The Ties That Bind: Personal Feelings in *Giovanni's Room*

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English

In *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*, Rachel Greenwald Smith argues that the depiction of individual feelings in literature precludes readers from observing and understanding the systems, institutions, and networks present in society. She believes that literature about these so-called personal feelings advances a neoliberal agenda, and calls instead for a literature about impersonal feelings, which make clear the ways in which an individual is acted upon by external forces. In "Violence, Mourning, Politics," the second chapter of their book *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Judith Butler claims that it is through personal feelings such as grief that we come to know how connected to each other we truly are. According to Butler, feelings such as grief are private but not privatized. They originate from the ties to others and society that constitute the individual. Although Butler does not focus on literature in the way that Smith does, this theory can certainly also be applied to works of literature. Smith believes that novels about personal feelings do not tell the reader about how the world works, but perhaps they would if they were read through the lens of Butler's vulnerability theory.

In this essay, I will provide an overview of both Smith and Butler's theoretical positions and the places in which these theories converge. I will then analyze the novel *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin through the lens of each theory, focusing especially on how each theory calls on readers to interpret the personal feelings and relationships present in the novel. Although Baldwin's novel was written and published prior to the full-fledged emergence of neoliberalism, the elements of capitalism and individualism that are present in neoliberalism are also present in

Giovanni's Room; it is therefore possible to use both Smith and Butler's theoretical lenses to analyze the text. While both Smith and Butler offer a valid and productive method of engaging with the text, Butler's theory offers insight into *Giovanni's Room* that Smith's theory occludes.

Smith on the Affective Hypothesis and Impersonal Feelings

Smith is writing against "the *affective hypothesis*, or the belief that literature is at its most meaningful when it represents and transmits the emotional specificity of personal experience" (1). The affective hypothesis receives its name from affect theory. Affect theory posits that feeling originates within the body, and then constructs the world (Devitt). One's experience and perception of the world is shaped by their internal, individual feelings. The affective hypothesis prioritizes literature that reinforces affect theory by focusing on the individual origins of feeling. In contrast, Smith believes that feeling originates in the systems acting upon the individual. For her, the world constructs feeling, rather than feeling constructing the world. Smith does not believe that literature should be read for the purpose of understanding and empathizing with individual characters. She writes that, "There is an odd and unsettling consensus: We read works of literature because they allow us direct contact with individuals who are like us but not us; they allow us to feel what others feel; they provoke empathy; and they teach us how to understand what it means to be a unique human being" (Smith, 1). Smith acknowledges that this may not at first glance seem like a bad thing, but explains that such an understanding of literature perpetuates neoliberal ideas of individualism, and obscures the ways in which humans are connected to each other and nonhuman entities.

As an ideology, neoliberalism emphasizes competition and austerity over community and equity (La Berge and Slobodian). In a neoliberal society, "individuals are encouraged to see themselves as the outcome of a range of investments and returns" (Smith, 37). Everything, even

human emotion, is commodified. For Smith, the "tendency to understand activities once seen to some degree as extra-economic as obeying the logic of the market is…one of the hallmark qualities of neoliberalism in general" (34). Reading literature, the focus of Smith's work, is one such activity. According to Smith, "While neoliberalism casts the individual as responsible for herself, the affective hypothesis casts feeling as necessarily owned and managed by individual authors, characters, and readers" (2). Like neoliberalism, the affective hypothesis prioritizes the individual. It also commodifies feeling; emotions become property, something to be "owned and managed" by individual creators and consumers of literature. Smith refers to this kind of privatized emotion as "personal feelings". She explains that

> Personal feelings function like personal property. They are private, not in the sense of being secret or interior, but in the sense of being 'privatized': they are personally controlled, even though they circulate outside the self; they are managed by the individual but they are augmented by connections with others; and ideally they enrich the individual through their carefully calculated development, distribution, and expansion (Smith, 2)

Personal feelings may be visible to others, but they are owned solely by the individual experiencing them. They can be affected by other people or institutions, but they originate in the owner.

This singular point of origin and ownership obfuscates the ways in which society and others within it act upon a person. Smith explains that while personal feelings may seem to trouble neoliberal economics and politics by prioritizing human emotion instead of data, they in fact perpetuate these systems by focusing on the individual. Individualism, according to Smith, is the crux of neoliberal capitalism. She concedes that neoliberal rhetoric endorses engagement and

interaction with others, offering the examples of social media and networking. However, she qualifies this concession by explaining that these types of interaction and association are generally thought of as ways to enrich the self rather than the family or community. Relating this back to personal feelings, Smith explains that, "In this social context, emotions are increasingly understood as resources to develop and manage, rather than as instances of authentic experience that fall outside rational control" (6). Personal feelings are a way to further the advancement of the self. Smith also states that while literature may offer readers moral instruction and amusement, in a neoliberal society, the desirability of this is "measured by how much morality or amusement is understood to enrich the life of the individual" (32). Literature is a way of advancing the self.

Smith argues instead for a focus on literature that portrays impersonal feelings, which "do not straightforwardly conform to a market model, because they are not easily codifiable or recognizable; they do not allow for strategic emotional associations to be made between readers and characters; and they emphasize the unpredictability of affective connections" (2). She goes on to explain that there is a "largely unrecognized history of literary scholarship that sees the relationship between aesthetics and feelings as one that destabilizes the connection between the emotional and the personal" (Smith, 11), what she has dubbed impersonal feelings. According to Smith, impersonal feelings "productively call into question the assumption that emotion is an owned resource that circulates from individual to individual" (32). Literature about impersonal feelings can therefore complicate the relationship between neoliberal ideas about individuality and scholarly ideas about the function of emotions in literature.

Literature that focuses on impersonal feelings often contains characters that seem to lack depth but are nonetheless vibrant. According to Smith, "this sense of liveliness can be

understood to index a different form of literary affect–not the representation of an individual character's feelings but a tonal intensity that emerges from the tensions generated out of the association of narrative elements in the prose" (12). It is the interconnectedness of each part of the text, and not the individual characters, that create the life of this kind of literature. The literature of impersonal feelings showcases the ways in which characters are acted upon by each other and the systems and institutions of the society they inhabit.

Smith endorses literature about impersonal feelings because it is more conducive to critical engagement with the ways in which society operates. She argues that impersonal feelings offer "greater potential for catalyzing experiences that are challenging to the status quo" (Smith, 19) than personal ones. This type of literature asks the reader to consciously consume it and facilitates a questioning of the way things are. Impersonal feelings are "potentially destabilizing insofar as their presence defies the prevailing notion that feelings only exist insofar as they are the property of the individual" (Smith, 20). Literature about impersonal feelings disrupts the status quo of the affective hypothesis, and by extension, the status quo of neoliberalism.

Butler on Vulnerability

In contrast to Smith's claims that personal feelings obscure connection and reinforce neoliberal ideas, Judith Butler believes that one's individual emotions can illuminate connection. Butler argues that we are all vulnerable, and that it is through that vulnerability that we come to know not only ourselves but each other. They use grief as a fundamental marker of this universal vulnerability. Butler describes grief and loss as an individual condition, but also as an experience that illuminates the ways in which we are connected to each other. When we experience loss, when we grieve, "something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are" (Butler, 22). Butler goes on

to explain that although grief can be personal, it is not privatizing. They claim that "many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticizing" (Butler, 22). Smith is one such person; she argues that personal feelings are "'privatized': they are personally controlled, even though they circulate outside the self; they are managed by the individual but they are augmented by connections with others; and ideally they enrich the individual" (2). For Smith, personal feelings are private property, and their purpose is to advance the self. Butler disagrees with this, arguing that in actuality, grief "furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility" (Butler, 22). The way we feel in response to a loss shows us our responsibility to and dependence on each other.

Loss can unmoor us, and it is in this unmooring that we realize just how tied to each other we are. Whereas Smith argues that "emotions…accentuate the specificity of individual experience" (3), Butler explains that grief shows us "the thrall in which our relations with others hold us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control" (23). In experiencing loss, we realize that we are not as independent as we might like to believe. Writing on Butler's vulnerability theory, Robert Watkins explains that, "we are never autonomous, but always already related to and dependent upon others as well as conditioned by power" (191). A truly independent existence is impossible. Butler writes that, "Passion and grief and rage, all of which tear us from ourselves, bind us to others, transport us, undo us, implicate us in lives that are not our own, irreversibly, if not fatally" (25). Grief disorients us; it causes us to question the world and our place within it. It

causes us to venture outside of ourselves and take a new perspective; it forces us to recognize the ways in which we affect and are affected by the lives of others.

Vulnerability is an essential part of being human. We cannot will it away, nor should we. Butler writes that, "To foreclose that vulnerability, to banish it, to make ourselves secure at the expense of every other human consideration is to eradicate one of the most important resources from which we must take our bearings and find our way" (30). To ignore our vulnerability is to ignore our own humanity and the humanity of others, to disregard the myriad ways in which we are connected to each other. In Butler's view, to do this would be to do away with the compass offered to us by human relationships both direct and indirect, close and distant. Butler believes that we are created by our relationships; to survive, we must attach ourselves to others. In order to do this, we must open ourselves up to the possibility of loss and grief. We must make ourselves vulnerable.

Nor can we ignore the vulnerability of others. To be in community, one must recognize that others are vulnerable, as well. According to Butler, "community itself requires the recognition that we are all, in different ways, striving for recognition" (44). When considering the vulnerability of others, we must especially consider that not everyone is vulnerable in the same way or amount; not every life is considered grievable. Butler argues that it is important to interrogate who is considered grievable, whose death would be a loss and whose would be collateral damage. They explain that "certain lives will be highly protected, and the abrogation of their claims to sanctity will be sufficient to mobilize the forces of war. Other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as 'grievable'" (Butler, 32). Grief and loss illuminate our connections, but also the ways in which we dishonor these connections by positioning certain kinds of people as more important than others. Marginalized people are often

not considered grievable, and this lack of grievability illuminates the ways in which our society situates them as less than.

Butler views the public obituary as an indicator of the grievability a life has been given or denied: "the instrument by which grievability is publicly distributed" (34). The obituary is a tool used to indicate which deaths are grievable and therefore which lives are and were deserving of protection from violence. Butler argues that not publicly acknowledging deaths can dehumanize those whose deaths are unmarked and therefore justify the violence perpetrated against them. They write that, "In the silence of the newspaper, there was no event, no loss, and this failure of recognition is mandated through an identification with those who identify with the perpetrators of that violence" (36). By publicly marking some deaths and not others, the public obituary perpetuates norms regarding who is grievable and who is not.

Butler's work is useful not only in illuminating the subjugation of marginalized people, but also in remedying it. Ingrid Cyfer explains, "There is no way to discuss emancipation (in any sense critical theorists have ever ascribed to it) without addressing the entanglement between ethics, politics, vulnerability and violence as Butler inspires us to do" (2). In order to be free, we must first acknowledge the ways in which we are connected to each other and acted upon by society.

Butler implores readers to critically examine social norms and the institutions, such as the public obituary, that perpetuate them. They argue that,

> We have to consider how the norm governing who will be a grievable human is
> circumscribed and produced in these acts of permissible and celebrated public grieving,
> how they sometimes operate in tandem with a prohibition on the public grieving of

others' lives, and how this differential allocation of grief serves the derealizing aims of

military violence (37).

Butler is speaking specifically about the institution of the public obituary, but these claims can be

applied to literature in general. Using Butler's ideas about vulnerability and grievability, one can

read texts about loss and grief as illuminating not only the personal feelings of the characters, but

also the ways in which said characters have been acted upon by societal norms and institutions.

Convergence Between Butler and Smith

Although Butler and Smith's respective theories seem at odds with each other, there are

some points on which they agree. First and foremost, both Butler and Smith agree that a person

is comprised of more than just the self. For both, individuals are irrevocably connected to those

around them, both close and far. Butler believes that we are constituted by our ties to others, as

does Smith. Smith discusses the importance of "calling into question the core neoliberal

assumption that the individual is affectively responsible for herself" (24). She does this herself

by defining impersonal feelings and performing readings of literature that emphasize

interconnection. Butler does this by stating plainly, "Let's face it. We're undone by each other.

And if we're not, we're missing something" (23). Who we are and how we feel is a product of

the existence and actions of others.

Butler and Smith also agree about the power of writing to perpetuate or disrupt the status

quo. Smith claims that, "works of literature themselves can be understood to work affectively,

catalyzing and modulating human attitudes and orientations toward other humans and their

environment" (25). Butler discusses the public obituary in a similar way, arguing that, "the

obituary functions as the instrument by which grievability is publicly distributed" (34) and

referring to it as "an act of nation-building" (34). Texts tell their readers how to feel about certain

others; this power can be deployed in service of neoliberal individualism, or in service of a more conscientious connection to people beyond the self. Both Butler and Smith believe in the importance of the latter.

A Smithian Reading of *Giovanni's Room*

Although published prior to neoliberalism's full realization, Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* is still an excellent candidate for literary analysis through Smith's theoretical lens. Despite the fact that they likely would not have been referred to as part of a neoliberal ideology at the time of publication, the personal feelings that are owned and controlled by the individual, and emphasis on connection only for personal gain that Smith describes as hallmarks of neoliberalism are present in the novel. The characters in the novel are largely focused on self-advancement, and do not hesitate to leverage their personal relationships to achieve this end.

Early on in the novel, David describes Jacques as possessing "that strong self-pity which was, perhaps, the only thing he had which really belonged to him" (Baldwin, 23). Jacques' self-pity is an example of a privatized personal feeling as described by Smith: it belongs to him; he has ownership and control over it. David then describes his relationship with Jacques, explaining that,

> Jacques' vaunted affection for me was involved with desire, the desire, in fact, to be rid of me, to be able, soon, to despise me as he now despised that army of boys who had come, without love, to his bed. I held my own against this desire by pretending that Jacques and I were friends, by forcing Jacques, on pain of humiliation, to pretend this. I pretended not to see, although I exploited it, the lust not quite sleeping in his bright, bitter eyes and, by means of the rough, male candor with which I conveyed to him his case was hopeless, I compelled him, endlessly, to hope (Baldwin, 28).

This is a clear example of Smith's idea that in the neoliberal novel, connections are leveraged for the benefit of the self. In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault asserts that the neoliberal individual is no longer a "partner of exchange" but an "entrepreneur of himself" (226). Such an individual uses the resources available to produce something that will satisfy them (Foucault). This is certainly the case in Jacques and David's relationship. Jacques needs David in order to perpetuate his self-pity, the aforementioned only thing that belongs to him. David needs Jacques to continue lending him money, so he pretends to be Jacques' friend and attempts to stay in his good graces. Each is using the other as a resource to produce their own satisfaction. Their relationship emphasizes the individualism of personal feelings: each is using the other for their own personal gain.

Giovanni is another character who uses others for the advancement of the self. When accused good-naturedly of attempting to poison his boss, Guillame, by bringing him to a seedy cafe, Giovanni replies, "Why would I poison you? Then I would have no job and I have only just found out that I want to live" (Baldwin, 49)" Giovanni's reason for not poisoning Guillame is not that to do such a thing would cause harm to another person, or even that it would be immoral, but rather that if he did so, he would be out of a job and therefore unable to make a life for himself. Guillame's ability to advance Giovanni's self-interest is further emphasized in the story of how they met. Giovanni tells David, "'I saw that he could be useful if I could only find some way to make him keep his hands off me'" (Baldwin, 61). The relationship that Giovanni cultivates with Guillame is an example of the kind of engagement with others that Smith describes as networking for the advancement of the self.

David too understands that relationships are often cultivated for personal gain. Of the older gentlemen where he stays in the south of France, he says, "They treated me…with great

distance, for I did not really belong to any of them; and they also sensed (or I felt they did) something else about me, something which it was no longer worth their while to pursue" (Baldwin, 65). Although he interacts with these men frequently, they are reluctant to form a bond with him, which David suspects is because they have no obligation to or curiosity about him. The phrase "worth their while" invokes economics, and reinforces the idea that one should not enter into a relationship that one is unlikely to benefit from.

David himself is no stranger to using others for his own gain. He convinces Sue, against her better judgment, to sleep with him, so that he might forget Giovanni and remember how to be attracted to a woman before Hella returns. He does not care for Sue, nor is he even really attracted to her, and he does not consider how his actions will affect her until it is too late. David says that, "Somewhere, at the very bottom of myself, I realized that I was doing something awful to her and it became a matter of my honor not to let this fact become too obvious" (Baldwin, 100). He acknowledges that his actions are unsavory and that he is using Sue, but instead of stopping, he simply redoubles his efforts to obscure this fact.

David's relationship with Hella is also an example of one using others to advance the self. Although he is less conscious of the ways in which he is using Hella than of Sue, he does eventually recognize that he has in fact tried to get something from her. At the very end of the novel, as Hella is about to leave him, he admits that, "I must have hoped that there would be something Hella could do for me" (Baldwin, 157). He may not have been conscious of it while the relationship existed, but now that it has ended, David realizes that he entered into and continued it for his own personal gain.

Although David does not use Giovanni for his own advancement, their relationship opens the doors for David to do so with others in the future. Luminita Dragulescu argues that David's

experience with Giovanni inspires him to commodify his sexuality. He compares David to Jacques and Guillame, two characters who leverage their sexuality for their own economic and social benefit (Dragulescu). Throughout the novel, David seeks human connection–with Sue, with Hella, with Giovanni–but he always does so with an ulterior motive.

The neoliberal agenda that Smith writes about is also present in *Giovanni's Room* in the ways in which characters attempt to absolve themselves of guilt and blame over what happens to others. David feels guilty about Giovanni's doomed fate, and while he is neither judge, nor jury, nor executioner, it is certainly possible that his actions may have inadvertently contributed to Giovanni's demise. Hella tries to convince him otherwise, telling him, "'We'll leave this city soon, David. You won't have to think about it anymore. People get into trouble, David. But don't act as though it were, somehow, your fault. It's not your fault'" (Baldwin, 152). She implores David to stop thinking about other people and the ways in which his actions might have affected them, and instead adopt the belief that he is not to blame for anything that has occurred.

Throughout the novel, Smith's theories of personal feelings and neoliberalism are exemplified, as seen in the relationships between the characters and the ways in which they view themselves as responsible only for themselves.

A Butlerian Reading of *Giovanni's Room*

Before embarking on a reading of *Giovanni's Room* through the lens of Butler's theories, it is important to understand the ways in which vulnerability, grievability, and connection function in the novel as a whole. The novel is about queer love and desire in a time period when such a thing was often considered unnatural and shameful. Josep Armengol argues that the novel also deals with race by mapping blackness onto homosexuality so that the "discourses of race and (homo)sexuality are inseparable from each other" (674). Novelist Garth Greenwell concurs,

noting that homosexuality is described using racialized language throughout the novel. Armengol is advocating for the intersectional approach to the novel that Butler's theory of vulnerability necessitates. To understand the novel fully, one must recognize that multiple marginalizations and vulnerabilities are acting on the characters, even though not all of them are visible. Connections between individuals are acknowledged by the novel when Baldwin describes a "dreadful human tangle occurring everywhere, without end, forever" (62). Although Butler and Baldwin seem to have differing thoughts on whether irrevocable human connection is positive or negative, both believe that it exists, and Baldwin illuminates the ties that constitute his characters both explicitly and implicitly.

Butler argues that grief is private but not privatizing: it is personal, but it is not owned or controlled by the individual experiencing it. There are multiple moments throughout the novel that show that this is also true of other personal feelings besides grief. When David first meets Giovanni, he narrates that,"I knew I could do nothing whatever to stop the ferocious excitement which had burst in me like a storm" (Baldwin, 42). David is experiencing a feeling that he cannot control; he does not have ownership of it. Towards the end of the novel, when David is leaving Giovanni, he does not deny that this is a decision influenced by fear and shame, but tells Giovanni, "I can't *help* the way I feel" (Baldwin, 141). Like the ferocious excitement he felt earlier, David is not in control of his fear and shame; he cannot leverage it for his own benefit. This is another example of Butler's idea of a feeling that is private but not privatized. David's fear and shame are his and his alone, but they are not under his control, nor are they completely separate from his relationships and connections.

The novel also highlights the idea that connection is not limited by proximity or physicality. David tells readers that he and Giovanni,

connected the instant that we met. And remain connected still, in spite of our later *separation de corps*, despite the fact that Giovanni will be rotting soon in unhallowed ground near Paris. Until I die there will be those moments…when his face will come before me, that face in all its changes, when the exact timbre of his voice and tricks of his speech will nearly burst my ears, when his smell will overpower my nostrils. Sometimes…I will see Giovanni again, as he was that night, so vivid, so winning, all of the light of that gloomy tunnel trapped around his head (Baldwin, 42-3).

Even after David and Giovanni stop seeing each other, even after Giovanni dies, the two remain linked. Their connection transcends the body; it is irrevocable. Giovanni will forever be a part of Daivd. Losing Giovanni illuminates David's ties to him and David's own vulnerability. Phrases like, "nearly burst my ears" and "overpower my nostrils" show that David is not in control of his connection to Giovanni or Giovanni's return to him. His grief and memories of Giovanni are his, but he does not own them; he does not control them. They are not his property.

The novel asks readers to interrogate the social norms and systems that affect the characters. "'You think,'" Jacques tells David, "'that my life is shameful because my encounters are. And they are. But you should ask yourself *why* they are'" (Baldwin, 56). Shame is a personal feeling, but like the grief that Butler talks about, it does not exist without other people, without society. Shame, like grief, illuminates the ways in which society has acted upon the individual, illuminates the ways in which their interactions with others have shaped them. Greenwell refers to *Giovanni's Room* as an "anatomy of shame, of its roots and the myths that perpetuate it, of the damage it can do." The novel makes clear that shame is not an inherent part of queerness, but a consequence of living within a homophobic society (Greenwell). In this way, a personal feeling illuminates the ways in which society acts upon the individual.

David, too, is aware that his shame is externally constructed. He knows that his feelings for Giovanni were "not really so strange, so unprecedented, though voices deep within me boomed, For shame! For shame! that I should be so abruptly, so hideously entangled with a boy" (Baldwin, 62). The voices in his head that shame David are notably not recognized as his own. Without a social and legal norm of heterosexuality, David likely would not find himself ashamed and afraid of his romantic connection with another man.

Of David's relationship with Giovanni, Jacques tells him, "'You are afraid that it may change you'" (Baldwin, 57). Jacques, for all his connivance and manipulation, understands that to feel something for or about another person is to be changed, echoing Butler's sentiment that the individual is both created and undone by their relationships to others. Jacques goes on to say that, "not many people have ever died of love. But multitudes have perished…for the lack of it" (Baldwin, 58). Jacques illuminates the ways in which we are connected to each other, the ways in which we need each other.

Giovanni's love does change David, as David's love does Giovanni. Of Giovanni, David says, "Each day he invited me to witness how he had changed, how love had changed him" (Baldwin, 88). David himself often thinks "of Giovanni's hands…hands which would have the power to crush me and make me whole again" (Baldwin, 88). Both Giovanni and David recognize that they are created and potentially undone by their relationships with others. Try as David might to be an individual unaffected by others, he is unable to do so. When he leaves Giovanni, he wants to feel nothing; he wants to avoid acknowledging how affected he was by their connection, but he is unable to do so. He feels "a tightening in a far corner of my heart, as though a finger had touched me there" (Baldwin, 131). David has been touched, physically and emotionally, and he cannot ignore it, cannot continue on as he was before it happened.

The last page of the novel makes one final statement about the human inability to escape connection. As David leaves the house in the south of France for the last time, he tears up the envelope containing Jacques' letter to him and throws the pieces to the wind. The last sentence of the novel is, "Yet, as I turn and begin walking toward the waiting people, the wind blows some of them back on me" (Baldwin, 169). David ripping up the letter from Jacques, which contains information on Giovanni's impending execution, represents his desire to escape his connections once and for all. He is, however, unable to do such a thing, as the pieces of this letter come back to him. No matter how hard one might run from it, Baldwin tells his readers, connection is eternal and inescapable.

Conclusion

Both Smith and Butler's theories offer insight into a literary text. However, Butler's theory of vulnerability illuminates aspects of a text that Smith's theory of personal feelings and neoliberalism in literature overlooks. When reading *Giovanni's Room* through the lens of Smith's theory, the leveraging of personal feelings and relationships to improve the characters' individual positions in society is highlighted, and the genuine, irrevocable connection between characters, specifically David and Giovanni, is overlooked. When reading the novel from a Butlerian perspective, this connection becomes the center of the novel, and readers are still able to see the ways in which these characters are being acted upon by systems outside of their control. The novel is about personal feelings, and it certainly contains personal feelings of the nature Smith describes, but the overall focus of the story is the personal feelings of Butler's imagination: those that originate outside of the self and elucidate the ways in which we are all created by and irrevocably tied to one another. It is through Butler's perspective that the reader can see all that *Giovanni's Room* has to offer.

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