

Intersectionalities of sexuality and race as portrayed in *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin and *Zami* by Audre Lorde

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“Joey’s body was brown, was sweaty, the most beautiful creation I have ever seen till then [...] I was suddenly afraid [...] my own body suddenly seemed gross and crushing and the desire which was rising in me seemed monstrous” (Baldwin 7-8)

In Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (Zami)* and James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, the intersectionalities of sexuality and race are most strikingly represented through sex scenes, the use of myth in *Zami* and the setting in *Giovanni's Room*. Both these novels deal with the societal exclusion of the protagonists due to their racial and sexual identities. In *Zami*, there is an attempt to unify her identity as a Black lesbian despite the social alienation she faces, whereas in *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin portrays the internal conflict which David faces when he tries to embody his homosexual identity as a white American.

In Lorde's *Zami*, the intersectionality of sexuality and race appears most strikingly through the explicit sex scenes in the novel, where Lorde experiences and explores both her racial and sexual identities simultaneously. Her first sexual awakening is stimulated through a regular activity of preparing spices in the mortar, a device strongly connected with her and her family's cultural roots conveying the connectedness between race/ culture and sexuality in *Zami*: "Every West Indian woman worth her salt had her own mortar" (81). In this scene, Lorde builds a rich sensory image through the interlocking description of the spices, tightly connected to her West Indian background, and her own physical body and pleasure: "my round brown arm [...] the moist reality of my armpits, whose warm sharp odour with a strange new overlay mixed with the ripe garlic smells from the mortar" (89). Through this trance-like process of pleasure – "thud push rub rotate up repeated over and over [...] thud push rub rotate up. The mingling of the fragrances [...] thud push rub rotate up" (84) – her sexual and cultural identities establish "a vital connection" (85). By choosing to explore both her sexual and racial identities in explicit scenes of intimacy which connect her to her physical body and her cultural history, Lorde glorifies both these intersectional identities as she embraces them and as they in turn embrace each other, rendering these intersectional

identities as “sites not only of the application of power but also of power’s transvaluation or redirection” (Keeling, xi).

This can be understood further through the symbolism of food and fruit included only during sex scenes with other Black women in the novel, used as metaphorical descriptors while describing Ginger, and subsequently used as literal instruments of pleasure with Afrekete: Ginger’s “skin the colour of well-buttered caramel” (157), her “spicy heat” (160), “Ginger’s flesh was sweet and moist and firm as a winter pear” (160), “thick crispy dark hair” (160), followed by Afrekete’s “strong body slowly mashed ripe banana into a beige cream that mixed with the juices of your electric flesh” (296), “squeezed the pale yellow-green fruit juice [...] over and around your coconut-brown belly” (298). Thus, the use of fruit and food either in the descriptions, or as instruments during sex both portray these experiences as the fertile ground which necessitates her growth in her exploration of her sexuality through another same-sex body, and her exploration of her race through a similar racial body to her own. Therefore, she initially realises and subsequently wields the power of her intersectionality the same way she describes her first sexual experience, namely through images alluding to food and fruit, before literally using them as instruments of pleasure with her last partner in the novel, Afrekete.

The intersectionality of race and sexuality is also explored through the homosexual sex scenes in *Giovanni’s Room*. However, unlike in *Zami* where the two identities come together during intimacy, in Baldwin’s novel, sexuality and race are portrayed through the divide which they create within the character of David. This divide is created as David’s internalised homophobia and self-oppression are subconsciously enforced through his white

American identity. In the intimate scene with Joey, this divide is portrayed through David's abrupt shift from his attraction to Joey to self-disgust:

"It seemed, then, that a lifetime would not be long enough for me to act with Joey the act of love [...] Joey's body was brown, was sweaty, the most beautiful creation I have ever seen till then [...] I was suddenly afraid [...] my own body suddenly seemed gross and crushing and the desire which was rising in me seemed monstrous" (7-8).

This shift from attraction to revulsion can also be found later in his relationship with Giovanni, who David describes as "beautiful" (74), with a "face so bright" (74), saying "I felt myself flow toward him, as a river rushes when the ice breaks up", "I really loved Giovanni"(74). However, his feelings of love suddenly turn to "sorrow and shame and panic and great bitterness" (74) resulting in a state where David feels "a hatred for Giovanni which was as powerful as my love and which was nourished by the same roots" (75). By equating his hatred with his love, Baldwin conveys David's internal divide. The last phrase, "nourished by the same roots", signifies that this sudden shift from attraction to revulsion emerges from the same source of his self-hatred which is necessitated by the compulsory heterosexuality ideal he has internalised due to his identity as an American man.

As Butler states relating to Western culture, "any kind of unregulated permeability [of the body] constitutes a site of pollution and endangerment" (168), what Sedgwick calls "male homosexual panic" (185). This forces David to reject his homosexual attraction to Joey and Giovanni, which thus causes him not only to divide his sexual and racial/ cultural identities, but to also make an object of his self, connected to his sexuality. In this way, "the innocence of homoerotic love and the tragic theme of self-denial" (DeGout, 426) conveyed through

these abrupt shifts in David's narration, as well as his confessional tone throughout the book, causes the reader to sympathise, or even pity David for his internal turmoil. Therefore, in contrast to *Zami*, where intersectionality is depicted as a site of growth and unity, in *Giovanni's Room*, intersectionality is rendered as a site of fragmentation and internal conflict.

Abur-Rahman has, however, further explored David's abjection of his sexuality as a way for Baldwin to convey the "racializing effects of queerness" (480). Abur-Rahman sees that David's exile state, due to his homosexual identity, "powerfully parallels – and analogizes – the social alienation and psychic fragmentation that African Americans and/as sexual outsiders experience at home in the United States" (478). Although this reading can be problematic if perceived as the erasure of other oppressions, if reframed as one of Baldwin's techniques to "open the space of black literary expression to subjects and experiences not deemed appropriate for black writers in the 1940s and 1950s" (Henderson, 313), it can reveal a very productive reading of racial oppression. This parallelism can be found in the repetitive image of a black cavern: "the black opening of a cavern [...] in which I would lose my manhood" (8), "a black cavern opened in my mind, black full of rumor" (8), "I saw my future in that cavern" (8). The first phrase portrays this cavern simultaneously as an allusion to gay sex and as an allusion to the state of being a black man in the United States, showing that through both these identities, gay and Black men suffer a similar dehumanization and alienation from society.

Moreover, for the gay man, the "rumor" which limits a man's "future" in that cavern, conveys his alienation from society, while in relation to the Black man, it alludes to his demonization throughout US history since the time of slavery. These allusions however, manifest into reality as "a mummy or a zombie" (34) man, which mirrors David's abjection

and embodies a sexual as well as a racial outsider. The man's "white" (34) face mirrors David's own abjection, while the repetition of "it" and the "horrifying lasciviousness" characterising its movements convey, once again, the dehumanisation and lustful conceptualization of Black men in American history. Thus, through an "imaginative space of whiteness" (Abur-Rahman 479), "free from proscriptive modes of representation [...] that devalue black literary texts" (478), Baldwin enables himself to portray the results of racism and (internalised) homophobia, targeting more than one oppressed group through the intersectionality of these identities.

Lorde's use of myth in *Zami* is another way in which she reflects the intersectionality between her sexuality and race. She does this by incorporating her female lovers into her own mythical world, which is itself a blend of her own and other cultures. Lorde is free to begin this journey of creating her new culture grounded in myth and difference only after she has left her childhood home, as she welcomes her new beginning with the phrase "*their shapes join [...] In libation, I wet the ground to my old heads*" (120). In this ritual she gives thanks and embraces her ancestral roots in her racial culture but also welcomes all the new possibilities which that cultural environment has limited her to in terms of discovering her sexual identity as a lesbian woman. Lorde's process of creating a new cultural identity for herself can be seen through Carlston's theory of positionality, which views "individual identity as an unstable construct, constantly (re)produced both by and within the social matrix, and by the subject's conscious creation of her self" (226).

Her journey to Mexico City portrays both the environment as well as her conscious effort to generate a new site for her intersectional identities of race and sexuality: "seeing my own colour reflected upon the streets", "I practiced holding my head up as I walked" (182).

Lorde's positionality therefore helps her create a new cultural identity which allows her to incorporate within it her sexual identity, as is shown by the cyclical listing of these sentences: "*Eudora. Mexico. Colour and light and Cuernavaca and Eudora.*" (189). Eudora is embraced within Lorde's mythical world by becoming an Amazon. By turning Eudora's scar of pain and difference into a mark of warrior power, Lorde attempts not only to transform and empower her personal cultural identity and "to resite many of the painful alienations that she experiences" (141), as Anderson states, but she also gifts that power to her lovers, in order to create a mutual "fiction of unity" (141). In this way, the transformation of her intersectional identities through myth becomes real, not just to herself, but to the people around her, allowing these outcast women to experience the same freedom she has created for herself.

Lorde realises that she could neither be part of her racial/ cultural community (due to her lesbian identity) nor part of the lesbian community due the erasure of her Blackness ("as lesbians, we were all outsiders and all equal in our outsisterhood" (239-40)) and because of the heterosexual binary roles adopted into the lesbian community which perpetuated and "reflected all the deprecating attitudes towards women" (262). Thus, she chooses to create a site for her own new cultural identity where she "dared for connection in the name of woman" (267), channelling the power of the intersectionalities of sameness and difference between women through myth and creating a space of freedom which allows for the healing of all women who are societal outsiders; all women who are willing to become "*Zami. A Carricaou name for women who work together as friends and lovers*" (303)).

Contrastingly, in *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin explores the site of these intersectionalities of sexuality and race by reflecting David's struggle to embrace his homosexuality as a white American man into the physical setting of the novel. Giovanni's

room becomes an embodiment of David's internalised homophobia and repression: "towering [...] boxes of cardboard [...] spilled down sheets of violin music" (77), "paper, the bottles, the fantastic accumulation of trash [...] innumerable boxes and suitcases" (78). "Projecting his desire to expel the aversive self, to abject Giovanni, David perceives Giovanni's room as the repository of the "garbage" of "Giovanni's regurgitated life"" (Henderson 319) but also as the space of his entrapment. For David, Giovanni's room becomes a literal manifestation of his self-repression as is evident from the hostile and claustrophobic description of the room personified as a beast praying upon him, echoing the "monstrous" (8) desire (mentioned above) which he felt rising after being intimate with Joey. Giovanni's room thus emerges through the eerie abhorrence of its "silent walls" (78), "staring windows, staring like two great eyes of ice and fire" (78), "its malevolence behind the yellow light which hung like a diseased and undefinable sex" (78). The grotesque, chaotic, dirty and claustrophobic room is thus associated with the inner turmoil, the filth and the repression David feels due to his internalised homophobia. Thus, he must reject both his own and Giovanni's homosexual identity, because of the compulsory heterosexuality entailed in his American identity.

The contrast between Giovanni's claustrophobic room and the spaciousness of the "great house" (139) which David rents with Hella in the south of France later in the novel, emphasises the freedom which comes with heterosexuality and conforming with societal norms but also the inescapable turmoil which comes by rejecting one's own identity as shown by David's guilt: "it was clear that I had no right to come here. By the time we found it, I did not even want to see it." (139). Here Baldwin shows how two intersectional identities which become contradicting due to societal and cultural norms, can cause a deep internal

fragmentation within the individual as David's reality is constantly torn between his feelings of attraction and revulsion towards Giovanni.

Zami and *Giovanni's Room* both deal with difficulties of societal alienation as well as embracing their own identities in their exiled states. However, the two novels portray two very different outcomes of dealing with the main characters' intersectionalities of sex and race. On the one hand, Lorde's is a reparative process and journey of self-discovery within and between her intersectional identities since, by acknowledging the problematic within society, she transforms both her sexual and racial identities, creating her own unifying fiction through sex and myth. On the other hand, David's is a failed journey of self-acceptance. Conveyed most strikingly through the sex scenes and the setting of the novel, David remains sexually repressed since he internalises the homophobia and compulsory heterosexuality of his white American racial identity. In contrast to Lorde who points out the problematic, David embodies it as Baldwin explores the parallel effects of racism and sexual oppression and the fragmentation which these can cause to the individual. Both texts however, no matter their positive or negative view, are productive in their outcome for the reader. While Baldwin urges his reader to avoid repressing their sexual and racial identities, even if these might contradict each other within society, Lorde teaches her reader how to create and inhabit a new space in which they can generate a new conceptualisation of these intersectional identities.

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