

# Inhabiting the Margins: Personal spaces as the negotiation zones of marginalized subjects

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## ABSTRACT

In this essay, I investigate the role and underlying political connotations of personal space in *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin and *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf, both of which enunciate marginalized subjectivity in 20th century English-language literature. I concentrate on using literary analysis while comparing the issues of marginalization, private and public resistance, class, race, and gender. While one text focuses on gayness in Paris and one focuses on queer womanhood in America, both reveal the temporal fragility of their respective marginalized spaces and the subjects' claim to liberation. To situate this analysis in the wider literary and anthropological conversation, I read them against Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* by Bell Hooks, and several other texts. My analysis argues that even seemingly quotidian actions are inscribed in a complex literary tradition that lies at the intersection of biopolitics, intersectional feminism, and queer heritage.

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*Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin and *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf each explore the relationship between the speaking subject's living accommodations and their ability to live out and express their identities in society. Both texts engage with the theme of queerness, yet the approaches are as different as are their respective gendered experiences. However, in both cases, the queernesses of the protagonists resonate with each other as experiences of alterity that form an outcast identity. In this essay, I will investigate the role and underlying political connotations of personal space, the "room," in these seminal works that enunciate marginalized subjectivity in 20th century English-language literature. While the similarities between the two "rooms" contain the essential history of alterity, it is the deeper differences between the two that will illuminate our conversation about the past and the future. To situate this analysis in the wider literary and anthropological conversation, I will read them against Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* by Bell Hooks, and several other texts.

James Baldwin's 1956 novel is titled "Giovanni's Room", and the room referred to in the title is actually the living space of the protagonist's lover. Baldwin's use of this title is significant in that it highlights the precarious and unstable nature of queer life, which often exists in borrowed time and space. By centering the reader's attention on this temporary and dysfunctional space, Baldwin employs a technique that creates the queer experience for the reader. This experience of reading becomes queer because the title ties the reader to the idea of a fragile marginal space, a situation that is prohibited or ostracized due to social oppression. This is a universal queer experience that Baldwin skillfully recreates through the novel's title. It is important to note that David, the protagonist, is an American expat living in Europe, and his sense of identity and social views are shaped by his battles with self-reflection. Although he spends only a short time in Giovanni's room, this experience is revolutionary and subversive for him, as it allows him to live as a person in a homosexual relationship, not just explore it. Ultimately, Giovanni's room in the novel is a transitory space of identity and time that cannot exist for very long due to external social pressures and the internal psychological narratives of the characters.

Looking deeper into Baldwin's description of Giovanni's room, we can see that its description is used as a tool for illustrating the internalized trauma of the homosexual identity and the contradictions of sustaining such a life. Giovanni is a gay man living in Paris whose personal space, his room, symbolizes his isolation and confinement in a

society that does not fully accept homosexuality. "Giovanni's room was the room of a man who had been, for too long, too long alone" (Baldwin 5). This solitude and isolation appear to be not simply parts of Giovanni's character and choice, but quite possibly the opposite of that. The loneliness of Giovanni's marginal space is society's punishment for being "other" and daring to try to live out one's genuine desire for love. Thus, the impression of this room is a sign of a larger conflict both within the character's mental world and in the society that surrounds him. The room represents the physical and emotional space that he has carved out for himself, while it also serves as a reminder of his inability to fully express his individuality in a homophobic world.

Baldwin continues describing the difficult position of his characters through their lived space: "Giovanni's room was a prison and a sanctuary, a place where he could be himself and yet not himself at all" (Baldwin 56). Here we can see the shifting and transitory aspect of Giovanni's room. It both protects him from the violence stemming from outside judgment and suffocates him with the confinement of its four walls. The room plays the role of a broken border in the novel because, by unsustainably shielding Giovanni from the aggression of the outside, it inflames the aggression within him that he tragically enacts against one of his fellow queer outcasts.

The novel's narrator, David, remarks how the apartment is dark, unwelcoming, and dirty. This description reflects Giovanni's trauma and mental exhaustion from his experience of conflicts around his identity. "To ensure privacy, Giovanni had obscured the windowpanes with a heavy, white cleaning polish...This was not the garbage of Paris, which would have been anonymous: this was Giovanni's regurgitated life" (Baldwin 86–87). Baldwin does not conceal the use of the character's personal space as an illustration of his struggles. While the apartment is kept gloomy by Giovanni's own design it is also to his, and his lover David's detriment. The hatred that they harbor for themselves due to their internalized homophobia is reflected in their physical surroundings, which viscerally disgust David and contribute to his decision to eventually abandon Giovanni. Even though the room might sometimes protect Giovanni from direct attack of the outside, the harm already inflicted does not allow him to have agency over his personal space. The paradox of this queer space is that it is not fully queer but is always fleeting and sometimes acts against the queer. As art historian Christopher Reed put it in his study of real-life "queer spaces" and the concept itself: "... queer space is imminent: rooted in the Latin *imminere*, to loom over or threaten, it means ready to take place. (...) More fundamentally, queer space is space in the process of, literally, taking place, of claiming territory" (Reed 64). The queer inside of the characters' lives is in constant battle with the heteronormative outside. The poison of social ostracism leaks inside through the cracks in the windows and doors, creating a space that is simultaneously a refuge and a prison.

Another reading of why Baldwin emphasizes the griminess of David's and Giovanni's environment is to comment on their muddled perceptions of themselves. Throughout the novel, David wants to "prove" his masculinity by agreeing to marry Hella, an American woman whom he met in Paris, yet he fails to remain faithful to her. It's possible to read his desire for a heteronormative relationship as a need to "tell the truth of sex" (Foucault 57). Despite his attraction to men, David strives to subscribe to the gender role expected of him: to be married to a woman and play the part of the strong, dominant husband. This is what David has been taught to be the true nature of human sexuality, and anything that veers away from this perceived "truth" is perverse or, what's worse, emasculating. Foucault theorizes that men:

...constructed around and apropos of sex an immense apparatus for producing truth, even if this truth was to be masked at the last moment. The essential point is that sex was not only a matter of sensation and pleasure, of law and taboo, but also of truth and falsehood, that the truth of sex became something fundamental, useful, or dangerous, precious or formidable: in short, that sex was constituted as a problem of truth. (Foucault 56)

To Foucault, the West has warped sex into an ideological weapon and uses it to manipulate people and hold them hostage to a repressive society. The "two great procedures for producing the truth of sex" are "pleasure itself" and "confession" (Foucault 57-59). Pleasure is derived from the experience of the body, while "confession" implies that sexual desires are transgressive, shameful, and therefore must be confessed. David and Giovanni each project disgust at their "transgressive behaviors" on women as a way to compensate for participating in gay sex.-The two men are cathartically lost in between the categories of "what is right" and their own desires for love and proximity. This

being lost and caught up in the whirlwind of gender and social expectations create the muddled perceptions of themselves, reflected by the griminess of their shared room and their self-shame and guilt.

At the same time, having a clean and neat room is often a socially admired lifestyle aspect. Many parents teach their children that having an orderly room is the foundation of an orderly life. From a young age, many children are constructed as subjects of the hierarchical system they grew up in, while living in disorder and untidiness is often seen as a lack of success and a triumph of despair. From this point of view, the disorder and grime of Giovanni's room can be read as an expression of protest against the dogmatism and prescribed "truth" of the outside. This point may seem in slight contradiction to the main argument of Giovanni's room as a reflection of trauma. However, it is a superficial illusion, as trauma and protest are intertwined more often than they are not.

Protest can take many forms and doesn't have to be limited to images of people marching on the streets. Protest, rebellion, and insurrection come from within the subject; she needs to find it within herself before acting it out in any way. Sustaining a short-lived homosexual romance can be read as a form of protest in Baldwin's novel, just as the act of writing and sharing the language of one's subjectivity is for Woolf in "A Room of One's Own." The protest of a writing woman for Woolf is also intrinsically connected to her personal space, more specifically a room with a lock.

However, in contrast to Baldwin's marginal room that exists on the brink of disappearance, Woolf's room is yet to be obtained. This journey towards and meanings behind securing a personal space is at the center of Woolf's text. In *A Room of One's Own*, the protagonist's journey to secure a room of her own serves as a metaphor for the fight to attain autonomy despite the limitations placed on her because of her sex and gender identity. The room in the title refers to the space and resources that women require to develop their talents and express themselves as individuals. Woolf uses the room as a symbol to show how the lack of access to education and financial independence limits the opportunities and possibilities available to women.

Virginia Woolf's text is in a complicated relationship with Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*. It also tells of a room – yet this room is not one and exact, but an idea of a room as an ideological and social factor. Woolf often skips the narrative image-making, instead utilizing a more direct conversation with the reader, so that there is less room for interpretation and her political message is clearer. According to Woolf, "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (Woolf 6). Though writing from a different situation and through a different style, Woolf arrives at the similar idea of a "room" as more than just a mundane material element of life, but as a hidden political and social instrument, a transitory space, and a border. For both authors, the room is a literal and metaphorical space, there as much for the four encircling walls as much as for the security, autonomy, and sanctuary they provide.

However, the kinds and modalities of transitions happening in Woolf's and Baldwin's literary rooms can be quite different. For Baldwin the transitory space of a queer person's room mostly relied on the transition between multiple identities, the private desire, and the public presentation. For Woolf, the conceptual room of a writing woman is the space of transition between generational beliefs, of undoing the inherited paradigms of femininity:

...there could be no doubt that for some reason or other our mothers had mismanaged their affairs very gravely. Not a penny could be spared for 'amenities'; for partridges and wine, beadles and turf, books and cigars, libraries and leisure. To raise bare walls out of bare earth as the utmost they could do. (Woolf 20)

The "amenities" that Woolf lists all point toward "leisure" and other comforts that lie beyond what no average woman could ever hope to afford. Woolf is writing provocatively, putting the ego and leisure of the writing subject at the heart of the text. Stylistically, this form of writing resonates with the voices of revolting youths that regularly rebel against their elders, using sensationalist language in order to start complicated conversations in society and shatter the status quo. As for a long time the feminine subject has been associated with family and domestic tasks, Woolf points to the society's oppressive idea that the most a woman can aspire to is motherhood and childbirth. Notice that Woolf writes "raise bare walls," not "build bare walls" or "construct bare walls" (Woolf 20). Her word choice implies that women are brought up to expect to rear in society rather than to create or design.

This passage creates a surreal sense of female-only heritage, autonomous feminist history, and generational conversation about values and meanings. Woolf is provocatively and subversively judging “mothers,” when the expectation of a feminist work would be to talk about fathers’ mistakes. Yet it is because of this provocation and writing on the edge that this passage gains power – it is so independent from outside critique and opinion that it can afford to be written from this perspective.

Yet, the provocation and autonomy of Woolf’s passage do not end there. Despite the sexist world in which the narrator of Woolf’s essay lives, she still dreams of realizing her potential. She makes her innate desires for the “luxury” of independence and freedom clear when imagining the interior of some stone buildings that she sees while gazing out of her window:

The old stone looked very white and venerable. One thought of all the books that were assembled down there; of the pictures of old prelates and worthies hanging in the paneled rooms; of the painted windows that would be throwing strange globes and crescents on the pavement; of the tablets and memorials and inscriptions; of the fountains and the grass; of the quiet rooms looking across the quiet quadrangles. And (pardon me the thought) I thought, too, of the admirable smoke and drink and the deep armchairs and the pleasant carpets: of the urbanity, the geniality, the dignity which are the offspring of luxury and privacy and space. (Woolf 20)

Here, Woolf’s word choices still connote childbirth, but this time the “offspring” are not “bare walls out of bare earth” but instead “Luxury and privacy and space” that are “born of dignity” (Woolf 20). The “amenities” of the room as imagined by the narrator symbolize mental and physical liberation, decadence, and seeming wealth. She, on the other hand, is left on the outside looking in. These passages on material decadence are two-fold; on the one hand, the excessive emphasis on expensive “amenities” is provocative as a literary technique, while on the other hand, it reads as utterly class-blind, especially considering Woolf’s position as a privileged white woman. At this point, it is crucial to acknowledge that just as the narrator’s fabled character Judith is barred from pursuing acting and artistry by societal expectations, so is the narrator limiting herself in her perceptions of freedom. The extent to which the physical existence of a subject influences her intellectual and mental existence may be the main political conclusion from this reading.

*A Room of One’s Own* is built around the concept that women may only attain the life they want by carving out their own individual space as opposed to redefining the spaces they currently inhabit. Judith’s attempts at taking action to pursue her dreams end in tragedy, and Woolf underscores the graveness of the situation:

...that any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at. For it needs little skill in psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty. No girl could have walked to London and stood at a stage door and forced her way into the presence of actor-managers without doing herself a violence and suffering an anguish which may have been irrational... (Woolf 41-42)

We can see a correlation between this view and Baldwin’s oeuvre. However, Baldwin expresses a similar underlying idea in a different, darker, more complicated, and uncertain way. The idea that the space of the marginal subject must be separate and autonomous in order to allow any, even if illusory, chance for a living and joy is alluded to in his novel through the sense of isolation of Giovanni’s room. While for Woolf, this autonomy is ultimately a positive and necessary desire, for Baldwin it is a contradictory observation of

life. Autonomy may gift independence and time, while it can also enhance desperate solitude and irreconciliation with the outside.

This difference in complexity and tonality is even more apparent when we look at the essential questions of class and race in this comparison. So far, we have mostly been comparing very specific aspects of marginalization: the position of women up to 1939 and that of gay men up to 1956. The picture gets much more complicated when we consider the positions and histories of the authors themselves. As a gay black male author in the 1950s, James Baldwin took the step of alienation by deciding to write about the situation of white gay male expats in Europe. It might appear to be disorienting to the reader at first, but an insightful reading by Aliyyah I. Abur-Rahman helps illuminate the complexity behind this choice:

... none of the central characters in the text are of French descent but all live in relative poverty and obscurity in France suggests that questions of lineage, of privilege, and of national belonging – all factors of social and racial identity but none quite reducible to race – are pursued in the novel as well. By establishing the whiteness of the protagonist David as his first authorial act in this novel, Baldwin sets up race, though not explicitly African American identity, as a primary concern of his narrative. (Abur-Rahman 480)

At the same time, as a privileged queer female writer, Woolf's scope appears to mostly be limited to the likes of herself, even if temporally shifted. Thus, we must be extremely careful with the word "marginalization" that titles this essay. It may dangerously conceal essential detail and difference, unnecessarily simplifying and blinding our analysis. In her famous criticism of Woolf's motif of a separate room, she writes:

What then are we to make of Phillis Wheatley, a slave, who owned not even herself? This sickly, frail, Black girl who required a servant of her own at times—her health was so precarious—and who, had she been white, would have been easily considered the intellectual superior of all the women and most of the men in the society of her day. (Walker 235)

This comparison clearly demonstrates the lack of scope of Woolf's political view and analysis, despite the literary genius of her seminal feminist work. To further illuminate what Woolf leaves out in her view, we can consider the connotations of class in her essay. For Woolf, the solution to the problem of physical autonomy appears to be financial. Only a woman of a certain wealth has a chance at securing a place of her own, although it does not truly belong to her. It's an extension of her family's, particularly her father's, wealth or prestige. The "quiet" or "soundproof" room literally insulates the "exceptionally rich or very noble" woman from being directly affected by male oppression. Her "pin money," even if dependent "on the goodwill of her father" still allows the wealthy woman to disengage from society, whereas women without financial means can't afford such sanctuary (Woolf 44).

Woolf's relationship with class speaks to what Bell Hooks refers to as "lifestyle feminism" in *Feminism is for Everybody*:

Lifestyle feminism ushered in the notion that there could be as many versions of feminism as there were women. Suddenly the politics was being slowly removed from feminism. And the assumption prevailed that no matter what a woman's politics, be the conservative or liberal, she too could fit feminism into her existing lifestyle. Obviously this way of thinking has made feminism more acceptable because its underlying assumption is that women can be feminists without fundamentally challenging and changing themselves or the culture. (Hooks 5-6)

If “lifestyle feminism” as an ideology can be compromised so it is more appealing or less controversial and molded to co-exist peacefully with the existing male-dominated culture, then is it really effective? Or does the lack of intersectionality only serve to delegitimize the belief that the sexes should be treated as equals? Is being concerned with making feminism more “acceptable” restrictive to validating or championing gender equality? According to Hooks, the answer is ‘yes,’ because “there can be no such thing as ‘power feminism’ if the vision of power evoked is power gained through the exploitation and oppression of others” (Hooks 6).

In the comparison of Woolf’s and Hook’s texts, while keeping in mind Baldwin’s descriptions, we can see that “the room” is a border in even more ways than we discussed before. One of the main prerequisites for being able to stay in a separate room is wealth, so the room is also a class border. People who come from inherited wealth do not have to spend as much (and sometimes any) time and energy getting to this point. Meanwhile, people without the same resources have to do all that, so that they have less time for expressing their subjectivity from a relatively secure position, both within the limits of the day and their age.

The image of a “room” as a border has immense political potential to this day. While, for Baldwin, the room as a border is primarily a sign of oppression, trauma, and isolation, it might appear that for Woolf it is more instrumental. For her, a room is a tool that provides the marginalized subject with the ability to sustainably write. While it is not a prerequisite for the creation of any literary work per se, and sporadic and cathartic texts are often produced despite the material obstacles (or so the myth has it), it is the ability to continue writing and living that Woolf is pointing at. At the same time, it becomes clear that the instrumentality of the room in Woolf’s text is just superficial, if the reader pays closer attention to the way she writes of and from the room. The analysis by Christina Stevenson is very helpful in this pursuit: “The room in both *A Room of One’s Own* and *Mrs. Dalloway* is physically and metaphorically tied to the female form, but by shifting the perspective from a masculinized voice within the room to a feminized voice of the room, and thereby shifting from an emphasis on the hidden depths of interior space to a focus on surfaces, Woolf’s texts work to undermine the difference between inside and out, fact and fiction, thus suggesting new possibilities for the representation of feminine desire” (Stevenson 113). Through the fabric of her writing, Woolf both identifies room as a border and makes a leap towards erasing it through such subversive strategies as irony and play. When these differences are already undermined, there comes the time for the creation of abstraction. Sheikh reads the ambiguity and multiplicity of voices in Woolf’s essay as the transgression of conventional gender identities: “Androgyny is as abstract as the metaphysical room, and it operates with the similar function of thwarting male dominance by proposing a non-combative cooperation. In other words, it is necessary that the “room” be also an abstract one, to allow for the abstraction of genders” (Sheikh 27).

Evidently, for Woolf, similar to Baldwin, the room is a border of the marginalized and oppressed. The outside is full of danger, expectations, and exploitation of women and gay men, so a separate room presents a bleak chance of separating oneself from society and trying at one’s own world-building, even just for a moment. This moment, though, is fleeting and unstable, as maintaining access to a room with a lock still depends on society, which is eager to break inside. Thus, same as Baldwin’s, Woolf’s room is a transitory space in respect to time: the marginalized subject can never be sure just for how long she will remain there. This fleetingness of time inside the room can be turned around and read productively with the help of the famous argument from José Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*: “Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (Munoz 1). Because Woolf was a queer writer, who expanded on queer writing in her text, this analysis is very fitting to her work as well as to Baldwin’s. By comparing these texts to Muñoz’s formulation, it is revealed that the temporal fragility of these marginalized spaces becomes their claim to liberation.

Even though these works were written in 1929 (Woolf) and 1956 (Baldwin), the situation has not changed much. White privileged women still have more chances of inheriting or securing a room and money than many other marginalized subjects. Racism, homophobia, and sexism remain extreme in most parts of the world. In the “Western world,” there is less control of one abstract person over another, yet the larger mechanisms of control and disenfranchisement appear to be the same, if not more dire. Corrupted urban politics, housing crises, lack of access to education,

the lack of ability to use one's voice in one's political system, gentrification, poor healthcare, and post capitalist economy are all macro factors contributing to the micro and mundane challenge of securing a room of one's own and making rent every month. While the problem itself might appear too small and unimportant, I hope that this analysis proves that this seemingly routine challenge is inscribed in a complex literary tradition that lies at the intersection of biopolitics, intersectional feminism, and queer heritage.

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