range of works written by major US authors, Toni Morrison attempts to decentralize the critic's and reader's attention from white characters to black presences crowding national literature.<sup>1</sup> Although these characters consistently populate (or do they somehow haunt?) American white literature from its very beginning, it seems they had always been relegated to minor roles. According to Morrison, the art of writing is always linked to politics; indeed, those stereotypical background roles that are usually depicted by black characters in many 19th and 20th-century works are also politically charged, especially when they emerge as a sort of consistent trend. Moreover, this tendency does not seem to have gone out of fashion through the centuries.

Morrison (1993) suggests the idea that "American Africanism," or "an Africanlike (or Africanist) presence or persona" (6) in US literature is evoked to serve a specific purpose, that is to contemplate chaos, to perform deviance from the imposed standards; in other words, to test the limits of American freedom and civilization (7). Accordingly, it is reasonable to assume that Africanist or, as Toni Morrison defines them, "Africanlike" characters and figures have been employed by white authors to ponder over queerness, not only to reflect on its etymological meaning of unconventional, strange, peculiar, or different from what is usual, or the norm,<sup>2</sup> but also in relation to

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<sup>1</sup> It is significant to highlight that in the first essay to Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, the author immediately states her will to draw attention to a "presence" that has been underestimated for a long time in American literary criticism. She states that "for some time now," she had been thinking about "a certain set of assumptions conventionally accepted among literary historians and critics and circulated as 'knowledge.' This knowledge holds that traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African Americans, in the United States. It assumes that this presence—which shaped the body politic, the Constitution, and the entire history of the culture—has had no significant place or consequence in the origin and development of that culture's literature. Moreover, such knowledge assumes that the characteristics of our national literature emanate from a particular idea of 'Americanness' that is separate from and unaccountable to this presence [...] I have come to believe [...] The contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination," 5.

<sup>2</sup> In the Merriam-Webster online Dictionary there is no entry for *queerness*. The online page redirects us to the adjective *queer*. By looking at the related section "Word History," it is possible to acknowledge that the first known use of this adjective dates back to 1513, when the term was only used as an adjective and had the meaning of "differing in some way from what is usual or normal." However, from 1894 on, the Dictionary reports that *queer* started to mean

being a person who does not identify as cisgender or whose sexual orientation is not heterosexual. Nonetheless, it seems necessary to mention that the aforementioned concepts of unconventionality and peculiarity are obviously affected by cultural relativism. In this case, the specific cultural environment to which they are related, if not even subdued to, cannot but be the self-referential dominant culture established by the white, male, socially-engaged, middle-class, heterosexual America, considered to be the essential yardstick by which everything is measured.<sup>3</sup>

#### HOW WHITE AND BLACK AUTHORS EMPLOYED THE TROPE OF AFRICANISM TO PONDER OVER QUEERNESS

Since the black population in the United States has suffered from an unjust system of laws that legally denied human dignity to millions of individuals (formally until 1865, when the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the United States Constitution entered into force, then with the establishing of the “separate but equal” legal doctrine<sup>4</sup>), minor roles played by African American characters in fictions and novels faithfully mirrored reality. According to Morrison (1993), the black enslaved population “offered itself up as surrogate selves for meditation on problems of human freedom” (37), and it is pivotal to stress that this latter idea has always been understood as a white prerogative, and, as such, calls to be placed up against its opposite, what was once called the “peculiar institution,” or chattel slavery. “Blank darkness”—what Morrison identifies as the unbridled use of blackness in American literature—seems to have always been understood as a canvas on which

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“a person who is gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, or otherwise not heterosexual,” thus gaining a sex-based discriminatory connotation. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/queer>.

<sup>3</sup> In “Romancing the Shadow,” part two of *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison states that “[t]here is no romance free of what Herman Melville called ‘the power of blackness’, especially not in a country in which there was a resident population, already black, upon which the imagination could play; through which historical, moral, metaphysical, and social fears, problems, and dichotomies could be articulated,” 37.

<sup>4</sup> The Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments, which respectively guaranteed the permanent banning of slavery in the United States and the granting of citizenship to formerly enslaved people, should have also provided equal protection before the law for every US citizen. However, with *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) the Supreme Court set the standard for a new legal form of racial discrimination, giving way to racial segregation in the United States for the next fifty years. <https://www.loc.gov/item/usrep163537/>.

the artist could test his skills, spared from any form of social or moral restraints.<sup>5</sup> This enterprise resulted in the objectification of the black minority, not only in real life by a set of unjust Court decisions<sup>6</sup> and clauses in the pre-Civil-war draft of the American Constitution<sup>7</sup> (especially through the 18th century), but also in the literary creative space, to the point of generating a literary trope. The exploitation of black figures allowed white authors to explore and meditate on queerness, a complex territory they restrained from exploring outwardly on the grounds of an alleged superior societal status they had been prescribed. Again, Toni Morrison's essay is helpful in emphasizing the exploitative character of the American idea of freedom,<sup>8</sup> which has always been so prominent a concept in US rhetoric since its foundation. The question of freedom became even more significant during and after the gaining of independence by the United States in 1776, when the institution of slavery started to be perceived, almost exclusively, more as a visible contradiction, unpleasant fact in a self-declared free country, than as a rough metaphor to describe, for example, wage and economic inequalities. As a matter of fact, slavery did shape the idea of freedom in America, and the literary trope of Africanism was instrumental for those white authors in exploring

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<sup>5</sup> In *Playing in the Darkness*, Toni Morrison states that the "black population was available for meditations on terror – the terror of European outcasts, their dread of failure, powerlessness, Nature without limits, natal loneliness, internal aggression, evil, sin, greed. In other words, this slave population was understood to have offered itself up for reflections on human freedom in terms other than the abstractions of human potential and the rights of man," 38.

<sup>6</sup> In chronological order, just to name a few Courts' unfair provisions: (1) *Prigg v. Pennsylvania* (1842), which the historian Eric Foner defines "the most proslavery moment in Supreme Court"; (2) *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857), which gave the ultimate pre-Civil War definition of slave; and (3) *Mitchell v. Wells* (1859), by which Mississippi's highest court stated that the status of slave of African Americans was recognized at interstate level. Paul Finkelman, "Slavery in the United States: Persons or Property?," in *The Legal Understanding of Slavery: From the Historical to the Contemporary*, ed. Jean Allain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 105-34.

<sup>7</sup> It seems worth noting that during the 1787 Constitutional Convention, the Three-Fifths Compromise was reached among delegates from various states in determining a state's total population for legislative representation in the House of Representatives and taxation. This provision increased the discriminatory perception of African American slaves, who would be counted as three-fifths of a free individual for the purposes of determining congressional representation, while also increasing and securing the power of slaveholding states in the government. The same Convention adopted another clause worth noting in 1793, the Fugitive Slave Act, by which slaveholders were given the right of reclaiming an escaped person, thus indirectly addressing African American slaves as property. Encyclopedia Britannica, "Three-fifths compromise," <https://www.britannica.com/topic/three-fifths-compromise>.

<sup>8</sup> Toni Morrison speaks of "the parasitical nature of white freedom" in addressing the "hell" in which Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* places the reader at the very end. In the last chapter of her essay, moreover, Toni Morrison tracks down the evolution of American Africanism and states that it is possible to observe a path that goes "from its simplistic, though menacing, purposes of establishing hierarchic difference to its surrogate properties as self-reflexive meditations on the loss of difference, to its lush and fully blossomed existence in the rhetoric of dread and desire." Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 57-63.

the conundrums of their own mind in a shielded and seemingly safe dimension that ‘the other’ represented for them. Moreover, the discourse on the limits of American freedom itself, explored in US literature through the trope of the Africanist presence, includes the possibility to openly address taboos in literary works; by projecting on the black body their own fears and anxieties, white writers had the chance to explore their darkest and/or most denied interiority. By means of this literary artifice, these writers investigated patterns of behaviors or practices considered non-standard or immoral, by projecting their wills and anxieties on fabricated black bodies, within a strictly binary and protestant religion-based understanding of reality. Furthermore, the exploitation of a fabricated and factitious black presence, perceived as the utmost form of otherness, brought to the construction of a “playground for the imagination,” as Toni Morrison (1993) describes the imaginative literary space (38), where white writers tested the limits of their civilization or talked about chaos in many of its aspects, including race policies, class-related matters, and sexuality. In sum, blackness became a sort of identity escapism.

## HOW RELIGION-RELATED PATRIARCHAL MODELS AFFECTED THE DEVELOPMENT OF AMERICAN SOCIETY’S SYSTEM OF VALUES

In order to gain a greater understanding of the reasons why the exploitation of black persons both in fiction and reality was an automatic and somehow safe<sup>9</sup> process, I will

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<sup>9</sup> Notice how many times Toni Morrison repeats the word “safe” in her essay, in relation to white author’s use of Africanism. Just to mention a few examples, at the end of the first chapter, when Morrison discusses Willa Cather’s novel *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, she states: “Only with Africanist characters is such a project thinkable [...]. Just as Sapphira has employed these surrogate, serviceable black bodies for her own purposes of power without risk, so the author employs them in behalf of her own desire for a *safe* participation in loss, in love, in chaos, in justice.” Moreover, the stress on the safeness is also emphasized using italics by the will of the author herself in this passage. In the second chapter of the essay, Morrison points out that romance, with its inborn ingredient of darkness, was the best device through which young America was given the chance not only for self-validation in front European culture, but it also “made possible the sometimes safe and other times risky embrace of quite specific, understandably human, fears: Americans’ fear of being outcast, of failing, of powerlessness; their fear of boundarylessness, of Nature unbridled and crouched for attack; their fear of so-called civilization [...]. In short, the terror of human freedom [...]. For young America it had everything [...] – above all, the opportunity to conquer fear imaginatively.” Lastly, Morrison ponders over the legacy of racialism in contemporary writing, recognizing that even though race has gained a metaphorical significance, on the ideological side it still “offers in historical, political, and literary discourse a safe route into meditations on morality and ethics; a way of examining the mind-body dichotomy, a way of thinking about justice; a way of contemplating the modern world.” *Playing in the Dark*, 28-64.

briefly recall how the idea of American freedom is closely related to the drafting of the document that lies at the heart of American identity. In retrospect, one is likely to recognize a narrative of privilege and exclusivity watermarked in various sections of the Declaration of Independence; various minorities seem to have been forgotten in the final draft that was written by its major contributor, Thomas Jefferson, a slaveholder (Helo 2014, 162). Because prejudices maneuvered the US legal system and informed the Courts' decisions, the Declaration remained more an inspirational document than a set of moral laws asserting the right of equal opportunities for everyone. Basically, the Preamble of the Declaration of Independence states that "all men are created equal" and with inalienable rights, such as "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness." In retrospect, this postulation is more of a failed ethos than a successfully implemented system of beliefs. The Declaration does not question much of America's early colonial life and establishment norms, mostly because these have always been a creation of white male heterosexual people, by white male heterosexual people, for white male heterosexual people.

It comes by itself that because non-conformism in American culture has represented a potential threat to the establishment, non-conformist acts have also been liable to punishment. In this light, "liberty" takes on a classist acceptance that is actually missing from the root of the word.

Since the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century until very recently, racial and gender policies have kept endorsing white supremacy and religion-related patriarchal models. Colonial young America was rather explicit about the roles that its people would have promoted, according to their ethnicity and gender. Just to get a picture of the situation at the time, Plymouth Colony established gender norms that determined the nuclear family unit as the basis of all other institutions, such as the government and the church. Men held leadership positions, while women were mostly submissive<sup>10</sup> to their

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<sup>10</sup> Ruth H. Bloch has produced many works analyzing changes in the history of family and sex roles. Just to mention an example, she postulates that "[i]n the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the rise of Protestantism, the centralized state, and early commercial capitalism reinforced the conjugal family unit and patriarchal dominance within family life. The dissolution of feudal economic, political, and ecclesiastical networks made the home the focus

husbands. Furthermore, in the matter of racial policies, Maryland and Virginia were the two colonies to pass the first anti-miscegenation laws<sup>11</sup> forbidding marriage between whites and blacks, and between whites and Native Americans; this set of juridical provisions regarding interracial marriages would be overturned only in 1967, with a landmark decision made by the US Supreme Court that goes by the name of *Loving v Virginia*. Regarding gender policies before 1962, sodomy was considered a felony in every US state, precisely because sodomy laws had already been enacted in the colonies as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century. At that time, Puritans in New England relied on biblical experience and prescriptions to ban “crimes against nature,” and so against God, as Governor William Bradford or Reverend John Cotton recorded in their writings (Chehardy). Seeing that governors main intent was to prohibit non-procreative sexual activity, their main target were homosexual couples. In 1641, the Massachusetts Bay Colony even adopted a legislative body of penalties featuring the twelve capital crimes that were up for punishment. Sodomy was one of the listed crimes.

Keeping this political and cultural background in mind, it becomes clear why in *Playing in the Dark* Morrison (1993) states that “American writers were able to employ an imagined Africanist persona to articulate and imaginatively act out of what was considered forbidden in the American culture” (66). Liberty and freedom from cultural and racial restrictions: this is what the exploitation of Africanist and Africanlike characters offered to American white authors. Africanism became a trope and a literary device the reading audience could grasp. According to Morrison, only by employing stereotypes is the writer allowed to convey “a quick and easy image without the responsibility of specify, accuracy, or even narratively useful description” (67). On this matter, Charles Mills’ analysis of how white domination keeps shaping our world seems

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of many religious, educational, and commercial activities. At the same time, the primary authority over women and children was increasingly concentrated in their husbands and fathers.” Bloch, “Untangling the Roots of Modern Sex Roles: A Survey of Four Centuries of Change,” 239.

<sup>11</sup> In 1664, Maryland enacted the first colonial anti-amalgamation law prohibiting interracial marriage. In subsequent decades other colonies followed its example. A 1691 Virginia law made interracial marriage illegal, fining women who bore mulatto children. See Bárbara C. Cruz., and Michael J. Berson, “The American Melting Pot? Miscegenation Laws in the United States,” 80–84.

worth mentioning. According to Mills (2022), the society we live in is shaped by a series of more or less tacit agreements between its members. Because we live in a mostly white supremacist society, Mills hypothesizes the existence of a Racial Contract shared among white individuals. He described this contract as an artificial system of beliefs based on the implicit idea that “white” stands for “full persons” and “nonwhite” for “subpersons” (10-11). Mills’ philosophical insights, which he presents in his book *The Racial Contract* (1997), however, reminds us of the social (if not even fabricated) nature, on which the ideal of a supposed “white supremacy” has been constructed (80). Furthermore, due to historical and political factors, white people have been allowed to create a world which serves their interests through “the racial exploitation of others and a moral psychology (not just in whites but sometimes in nonwhites also) skewed consciously or unconsciously toward privileging them, taking the status quo of differential racial entitlement as normatively legitimate, and not to be investigated further” (40). Thus, this implicit “shared knowledge” exposed by Mills prepares the ground for understanding Morrison’s ideological analysis of the exploitation of African and Africanlike figures in the work of US white authors in detail.

But what about black American authors and their perspective on imaginative freedom? Assuming that they are already considered to be people who somehow embody the very idea of boundarylessness, and are thought to inhabit the space where forbiddance gives way to possibility, the real question is: what spaces and limits are they supposed to trespass? *How* would they do this? What limits have they already trespassed? Moreover, would they rely on the same trope of Africanism to address taboo matters as white authors did?

#### HOMOSEXUALITY AS A TABOO THEME IN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND AS THE MAIN THEME IN BALDWIN’S *GIOVANNI’S ROOM*

This part of the essay will focus on James Baldwin’s second novel, *Giovanni’s Room* (1956). Baldwin was one of the major writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and one of the few who overtly addressed homosexuality from an African American perspective. The purpose of this article is to argue that Baldwin’s narrative structures rely on the same devices used



by US white authors. I maintain that in 1950s America the only possible way to explore and address queerness—both in its meaning of unconventional and not heterosexual—was to enlist the trope of Africanism, just as white authors have done.

In *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin meditates on the development of sexual and gender identity in connection with racial, gender, and social class stereotypes and expectations against the background of postwar America, where conventional values and traditional gender roles were somehow reaffirmed. Although financial prosperity and a sense of uniformity are considered key assets of the '50s, racial and sexual discrimination were still rampant. During World War II, many African Americans had served in the U.S. military and workforce, but at the end of the conflict they still had to face discrimination at home. Rejecting second-class citizenship, the Civil Rights Movement began demanding for African Americans' racial equality vehemently. Baldwin himself joined the Civil Rights Movement, and not only he became an activist, but also a close friend of many of the Movement's most distinguished figures, such as Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., Maya Angelou, Malcolm X, and Nina Simone. However, in 1948 Baldwin moved to Europe, leaving the asphyxiating environment of racially and sexually discriminatory America to experience a more relaxed living and working environment in Paris. It was Paris that granted him the opportunity to explore his truest self outside of the US' physical and moral boundaries. Not only did Paris provide him creative freedom, but it also directly inspired him to set most of *Giovanni's Room* in the European city; he lived in an artistic neighborhood and made Saint-Germain his home abroad.

Europe, and Paris in particular, was the place where Baldwin felt safe in taking a critical stance against the oppressive American culture he had endured all his life. Although religion in *Giovanni's Room* is not as outstanding a theme as in Baldwin's first novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), its echo persists, and the author's religious background<sup>12</sup> seems somehow to shape his exploration of sexuality and the development of gender identity.

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<sup>12</sup> James Baldwin's involvement with Pentecostalism and the Baptist Church is well documented. See Douglas Field, "Pentecostalism and All That Jazz: Tracing James Baldwin's Religion," 436-57.

For those who are familiar with the novel's plot, it may seem unusual to discuss Africanist or Africanlike characters in the novel, since they are not immediately discernible. Yet, a close-reading approach to the book allows the reader to detect them. Moreover, the black novelist Caryl Phillips, who wrote the introduction to the novel for Penguin's 2021 edition, declared that *Giovanni's Room* is an "audacious" (Phillips 2001, VIII) piece of "raceless writing" (ibid.). Even if Caryl Phillips connects Baldwin's audacity to his overt approach to homosexuality, a close-reading approach to the text might problematize Phillips' definition of the novel as raceless. Nonetheless, in support of Phillip's hypothesis, late-literary critic Leslie Fiedler, admitted that "There is not only no Negro problem in Baldwin's new book; there are not even any Negroes" (Fiedler quoted in Baldwin and Tomlinson 1999, 139). However, to what extent are these statements convincing? Are there really "no black characters" (Phillips 2001, 9) in *Giovanni's Room*? This statement is only partly true, as Fiedler himself would write about ten years later: "one begins to suspect at last that there must really be Negroes present, censored, camouflaged or encoded" (Fiedler quoted in Baldwin and Tomlinson 1999, 16).

Indeed, we can identify two solid elements in the novel that refute Phillips's and Fiedler's speculation. The first element worth considering regards a certain "incident" (Baldwin 2001, 20) recalled by the novel's protagonist at the beginning of the story. Recalling salient memories from his childhood, David lands on one specific memory about his sexual development, which unexpectedly includes an Africanist—or as Toni Morrison would suggest, an Africanlike figure—, by the name of Joey. Baldwin describes him as David's childhood friend, and the first person with whom David becomes sexually intimate with. However, it seems worth noticing that Joey is a character who does not act in the present time of narration, because he only relives through David's memories. Nonetheless, he has been playing a pivotal role in the protagonist's life. He triggers David to begin a process of self-discovery, which obviously involves the acknowledgement of his own homosexuality.

This act of *rememory*,<sup>13</sup> as Toni Morrison would describe it, is a melancholic and frightening process for David: it prompts David's feeling of guilt<sup>14</sup> and makes him recall why he felt the need to run away from his father's expectations, who also allegorically stands for the system of beliefs of a white, male, and heterosexual, America. Thus, Joey's dark features are a major element in the novel, enabling the white, blonde, male, middle-class David to unravel his non-standard gender identity.<sup>15</sup> David's flashbacks and confessions of his one-night affair with Joey and his honest retelling of the story lead to the acknowledgment of the foolishness of escaping from one's truest self. Joey is the Africanist character that both allows and triggers the protagonist to test the boundaries of his own social positioning and explore space of forbiddance; more specifically Joey's dark figure allows Baldwin to address homosexuality and other sexual-related issues: a set of themes that otherwise would have been impossible to deal with in relation to whiteness alone. According to Robert Tomlinson, who makes a crucial connection between issues of race and sexuality in Baldwin's works (he also investigates a memoir which Baldwin wrote for his mentor Richard Wright, *Alas, Poor Richard* [1953]), the two terms become the paradigm for a racialized America. It is as if Baldwin needed to enlist a white narrator—which functions as a mask—to express racial inequity in America and, as Tomlinson defines it, through a process of “metaphoric

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<sup>13</sup> The term *rememory* appears many times in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987) and is used by the protagonist, Sethe, to refer to her traumatic experience as a slave. It is interesting to notice that the act of “rememory” takes on a negative connotation, since memories of the past still haunt the present. Somehow this very negative implication of the term seems to relate Sethe's and David's quest for self-identity in the present.

<sup>14</sup> David recalls having mixed feelings about his father and his aunt Ellen after his intercourse with Joey: “I despised my father and I hated Ellen. It is hard to say why. I don't know why [...] It was after Joey. The incident with Joey had shaken me profoundly and its effect was to make me secretive and cruel. I could not discuss what had happened to me with anyone, I could not even admit it to myself; and while I never thought about it, it remained, nevertheless, at the bottom of my mind [...] it soured the atmosphere of my mind.” Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, 20-21.

<sup>15</sup> David feels ashamed in acknowledging that something about his sexuality is wavering. Unconscious pathways created in childhood support the emergence of self-destructive thoughts: “Joey's body was the most beautiful creation I have ever seen till then [...]. I would have touched him to wake him up but something stopped me. I was suddenly afraid [...]; my own body suddenly seemed gross and crushing and the desire which was rising in me seemed monstrous. But, above all [...] It was borne in on me: *But Joey is a boy* [...]. Then I thought of my father [...] a cavern opened in my mind, black, full of rumor, suggestion, of half-heard, half-forgotten, half-understood stories, full of dirty words [...]. I could have cried, cried for shame and terror, cried for not understanding how this could have happened to me, how this could have happened *in me*.” *Giovanni's Room*, 14.

condensation” (Baldwin and Tomlinson 1999, 140), he makes use of dark figures to project onto them inexpressible fears and desires that belong to the white man.

#### HOW BALDWIN’S PROTAGONIST EXPLORES HIS TRUEST (SEXUAL) IDENTITY BY RELYING ON AFRICANISM

Baldwin seems to rely on the trope of Africanism to address both interracial homosexuality and homosexuality, at large. This is why Tomlinson (1999) states that “the ‘Negro’ is not to be thought of here as an individual subject or even as a representative of the race, but rather as a narrative role in the shadow play of American ‘phantasy,’ or an agent of the metaphoric uses of darkness” (140). More into detail, it is possible to notice how David himself stresses the darkness of his friend’s body and the mixed feelings it provokes him. Lure and a sense of frightening fascination for forbiddance merge with feelings of shame, as David lives his (homo)sexuality for the first time. And so, he introduces Joey to the audience by remembering him. Joey’s memory makes him “tainted,” well-deserving of his own self-loathing: “He [Joey] was a very nice boy [...] very quick and dark, and always laughing” (Baldwin 2001, 12), or “He looked at me with his mouth open and his dark eyes very big” (13), and again David states that “Joey’s body was brown, was sweaty, the most beautiful creation I have ever seen till then” (14). Moreover, darkness also significantly permeates the entire love scene between Joey and David. It is as if David merges with blackness, first spatially when he states: “I remember walking down the dark, tropical Brooklyn streets” (12), and then physically when he becomes aware of Joey’s dark body, and states: “The power and the promise and the mystery of that body made me suddenly afraid. That body suddenly seemed like the black opening of a cavern in which I would be tortured till madness came, in which I would lose my manhood” (14).

Thus, text-based evidence seems to support the idea that Baldwin adopts a racialized approach to address unconventional sexual behaviors. Hence, in response to Phillips’s and Fiedler’s claim, I can confidently state that the novel features at least one black character, and this character is precisely Joey, even though the novel alludes to Joey’s darkness ambiguously. Although Joey could be labeled as biracial or of mixed

white and black ancestry, the book still makes references to his darkness, and Baldwin's use of a "non-white, Africanlike (or Africanist) presence" (Morrison 1993, 6) to explore sexual diversity is conspicuously employed here. The second element that seems to disprove Phillips's and Fiedler's hypothesis of a raceless novel is the character of Giovanni, an Italian bartender whom the novel is clearly named after. He is the other character who solicits critical attention and discussion.

Giovanni is an Italian immigrant living in France, and David's lover. He obviously plays a pivotal role in the development of the plot because he helps David emancipate from his American cultural restraints, awakening his dormant self, the one that has remained at the bottom of his mind (and identity) for many years as a "decomposing corpse" (Baldwin 2001, 20). So, at this point of the novel Baldwin could have done without the trope of Africanism to address his protagonist's homosexuality, namely because David has trespassed US borders, just like the novel's author. He is now living in Paris and experiencing a higher degree of imaginative freedom than what he would have been able to explore in the US. However, he continues relying on the safe trope of Africanism to address homosexuality abroad. Though in the beginning it might not be too obvious, Giovanni himself could be interpreted as the other Africanlike figure in the novel.

According to many scholars who have investigated the novel's racial question, Baldwin seems to employ a technique known as *racial displacement*, which, according to Armengol (2012), results in placing black souls in white bodies. This process of soul dislocation might be confirmed by what American Cultural Studies scholars and historians have widely documented in their works on cultural stereotypes and prejudices, such as the stereotypical parallel between sexual identity and color (675) in the Western society. Moreover, historians David Roediger and Rudolph Vecoli have highlighted the ambiguous racial status of Italian immigrants on their arrival in the US in the late 19th and early 20th century. According to Roediger (1997), Italian immigrants had this ambiguous and unclear status of "in between people" (10), thus suggesting that the new immigrants have acquired their white status only over time. Vecoli (1995) endorses the same idea and states that in the years of massive European migration to

the US, the racial status of Italian immigrants was uncertain. Many Americans questioned whether “these swarthy sons of sunny Italy were really white,” to the point that employers referred to Italians and blacks as “black labor,” as if they stood for a homogenous group of undesirable people (156).

At the turn of the last two decades of the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th century, Italian immigrants in the US were subject to many misconceptions and racial prejudices. As historian Arnold Shankman (1978) pointed out, around the same time, “a significant black exodus from Dixie [took place]. In urban centers of the North more Negroes than ever before were frequently coming into contact with Italians. Increased contact somewhat improved the black community’s image of the Italian” (34) and this might have been crucial for the diffusion of prejudices that wanted no color-line between African Americans and Italians. In addition, Shankman shows another problematic aspect which contributed to the blurring of racial boundaries among the two groups at the time; spatial proximity shared by the two communities contributed to support the stereotype that African Americans and Italians represented one single ethnic group. According to Shankman, they actually used to live as a mixed community in the area of Harlem, “compet[ing] for jobs, housing, and status” (30). It is well documented that these two groups were not on good<sup>16</sup> terms. It is worth pointing out that James Baldwin was actually born in Harlem, New York, in 1924. So, it is possible to suppose that Baldwin’s close contact with that mixed neighborhood influenced the development of a character like Giovanni, whose whiteness is often debated in the text.

Again, close reading helps noticing details that Baldwin disseminated through the text, such as the connection between Giovanni’s darkness, which, as Lynne Segal (1990) suggests, has “always been entangled – in Western consciousness – and sex [...] Black is the colour of the ‘dirty’ secrets of sex” (176). Thus, the very first words with

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<sup>16</sup> “Innocent of the racial code in this ‘free country,’ newly arrived immigrants often worked with and lived among African Americans. Such association was itself taken as confirmation of the Italians’ ambiguous racial status. Once they became aware of the terrible price to be paid for being ‘black’ they hastened to distance themselves from African Americans and to be accepted as white. The historic relationships of Italian Americans and African Americans are, of course, much more complex than that.” Vecoli, “Are Italian Americans Just White Folks?,” 156.

which David describes Giovanni, who is working as a barman at Guillaume's Café, should solicit the reader's attention: "[Giovanni] stood, insolent and dark, and leonine" (Baldwin 2001, 31). Once again, physical darkness is somehow inherently African and establishes a connection between Giovanni and the text's other Africanlike character, the dark Joey. In this perspective, Giovanni does seem to be Joey's Old-World counterpart. In addition, later in the text Giovanni's room—where he and David sleep together for the first time—is described as a dark and claustrophobic environment. The same was said for the room where David first experienced his homosexuality with Joey, back in his teens: "His room was in the back, on the ground floor [...] We passed the vestibule and the elevator into a short, dark, corridor which led to his room. The room was small, I only made out the outlines of clutter and disorder [...] He locked the door behind us, and [...] in the gloom, we simply stared at each other." Again, physical and spatial darkness—intended as a phagocytizing overwhelming reality—go together.

Furthermore, the same narrative pattern tracing David's pointless escape from his homosexuality seems to repeat itself when, later in the text, he realizes that his girlfriend Hella is returning to Paris after traveling solo to Spain. After having escaped from Joey and the non-free, judging morality of his country, he looks for a way out of the homosexual relationship he was exploring with Giovanni in Paris. David decides to prove to himself that he was a "real man," by showing off his boisterous sexuality to women, as his father suggested at the beginning of the novel, stating that "all I want for David is that he grows up to be a man. And when I say a man [...] I don't mean a Sunday school teacher" (20). So, David's evaluation culminates in a casual love affair with a girl called Sue, who he nearly despises. In performing this act of self-determination, David wants to demonstrate to himself that he can fit into the role of the heterosexual white man. We can therefore interpret this scene as David's extreme act of self-denial, as he struggles to conform to a pre-established gender framework. However, his words betray total discomfort in this role: "I wondered if she had done anything to prevent herself from becoming pregnant; and the thought of a child belonging to Sue and me of my being trapped that way – in the very act, so to speak, of trying to escape – almost precipitated a laughing jag" (96). Again, it is interesting to notice that in this specific

scene, Baldwin relies on images of darkness to address the question of bisexuality, even if he speaks of darkness in spatial terms alone, here. As a matter of fact, David describes Sue's apartment first as "a dark place" (ibid.), then as claustrophobic: "dark and full of furniture" (94).

David's white heterosexual culture's conditioning makes him aware, and even scared, of his truest sexual identity. Accordingly, darkness imagery expands to include claustrophobic feelings when he's with Sue. However, even before David makes love to Sue, he feels guilty and states: "I was thinking that what I did with Giovanni could not possibly be more immoral than what I was about to do with Sue" (95), but it is in the very act of sleeping with a woman that he acknowledges the utmost malaise generated by performing a social role he does not feel comfortable embracing, just to meet social expectations. During his sexual intercourse with Sue, David's mind begins to wander, as if to dissociate from his body, and states: "I travelled through a network of Sue's cries, of Sue's tom-tom fists on my back, and judged, by means of her thighs [...] how soon I could be free [...], then it was ending and I hated her and me, then it was over, and the dark, tiny room rushed back. And I wanted only to get out of there" (96).

When David leaves Sue's apartment, he sinks into a state of gloominess, paralleled by "the darkness and the long moan of this long night" (100) and, for the first time, suicidal thought arisen in his conscience since he feels "fallen out of the web of safety" (ibid.). However, when Hella comes back from her vacation in Spain, David feels completely lost: he decides to break up with Giovanni and restore his manhood (135). Yet, Hella chooses to leave when she senses David's disgust towards her own body. David can only remain alone overthinking about his obsession for purity and morality. However, it is worth noticing that, having reached the peak of his personal quest for self-identity, he no longer feels the need to identify with social expectations. David just lets Hella return to the US, and, now alone, tortures himself by indulging in a personal dark fantasy about Giovanni's execution (151).



## CONCLUSION

It seems possible to state that, in *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin relies on the trope of Africanism to address taboo themes, such as homosexuality and bisexuality, just as many white authors have done before him. As Toni Morrison suggests in her seminal essay, which has been widely discussed at the beginning of this article, to make use of African and Africanlike figures and to project onto them fears, desires, and obsessions create a safe distance from which to observe them act in the space of a harmless forbiddance. After all, black represents the utmost shape of “otherness” in the American white culture; yet, even if Baldwin is black, he senses that the trope of Africanism—so the imagery connected with darkness and blackness—is the only safe option he has to address taboo themes and find a way into his American audience of the late '50s. Moreover, as result of close reading approach to the novel, it seems plausible to deny the idea that *Giovanni's Room* is a “raceless” piece of writing—as Caryl Phillips and Leslie Fiedler have suggested—because if it deals with the taboo theme of homosexuality, and to a lesser extent even with bisexuality, it is only due to the exploitation of Africanist or Africanlike fabricated figure. Nonetheless, it is interesting to notice that it is James Baldwin himself who stated in a 1989 interview that it is impossible to deny the connection between race and sexuality, in Western culture and more specifically in the US. He admitted that “[t]he sexual question and the racial question have always been entwined, you know. If Americans can mature on the level of racism, then they have to mature on the level of sexuality” (Armengol 2012, 671).

In conclusion, it is possible to argue that the trope of Africanism is crucial to understanding the idea of Americanness. By distancing Africanist and Africanlike figures far into a space of multidimensional darkness, American authors had the chance to create a unbounded imaginative environment in which to investigate queerness, explore fears and desires, and identify a possible threat to the social construction of Americanness as white, male, and heterosexual. Considering this evidence, it appears less obscure that Toni Morrison (1993) describes white freedom as “parasitical” (57), relying on the centennial tyranny exerted over the black population in the US, legally until 1863. A statement which seems to parallel what James Baldwin himself once stated: “White people invented black people to give white people identity [...]. Straight cats

invent faggots so they can sleep with them without becoming faggots themselves” (Baldwin and Giovanni 1975, 88-89).

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