



Università degli studi di Napoli
“L’Orientale”

DIPARTIMENTO DI STUDI LETTERARI, LINGUISTICI E COMPARATI
DOTTORATO IN STUDI LETTERARI, LINGUISTICI E COMPARATI



Quaderni della ricerca - 1

L’immagine nel mondo, il mondo nell’immagine

Nuove prospettive per un approccio pluridisciplinare
alla rappresentazione testuale ed extra-testuale

The Image in the World, the World in the Image

New Perspectives for an Interdisciplinary Approach
to Textual and Extra-Textual Representation

A cura di/edited by

DANIELA AGRILLO, EMILIO AMIDEO, ANTONELLA DI NOBILE, CLAUDIA TARALLO

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Indice

Premessa/Foreword di CARLO VECCE	5
Prefazione/Preface di DANIELA AGRILLO, EMILIO AMIDEO, ANTONELLA DI NOBILE, CLAUDIA TARALLO	7
HANS BELTING <i>Antropologia e iconologia</i>	9
FRANCESCO DE STEFANO <i>Linguaggio iconografico e contesto socio-culturale: un caso di studio archeologico tra Magna Grecia e mondo italico</i>	23
VINCENZO ALLEGRINI <i>'Figurarsi nella fantasia': sulle fonti e sull'ispirazione visiva della Vita abbozzata di Silvio Sarno</i>	41
EMILIO MARI <i>Soglie, isole e orti urbani: note ai margini del 'testo pietroburghese'</i>	55
DANIELA AGRILLO <i>L'artista surrealista: tra immagine, immaginario e realtà</i>	73
HANIN HANNOUCH <i>«It's so plastic, so visually written!»: Sergei Eisenstein on Émile Zola</i>	87
EMILIO AMIDEO <i>Queer Tidalectics: Sea-change in Giovanni's Room by James Baldwin</i>	101
GIULIA IMBRIACO <i>Fuori di testo: il pastiche di Kathy Acker in Blood and Guts in High School (1978)</i>	117

Indice

BIAGIO SCUDERI <i>Tra teatro e immagine:</i> <i>Die Walküre e Parsifal secondo Federico Tiezzi e Giulio Paolini</i>	139
GAIA BERTONERI <i>Oltrepassare la soglia: il pictorial turn nell'opera di Ana Teresa Pereira</i>	161
LORENZO LICCIARDI <i>Immagini della metropoli digitale:</i> <i>una 'video-scrittura' di Berlino in Teil der Lösung di Ulrich Peltzer</i>	179
ADELE SORICE <i>Scrittura e immagine: la poetica della memoria di Marica Bodrožić</i>	195
CLAUDIA TARALLO <i>Grammatiche scolastiche dell'italiano: criteri d'impostazione grafica</i>	209
ANTONELLA DI NOBILE <i>Grottesco e parodia ne El síndrome Guastavino:</i> <i>immagini della dittatura argentina</i>	225
DANIELA VITOLO <i>Immagini performanti: identità femminili in performance nei comics</i>	235

EMILIO AMIDEO

Queer Tidalectics: Sea-change in *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin

Words [...] are full of echoes, of memories, of associations – naturally. They have been out and about [...] for centuries. [...] In the old days, of course, when English was a new language, writers could invent new words and use them. Nowadays it is easy enough to invent new words [...] but we cannot use them because the language is old. [...] In order to use new words properly you would need to invent a new language; and that, though no doubt we shall come to it, is not at the moment our business. Our business is to see what we can do with the English language as it is. How can we combine the old words in new orders so that they survive, so that they create beauty, so that they tell the truth? That is the question.¹

In this excerpt, from a 1937 BBC radio broadcast for the series *Words that Fail Me*, Virginia Woolf maintains that words come always loaded with implications and that, in order to produce a new meaning and, as a consequence, a new understanding of reality, it is necessary to combine them in new and different ways. This combination, Woolf seems to suggest a few pages later, is made possible by the metamorphic potential of words themselves, by their capacity to be unstable, shifting, fluid: «it is their [words'] nature to change. [...] because the truth they try to catch is many-sided [...] and it is because of this complexity that they survive. We pin them down to one meaning [...] they fold their wings and die».² The movement that Woolf suggests, the metamorphic aspect of words and their potential to be combined in order to express the unsayable or the not yet said, is what prompted the African American writer James Baldwin to address queer desire in the 1950s.

In the absence of, or in the face of very scant, representations of homosexuality in literature in those years – even less so by black writers – Baldwin subtly turned to the aquatic imagery in his novel *Giovanni's Room* (1956) as a way of expressing a more complex and fluid conception of sexuality in a society still strictly bound to dichotomous thinking, particularly in relation to issues

¹ V. Woolf, *Craftsmanship*, in *The Death of the Moth and other Essays*, London, The Hogarth Press, 1942, pp. 126-132, pp. 129-130.

² Woolf, *Craftsmanship*, cit., pp. 131-132.

of gender and sexuality. Baldwin tries to find a fluid language that, as Luce Irigaray would theorise in the late 1970s, «overflows the subject», that is to say, it undoes the common notion of the unified and all rationalist Western *cogito* by blurring its boundaries through a discussion which, like fluids themselves, is «unstable», uncontainable, both «inside/outside of philosophical discourse».³

Drawing on Edward Kamau Brathwaite's concept of 'tidalectics' and on the work on queer temporalities,⁴ this paper aims at reading Baldwin's novel through what I would call a 'queer tidalectics' in order to show how the author's use of aquatic images associated with queer desire, has the potential of re-imagining life outside of contemporary «racialized heteropatriarchy».⁵

Queer Tidalectics

Queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience – namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death.

Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005)

The main aim of the anti-essentialist and anti-identitarian discourse of queer theory is to sustain that sexuality is not natural, but is rather discursively constructed and historically contingent.⁶ The endorsement of heteronormativity, that is to say of heterosexuality as the 'norm' in society, is reflected in what Elizabeth Freeman calls 'chrononormativity'. As an institutionalised regulation of time meant to preserve the state apparatus, 'chrononormativity' compels in-

³ L. Irigaray, *The "Mechanics" of Fluids*, in *This Sex which is not One*, Eng. trans. by C. Porter, Ithaca – New York, Cornell University Press, 1985 (1977), pp. 106-18, p. 112.

⁴ Especially J. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, New York, NYU Press, 2005; J. E. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, New York, NYU Press, 2009; and E. Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2010.

⁵ J. S. Allen, *Black/Queer/Diaspora at the current conjuncture*, «GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies», 18:2-3, 2012, pp. 212-248, p. 220.

⁶ Cf. N. Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, New York, NYU Press, 2003, p. 1.

dividuals toward maximum productivity by organising their lifetime, literally, and expectations: birth, health preservation, wealth accumulation, reproduction, and death.⁷ Hence, by imagining alternative modalities of existence, as the epigraph to this section advances, queer theory and politics necessarily situate themselves in dissonance with the common and linear notion of time. As José Esteban Muñoz sustains in *Cruising Utopia*:

Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality [...] that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. [...] The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*. [...] Queerness is also a performative because it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.⁸

Queerness' intrinsic potentiality to create another world, its grounding itself in an alternative temporality which breaks up the historical temporal order, is evoked also in the concept of 'tidalectics'. The term, coined by the Barbadian theorist Brathwaite by joining the words 'tidal' and 'dialectics', expresses a resistance to the synthesising *telos* of Hegel's dialectic by invoking the movement of the sea waves, of the tides, as a way of explaining our histories, lifestyles and life changes. Through the performing of a going out and a return movement which does not have an imposed resolution,⁹ Brathwaite's cyclical, oceanic poetics of flows and currents is hence characterised by interruptions, repetitions and returns. Tidalectics can be thus read as a 'queer' conception of time that validates a fluid, rhizomatic,¹⁰ and relational¹¹ approach to the past (and present) while clashing with the linear and fixed Western official historiography. In refusing the violence inherent in monolithic thinking and linear historiographic accounts, the trajectory of both theoretical paradigms takes the shape of a 'détour' (in Édouard Glissant's terminology): «not a return to the longing for origins

⁷ Cf. Freeman, *Time Binds*, cit., p. 3.

⁸ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, cit., p. 1.

⁹ Cf. Naylor, *Poetic Investigations: Singing the Holes in History*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1999, p. 145.

¹⁰ Cf. G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Eng. trans. by B. Massumi, London, Continuum, 2003 (1980).

¹¹ Cf. É. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, Eng. trans. by B. Wing, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 2006 (1990).

[...] but a return to the point of entanglement». ¹² The long history of the erasure of queer desire, which mirrors the attempt of colonialism to obliterate the origins of the Afro-diasporic tradition, enables a rethinking of the false universality of what Glissant terms ‘systematic thought’ (*pensée du système*) to venture into a ‘trace thought’ (*pensée de la trace*): ¹³ a non-linear process which recognises the importance of a necessarily fragmented memorial retrieval, but also (and especially) of syncretism and the creation of a ‘usable past’. ¹⁴ The ‘trace’, then, is meant as Deleuze’s and Guattari’s ‘rhizome’, that is multiple rather than univocal or dichotomous, circular rather than linear, broken and dispersed but always recreating itself. ¹⁵ Against the attempts to break, disperse and silence queer desire, Baldwin thus demonstrates in his novel the possibility of alternative modalities of existence. In anticipating and fruitfully conflating both theoretical paradigms, Baldwin links queer desire to the aquatic imagery in order to conjecture not only the disruption of the linearity of gender essentialism but also the subversion of the Western binary and individualistic ontological system. Through the homoerotic subtext – literally a sub(merged)text, a text underwater – of *Giovanni’s Room*, Baldwin disentangles desire from rooted and monolithic interpretations and ‘re-presents’ it as multiple and nomadic.

The Sub(merged)text in Giovanni’s Room

Prefer what is positive and multiple, difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile arrangements over systems. Believe that what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic.

Michel Foucault, Preface to *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (1983)

¹² Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, Eng. trans. by M. Dash, Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 1994, p. 26. Drawing on Deleuze’s and Guattari’s rhizomatic thinking, by ‘détour’ Glissant refers to a departure (‘dé-part’) which is also a return (‘re-tour’), and yet becomes a different thing altogether.

¹³ Cf. Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique du divers*, Paris, Gallimard, 1990, p. 14.

¹⁴ Firstly theorised by the American historian and literary critic Van Wyck Brooks, the concept of ‘usable past’ refers to the production through narrative of an otherwise irretrievable past and has been widely used in the black diasporic tradition. Cf. V. W. Brooks, *On Creating A Usable Past*, «The Dial. A Fortnightly Journal of Criticism and Discussion of Literature and the Arts», LXIV:757, Chicago, 3 January 1917, pp. 337-341.

¹⁵ Cf. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, cit., pp. 3-28.

Since the beginning, *Giovanni's Room* demonstrated to be an atypical, even 'problematic', text, bound to create interest and even public outrage for a long time to come. Following the publication of his first largely autobiographic novel, *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (1953), which introduced Baldwin as the most promising black novelist of the second half of XX century, his second novel – with his white characters, the homosexual theme and the Parisian location – seemed doomed to fail. In a 1984 interview Baldwin explained the reason behind his decision to leave out any black character from his novel:

[...] *Giovanni's Room* came out of something I had to face. [...] I certainly could not possibly have – not at that point in my life – handled the other great weight, the "Negro problem." The sexual-moral light was a hard thing to deal with. I could not handle both propositions in the same book. There was no room for it. I might do it differently today, but then, to have a black presence in the book at that moment, and in Paris, would have been quite beyond my powers.¹⁶

Baldwin's decision to carry on with the homosexual theme, despite being advised to 'heterosexualise' the main love story of the novel, met fierce opposition. His agent Helen Strauss, after openly advising him to burn the manuscript in order to avoid the demise of his emerging career, decided to end their professional relationship. The editor of his first novel, Alfred A. Knopf, refused to publish the novel for fear of legal consequences. It was only thanks to the British editor Michael Joseph that the novel was published in 1956.¹⁷

Set in the bohemian environment of post-WWII Paris – the same that Baldwin frequented in his Parisian 'exile' started in 1948 –¹⁸ the novel narrates the

¹⁶ J. Baldwin interviewed by J. Elgrably, *James Baldwin, The Art of Fiction No. 78*, «The Paris Review», 91 (Spring 1984), <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2994/the-art-of-fiction-no-78-james-baldwin> (last accessed: 15 January 2016).

¹⁷ Subsequently the novel was accepted also by the American publishing house Dial Press. Cf. Y. Y. DeGout, *Dividing the Mind: Contradictory Portraits of Homoerotic Love in Giovanni's Room*, «African American Review», 26:3, Fiction Issue, (Autumn, 1992), pp. 452-435, p. 452.

¹⁸ Aware of the difficulty that many authors have highlighted in defining Baldwin's departure from the United States either as an 'expatriation' or as an 'exile', I have decided to use 'exile' in this paper because this is the word that Baldwin uses to describe his own condition: «I was an exile long before I went away [...] I am an exile because I can't live in America under the terms on which Americans offer me my life». Baldwin and M. Mead, *A Rap on Race*, Philadelphia, Lippincott, 1971, pp. 220-221.

story of a young and white American man, David, who leaves his country in order to “find himself”:

Perhaps, as we say in America, I wanted to find myself. [...] I think now that if I had any intimation that the self I was going to find would turn out to be only the same self from which I had spent so much time in flight, I would have stayed at home. But again, I think I knew, at the very bottom of my heart, exactly what I was doing when I took the boat for France.¹⁹

As the story evolves, the reader understands that rather than trying to find himself, David flees his homoerotic feelings. After recalling a first homoerotic encounter in his childhood with Joey, a school friend with whom he fears losing his manhood,²⁰ David takes a boat for France where he meets Hella, an American girl to whom he soon proposes. «I wanted a woman to be for me a steady ground, like the earth itself» (GR: 305) he explains later on, metaphorically connecting heterosexual marriage with stability. His aim is to comply with what Baldwin calls the ‘American ideal of manhood’, that is to say with the societal construction of heteronormative masculinity and its code of conduct.²¹ While Hella is away in Spain, pondering over his marriage proposal, David meets Giovanni, an Italian bartender with whom he has a passionate love affair that ends abruptly upon Hella’s return. While Giovanni’s life slowly descends into tragedy as, accused of a murder, he is sentenced to death, Hella discovers the truth about David’s sexuality and leaves him. The narration ends with David’s final departure from Paris.

The novel, which clearly criticises heteronormativity and its damaging effects on a healthy heterosexual or homosexual relationship, is structurally interested by the ‘queer tidalectics’ paradigm as the narrative strategies of *analepsis* and *prolepsis* break up the linearity of the narration. The story starts with a lone David in a big house in the south of France on the eve of Giovanni’s execution, it con-

¹⁹ Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room*, in T. Morrison (ed.), *James Baldwin: Early Novels and Stories*, New York, The Library of America, 1998 (1956), pp. 217-360, p. 236. From now on quoted ‘GR’ in the text.

²⁰ Recalling the masculine features of Joey’s body, David remembers: «The power and the promise and the mystery in 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» (GR: 226). The choice of the character’s name – Joey – moreover allows Baldwin to play with David’s contrasting feelings of fear and joy, as he recalls that during the night that they spent together they: «[...] gave each other *joy*» (GR: 225, my emphasis).

²¹ Cf. Baldwin, *Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood*, «Playboy», January 1985.

tinues with a long flashback through which David remembers his relationship with Giovanni, and eventually ends, coming full circle, with David's final departure on the morning of Giovanni's execution. This cyclical and open-ended structure is emphasised by the presence of smaller back and forth movements that testify to the constant washing upon each other of past and present.

Through the use of the aquatic imagery, the 'queer tidalectics' returns at a thematic level in the opposition between stasis (earth) and movement (water). By representing David as constantly anxious over his performance of heteronormative masculinity, Baldwin explores, and eventually reverses, the usual perception of security and stability granted by the land and the danger and instability generally associated with water, movement, or wandering (e.g. the devil as the quintessential wanderer). If pressurised by the society's gaze, David is afraid of «*rocking* through the world *unanchored*» (GR: 271, my emphasis) and wants to find his «mooring posts» through his marriage with Hella (GR: 222), most of the time he is actually drawn to movement. When asked by his father to go back home and «settle down», he ponders: «whenever he said that, I thought of the *sediment* at the bottom of a *stagnant pond*» (GR: 237, my emphasis). Similarly, throughout the novel, his interactions with women are usually associated with groundedness and rigidity, while his relationship with Giovanni is mostly associated with fluidity, movement, and to a greater extent with water, as if suggesting the regeneration that Giovanni brings to his life. The first time that they meet in the gay bar where Giovanni works, David notices: «[i]t was as though his [Giovanni's] station was a promontory and we were the sea» (GR: 241) which is reinforced by the fact that every time he thinks of Giovanni, «a million details, proof and fruit of intimacy, *flood* my [David's] mind» (GR: 313, my emphasis). This first association of Giovanni with water becomes a constant as Giovanni's 'overflowing' of emotions clashes with David's difficulty in letting himself go (GR: 283). In this case, movement is associated with affect, as when David describes his attraction for Giovanni through the image of the flowing of a defrosted river:

[...] I really loved Giovanni, who had never seemed more beautiful than he was that afternoon. And, watching his face, I realized that it meant much to me that I could make his face so bright. I saw that I might be willing to give a great deal not to lose that power. And *I felt myself flow toward him, as a river rushes when the ice breaks up.* (GR: 288, my emphasis).

The happiness and love that David feels with and for Giovanni are, nevertheless, often accompanied by David's second thoughts, sprouting out of his sense of inadequateness when confronted with society's stereotypes and rigid norms

of masculine conduct. Accordingly, the positive qualities associated with water become threatening in David's mind. Already connected with Giovanni (and as such with queer desire), the aquatic imagery becomes synonym with 'transgressive' behaviour: the 'queer tidalectics' does not only privilege movement over fixity, but is also characterised by a basic disruptive potential. When Hella gets back from Spain her 'transgressive' decision to postpone the heteronormative aspiration of creating a nuclear family is marked by the fact that «[s]he smelled of the wind and sea» (GR: 318), and again, when she asks David to marry her, she pleads: «David please let me be a woman. [...] *Don't throw me back into the sea*» (GR: 353, my emphasis).²² Indeed, the evolving of the story shows that even Hella's acceptance of David's marriage proposal is not dictated by love, but by societal expectations.

Later on, aquatic images are used by David in his reconstruction of the events leading to the death of Guillaume – the owner of the bar in which Giovanni worked for some time – and to the incarceration of Giovanni for his murder. In this context, the aquatic imagery is not only conceived of as threatening but becomes a means for the expression of an unspeakable pain, as Giovanni's refusal of the sexual advances by Guillaume turns into a rape:

He [Giovanni] tries to talk, to be practical, to be reasonable, but of course, it is too late, *Guillaume seems to surround him like the sea itself*. And I think that Giovanni, tortured into a state like madness, *feels himself going under*, is overcome, and Guillaume has his will. I think if this had not happened, Giovanni would not have killed him. For, with his pleasure taken, and while *Giovanni still lies suffocating*, Guillaume becomes a business man once more and, walking up and down, gives excellent reasons why Giovanni cannot work for him anymore. Beneath whatever reasons Guillaume invents the real ones lies hidden and they both, dimly, in their different fashions, see it: Giovanni, like a falling movie star, has lost his drawing power. Everything is known about him, his secrecy has been discovered (GR: 348, my emphasis).

The image of Giovanni being dragged underwater, recalls a similar expression used by David to describe something that he cannot name: the fear that his feeling for Giovanni has awakened in him. Remembering the time spent with Giovanni, David recalls: «Now – now of course, I see something very beautiful in those days, which were such a torture then. I felt, then, that Giovanni was *dragging me with him to the bottom of the sea*» (GR: 313-314, my emphasis).

²² Symbolically enough, David is caught cheating on Hella with a sailor: a figure mixing sea imagery with wandering.

It is particularly the room that David shares with Giovanni that assumes aquatic connotations and becomes a sort of metaphor not only for David's relationship with Giovanni but also for 'non-normative' sexualities in a heteronormative society. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's use of the concept of 'chronotope' for literary analysis, that is to say a trope bearing witness to the intrinsic interconnectedness and inseparability of spatial and temporal relationships,²³ the room could symbolically represent: a 'closet' as the «structure of gay oppression»;²⁴ an enclosed and protected space for self-expression; a cavern associated with castration fear through a psychoanalytical reading; or a womb, in its capacity to create a new life.

Describing the room David recalls: «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» (GR: 281). It is particularly this (in)different flowing of time which David experiences in the room that is of interest to this paper, as it suggests the possibility for an alternative temporality or tempo-r(e)ality that the two manage to create together. The room as a chronotope, read through a 'queer tidalectics', represents indeed an epistemic interruption in the dominant heterosexist discourse, as it enables David and Giovanni to create an alternative (dis)order and to experience life otherwise, that is to say outside of the 'norm' dictated by heteronormative society and its chrononormativity. This alternative tempo-r(e)ality, however, has to remain hidden ('beneath the sea') in order to be fully enjoyed, and indeed when society's heteronormative gaze dawns upon David, he continues:

In the beginning our life together held a joy and amazement which was newborn everyday. Beneath the joy, of course, was anguish and beneath the amazement was fear; [...] anguish and fear had become the surface on which we *slipped and slid*, losing balance, dignity, and pride (GR: 281, my emphasis).

On the surface, that is to say facing society's judgement, the positive emotions connected with water assume again negative connotations, derailing the possibility of creating a space for the expression of their 'forbidden' desire. The room becomes for David claustrophobic and threatening: the windows appear

²³ Cf. M. M. Bakhtin, *Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel*, in M. Holquist (ed.), *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, Eng. trans. by C. Emerson and M. Holquist, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2011 (1981), pp. 84-258.

²⁴ E. K. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Berkley, University of California Press, 1990, p. 71.

as two big staring eyes, the ceiling seems to lower like a demonic cloud, and the yellow ceiling light resembles a hanging «diseased and undefinable sex» (GR: 291) testifying for the judgement and pressure that David feels from society and its pathologisation of homosexuality. With his mind saturated by these discourses, David believes that the key to the disorder of the room is a «matter of punishment and grief», and believes that Giovanni has brought him there in order to destroy the room and to give Giovanni a new and better life (GR: 291). Giovanni, instead, in order to show to David how much «love had changed him» (GR: 291) starts working on the renovation of the room:

He [Giovanni] had some weird idea that it would be nice to have a bookcase sunk in the wall and he chipped through the wall until he came to the brick and began pounding away at the brick. It was hard work, it was insane work, but I did not have the energy or the heart to stop him. In a way he was doing it for me, to prove his love for me. He wanted me to stay in the room with him. Perhaps he was trying, with his own strength, to push back the encroaching walls, without, however, having the walls fall down (GR: 313).

Giovanni's insane work on the room symbolically demonstrates how he tries with all his strength to make room for their love in a society which ostracises it, but without having the whole system collapsing. While at first David believes that Giovanni wants him to destroy the room (the 'closet'), hindsight he understands that Giovanni was already over the Western dichotomous structuring of sexuality as something which is secret and has to be revealed, and which is also partly responsible for its pathologisation.²⁵ Giovanni recognises the true metamorphic potential of the room, the possibility for another world,

²⁵ In *The Will to Knowledge*, Michel Foucault sustains that Western cultures, through a mechanism of knowledge-power, have historically tended toward the revelation of the practices pertaining to sexuality. In other words, by indirectly forcing individuals to reveal the 'secret' of their sexual practices, Western cultures have constituted a *scientia sexualis*, whose desire to define the 'truth' about sexuality is responsible for the pathologisation of certain forms in which sexuality comes. To these cultures, Foucault opposes the ones belonging to the ancient Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Roman and Arabo-Moslem societies, where sexuality remained *ars erotica*. In these cultures the pleasure connected to sexuality had to remain secret, not because it was perceived as negative, but because the truth did not come from a categorisation of the practices of pleasure, but from the pleasure itself, that would have lost its validity and virtue if made known. Pleasure, therefore, was intended as an experiential practice to be known as such, according to its intensity and reverberation on the body and soul. In this context the practice of initiation was privileged, as opposed to the Western knowledge-power structure based on the strategy of confession. Cf. M. Foucault, *Scientia Sexualis*, in *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge*, Eng. trans. by R. Hurley, London, Penguin, 1998 (1976), pp. 53-73.

which David only grasps once the situation has irrevocably precipitated: «I scarcely remember how to describe that room. [...] I did not really stay there very long [...] but it still seems to me that I spent a lifetime there. Life in that room seemed to be *occurring underwater*, as I say, and it is certain that I underwent a *sea-change* there» (GR: 289, my emphasis). The reference to the different tempo-r(e)ality is again aided by the aquatic imagery which serves not only as an enhancer of perceptions (the few months that David spends sharing the room with Giovanni become a lifetime), but also to blur temporal categories. As Neil Browne sustains:

[...] the sea [...] contains the past, present, and future; indeed, in the cycle of things, the distinction between these humanly defined temporal categories become blurred. Time does not seem linear – if anything is cyclical, experiential, linked with the processes of living, dying, and decomposing of various life forms.²⁶

The metamorphic potential of the cyclical, experiential time that David perceives in the room is emphasised by the use of the word 'sea-change' intertextually evoking a deep transformation «into something rich and strange».²⁷ The life that David experiences in the room as a chronotope, albeit strange – and 'strange' is one of the meanings of the word 'queer' – indeed enriches him past his expectations. Through a 'queer tidalectics', that is to say through the experiencing – aided by aquatic imagery – of an alternative temporality which does not 'flow' historically (and as such heteronormatively) but cyclically, experientially, relationally, David understands (and with him the readers) the possibility for a different world. Jacques, who like all the minor characters in Baldwin's oeuvre is pivotal in conveying the narrative meaning,²⁸ recognises this potential for change when, with reference to the friendship between David

²⁶ N. Browne, *Activating the 'Art of Knowing': John Dewey, Pragmatist Ecology, and Environmental Writing*, «ISLE», 11.2 (Summer 2004), pp. 1-24, p. 20.

²⁷ Literally meaning 'deep transformation', the expression 'sea change' was coined by William Shakespeare in *The Tempest*, when Ariel sings about King Alonso's death by drowning and the metamorphosis he goes through. Recalling how King Alonso's bones became coral and his eyes pearls, Ariel sings: «[n]othing of him that doth fade/But doth suffer a sea-change/Into something rich and strange». W. Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 1.2.403-405.

²⁸ In a 1984 interview Baldwin sustained that «minor characters are the subtext, illustrations of whatever it is you're trying to convey. [...] They carry on the tension in a much more explicit way than the majors». Cf. Baldwin interviewed by Jordan Elgrably, *James Baldwin, The Art of Fiction No. 78*, cit.

and Giovanni, he tells David: «you are afraid it may change you. [...] love him and let him love you [...] you can give each other something which will make both of you better – forever – if you will *not* be ashamed, if you will only *not* play it safe» (GR: 267). Despite his love for Giovanni, David fears a world which constantly slips from his grasp, which is out of control. This is especially evident when he decides to leave Giovanni and meets him for the last time. In this occasion Giovanni opens up to David and tells him his story: he used to live in a small Italian village with his wife but, overwhelmed by the desperation of witnessing the death at birth of his child, he decided to leave everything behind him to move to Paris. After hearing his story, David recalls:

I stood up, my head was turning. Salt was in my mouth. The room seemed to rock, as it had the first time I had come here, so many lifetimes ago. I heard Giovanni moan behind me: ‘*Chéri, Mon très cher. Don’t leave me. Please don’t leave me.*’ I turned and held him in my arms staring above his head at the wall, at the man and woman on the wall who walked together among roses (GR: 336).

With the room rocking, salt in his mouth, and an altered perception of time, David describes again his discomfort through aquatic images. He embraces Giovanni and notices the only wall that, despite Giovanni’s efforts in renovating the room, was «destined never to be uncovered» (GR: 289). That wall presents a wallpaper in which a man and a woman «perpetually walked together, hemmed in by roses» (GR: 289) symbolically representing the, as yet, dominant and unalterable heterosexist norm. Feeling like he could not move, as if his «feet were held back by water» (GR: 306), David recalls the very last moment he saw Giovanni:

I will never forget the last time he looked at me. [...] Giovanni sat on the bed, completely naked, holding a glass of cognac between his hands. His body was dead white, his face was wet and grey. I was at the door with my suitcase. With my hand on the knob, I looked at him. Then I wanted to beg him to forgive me. But this would have been too great a confession, any yielding at that moment would have locked me forever in that room with him. And in a way this was exactly what I wanted. I felt a tremor go through me, like the beginning of an earthquake, and felt for an instant, that I was *drowning* in his eyes (GR: 339, my emphasis).

David feels like drowning in Giovanni’s eyes and wishes to remain forever locked in his room, that he now recognises as his dwelling place: his life with Giovanni gives him a sense of belonging that he cannot find in the threatening

world waiting outside those four walls. David understands that he will never be able to erase Giovanni from his memory and that Giovanni's room has irrevocably altered him, so much that towards the end of the story it is Hella's body – the one that he thought of as a refuge, the safe mooring post – that becomes threatening: «I felt my flesh recoil. [...] I was frantically intimidated by her breasts, and when I entered her I began to feel that I would never get out alive» (GR: 350).

Giovanni's body becomes a constant presence in his mind. In the night preceding his execution, while David gets undressed to have a shower, the reflection of his naked body in the mirror starts to merge with that of Giovanni's as evoked by his memory. He imagines Giovanni's tensed muscles opposing resistance to his executioners while he is dragged to the guillotine, and his forthcoming beheading becomes a haunting parallel to David's castration: the demise, psychically and physically, of queer desire. Feeling trapped in the reflected image, which symbolically represents society's controlling gaze, David longs to «crack that mirror and be free» (GR: 359).

By announcing the death of Giovanni, Baldwin seems to adjust to the classic script that wants the 'deviance' removed in order to restore the 'order'. After all, when David and Giovanni meet for the first time, he entrusts Giovanni with a reflection on time which hauntingly foresees his death:

‘[...] Time is just common, it's like water for a fish. Everybody's in this water, nobody gets out of it, or if he does the same thing happens to him that happens to the fish, he dies (GR: 247-248).

The figurative connection of water with time, in this case, affirms the impossibility of living 'out of time': recalling not only a sort of *memento mori*, but also a reflection on the impossibility of living in a world which does not accommodate difference. The end of the novel seems to confirm this state of things as David, preparing to depart on the morning that would lead to Giovanni's death, tears off the letter containing the time of the execution and watches its pieces flying about in the wind. Yet, when it all seems lost, in a final tidalectic movement, the wind blows some fragments of the letter back on him. Baldwin's closure to his novel is highly symbolical as it represents the folding of time upon itself. In resisting closure and with that erasure, Baldwin's 'queer tidalectics' disrupts the linear, chrononormative (which is also heteronormative) experience of time and history.

Conclusion: A Cultural Sea-change

If, to say it with Sara Ahmed, the queer body «does not extend the shape of this world, as a world organized around the form of the heterosexual couple»,²⁹ then Baldwin uses a language that draws on aquatic imagery not only as a means of expression for the unsayable – namely queer desire in the 1950s – but also to show the possibility of creating an alternative to society’s heteronormativity. In Baldwin’s quest for a dwelling time and place for queer people, Giovanni’s presumed death at the end of the novel is not in vain, since his literary ‘sacrifice’ does not signal the demise of queer desire, but it rather calls for a future reverberation of its power, already manifest in the changes brought in David’s life. Through a candid depiction of pain and loss, but also of love and joy, Baldwin shows the complexity of the human experience while conceiving a path-breaking text in the expression and recognition of queer desire. In other words, through an anticipation of the ‘queer tidalectics’ paradigm, Baldwin uses old words in a new order that blurs the boundaries of dichotomous categorisations pertaining to sexuality and opens up the potential for a cultural ‘sea’-change:

You write in order to change the world, knowing perfectly well that you probably can’t, but also knowing that literature is indispensable to the world [...]. The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you alter, even by a millimeter, the way [...] people look at reality, then you can change it.³⁰

Abstract

In his second novel *Giovanni’s Room* (1956), often quoted among the texts reconstructing a queer genealogy, the African American writer James Baldwin presented the damaging effects of what Jafari S. Allan has termed Western classed and ‘racialized heteropatriarchy’ (Allen 2012).

Drawing on the fruitful conflation of two theoretical paradigms – namely Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s concept of ‘tidalectics’ and the work on queer temporalities (Hal-

²⁹ S. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2006, p. 20.

³⁰ Baldwin, *interview with Mel Watkins*, «New York Times Book Review» (23 September 1979), p. 3.

berstan 2005; Muñoz 2009; Freeman 2010) – this paper aims at exploring how, through the use of aquatic imagery as a dissolvent of borders and categories, Baldwin tries to find a language to express an alternative to this normative and oppressive system. Brathwaite's 'tidalectics' (a 'tidal dialectic'), that draws on the back and forth movement of the tides to express a cyclical temporality which resists closure, parallels the resistance of queer temporalities to 'chrononormativity', that is the structuring of individuals' lifetime according to the rhythms of birth, accumulation of wealth, reproduction, and death.

In Baldwin's novel, shaped around the *ménage à trois* which sees the male protagonist (David) involved with his American fiancée (Hella) and his Italian secret lover (Giovanni), it is especially the room that David shares with Giovanni which assumes aquatic connotations. The room then, through the paradigm offered by the 'queer tidalectics', will be read as an ever-changing place of transformation that enables Baldwin to find a site for the expression and recognition of queer desire, while disrupting the linearity of Western historiography and gender essentialism.

Nel suo secondo romanzo *Giovanni's Room* (1956), spesso menzionato tra i testi che ricostruiscono una genealogia queer, lo scrittore afroamericano James Baldwin presenta gli effetti disastrosi di ciò che Jafari S. Allan ha definito come l' 'eteropatriarcato razzializzato e classista occidentale' (Allan 2012).

Sulla base della feconda combinazione di due paradigmi teorici – il concetto di 'tidalectics' di Edward Kamau Brathwaite e la produzione teorica intorno alle temporalità queer (in particolare Halberstan 2005; Muñoz 2009; Freeman 2010) – questo articolo intende esplorare il modo in cui, attraverso l'utilizzo dell'immaginario acquatico come solvente di confini e categorie, Baldwin cerca un linguaggio adatto ad esprimere un'alternativa a questo sistema normativo ed oppressivo. La 'tidalectics' (una dialettica delle maree) di Brathwaite, infatti, nel suo ispirarsi al moto delle maree per esprimere una temporalità ciclica che resiste qualsiasi chiusura, si pone in parallelo alla resistenza che le temporalità queer oppongono alla 'crononormatività', ossia allo strutturarsi della vita degli individui secondo i ritmi della nascita, dell'accumulazione di capitale, della riproduzione e della morte.

Nel romanzo di Baldwin, che si struttura intorno al triangolo amoroso che vede il protagonista (David) coinvolto in una relazione con la sua fidanzata (Hella) e con l'italiano Giovanni, è soprattutto la camera che David condivide con Giovanni che finisce per assumere connotazioni acquatiche. La stanza, dunque, attraverso il paradigma teorico offerto dalla 'queer tidalectics' (dialettica delle maree queer), sarà letta come luogo di trasformazione continua che permette a Baldwin di trovare una modalità di espressione e riconoscimento del desiderio queer, scardinando al contempo la linearità della storiografia occidentale e dell'essentialismo di genere.