James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination

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CHAPTER 2

Paradoxical Reading Practices

Giovanni’s Room as Queer/Gay/Trans Novel

American males are the only people I’ve ever encountered in the world who are willing to go on the needle before they’ll go to bed with each other... I’ve known people who literally died out of this panic.

— JAMES BALDWIN, INTERVIEW

Still, there’s a long way to go from reveling in queer theory’s possibilities to exacting its theoretic purchase, especially given the untimely interruption of everything we cannot control, including our unruly selves and the world’s haunting ability to resurrect, against our best intentions, its version of itself. So let’s not assume—to make the first of several points—that as a form of internal critique, queer theory bears a truth that identity’s inaugural form does not.

— ROBYN WIEGMAN, OBJECT LESSONS

EX-GI BECOMES BLONDE BEAUTY: OPERATIONS TRANSFORM BRONX YOUTH

— NEW YORK DAILY NEWS HEADLINE, DECEMBER 1, 1952

If chapter 1 offered a sense of the paradoxical positions from which Baldwin’s larger oeuvre has been and must be read, chapter 2 homes in on a single Baldwin novel, Giovanni’s Room (1956). I bring that work into focus by approaching it from three of the critical orientations that have been gathered together under the “big tent” or LGBT formulation of “queer.” These critical orientations are queer theory, gay studies, and transgender analysis. On a basic level, my methodology implicitly acknowledges the richness of a novel that invites sustained attention by a number of LGBT interpretive paradigms. Yet as one reviewer of this chapter noted, the fact that multiple reading strategies recommend themselves as appropriate to Giovanni’s Room may simply suggest that “Baldwin’s fine novel is indeed available to us all.”
In effect, the idea that the novel has found various LGBT audiences risks seeming benign. I want to pause, then, to interrogate this underwhelming hypothesis, for I think it is striking to say that Baldwin’s traditionally “gay novel” is available to us all. What a porous text it must be to invite us all in. How paradoxical, given our queer differences, that we should feel at home in such mixed company.

My argument will be that *Giovanni’s Room* offers a particularly productive text for cultivating the queer imagination, not because it repays close readings by individual queers of different stripes, but because it so urgently compels the individual reader to engage incompatible or incommensurable LGBT reading practices. The novel is not simply textually available to queer theory, gay studies, and transgender analysis; rather, it invokes the tensions and contradictions that problematically bind those approaches together. In other words, *Giovanni’s Room* indexes the non-identity of queerness and the differences of the queers who are not so much invited as coerced by the text to read from multiple, potentially uncomfortable positions.

The stakes of my thesis are especially high on a personal level as well as a critical one, for *Giovanni’s Room* forces readers to situate and resituate themselves, to read both as and also beyond themselves. Enacting its chief thematic, the book engages queer readers in risky self-reflection. We must each ask, how does my queer imagination work? What are its characteristic moves and boundaries? How is my reading self a function of my sexual and/or gender identity, my critical training, my politics, and so on; and therefore, which queernesses do I embrace and which do I reject as a reader? Ironically, these questions come to light because the novel’s protagonist, David, represents so dramatic an example of the inability to think queerly. Readers must do something with *Giovanni’s Room* that Baldwin, through David, does not and cannot do for them: ever unseat themselves. The near-total failure of David’s queer imagination therefore creates a blank map on which readers must chart their own coordinates. I argue that in the interpretive void created by David’s ignorance, the reader is thrown into a queer reading crisis. The real drama in this chapter’s narrative therefore emerges as I articulate my queer, gay, and trans readings of the novel to one another in order to foreground moments of interpretive exchange, overlap, backtracking, and stressful innovation. One of my underlying assumptions is that such moments (and series of moments) in which a reader shifts intellectual stance are themselves worthy of interpretation, perhaps especially for the field of queer studies, which must be so invested in how it is constructed because it has always been and is currently in peril.
With *Giovanni’s Room*, Baldwin seems to intentionally provoke what theorists now call a queer critique. The novel offers an overt indictment of sexual and gender categories as constructed, confining, and impoverishing, a problem that Baldwin believed undermined the human capacity to give and receive love. Astonishingly, for the novel was published in 1956, Baldwin chooses to stake his (now-queer) claim about the stultifying effects of sexual identity categories on a story of failed love between two men. Yet even as this singular feature drew his publisher’s criticism and prevented the novel’s initial publication in the United States, Baldwin insisted that “*Giovanni’s Room* is not really about homosexuality. . . . It’s about what happens to you if you’re afraid to love anybody.” Far from the “gay novel” it was first derided as and is often celebrated as today, *Giovanni’s Room* represents a sustained effort to consider men’s sexual and erotic relations queerly, that is, beyond prescribed sexual identity categories and, perhaps most surprisingly, against homosexuality.

Though set in France, *Giovanni’s Room* is, in many ways, a typically American novel. With a central male character in flight from suffocating adult sexual relations, the novel retells what Leslie Fiedler has identified as the prototypical story of American manhood: the man on the run. Baldwin’s young protagonist, David, like Fiedler’s man on the run, attempts to escape from the heteronormative entrapment of marriage, but with a more explicit relationship to the homoerotic attachments to men that typify canonical male characters. David flees from a relentless “bulldog,” the terror and humiliating emasculation he associates with his sexual desire for men. But having fled Brooklyn for Paris (and therefore mirroring Baldwin’s own journey), David discovers that he cannot escape his same-sex desires and finds himself “brought up short once more before the bulldog in [his] own backyard—the yard, in the meantime, having grown smaller and the bulldog bigger.” Elsewhere David reflects, “perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition” (92). It is in Paris (but very much with his homeland in mind) that David must finally face his demons, for there he meets and enters into a sexual relationship with Giovanni, an Italian bartender. David’s subsequent marriage proposal to his girlfriend, Hella, reflects the unrelenting heteronormative pull of his native American shores, a pull made all the stronger by the “unbearable” freedom that Giovanni represents. “I
suppose this was why,” muses David, “I asked [Hella] to marry me: to give myself something to be moored to. But people can’t, unhappily, invent their mooring posts, their lovers and their friends, anymore than they can invent their parents” (5). Baldwin thus positions his protagonist between diverging forces: on the one hand, a sexual impulse toward men and, in particular, toward the anti-American Giovanni; on the other, the heteronormative social prescription toward marriage, represented by the “very elegant, tense, and glittering,” all-American mooring post, Hella.  

The association of repressed desire with geography and, more importantly, with a national American consciousness becomes central to the novel’s queer argument. *Giovanni’s Room* is not simply a study in sexual identity crisis but a story of located male struggle, contested first in David’s backyard of America and then in Europe, but rooted more distantly. Staring at the reflection of his own white face as the novel opens, David sees his ancestors who “conquered a continent, pushing across the death-laden plains, until they came to an ocean which faced away from Europe into a darker past” (3). Structured as a necessarily backward glance, the novel thus explores a particular and particularly raced American crisis of male sexual identity as a historically produced condition predicated on a refusal of that history. The result of his white countrymen’s rejection of their “darker past,” for Baldwin, was a gross simplification that manifests in *Giovanni’s Room* as the overpowering American impulse to categorize, define, and thereby limit and pervert complex human emotions, desires, and relationships.

The tension between identity categories and “the human being,” first and most famously expressed in his groundbreaking early essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” would become a major theme in much of Baldwin’s work. “[T]he failure of the protest novel,” Baldwin writes, “lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended.” Baldwin would, controversially, distinguish his writing philosophy from the work of Richard Wright and, more kindly, from that of his friend Lorraine Hansberry, whose *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) he thought to contain a “flaw . . . not really very different” from that of Wright’s *Native Son*. The novel fails in its “attempt to illuminate ruthlessly as unprecedented a creation as Bigger by means of the stock characters of Jan, the murdered girl’s lover, and Max, the white lawyer,” because “[t]he force of Bigger’s reality makes it impossible to believe in these two.” In Baldwin’s estimation, *A Raisin in the Sun*, like *Native Son*, also “involves the juxtaposition of the essen-
tially stock—certainly familiar—figure of the mother with the intense (and unprecedented) figure of Walter Lee.” Marlon Ross summarizes Baldwin’s critique of protest fiction, writing that rather than “fictionally representing the categories on which . . . injustice is based . . ., Baldwin wants to explode those categories, offering not a protest but rather a critique that disables the categories from retaining their oppressive power.”

If, as Baldwin intended, David is a more human protagonist than Bigger Thomas, this is because the human drama that surrounds the former more believably resonates with the force of his own reality. Though David often feels isolated by his desires, he sometimes dimly perceives a more general circumstance shared by his fellow men and women. “I began to see,” David reflects, that “while what was happening to me was not so strange as it would have comforted me to believe, yet it was strange beyond belief. It was not really so strange, so unprecedented, though voices deep within me boomed, For shame! For shame! that I should be so abruptly, so hideously entangled with a boy; what was strange was that this was but one tiny aspect of the dreadful human tangle, occurring everywhere, without end, forever” (62). The “dreadful human tangle” that David feels a part of offers a particularly helpful image for Baldwin’s conception of the relations, interwoven and knotty rather than one-dimensional and stock, that are produced by forces of desire. It reflects Baldwin’s unwavering and lifelong belief that people’s sexual (and racial, national, and gender) identities are interrelated, interdependent, and shared. To return to an important passage, Baldwin’s belief that “we are all androgynous, . . . a part of each other,” was “exceedingly inconvenient” but undeniable. The inconvenience for Americans of human interconnectedness was, in fact, so exceeding that Baldwin described it as a panic, one seen “[n]owhere . . . more vividly than in my country and in my generation.” These sentiments, written three years before Baldwin’s death, represent one of the final and most explicit formulations of the author’s universalizing queer perspective on identity categories.

David, the symbol of Baldwin’s twenty-something post-war generation, can sustain neither his entanglement with Giovanni nor the larger vision of complex human relationality that he has glimpsed. Although a series of doomed messengers attempts to relay Baldwin’s queer message, the young American invariably fails to heed their warnings. One of David’s acquaintances and pursuers, the wealthy and lecherous Frenchman Jacques, warns that while “not many people have ever died of love,” its absence has certainly proven to be deadly: “[M]ultitudes have perished, and are perishing every
hour—and in the oddest places!—for the lack of [love]” (58). Jacques implies that even—or precisely—in queer places, love is a lifeline. “Love [Giovanni],” he exclaims, “love him and let him love you. Do you think anything else under heaven really matters?” (57). Baldwin thus pushes the reader to comprehend the potential for humanity inherent in male-male erotic relations. Further, those relations provide a site for understanding the importance of love in all lives “under heaven.”

While the dirty old man Jacques acts as a somewhat surprising wisdom figure, Giovanni offers a more pointedly queer critique of David. In their final lovers’ quarrel before David leaves him, Giovanni distinguishes his notably anti-American perspective from David’s highly taxonomic worldview: “You are the one who keeps talking about what I want. But I have only been talking about who I want” (142). “Who” versus “what” neatly encapsulates the queer critique of Giovanni’s Room: we can love not categories but individuals. Eventually, Giovanni’s execution and David’s crushing alienation literalize the stakes of failing to love queerly. David may not “go on the needle” in order to forestall going to bed with men, a deadly but common substitution according to Baldwin (see the first epigraph to this chapter), but having sacrificed Giovanni, David comes ever closer to his own disastrous end.

Donald Hall, in his introduction to the patchwork field of queer theory, identifies Giovanni’s Room as an “exemplary ‘queer text.’” Hall cements his argument in a wonderfully rich paragraph that familiarizes the reader with a lexicon that has encoded much of queer thought. I quote it at length in order to highlight that queer language (the emphases are mine).

But certainly the lingering possibility that individuals can resist by living and loving in excess of preexisting social categories does make [Giovanni’s Room] a thoroughly queer [novel]. It suggests that desire can manifest itself in the most surprising ways and in nonexclusive terms. It suggests mutability in sexual relationships over time and also in ways that exceed a simple hetero/homo binary. It suggests strongly that individuals have the ability and responsibility to allow for human complexity outside the starkness of received social definitions and valuations, even as it does not deny the power of those contextual forces. It evokes the possibility of a different set of sexual relationships and definitions without prescribing exactly what the future might hold.11

The novice queer theorist, for whom Hall’s pedagogical text is generously written, could not ask for a more succinct characterization of the poststruc-
turalist strain of queer theory. The above paragraph, like Baldwin's novel, fairly bristles at the notion of inherently stable, intrinsically meaningful sexual identity categories. William Turner likewise suggests that “[o]ne vastly oversimplified but still useful way to understand queer theory begins with the proposition that many persons do not fit the available categories and that such failure of fit reflects a problem not with the persons but with the categories.”

Indeed, David’s problems do seem to be category problems. To David’s normative mid-twentieth-century mind, only two options, heterosexuality and homosexuality, present themselves as possible futures. Yet each of these futures, Baldwin insists, is really a trap for David. This point is important for queer theoretical readings of the novel: neither straight identity nor gay identity can do justice to the complex realities of erotic life. The former embodies Western culture’s heteronormative mandate and, as is typical of norms, veils its own mechanisms of coercion. Baldwin embodies David’s straight future in the figure of the pure, clean, soap-stained American man. Waiting with his countrymen for mail at the American Express office in Paris, David observes of American men that “they smelled of soap, which seemed indeed to be their preservative against the dangers and exigencies of any more intimate odor; the boy he had been shone somehow, unsoiled, untouched, unchanged, through the eye of the man of sixty” (89–90). But the antiseptic veneer meant to preserve the boyish innocence of the man is pure shell, a formal front built on an abdication of self that Giovanni, employing the identical metaphor, characterizes as immoral.

You want to be clean. You think you came here covered with soap—and you do not want to stink, not even for five minutes, in the meantime. . . . You want to leave Giovanni because he makes you stink. You want to despise Giovanni because he is not afraid of the stink of love. You want to kill him in the name of all your lying little moralities. And you—you are immoral. (141)

The preoccupation with cleanliness at the heart of this passage suggests a form of American self-alienation, the veil of soap providing a thin but symbolic barrier against bodies and, in turn, bodily desires, both heterosexual and homosexual ones. Baldwin thus traces David’s need to be clean back to its American context; the deceptively clean smile signifies one of David’s “lying little moralities” that, like soap, spreads out in a sweet-smelling, superficial layer over human flesh. Desires of the flesh, Giovanni implies, are betrayed by a superficial—and thus immoral—American moral code.
Although Giovanni’s reading of David takes place within the context of a male-male relationship, cleanliness and American (im)morality must be understood not solely as reactions against homosexual desire but also as equally unfulfilling, idealized states of heterosexual American manhood.\textsuperscript{13} Put differently, David fails to be straight not only because his most pressing and authentic sexual yearning is for men but also because heterosexuality itself is a failure. Heterosexuality fails at a structural level—that is, as a category—because it rests on a performative and therefore unstable fiction of American manhood. Chasing an elusive masculinity, Baldwin’s protagonist is in the company of other literary “made men.” David Leverenz argues that the passage into manhood as reflected by key texts of the American canon is primarily motivated and marked by fear and shame rather than accomplishment. “Any intensified ideology of manhood,” writes Leverenz, “is a compensatory response to fears of humiliation.”\textsuperscript{14} For David, heterosexuality’s enticement rests in its promise of emboldening his masculinity, a promise that surely has special significance given David’s supposedly emasculating desires for men. On one level, the “straight trap,” while it would thwart David’s freedom to openly pursue his desire for men, vows to produce him as a man. In the vacuum of desire that characterizes the heterosexual option for David, normative gender identity expands to sustain—indeed, define—heterosexual identity. Of course, this product is itself chimerical. David’s “manhood,” inflated by (i.e., in order to fill the void of) the fiction of heterosexuality, itself becomes a powerfully alienating force. David, still looking at his compatriots, sadly realizes that “beneath these faces, these clothes, accents, rudenesses, was power and sorrow, both unadmitted, unrealized, the power of inventors, the sorrow of the disconnected” (90).

The implications of David making the heterosexual false choice are thus far reaching. Not only does he realize that he is not straight, but he also therefore experiences a traumatic separation from the masculine gender identity that his straight lie attempts to purchase for him. In knowing that he is not straight, David literally cannot know whether he is an American man. But even if David were straight, the heterosexual “option” would cut him off from masculine gender identity at the same time that it attempted to secure it. Whether taking the form of the macho father or of the impeccable, impenetrable sailor, the recurring figure of the American Adam dominates David’s imagination as, paradoxically, both the essence of natural masculinity and an unreachable cultural ideal, an impossible, unassailable heterosexuality. The queer question of the novel thus hinges not on the rec-
ognition that sexual identity can be fluid or multiple but on a deeper issue: does David realize that, even if he could be straight, straightness would not help him become a “real” man?

If the trap of American heteronormativity simultaneously foists on and denies David and his countrymen masculine identity, Baldwin also creates for David a counterpart to the American Adam. Just as an impossible heteromasculinist ideal—Mr. Clean—guarantees perpetual identity failure at the top of the hetero/homo binary, another figure even more dramatically represents category failure from below. Baldwin sets the “gay trap” by inverting the metaphor of cleanliness, substituting filth in its place. The soap-washed masculine veneer of the straight man becomes the perfume-stained but putrified flesh of the effeminized homosexual, variously associated with a vomitous old queen, a rotting female corpse, a shit-eating monkey, and, as I will explore in depth below, a lascivious zombie—the flaming, living dead. The rank horror of gay effeminacy gives teeth to the threat of homosexuality as a false choice for David, as these portrayals situate the gay man not merely inside a limiting category but as the embodiment of a cultural end point. David cannot live as a gay man.

The awakening of David’s “insistent possibilities” as a gay man occurs when, in full view of an expectant queer community at a “dubious” bar, he meets the barman Giovanni. The attraction is instant, undeniable, and, most important, public. By the end of the night, David feels, for the first time, that he can no longer escape homosexual categorization. Riding to breakfast through the streets of Paris with Giovanni, Jacques, and the bar owner Guillaume, the American panics, thinking, “I was in a box for I could see that, no matter how I turned, the hour of confession was upon me and could scarcely be averted; unless of course, I leaped out of the cab, which would be the most terrible confession of all” (47). The “truth” of sexuality, as Foucault suggests, must be told. Ironically, homosexuality represents not a range of “possibilities” but the only possible way for David to understand the trajectory of his queer desire. Here, Baldwin seems to argue against homosexuality in the same way that one might argue against a forced confession: what else can David possibly say?

But why not just say “it,” since “it” is, after all, true: David likes Giovanni. The answer lies back at the bar “of dubious—or perhaps not dubious at all, of rather too emphatic—reputation” (26). Emphatic indeed, the reputation is resounding, forceful, and categorical. To David’s impoverished and typical American mind, liking Giovanni would mean, emphatically, identifying
with the habitués of the bar, from whom David has until now been able to hold himself apart. It would mean falling into the filth of homosexuality, metaphorized as a “cavern . . . black, full of rumor, suggestion, . . . full of dirty words” (9). The cavern references gay male anality and equates it with a grave in which David, in his nightmares, is pressed against his dead mother’s decaying body, “so putrescent, so sickening soft, that it opened, as I clawed and cried, into a breach so enormous as to swallow me alive” (10–11). Homosexual identification would initiate a descent into literal and figurative dirtiness marked by a return to the feminine and a decomposing masculine gender identity.¹⁵

Two resonant examples demonstrate the categorical failure or impurity—the dirty femininity—of the gay man as depicted in Giovanni’s Room. Approached in the bar by a shadowy figure, a male with “very large and strong” hands yet wearing mascara, lipstick, foundation cream, and a shirt covered with paper-thin, brightly colored wafers that make it seem as though the stranger “might, at any moment, disappear in flame,” David interprets the effeminized male body as a walking corpse: “Now someone whom I had never seen before came out of the shadows toward me. It looked like a mummy or a zombie—this was the first, overwhelming impression—of something walking after it had been put to death” (38). The epitome of what Lee Edelman has characterized as homographic display—the making legible of homosexuality on the body—the zombie embodies feminine gender marks as a way of making himself gay.¹⁶ That cultural inscription simultaneously functions as a form of mummification, of stylized death. The homosexual—coded as a man turned woman—is a dead man. Alternately, he is made to take on those fatal marks and meanings as a symbolic form of violence committed by those, including himself, who insist on the visibility of his difference, in which case the mummification becomes not only suicide but murder by gender.

Smiling at David in the bar, the “flaming” mummy sees to the heart of and articulates David’s peril upon meeting Giovanni: “Il est dangereux, tu sais. And for a boy like you—he is very dangerous.” The danger for a boy like David is threefold. First, it is imagined by Baldwin specifically as a boy’s danger, a case of threatened masculinity. Second, because David has been able to pass as straight, a boy like him risks an especially great fall if he becomes a “marked” man. Third, as the specter/spectacle becomes spectator, he reveals what was, in Baldwin’s eyes, the real danger, David’s denial of his desire: “But you, my dear friend—I fear that you shall burn in a very hot
fire.’ He laughed again. ‘Oh, such fire!’ He touched his head. ‘Here.’ And he
writhed, as though in torment. ‘Everywhere.’ And he touched his heart. ‘And
here.’ And he looked at me with malice and mockery and something else; he
looked at me as though I was very far away."

The zombie implies that David will burn with the flames of desire
but that his denial of that desire will be the American’s true torment. His
insight—he sees David as though he was “very far away”—reflects distance,
and yet his final warning, “You will be very unhappy. Remember that I told
you so,” suggests an intimate connection between the two. Looking at David,
does the phantom fortune-teller not seem to look back on his former self?
Does David, looking into the “dark eyes narrowed in spite and fury” (40)
not envision his own terrifying future? The danger, then, stems from this
moment being an identificatory one. If David’s eyes mirror the phantom’s
own, perhaps the latter’s prediction is true. Perhaps David will suffer the
same unhappy “death” as the man in front of him. This is, of course, David’s
greatest fear.

Juxtaposing this scene with another will show the death grip of the as-
sociation between homosexuality and effeminacy in the novel. In this next
scene, David has a brief and largely fantastic interaction with the epitome
of masculinity, an American sailor. Gazing at the sailor as he crosses the
street, David forgets himself momentarily, only to be all the more forcefully
reminded of who he is not and thus must try to be: “I was staring at him,
though I did not know it, and wishing I were he. He seemed—somehow—
younger than I had ever been, and blonder and more beautiful, and he wore
his masculinity as unequivocally as he wore his skin. . . . I wondered . . . if I
had ever been like that.” David’s initial vision is one of difference. The sailor’s
manhood seems natural compared to David’s own. Yet we know that David
is a young, blond American, hardly so different from the sailor—even in
the way he wears his masculinity, if his own self-assessment is reliable. Of
his emasculation, David reflects, “I was too old to suppose that it had any-
thing to do with my walk, or the way I held my hands, or my voice—which,\nanyway, he had not heard. It was something else and I would never see it. I
would never dare to see it. It would be like looking at the sun.” David thus
naturalizes his difference from the sailor, even though they appear (and per-
haps sound and move) the same and though he characterizes the sailor as
wearing his masculinity. Why, in the face of ostensible sameness, does David
not identify with the sailor as I have argued he did with the mummy?

David continues by elaborating his emasculation.
We came abreast and, as though he had seen some all-revealing panic in my eyes, he gave me a look contemptuously lewd and knowing; just such a look as he might have given, but a few hours ago, to the desperately well-dressed nymphomaniac or trollop who was trying to make him believe she was a lady. And in another second, had our contact lasted, I was certain that there would erupt into speech . . . some brutal variation of Look, baby. I know you. I felt my face flame. . . . I wondered what he had seen in me to elicit such instantaneous contempt. . . . But, hurrying, and not daring now to look at anyone, male or female, who passed me on the wide sidewalks, I knew that what the sailor had seen in my unguarded eyes was envy and desire: I had seen it often in Jacques' eyes and my reaction and the sailor's had been the same. (92)

The richness and sadness of this passage lie in the startling illogic of David's brand of homosexual panic. He says that he envies the sailor. He wants to be him, yet in the most striking ways, the sailor is already David's double. Not only do they look, or appear, alike, but they look, or see, alike. If the sailor's gaze is “contemptuously lewd” toward David, so has David's been toward other gay men. Further, in the sailor's eyes, David reads, “Look, baby. I know you,” words that might be interpreted as connoting not (only) disdain but also desire, perhaps even an invitation offered in the parlance of a shared urban masculinity (“baby”). Nevertheless, David invests the sailor's eyes only with the knowledge, contempt, and power of unimpeachable straightness, which is to say unimpeachable masculinity. When the gay boy looks at the straight boy, his very act of looking proves to be his downfall. The look in his eyes alone turns him into a “well-dressed nymphomaniac or trollop,” and thus the look of gay male desire becomes the most telling and most indelible of homographic marks in Giovanni's Room. Corresponding with the phenomenon of internalized homophobia, homographesis, Baldwin suggests, can mark the gay man from the inside out. What David fails to realize but what Baldwin puts within our critical grasp is the queer idea offered by Kaja Silverman that “all subjects are necessarily within specularity, even when occupying a viewing position, and that all antithesis of spectator and spectacle are consequently false.” Precisely through David's failed queer imagination, Baldwin is able to represent what Silverman calls “male subjectivity at the margins.” He casts a new relationship between the “straight” male subject/object who stands at the center of definitions of the masculine and the “gay” male subject/object who stands on the periphery of those definitions.
Key here is the transgressive union of “envy and desire,” a transgression that rests on the gender difference—gender being the irreconcilable difference—that lays the very foundation for the hetero/homo binary. As Michael Warner argues in “Homo-Narcissism; or, Heterosexuality,” “The difference between hetero- and homosexualities is . . . an allegory about gender. . . . [T]he core of the psychoanalytic tradition . . . is the assumption that gender is the phenomenology of difference itself.”18 That David is like the sailor cannot sustain the weight of his desire for the sailor, for the logic of gender as difference requires that desire structures objects outside of or other than the self and that identification structures subjects as a feature of the self. “Freud’s deepest commitment,” according to Warner, “is that these two operations will be exclusive, and one will be reserved for each gender. An admission that it would be possible to identify with and to desire a gendered image would be the most troubling of all.”19 Following Warner, one queer theory that might be brought to bear on Giovanni’s Room would posit the possibility of the masculine gay male couple. But unable to manage his simultaneous identification and desire, David rejects his own masculinity. This disidentification with the masculine self affects a regendering or an inversion as David remakes himself in the image of a (female) “trollop.” Drawn taught with paradox is the seemingly straightforward question that Mae Henderson identifies as at the heart of Giovanni’s Room, “What is it to be a homosexual and a man?”20

That David can sooner believe that he is a woman because he desires men than believe that he is a man who desires men—the utter impossibility of the latter option—seems sufficiently suspect to make us question the logic of gender sameness and difference on which normative sexuality depends. In fact, the scene encourages the reader to reject the “truth” of gender: that all men are somehow fundamentally the same and that those men who are different are, under the strict rules of the binary, women. In other words, the scene encourages the reader to cast a critical eye on the power of gender to override, by defining the terms by which sexual sameness and difference are understood, erotic differences that would trouble the deployment of gender sameness as a meaningful identity marker. But for David, our first-person narrator, masculine gay men are not merely unrecognizable as gay but, indeed, unthinkable as gay. That ontological void relies not simply on David’s stereotypical assumptions that the masculine men he encounters are straight but, rather, on a gender-determinative logic that recodes all gay men as effeminate. In fact, for David, being gay is largely a process of becoming a
woman or, as he tells Giovanni, a “little girl” (142). Just as the trap of straight identity attempts to construct an ideal masculine Mr. Clean, the trap of gay identity does not so much reveal as produce the dirty little girl. Sexual identity categories in Giovanni’s Room become emphatically gender-defining acts. They do not express or naturally correspond to gender identities but instead insist on and determine them.

An extension of the queer theory that would unite, rather than oppose, identification and desire might posit a more flexible and comprehensive relationship between the two. In “The Male Prison,” an essay about Andre Gide’s homosexual “dilemma” (published in 1954, just prior to Giovanni’s Room), Baldwin writes that “[t]he great problem is how to be—in the best sense of that kaleidoscopic word—a man.” By “kaleidoscopic” man, Baldwin indicates neither a natural state nor a mere category but a subjectivity capable of grappling with both masculinity and femininity to achieve “genuine human involvement,” the highest expression of which is love, with both women and men. The figure of the “kaleidoscopic” man seems to me to best represent the queer vision that hovers over but is never realized in Giovanni’s Room. With its changing colors and shifting shapes representing the mutable relationship between gender and sexuality, the kaleidoscope metaphorically explodes categories into fragments and reconstitutes them into patterns as complex as life itself.

CRITICAL BACKTRACKING: GIOVANNI’S ROOM AS POST-QUEER GAY NOVEL

Reading Giovanni’s Room as a model queer text makes a great deal of sense. The novel’s queer exemplarity stems from Baldwin’s insistence time and again that prescribed identity categories invariably betray the complexity of the individual and, by isolating him in their “cells,” belie his inescapable state of dependence on the other. As Hall demonstrates, the tools of queer theory are well-honed for explaining this position. It was to my surprise, then, that, over time, I found myself resisting the kind of queer theoretical analyses of Giovanni’s Room that I so value. Rather than the queer text I had been reading and teaching, the novel began to seem downright gay.

In calling Giovanni’s Room a gay novel, I might seem to be making an obvious claim, central as the work has been to the gay canon. The Publishing Triangle, the association of lesbians and gay men in publishing, offers
a fairly representative list of the one hundred best lesbian and gay novels, on which Baldwin appears multiple times. The “Books” section of the Los Angeles Times recently released its list “20 Classic Works of Gay Literature,” including “books that have provided a richer understanding of the joys and challenges particular to gay life.” *Giovanni’s Room* tops the list (it was second in the longer, Publishing Triangle ranking), and the embedded picture of Baldwin offers a visual symbol of his ubiquitous presence in the gay canon. More interesting than the assertion that *Giovanni’s Room* has become a classic work of gay literature is where this claim falls in my history of reading and teaching the novel. Oddly, my gay reading, which relies on the kinds of identity-based claims that enabled gay studies to flourish, followed my queer reading, which uses an anti-identitarian, poststructuralist queer theoretical approach. This was a surprising trajectory, from queer to gay, yet it also seems wonderfully suggestive to me, dynamically pointing both backward and forward. It points to a fruitful evolution in queer reading practices, one surely bolstered by queer theoretical disciplinary innovation and deepened by historical sensitivity, the result of which is a theory of gay difference. As my thinking about the novel evolved, I found myself reordering the usual trajectory from gay to queer that Thomas Piontek associates with the shift from the modern to the postmodern. *Giovanni’s Room* became a post-queer gay novel.

Yet the process of rereading and of overwriting deconstructive queer renderings of *Giovanni’s Room* with a post-queer gay interpretation was more uneasy for me than I have implied. In fact, I found my scholarly investment in queer theory to be deeply antithetical to my instincts as a gay reader of Baldwin. As an academic, I privileged my intellectual training; as a gay man, I trusted my experience. These threads of “me” were unwrapping themselves in a fray of readerly self-difference. To put this another way, as a queer theorist, I was experiencing, to point back to Robyn Wiegman’s epigraph, an “untimely interruption” of my “unruly” gay self. The truths of queer theory and of gay identity that informed my two interpretive approaches could not be reconciled. Wary of revisiting chronological arguments about the births of gay studies and its counterpart (offspring? evil twin?) queer theory in the academy, I nevertheless faced the question, In a post-queer context, just how was I making *Giovanni’s Room* gay, again? Strange temporalities are presently so associated with liberatory queer theories that thinkers have found themselves needing to work especially hard to re-recover gay pasts that remain impervious to liberation. Heather Love, in *Feeling Backward: Loss and*
the Politics of Queer History, argues that readers are incentivized to turn away from early representations of same-sex desire because they archive painful affective readerly experiences of loss, shame, despair, and regret. By holding her gaze on the “stubborn negativity of the past” without the goal of transforming it, Love returns an important legacy of literary response to homophobia to her present-day readers. A similar painful attachment to the homophobic construction of homosexuality in Giovanni’s Room powerfully held my gay attention and set in motion a process of critical backtracking.

A personal, readerly dilemma arose before me: despite Baldwin’s category-busting, kaleidoscopic queer vision and despite my deep investment in queer theory, I started reading David as gay again. This was not an expected or comfortable reading trajectory for me. That I continued over months and indeed years to be nagged by my untimely return to gay from queer seemed increasingly important and worth further exploration. Why did I, despite the treasure trove of queer thought available to me, including my own critique of identitarian need in chapter 1 of this volume, continue to revisit a not-so-queer critical place? The question already answered by queer theory lingered nevertheless: why and how is David not gay? Baldwin tries preemptively to answer that question in novelistic terms, writing as early as 1949 that “[i]t is quite impossible to write a worth-while novel about a Jew or a Gentile or a Homosexual, for people refuse, unhappily, to function in so neat and one-dimensional a fashion.” Giovanni’s Room, if it is a worthwhile novel, must not be “about” a homosexual. Readers must not, if we are to appreciate the novel fully, let David’s sexual identity obscure or detract from a larger human message, for “[a] novel insistently demands the presence and passion of human beings, who cannot ever be labeled. Once the novelist has created a human being, he has shattered the label and, in transcending the subject matter, is able, for the first time, to tell us something about it and to reveal how profoundly things involving human beings interlock.” In essence, Baldwin denies that representation of the oppressed and representation of the dominant are significantly different endeavors. To answer my nagging question, the reason David cannot be gay is because Baldwin will not permit David to read as gay—even if he is. At the level of narrative, David cannot inhabit the inert category “gay,” because that rendering would—must, it seems—suffocate him in an “airless, labeled cel[l]” and consequently thwart human revelation. Further, at the interpretive level, we must not read David as gay—that is, insist on his gayness—for that would, in turn, produce a suffocating critical gay reading practice, ironically just the
kind of reading practice that has elevated a cadre of texts to visibility but that also has created a false distinction between major and minor literatures. If we are to know David as gay, it is only by first following the transcendent representation of David the human being.

We can now begin to understand the meaning and significance of Baldwin’s assertion that “Giovanni’s Room is not really about homosexuality. . . . It’s about what happens to you if you’re afraid to love anybody.” In this claim, which also constitutes an act of disclaiming, Baldwin leverages the considerable powers that construct and enforce a heterosexual/homosexual distinction, while he simultaneously and all the more forcefully attempts to render that distinction unimportant by insisting on the universality of his message. Giovanni’s Room asks us to understand the universal (love) through the particular and “perverse” (love between men), transposing the terms of the usual integrationist analogy “we (homosexuals) are like them (heterosexuals)” so that it reads “they (heterosexuals) are like us (homosexuals).” The ultimate meaning is that we are all, fundamentally, in the same boat. Among queer theorists, Sedgwick most famously advocates for a related universalizing perspective that regards issues of homosexuality as important to and having impact on people of all sexualities. Baldwin’s shift to universality from gay specificity, which is, in effect, a deconstruction, certainly attempts to make erotic and sexual relations between men less differently meaningful than those between men and women and, thus, meaningful to everyone, though as Trudier Harris points out and as I will address more fully in the conclusion to this book, lesbian relationships are nowhere explicitly addressed by Baldwin. From this reverse assimilationist point of view, which takes as its chief tenet the underlying interconnectedness of all people, male sexual relations in Giovanni’s Room provide the template for understanding larger, typically normative social relations.

In “Letter to My Nephew on the One-Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation,” which opens the book The Fire Next Time, Baldwin explains, in racial terms, another version of reverse integration. About white people, Baldwin writes to his young nephew that “[t]he really terrible thing, old buddy, is that you must accept them.” Near the end of the letter, Baldwin emphasizes the importance of this redefinition, for “if the word integration means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it.” I want to distinguish Baldwin’s perspective on racial integration in The Fire Next Time, published just after Another Country, from that
in *Giovanni’s Room*, published seven years earlier. As I will argue in the next chapter, *Another Country*’s treatment of (homo)sexuality aligns more closely with the racial advice to his nephew than does that of *Giovanni’s Room*, reflecting Baldwin’s evolving relationship to gay experience and its place in the larger heteronormative culture. But in *Giovanni’s Room*, gay subjectivity offers less of a cultural location from which to “love” and thereby effect social change and more, rather, of a cultural abyss.

While honoring Baldwin’s powerfully unifying vision, I hesitate to turn quite so quickly from his critical treatment of the “one-dimensional” gay character, for that character seems to exist off the page for Baldwin as well. Here we enter into the complicated and, as I argued in chapter 1, undertheorized issue of Baldwin’s relationship to gay identity. Represented in *Giovanni’s Room* as prescriptive and confining and, as the next chapter will demonstrate, elsewhere associated with liberatory potential, gay identity exposes a tension within Baldwin’s work and life. Perhaps most kindly but also accurately, we could say that so few positive models of homosexuality existed in the mid-1950s as to make advocating for gay identity painfully distasteful, if not unthinkable. While writing *Giovanni’s Room*, Baldwin seems to have held a grim view of the “plight” of the homosexual.

The really horrible thing about the phenomenon of present-day homosexuality . . . is that today’s unlucky deviate can only save himself by the most tremendous exertion of all his forces from falling in to an underworld in which he never meets either men or women, where it is impossible to have either a lover or a friend, where the possibility of genuine human involvement has altogether ceased.34

My critique is not that Baldwin mischaracterizes the social circumstances that disable and traumatize gay people. Rather, I question the way he thereby negatively juxtaposes gay identity (“present-day homosexuality”) with the possibility of human life (“genuine human involvement” and “growth”). Problematically, that distinction would prove to be a lasting one for Baldwin. When asked in a 1969 interview whether homosexuality is a disease, he first argued that “[t]he fact that Americans consider it a disease says more about them than it says about homosexuality.”35 But he then, oddly, reversed course when prompted to comment further about “societies where homosexuality becomes very open”: “When it becomes open as it has here, it becomes a disease. These people are not involved in anything resembling
love-making: they’re involved in some kind of exhibition of their disaster. It has nothing to do with contact or involvement between two people—which means that the person may change you. That’s what people are afraid of. It’s impossible to go through life assuming that you know who you’re going to fall in love with. You don’t.”

Open homosexuality can only be a disastrous exhibition in this formulation, a manifestation of the “disease” of looking for the love you naively think you want, whereas homosexual “love-making” can apparently only occur in some privatized space that allows for true “contact or involvement.” Fifteen years later, Baldwin appears perhaps even more willing to position gay people as culturally dislocated members of a pitiable “underworld.” Writing in the midst of the murderously homophobic culture war that fueled and sustained the AIDS crisis, he troublingly disregards the ways sex became, for many gay men, an important and even central expression of gay identity, politics, and pride: “There is nothing more boring, anyway, than sexual activity as an end in itself, and a great many people who came out of the closet should reconsider.” Of course, by 1985, when these words were published, going back in the closet was no longer an option for the earliest AIDS dead and the visibly infected. But beyond this, by advocating for the re-closeting of a “great many” gay men, Baldwin suggests that the appropriation of gay identity (here linked explicitly to gay sex for its own sake) produces a more “brutal and dangerous anonymity” than does remaining in the closet. The ease with which he imagines identity-based gay sexual culture to be culturally expendable points to an enduring attitude about the insufficiency of gay identity. What Baldwin cannot imagine, except as oxymoronic, is the concept of gay life.

It might be appropriate at this point to reiterate Baldwin’s early and long-standing goal as writer and social witness: “to reveal how profoundly all things involving human beings interlock.” The struggle to embrace one’s full humanity is a shared struggle for Baldwin, and the extent to which one struggles alone, without recognition of the humanity of others and without one’s own humanity recognized, is precisely the measure of our shared failure. I foreground this point in order to stress that, remarkably, Baldwin seems always to have presupposed that queer people are deserving heirs to the interlocking human drama—in short, that queer people are fully human. On the one hand, I find this assumption so radical as to be one of Baldwin’s most enduring queer ideas. On the other hand, I wonder about the precise logic of Baldwin’s “taking for granted” the humanity of gay people, a logic that replays itself in the “post-gay” liberal sentiment of today.
nder about the motivations and goals when, in the name of “genuine human involvement” (with whom?), gay identity is assumed away as unnecessary and even destructive.

It is an odd thing to perceive one’s sexual identity being set at odds with one’s humanity, as Baldwin unambiguously positions it. It is strange to hear that one’s resolute (if catalog-like), deeply felt, keenly experienced, and, yes, singular gayness could possibly exclude one from a state of transcendent universality, that is, from recognition as nothing less than a human being. Again, on the one hand, Baldwin’s assumptions are radical: what, he asks, could the homosexual possibly mean short of what he means as a human being? Quite on the other hand, however, in both his fiction and his essays, he imagines that the homosexual can achieve full humanity only by transcending homosexual specificity. Fully human beings cannot only or primarily be gay, as though one’s humanity must be staked somewhere other than and evidently beyond homosexuality, lest the stakes pull up and one’s humanity floats away, free of the mere homosexual.

In my earlier queer formulation, the category “gay” appeared as a limiting element because it obscured the interconnectedness of our “dreadful human tangle.” My post-queer gay reading of Giovanni’s Room argues just the opposite. I think Baldwin’s universalizing impulse, which degrades the importance of sexual identity in order to privilege our shared humanity, moves in a dangerous direction. The fundamental problem is that humanity, as anyone who has ever needed to argue for theirs knows, is itself the most banal and meaningless of categories. To be forced to insist on one’s humanity, as queers are constantly forced to do—to need to fall back on this most obvious and inarguable of claims and to treat that claim as profound—is the incomparably degrading position. To argue that we are all complex human beings is to argue, literally, nothing. To search for some meaningful and enduring understanding of our commonality at the base level of humanity precisely by denying the baseness of that comparison and elevating “humanity” to an achievement seems to me a poignant but illusory endeavor. Gay as we insistently are, our humanity can never be questioned, can never be partial, can never be “achieved.” Being gay is as good as humanity gets.

I propose that one’s sexuality is coextensive with one’s humanity and that we cannot deconstruct one without deconstructing the other. Putting aside the reasons we might want to do just that, if we want to privilege our humanity, it therefore must be a complex humanity informed by deep knowl-
edge and experience, including the many forms of sexual difference and identity. There is, I argue, no intrinsic shared humanity separate from the engagement with others at their privileged levels of specificity (sexual and otherwise) and at one’s own. Losing our sexual identities would mean losing an important opportunity either to connect at a detailed level of human experience or to face the fact of our sustained disconnection.

It would also mean, as Sarah Schulman’s unpublished play *The Lady Hamlet* dramatizes, leaving in place the unstated connection between a “universalizable” point of view and heterosexual male privilege. Schulman argues that theater audiences have only been taught to regard the man’s drama—Hamlet’s being the case in point—as the human drama: “[A man] steps onto the stage and all the world is his to prowl until he exhibits his human flaw. Then, audience gasps. There are no higher stakes than a man’s fate.” But Hamlet’s perspective is specific, not general. When we are trained to interpret his drama as our own, we mistake the act of making meaning out of unique difference for the act of accessing general human truth and experience. The Lady Hamlet, if such a role existed, would require audiences “to universalize to her, as we now universalize to [Hamlet].” If Baldwin’s queerer impulse was to generalize away David’s gay specificity, the power of the novel compels just the opposite reading: we cannot help but see through David’s eyes, to universalize to him, to read and to experience him as gay.

What if it were impossible to imagine “gay” as a limiting category? What if gay identity represented a fully complex, fully human subjectivity? What if we assumed, finally, that gay people exist by virtue of, rather than despite, the specificity of their gayness? Then we could universalize through the particularities of gay experience, which is to argue not that the category “gay” is not a troubled and troubling one but, rather, that gay life can be neither reduced to a category nor inherently reduced by the category. This means that we could craft a reading practice for *Giovanni’s Room* that need not reject gay identity. We do not need to queer David to liberate him. Rather, we must face the fact that gay, closeted David is not liberated. He is gay, and in the homophobic world that envelopes him, he is doomed. Further, he is not doomed “like” all unloved and unloving people are doomed. His tragedy is specific, it extends from ungeneralizable motives and social dynamics, and it cannot have universal meaning apart from those details. If we do not allow David to be gay, the novel can teach us nothing, precisely, about gay people. The question is, do we want to learn?
FEELING THE GAY BODY: ON THE NECESSITY OF TRANS-GAY ANALYSIS IN GIOVANNI’S ROOM

In the first two sections of this chapter, I have argued for a necessary and productive incompatibility of queer and gay reading strategies. “Post-gay” queer cultural critique both supplants traditional gay readings of Giovanni’s Room and cedes to a rejuvenated “post-queer” gay interpretive strategy, in a cycle that will assuredly—indeed, must—continue. In this final section, I enrich my previous readings with transgender analysis, a move that I want to characterize as fundamental to this chapter in its potential to disrupt, necessarily, my earlier reading practices and positions. Paradoxically, my trans analysis is incommensurable to, yet inextricable from, my queer and gay readings of the novel. It has no common measure; it tilts on its own axis. Yet it gravitationally draws in and draws toward its companion readings. While I join a chorus of transgender thinkers in questioning the ways transgender has been co-opted by queer academics in hopes of “prolong[ing] the queerness of the moment,” I maintain that trans reading strategies can, in fact, gain saliency when set alongside queer/gay interpretations, and vice versa. This is true not so much because queer/gay analysis and trans analysis are always intimately interrelated forms of meaning making but for the more general reason that opportunities for transgender analysis (like opportunities for racial and class analyses) are woven into the entire fabric of cultural production. Rather than insisting that Giovanni’s Room is a discrete “transgender text,” I am arguing that transgender critique must be considered broadly applicable, appropriate for understanding texts produced and/or consumed under the cultural conditions of gendered existence. In what follows, I employ what might be best termed a “trans-gay” critical framework that moves my discussion away from both queer fluidity and gay identity and toward a focus on the multiple stakes of trans misrepresentation and, ultimately, the issue of embodiment. Specifically, I link David’s transphobic worldview as failed reading strategy to his final encounter with his sexed gay body, for at the heart of Giovanni’s Room is a fundamental corporeal questioning.

To characterize the matter differently, my further reading of Giovanni’s Room hinges on recognizing and unraveling the logic of another false choice: not the choice between the first two options above that argue alternately for a queer interpretive lens and for a gay interpretive lens, but the choice between those options and anything else. A queer or gay framing of the novel
is itself a false choice, because it forecloses other possible readings, specifically ones that attend to matters of gendered embodiment as related to but not subsumed within matters of sexual desire. One of the chief insights of transgender studies is that gender has no necessary relation to sexuality. “Why,” Susan Stryker asks in her introduction to The Transgender Studies Reader, “[has] the entire discussion of ‘gender diversity’ [been] subsumed within a discussion of sexual desire—as if the only reason to express gender was to signal the mode of one’s attractions and availabilities to potential sex partners?”

To the extent that we make trans reading strategies available where critics have previously failed to employ them, texts take on extra-cultural meaning. Not only are trans narratives culturally important because they exist; they are especially important because they have been hidden and so must first be excavated in order for their importance to be recognized. Giovanni’s Room reflects widespread fears about homosexuality, to be sure. But in its narrative logic that argues that gender cannot shift on its own terms, the novel’s homophobia is founded on transphobia. However, the novel’s meta-narrative argument, not fully attributable to Baldwin, potentially posits transgenderism and transsexuality as lively cultural possibilities that must broadly inform queer reading practices.

In casting transgender as an always already available interpretative potentiality, I take my cue from Jay Prosser, who identifies an error that routinely plagues readings of Radclyffe Hall’s 1928 classic, The Well of Loneliness: namely, the transgender subject and, more specifically, the transsexual one have been read as homosexual. “[T]ransgendering,” argues Prosser, “merely symptomatiz[es] homosexuality” for most critics of the novel. Transgender critique speaks pointedly to the need to weaken and often break the link between homosexuality and gender “inversion.” Specifically, it reveals the misperception, which I argue is both recirculated and exposed as misperception by Giovanni’s Room, that inversion can serve as a metaphor for or an indicator of homosexuality. Prosser locates that conflation not at the beginning of the study of inversion but only recently, with the psychopathologizing of homosexual identity around 1900. Prior to Freud, transgender subjects could be treated apart from homosexuality (as well as interconnected with it). Such sexologists as Krafft-Ebing and Ellis were “ambivalent . . . about the relation between sexual inversion and homosexuality.” Transgender signals not sexual confusion (e.g., a desiring subject in the “wrong” body) but, rather, an experience of oneself as a different gender than might be expected or mandated given the perception of one’s sexed body.
As gender “inversion” has come to signify homosexual display rather than a subjectivity in its own right, the trans subject has been threatened with erasure. Recall that in *Giovanni’s Room*, homosexuality definitionally produces and enforces gender switch. The potentially transgender subject is thus easily mistaken for the homosexual subject, and this is because David imagines gender switch as exclusively a function of the coming-out process. With homosexual identity firmly centered as the referent for transgender, the narrative of the homosexual coming-out process has consequently become the hegemonic transition story in our culture, foreclosing narratives of gender transition. Two competing versions of transgender thus emerge: on the one hand is transgender subjectivity as elucidated through first-person accounts and contemporary theory; on the other is the more prevalent “transgender” misrepresented as an explanation for homosexuality. Further, the impossibility of the gay man being figured as the effeminate, happy queen makes the figure of the transwoman doubly impossible, for transgender analyses is undermined by the figuration of the “tragic” death of the gay man turned monstrous woman. The mummy, the zombie, the walking dead—taken as gay queens, these figures make identification as homosexual unpalatable, even horrifying. But they render transgender subjectivity nearly unthinkable in the absence of a ready, internalized trans reading practice. The “flaming princess,” potentially a transwoman, can be nothing other than a gay failure. Transgender analysis reveals that the agent of non-subjectivity that overshadows the novel is not the abject gay or queer man but the cumulative specter of transgenderism. In all of these ways, necessarily linking the gay man who comes out with a burgeoning effeminacy creates a screen behind which the possibility of a male-to-female (MTF) transgender subject is screened out, mistaken as nothing other than the threat undergirding homosexuality. A trans imaginative reading must start by recognizing the erasure of the trans possibility rather than (queerly) championing the demise of categories or (gay-ly) championing their resiliency.

Yet, unlinked as they are, can be, or may be theoretically, gay male effeminacy and MTF transgender possibilities exist in relation to each other in *Giovanni’s Room*, just as they often do outside the novel. At issue is a larger question for gay, queer, and trans studies: how are they related? The work of disentangling trans narratives from gay ones and of understanding their potentially stubborn inter-narrativity is complicated. Jack Halberstam asks, “Is it believable in this day and age that [a lesbian butch character] would not have thought of being trans?” He thus reminds us that gay and lesbian
identities can organize around gender, whether fundamentally or peripherally, and can sometimes become meaningful in relation to increasingly familiar models of transgender experience, even while processes of gay male emasculation and transgender non-compliance that may appear very similar and may inform each other are by no means identical or set in fixed relation to each other. Still, we can say that potentially transgender characters in *Giovanni’s Room* are forced to pass as gay because male effeminacy is yoked to a brand of homosexuality dislocated from trans identity, even though the “gay” “male” patrons of Guillaume’s dubious bar might not be having sex with men at all or might not be having sex with men as men, a point David seems to confront without at all grasping. Surveying *les folles*, a term meaning “queens” but translated literally as “madwomen,” David notes how “they always called each other ’she.’” He then ventures a theory of sexuality about these patrons who “looked like a peacock garden and sounded like a barnyard.” “I always found it difficult to believe,” reports David, “that they ever went to bed with anybody, for a man who wanted a woman would certainly have rather had a real one and a man who wanted a man would certainly not want one of *them*. Perhaps, indeed, that was why they screamed so loud” (27). David treats gender noncompliance as a sexual problem: the gender-ambiguous “peacock” is a sexual abject. He therefore makes the mistake, to repeat Stryker, of thinking that gender exists for sex and, consequently, that gender “failure” amounts to sexual failure. A different reading of this scene might argue that the stories of sexual escapades told and retold by *les folles* are props used to elaborate a primarily transgender identity and assemble a trans or possibly a trans-gay community. Sex, both real and fictitious, might just exist for gender.

The strong version of the claim I am building here is that beyond asking whether David is gay, straight, or bisexual, we can also ask whether he is a man, a woman, or outside the gender binary. The reason we do not ask the second question is precisely because we are so taken with the first. Gender switch, in the form of inversion, is peremptorily explained with reference to effeminate gay male identity. Gender dysphoria is explained with reference to homophobia. Edelman posits that the gay man is infinitely readable, and we might say that this is true to the exclusion of other subjectivities. The gay man must be read even where he is not present, a reading-over process that carries with it the potential not just to threaten straight men, as Edelman argues, but also, I would add, to erase trans and trans-gay experience. At what point in the novel are we sure that David is, indisputably, a man? We see Da-
vid interpret his desire as homosexual and interpret homosexuals as women. But David is an interpretive failure. Though he is read by the zombie, the sailor, Jacques, and Giovanni, David is a terrible reader of himself. Turning now to two scenes of misinterpretation and to David’s final, emblematic moment of self-misrecognition, I suggest that David and the reader need a trans-gay reading strategy for interpreting gender in Giovanni’s Room—even if David ultimately neither identifies himself as transgender nor is identified as such by the reader.

Narratologically, Giovanni’s Room uses the abjection of transgenderism, evinced in the phantom figure of the transgender specter, to shore up its message that neither gay nor straight identifications can empower David. In other words, a queer privileging of the failure of categories to speak truth to desire rests on a willingness to render and use the potentially transgender agent as a non-subject, an “unreal” category. What is needed is an understanding of trans subjectivity grounded in personhood rather than deadly figuration. “The truth is I’m no mystery,” Leslie Feinberg flatly attests. Quoting Naomi Scheman’s “Queering the Center by Centering the Queer,” Jacob Hale similarly points out the obvious: “Transsexual lives are lived, thus livable.” Hale goes on to suggest that trans representations must not exist devoid of reference to trans lives, experiences, and embodiments. I am arguing that the narrative of Giovanni’s Room, warped as it is by David’s impoverished imagination, not only erases trans lives but does so quite literally by disfiguring and then killing off the transgender “threat.”

Baldwin’s narrative mechanism is not subtle. He articulates a dehumanized subject position for gender variants by participating in a version of what Namaste calls the “staging of transgendered subjects.” In fact, as David levels his gaze at Guillaume’s patrons one evening, the bar operates as a stage, one on par with a cage at the zoo. In that cage, the potentially transgender subject becomes, horribly, a shit-eating monkey.

There was a boy who worked all day, it was said, in the post office, who came out at night wearing makeup and earrings and with his heavy blond hair piled high. Sometimes he actually wore a skirt and high heels. He usually stood alone unless Guillaume walked over to tease him. People said that he was very nice, but I confess that his utter grotesqueness made me uneasy; perhaps in the same way that the sight of monkeys eating their own excrement turns some people’s stomachs. They might not mind so much if the monkey did not—so grotesquely—resemble human beings. (27)
The “boy” in this passage, standing alone in the spotlight created by Guillaume’s emcee-like teasing, exists as though on stage for David’s spectatorship. As the metaphor shifts to that of a cage, however, David, the gender-appropriate male onlooker, remains and is simultaneously re-created as human in relation to the “monkey” that threatens him with identification. Namaste claims that trans staging in gay bars, in that it “excludes transgendered people even as it includes us,” operates as a means by which “gay male identity establishes itself as something prior to performance.” In this case, that exclusion works through a false human/non-human distinction to simultaneously display and invisibilize the trans subject. I wonder, though, precisely what identity is given priority in David’s case as he speculates on the caged and dehumanized transwoman. The gay bar in which David inevitably locates himself contains a much more diverse set of sex/gender practices than can be accounted for by the gay male/transgender dichotomy imagined by Namaste. David, for instance, is trying to confirm his phantasmatic heterosexual masculinity. Giovanni is trying to earn a meager living by relying on precisely the trappings of masculinity that David and many of the patrons admire. Guillaume is trying to earn a handsome living by hiring and staging—though behind the bar—the angelic masculinity of Giovanni. Surely some of the patrons, including gay ones, are learning about and even learning how to become transgendered subjects. Inevitably, gay bars represent spaces that not only divide gay and trans but also make possible and encourage investigations across sexuality and gender. If transgenderism is staged, as it always is from our first-person narrator’s transphobic perspective, it is also modeled, if modeled from a staged distance.

In thinking about the trans possibilities in Giovanni’s Room, it is worth pausing for a moment to consider the particular context in which the novel was produced, so as to better understand the social relations that are inscribed in the text. Georges Sidéris describes the atmosphere of the Saint-Germain-des-Prés quarter of Paris, the setting of much of Giovanni’s Room, as “the principal setting for male homosexual life in Paris” during the 1950s. Baldwin lived primarily in Paris from 1948 to 1957, the year after Giovanni’s Room was published. He was, without doubt, familiar with le quartier. Yet why did he choose to depict Saint-Germain-des-Prés rather than another Parisian neighborhood where gay life was visible and even vibrant? Saint-Germain-des-Prés had, according to Sidéris, “a special place in the homosexual geography and sociability of the period,” for it contained a unique blend of artists and existentialist philosophers; homosexual cafés, bars, and restaurants; and an active street scene that provided plentiful cruising op-
opportunities. Sidéris cites an October 1952 edition of the homosexual French newspaper *Futur*: “Saint-Germain-des-Prés, capital of non-conformity, [is] the only place in Paris where you can amuse yourself according to your tastes.”

Perhaps the most characteristic “taste” of this particular quarter of Paris was a taste not simply of gay men for gay men but of gay men for gender variance. “[T]he quarter,” writes Sidéris, “was famous above all for its *folles*, who were not specific to it but who stood out by their effeminate mannerisms, their swishing walk, their elegant clothes, sometimes their facial makeup, and especially their mannered way of speaking, often punctuated with piercing shrieks, which distinguished them from other homosexuals.”

The distinctive openness of gay life in Saint-Germain-des-Prés was largely a response to the pressures of overarching social norms, gender prescriptions chief among them. Predictably, agents of social enforcement pushed back. By the 1970s, the transgressive atmosphere of the neighborhood had been changed by homophobic laws passed in the name of “decency.” But it was not only dominant culture that worked to eradicate “the scourge” of *les folles*. “Homophile” culture, characterized by its insistence on gay male virility and the assimilation it could provide, was well organized through a variety of memberships (including, in the United States, the Mattachine Society). Representatives of the homophile movement attempted to minimize the presence of *les folles*, to blame them for social animosity toward homosexual men, and to pathologize them for their strident effeminacy.

Sidéris thus identifies an important dichotomy within Parisian gay life: the homophiles versus the “effeminates.” At no point does he identify the “effeminates” using the language of transgender, as that language was not fully part of the socio-linguistic conditions of post-war Paris. Indeed, he refers to the effeminates’ “distinctive and authentic homosexual identity that challenged a normalizing society.” But the homosexual dichotomy that emerged most urgently in Saint-Germain-des-Prés clearly broke along lines of gender, and it is that dichotomy that Baldwin found so useful for dramatizing David’s dilemma in *Giovanni’s Room*. James Campbell argues that “Baldwin has scant interest in serving up a picture of the gay scene in St.-Germain. Although there are one or two vignettes featuring screeching queens—*les folles*—their appearance provokes disgust rather than desire. . . . Such descriptions are there in order to set in relief the purity of purpose of Giovanni and . . . David.” I suggest that, distinguished by its “degeneracy,” Saint-Germain-des-Prés offers the ideal and even necessary setting for the novel because it casts difference between the pure and profane of gender as always threatening to
collapse. If various homosexual identities were being realized and contested in this context, this was done, to a significant extent, in ways that expanded the insistent possibilities for gendered existence. One can even surmise that it was precisely the threat of gay-trans crossover that galvanized the homophile movement to attempt to shore up the imperiled masculinity of homosexuality. Within the reality of gender non-conformity, variance, and rebellion that indisputably marks the Saint-Germain-des-Prés of the period, can we not posit a nascent and perhaps elaborate mode of transgender-gay male sociality? If there was quite possibly, in the figure of the blond boy from the post office, a future “ex-GI turned blonde beauty,” what other gay-trans formations were occurring?

Baldwin, perhaps inseparable from David in this respect, can only envision the person who transitions gender as threatening beast, not beauty. This is nowhere so evident as in Guillaume’s murder scene, in which Baldwin elaborates on the trope of transgender mortification by literalizing the death of the gender non-normative individual. As reported in the French press, the known facts of the “terrific scandal” are few but straightforward. The destitute immigrant Giovanni has strangled Guillaume, who, whatever else he may be, is a French citizen and symbolic patriarch from a well-known family. David rejects the motive, reported in all the Paris newspapers, of a botched robbery attempt. In place of such speculation, David meticulously reconstructs the events of the murder as he imagines them to have happened. That wholly imagined recounting of what was “too black for the newsprint to carry and too deep for Giovanni to tell” (153) emerges, however, not simply from David’s belief that the French have demonized the man he loves as a foreigner-criminal but that they have made of Guillaume a national hero. In an argument with Hella, David rails against the hypocrisy of the French press ensuring that Guillaume’s name will become “fantastically entangled with French history, French honor, and French glory, and very nearly . . . a symbol of French manhood.” “But listen,” David counters, “he was just a disgusting old fairy. That’s all he was! . . . Isn’t there some point in telling the truth?” (150).

That “truth” compels David to imagine another one, and he believes that he alone knows this deeper truth: “I may have been the only man in Paris who knew that [Giovanni] had not meant to do it, who could read why he had done it beneath the details printed in the newspapers” (153). David’s rereading of Guillaume’s death stems not from a belief in Giovanni’s innocence but from a confidence that “Giovanni certainly did
not mean to do it” (156; my emphasis). Relieving Giovanni of intentional-
ity, David points the finger of blame elsewhere. As his detailed fantasy
of the murder reveals, the truth for David is that Guillaume, a “silly old
queen,” has participated in his own death. David thus recasts the murder
as a murder-suicide by suggesting that Guillaume has reneged on a sex-
for-work bargain struck with Giovanni, driving the Italian into a blind
rage. That imagined provocation to violence, however, operates as a false
front for the deeper logic that governs David’s retelling of the event. An
analysis of David’s reconstruction of the murder reveals that what truly
motivates and justifies Giovanni’s murder of Guillaume was the murder-
ous truth of Guillaume’s gender nonconformity.

David begins to reconstruct the night—and reorient blame—by imag-
ing that “[i]t must have been a great evening for the bar when Giovanni
swaggered in alone. I could hear the conversation.” As Giovanni approaches
his former employer in hopes of being rehired, Guillaume’s homo-femininity
violently offends, even “hits” him: “Guillaume’s face, voice, manner, smell, hit
him; . . . the smile with which he responds to Guillaume almost causes him
to vomit” (154). The vomitous Guillaume tells Giovanni to return after the
bar closes. He then directs him to his quarters above the bar, where Giovan-
ni finds himself “surrounded by Guillaume’s silks, colors, perfumes.” Guil-
laume, “precipate, flabby, moist,” appears in his “theatrical dressing gown”
and, becoming one with his feminine accoutrements, “seems to surround
[Giovanni] like the sea itself,” until the now helpless Giovanni “feels himself
going under, is overcome, and Guillaume has his will” (155).

This scene of conquest of the masculine foreigner by the feminine Pa-
risian happens, remember, in what David imagines to be his singularly in-
sightful imagination. “I think that if this had not happened,” David ventures,
“Giovanni would not have killed him.” But what is “this” in David’s mind?
On the one hand, “this” stands for unpaid sex. David believes Guillaume
to have broken his promise and refused to rehire Giovanni: “For, with his
pleasure taken, and while Giovanni still lies suffocating, Guillaume becomes
a business man once more and, walking up and down, gives excellent reasons
why Giovanni cannot work for him anymore” (155–56). But there is more
here than a deal gone wrong. The price Giovanni has paid goes far beyond
sex. David pictures Guillaume being so delighted with himself—“he has
scarcely ever gotten so much for so little before”—that he “begins to prance
about the room.” There can be only one response: “[N]ow it was Giovanni’s
turn to be delighted.”
[Giovanni] grabbed him, he struck him. And with that touch, and with each blow, the intolerable weight at the bottom of his heart began to lift. . . . The room was overturned, the fabrics were shredded, the odor of perfume was thick. Guillaume struggled to get out of the room, but Giovanni followed him everywhere: now it was Guillaume’s turn to be surrounded. And perhaps at the very moment Guillaume thought he had broken free, when he had reached the door perhaps, Giovanni lunged after him and caught him by the sash of the dressing gown and wrapped the sash around his neck. Then he simply held on, sobbing, becoming lighter every moment as Guillaume grew heavier, tightening the sash and cursing. Then Guillaume fell. And Giovanni fell—back into the room, the streets, the world, into the presence and the shadow of death. (156–57)

Given his class status as a foreigner, Giovanni’s body becomes his last resource and resort. Guillaume uses his position—not only as business owner, but also as arbiter of national propriety—to cheat Giovanni out of what his masculine body was meant to purchase for him. When Guillaume fails to live up to his end of the bargain, however, we see that Giovanni strikes a new deal. Crucially, the quid pro quo of this new deal, the price to be extracted from Guillaume, responds not merely to unpaid sex but to unpaid sex with this kind of person. To be fucked by a “silly old queen,” by a perfumed, prancing man in silk robes—this justifies murder. Giovanni literally kills Guillaume with the symbol of his gender transgression, the sash to his dressing gown. In David’s dangerous imagination, this end seems fitting, as though Guillaume’s hyperfemininity has sealed his fate, as though to be gender variant is to don the instruments of one’s own inevitable demise. No longer metaphorical specters of death, gender non-conforming individuals explicitly invite death on themselves.

In addition, we must remember that underwriting David’s fantasy of Guillaume’s gender nonconformity is a different gender narrative. The “truth” that Guillaume is a “disgusting old fairy” operates so powerfully on David, perhaps, because the “fairy” can simultaneously lay claim to a masculine identity. Though David fantastically effeminizes him, Guillaume unmistakably represents the masculine authority of the law, not only because his legal standing as a French citizen trumps Giovanni’s status as foreign worker, but because, given Guillaume’s family name, the police are forced to cooperate with him by giving advance notice of their raids on his bar. Most
unimaginable to David, Guillaume becomes, in death, the very “symbol of French manhood.” It is, then, Guillaume’s irreconcilable status as boy-girl that galvanizes David’s need to justify Giovanni’s act of murder by reimagining it.

The question of why Giovanni murders Guillaume thus has two very different answers. On the one hand, Guillaume has reneged on a deal. Guillaume’s action has a material consequence, and perhaps the murder can even be said to be justified in this sense. But on the other hand, what permits Giovanni to kill Guillaume, makes him murderable, and actually justifies the murder in David’s imagination is not the act of reneging on the deal. Rather, the murder is a consequence of a transphobic threshold of personhood. Guillaume is the victim of transphobic violence, punished by—quite literally as a function of—his gender transgression and not simply his homosexuality. Further, more dramatically, the point at which personhood can be denied, the point at which a person becomes murderable, is arbitrarily, immeasurably low for those who fail to obey the rules of gender, and this is true whether they make good on their promises or not.

I have used Guillaume’s murder scene to suggest that transgender analyses—in this case, one attuned to the deadly implications of a transphobic imagination—can offer important insights into the narrative logic of an alternately “classic” gay and “exemplary” queer novel. I want to pursue that idea further in a discussion of the final scene of Giovanni’s Room, a scene that seems to purposefully withhold or evade meaning. A bookend to the opening scene of the novel, in which David considers his thin white reflection in a darkened window on the night preceding Giovanni’s execution, the final scene stages yet another confrontation between David and his now “dull and white and dry” body, as reflected in a large bedroom mirror just before dawn. The scene progresses according to a dual, entwined narrative in which David both imagines Giovanni being led to the guillotine and also searches out his own fate on this last night of their lives “together.” That fate crystallizes in a corporeal mystery, the pull of a strangely resolute yet uninterpretable body: “The body in the mirror forces me to turn and face it. And I look at my body, which is under sentence of death. It is lean, hard, and cold, the incarnation of a mystery. And 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” (168).

The most important point to make is that a certain “recalcitrance of bodily matter” emerges at the end of Giovanni’s Room. In that the novel stages its final, dramatic moment as a confrontation with corporeality, it
stands as a body-insistent text. That materiality is complicated by the fact that, though David recognizes it as “his” body, he largely dissociates “the” body in the mirror. In part, that dissociation reflects sympathy with the doomed and absent body of Giovanni, who will soon be “thrown forward on his face in darkness.” David perceives his body, like Giovanni’s, as “under sentence of death,” and thus he identifies with his lover’s metaphysical condition. As Giovanni’s “journey begins,” David senses that his own body “hurries toward revelation.” But this mirror scene also reflects the larger theme of self-ignorance and, specifically, the problem, identified by Mae Henderson, of “self difference—or the ‘otherness’ of the self.” Henderson argues that the specular/spatial logic that governs Giovanni’s Room traps David within his own illusory reflection in this final moment of the novel. If David is to rescue his manhood, “his false mirror image must be destroyed.” Henderson brilliantly links David’s predicament and potential salvation to Baldwin’s own authorial strategy of “racial drag,” in which he “produces a highly mediated reverse passing narrative in which he appropriates whiteness as a way of exploring the contours of his own sexuality.” Notes Henderson, “In other words, Baldwin’s literary masquerade, and racial imposture, enables the author to examine internal aspects of the complex self by occupying a position of radical otherness.” While the term “racial drag” stands open to critique for deploying a gendered term to indicate a racialized transition, it has the great advantage of implying that Baldwin’s use of narrative “whiteface” initiates and compels the powerfully normative associations, including gendered ones, that offer David both privilege and torment. This stabilizing dynamic implicit in “racial drag” becomes clear if we remember that drag, rather than being typified by spectacular performance, better describes the “mundane” ways that gender is done. The figuration of white manhood thus not only grants Baldwin “a certain self-distancing” but also helps him to construct an “other” narrative about the price of normalcy. Indeed, in some ways, through that self-distancing in the writing of Giovanni’s Room, Baldwin achieves a “radical otherness” that David never will.

Ultimately, though, the stability of white masculinity—which is, after all, David’s double-edged American birthright—cannot hold. While Henderson suggests that David “must divest himself of conventional notions of masculinity before he can achieve self-realization,” I propose an alternate reading that dramatizes a different mode of self-confrontation. I suggest that at the heart of this final scene operates a very specific kind of body questioning, located as a deep-seated anxiety of the sexed flesh. If David seems unsure of how to inhabit his body, whether his body is habitable,
how it is bounded, and what it contains (“I do not know what moves in this body, what this body is searching”), this is largely because he finds himself, unavoidably at last, at odds with his “sex,” including its racial meaning. Arrested by his inscrutable reflection, David laments, “I long to crack that mirror and be free. I look at my sex, my troubling sex, and wonder how it can be redeemed, how I can save it from the knife. . . . [T]he key to my salvation, which cannot save my body, is hidden in my flesh” (168). What interests me in this passage is the stubborn materiality of the body, shrouded as it is in Baldwin’s characteristic invocation of religious mystery. For what is happening here but a fundamental failure on David’s part to recognize, identify with, and own “his” body. David’s anxiety is not, as it has been for much of the novel, related to a figurative or performative gender switch. Certainly David fears more than castration as he imagines a literal alteration of the sexed body. Instead, we need to read this scene as a person’s failure to recognize himself as unified with his reflected image. I therefore contend that both transsexual theory in particular and transgender theory more generally offer important critical lenses through which to view this scene and the larger work, for if problems of the sexed body define David’s ultimate identity troubles, we might also ask whether that particular problematic has been there all along.

What relationship must David now forge with himself, trapped as he is in a state of “somatic non-ownership”? I propose that what David lacks—and what remains underdeveloped without transgender and transsexual analyses—is a theory of gay male embodiment by which he might ground his various desires. The equally complementary and competing insights of Prosser and Halberstam have been particularly important in helping me to understand the need for a theory of gay corporeality, because the field of transsexual and transgender studies forcefully articulates the importance of attending to sexed embodiments, to gender as an embodied register of identity, and to the claim that the body is the “contingent ground of all our knowledge.” Once more, then, I want to stress the utility of trans critique for “non-trans” interpretations, while also blurring the line between what is a “properly” trans narrative. The “trans-gay” reading strategy I have proposed means to capture the potential of these ambiguities. I do not want to appropriate transgender experience for a purely textual queer reading practice; nor, conversely, do I want to dismiss the possibility of re-narrating David’s experience as transgender or transsexual; nor do I want to delimit the scope or impact of trans critique, even in cases where homosexual desire is the
operative and perhaps primary narrative consideration. Following Gayle Rubin, Prosser affirms that "the writing of transsexual history will surely depend upon performing retroactive readings of figures and texts that have been central to the lesbian and gay canon."75 Significantly, those retroactive readings, informed by transsexual possibility, must be brought to bear on a diverse set of lesbian and gay texts and give new meaning to those texts even where transsexuality and transgender cannot ultimately be reinscribed. If there is surely no regular pattern by which narratives of homosexual desire and trans experience are imbricated, we must ask how they might sometimes nevertheless be meaningfully related.

The point of overlap I have currently identified in Giovanni’s Room is the moment where the mysterious body becomes the site of non-identity for the gay man whose culture has produced out of his desire a profound sense of gender dysphoria. In David, that dysphoria seems to undercut, rather than enable, trans subjectivity, building, as it does, on the transphobic undercurrents that buoy up the homophobia in the novel. Yet in theorizing female masculinity, Halberstam writes that “it would not be accurate to make gender dysphoria the exclusive property of transsexual bodies or to surmise that the greater the gender dysphoria, the likelier a transsexual identification.”76 So while David’s narrative of self-difference is not (yet) characterized by the “lengthy, formalized, and normally substantive transition” — a “correlated set of corporeal, psychic, and social changes”77 that, according to Prosser, typifies transsexual narrative—his trans- and homophobia-induced gender dysphoria nevertheless causes him, unequivocally, body problems. In terms of the applicability of trans critique, does it matter that those problems are not “rooted” in the body or that David appears to come late to an explicit, felt sense of corporeal non-identity? If it is true that “[t]ranssexuality reveals the extent to which embodiment forms an essential base to subjectivity,” can it also be true that the experience of embodiment is mystified and thus unrecognizable as “an essential base to subjectivity?” Perhaps the central metaphors of dirt- and soap-covered bodies, for example, need to be reread as literal states of embodied experience even as they are used, primarily, to figure the complementary failures of heterosexual and homosexual categories. David feels dirty as a gay man, and that feeling renders him not only unable to accept his homosexuality but, crucially, unable to feel the gay body overlaid with figurative-but-felt dirt. The transsexual insight that “embodiment is as much about feeling one inhabits material flesh as the flesh itself”78 is therefore apropos, though the ways transsexuals and gay men feel or do...
not feel their bodies may drastically differ. How, then, does a gay man feel his body? How is gay male desire materialized as and on the body? What is “gay embodiment”?79

Like transsexuality, which is often characterized by a felt body image or experience that does not align with or feel like the apparent physical body, gay identity, I argue, is also typified by (though certainly not limited to) a felt body experience, that of the “felt desiring body.” I am arguing that rather than merely positing a gay male body, gay identity raises questions about embodiment and specifically about how gay bodies feel. Gay identity suggests the corporeal manifestation of desire not in the facile sense that humans must have bodies but because it is in some respects akin to (and in many cases achieved by)80 the corporeal recovery noted in transsexual autobiography. Prosser reports that in transsexual narratives, pre-operative transsexuals often report feeling a different body, sensing a “second skin” that is not coextensive with their tangible flesh yet that offers the true psychic/somatic interface for their experience of themselves in the world. Indeed, the pre-operative transsexual’s “invisible” body image has such sentience, such material force, that Prosser postulates that “the transsexual’s postreassignment body [might] be reconceived as already phantomized preassignment.”81 “Surgery,” Prosser continues, “deploy[s] the skin and tissues to materialize the transsexual body image with fleshly prostheses in the shape of the sentient ghost-body.”82

Rather than describing a second skin, gay people often tell their stories by using the metaphors of “living a lie,” of not being their “true selves,” or of being “trapped in the closet.” These figurations help many to narrate the experience of the ways homophobic culture impinges on their self-realization. Notably, self-difference in these formulations is not described in corporeal terms, nor is the problematic trope of the “wrong body,” frequent in trans narratives, typical when gay people tell their stories. But this only highlights the degree to which metaphorical constructs such as the closet, helpful as they have been to those seeking language for their experiences, have inadvertently turned attention away from the materiality of gay identity.83 Transsexual theory, by troubling the relationship between bodies, felt experience, and subjectivity, can be effective in turning our attention back to the idea that gay people do not just desire bodies; insofar as the body is an important locus of desire, our relationship to our bodies can determine our relationship to our desire.84 Gay identity may require an interrogation of how and where we feel our desiring bodies.
The connection I have made to trans theory exposes, I hope, a fascinating point: it is not at all clear just how the bodies made available as gay relate to gay desires. Being gay may necessitate a search for a gay body, may require a journey toward gay embodiment precisely because homophobic and transphobic culture demands of gay people a certain non-ownership of the body. Gay people are given sentient metaphors, such as filth, that literally make them feel on their skin different than they ought to feel about their desires. They are given images of themselves, the “trans” specter chief among them, that attempt to prescribe the relationship between the material referent of the body and the possibilities for gendered experience. Coming out, as much as it might be said to affirm or solidify an identity, might actually thwart and therefore necessitate a search for embodied desire, much to the surprise of the gay individual who thinks—but may only ambiguously feel—that he already has a gay body.

With this idea of articulating a new relationship to gay bodies, I want to return to David’s corporeal questioning in order to close this chapter. David does not know quite what to do with his body. Specifically, he does not know what to do about or what is to be done with his penis. Is it the source of masculinity or emasculation? Does his stare indicate a classically fetishistic over-investment of meaning in his genitals, or does he stare precisely because meaning cannot be fixed by/on the phallus? Or perhaps we need to ask different kinds of body questions. Does what David desires to do with his penis make him feel ownership of his body or feel improper toward and in it? Does the prospect of losing his penis to the knife operate in his imagination purely as a threat? Or is the dissonance David experiences at the level of the sexed body an indication either that he feels his gay male body elsewhere or that the body he feels elsewhere is not that of a gay male at all? How does it feel, at this moment, to be gay or not? These questions are not answered with certainty in the text. But I propose that, confronted by his body, David seems on the verge of initiating a transition from one kind of gay man to another. On the final page of the novel, he determines that his nakedness must be held “sacred” and, therefore, “scoured perpetually with the salt of my life” (169). This final, painful resolution to abrade the flesh, to both punish it and make it feel, seems either to escalate the effort to cleanse the body of homosexual desire or, conversely, to wear away the gay body that cannot feel, in the search for one that can.