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# Space, Race, and Desire, in *The Street* (1946), and *Giovanni`s Room* (1956)

The entanglement of space, blackness, and gender in two African American novels

Master's thesis in English Literature

Supervisor: Hanna Musiol

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## Abstract

This project explores how the two novels, *The Street* (1946), and *Giovanni's Room* (1956), both written by the African American writers Ann Petry and James Baldwin, narrates the entanglement of space, blackness, and gender. Specifically, I argue that both works narrate space's subjectivity, illustrating how space and geography can be biased, gendered and racist. Framed by Critical Race Theory and Queer Theory, the central argument of this thesis is that both novels represent social and racial hierarchies, echoing the racial divisions and power structures working in 1940s US. The thesis is divided into two chapters. "Space and the Black Female Body, in *The Street*" explores Petry's representation of the black female body, along with their place, visibility, or invisibility in the city of Harlem. "Gender, Body and Homophobia, in *Giovanni's Room*" explores the representation of gender, race, body and desire, with a poignant emphasis on affective spaces, illustrating how cultural conceptions on gender affect the main character David in his experience with the gay environment in Paris.

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## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	1
Acknowledgements .....	2
Introduction .....	4
Chapter 1: Space, and the Black Female Body, in <i>The Street</i> (1946) .....	9
Chapter 2: Gender, Body, and Homophobia, in <i>Giovanni`s Room</i> (1956).....	49
Comparison .....	83
Conclusion.....	87
Works Cited.....	89

## Introduction

What is space in literature? In his work, *Modernism, Space and the City* (2019), Andrew Thacker looks at four different European cities and the vast historical as well as cultural shifts that took place during modernism (1890-1970), explaining how the different spaces came to represent and hold specific ideas and values, becoming evident in the physical landscape of the city. Thacker is interested in the interconnection and "...issues relating to space and place...", showing how "...social space shapes literary forms" (Thacker 7). In other words, his theory implies that geography can communicate, as well as generate and uphold, certain values and meaning, affecting subjects differently depending on several factors surrounding the experiencing subject. This again affects literature, becoming visible in how spaces are narrated. This means that physical structures and landscapes can reinforce specific cultural norms and values, reflecting, and projecting certain kinds of emotions and moods within the experiencing subject. Thacker speaks of the "...loosely articulated theory of affect and mood, that is, how particular cities are experienced, viscerally and vitally, by the writers..."

(Thacker 7). This way of reading and understanding space is also explored in Katherine McKittrick's work *Demonic Grounds* (2006). In her work, she argues that geography is, in fact, socially produced, illustrating how it is a representation of social and racial structures and hierarchies in society: "Concealment, marginalization, boundaries are important social processes. We make concealment happen; it is not natural but rather names and organizes where racial-sexual differentiation occurs" (McKittrick xii). In her work, she challenges the traditional conceptions of geography, as she argues how this form of representation is based on ideas and "...formulations that assume we can view, assess, and ethically organize the world from a stable (white, patriarchal, Eurocentric, heterosexual, classed) vantage point" (McKittrick xiii). As such, she draws our attention to the ways geography is "raced and gendered", and this opinion is shared by several ground-breaking theorists, such as Achille



Mbembe, Frantz Fanon and Eyo Ewara; the idea that society is structured according to given (white) cultural norms and expectations regarding sex, race, gender, and desire. This thesis explores how the two novels, *The Street* (1946) and *Giovanni's Room* (1956), written by the two African American authors, James Baldwin, and Ann Petry, narrate the entanglement of space, race, and gender. To what degree can space be racist, sexist, and homophobic? How can space in these literary works represent social and racial hierarchies in 1940s US society? The reason I have chosen to work with these texts is because they both illustrate how space is a social construct, based on cultural ideas and norms along with expectations in a society, and I want to explore how this is connected to ideas of race, gender, and desire. Both texts challenge and problematize the way we understand the meaning of space, geography and nation, and the texts may help us in understanding the hereditariness of racism and poverty, along with its side effects. Even though this thesis will focus on space as it is experienced individually, it nevertheless can help me in understanding how some bodies become invisible, or as McKittrick argues “ungeographic” in the American society (McKittrick).

In my analysis, I argue that both works narrate space's subjectivity, illustrating how maps, along with specific geographical areas can be racist, gendered, and prejudiced, communicating as well as affecting subjects differently depending on factors such as race, gender, and desire. The theory I have included illustrate how space and geography in fact creates differences, violence, and prejudice, and how this becomes a pattern which contributes to maintaining the status quo and the asymmetry of power which still exists between the normative and the “outsider”, the latter being, in this case, the man and woman of colour and the homosexual. To support such reading of the two novels, I will use Critical Race Theory and Queer Theory, drawing on the work of Eyo Ewara, Katherine McKittrick, Carla Kaplan, Franz Fanon, Joseph Armengol, Achille Mbembe, Christina Sharpe, Stephen Valocchi, and others. All expanding my understanding of space as, equally, a material location, a

geographical area that is produced by social practices, metaphors representing, and producing racial and social hierarchies in society.

Both novels are written by African American authors, in a place and time where there were clear racial divisions in the US. *The Street* tells the story of Lutie Johnson, a poor, African American woman, and her struggles to find a safe environment and home for herself and her son, in a racist and misogynist 1940s Harlem. *The Street* has many similar, but also different features, and makes an interesting comparison with *Giovanni's Room*. *Giovanni's Room*, set in Paris, focuses on David, a young, white American who struggles with coming to terms with his own body and sexuality. David falls in love with Giovanni, an Italian bartender, thus creating an inner conflict and struggle due to his white heteronormative background. The works are written in a period where racism is still predominant in the US, such being the case in Harlem, what Carla Kaplan argues in her work, *Miss Anne in Harlem: The White Women of the Black Renaissance* (2013) a Harlem "...that whites flocked to for pleasure and the one that (mostly) blacks lived and worked in" (Kaplan 29). In her work, Kaplan explains how, despite the fact that the Harlem Renaissance brought many positive changes to the different groups living in Harlem, racism was still carried out institutionally and socially, affecting every area in society, as people of colour had literally no rights: "Far too often, the nation proved indifferent to people of color. By the early 1920s, hundreds of antilynching bills had been launched, but none had managed to pass" (Kaplan 73). The racial divide in the US at the time, is crucial to be aware of in the analysis of both works, as racism and stereotypes of blackness permeates both novels, becoming visible through the ways spaces are narrated. In *The Street* and *Giovanni's Room*, space becomes detrimental to the main characters, as the physical setting in both works prevent the main characters from being able to experience safety and belonging in the American society.

In the novels, specific geographical areas come to represent and communicate certain values that are connected to ideas of race and nation, corresponding to McKittrick's work on "black neighbourhoods"; spaces that come to reinforce and naturalize racist ideas and notions through the very physical landscapes of these areas "...black women live in "bad"/black neighbourhoods, have unhealthy children, restricted employment opportunities and resources" (McKittrick 12). Self-reinforcing stereotypes and prejudices such as these come to both define and affect the characters in my primary sources, as both main characters possess qualities, features and desires that were "othered", discriminated against and certainly looked down upon in 1940s US. The novels correspond to Thacker's argument on how space can affect subjects "...bodily or non-semantically...", showing how spaces can be racist, misogynist, and homophobic, revealing the social structures working within a geographical area (Thacker 10).

Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), and his description of "the native town", is interesting to consider in this regard: "It is a world without spaciousness; men live there on top of each other, and their huts are built one on top of the other" (Fanon 30). Fanon's description resemble some of the setting in both novels, revealing how racism and poverty are so intricately connected, and to some extent inherited through the very physical areas people of colour have had to stay in. Both main characters represent the outsider in the story due to their race, gender, and/or desire, as both incorporate features that were discriminated against and looked down upon in 1940s US; People of colour and people with a different sexual orientation than the culturally speaking, "normal", heteronormative man.

My analysis in both chapters will be in accordance with the theory presented. I will discuss how the novels coincide in terms of the main character's ideas and conceptions of race, gender, and desire, exploring how this plays out differently in their surroundings and environment. I will look at the novels' representation of homosexuality and blackness, where

I argue that there are clear similarities in the main characters` experience of the city. In chapter one, "Space, Body and Blackness, in *The Street*" I explore the subjective experience we are presented to in the city of 1940s Harlem. I focus on space, blackness, and body, and what it means to be a woman of colour in this environment. I will look at how Petry represent black female bodies and their place, visibility, or invisibility in the city. To what degree do women of colour represent, as McKittrick illustrates in her work "...transatlantic slavery and colonialism: the landless black subject...a new world grid that is economically racially, and sexually normative..."? (McKittrick 3). In chapter two I focus on gender, race, body, and homophobia, with a poignant emphasis on affective spaces; I am interested in exploring how different cities and districts in *Giovanni`s Room* represent different emotions and ideas, corresponding with and demonstrating what Thacker calls the "...subjective sense of the metropolis..." (Thacker 8). I am also interested in analysing how cultural conceptions on gender affect the main character David in his experience with the gay environment in Paris.

## Chapter 1: Space, and the Black Female Body, in *The Street* (1946)

“Streets like the one she lived on were no accident. They were the North’s lynch mobs, she thought bitterly; the method the big cities used to keep Negroes in their place” (Petry 323).

Ann Petry’s novel *The Street* (1946) shows, through its unique depiction of physical objects and spaces, how the aftermath of slavery takes hold in geography and public spaces, and it demonstrates how this affects subjects on several levels: collective and individually, bodily, and physically, as well as psychologically. In her article “Narrative Desire in Ann Petry’s *The Street*”, Kari J. Winter argues how Petry, through the novel “...represent the streets of Harlem as the product of a specific history of white supremacy, patriarchy, and class oppression” (Winter 2). In *The Street*, cities become alive in that they come to represent qualities that are synonymous with living beings, incorporating emotions and features that represent the racial division and hierarchy which defined 1940s Harlem, New York.

McKittrick alters the understanding of geography and space as something neutral and impartial, as she offers an alternative interpretation, explaining how geography can display different and opposite stories and truths about a country and a nation. She focuses her work on black women’s place in geography and reveals how the aftermath of slavery becomes apparent in physical spaces and even in maps, and how these maps and borders represent black women’s history and struggle. McKittrick’s work on spaces and blackness is of much value, as *The Street* illustrates how people are bound to their physical environments; spaces that for some become a natural path and for others an inevitable destiny. This is interesting to explore in *The Street*; how Petry, through the emphasis on different spaces, manages to tell a story of white supremacy and spatial segregation. I will look at how spaces are narrated, with a particular focus on blackness and body. I am interested in the subjective experience and what it means to be a woman of colour in this particular environment. The novel is important because Petry is addressing, in her own unique way, the interconnection and hereditability of

racism, oppression, and poverty. Moreover, the novel challenges our perception and understanding of terms such as public space and domestic space, as we see that there is a fusion of spaces in Petry's work, testifying to some of the troubling aspects that we are presented to. In *The Street*, Lutie never seems to find a safe space, not even when being in her own living room. As McKittrick so poignantly argues "...geography is always human and that humanness is always geographic..." (McKittrick ix). In other words, space is man-made and subjective, and can in some instances be part of a political regime. The novel is told through a third person omniscient narrator, allowing us to hear several voices, stories, and perspectives, including the perpetrators' point of view, the latter playing a key role in understanding the complexity of Lutie's story. The novel depicts the story of Lutie Johnson, a beautiful, poor, African American woman, who is determined, despite all the odds she has against her, to create a life for herself and her son in the city of Harlem. This chapter will explore and close read the subjective spaces we are presented to in Ann Petry's novel *The Street* (1924). I want to examine the representation of blackness and space; how spaces and the city become, what Carol Henderson, in her paper "'The Walking Wounded': Rethinking Black Women's Identity in Ann Petry's *The Street*": "...a site that seeks to silence women" (Henderson 851). I will analyse the novel through McKittrick and Thacker's works on space, blackness, and geography, focusing on emotion, affect and resignation; the latter becoming the inevitable cause of living in a racist, misogynist society.

"When they reached the fourth floor, she thought, instead of her reaching out for the walls, the walls were reaching out for her" (Petry 12). In this quote, the novel explores Lutie Johnson's subjective experience in what is her first encounter with the cramped and dark space that will soon become her new home in 116<sup>th</sup> street, Harlem. The apartment, due to its narrowness, causes a claustrophobic sensation in Lutie, and she feels that the walls are trying to trap her, as they are closing in on her "...in an effort to envelop her". The novel's

engagement with and use of spaces echoes McKittrick's work on black women's geographies and representation: "The connections, across the seeable and unseeable, the geographic and the seemingly ungeographic, and the struggles that indicate that the material world is assessed and produced by subaltern communities..." (McKittrick xii). McKittrick argues for the need to view geography and space as subjective as she demonstrates how they are part of a larger social construction which is grounded on white superiority. Her work is crucial to the reading of the novel as its engagement with race and nation becomes apparent through the ways spaces are narrated, illustrating how space has the ability to form and shape individuals, emphasizing environment's power on the subject, along with the difficulty of breaking colonialist patterns and structures. The story centres around Lutie Johnson, the protagonist of the story, who is a young and beautiful African American woman whose aspirations are to live an independent and safe life in Harlem, together with her son, and to do this while having the ability to support her family financially and emotionally. Lutie is determined to achieve this through dedicated hard work, despite her knowledge of her rights and value in this space; a space where women of colour are at the bottom of the social range.

In the novel, Lutie and other women of colour are constantly being sexualized, dehumanized, and viewed as, what Winter argues "...consumable objects..." (Winter 105). In her work, Winter illustrates how racism along with racist stereotypes on women permeate the novel, and she illustrates how these manifests through the ways characters and spaces are narrated, in that they always are connected to ideas of superiority and desires of ownership. The character and supervisor of Lutie's apartment, Jones, or Super, is a clear example of this: "When he sees Lutie Johnson, he wants her `worse than he had ever wanted anything in his life" (Winter 105). In her work, Winter argues how Jones' behaviour and ill-treatment of Lutie not only testify to a distortive view on women, but how his character and hostile attitude towards women of colour have derived from living in a racist, patriarchal society. In other

words, the novel's engagement with race becomes apparent also through the portrayal of harmful relationships, where violence and the use of force are the norm. This is demonstrated through the novel's focus on bodies and desire, and with the emphasis on the materialisation of the body. In the novel, subjects become the environment in which they inhabit; walls, sounds and darkness representing Lutie's own emotions and terror, and the novel shows how force and inequality are geographically dependent, in the very environment in which subjects find themselves in.

In the novel, Lutie, regardless of where she physically is, must withstand social categorization and racial discrimination, becoming obvious in the way she is perceived and looked upon by white subjects in public spaces: "She got off the train, thinking that she never felt really human until she reached Harlem and thus got away from the hostility in the eyes of the white women who stared at her on the downtown streets and in the subway" (Petty 57). In this section, when being on the train, Lutie is exposed to racial discrimination through the way she is closely examined and observed by white people. No word is uttered by the other passengers, yet their body language and way of looking at Lutie's body demonstrate white superiority, viewing her and the colour of her skin as something suspicious, a curiosity, something inhuman. Lutie experiences this whenever she is in the company of white people, as she instantly becomes "the other", through their ways of evaluating and judging her, viewing her as an object. Achille Mbembe, in his work, explains how ideas and stereotypes on blackness has its roots in colonist thoughts and ideology, as these images have functioned as a means of justifying and upholding the status quo and the asymmetry of power: "To exercise a lasting hold over the native people they had subjugated, and from whom they wanted to differentiate themselves at all costs, the settlers had somehow to constitute them as physical objects of various sorts" (Mbembe 47). Mbembe's work on colonialism and ideology are important in the analysis and reading of the novel, particularly in terms of understanding the



nature of the oppression Lutie encounters and the difficulty in changing racist patterns and structures. Lutie experiences the discrimination solely because of her gender and the colour of her skin. Racism is everywhere in Harlem, defining the city and its buildings, operating as if it is part of a universal truth, thus resembling the racial segregation in 1940s Harlem. It does not matter what Lutie says or does, or where she physically is, as she nevertheless must withstand being viewed as less smart and less valuable in this space. The story is told through the use of multiple flashbacks, which enables the understanding of the duration of Lutie`s struggle and consequently how racism has come to shape her entire life.

Lutie is very divided in the way she handles the adversity she faces; on the one hand, she represents and incorporates many of the same dreams and desires connected to the American Dream, sincerely believing that her independence is achievable through continuing her hard work. On the other hand, she is repeatedly reminded of her place and worthlessness in this space, which turns her increasingly bitter towards both the notion of the American Dream and to white people. In the novel, the racial division and hierarchy are maintained through contrasting structures and spaces, where the sudden shifts of time and space, Lutie`s alternation between past and present events, demonstrates opposite ideologies. Lutie`s emotional state changes depending on where she physically is, becoming visible through seemingly insignificant objects and items, such as an advertisement Lutie encounters when being on the train on her way home, to her newly rented apartment, in 116<sup>th</sup> street in Harlem New York: “For the advertisement she was looking at pictured a girl with incredible blond hair. The girl leaned close to a dark-haired, smiling man in a navy uniform. They were standing in front of a kitchen sink – a sink whose white porcelain surface gleamed under the train lights” (Petry 28). This passage demonstrates how racism and ideas of race affect every area of Harlem, showing its connection to representation, social inequality, and poverty, along with housing and work opportunities. The novel`s use of contrasting spaces and its portrayal

of “good” white characteristics, such as the “white porcelain surface” emphasize this, illustrating how social differences are created and maintained partly through images that holds specific ideas and ideals. The novel illustrates this through its use of specific objects that come to represent meaning, many of whom first appear as insignificant but nevertheless communicate specific ideas or ideals connected to race and nation. Lutie encounters the advertisement while being herself in a cramped, dark, and small space on the train, illustrating the clear division and contrast in terms of social class and mood represented. In this quote, the allusions to race and nation becomes visible partly because of blackness` invisibility in the advertisement, but more significantly through the images and symbols represented, such as the “...smiling man in the navy uniform”. The novel demonstrates how ideas on race and nation become evident in the environment through objects and “trivial things”, such as an advertisement, in such a way that they contribute to maintaining the divisions. The allusions to race and nation appear several places in the novel, emphasizing how ideologies function in terms of shaping and affecting human thought and meaning, as well as spaces. The train is crowded and full of people, and the passengers “...forced their bodies into the coaches, making room for themselves where no room had existed before” (Petry 2).

The train is full of workers, of people of colour heading home or to work, and the space is so crowded with people that in order to endure this, Lutie and other passengers need to create a space that is not there. While making room for herself, Lutie sees the advertisement in the train, the white characteristics and emotions represented, and this triggers a memory from when working for a white wealthy family in Connecticut, in the countryside, as a live-in maid. The train and this specific environment and space evoke emotions in Lutie, and it is here readers are provided with important knowledge of Lutie`s background and experience while working as a servant, and how this has affected and shaped her life as a woman of colour. Several important events in the novel occur when Lutie is on the train and

when being in public spaces, as this space come to reinforce and remind her of the racial distinction and differences between herself and whiteness. In this section Lutie goes back in time, remembering the space and the family she worked for, how she felt then and how she feels now, demonstrating what Thacker refers to as “affective responses”. In his work, Thacker illustrates how different cities and spaces can create different and sometimes conflicting emotions in subjects, demonstrating how space is never just a space as it represents and communicates certain ideas. Thacker terms this as: “...the language of affect, of `intense emotions` and `poignant moods` such as terror or grief, and Thacker argues how these affects derive from encountering certain spatial features of the city: “... sounds, odours and sights in the city produce these affects, rather than ideas or texts” (Thacker 7). This is exactly what happens when Lutie is on the train, and when being in public spaces where she is frequently taken back to former memories and emotions, - this as a consequence of her geographical placement.

When Lutie discovers the advertisement on the train, she is immediately taken back to her emotions and the traumatic events from the period when she worked for the wealthy family in Connecticut. The advertisements and its representation of values and symbols, resemble ideas she was introduced to and confronted with when living with the Chandler family. When applying Carla Kaplan`s work in this reading of the advertisement, this section comes to represent how New York was perceived as a space and city during this period, with existing pre-conceived ideas and notions of race and gender. The passage illustrates how racism is not always spoken straight out, but how spaces and geography can create and uphold such views. In her work, Kaplan demonstrates how 1940s New York and Harlem were still very much driven by specific ideas and ideals of what constituted the American: “If you were in your kitchen on an autumn day in 1925, drinking coffee and leafing through The New York Times, you`d see images of a high-spirited America proud of its prosperity and pleased with

the status quo” (Kaplan 4). This corresponds well with the image we are presented to in this section of *The Street*; the happy white couple, the “incredible blond hair”, the “navy-uniform”, communicating white supremacy and patriotism, all based on ideas of race and nation. This passage confirms how Lutie, and other women of colour, are excluded in the American imagination of the nation.

The novel’s emphasis on spaces and bodies, particularly urban space, becomes apparent from the very beginning: “There was a cold November wind blowing through 116th Street” (Petry 1). Already on the novel’s first page the city space is described with fear, and you get a sense of something horrible is about to happen. *The Street*, with its vivid descriptions, illustrates and echoes what McKittrick terms as “speakable” surroundings, and the novel demonstrates how notions of blackness becomes hereditary and spatial, and how some subjects are more visible and valuable than others in geography.

The novel opens with a vibrant description of 116<sup>th</sup> street as Lutie Johnson is on her way looking for a home for herself and her son, Bub: “It did everything it could to discourage the people walking along the street. It found all the dirt and dust and grime on the sidewalk and lifted it up so that the dirt got into their noses, making it difficult to breathe...” (Petry 2). This passage illustrates how the cityscape is dangerous for Lutie, functioning as an evil force on its own, creeping up on her and creating what Thacker refers to as a “bodily reaction”, the city causing Lutie’s strain and tension. *The Street* is infused with these types of “bodily reactions”, often related to the ill treatment of Lutie as well as the existing preconceived, destructive notions of blackness which lingers in Harlem. Lutie Johnson is frequently exposed to discrimination, violence, sexual harassment, and exploitation by men and other women, this being only because she is a woman of colour. Despite the many obstacles she faces, Lutie relentlessly aims to take ownership in ideas of the nation; the American Dream, believing that if she only works hard enough, she will succeed in building a better life for herself and her

son. The novel demonstrates how race and gender segregation is visible in artefacts and geography, how some are imprisoned by space, and the story is unique because we are given several different perspectives from characters that are all a victim of a system that is racist at its core. Lutie Johnson is in this environment, walking, in the street, her body against the strong wind, as she is on her way to look at an apartment that she hopes to rent for herself and her son Bub. In this early part of the novel, Lutie and her son Bub are living together with Lutie`s father and his alcoholic partner, raising her son in what is anything but a healthy and safe environment. As Lutie tries to orient herself in the street, the wind is described in detail; powerful and unpredictable, incorporating magical features and humanlike emotions, and has the ability to claim the subjects that are in the street, changing them and preventing them from moving, seeing, and breathing: "...the dust got into their eyes and blinded them, and the grit stung their skins" (Petry 2). The passage is significant because it sets the tone of the story and foreshadows what is to come. The allusion to slavery, Lutie`s place in this environment and the overwhelming focus on garbage and waste, grime, and grit, together with the suffocation sensation illustrated here, gives the impression that the wind represents the antagonist of the story, white superiority, abuse, and power.

In her work, Winter argues how the wind "...symbolizes the ubiquitous forces of economic oppression in Harlem that doom African Americans to poverty, degradation, and despair" (Winter 1). For Lutie, a young black woman in 1940s Harlem, finding a decent place to live seems impossible. Lutie has just become separated from her husband who we get to know has had an affair with another woman while Lutie worked as a maid in the countryside, having had to leave her then husband and young son for long periods of time. As Winter illustrates, poverty and violence, another side effect of racism, are huge themes of the novel, as this constrains Lutie and other characters in their ability to choose for themselves when it comes to work, housing and even love. In the novel, we see the consequences of severe

poverty and its clear link to racism, and how this creates a condition which has a hereditary effect. Lutie`s financial situation is an important example of this, as she is forced to work long hours away from home in order to provide for her family. Lutie`s working hours and absence in her son`s childhood have severe consequences for her son and his safety, as he eventually and unknowingly, starts to engage in criminal activities with dangerous people, all as a means of trying to earn money for himself and his mother. Christina Sharpe argues in her work (2016) how we are still, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, dealing with the aftermath of slavery and how racism has never ceased to exist, but instead been allowed to evolve, changing form, and becoming evident in spaces; in how people and certain groups live their lives: “In the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present” (Sharpe 9). Sharpe explains in her work, how her own brother`s death was a direct result of poverty, starting with racism, and she argues how this is the case today with many African American families living in the US today. This is interesting to consider with Lutie Johnson`s story, despite the works being published decades apart. Lutie is educated, hardworking, and determined, yet she is restricted to stay in certain spaces and areas and forced to interact with dangerous people with bad intentions, because of the colour of her skin. In the novel, the various spaces become what causes Lutie`s downfall, as the prospect of being able to build a good life in this space is virtually non-existent.

In her work, McKittrick explains how racism is visible in geography; how some areas and neighbourhoods become black spaces, reenforcing as well as upholding racist ideas and stereotypes of blackness and contributing in upholding the social division and hierarchy: “Race becomes attached to place in detrimental ways because local conditions reify and naturalize identity-difference: black women live in “bad”/black neighborhoods, have unhealthy children, restricted employment opportunities and resources” (McKittrick 12). McKittrick`s description of black/bad neighbourhoods resembles the Harlem we are presented

to in the novel, and despite Lutie`s hard work and relentless efforts in not accepting these predetermined outcomes, racism and poverty characterize the area where Lutie is located, and consequently her job and housing opportunities. The description of specific objects in this space illustrate this: “Even with the wind twisting the sign away from her, she could see that it had been there for a long time because its original coat of white paint was streaked with rust where years of rain and snow had finally eaten the paint off down to the metal and the metal had slowly rusted, making a dark red stain like blood” (Petry 3).

In this part, Lutie is observing the house and space in which she is about to enter; a dilapidated, unmaintained building, which represents anything but a safe and healthy environment. The use of personification and the violent description enhances the ability to see Lutie`s awareness of her place in this space, being a woman of colour. The sign along with the area are described with decay and disgust, and there is an overall hopelessness which is grounded in poverty, lack of opportunity and racial discrimination. The sign which has been “eaten” off its original state, along with the poorly maintained building, reflects, as Eve Shockley argues, how racial segregation and discrimination are visible in artefacts, objects and through the space in which people live their lives: “In this mid 20<sup>th</sup>-century urban setting, it becomes the eponymous “street” on which Lutie`s prospective apartment is located, a trash-infested, dirty, odorous street where the `buildings were old with small slit-like windows...” (Shockley 447).

When analysing the description of Lutie`s neighbourhood and apartment, McKittrick`s work on racism and geography is accurate: “The socioeconomic mapping of blackness, the unjust and economically driven naturalization of difference, shows the material base of race/racism, the conditions under which many subaltern populations live and have lived, and the spatial constitution of socially produced categories” (McKittrick 13). In Petry`s descriptions, Lutie`s surroundings can speak, and the building, sign and the poor

neighbourhood testify to racial and social hierarchies and class differences. In this poor and black neighbourhood nothing is maintained, echoing events of the past. The "...dark red stain like blood" functions as an imagery of the lives that have been lost due to slavery, memories of bloodshed and the terror that still lingers in society. In other words, the novel engages with slavery through its focus on space and blackness and by illustrating Lutie's experience living and working in a black, poor neighbourhood. Despite Lutie's hard work she is forced to live in a dangerous environment and to interact with people that have bad intentions, like her landlord Super. Lutie's descriptions are very much driven by her emotions, changing rapidly depending on where she physically is and with whom, corresponding with Thacker's "geographical emotions": "...how particular places affect people, bodily or non-mentally, and are then translated into emotions and moods..." (Thacker 10). With all the sensations, movements and emotions described it is almost as if you are reading a horror story:

She looked at the outside of the building. Parquet floors here meant that the wood was so old and so discolored no amount of varnish or shellac would conceal the scars and the old scraped places, the years dragging furniture across the floors, the hammer blows of time and children and drunks and dirty, slovenly women (Petry 3)

The reality as described in the above passage is a striking contrast to the advertisement: "Three rooms, steam heat, parquet floors, respectable tenants..." (Petry 3). This is interesting to consider as it is distinctive in terms of the use of positive connotations, resembling a language that belonged to white collar jobs; public statement and announcements made by and for white people at the time. In his article, "Material Resistance and the Agency of the Body in Ann Petry's *The Street*", William Scott argues how the novel's use of language, such as in this announcement, functions to camouflage the truth of reality, "Throughout the novel, money, like language, is associated with acts that serve to disguise, mask, or obliterate sordid or sad facts of violence" (Scott 96). The description of the apartment accentuate this, and



gives the impression that Lutie, being a woman of colour, cannot expect to be treated well nor to be privileged the truth. Lutie clearly knows the space in terms of standard as she ridicules the sign and explains its true meaning in her observations above.

In this section, Lutie manages to illustrate the reality and hardship of her and other women/people of colour's housing opportunities, in a city where you are at the bottom of the social ladder. Lutie's distinction functions as an imagery of 1940s divided Harlem and illustrates how if you lived in a certain part of the city, you could not expect to be treated well nor be part of a law-regulated practise. In other words, in this space, the meaning of parquet floors differs depending on which part of the city you belong to. In Lutie's space, women of colour's interests or needs are completely immaterial, neglected, and invisible, as this is part of a political regime. Lutie is not surprised as this is what she expects, being a woman of colour. Lutie's distinct action of breaking this false description into bits as she reveals its true meaning, illustrate an awareness and resignation in Lutie which represent or shows the hereditariness of slavery and how this manifests itself in every aspect of Lutie's life. Lutie does not expect a pleasant apartment as she knows her worth in the city and that this is "as good as it gets". The "...children and drunks and dirty, slovenly women" accentuates this, uttered by Lutie herself.

Several places in the novel, Lutie seems to incorporate and adopt some of the antipathetic adjectives used to describe women of colour, demonstrating environment's effect on the human psyche, or with Thacker's theory, the city's ability to change and claim its subjects. If you are a woman in 1940s Harlem, and particularly if you are a woman of colour, that is all that you are. The quote is a disturbing composition, misogynist at its core, but it gives a realistic image of women of colours' situation at the time. The horror continues as Lutie enters the building and is on her way up the stairs, together with her landlord, who clearly finds her sexually attractive. Lutie's subjective experience in this space comes as a

result of her body being closely examined by an unknown man, in addition to her feelings of being trapped in a small and dangerous space: “The halls were so narrow that she could reach out and touch them on either side without having to stretch her arms any distance” (Petry 12). The use of personification enhances our understanding of what this space does to Lutie, and the suffocation sensation together with the size of the apartment illustrate so well how this space affects her physically and mentally, corresponding to Thacker’s affective responses. In this space Lutie clearly feels claustrophobic and scared; feeling trapped in a small space with an unknown staring man who appraises her body: “As she climbed up the last flight of stairs, she was aware that the skin on her back was crawling with fear. Fear of what? She asked herself. Fear of him, fear of the dark, of the smells in the halls, the high steep stairs, of yourself?” (Petry 13). The conditions are bad, the apartment has no light and barely air, and there is the “...sour smell of garbage...” (Petry 16). Despite all this, Lutie accepts the apartment, as she cannot afford anything else, being a woman of colour and therefore at the very bottom of the social ladder. In her work, Winter explains how Lutie feels imprisoned by this environment, but the hopelessness lies in her knowing that she does not have any other alternative. Winter argues how Lutie is “...trapped by her race, gender, and class, and a change in environment is crucial to her survival, but changing her environment would not, by itself, enable her to escape oppression” (Winter 109). In other words, Lutie cannot herself change these structures, as these are connected to values that are unattainable to her due to her race and place in this space.

In her work, Henderson argues how Lutie’s identity and destiny are constructed in the street, and she explains how “...in the street, individual existence is predetermined by mitigating factors that affect not only how people live but also how their identities are constructed in the public and private spheres” (Henderson 852). This is exactly what is

illustrated in *The Street*, where Lutie, regardless of where she physically is, must withstand social categorization and discrimination due to her race, whether she is out in the city or when being in her own living room. Henderson further explains how the image of the street's power on the subject functions, by African American writers "...as a literary trope to ground their discussions of race, class and gender" (Henderson 852). This corresponds well to the way the novel portrays the cityscape and public spaces, and the way these spaces treat Lutie and other women of colour. The city becomes a force on its own, and regardless of Lutie's own efforts to fight and endure this, she nevertheless falls short.

In the novel we see how Lutie's attributes and good work ethics actually contribute to the destruction and downfall of her family, as is the case with several other female characters we meet in the *The Street*. Due to extreme poverty, women of colour do not have a choice but to leave their husbands and children for months or years, for servant jobs, as their men are men of colour and their ability to get a job is non-existing. The long-term effects of racism and how this affects family life become essential to consider in understanding the different events in Lutie's life along with her character.

Kimberle Crenshaw, in her amazing work "Mapping the Margins", discusses the representation of blackness along with how racism operates differently depending on subjects. More importantly she addresses the complexity of racism and its affect in connection to gender, and she argues that racism affects men, as opposed to women of colour, in a complex and perhaps not so visible manner. This especially when it comes to affiliation, in terms of their lack of a sense of belonging in society. In her work, Crenshaw draws parallels to domestic violence, explaining how not being able to participate in one's own society through work can lead to devastating consequences for the individual and his family, as men are, in several cultures, expected to be the one who provides for the family: "...the chain of violence is more complex and extends beyond this single link...Racism linked to patriarchy to the

extent that racism denies men of colour the privilege that dominant men enjoy” (Crenshaw 1258). In terms of privilege and space, Crenshaw`s work is important when analysing and working with *The Street*, as poverty and violence are recurring themes throughout the novel. Lutie is the only one who can support her family financially and her life choices reflect this and becomes visible several places in the novel when she reflects on her choices and why she has come to be where she is. The novel`s vivid descriptions of Lutie`s home conditions, whether she is in Harlem with her son Bub or when looking back to when she was living with her previous husband Jim, are always marked with the weight of poverty. *The Street* thus illustrates poverty`s effect on relationships, family, and on the human psyche: “She could hear the word cheap, cheap, cheap, whether she was asleep or awake. It dominated all her thinking. Cheap cuts of meat, cheap yellow laundry soap, yeast in bulk because it was cheap...They went to bed early because it kept the light bill down” (Petry 170). In this section, Lutie lives in Harlem with her son and has just started dating Boots; a sketchy man who promises her a well-paid singing job, in exchange for her company. While Lutie contemplates Boots` potential for way out of poverty and a prospect of a better life, she is faced with flashbacks to when she lived together with her husband Jim, before they separated. While Lutie alternates between being in the past and present space, she tries to somehow figure out what went wrong between her and Jim: “So day by day, month by month, big broad-shouldered Jim Johnson went to pieces because there wasn`t any work for him and he couldn`t earn anything at all. He got used to facing the facts that he couldn`t support his wife and child. It ate into him” (Petry 168). Jim, being a man of colour, is refused the right to participate in society because he is a man of colour; he cannot obtain a job because no one wants to hire him, and this leads to a growing suspicion and hate towards white people, let alone Lutie, as Lutie, at this stage, functions as the family`s breadwinner and thus reinforces his feelings of inadequacy in society. This ends up with him hitting her: “He leaned over the bed. His eyes were bloodshot,

angry. 'I oughtta beat you up and down the block.' He slapped her across her face" (Petry 182). Through frequent revisits to the past, Lutie tries to make sense of the present, and she compares Jim to Boots, the Jim - before extreme poverty. This passage illustrates how Lutie's memories of the past enables a growing awareness in her of what destroyed them as a family and more specifically, how the poverty is a result of racism. In her work, Sharpe speaks of a "...poverty of the work-too-hard-and-still-can't-make-ends-meet-kind" (Sharpe 8), and this is exactly how Lutie's situation is described in *The Street*, and we see how poverty affects and restricts every area of Lutie's life.

Lutie Johnson is presented as a walker; a worker, serving in a dark, dirty, and dangerous environment, corresponding with Shockley's description of the African American heroine in 1940s Harlem: "...social terror is constructed as a way of life for the mostly, poor, African American residents of Harlem – but especially for the heroine, in her fight for control of her own sexuality" (Shockley 439-440). Shockley argues that Lutie Johnson functions as Petry's "...doppelganger", as Lutie's personality and characteristics, being a strong and independent woman, are very similar to Petry herself (Shockley 442). However, Lutie's visibility and her place along with her value in the city is always connected to the colour of her skin, as she, and other women of colour, are only visible in certain spaces and in certain areas in the city. There are several allusions to racial segregation and slavery in the novel and Lutie's description of the city space and buildings are examples of this. Lutie's working experience along with the way other white characters view her also accentuate this.

To be a woman of colour in 1940s Harlem meant, according to Kaplan, that you could be objectified and suspected of a whole range of things, including allegations of deceiving others, and to "...sneak into whiteness" (Kaplan 7). In her work, Kaplan tells the real and disturbing story of Alice Beatrice Jones. In New York 1924, in trial, she was forced to undress the upper body for the white male judges to figure out whether she had tricked her husband

into believing that she was white, after being accused of this by her elite parents-in-law who refused to accept their son marrying a woman of colour. The Ku Klux Klan were central in these allegations. Kaplan further explains how there were even “Guidebooks written for white readers presenting Harlem as ...`Negros...remind one of the great apes of Equatorial Africa” (Kaplan 29). Kaplan`s description is highly relevant to consider in the analysis of the various female characters, illustrating how racism and racist stereotypes of women of colour were in many ways accepted during this period, both culturally, socially, and legally. In *The Street*, women of colour are viewed as exotic and sexually willing bodies.

To be a woman of colour in *The Street* means to accept to live under unhealthy conditions and to be exploited. To be a woman of colour in this space and environment means to accept to live in a dark and narrow space with no sunlight, and to be objectified, particularly by other men. This comes to light through the descriptions of spaces, and the descriptions of the city space is especially interesting to consider with Fanon`s depiction of the “native town”, written in 1963: It is a world without spaciousness; men live there on top of each other, and their huts are built one on top of the other. The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light (Fanon 30). Fanon`s disturbing painting of the “native town” refers to colonialism and the colony, but it nevertheless applies to the segregated US city in *The Street*, illustrating how slavery never seized to exist, but how it has changed form, becoming visible in how and where people of colour live their lives. Fanon`s “native town” in many ways resembles Petry`s Harlem; the apartment and the neighbourhood Lutie moves into, along with the novel`s strong emphasis on emotions and bodily sensations. Applying Fanon`s work to the reading and analysis of the novel help identify the connections between race and space; Lutie and other women of colour`s place in the novel along with their visibility and how they are stereotyped by white people, represents white supremacy and what Fanon argues is the effects of colonialism, where people of colour

are viewed as less smart, less developed and in need of being civilized. This is demonstrated in *The Street*, through Lutie`s place in this environment, reflecting, in many ways, McKittrick`s argument that “...geography is always human and that humanness is always geographic” (McKittrick ix). In *The Street* colonization becomes visible in spaces and through the ways women of colour become objects and white people`s possessions. I will now look at one passage where this is highlighted, focusing on body and representation. In this part of the novel Lutie has moved into the apartment, and Super, Lutie`s landlord is fantasising about her and daydreaming of her body:

He remembered how her long legs had looked going up the stairs ahead of him. Just watching her like that he had wanted her so badly it was like a pain in his chest. Those long legs walking up and up in front of him, her rump moving from side to side as she walked. He remembered how his hand had cupped into a curve – unconsciously, uncontrollably, as he walked in back of her.... She went into the kitchen and the bathroom and he made himself stand still. For he knew if he followed her in there, he would force her down on the floor, down against the worn floor boards. He had tried to imagine what it would be like to feel her body under his – soft and warm and moving with him (Petry 98).

In this powerful passage, the novel presents space as it is experienced intimately and differently by the characters. In this section there is a 3<sup>rd</sup> person narration that switches to indirect discourse, Super experiencing this space subjectively, violently, and sexually, as he fantasises about how it would feel to abuse Lutie. Lutie feels Super`s desires on her entire body all the way from her first encounter with him “She could feel his eyes travelling over her – estimating her, summing her up, wondering about her” (Petry 13). Super wants to take possession of her body, not Lutie as a person, and he sees her as a trapped animal, symbolizing how she is at his mercy. In her work, Winter argues how the novel`s portrayal of

sexual desire and exploitation comes to light through Super's hunger for women's bodies, viewing Lutie only as an object and a body for sexual pleasure "Like a starving infant, he has an uncontrollable urge to consume female flesh" (Winter 105). When comparing Super's desire and his imagining of taking control of Lutie's body, to Fanon's work on colonialism, it becomes clear that Super represents the aftermath of slavery through his desire of owning human bodies; The "those long legs" and "her rump" are both personification and is thus her. To Super, Lutie equals her long legs and rump. Super perceives Lutie as an object of sexual satisfaction, and he dreams and fantasizes of touching her body and raping her. What is worse is that he imagines that she would want this as well, because she is poor and a woman of colour: "He had thought she'd be so pleased and that she would come down and ring his bell and stand there smiling at him. Mebbe she would have got so she rang his bell often. `Just to say hello to you`, she would say" (Petry 97). Super's imaginative space testifies to a distorted perception of reality that is based on ideas of submission and superiority, representing the racial patriarchy. Super sincerely believes that they would be a good match, despite his attraction being based only on her physical appearance (her body), and his need of controlling this. Shockley argues how Lutie resembles how African American women have been portrayed and understood: "... (during and after slavery) and the stereotype of black female lasciviousness and licentiousness that has enabled and excused white men's rape – and the general sexual exploitation – of black women" (Shockley 439). Lutie, along with other women of colour, are in Super's eyes viewed as sexual objects that he can do whatever he wants with, and this makes Lutie's living conditions dangerous, as she needs to always be on her guard when being near him. There are striking similarities between Fanon's description of "the native" and Lutie's situation: "The native is always on the alert, for since he can only make out with difficulty the many symbols of the colonial world, he is never sure whether or not he has crossed the frontier" (Fanon 41). Lutie is always on the alert, and the fact that they



live in the same building worsens Lutie`s situation as this invades her own private space, creating a constant terror and fear. In her work, McKittrick discusses how “One of the many ways violence operates across gender, sexuality, and race is through multiscalar discourses of ownership: having “things”, owning lands, invading territories, possessing someone...” (McKittrick 3). To possess another human being, or to have the desire to do so, is what we see illustrated in *The Street*, as Super feels entitled to treat women of colour a certain way, degrading them, not looking upon them as equals, resembling Fanon`s effect on colonialism. Min, Super`s silent roommate, is another example of this.

The first description of the character Min, who Lutie suddenly sees when being in Super`s apartment for the first time, comes forth as surprisingly unsympathetic: “As she looked, the shapeless small dark woman in the chair got up and bowed to her without speaking. Lutie nodded her head in acknowledgement of the bow, thinking, That must be the woman I heard whispering. The woman sat down in the chair again. Melting into it” (Petry 23). Min immediately fits the description of the invisible character, and she is presented not through her voice, but through her body and way of moving. Henderson argues in her work, how the novel`s focus on Min`s body emphasizes her insignificance in this space as she is not viewed as human, but more like a “ghostlike” shadow, illustrating how “...the body is voice...” (Henderson 854). The body`s ability to speak is clearly shown in the character Min, through her subjugation and apparent unimportance in this space, and she comes to represent different qualities compared to other central female characters. In the introduction of Min, the body and movement are prominent factors to pay attention to; Min does not speak, yet the description and emphasis on her body and movement tells a story on its own. Min is not even being referred to by her name, but described as some kind of rare creature, something dark and irrelevant, as an object with no purpose but sitting in a chair and “...melting into it”, becoming one with the chair. Min thus comes forth as a submissive woman whose body

blends in with the environment, symbolizing her insignificance in this space. The body “melting into it” accentuates this. Min is clearly abused by Super, mentally, and physically, bowing to his visitors without speaking, and if she is speaking, she is whispering. Keeping McKittrick’s work on black geographies in mind, Min can be said to represent the submissive woman of colour whose body is exploited, her character and invisibility representing the aftermath of colonialism and slavery. Henderson discusses the character Min in her work, explaining how “Her body is void of any noticeable expression or form, She has, in essence, become part of the environment” (Henderson 854). In Super’s space, Min becomes nothing more than a sexual object, this being a result of a long-term abuse.

The representation of Min is interesting to consider in connection to Henderson’s work, especially when she points to the novel’s emphasis with “...the social landscape of the body” when explaining how women of colour in *The Street* are marked by events, and “...tattooed by their experience in the city (Henderson 850). Min has not got any voice in the first section of the novel, but her body nevertheless tell us her story, functioning as a voice on its own (Henderson 854). Through the novel’s representation of subjects, such as Super and Min, 116<sup>th</sup> street becomes “...a site that seeks to silence women” (Henderson 851). However, what is interesting about Min as a character is how she changes after her meeting with the prophet, who she seeks out for advice as she fears she will be evicted soon, after having realized that Super has discovered potential in Lutie Johnson’s body. When visiting the prophet, Min is listened to and acknowledged for her fears, which results in a change of her emotional state, let alone her body. The prophet gives Min a cross, as a means of protection from Super and her fears, and this object, along with Min’s emotional change after her visit ultimately transforms the space in her home with Super. The cross becomes a disturbing and dangerous object to Super’s power in this space, due to its powerful and religious symbolism. What is interesting is how the cross has the complete opposite effect for Min, echoing

Thacker`s work on space`s subjectivity. The object completely changes the order in the apartment, functioning as, what Scott argues in his work "...an accusing finger", which Super is confronted with whenever he sees it, and it prevents him to continue his violence towards Min. In his work, Scott argues how the cross "...interferes with Jones`s pattern...", in such a way that it creates a chaos in his position and order in this household (Scott 105). Min`s sudden change after her meeting with the prophet is very interesting as this manifests itself in the environment and space, in such a way that even her neighbour, Mrs. Hedges, notices: "There was such energy and firmness about the way she walked that Mrs.Hedges` eyebrows lifted as she craned her neck for a further look" (Petry 138). This descriptive sentence demonstrates Min`s development and sudden change in body, movement, mood, and emotions, and it becomes visible through the way she moves her body with a new sense of confidence. Min regains self-determination and clarity after her meeting with the prophet, which she manages to implement into her own private space in Super`s apartment. Min is no longer viewed by Super as an object, nor does she see herself that way, as she now has come up with a plan on how to recover. The novel`s emphasis on body and movement, such as the "...eyebrows lifted..." and "...craned her neck..." illustrate McKittrick`s argument on bodies` ability to speak and to tell a story. After being listened to and acknowledged by the prophet, Min becomes a person with strength and courage, and she slowly but surely regains her visibility and voice. The change in Min`s apartment and space with Super illustrates this, demonstrating how space affects subject and vice versa.

In the novel, women of colour become the space they inhabit, corresponding with what McKittrick explains, in her chapter on bodily geography: "...the ties between ownership and blackness rendered the black body a commodity, a site of embodied property, through ideological and economical exchanges" (McKittrick 44). This applies to how Min comes forth in the beginning of the novel, let alone how other women of colour are portrayed and viewed

by white people. After Min's meeting with the prophet, Super notices a firmness that has never been there before, which he finds threatening, as he finds himself no longer in control of this space: "This key was being thrust in with assurance, and the door was pushed open immediately afterward. He frowned as he listened because on top of that she slammed the door" (Petry 138-139). Now that the roles have changed, Super feels that he as a man, his masculinity, and his need for being in control is being threatened. This section is important because it demonstrates how space can represent misogyny and power, and more importantly this illustrates how space is subjective and will change depending on the subject. Super's attitude towards Min suddenly changes as he is no longer in control, and he comes forth as confused and disoriented of his own reaction: "Her unaccustomed actions surprised him so greatly that when she came into the living room, instead of starting immediately to throw her out...he found himself saying "where have you been?" (Petry 139). In this section, Super, when losing Min's reverence, completely changes and reveals his own darkness and insecurities. Min's golden cross accentuates this, appearing "everywhere" in Super's apartment, and the cross evokes Super's own fears and emotions of terror "He covered his eyes with his hands, for it seemed to him the great gold-colored cross was hanging directly in front of him instead of over the headboard of the bed where he had last seen it" (Petry 139). Super reacts aggressively by the sudden change of control, and ends up kicking the dog "...savagely" (Petry 139). As Min is no longer psychologically available to Super's violence, Super needs to find other ways of exercising his supremacy and power and thus transfers the violence to the dog. When working with space and the black female body in *The Street*, I am frequently taken back to Fanon's work and his depiction of the native:

He is, let us dare to admit, the enemy of values, and in this sense he is the absolute evil. He is the corrosive element, destroying all that comes near him; he is the deforming element, disfiguring all that has to do with beauty or morality; he is the depository of

maleficent powers, the unconscious and irretrievable instrument of blind forces (Fanon 32).

Fanon's very moving description helps in reading and understanding racism, space and affect, along with how and why the different characters are described and viewed the way they are. The "...deforming element..." in Fanon's passage corresponds to how both Min and Mrs. Hedges, another important female black character in *The Street*, are represented. Despite Min's change after her meeting with the prophet, she is still viewed by Super as ugly, less valuable, less human, and it is only the cross' power that prevents him from continuing the violence. In her work, Henderson discusses how Mrs. Hedges, another central female character "...embodies two states of being – she is both seen (as a thing/object) and not seen (as a human being/subject)" (Henderson 860). Mrs. Hedges comes across as different mostly because of her appearance and attitude, and she does not inhabit the same feminine features or qualities as Lutie or Min, as her body has deep scars due to a severe fire accident. The first acquaintance with Mrs. Hedges is when Lutie suddenly notices her when standing outside the apartment building in 116<sup>th</sup> street for the first time: "There was a faint light somewhere in the room she was looking into and the enormous bulk of a woman was silhouetted against the light...The woman was very black" (Petry 5). The way Mrs. Hedges is described comes across as dark, racist, and violent, incorporating no feminine, or "womanly" features or qualities, corresponding to Fanon's depiction of the native: a "...deforming element, disfiguring all that has to do with beauty or morality...". In her work, Henderson explains how Mrs.Hedge's visibility in the city is connected to her masculine characteristics, and she argues how her "... `lack` of femininity allows her to command spaces and places that the other two cannot" (Henderson 862). This is interesting to consider as Mrs.Hedges, despite her strong and tough appearance, has had her own difficulties in the street, many similar to the other two female characters. In the introduction of the novel, Mrs. Hedges is presented as a

dark, mysterious shadow. However, because of her strong appearance it becomes clear that she holds a certain power to this street and space, as opposed to Lutie and Min. In this section, Lutie observes Mrs.Hedges as she sits in the window and gazes out into the street, as if she is looking or waiting for someone: “She began to wonder how the woman could sit by an open window on a cold, windy night like this one. And she didn’t have on a coat, but a kind of loose-looking cotton dress...” In this section, the infusion of private and public space is engaging, as Mrs.Hedges practically sits outside, in her window, with no coat on and seemingly with no mission. It is as if her window functions as a living room on its own, and the street somehow representing a safe space for Mrs.Hedges. In this space, Mrs.Hedges, as opposed to Lutie, is in control, as she keeps an eye on everyone and everything that goes on in the street. In this early section, Mrs.Hedges speaks with confidence and reassurance when she, from her window, guides Lutie to the entrance: “Nice little place, dearie. Just ring the Super’s bell and he’ll show it to you. The woman’s voice was rich. Pleasant” (Petry 5). Lutie and Mrs.Hedges’ first interaction is telling as this illustrates space’s subjectivity, their experience of the city being so different, and to some extent opposite, despite both being women of colour. However, we later get to know that Mrs.Hedges too has felt racism, oppression, and extreme poverty on her body, and that this is why she comes to represent something different than Lutie and Min. Mrs. Hedges’ appearance and place in this space comes as a result of her lifelong struggle in the city. In other words, she comes to represent the result of racism and poverty. The way she is represented reflects how white people view her as an object, as something unnatural, dangerous, and at the same time sexual: “They stared amazed at her enormous size, at the blackness of her skin. They glanced at each other, tried in vain to control their faces or didn’t bother to try at all, simply let her see what a monstrosity they thought she was” (Henderson 860). We get to know that Mrs. Hedges runs a brothel, using young girls’ vulnerability and bodies to make money, and that she has

eventually a plan of recruiting Lutie as well into this space. With Mrs. Hedges, Petry demonstrates environment's effect on the body; how by being a woman of colour in 1940s Harlem you are condemned to poverty and desperation, and to a life of few opportunities. This may even force women to resort to prostitution. Mrs. Hedges is not only a woman of colour and poor, but she is also full of scars, deep scars all over her body, and is therefore viewed by others as inhuman and ugly, leaving her no other option in this space than to engage in a dangerous and criminal environment. Mrs. Hedges thus sits in the window in order to survey the terrain for new vulnerable women in which she can recruit to her business. Henderson argues how Mrs. Hedges compensates for her scars and previous life in the city with developing "...another source of income, built on the bodies of others – a brothel house that took its customers from a space she knew well, the street" (Henderson 862). Before the fire, Mrs. Hedges too was someone like Lutie and Min, and therefore she knows the street and city space, however, when she starts to run a brothel, earning money on young women's bodies her space and thus visibility changes. Henderson explains how the young women she recruits as prostitutes may function as a comfort for Mrs. Hedges loss, as she "...is able to revision her own scarred body through her associating with young, disenchanted women who blossom under the auspices of her care" (Henderson 862). Because of Mrs. Hedges' scars and thereof her lack of femininity, she obtains a tough appearance which makes her able to gain more power in the street than Min and Lutie. Because of the fire accident, Mrs. Hedge's body is full of scars, and therefore she is no longer desirable in the same way as with the other two characters. To put it differently, the difference between Mrs. Hedges and Lutie and Min lies in the body. Mrs. Hedges is not only a woman of colour, but she is a woman of colour full of big and ugly scars which then reinforces the racist prejudices considerably, and no one wants to or dares to have anything to do with her. No one, except Junto, the man whom she shares her business with.

Women of colour in *The Street* all have their stories and scars from living in a racist society and culture, where one's body and gender set the standard for their value and right to space. In the novel, we see how space represents social hierarchies and class divisions, and how this also becomes visible in geography and nature, resembling McKittrick's argument on how "...geography holds in it the possibility to speak for itself" (McKittrick ix). This is illustrated several places in the novel, and perhaps most noticeably when Lutie travels to the countryside to work as a maid for the wealthy Chandler family. This part represents the most defining period for Lutie as a character, as it is here her whole identity along with her work ethics are being questioned and formed. In his work, Scott argues how Lutie, when being in this space and working for the Chandler family, begins to map her surroundings as a means of understanding the difference between herself and white people: "...in this particular context, she is mapping a certain lifestyle that she associates with the distinction of whiteness" (Scott 94). Lutie's mapping of the environment and her observation of the changing structures in the physical environment illustrate what this space does to her in terms of creating awareness of the very present racial segregation. More importantly, Lutie realizes how racism and oppression manifest in physical spaces. While she is on the train, Lutie looks out of the window and starts to compare these surroundings to the surroundings in the city: "There was low, marshy land on each side of the train tracks. Where the land was like that, there were very few houses. She noticed that near the cities the houses were small and mean-looking, for they were built close to the railroad tracks. In Bridgeport the houses were blackened with soot and smoke from the factories" (Petry 35). This description so poignantly illustrates how racism, class differences and poverty go hand in hand and how this is visible in geography, in where and how people live their lives. The space in the city represents the opposite of what meets Lutie in the countryside, where everything at first glance seems to be in perfect order, and there is this sense of proudness in the landscape, as opposed to the feel of the city. Lutie's



description when looking out of the window as she observes the city connects with Thacker's "geographical emotions" and the belief that different spaces create different emotions in various subjects (Thacker 7). The city environment clearly affects Lutie both emotionally and psychologically, as everything that she sees from the train is portrayed and viewed in a negative light, from her own subjective point of view, causing feelings of dread, hate and terror in Lutie. Some of the vivid descriptions are even synonymous with evilness and disease, such as the representation of houses that are "...mean-looking...", and covered in soot, - which is known to be harmful to health. In this passage, the inequalities presented in the physical environment become representative of the gender and racial divide in Harlem. The use of personification emphasizes this, along with Lutie's own emotions when describing the space of the city. However, these emotions change when Lutie arrives in the rural environment, in a completely different space and environment, and there is suddenly this sense of calmness and beauty. When Lutie arrives at her destination, she is stunned by the beauty she sees, emphasizing what this space does to her, emotionally and psychologically:

...Lutie stared at it, catching her lip between her teeth; it wasn't that it was so big; there were houses in certain parts of Jamaica that were just as big as this one, but there weren't any so beautiful. She never quite got over that first glimpse of the outside of the house - so gracious with such long low lines, its white paint almost sparkling in the sun and the river very blue behind the house (Petry 37)

The countryside space evokes soothing emotions and sensations in Lutie, reflecting Thacker's "affective responses", as Lutie, only through her observing the physical environment experiences feelings of amazement and awe. Moreover, if we apply McKittrick's argument on surroundings' speakability to our reading, we see how the countryside speaks for itself, its beauty and spaciousness representing the complete opposite than what is the case in the city. The surroundings in the countryside evoke feelings of happiness and gives associations of

being close to nature. The bright colours symbolize clarity, prosperity, and the river symbolizing life itself. We as readers do not need this conveyed or illustrated by Lutie herself, because her surroundings alone manage to demonstrate this. However, despite all the beauty Lutie encounters in the countryside, she nevertheless realizes that this space does something to her and changes her in some way, already apparent in her first interaction with Mrs. Chandler: “Would you like to sort of go through the inside of the house before I show you your room?” Mrs. Chandler asked. “Yes ma’am”, Lutie said quietly. And wondered how she had been able to say “yes, ma’am so neatly and so patly” (Petty 37). In this passage, Petty illustrates space’s power on the subject and shows how different spaces shape and affect subjects differently, both consciously and unconsciously. Moreover, Lutie’s sudden change in behaviour when meeting the Chandlers represent a type of assimilation which resembles Fanon’s work on racism and violence. In his work, Fanon points to the belief and idea that the native must adopt to the settler’s imagination and culture, in order to be accepted and assimilated, something in which happens immediately after Lutie enters the Chandler’s space: “In order to assimilate and to experience the oppressor’s culture, the native has had to leave certain of his intellectual possessions in pawn. These pledges include his adoption of the forms of thought of the colonist bourgeoisie” (Fanon 38). Lutie’s unexpected response demonstrates how she, when being in this space, immediately becomes the submissive part, as she takes on a demeanour that fits into this environment and thus immediately finds her place in this hierarchy, unconsciously and consciously. In other words, the environment conveys the social structures in this specific household and affects Lutie’s own way of being. During her stay, Lutie increasingly becomes aware of the social hierarchy and her place and value in this space. Despite all the immediate beauty in the countryside setting, Lutie is treated badly, objectified, and made suspicious of due to the colour of her skin. Despite the beautiful nature

and landscape Lutie encounters when first visiting the countryside, she soon realizes that the space in the Chandler family`s home incorporates racist notions and beliefs.

When being in this space, Lutie becomes invisible and is ultimately viewed as a sexually vile object, a curiosity, someone who needs to be tamed and watched out for. McKittrick explains in her chapter on black women`s geographies, how the transatlantic slavery continues to exist through the categorization of black women, and this is significant to consider in the analysis of the portrayal of Lutie : “The classification of black femininity was therefore also a process of placing her within the broader system of servitude – as an inhuman racial-sexual worker, as an objectified body, as a site through which sex, violence, and reproduction can be imagined and enacted, and as a captive human” (McKittrick xvii). Applying McKittrick`s theory to this space, Lutie becomes the captive human; The objectification and prejudice towards Lutie continue while staying with the Chandler family, demonstrating how racism permeates social structures and hierarchies, and she realizes that in this space she has no human value.

Whenever she entered a room where they were, they stared at her with a queer, speculative look. Sometimes she caught snitches of their conversation about her. `Sure, she`s a wonderful cook. But I wouldn`t have any good-looking colored wench in my house. Not with John. You know how they`re always making passes at men. Especially white men (Petry 41)

In his work, Scott argues how in this space, “...Lutie`s sexuality is defined as not only predictable but predictably unpredictable – uncontrollable, wild, or uncontainable – when she is in the presence of white men” (Scott 98). In other words, when Lutie is in the presence of white men she is immediately regarded with suspicion and as a threat to the white social structures working in this household, and the white women are on their guard, following her movements carefully. Lutie`s life changing realization comes after this passage, where she

becomes aware of her place in this space: “It was, she discovered slowly, a very strange world that she had entered” (Petry 41). The word “coloured wench” reveals their racist prejudice towards Lutie, viewing her only as a sexual object. It does not matter how well she performs her job, as she first and foremost is a woman of colour. It is here, in this space, that Lutie changes as a character, becoming aware of what she is up against. After this passage the beauty of the countryside space fades, correspondingly and almost simultaneously with Lutie realizing her invisibility and worthlessness in this space, which causes her feelings of confusion, regret, alienation, and terror. Moreover, Lutie’s first fascination with the Chandler family’s wealth and status also changes, as she becomes increasingly aware of their nature and differences in terms of values. The little boy Lutie attends to is, more or less, completely ignored by his parents, who are first and foremost concerned with their money, status and their white privilege. This is illustrated in the several quarrels Lutie witnesses during her stay, along with the ways spaces are narrated according to where they are geographically located. Whenever Mrs. Chandler and Lutie are in the presence of other white people the racial divide becomes clear as the dynamic between them changes, becoming visible through the way the sound of Mrs.Chandler’s voice changes. As soon as Lutie and Mrs.Chandler are in public spaces Lutie is treated as a servant and an object of ownership: “There was a firm dismissal in her voice so that the other passengers pouring off the train turned to watch the rich young woman and her colored maid” (Petry 51). This image resembles Fanon’s work on the native, as Lutie instantly becomes the obedient object of ownership when she is together with Mrs. Chandler, reinforcing Lutie’s position in this hierarchy. This too emphasizes, as McKittrick illustrates in her work, how spaces can produce and reinforce racial and social structures in society, seeing that the racist structures increase when they are together in public spaces. The Chandler family’s space and values reflect their behaviour and thought in such a way that even the most terrible events that take place are left undisturbed; when Mr.Chandler’s brother

commits suicide, the Chandler family's first and foremost concern is how to hide this from the public, viewing the event with shame and as a potential threat for their reputation and status in the white community. The tragedy results in a silence in the household and in both parents becoming even more absent from their son, accompanied by a considerably increased alcohol consumption:

Mr.Chandler poured drink after drink of straight whiskey and then, impatiently shoving the small glass aside, raised the bottle to his lips letting its contents literally run down his throat. Lutie watched him, wondering why none of them said a word about it's being a shame; thinking they acted worse and sounded worse than any people she had seen before (Petry 48).

In this section, Mr.Chandler's way of moving and the sounds he makes with the glass sets the tone of the room, and it becomes clear that he is the one who controls this space, reflecting both Thacker and McKittrick's work on representational space and its ability to speak (Thacker 8). The Chandler family's solution of displacing the event, regarding it with shame, reveals their own prejudice and inability to acknowledge and understand the reality along with subjects that fall outside their ideas of normalcy, as everything is coloured by their white, superior perspective. Mr. Chandler is obviously affected by the suicide, but he refuses to talk about it, yet his reaction becomes visible in the environment that is portrayed, through his ways of drinking and his silence. In other words, Mr. Chandler's reaction becomes visible in the physical environment, through his body and what is not said. This part of the novel demonstrates how the illusion of, or experience of space is always subjective and how space is intertwined with social structures and meaning. In this part of the novel, Petry manages to represent social hierarchies and contrast that are all tied to ideas of race and racial segregation; In the beautiful and spacious countryside setting, white wealthy people live together with their perfect families and their servants, whereas in the city, in the ghetto,

people of colour continue to live on top of each other in cramped and dark apartments covered in smoke and soot. The contradictions are immense and demonstrate so poignantly racism's connection to poverty and class oppression, and the novel thus illustrates how a space is never just a space, but rather a representation of ideas of a nation, and the different features present, representing the social structures working in a society. In the novel, the description of spaces corresponds to Thacker's work in that they come to affect people differently depending on factors such as race and gender, showing space's power to influence subjects "...bodily or non-semantically..." and how this is then transferred into a subject's feelings and/or sensations. (Thacker 10). The description and feel of the countryside setting is a good example of this as this completely changes as soon as Lutie is confronted with whiteness and the latter reminding her of her place in this space.

Lutie experiences feelings of confusion as well as jealousy while staying with the Chandlers, particularly because the little boy she attends to has seemingly everything he needs, as opposed to her own son who she has left in order to be a maid in the Chandler household. Lutie is thus clearly envious of some of the wealth, however, after having stayed there for months she realizes that this space is worse than the poverty she experiences at home, and the ill-treatment she is exposed to completely changes her views on white people, along with their ideas: "Some of her madams had been openly contemptuous women who laughed at her to her face even as they piled on more work; acting as though she were a deaf, dumb, blind thing completely devoid of understanding, but able to work, work, work" (Petty 126-127). Lutie realizes that in this space she is only a maid who takes care of someone else's child, and her realization makes her bitter as she becomes aware of her place in this environment. Lutie's realization leads to a growing hate towards white people at the same time as she still aspires to the American Dream and so desperately wants to achieve independence. In her work, Winter illustrates how Lutie's realization when living with the

Chandler`s contributes to a worsening of her situation as she is confronted with the reality of the American Dream, its values and exclusiveness, and she starts to realize, slowly but surely, that she, being a woman of colour, will never achieve self-determination: “Lutie is certainly trapped by her race, gender, and class, and a change in environment is crucial to her survival, but changing her environment would not, by itself enable her to escape oppression” (Winter 109). As a result of Lutie`s experience with whiteness, Lutie becomes increasingly aware of her situation and how black subjects, particularly women, are treated and condemned to constantly having to work for their visibility and prove their right to space in the American society. The novel thus manages to question “...the value of the patriarchal, materialistic, and individualistic `American Dream` that Lutie unswervingly pursues” (Winter 4).

Petry depicts the patriarchy, and how racism permeates Harlem and all its spaces, and how it has the power to distort one`s identity and world view, causing alienation and resignation. The latter can be traced through people of colour`s invisibility and worthlessness in the city, as seen through Min`s melting into the chair in Super`s apartment, and through the overall sense of hopelessness which increases towards the end of the novel. This demonstrates an overall individual and collective resignation and becomes apparent through the several confrontations with whiteness. The novel thus demonstrates narrative`s power on the subject and what implications “these stories” have, both individually and collectively. The hopelessness becomes visible in the different characters` reaction patterns and way of relating to and accepting the different injustices and violences in the city. In the novel, Petry illustrates this by showing a form of collective resignation in the different women of colour that Lutie meets, women who have lost their voice in their fight for independence. This is highlighted when a young man dies out in the street as a result of poverty and his attempt of stealing a loaf of bread. What is interesting with this description is how, despite the character`s silence, the space manages on its own to communicate the racial segregation that has become

hereditary. In the descriptions of the city street surroundings, the boy's poor appearance and his grey broken shoes, illustrate the link between as well as cost of poverty and racism:

The people standing in back of her weren't moving. They weren't talking. They were simply standing there looking. She watched a cop touch one of the man's broken, grayish shoes with his foot. And she got a sick feeling because the cop's shoes were glossy with polish and the warm spring sunlight glinted on them (Petty 197).

The contradictions used in this passage, such as the description of shoes, help reinforce the social class differences in the city and the clear differences between the injured and the police officer, in terms of human value. The way the police officer touches the man's shoe is disturbing, and testifies to a racist approach and view, illustrating an imbalance of power in terms of human value. The dead man, being a man of colour, is immediately viewed as less significant, not even worthy a touch from the police officer's hands. The young man's sister is there, and as she realizes that it is her brother who is dead, Lutie is disturbed by the girl's lack of action:

Lutie didn't look at the man's face. Instead, she looked at the girl and she saw something – some emotion that she couldn't name – flicker in the girl's face. It was as though for a fraction of a second something – hate or sorrow or surprise – had moved inside her and been reflected on her face. As quickly as it came, it was gone and it was replaced by a look of resignation ... 'I always thought it'd happen', she said in a flat voice (Petty 197)

Lutie experiences this situation as both confusing and shocking, and she cannot herself understand how the girl can seem so unaffected: "Why doesn't she scream? Lutie had thought angrily. Why does she stand there looking like that? Why doesn't she find out how it happened and yell her head off and hit out at people?" (Petty 198). The violence presented in



this passage resembles Mbembe`s work on “pro-slavery democracies”: “...the obsessive fear of pro-slavery democracies does not merely concern how to keep these slaves carefully out of the way. It is above all about knowing how to toss them out, by getting them to leave the country willingly or, when need be, by deporting them en masse” (Mbembe 18). Mbembe`s work on slavery and racism becomes increasingly relevant to consider in the reading of *The Street*, because of the recurring patterns of violence people of colour experience in the novel. There is no safety net or justice for poor people of colour, and the sister`s way of not reacting in this passage and the fact that she expected this to happen not only demonstrate the severity and duration of the racial oppression, but also how she has become accustomed to the repeated abuse of power and violence. Racism and violence have, in other words, become part of her everyday life. The dead man`s sister knows that if she rebels against the policeman, as Lutie requests, she will be next. The event is interesting to look at in the context of Fanon`s work: “All that the native has seen in his country is that they can freely arrest him, beat him, starve him: and no professor of ethics, no priest has ever come to be beaten in his place, nor to share their bread with him” (Fanon 34). To put it differently, people of colour have no value or rights in this society. They are unwanted and disregarded as human beings, and they know this themselves. Fanon`s work is helpful in the reading of the ending of the novel, specifically in terms of understanding the racial structures at play. The sister`s lack of action and resignation comes as a result of the violence and genocide having become part of everyday life for people of colour living in Harlem.

Narratives become destructive in *The Street*, not only collectively but also through individuals` own awareness of their place and worth in society, creating an otherness which has severe consequences for the subject. The narrative illustrates, as McKittrick argues, how ideologies on race and nation affect groups differently and how this manifests in ideas of superiority, becoming visible in spaces and maps, through bodies and sexual desire, and how

this function in terms of silencing women of colour, degrading them into objects of ownership and of sexual satisfaction. The novel demonstrates the consequences of racism, how it becomes ingrained and institutionalized in such a way that if you are a man or woman of colour, you are literally refused to participate in society on all levels. The novel shows how racism is visible in spaces, through "...the seeable and unseeable, the geographic and the seemingly ungeographic..." (Sharpe). In the novel, women of colour become the ungeographic subjects, as they are represented as a different species; their voices are not heard, only sometimes we know their names, and they are regarded by society to be somewhat insignificant, less important, less valuable, less beautiful, always viewed with suspicion and disbelief. In *The Street*, women of colour are regarded as objects of ownership, viewed with disgust and aversion, and this is reinforced through the very physical spaces that they inhabit, as they are forced to accept living in dark and dangerous spaces in the city. The novel thus demonstrates the connection between subject and space, and how physical spaces as in geographical areas represent social structures in society, echoing both Thacker and McKittrick`s work on space and blackness.

Petry illustrates the challenge of breaking out of the pattern; the hereditariness of racism and the difficulty of building one`s own life in such a society, where fundamental ideas on whiteness, superiority and power have existed and prevailed for centuries. The novel`s ending, Lutie having to escape in order to break free from the system that systematically tries to dehumanize her, illustrates the hopelessness and desperation of her and other women of colour`s situation. In this section of the novel, Lutie has just been informed that her son has been taken care of by local authorities due to his stealing, something in which Super has organized in order to get rid of him. Lutie panics and contacts her former friend and suitor Boots to ask for legal guidance and help, and during their meeting, Boots locks the doors and tries to rape her, something in which he has been planning to do for a very long

time. Lutie is again captured by a man who sees sexual potential in her body, something in which Lutie refuses to accept. Lutie kills Boots and soon after realizes that no one in a potential courtroom will believe her story, and this leads her to immediately leaving Harlem and her son. Lutie knows that she will never be taken seriously by a court, given the fact that she is a woman of colour, her experience in the city enables her to see the outcome of the event, knowing that she will be imprisoned and that her life, her independence and what she hoped to achieve in life is lost.

Women of colour are generally portrayed in a negative light in *The Street*. They are not only excluded institutionally and socially, but are looked upon as being less intelligent, cunning, sexually wild, and uncontrollable. In other words, someone one should watch out for. McKittrick's work on violence and the transatlantic slavery represents much of how women of colour are viewed and treated in the novel: "Ownership of black women during transatlantic slavery was a spatialized, gendered, often public, violence; the black female body was viewed as a naturally submissive, sexually available, public, reproductive technology" (McKittrick 44). In the novel, racism operates on so many levels in such a way that it is impossible to escape it.

Racism is the norm of 1940s Harlem; it lives in the city and is expressed by the cityscape, through dangerous oppressive spaces and legislation. This shape all the subjects in these surroundings, resulting in feelings of terror, resignation, and affect. As McKittrick so poignantly argues: "Once the racial-sexual body is territorialized, it is marked as decipherable and knowable – as subordinate, inhuman, rape-able, deviant, procreative, placeless..." (McKittrick 45). The subordinateness is illustrated in public spaces and in Lutie's working space, but also in her private space as she is violated in her own home and forced to accept to live right next to a landlord who sexually harasses her, objectifying her, imagining having her as his, as an object, due to her gender and race: "Seeing her there in his apartment with one of

her long legs thrust forward – a bare, brown leg with red stuff on the toenails. And he would shake out the long stocking and pull it slowly over her foot” (Petry 98). The objectification and sexualization of women`s bodies in *The Street* illustrate the horror of being a woman of colour in 1940s Harlem, and the novel illustrates how this affects the descendants of African American women, along with their hopes and futures in the American society. The ending is very tragic but nevertheless important as this again illustrates the hereditariness of slavery; how racism and social inequality manifest in society, in social structures and spaces, becoming a repetitive pattern in the lives of women of colour, like Lutie.

## Chapter 2: Gender, Body, and Homophobia, in *Giovanni's Room* (1956)

“Then my father was at his best, boyish and expansive, moving about through the crowded room with a glass in his hand, refilling people's drinks, laughing a lot, handling all the men as though they were his brothers, and flirting with the women” (Baldwin 11).

Masculinity, gender, body, and sexual desire are central features in James Baldwin's novel, *Giovanni's Room* (1956). As the quote suggests, the novel engages with stereotypes of gender and race, through the eyes of the character and young, white male, David. Taking place for the most in the city of Paris, *Giovanni's Room* (1956), revolves around a young man's struggle and desire to belong. The fact that Baldwin wanted the novel's setting to take place mostly in Paris is no coincidence, as Baldwin himself moved to Paris in 1948 in order to escape the racism in the south “...Paris lacked the spatial segregation of the Jim Crow Laws that operated in the southern states...” (Thacker 59). In other words, the novel's engagement with space and otherness echoes Baldwin's own experience and life, being both a homosexual and a man of colour, living in a white heteronormative US.

Abur-Rahman argues in her article “`Simply a Menaced Boy`” how the novel “... borrows its focus from Baldwin's life” (Abur-Rahman 477), and she explains how Baldwin wanted to demonstrate the destructiveness of nationalism or the so-called ideas of a nation, and that his “...life project was to locate, or if necessary to forge, a place for the black, the impoverished, the artist, the gay – the oppressed and weary “outsider” – in his own country” (Abur-Rahman 477). In *Giovanni's Room*, the “outsider” is the protagonist David, a homosexual white American man.

This chapter will explore and close read the various spaces we are presented to in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*. More specifically, I look at how gender, body, and desire, function in predetermining a subject's right to space. I will look at how cultural

conceptions on race and gender operate in the novel and through spaces, and how the representation of homosexuality resembles the way people of colour have been portrayed for centuries. Thacker and McKittrick`s work on geography and affect will be thoroughly used in the analysis, along with Frantz Fanon, Achille Mbembe and Joseph Armengol`s work on race and otherness. Njelle Hamilton, Abur-Rahman, Stephen Vallochi and others will provide a historical basis for the novel`s portrayal of gender stereotypes and homosexual desire. Other relevant sources will also be included.

In *Giovanni`s Room*, Baldwin manages to question cultural notions about gender and sexuality, illustrating how these are nothing more than conceptions that are culturally and socially produced, changing accordingly as society progresses. More importantly, Baldwin does this while also demonstrating the connection between these ideas and other concepts of race and nation. All the way from the beginning of the novel, it becomes clear that David is obsessed with appearance and whether he incorporates enough masculine features. David`s idealization and glorification of his father`s attributes are what becomes destructive to him, as he cannot identify with these properties himself, given the fact that he is sexually attracted to men. The novel engages with racist stereotypes and blackness through its focus on deviant sexuality and desire, together with the implication this has for the David`s opportunities to belong in and identify with the American society.

“What does it mean to have no home in the world”, Eyo Ewara asks, in the introduction to his 2023 article “For Estrangement: Queerness, Blackness, and Unintelligibility” (Ewara 1). In his work, Ewara explains how queer people and others who do not “fit in” with the established cultural conceptions and heteronormative norms of sexuality and gender are looked down upon and "othered" in society. This, Ewara argues, is also the case when it comes to people of colour, explaining how both "...have often appeared as threats to visions of the home, the family, and the social order that shapes and is conveyed through

them" (Ewara 3). When applying queer theory to the analysis of the novel, the nature of the cultural conceptions of gender and race become visible, illustrating how these concepts are based on a uniform structure, representing, and elevating only one group in society, and thus excluding others that fall outside of this form of cultural normalcy. In the work *On Literature*, J. Miller argues how all literary works represent or echo certain cultural values and ideologies: "These are seen as modes of vision, judgement, and action presented as objectively true but actually ideological" (Miller 123). The novel problematizes ideologies' effect on subjects and groups in society, and demonstrates how this affects the character David, showing how cultural conceptions on gender and race function in creating a division between subjects that are based on false representations and ideas. David is very self-aware and strives to fit into his own distinct image of what he believes constitutes the white American man. This becomes evident all the way from the beginning of the novel, through David's descriptions of his surroundings and environment along with the different events that takes place.

David's own expectations and ideas connected to gender and desire stems from having grown up in a space and home where white, heteronormative expectations on gender (and race) have dominated. The setting of the novel is important, as it represents a time and period where homosexuality was viewed with shame, echoing David's own feelings of shame and inadequacy. This is debated in William Spurlin's work "Queer identity and racial alienation":

During the 1960s and 1970s homosexuality was being investigated and looked upon as a form of disease in the US. Scientists at the time claimed that homosexuality was a result of having had an unhealthy upbringing, that it was linked to a form of depression, or that it was connected to a poor relationship with their parents, particularly their close-binding mothers (Spurlin 224)

Here Spurlin argues how these cultural notions on homosexuality are important to keep in mind when analysing the novel, let alone that Baldwin himself was not only an African American writer, but also a homosexual who strived to raise his voice for the marginalized groups in society. Because of his race and sexual orientation, Baldwin`s work was rejected by the public, as the novels were accused of normalizing deviant sexual behaviour. In his work, Spurlin points to how Baldwin`s novels, precisely because of its focus on same-sex sexuality, were received by the public, and how this illustrates how homosexuality was viewed and frowned upon in society: “Baldwin`s treatment of homosexuality, and his construction of subjectivity and identity politics along intersecting and mutually inflecting axes of difference, led to intense criticism and censure later in the decade...” (Spurlin 226). Spurlin`s work help to reinforce the connection between gender, sex, and race, and shows how the novel`s engagement with gender prejudices and the categorizing of gender resemble the ideas connected to white supremacy and ideas of superiority: “...makes use of classificatory systems that are reminiscent of colonial relations of rule, here strains of `evidence` are conveniently and idiosyncratically borrowed from science” (Spurlin 230). In other words, the novel`s engagement with these issues becomes apparent through subjects` ways of preferring and projecting certain qualities that are synonymous with whiteness and heteronormativity. This is visible through the way David constantly evaluates himself and his masculinity, along with the various areas in which David finds himself. David is governed by these ideas, and they have shaped his entire existence, and come to light through the way he reflects and justifies his own actions and values, let alone his sexual desires. David`s description of his childhood accentuates this and echoes McKittrick`s argument on how space and geography shape subjects: “We, in the days when I was growing up, were my father and his unmarried sister and myself” (Baldwin 9). The “unmarried sister” is interesting to consider as this early representation reveals some of David`s way of thinking and categorizing when it comes to



gender, and it represents an underlying view on women along with their place in terms of value and status in domestic spaces.

David`s form of dividing subjects into categories based on their gender and assigning them specific expectations and qualities is, according to Valocchi, a social construction, and he illustrates in his work, how this construction and categorization of gender is based on heteronormative values and ideas, and how these have become a way of assessing and evaluating subjects, ultimately creating prejudice and an imbalance of power: “By taking these categories as givens or as reified, we do not fully consider the ways that inequalities are constructed by the categories in the first place” (Valocchi 752). Valocchi explains in his work, how the cultural representation and common terminologies on homosexuality have changed vastly compared to the 1950s and 1960s, where homosexuality was ranged as pollutive to society and viewed as a “...state-driven social repression” (Valocchi 759). These views and concepts are nevertheless highly relevant to the reading of *Giovanni`s Room*, particularly in terms of the way different spaces are narrated and experienced by the different subjects. Despite the major cultural shift and change in views and attitudes towards sexuality in 1980s US, in terms of accepting and normalizing the existence of more than one sexual orientation, Valocchi demonstrates, by looking at Hollywood films, how the representation of homosexuality still is portrayed and defined in heteronormative ways, revealing how homosexuality is still subject to cultural norms and expectations: “...gays and lesbians are made visible and included as citizens as long as `we are gender conventional, as long as we link sex to love and marriage-like relationship, as long as we defend family values...and display national pride (Valocchi 760). This coincides with the novel`s appliance of gender roles, along with the values presented, such as David`s strong desire for adapting to the cultural expectations when it comes to marriage and having children: “...I wanted children. I wanted to be inside again, with the light and safety, with my manhood unquestioned,

watching my woman put my children to bed” (Baldwin 93). When applying Valocchi’s work to the reading of the novel, David’s aspirations and prejudices come to represent a certain collective imagination of the 1950s and 1960s. David is expected by his father to hold and create a certain life for himself when it comes to choosing a partner as well as when it comes to inhabiting the right types of family values, such as getting married and having children, as these are merits that are culturally viewed with and connected to masculine, as well as healthy, “good” traits.

The novel engages with gender stereotypes and aspirations connected to race and nation, through the white protagonist David and the different spaces presented; David desperately wants to live up to what he believes is the right or correct way of living as a white American man, and these ideas affect everything in his life, from the way he moves his body and the desires he has, to where he physically is and with whom. David carries these ideas and values so strongly in his personality and sense of self, which makes differences to these seem strange and alienating to him. Nevertheless, when David travels to Paris he meets Giovanni, an Italian man who becomes his lover and who causes both feelings of sensation and fear in David. David is again confronted with his hidden desires and shame through his meeting with Giovanni but continues to see him despite his refusal of not openly nor publicly accepting their relationship. David’s love for Giovanni is sincere, but it still does not exceed his clear ambitions and expectations of who he wants to be. In other words, David’s concepts and ideas of race and desire prevents him from being able to form a genuine relationship with Giovanni or any other men.

David is first introduced as he observes his own reflection in the windowpane. The mood is very dark and tense: “My reflection is tall, perhaps rather like an arrow, my blond hair gleams. My face is like a face you have seen many times. My ancestors conquered a continent, pushing across death laden plains, until they came to an ocean which faced away

from Europe into a darker past” (Baldwin 3). The quote is significant, as this representation functions as a metaphor for David’s own self-image, and there is this overall sense of resentment towards himself and his race. The allusion to slavery, such as the “...My ancestors conquered a continent...” is obvious and interesting to consider, as Baldwin himself was an African American writer who spent most of his life fighting for the rights of black people, in what was a race and gender segregated US. However, the question of race is merely mentioned by David himself. These ideas and questions are raised through the descriptions of the various spaces, where some incorporate features that are reminiscent of how people of colour have been portrayed throughout history. In addition to this, the novel describes groups and subjects that fall outside society’s definition of normalcy in terms of their gender, sex, and race. The character David is white and has a white protestant background, yet he does not experience a sense of belonging in society due to his hidden homosexual desires, as they do not match the white heteronormative standard. In his work on queerness, gender, and society, Valocchi explains how a person’s sense of self, subjects, or one group’s identity is formed through cultural ideas and expectations, and “...the repeated performance of cultural signs and conventions” (Valocchi 756). This illustrates how subjects’ identities do not arise by itself, but how they are a concept that is created and founded on several cultural ideas connected to normalcy and heteronormativity, affecting every aspect and groups in society. Therefore, Valocchi shows, when studying works that problematize identity, one needs to address several aspects surrounding the subject: “...a queer analysis goes beyond the study of homosexuality to bring its conceptual and theoretical apparatus to the study of heterosexuality and heterosexuality’s relationship to gender and other axes of social difference such as class, ethnicity, and race” (Valocchi 762). The novel examines and shows how these structures are interconnected, and how the heteronormative standard and views on gender, sex, and race function in creating prejudice and feelings of otherness in the American society.

In the opening of the novel, the mood and descriptions are dark, and there are a lot of emphasis on time and continuity, along with this notion and belief that some things never change: “The train will be the same, the people, struggling for comfort and, even, dignity on the straight-backed wooden, third-class seats will be the same, and I will be the same” (Baldwin 3). The opening and its clear allusions to class, race, and nation, together with the emphasis on time and repetition, remind me of Sharpe’s work on blackness and representation. In her work, Sharpe discusses how by being Black you are going to have to face a much more difficult life than if you were white. She explains this by looking at racism today and the social stigma and poverty which follow, explaining how these have a hereditary effect and become a pattern which limits subjects in terms of space, visibility, and rights; starting with slavery – and being upheld by society’s normative conceptions and beliefs regarding race and nation. Applying Sharpe’s work on blackness to the reading of *Giovanni’s Room* enhances the understanding of how race and gender stereotypes operate in the novel, and how they can manifest themselves in geography, in public spaces as well as intimate ones. Despite the question of race being merely mentioned by David, the description of spaces and categorization of gender and values testify to a similar hierarchy. Moreover, Sharpe’s work increases the understanding of the novel’s emphasis on time and continuity, which can be viewed as an image on how concepts on gender and race manifest and function in society in creating a subject’s sense of self. *Giovanni’s Room* represents several ideas and notions connected to race, gender, and nation; notions that are rendered/portrayed as “correct” i.e., good, and “incorrect”, along with the several connotations thereof. Furthermore, the novel illustrates how these ideas become hereditary, like a pattern which appears again and again, as part of an ingrained social structure. The novel thus demonstrates how subjects can become claimed by their gender and race, along with the ideologies thereof, and demonstrates how they are visible in spaces and geography.

At the beginning of the novel, David finds himself in a spacious house in the South of France, as he engages in a form of introspection, shifting frequently between his past and present self, as he looks back on the events that have led him to his resentment and regret:

I repent now – for all the good it does – one particular lie among the many lies I’ve told, told, lived, and believed. This is the lie which I told to Giovanni, but never succeeded in making him believe, that I had never slept with a boy before. I had. I had decided that I never would again. There is something fantastic in the spectacle I now present to myself of having run so far, so hard, across the ocean even, only to find myself brought up short once more before the bulldog in my own backyard – the yard, in the meantime, having grown smaller and the bulldog bigger (Baldwin 5).

This early part serves as a foreshadowing of what is to come, and it is in many ways revealing, as readers here get an insight into how the big lie about himself has operated and persecuted him all his life, and how it has led him to this darkness and loneliness. In this passage, Giovanni, his former lover, has been wrongfully imprisoned and has been sentenced to death, a sentence in which David realizes that he has been somewhat part of. The growing big bulldog demonstrates opposite qualities to David’s shame and regret, the dog representing a form of pride and resilience that David himself does not possess. From then on, the story is told through multiple flashbacks to his childhood and adolescence, and to the several events that took place when living in Paris with Giovanni. David, despite his white physical appearance represents the outsider in the story, as he is sexually attracted to subjects of the same sex; a desire which does not correspond to his white heteronormative beliefs and values. Homosexuality was not, at the time the novel was published, illegal in the United States, but was still, to the very highest degree looked down upon and treated as a disease, something spectacular and unnatural; sensations that David himself adopts and expresses when being in certain spaces and areas. David’s struggle in coming to terms with who he is, comes as a

direct result of his sexual desires not matching his own narrative and identity, and his experience of not truly being able to identify with what he views as his American values and aspirations. Put another way, David`s own sense of self, the fact that he believes his desires, body and personal characteristics are deviant and “wrong” is what becomes destructive to him.

In his work, Armengol argues, like Spurlin, how the novel engages with racism through the otherness David experiences, and how the gender prejudices resembles the prejudice people of colour are frequently exposed to: “...Even though David is not a black man, the problems he faces...are best defined in terms that would equally fit a black man” (Armengol 674). Moreover, Armengol argues that the novel also engages with racism through its focus on spaces and specific objects, demonstrating how these are connected to David`s repressed sexuality (Armengol 674). The novel`s use of windows and mirrors are some examples of this, as David often, in his self-examination and fear, looks at and evaluates himself in his reflection. The mirror functioning as David`s conscience, reminding him of the big lie and his utter shame for who he is: “There is a mirror in this room, a large mirror. I am terribly aware of the mirror” (Baldwin 148). At the time the novel was written, there was no space for people of colour or people who had a different sexual orientation than the majority (Robertson et al). Both were equally placeless in society, which coincides with David`s shame and fear when experiencing desires that do not match his manhood or masculine aspirations in terms of sexual lust and desire. Monica B. Pearl, in her work, “Chagrin d`amour: Intimacy, Shame, and the Closet in James Baldwin`s *Giovanni`s Room*”, argues how David`s views on gender along with his obsession with characteristics of gender represent a common concept of the 1950s: “It is not a peculiarity of Baldwin`s or of his protagonist to equate masculinity, or – in the parlance of the novel – manliness, with heterosexuality, and therefore femininity with homosexuality...This was a conception of the 1950s and one that persists – that

homosexuality is a failure of masculinity...” (Pearl 67). In other words, the novel’s engagement with gender stereotypes, through David’s obsession with categorizing subjects in terms of whether they incorporate the right feminine or masculine features resemble a view which has realist roots.

David constantly evaluates others based on these qualities and has a distinct and proud image of how a man and woman should be, all representing ideas and values connected to his white heritage. This applies to everything from the way a subject moves his/her body, talks, and walks, to physical appearance and values, and there is a clear link between his view on preferred physical attributes and his idea of home. There is a lot of emphasis on longing, particularly the longing for a home, for safety and meaning, reflecting, according to David Leeming’s biography, James Baldwin’s own personal experience and desires, being an African American writer in a white racist society: “The question of identity obsessed him. What was a homosexual, what was a Negro? Was it necessary to live by these “presumptuous labels?” (Leeming 53). Leeming’s biographical work enhances the understanding of the novel’s message and shows, as previously illustrated by Spurlin, how a lot of David’s struggles are directly traceable to Baldwin himself. David’s clear ideas on gender and desire have derived from living in a white racist society, a society in which evaluates others based on their race and appearance, where certain qualities and features are viewed more valuable than others. Giovanni is not only homosexual, but he is also not white, which contributes to the ill-treatment he experiences. In the novel, David, and Giovanni, even when being alone together, in their small intimate space, never get this sense of being safe:

We sometimes heard playing outside our window, sometimes strange shapes loomed against it. At such moments, Giovanni, working in the room, or lying in the bed, would stiffen like a hunting dog and remain perfectly silent until whatever seemed to threaten our safety had moved away (Baldwin 76).

This passage shows the extent of how all-consuming their shame and fear is, and how these feelings colour and affect David and Giovanni's emotions and space, even when they are indoors and alone together, where the slightest sound or sign from life outside their windows create an enormous fear of being exposed. More importantly, the passage and space described, resembles both Thacker and McKittrick's work on spaces, through the way both characters, in this section, become the space they inhabit, their emotions and fear changing the entire room and making even the slightest sounds seem dangerous. This is most explicitly illustrated through Giovanni's bodily reaction, the stiffening and change in his body as soon as they hear a sound from outside. This adds to their act of becoming "invisible", which testifies to their otherness and placelessness in society. The description of Giovanni is interesting to consider, as he comes to represent what McKittrick terms as the "landless black subject", someone who do not have a right to space due to their race and/or sexual desire (McKittrick 3). Moreover, the description of Giovanni's vigilance, his positioning in this section resembling "...a hunting dog...", along with the alertness described resemble Fanon and Mbembe's portrayal of the native: "...the Other is constantly on alert" (Mbembe 132). In this space, Giovanni, because of his non-white features, along with his sexual desire, ultimately becomes the other, and his experience in this space is vastly different compared to David's, as he incorporates and represent not only deviance in terms of desire, but also race.

David's way of describing spaces is always marked with his ideas of race, and he is constantly on the search for finding somewhere he feels that he belongs. His longing for home becomes apparent in his idealizing other white subjects whom he sees and believes to represent the correct/right characteristics and qualities: "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. He made me think of home – perhaps home is not a place but simply and irrevocable condition" (Baldwin 82). In this passage, David observes a sailor



whom he immediately admires solely because of the way he carries his masculinity and whiteness, and he starts to compare himself to him, and then to his father, and the quote thus illustrates how David's idea of home is, in fact, identical to these attributes, emphasizing ideologies' effect on subjects and spaces. The passage illustrates how subjects affect spaces, through the way David is influenced, emotionally and bodily, just by observing the characteristics of the sailor. The sailor triggers a memory of his father, whom he aspires to be like due to his masculine, American characteristics. Moreover, subjects who stand outside these categories are described by David as less good, less attractive, and less valuable.

Like Armengol, Salenius, in her article "Marginalized identities and Spaces: James Baldwin's Harlem, New York", argues how the novel's protagonist, despite the clear focus on gender and sexuality, resembles Baldwin's own life and engagement with race, nation, and affiliation: "Baldwin's nostalgia was for a nation he could call his own, not only for citizenship and roots, but also for a freedom he had never tasted... The black American had several, and yet no home in his cosmopolitan reality" (Salenius 889). The desire and human need to belong in a community are aspirations that permeate the novel, along with the human basic need of having a place, or home in society. David's sexual desires prevent him from finding his place in society, because they are regarded by himself and his white conservative background and heritage as fundamentally wrong, deviant, and dirty. Whenever David experiences the feelings that collide with his sense of self, he becomes scared and shameful, which results in him not trusting himself, oppressing and distancing himself from his own body: "I ached abruptly, intolerably, with a longing to go home; not to that hotel, in one of the alleys of Paris, where the concierge barred the way with my unpaid bill; but home, home across the ocean, to things I knew and understood..." (Baldwin 54). David's meeting with Giovanni, and the feelings that he experiences when being with him worsens his condition, as he cannot understand nor place his desires, viewing them only with shame: "I looked at

Giovanni's face, which did not help me. He belonged to this strange city, which did not belong to me. I began to see that, while what was happening to me was not so strange, so unprecedented, though voices deep within me boomed, For shame! For shame!..." (Baldwin 55). David's shame occurs because he genuinely feels that he is doing something fundamentally wrong and immoral by feeling the way he does towards Giovanni, and this is what becomes destructive to him and their relationship.

In the novel, the various characters incorporate different features that are all linked to their visibility in the cityscape, and there is no consistency in the way the characters experience the same environment, testifying to space's subjectivity. In the novel, spaces incorporate meaning depending on the subject, and this can manifest in the physical spaces, in terms of specific objects, as well as affecting characters differently psychologically and/or emotionally. According to Salenius, Baldwin does this to demonstrate the connection between space and subject, and to show how space is representative for "...the inner landscapes of the characters who are intricately linked to the space in which they act" (Salenius 46). In other words, the novel's portrayal of space can be experienced as hostile and dark, whereupon the same space can also be experienced as bright and pleasant, illustrating, and echoing Thacker's work on space's subjectivity (Thacker 7). Thacker's work is interesting to consider with Ewara's work on ideologies.

Ewara, in his work, explains how strongly American nationalist ideologies affect the experience of belonging in the society, and he illustrates how homosexuality has been seen as a threat to the, culturally speaking, white "good" heteronormative values: "...one of the reasons that people fear queer sexuality so violently has to do with the fact that it threatens an ideology in America that is older and stronger even than baseball or apple pie – it threatens the idea of 'home'" (Ewara 3). Ewara speaks of virtues and ideas that correspond with David's white heritage, a "reproductive home", a home in which there is a mother and a father

i.e., the nuclear family, and as the quote illustrates, these ideas of home are produced by and connected to the values and ideas of the American nation. This is exactly how David understands and treats his sexual desires, viewing them as unnatural and dangerous to him and to his place and future in society. David's desires cause a distance in him which triggers a fear and distrust in his own body and emotions, and he constantly tries to avoid certain spaces that reinforce or confirm to him his true nature. The novel thus illustrates how a subject's body and gender predetermine one's right to space and place in the American society, and more specifically how this affect subjects on a psychological level. The novel shows how different spaces, as in objects and/or geographical locations can represent and uphold different ideas, beliefs and emotions in subjects, corresponding with Thacker's theory on affective responses: "...a concern with the spatiality and temporality of emotions, with the way they coalesce around and within certain places and state that they understand emotions `in terms of its socio-spatial mediation and articulation rather than as an interiorised mental state" (Thacker 7). Thacker's work shows that a space is never just a space, but rather an image of an imagined reality, subjective, and, in a sense changeable, depending on various factors surrounding the experiencing subject. The novel's emphasis on spaces shows this and manages to demonstrate Thacker's argument on how space forms subjects and vice versa; both equally dependent on each other. This is relevant to consider in the analysis of David's childhood and home environment.

David's upbringing is characterized by psychological neglect and absent parents, as he loses his mother at five, and is left with unresolved trauma and what seems like a severely depressed father, who "shuts off" for years and disappears into his own depressed mind. The description of his childhood and the surroundings themselves bear witness to the consequences of losing a loved one, and there is a silence and sense of lethargy that affect everyone in the household. This is maintained by the appearance and mood of David's father,

his silence and emotional state corresponding with this environment. In this section, space is described with a sense of disorderliness, reinforced through David's father's "sleeveless sweater", loosened tie, as well as the appearance of specific objects. In David's childhood home, there is one specific object that causes a disturbance in this space, which is the photograph of David's mother in the living room: "...my mother's photograph, which stood all by itself on the mantelpiece, seemed to rule the room. It was as though her photograph proved how her spirit dominated that air and controlled us all" (Baldwin 10). The photograph's effect on this space is interesting, as the picture itself communicates meaning and creates an illusion in David, namely that of his mother's presence. The descriptions of the photograph; the blond hair and the gentle, feminine yet firm features cause feelings of shame and insecurity in David, and the living room space is coloured and marked by her image and presence. The photograph's effect on David's emotions and mood are immense, representing Thacker's argument on how certain objects can affect subjects individually, as David feels controlled and haunted by this picture, as if it were a ghost, and this creates confusion and tension in David as he never got to know his mother nor spoke of her with his father after her death. The death of David's mother is crucial to consider in the analysis of David, as his own handling of emotions in adulthood echoes young David's lack of support and a healthy role model after his mother passed away: "He would be reading a newspaper, so hidden from me behind his newspaper, so that desperate to conquer his attention, I sometimes so annoyed him that our duel ended with me being carried from the room in tears" (Baldwin 10). David's father shows little or no attention to David when he is a child, as he has his own way of handling the trauma which does not involve addressing emotional subjects. David's father handles this pragmatically, "manly", raising his son to become what he believes is a strong man. This, in the company of his sister Ellen, who clearly disagrees with his way of parenting, worrying about David having to grow up with a father who spends most of his time out drinking and

sleeping with various women. David's description of Ellen is interesting as she comes forth as the stereotypical "woman", who possesses what can be seen as extreme feminine womanlike qualities: "...with too much jewelry everywhere, clanging and banging in the light, sits on the sofa, reading...all the new books...or she knits" (Baldwin 10). David's narrative of Ellen resembles a woman who is first and foremost concerned with appearance, status, and privilege. In her work, Abur-Rahman argues how Ellen fits the description of "...the 19<sup>th</sup> century ideal of womanhood that made women responsible for the sexual behaviors of men; expected to exert a moral and `civilizing` influence, women`s role mandated their policing male sexual appetites and activities" (Abur-Rahman 483). This coincides with how Ellen and other female characters are represented in the novel. Ellen takes on the role as a mother to David, and in this way, sets demands and expectations regarding David's father's priorities, confronting and criticizing him when he comes in late at night. This leads to several arguments and fights between them, and in one of these arguments gender stereotypes and expectations are again highlighted: "And listen`, said my father suddenly, from the middle of the staircase, in a voice which frightened me, `all I want for David is that he grow up to be a man. And when I say man, Ellen, I don't mean a Sunday school teacher" (Baldwin 14). The quote is important to note, as this represents a view on men which becomes central to the analysis of David's sexual desires along with his strong views on manhood and masculinity, and how these notions are connected to concepts of a nation. David is sexually attracted to other men, but at the same time he is claimed by and aspires to become his father's image of the white masculine heterosexual man. David's first sexual experience with a man is with his childhood friend, Joey. The event takes place when both are in their teens, at Joey's house one summer night after having hung out together several days for weeks. This event is the starting point for David's utter shame and fear, as he, the morning after, immediately regrets and displaces what happened:

*But Joey is a boy*, I saw suddenly the power in his thighs, in his arms, and in his loosely curled fists. The power and the promise and the mystery of that body made me suddenly afraid. That body suddenly seemed the black opening of a cavern in which I would be tortured till madness came, in which I would lose my manhood (Baldwin 8).

The quote is significant because it reveals the connection between body and race, and illustrates how Joey's body, first and foremost because of his masculine features and non-whiteness, represents danger to David. The event causes tremendous shame and terror for David, and he leaves Joey's house, and from then on treats both him and his own desires as foreign and dirty. David, in this section, completely represses what has happened. He becomes genuinely afraid of Joey's body and his masculine features and ends up distancing himself from what happened. David cuts all contact with Joey and starts to treat him horribly in school, as a means of rejecting everything that happened. Keeping McKittrick and Thacker's work in mind, specifically the belief that certain spaces, sounds and objects can communicate as well as generate certain kinds of emotions and moods, are all very relevant to the analysis of this section. There is a clear link between David's emotional state and where he physically is, and the objects presented carry a story or a meaning themselves. When David is together with Joey, in their dark private intimate space, he experiences feelings of sensation and contentment, whereas this turns to the complete opposite after the event. When David's sexual desires have been fulfilled, his mind and logic, all stemming from his white heteronormative background, create shame and disgust towards himself and what has happened. The novel's descriptions emphasize this, illustrating how Joey's bedroom, the very bed and sheets are able to tell a story: "The very bed, in its sweet disorder, testified to vileness" (Baldwin 8). The "vileness" testifying to David's views on what happened, the wrongness and immorality of him participating in a sexual act with a boy. The use of personification in this quote emphasizes space's effect on bodies, and this demonstrates how a

space, as in Joey's bedroom, can communicate meaning through seemingly insignificant objects and artefacts. In his work, "Under a Foreign Sky: Place and Displacement in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*", Njelle Hamilton argues how David "...deploys a host of heteronormative, if not homophobic, mooring posts from which to flee the consequences and possibilities of 'the mystery'" (Hamilton 34). The mystery being, his own sexual desires. For David, the space and environment here acts as confirmation of evilness, and it creates a fear in him that shows "...the powerful impact of normalizing discourses..." (Hamilton 34). In other words, the novel illustrates the destructiveness of ideologies; David's narrative and heteronormative ideas are so strong that they change the room and its objects in terms of their meaning, and he experiences the space as dirty. This is also demonstrated in the description of the area where Giovanni lives, along with his room, which becomes a site for their secret relationship and love making.

The street he lived on was wide, respectable rather than elegant, and massive with fairly recent apartment buildings; the street ended in a small park. His room was in the back, on the ground floor of the last building on this street. We passed the vestibule and the elevator into a short, dark corridor which led to his room. The room was small, I only made out the outlines of clutter and disorder, there was the smell of the alcohol he burned in his stove (Baldwin 56).

Giovanni's street and space represent and cause discomfort to David and testify to the differences between them in terms of social class and race, but more importantly, they function as a representation of David's narrative and memory of his relationship to Giovanni. David's experience of the space is coloured by his shame and way of distancing himself from his body and dirty desires, his immoral acts, the "...clutter and disorder...", illustrating his own views on homosexuality, and the space comes to represent, as Hamilton argues "...a closet, as it were, in which David attempts to contain his homosexual desire for Giovanni"

(Hamilton 42). Moreover, the description illustrates David's subjective experience in this space, what this space does to him in terms of changing him emotionally, and the disorder represented in the room represents the chaos within him. In this sense, David's experience when being in this space confirms his own ideas and views on his sexual desires: "It echoes the dead-end, dark cavern in its surrealistic juxtaposition of all things dysfunctional, unproductive and unsuitable for life: its windows are obscured; its air is toxic with the fumes of paint, turpentine, and spilt red wine..." (Hamilton 42). The space in Giovanni's bedroom comes to represent something separate and completely different from David's imagined reality in the city, in public spaces where he can "blend in" and thus disguise his sexual desires. After having stayed for days together with Giovanni, David, in order to endure his immoral acts, creates a space that is not there as a means of distancing himself from his own reality:

I remember that life in that room seemed to be occurring beneath the sea, time flowed past indifferently above us, hours and days had no meaning. In the beginning our life together held a joy and amazement which was newborn every day. Beneath the joy, of course, was anguish and beneath the amazement was fear... (Baldwin 67).

David's remembrance of this period illustrates how he strives to accept who he is and what happened between him and Giovanni, portraying the memory as almost fictional, as if he struggles to recall exactly what happened, illustrating how he, when being together with Giovanni, or Joey, separates himself from his own body. In his work, Hamilton illustrates how Giovanni's bedroom represents David's own fear, as his desires function as destructive to his white heteronormative background, arguing how the novel does this in order to demonstrate the connection between race, gender and sexuality: "Baldwin thus critiques, through a series of displacements worked out in David, the white American's...denial of more than his 'darker past'; the darkness within" (Hamilton 46). The novel's engagement with



space and otherness corresponds to Fanon and Mbembe`s work on colonialism, particularly in terms of how David, in his relationship with Giovanni, and when being in gay spaces, expresses views and ideas that correspond with his whiteness and superiority.

David`s description of his aunt Ellen is another interesting example; her way of dressing, with flashy jewellery, always carrying books and knitwear, which ends up communicating important information about her place and visibility in this specific environment. The general atmosphere along with the several fights between David`s father and Ellen also accentuate this: “Aren`t you in bed yet?, my father asked. He was trying to be pleasant and trying to avoid a scene, but there was no cordiality in his voice, only strain and exasperation” (Baldwin 12). In this section, the very sound of David`s father`s voice communicates a certain mood, and a state of being that is not spoken straight out but understood as repressed anger. The words not spoken and their cold way of communicating reveal the tension between them.

After the event with Joey, David decides to move to France, with the determined mission of forgetting everything that happened with Joey, convinced that him moving country will make him forget the event: “This is certainly what my decision, made so long ago in Joey`s bed, came to. I had decided to allow no room in the universe for something which shamed and frightened me. I succeeded very well – by not looking at the universe, by not looking at myself, by remaining, in effect, in constant motion” (Baldwin 18). David`s decision of running away, along with inability in obtaining a safe space for himself, keeping himself in “constant motion”, reveals how he treats his desires as foreign, and thus testifying to his feelings of inadequacy. The fact that he moves physically and geographically to another area and country in order to escape the space in which causes his terror, is interesting to consider with Mbembe`s work on borders and mobility: “In a world characterized more than ever by an unequal redistribution of capacities for mobility, and in which the only chance of survival, for

many, is to move and keep on moving, the brutality of borders is now a fundamental given of our time” (Mbembe 3). Despite that Mbembe’s work here focuses on refugees and borders in contemporary time, he nonetheless speaks of an otherness and fear that is relevant to the analysis of *Giovanni’s Room*. In his work, Mbembe shows how ideologies and concepts on race and nation function in dividing human beings not only in terms of thoughts and value, but also geographically, as some places become more white or black, than others. This is interesting to consider as Baldwin himself moved to Paris in order to escape the harsh racism in the South, as Paris was a very different city and space concerning these issues at the time. The novel thus engages with questions of race through the emphasis on gender, geography, and space, and through David’s need to escape to Paris. David’s fear of Joey’s dark body and what happened leads him to run away, not fully acknowledging his own willing part in the sexual act. Moreover, the “constant motion” illustrates David’s way of dealing with emotional struggle, choosing a “masculine” path; to run away rather than confronting his desires and emotions, but as a means of self-protection.

In his work, Mbembe illustrates how racism can be divided into two different categories; vulgar and cultural racism, whereas the latter operates through destructive discriminatory ideologies which turn subjects into objects of the “exotic” (Mbembe 130-131). The objectification of subjects that inhabit features that are different to what can be viewed as “whiteness” or attributes thereof, and the turning subjects into spectacular “things”, resemble the sensationalist portrayal of gay spaces and subjects in the novel:

Now someone whom I had never seen before came out of the shadows towards me. It looked like a mummy or a zombie...and it walked, really, like someone who might be sleep-walking or like those figures in slow motion one sometime sees on the screen. It carried a glass, it walked on its toes, the flat hips moved with a dead, horrifying lasciviousness (Baldwin 34).

In this section, David is in one of the gay night clubs, and he describes his encounter with a man he meets, who possesses characteristics that represent the complete opposite of what he associates with whiteness and masculine features. The man's appearance and way of dressing, along with his body and movement arouse disgust and fear in David, echoing Armengol's argument on how the novel's portrayal of homosexuality resembles racist images of blackness. In his work, Mbembe argues for the need to view racism as not separated from sexuality and desire, pointing to its connection to power structures and control in a society: "...a racist society is one that is worried about the question of losing its sexual potential. It is also a society inhabited by "an irrational nostalgia for the extraordinary times of sexual licentiousness..." (Mbembe 131). *Giovanni's Room*, to the very highest degree portrays racist images on desire and gender, through the ways homosexuality is portrayed together with and in comparison, to racial images on blackness. David desperately wants to obtain his own ideas of manhood, viewing subjects that interfere with this with shame and disgust.

The novel's representation of homosexuality and gay spaces are both confusing and intriguing, because it is always intricately tied to questions of race and nation. David's encounter with the gay environment in Paris is an example of this, as it functions as a double-edged sword; David is clearly drawn to and seeks this space, but he nevertheless refuses to take an open part in this, choosing to be an observer rather than participator, and he finds the environment fascinating and grotesque at the same time: "Most of the people I knew in Paris were, as Parisians sometimes put it, of le milieu and, while this milieu was certainly anxious enough to claim me, I was intent on proving, to them and myself, that I was not of their company" (Baldwin 20). David protects himself through his own narrative of who he is, despite this being seen through by his gay Parisian friends. He obviously judges what he meets in the gay community, and this becomes visible through the way he describes their appearance, their clothing and demeanour, always with a condescending and superior

undertone: “There were the usual paunchy, bespectacled gentlemen with avid, sometimes despairing eyes, the usual, knife-blade lean, tight-trousered boys. One could never be sure, as concerns these latter, whether they were after money or blood or love” (Baldwin 23). The description of how they dress, “tight-trousered boys” demonstrates David’s obsession with appearance and body, along with his own ideas on gender and appropriateness. When being in the presence of other gay men, David places himself outside of this category, believing that he is superior to them, resembling racist beliefs of superiority. David’s encounter with and description of the gay nightclub and its subjects fit the description of a jungle, and there is a clear social hierarchy where those who are white and privileged (with money) are in power and control this space. David’s friends, such as Guillaume and Jacques, are examples of such power, as they frequently buy sexual favours from young vulnerable foreign boys, on the pretext of “helping” them out of their financial distress and difficulties. The image is, to say the least, disturbing at its core, yet it testifies to a social inequality and desperation; a desperation which is being exploited by other white powerful men. Abur-Rahman explains in her work, how the novel’s depiction of racism and sexual desire reveals “...the connection between sexual exploitation, labor, and global poverty” (Abur-Rahman 483). This is demonstrated through the various characters’ psychological struggles, which have come as a consequence of not having the right to space in the white heteronormative society. Homosexuality is then, according to Abur-Rahman, in this sense, described in two different ways: “On the one hand, it is constructed as innocent, natural, and curative for the novel’s male characters; and, on the other hand, she argues, it is constructed as `deviant behaviour that proceeds from psychological and socioeconomic depravity” (Abur-Rahman 483). The different characters’ issues are complex, yet they have all derived from the “...economic ordering of society that places on sale emaciated, foreign boys to be purchased and in every way (ab)used by wealthy, sexually rapacious, closeted natives” (484). The novel thus

illustrates various dimensions of “otherness” and demonstrates how this has its nature in western racism and ideology. The “closeted natives”, being in this case the people of colour as well as the homosexuals, as they become foreigners due to their race, gender, and social status in this space. In addition to Jacques and Guillaume’s bad intention, they represent the disturbing image of the connection between race, gender, and power. Jacques also has his own story and background from not fitting into the heteronormative society, and he tries, in his own way to influence David to follow his desires to avoid having to meet the same fate as him: ““You play it safe long enough,` he said, in a different tone, `and you`ll end up trapped in your own dirty body, forever and forever and forever, like me””(Baldwin 50). Abur-Rahman explains how the predators, such as Guillaume and Jaques, play a key role in the novel as their behaviour illustrate the various effects racism has on subject and body: “In casting Guillaume as both a sexual predator and as the symbol of national manhood, Baldwin links explicitly repressed sexuality, masculinity, and exploitation as fundamental characteristics of Western nationhood” (Abur-Rahman 484).

The novel’s setting and how most of the events take place in the cityscape of Paris is interesting to look at. In his work, Thacker explains how Paris has, historically speaking, been a popular city for writers due to its openness and diversity: “Paris attracted writers, artists and political exiles from around the world” (Thacker 25). Paris is known to have stood out when it came to diversity in terms of sexuality, and Paris itself was perceived as a more or less raceless city, which ultimately offered a sense of “political freedom... to black subjects in the city” (Thacker 25). In *Giovanni’s Room* the prominence of geography is pervasive and reflects Thacker’s argument on how geographical locations affect emotions differently, depending on the subject. Moreover, Thacker’s work illustrates how the feel of Paris differs depending on whether you are an insider or outsider in this specific environment. The specific locations in the city space also enhances this. In the novel, the action takes place in several

different districts of Paris; different spaces within the same city, and the different locations represent and trigger contrasting effect. In the introduction of the novel, David looks back to when he first met Hella, his “mask” girlfriend whom he makes love to “...only with the body” (Baldwin 70). In this part, David not only mentions Hella`s attractive characteristics, but he also names the district of the bar where they met “...St Germain des Pres” (Baldwin 4). Applying Thacker`s work on geographical emotions to the reading of this part, enhances the ability to understand the social structures working in this specific space and more importantly, how Hella is represented, compared to David, in this space: “I can see her, very elegant, tense, and glittering, surrounded by the light which fills the saloon of the ocean liner...” (Baldwin 4). In this part, space and subject become intertwined; St Germain des Pres is described as a beautiful space with lights and laughter, and there is a sense of carelessness which is distinctive compared to other city spaces David visits. In St. Germain des Pres social hierarchy is important, and Hella clearly represents a social class and belonging which does not coincide with David`s emotions nor affiliation in this space. Hella identifies with this space as she is surrounded by people who enjoys her company, and who are in many ways like her. David feels alienated in this space as he experiences the same space differently than Hella, he and becomes an observer rather than a participator in this space and bar. David returns to St. Germain des Pres later in the novel, when he looks back to some of his memories with Hella and their several walks together in Paris:

At the end of the long, curving street which faced us were the trees of the boulevard and straw chairs piled high before cafes and the great stone spire of St. Germain des Pres – the most magnificent spire, as Hella and I believed, in Paris...I had often walked this street, sometimes with Hella, toward the river, often, without her, toward the girls of Montparnasse (Baldwin 39).

David's flashback here appears as he is on his way towards an unknown remote location, outside of Paris. In this section, David, together with Giovanni, Guillame and Jacques are in a taxi heading towards the village Les Halles; a place which clearly contains several facets of the city. David observes the cityscape from the taxi window, and he describes how the city environment changes as they drive, from being bright and orderly to becoming dark and foggy, giving a contrasting view of the city: "Mist clung to the river, softening that army of trees, softening those stones, hiding the city's dreadful corkscrew alleys and dead-end streets, clinging like a curse to the men who slept beneath the bridges – one of whom flashed by beneath us, very black and lone, walking along the river" (Baldwin 40). In this quote, the novel engages with issues of race, poverty, and social inequality, doing so through illustrating geography's connection to social structures and hierarchies. The mist symbolizes David's fear of the unknown, corresponding with his unease and terror when it comes to his body and sexual desires. The river functions as a symbol of life and movement, again reflecting the novel's emphasis on time and this notion that some things never change. Both quotes illustrate David's struggle in terms of identity as he represents two conflicting world views and values; When David is with Hella, he finds himself in a completely different environment and space than when she is not there, and this testifies to his repressed feelings about his own identity. Hella functions as David's security and sense of normalcy in his confusion, and when they are together, they are in specific geographical locations and hold specific qualities in terms of status, values, and race. The racist undertones in the description of the changing cityscape, the man under the bridge being "...very black and lone", stand in sharp contrast to his life in Paris with Hella. These contradictions show how space and subject are interconnected and become visible in the cityscape. In Paris, certain urban spaces are reserved for certain subjects, depending on factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, and the colour of one's skin. In the novel, specific geographical areas communicate and produce context and meaning,

reflecting, and corresponding with Thacker's work on geography and spaces. David's frequent walks to Montparnasse is another example of this; a place he visits on several occasions, with the aim of proving to himself that he is heterosexual: "My real fear was buried and was driving me to Montparnasse. I wanted to find a girl, any girl at all" (Baldwin 84). In the novel, Montparnasse becomes, in this way, a misogynist space, sexualized but at the same time safe as it incorporates masculine characteristics that identify with and confirms David's whiteness and his own ideas of manhood.

Baldwin's engagement with race becomes apparent through the novel's portrayal of space and desire; both incorporating racist notions and beliefs, and through the different characters' ways of seeing and understanding the world around them. In his work, Armengol argues how David's prejudice and shame come as a direct result of his whiteness. David is thus claimed by his white heritage, which affects and shapes his views on subjects who do not match the white heteronormative category. Armengol illustrates how then, Joey and Giovanni ultimately can be seen as a threat to his white identity. Some of the racist images in the novel are strikingly similar to Frantz Fanon's work on blackness, particularly in terms of how space and race are narrated and how this shape subjects, consciously and unconsciously: "The white man is desperate trying to achieve the rank of man...The white man is locked in his whiteness" (Fanon xiii). When applying Fanon's work to the reading of the novel, David is clearly coloured by and trapped in his set of beliefs, and this leads him to condemn not only people who are different from the American norm, but also his own self. Moreover, Fanon demonstrates, like Thacker, space's influence on bodies, and it becomes interesting to see the connection this has to *Giovanni's Room*, despite the novel's clear homosexual theme: "Society, unlike biochemical processes, does not escape human influence. Man is what brings society into being" (Fanon xv). This is exactly what is illustrated in *Giovanni's Room*, where ideologies on race and gender become so ingrained that they become hereditary, limiting, and



restricting and controlling subjects' bodies, movement, and values. David's white heritage prevents him from being able to form any serious relationship with a man, particularly not a man of colour, as this will be deviant and completely unacceptable from his white, heteronormative perspective and background. In the novel, David, despite his white heritage, nevertheless falls short when being in a white "preferred" environment, as previously illustrated with his mask girlfriend Hella, as he cannot fully identify with these values due to his deviant sexuality and desires. David partly realizes this, but he nevertheless aims to seek this future for himself, by seeking out spaces where he can confirm his masculinity and heterosexual desires. Salenius explains in her work how David's experience of alienation is also present when being in the gay environment in Paris, resulting in an increasing loneliness which reinforces his feelings of not belonging. David experiences the gay environment as strange, abnormal, and to some extent disgusting, and he demonstrates this by looking at appearance and behaviour, identifying this as something totally different than his own, and he rationalizes this through his whiteness. However, what is interesting is how he reflects on these issues, illustrating that his own lack of recognition and sense of belonging in this space does something to him.

Salenius illustrates how the novel's representation of race and space, becomes apparent through David's realization of his lack of place in this space, and she demonstrates how this testifies to an understanding which is based/grounded on racial distinctions: "When the disorientated white American protagonist, David, has an attack of nostalgia for his 'home across the ocean', away from people he would never understand, he looks at Giovanni, only to realize that the Italian 'belonged to this strange city, which did not belong to me'" (Salenius 896). The question of race permeates the protagonist's understanding of subjects and spaces; Even though David merely mentions the word race himself, his views and images carry racist notions and ideas which have derived from his upbringing along with an ideology on what

constitutes the American man. David's father reinforces this through his conception of gender, and he passes this on to his son, also in adulthood, through their many exchanges of letters: "'Dear Butch', my father said, 'aren't you ever coming home?'" (Baldwin 81). The first sentence of this letter is telling, as it reveals the dynamic between David and his father. The rather aggressive nickname "Butch" comes off as inappropriate given their father-son relationship, as this is obviously not a loving way of greeting one's son. However, it testifies to a conservative and at the same time violent view on gender. David is neither macho nor masculine, but he aspires to and strives to fit into his father's image of a man, because he is not given, nor does he know of any alternative. This way, David's ideology becomes destructive as he is obsessed with how others perceive him and whether he is masculine or boyish enough: "I looked at her with a smile which was, I hoped, both boyish and insistent" (Baldwin 87). This is also illustrated in the aftermath of a serious incident between Giovanni and Guillame, where David, in his attempt to comfort Giovanni chooses to grin and "...cuffed him roughly, football fashion, on the neck" (Baldwin 98). David's behaviour in this part resembles someone who is completely emotionally detached from himself and others, and it seems almost as if he acts automatically, through a learned emotional distance, resembling his own father's way of dealing with emotional difficulties by choosing a "masculine" approach.

In Grewal and Kaplan's work on *Global Identities*, they illustrate how stereotypes on gender represent power structures: "...sexual identities are similar to other kinds of identities in that they are imbued with power relations. These power relations are connected to inequalities that result from earlier forms of globalization, but they have also generated new asymmetries" (Grewal & Kaplan 663). Grewal and Kaplan argue that the way subjects think of, and address gender is always biased, connected with social and political structures and meaning, and they argue for the need to acknowledge how these ideas are connected to, and not separate from "...race, class, nation, and other factors in modernity" (966). The

naturalization of gender stereotypes and discrimination are, in other words, transferred from political and social ideas and agendas. In *Giovanni's Room*, sex, gender, and race become intertwined in such a way that homosexuality represents blackness and vice versa. This is demonstrated through the representation of subjects and desires, and through the depiction of divided and contrasting spaces, all incorporating features and characteristics that are linked to gender and race.

The novel engages with racism and blackness also through the portrayal of characters that represent contrasts in terms of their appearance, features, and qualities. In the novel, David, through his whiteness, represents the orderly and clean white Protestant, whereas Giovanni, together with the homosexual desire, represent darkness and fear, all resembling racist images on blackness. Giovanni is frequently exploited by other white and more powerful men, and this is solely and only because of his race. Moreover, Giovanni's financial situation forces him to accept the ill-treatment as he knows that he will not be able to obtain any work any other places than with Guillame, and despite the sexual and psychological abuse, Giovanni continues to work for him in the bar. Giovanni is fully aware of his position and value in this relationship, yet he must continue to work there because of his financial situation. Guillame has his own way of justifying their relationship and the imbalance of power, and in this way, he comes to echo Fanon's view on the "settler", believing that he is kind and generous to even have employed Giovanni. At the end of the novel, Guillame becomes envious and suspicious of Giovanni and David's affair, which leads him to falsely accuse him of stealing, resulting in Giovanni losing his job. This finally culminates in Giovanni being imprisoned. The absent and silent response from other people in the bar, reveals how Giovanni's own credibility and character is coloured by collective, racist notions. No one in the bar suspects Guillaume's accusations to be false, because of a collective way of resonating that, Guillame is privileged and therefore he speaks the truth:

He came into the bar, all dressed no, like a French businessman, and came straight to me. He did not speak to anyone as he came in, and he looked white and angry and, naturally, this attracted attention...I was so astonished I could not say anything and all the time his voice was rising and people were beginning to listen and, suddenly, mon cher, I felt that I was falling, falling from a great, high place...And nobody knew what he meant, but it was just as though we were back in that theatre lobby again, where we met, you remember? Everybody knew that Guillame was right and I was wrong...” (Baldwin 97).

In this section and space, Giovanni instantly becomes the villain, or what Fanon would label the “native”, and no one in this space seems to doubt this. Because of the colour of his skin, Giovanni is subject to suspicion and heresy, and there is nothing that he can do to reverse this as he has no value or right in this space. Applying Fanon`s work on blackness to the reading of this makes Giovanni the native who fails to adopt to the white settler`s imagination: “In order to assimilate and to experience the oppressor`s culture, the native has had to leave certain of his intellectual possessions in pawn. These pledges include his adoption of the forms of thought of the colonist bourgeoisie” (Fanon 38). In other words, Giovanni is humiliated and punished because he raises his voice and refuses to adopt to the settler`s imagination and demands. Giovanni is fully aware of the racial distinctions along with his value and place in this space, but he rejects to incorporate them as he is in love with David.

Valocchi argues, in his chapter on gender and society, how sociologists often define and consider bodies as either female or male, following the perception that “...our sexuality is either heterosexual or homosexual” (Valocchi 752). This can lead to, according to Valocchi, certain expectations of how one should behave, act and look, all depending on your gender. This way of categorizing and thinking is what we see in *Giovanni`s Room*, where there are clear expectations of how men and women should behave along with clear ideas of what is

consider good or bad in the American society and culture. Both Giovanni and David fall outside the social and political designation of man, but only Giovanni, because of the colour of his skin, is the one who ends up being punished for this. *Giovanni's Room* thus illustrates how collective ideas and concepts on race and gender affect individual's self, leading to alienation and otherness for subjects who find themselves outside of the, culturally speaking, correct categories. Valocchi explains that "By taking these categories as givens or as reified, we do not fully consider the ways that inequalities are constructed by the categories in the first place" (Valocchi 752). This is exactly what Baldwin demonstrates in this work, through the emphasis on space and space's subjectivity.

David's emotions and sense of self change depending on where he physically is and is always influenced by the space in which he finds himself in, corresponding with Thacker's work on how different spaces can create different emotions and sensations. Space and environment are crucial to consider in *Giovanni's Room*, as the novel illustrates environment's ability to change and shape subjects, as well as emphasizing the importance of belonging.

The desire to find one's place in society comes to light through David's confusion and search for a home, for a safe space where he feels that he belongs. David struggles to acknowledge and accept his own identity, and regardless of where he physically is, he is tormented by his own fears, illustrating how his white heritage claims him in terms of preventing him from being true to himself and to his desires. In this sense, the human basic need and desire to belong in society is emphasized, and the novel questions the concept and meaning of the word "home": "'Home' ... a word deeply invested with ideological meaning; unlike "house", "apartment", "residence," or other such terms, "home" signifies not simply lodgings, but also safety, belonging, comfort" (Shockley 446). Shockley's work illustrates how the word home can have several meanings and how it is subjective in terms of it

representing different state of beings, as well as emotions for various subjects. David does not feel at home when he is together with his father in the US, nor does he experience feelings of safety or belonging when being in Paris. This shows how the experience of home rests on completely different factors than physical, geographical ones. In *Giovanni`s Room*, “home” is connected to identity and feelings of safety and meaning, along with subjects` own ability to identify with their environment and space.

## Comparison

Analysing both works, it becomes clear that despite the novels' differences, there are many interesting similarities between *Giovanni's Room* and *The Street*. Both novels may be viewed as social critiques towards an American ideology and identity which is based on white heteronormative ideas and values. Both works demonstrate how these ideas are connected to geography and ideas of a nation, becoming visible in physical spaces, objects and in maps, illustrating how various spaces can represent social and racial structures and hierarchies in society. Moreover, both works illustrate how space is always subjective, and in this sense biased, changing, and affecting subjects differently depending on factors surrounding the subject.

In *The Street*, the racism Lutie encounters echoes the real racial segregation which defined 1940s Harlem, whereas *Giovanni's Room* in many ways examines the continuation of such ideas, where certain features and qualities connected to race, body and gender are preferred and elevated above others. David's obsession with appearance and bodily features, along with the categorization of gender, are examples of this, representing a view which is grounded on heteronormative ideas and values. *Giovanni's Room*, written a decade after *The Street*, shows how notions of race and nation continue to form clear divisions in society, echoing Armengol's argument on how the novel's portrayal of homosexuality and homophobia resemble the prejudice people of colour have been frequently exposed to.

Both main characters represent the outsider in society, as both experience feelings of not belonging or finding their place in society due to their gender, race, and sexual desire. The values David and Lutie individually represent are nevertheless also contradictory, and in this sense Lutie comes to represent a certain image on blackness whereas David represents whiteness, along with the various connotations thereof.

Fanon's work on colonialism is interesting to consider in the comparison of both works; David, due to his clear notions on gender and sexuality, in addition to his prejudice towards subjects and groups that represent homosexual desire, can resemble Fanon's image of the colonist. Lutie thus comes forth as the colonized, or what Mbembe refers to as the native, illustrating how notions of gender and discrimination on the basis of gender, in *Giovanni's Room*, are comparable to the racism in Petry's work. David's own prejudice and treatment of his sexual desire, along with his categorizing of the various subjects he meets in the gay environment, resemble the suspicion Lutie and other women of colour are frequently exposed to in *The Street*.

Both works illustrate how a subject's body and gender predetermine one's right to space in the American society, demonstrating how this is interconnected with cultural ideas and images of race and nation. David, despite his internal struggle and terror, represents and holds a completely different socio-economic status compared to Lutie, and this is solely and only because of his gender and race. Lutie, being a woman of colour, has far fewer options in terms of achieving sovereignty, this being because of her gender and body not inhabiting the "right" features, i.e., being white, however, both protagonists experience alienation and feelings of otherness due to their gender and race, as a result of not fitting in nor finding their place in the society. Lutie must endure oppression, violence, and racism on every level, and she is very aware of the social structures working in the various spaces of the city. David's struggle is different partly because of his inability to recognize the social structures and patterns, and he experiences confusion and feelings of terror mainly because of him not being able to truly identify with his white heteronormative expectations.

Both works echo Thacker's argument on how space affect subject, illustrated in the several events that take place, where certain spaces cause certain emotions within the characters. Both novels illustrate how racism, the social stigma and poverty which follows,



has a hereditary effect, becoming a pattern which limits subjects in terms of space, visibility, and rights, starting with slavery and being upheld by society's conceptions and beliefs of race and nation. Both novels demonstrate this through the categorization of gender and race along with the different stereotypes present; In *The Street*, Lutie, because of her gender and race, is constantly being viewed with suspicion and as a threat to other subjects' whiteness, becoming visible when Lutie is in the presence of white people, particularly when working as a maid in the countryside. The countryside space, its beauty and orderliness come across as the complete opposite than what meets Lutie in 116<sup>th</sup> street, testifying to the racial division and hierarchy working in these different spaces. When Lutie is in the countryside she is treated as an object of ownership, sexualized, and looked upon as suspicious and uncontrollable due to her blackness and gender. This prejudice is comparable to David's clear aversion to gay spaces, along with the subjects he meets that fall outside of his category and views on gender and normalcy.

The novels are alike in their engagement and representation of the significance of concepts of race and nation, and both illustrate in their own unique way how racism and ideas of race manifest in physical spaces and geography. Both works manage to demonstrate how social structures and hierarchies can represent and produce social inequality, prejudice, and bias. David, coming from a white conservative protestant family represents white supremacy through his white heritage and appearance, along with his poignant views of himself and what defines the white heterosexual man. David aspires to whiteness through his strong sense and firm ideas of what constitutes a man, physiologically as well as psychologically. These ideas shape David's views on himself as well as on others and contributes to creating a belief that is destructive to himself. His ideas have derived from his upbringing where there have been clear expectations between gender and behaviour, his father representing David's ideal in terms of his harshness and masculinity. Lutie represent the opposite, being a woman of

colour. David looks up to and is governed by his whiteness, and he desperately wants to fulfil his own ideas about heteronormativity. He is governed by an ideology that is destructive to him because of his deviant sexual desires. Both works illustrate how space and geography is a social construct, subjective representing values that are and based on nothing more than human thought and reason, and how it is connected to values and meaning, representing only one group of society.

## Conclusion

In this project I have illustrated how space is subjective and thus a social construction and image of a reality, that will vary depending on factors such as gender, skin color and sexuality. In this project, I have explored two African American novels and looked at how the time in which they are written, the 1940s USA, affects the description and depiction of the city and the surrounding spaces. In both works, space becomes something that influences and determines the social as well as emotional life of the characters.

Both novels show how certain areas, cities and even maps can exclude people and groups in society. In *The Street*, this results in a collective resignation and powerlessness in the women of color we meet. Lutie who, despite her endless efforts in creating a safe life for herself in Harlem, is forced to leave her son and flee the city. In *Giovanni's Room*, spaces reinforce David's own prejudice and homophobia; images and expectations that David carries with him from his conservative upbringing, with a father as the ideal of the masculine man. David is trapped by his own ideas and views on gender and sexuality, in such a way that it prevents him from living a life in line with his own feelings and identity.

Both *Giovanni's Room* and *The Street* demonstrate how ideologies on race and gender function in dividing human beings in terms of gender and race, and the connection this has to the cultural ideas and values of a nation. Both novels illustrate this through their emphasis on spaces, showing how space can create and reinforce racist ideas and beliefs. Both novels illustrate how spaces, as in different cities and areas, can communicate as well as generate meaning through seemingly insignificant objects and artefacts. The description of Lutie's neighbourhood and apartment are good examples of this, where the dilapidated building and area, the narrow halls, and her room with no air, testifies to the racial segregation in Harlem, echoing real events of the past. The descriptions given in *The Street* shows the connection between racism and poverty, and how the oppression becomes hereditary due to subject's and

groups` inability to break out of these patterns, as the patterns are part of a political regime and power unattainable to people of colour. *The Street* thus demonstrates how racism affect families and individuals, collectively and individually.

In *Giovanni`s Room*, racism operates through David`s own expectations and views on differences in terms of gender and sexuality. David is sexually attracted to other men, the same men whom he at the same time despises because of how their bodies and differences make him feel. David is thus claimed by his set of white heteronormative beliefs in such a way that he is imprisoned by them, restricting himself only to feel what his American identity allows him to feel, and he frequently compares subjects he meets to his own ideas of gender and sexuality. David is claimed by his white heritage and views on gender and desire, preventing him from being able in forming any serious relationship with Giovanni.

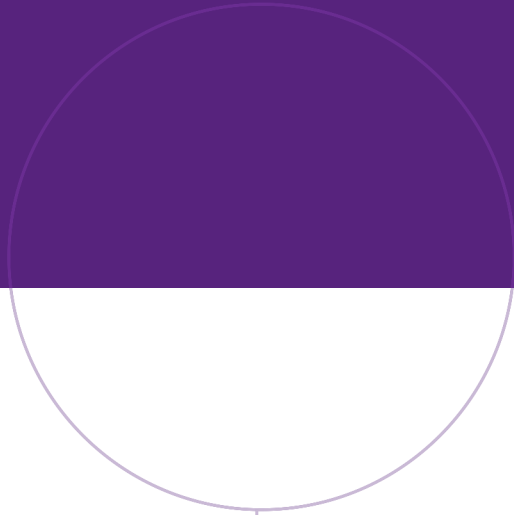
*The Street* and *Giovanni`s Room* both illustrate the entanglement of space, blackness, and gender. This, through the ways both demonstrate space`s subjectivity. Both novels demonstrate how geography can be biased, sexualized and racist, representing the very real social and racial structures in 1940s US society. The novels illustrate how space is nothing more than a social construction, based on heteronormative ideas and values, demonstrating how these ideas become destructive for subjects and groups that do not fall into the category of normalcy in the society.

In these works, the various stereotypes of blackness, desire and gender become visible through the ways spaces are narrated. Both works show how physical structures and landscapes can reinforce specific cultural norms and values, reflecting and projecting certain emotions and moods within the experiencing subjects. In these works, geography affect and reinforce stereotypes on blackness, gender, and desire, preventing the main characters from being able to experience a sense of belonging and a «home» in society.

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