Giovanni’s Room And The Politics Of Queer Space

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Abstract
Henri Lefebvre states that every society produces its own space. However, this space is also a territory for the society to monitor and regulate. Sex and sexuality is intricately connected to these constructed spaces and oftentimes a queer individual experiencing oneself and in expressing oneself threatens the fabrics of these said structures. The geography of queer spaces is governed by borders motivated by society and in response to these social frontiers, queer individuals employ personalized spaces to not only shelter themselves against the hegemony of the society but also interrogate the established domains of patriarchy and heteronormativity. The paper attempts to portray the individual and collective queer accounts of the act of existing and of creating ‘spaces’ of their own in the novel Giovanni’s Room by James Baldwin. In Giovanni’s Room we see how queer spaces are extended to the act of going away and of finding oneself in a place far from one’s own. This novel also distributes these spaces in terms of designation pertaining to class and societal hierarchies. Drawing on a queer theoretical framework, this paper focuses on the attribution of space and the demarcation between ‘space’ and ‘place’, in correspondence to queer identity and on the hegemony that operates within changing circumstances across cultures and of time and place.

Keywords: Space, Place, Homosexuality, Queer, Class, Society.

Introduction
Giovanni’s room was a space where David could be himself. He was free to discover and experience who he was, as in Giovanni’s room he was furthest from home. In Baldwin’s novel, home signified a space where he was not expected to be true to his self. Home was a metaphor for the confinements of a heteronormative domestic space that mutilates the queer spirit and forces the subject into a performance. In the novel, the city of Paris to David was a place where he could go away to and experience his queer self. The novel juxtaposes the two places where America or home was the closet David was trying to escape from and Paris offered him that freedom, where the city itself was completely described through a queer lens. However, David was incapable of decoupling himself from a space that bound him to structural oppression. As David towards the
end of the novel confesses, “Perhaps, as we say in America, I wanted to find myself. This is an interesting phrase, not current as far as I know in the language of any other people, which certainly does not mean what it says but betrays a nagging suspicion that something has been misplaced. I think now that if I had any intimation that the self I was going to find would turn out to be only the same self from which I had spent so much time in flight, I would have stayed at home.”

Gore Vidal’s The City and the Pillar, Andre Holleran’s Dancer from the Dance and Baldwin’s Giovanni’s Room are considered to be three of the most famous queer novels where we see a recurring theme which is the obligation of the queer subject to go away to a different place which offers him limitless possibilities to be himself. We see how queer spaces like gay bars and parties are offered to the queer subject. These spaces are spaces of freedom to the individual for they nurture various tropes of the queer experience, from queering language to expressing the body through queer style, art and fashion, these spaces evolve the subject who was previously performing under the closet to what Baldwin in his novel calls being ‘various’. Towards the end of the novel, David’s fiancé finds him in one of these bars, as a sailor asks him, “hasn’t she got the wrong bar?” The Stonewall Riots of in 1967, the event that led to the gay liberation movement started from such a space. These spaces revert the position of the heterosexual individual where he was the ‘other’ in a space that contains a crowd having fun and being themselves. The gaze of the straight person is weak in such a space. It is an arrangement that destabilizes the heteronormative.

Fernando Pessoa in his The Book of Disquiet, writes, “Is it that my habit of placing myself in the souls of other people makes me see myself as others see or would see me if they noticed my presence there? It is. And once I’ve perceived what they would feel about me if they knew me, it is as if they were feeling and expressing it at that very moment. It is a torture to me to live with other people. Then there are those who live inside me. Even when removed from life, I’m forced to live with them. Alone, I am hemmed in by multitudes. I have nowhere to flee to, unless I were to flee myself.” (). Probably Pessoa’s words describe best the paradoxical relationship David maintains with himself. Oscar Wilde in his Picture of Dorian Gray claims, “When good Americans die they go to Paris.”() which in David’s case proves to be true. America has been a kind of death to his identity, however it was his own doing. David and every other character in this book are despicable in nature. David internalized homophobia to an extent where he ruined the lives of people around him. Giovanni for instance was sexist in his remarks about women and the other queer people were terrible human beings, portrayed as predatorial and opportunistic. They imbibe the stereotypical traits that surround the queer community. They existed and functioned only in these queer spaces and circles. David claimed, “I would be like the others, find myself turning and following all kinds of boys down god knows what dark avenues, into what dark places?”. To David a queer life can only function in a queer space that was made available to him and which he would never construct himself. The “dark alleys” are spaces that find connections to the queer community. As Baldwin mentions in his novel, when Guillaume was murdered, “it was not only the boys of the street who were frightened; they, in fact, were a good deal less frightened then the
men who roamed the streets to buy them, whose careers and positions, aspirations could never have survived such notoriety”. These spaces hold a certain kind of reputation, as these spaces are castrated from the ‘civilized’ world and are kept under close surveillance. A strategy to perpetrate homophobia was constructed by relating the queer community with these spaces. In these spaces, factors of class and power are very much prevalent. A queer individual who might be a sex worker is one of the most demonized subjects compared to a queer person with power. A queer person with power on the other hand can have everything to lose as Baldwin mentions, if he finds himself in the midst of a police raids for instance. These spaces are the transaction points where authority, surveillance, and power meet the dehumanized queer only to degrade him further. In the novel David’s character hints on these spaces relating them to a breaking point or the last resort of a queer individual.

The gay establishments like the place that Guillaume owned, saw different subjects of the queer community, from cross dressing individuals, who were extremely degraded in the novel to people like Giovanni who yearned for stability to characters like David who preferred to perform under certain pretexts, the space was a microcosm for a lot of people who were very different from each other. The term queer, being an umbrella term, encompasses various members of the LGBTQIA++ community. There are people from the community who would visit these places just to be addressed in their preferred pronouns. These spaces therefore are chroniclers of a multitude of queer experiences. The novel however managed to dehumanize the collective queer spirit through David’s eyes. For instance, he was very conscious of his surroundings after his first meeting with Giovanni. In a space where the majority if not everyone is queer, David was afraid not just of being identified but also of being categorized in terms of the space he was in. Throughout the novel, David was fearful of these queer spaces. David had a separatist view regarding these spaces. He had a problem with queer subjects being effeminate and would certainly prefer if these spaces were masqueraded like himself and functioned according to heteronormative conditions.

The queer subject also tends to reject the space he longs for. Giovanni’s room was the space that David longed for yet would not allow himself to have. To David, “it was not the room’s disorder which was frightening; it was the fact that when one began searching for the key to this disorder, one realized that it was not to be found in any of the usual places. For this was not a matter of habit or circumstance or temperament; it was a matter of punishment and grief ( ).” Giovanni has already abandoned his home in Italy, it was the room that he managed to structure and work on bit by bit. It was his aspiration for stability that David did not share. Declares, “I do not know what moves in this body, what this body is searching. It is trapped in my mirror as it is trapped in time and it hurries toward revelation” (154). For David, Giovanni’s room symbolized a freedom that he could not accept without discarding his performative self. To him that room was a space of redemption and acceptance. When he found himself unable to submit to the space as he never did believe that two men could lead that sort of a life, it turned claustrophobic to him. The room called out to a subconscious desire in him that he could not submit to, therefore, the room manifested into
something of a ‘nonspace’ to him. David confesses that, “Life in that room seemed to be occurring underwater, as I say, and it is certain that I underwent a sea change there” (82)

Emmanuelle Peraldo in her article “From the City of London to the Desert Island: Defoe and the writing of space and place” claims that, “Essentially, place cannot be separated from space. Place exists within space. The borders between space and place are constantly changing as the subjective view of places by people continues to shift. Place depends on the subjective view of those who claim it.” She quotes Yi-Fu Tuan, author of Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience, and Bertrand Westphal, author of Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces, who discusses the complexities of separating place from space and vice versa: “Space turns into place when it gains definition and becomes meaningful: “All people to transform amorphous space into articulated geography”. Place is a land-mark upon which the eye pauses when it surveys a general scene, “a point of rest”. (233)

David looking back at Giovanni’s room, says “I scarcely know how to describe that room. It became, in a way, every room I had ever been in and every room I find myself in hereafter will remind me of Giovanni’s room. I did not really stay there very long—we met before the spring began and I left there during the summer—but it still seems to me that I spent a lifetime there.” To David, this space was a “point of rest”, however, the establishment of Giovanni’s room was a process that inserted a paranoia in David. The closet space that David was comfortable in was threatened with a space that was visible and not abstract.” If we look at David’s description of the room, where he states:

“To begin with, the room was not large enough for two. It looked out on a small courtyard. “Looked out” means only that the room had two windows, against which the courtyard malevolently pressed, encroaching day by day, as though it had confused itself with a jungle. We, or rather Giovanni, kept the windows closed most of the time. He had never bought any curtains; neither did we buy any while I was in the room. To insure privacy, Giovanni had obscured the window panes with a heavy, white cleaning polish. We sometimes heard children playing outside our window, sometimes strange shapes loomed against it. At such moments, Giovanni, working in the room, or lying in bed, would stiffen like a hunting dog and remain perfectly silent until whatever seemed to threaten our safety had moved away.”

The room is described as a space where the windows are never opened, it doesn’t have curtains but is permanently shielded from the gaze of the outsiders. The room to David had a separate flow of time, the memory of the room reverberated and projected itself in multiples places David has been thereafter, he feels that the room had its own existence away from the place it was situated in. It has the characteristics to be looked at as a heterotopia however, what happens when a subject reject the heterotopic space and its opportunities. For David, it has become a kind of ‘non-space’, that with the opening of a window will lose its properties. The blocked view from the window was the only thing that preserved the space for David. The secret of two men being in love with one another was the only thing that the room contained and nothing more. David refused to believe
that the room would continue to exist after he abandons it. However, the queer space repeated itself in the framework of the room. The memories of the space continued to haunt him further in life.

Paris was presented in a queer framework that consisted the gay bars, dark alleys and Giovanni’s room, as these spaces regarded and acknowledged each other through the network of queer spaces. Unlike communal queer spaces in the novel, private spaces like Guillaume’s quarter and Giovanni’s room saw the effort of the queer individual in queering the particular space. The institutionalized spaces have already achieved visibility however, the domestic queer spaces allow themselves to be visible only through private communications. We see how David, who has never been in Guillaume’s quarter conjure the space in his mind while enacting his murder. He uses terms like, “surrounded” as he thinks of Giovanni being in that room. He says, “he finds himself in Guillaume’s rooms, surrounded by Guillaume’s silks, colours, perfumes, starting at Guillaume’s bed” (p 142). David further adds, “Guillaume seems to surround him like the sea itself” (142). The concept of the space surrounding someone suggests the feeling of being consumed by it or being conquered by it. this becomes more evident as he talks about Giovanni taking control of the situation as he says, “it was now Guillaume’s turn to be surrounded”. David looks at the situation with the lens of a kind conquest of space. As Giovanni ‘surrounds’, he also conquers. The room with all its qualities that appeared hideous to David ceased to perturb David. Even in Giovanni’s room we see how Giovanni seemed to preserve the desire that the room would grow and he would keep on renovating the room further. However, David viewed the space in terms of fragments, his gaze suggested the decimation of these spaces. These spaces embody the cultural and individual histories of the queer culture. These spaces empower queer narratives and are visible proofs of the queer stations that the patriarchal heteronormative agenda aims to dismiss. David who has already internalized this strategy echoed the same agenda. When he met Giovan for the first time, was also unsettled after he encounters a cross-dresser. Homophobia, even internalized homophobia is directed at these spaces as well as the queer individual. Internalized homophobia reacts against queer spaces. Queer people like David who internalized the constrains against his self, sees these locations as spaces that seeks to bind him rather than liberate him. He resists because he feels that these spaces would impose an identity that he is culturally conditioned to fear. He desperately wanted to retain that ‘American-straight-white-male’ category that stood on the top of the ladder among social hierarchies. Was he afraid of losing out of being a part of the most oppressive social group or simply because he himself feared this category. He was a part of the army as the army back then provided the most ‘masculine’ spaces. he was concerned of his own wellbeing a person he was associated with was thrown out of the army after he was forced out of his closet.

Filmmaker and novelist, Alejandro Jodorowsky once famously said, “A Bird born in a cage will think flying is an illness”. We can look at David as one such subject however, David is also afraid of the cage that binds him. The spaces that David develop are spaces that encages, these spaces he also feels the need to destroy and escape. Kafka has a famous aphorism in his book The Zura Aphorisms, that goes, “A cage went in search of a bird (no.16)”. Rene Magritte the famous surrealist painter developed on this idea echoing Kafka’s statement in his paintings Elective
Affinities (1933) and The Therapist (1937) where we see a cage in both paintings containing an egg and a bird. These cages are spaces that betray the subject that is caged in it by making it more visible. David’s perception of queer space is something similar. In the two paintings, the subjects are more visible because of the cage that surrounds it. David positioned himself as the cage and also the subject inside it. Jacques pointed out the same as he said, “You play it safe long enough…and you’ll end up trapped in your own dirty body, forever and forever like me” (p 57)

David speaks about this confinement as he projects the image of his confined self in a mirror, he articulates, “The body in the mirror forces me to turn and face it…It is trapped in my mirror as it is trapped in time and it hurries toward revelation”. (154) Foucault sees the mirror as a heterotopia. He claims:

I believe that between utopias and these quite other sites, these heterotopias, there might be a sort of mixed, joint experience, which would be the mirror. The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.

The image of the oneself positioned in the mirror as David towards the end of the novel sees as a certain kind of realization dawns on him, he sees a similar kind of a virtual space that Dorian witnesses in his portrait. Dorian Gray must have realized the fact that the portrait did what all the mirrors in Victorian England failed to do. It showed him his natural self that wasn’t displayed in flesh. These medium occupies space because they contain memories and stories about the queer subject.

**Works Cited**


