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## James Baldwin and Black Women's Fiction

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African American women novelists of recent decades recognize James Baldwin as a crucial influence. Alice Walker writes that after encountering

a book rack completely filled with copies of *Another Country* in 1963. . . . Baldwin's world became my privacy . . . he proved several things to me that I *needed* to be proved; that being black added treasure to the already rich art of writing well; that to be vulnerable with one's self is a gift others desperately need; and that it was indeed possible to be black, a writer, and someone who could make a living being both. ("Typescript")

Many women writers recollect experiencing similarly intimate connections upon reading Baldwin's words. Reflections on Baldwin around the time of his death are particularly thick with celebrations of his work and life. Toni Cade Bambara, Paule Marshall, Maya Angelou, and Sonia Sanchez participated in the final celebration of Baldwin's life (Smith 77). His funeral program lists Marshall, Vertamae Grosvenor, Rosa Guy, and Louise Meriwether among his "honorary pallbearers." In her eulogy for Baldwin, Toni Morrison says, "You gave me a language to dwell in, a gift so perfect it seems my own invention. . . . You went into that forbidden territory and decolonized it . . . un-gated it for black people so that in your wake we could enter it, occupy it, restructure it in order to accommodate our complicated passion" ("Life" 76).

There is no question that Baldwin means something important to contemporary black women writers. I am interested here in how his influence shapes their literary strategies for writing about same-sex desire among women. This legacy demands that we grapple with two apparent dissonances between Baldwin's fiction and that of his female descendants. First, authors including Gail Jones, Gloria Naylor, and Morrison evoke Baldwin as a touchstone for their depictions of characters and relationships, which is surprising because Baldwin generally portrays women in less nuanced terms than men.<sup>1</sup> Second, Baldwin is celebrated as a queer or gay writer, but some who claim him as a literary ancestor offer deeply troubling depictions of same-sex female desire, from Cat and Jeffy in Jones's *Corregidora* (1975) to "The Two" in Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1980), or fail to depict lesbians among otherwise wildly varied women, as in Morrison's novels. Jones, Naylor, and Morrison inherit Baldwin's uses of music, his struggle with terms for identity, and his careful efforts to depict love and sex. Unlike Baldwin, they use these literary strategies to struggle toward what Michael Awkward calls "redemptive possibilities of female coalescence" (98). Awkward's "coalescence" involves a "female unity" of both a female character's private and public selves and her community of women (98). Coalescence helps us understand contemporary black women's novels because this notion of a group of women working for social change is always a goal, always in process, and rarely sustainable.<sup>2</sup>

The simultaneity of "redemptive possibilities" on the one hand and the constant threat that such a community will dissolve on the other makes coalescence especially useful for describing how contemporary black women novelists depict same-sex relationships, sexual or not. Awkward does not use "female coalescence" to describe lesbian relationships, but his term for women's alliances proves useful in understanding the representation of lesbians in contemporary black women's novels.

These particular female alliances both offer the possibility of social change and make failures of community visible. Baldwin shows characters working out individual identity in relationships that are frequently interracial and often among men. Later women writers use Baldwin's language and narrative strategies to depict communal identity in intraracial relationships, often among women. While the New York and Paris of Baldwin's *Another Country* are multiracial, Jones's *Corregidora*, Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, and Morrison's *Love* (2003) take place in exclusively black communities. In discussing these four novels, I will explore how women authors seize on Baldwin's language to depict a female coalescence that creates, defines, and also limits community. Community in these women's novels succeeds or fails almost directly according to its ability to make room for romantic relationships among women.

A word about my use of *Another Country* rather than *Giovanni's Room* (1956) is in order here. Although thematic concerns connect all of Baldwin's novels with contemporary African American women's writing, I explore four particular novels in this essay because of their formal as well as thematic ties. For example, both Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* and Naylor's *Linden Hills* (1985) show the danger and impossibility of a gay man attempting to structure his life around heterosexual marriage, but I am more interested in the multiple points of view from an ensemble cast that appear in both *Another Country* and *The Women of Brewster Place*. While *Giovanni's Room* employs a white, first-person narrator, none of the novels I treat in this essay rely on a single voice and all of them focus exclusively on African American characters. Even *Corregidora*, told in the first person, makes room on the page for past generations of women to tell their own stories. While *Giovanni's Room* is explicitly about a gay protagonist failing to come to terms with his sexuality, both *Another Country* and Morrison's *Love* are interested in complex friendships that sometimes have a sexual valence (a character could come out of the closet in *Giovanni's Room*, but coming out would make no sense in the context of *Another Country* or *Love*). Troubled and productive friendships, polyvocality, and multiple points of view are definitional for African American women's novels, particularly in the last few decades of the twentieth century. I trace some of these strategies back to Baldwin as part of my investigation into his literary legacy of depicting same-sex desire.

So how did Baldwin's legacy become one of making little, no, or deeply problematic room for same-sex desire in women's communities? To answer that question, I will discuss Baldwin's fiction using *Another Country* and attempt to grapple with his legacy in novels by Jones, Naylor, and Morrison. The stakes of Baldwin's *Another Country* are survival; the title conjures up an alternative world where the jazz musician Rufus could have lived rather than killing himself. Black women novelists are also concerned with the difficulty of finding room in a community for all would-be members, but in the context of black women's communities: *Corregidora* banishes the lesbian characters from its pages, Naylor's neighborhood in *Brewster Place* includes lesbians but doesn't let them survive and Morrison's *Paradise* (1998), *Love*, and *A Mercy* (2008) depict female households in which there are no clearly erotic relationships. These authors use Baldwin's layered characterization of love, but remake it to depict female coalescence as the essential element determining whether black communities thrive or fracture. Jones takes up Baldwin's uses of music to convey sexual identity. Naylor explores what Baldwin calls "the disastrously explicit medium of language" ("Autobiographical Notes" 7-8) to extend his vision of love to include female community. Morrison, the most vocal of these three authors about Baldwin's influence on her writing, creates no characters whom we might easily identify as lesbians. This too is an inheritance from Baldwin, but one Morrison remakes to emphasize bonds among women.

## *Another Country*

*Another Country* offers several fictional tactics that became important to African Americans writing in his wake. The novel uses complex characterization, music, and an absence of terms such as “black,” “white,” “gay,” and “straight” to resist fixed notions of identity. *Another Country* bridges what Eve Sedgwick calls “the radically discontinuous relation of male homosocial and homosexual bonds” (5) to open up a wider range of relationships. For both Sedgwick and Baldwin this enterprise is about relationships among men. We find no sexual relationships among women in Baldwin’s fiction. As Trudier Harris notes, “As lovers, Baldwin’s women are always engaged in heterosexual affairs; lesbianism as a concept does not surface in his books” (8).<sup>3</sup> Scholars of *Another Country* understandably follow Baldwin’s lead and equate the queer and the gay almost exclusively with men.<sup>4</sup> In various sexual encounters, *Another Country* asserts that sex with women endangers masculinity, while sex between men offers the power to restore complex masculinity to two male bodies. Heterosexual relationships, regardless of race, are never spaces of possibility in the novel: Ida and Vivaldo betray and resent one another, Rufus rapes Leona the first time they meet, and Cass and Richard live their days in a painful and tense marriage.

For Baldwin, concrete terms for identity make self-definition impossible. Labels such as “gay” and “straight” come with culturally constructed sets of ideas. This means that the terms have been set before the subject has the opportunity to develop her identity. *Another Country* rejects some of these terms to interrogate masculinity, a prescient strategy in the era of civil rights and just before the rise of Black Power—two movements whose gender politics would soon face extensive criticism. Baldwin asserts, “We’re trapped in language, of course. But homosexual is not a noun. At least not in my book. . . . Perhaps a verb. You see, I can only talk about my own life. I loved a few people and they loved me. It had nothing to do with these labels” (Goldstein 183-84). There is freedom in living as “a verb,” rather than being “trapped” as a “noun.” In this sense, Baldwin’s vision of sexuality is queer; he disrupts and destabilizes identity in the mode of queer studies. While we must value Baldwin’s resistance to “labels,” we must also recognize his refusal to use such terms as an impediment to political action (if one does not, for example, believe there is such a thing as being gay, one cannot act for gay civil rights). Phillip Brian Harper describes this difficulty with language: “it is precisely the indeterminate character of queer critique that predicates its analytic force” (110), but “the name recedes precisely to the same extent that shame waxes” in the context of a homophobic culture (115).<sup>5</sup> Using the flexibility of the “verb” means complying with homophobia by disavowing the “noun.”

Baldwin came under critique as a racial spokesman from a younger generation of writers and activists, and partly as a result of these critiques retreated from issues of sexuality in his nonfiction, participating increasingly in a heteronormative black nationalist discourse.<sup>6</sup> Although Baldwin’s fiction plays an important role in a canon of gay literature, he was “deeply suspicious of the gay movement” and refused to use “gay” or “homosexual” to describe himself (Field 115). In his response to Eldridge Cleaver’s attacks in *Soul on Ice*, Baldwin went so far in the late 1960s as to use “a rhetoric (faggots, punks, and sissies) that even the Black Panther Party had by then officially prohibited” (Field 132). E. Frances White describes the Baldwin-Cleaver exchange as the apex of “Baldwin’s own narrow vision of masculinity” in that “he made the mistake of allowing Cleaver to set the terms—terms that assumed that ‘woman’ is an inherently diminished position” (254).<sup>7</sup> In other words, Baldwin

responded to claims that gay men are like women by defending masculinity and thus left intact Cleaver's heterosexist terms. This rigid mode of normative masculinity in the Black Power Movement was empowering as well as limiting. In political movements generally and black nationalist movements in particular, the urgent need for political action often elides differences within unity.

*Another Country* reveals the dangers of normative black masculinity through the friendship of Vivaldo and Rufus. These characters, like Baldwin, believe there is such a thing as a "real black man"; Rufus thinks he has to be it and Vivaldo thinks he can borrow it. This limited notion of black male identity hurts them both. Vivaldo holds progressive political views; he's a white bohemian writer in midcentury New York City. Rufus is his closest friend. Baldwin draws both characters with complexity and depth. The novel sympathizes with Vivaldo; in Baldwin's fictional world, all characters across lines of race, class, and gender suffer and earn readerly empathy. I am interested here, however, in the cultural borrowing that is both Vivaldo's least likable trait and the novel's central obstacle to any successful romantic relationships that include black people.

Early in the novel, the two men sit in Vivaldo's apartment listening to Bessie Smith's "Backwater Blues." Hearing Smith's record, Vivaldo equates his own experiences with Rufus's: "'Rufus,' said Vivaldo, suddenly, 'believe me, I know, I know—a lot of things hurt you that I can't really understand. . . . A lot of things hurt me that I can't really understand'" (50). The link Vivaldo makes between himself and Rufus, likening his own problems to Rufus's, elides racial oppression. "Backwater Blues" is an apt choice: its lyrics document the suffering of African Americans during a 1927 flood and suggest diasporic displacement throughout history, thus archiving the very structural racism that Vivaldo erases in identifying with Rufus. The next Smith song the men listen to, "Empty Bed Blues," allows for a nascent sexual connection in which Vivaldo fetishizes both Bessie's blues and Rufus's sexuality. "*When my bed get empty, make me feel awful mean and blue*, 'Oh sing it, Bessie,' Vivaldo muttered. *My springs is getting rusty, sleeping single like I do*" (51). Through his affirmative response to the record, Vivaldo relates his own loneliness to Smith's, just as he relates his own problems to Rufus's. The sexual content of Smith's lyrics fosters a dialogue between the two men about whether they wish to be "queer" (51). Both the song and Rufus are markers of blackness that are meaningful to Vivaldo only as tools with which to develop his own queer identity. While Vivaldo eventually admits his own sexual desires, he can never fully imagine that Rufus too might have desired men. The construct of "real black man" makes room for Rufus as a stud who beats his white girlfriend Leona, but not as a man who desires other men.

Vivaldo's instrumental use of Rufus is another danger of this discourse. On the way to Rufus's funeral, Vivaldo looks at Harlem, compares it with the neighborhood of his youth, and asserts that the black children are "more *alive*" (113). Following the funeral Vivaldo declares, "I wish that something real would happen to me" (126). He immediately seeks that "something real" in Rufus's sister Ida. Baldwin's omniscient narration reveals Vivaldo's statements to be problematic in two ways. First, he relates his own suffering to that of black people, again erasing racial oppression. Second, Vivaldo participates in the type of narrow racial defining that left Rufus socially homeless and may have led to his suicide.

Until the last part of *Another Country*, Vivaldo moves between what he perceives as white and black modes of experience. Ernesto Martínez asserts that *Another Country* posits identity not just as a set of constricting terms to be discarded, but rather as "practices of interpretation and interaction for which we need to be increasingly more responsible and through which we might better understand our social world" (783). Assuming this responsibility entails difficult work. Inhabiting "another country" can be terrifying, as Vivaldo realizes when he looks in a mirror and sees Rufus:

And now—now it seemed that they all were equal in misery, confusion, and despair. . . . Aha, he heard Rufus snicker, you don't be careful, motherfucker, you going to get a *black* hard on. He heard again the laughter which had followed him down the block. And something in him was breaking; he was, briefly and horribly, in a region where there were no definitions of any kind, neither of color, nor of male and female. (301-02)

Vivaldo sees what it would be like to break free from terms for identity, and he is horrified. To have expressed his complex love for Rufus, Vivaldo would have to have had no rigid racial, sexual, or gender identity. While he may find a way to mourn the loss of Rufus, Vivaldo cannot stand the loss of his whiteness. Further, his rigid idea of Rufus leaves no room for Rufus to be anything other than black. Vivaldo's fear offers him the possibility of what Martínez calls "risking identities" as a kind of socially productive "chaos" (791). The "region where there were not definitions of any kind" might have allowed Vivaldo and Rufus to act on their love for one another, but travel to this "region" requires a "breaking" that Vivaldo is not ready to accept. Baldwin grapples here with the possibilities and perils of rejecting categorical language for identity, of avoiding "the disastrously explicit medium of language."<sup>8</sup>

Baldwin passes this struggle on to a generation of black women novelists. Like Baldwin, Jones, Naylor, and Morrison rarely use "lesbian" or "gay," and like Baldwin they depict a spectrum of same-sex affinity and desire that is both freed and limited by this linguistic choice. By "free" I mean here free from a label, and by "limited" I mean limited by the danger of a linguistic closeting whereby same-sex desire becomes invisible.<sup>9</sup> Dwight McBride, describing how this occurs in African American studies, writes that "the very models of intervention into racial discrimination at the heart of the analysis represented by African American studies are themselves committed to the flattening out (if not the evisceration) of queers or queer sexuality and the challenges they pose to the heterosexist construct that is 'the African American community'" (69). In other words, combating "racial discrimination" in literature and scholarship can lead to an erasure, a "flattening out" of "queers or queer sexuality."

Baldwin includes, even focuses on, queerness in his fiction. Contemporary black women novelists in his wake write novels that have queer elements, but offer troubling or absent depictions of gays and lesbians. The productive slipperiness of "queer" avoids getting "disastrously explicit," thus failing to call anyone gay or lesbian. It is this "flattening out," a linguistic closeting or erasure, that interests me as it persists from Baldwin's novels to works of later women writers. These novelists are also literary scholars: Jones, Naylor, and Morrison hold postgraduate degrees and have all taught at universities. They are thus implicated in the ongoing invisibility of black queerness that McBride explains: "African American studies' institutional rise necessitated the primacy of race politics with regard to its embattled and contested institutional status. . . . This often led to the collapsing of differences of gender, class, and sexuality into a more homogenous, hegemonic black subjectivity" (85-86). In their novels, these women authors, like Baldwin, interrogate a "hegemonic black subjectivity" but use his literary strategies in an all-black setting populated by nuanced female characters.

Jones, Naylor, and Morrison rework Baldwin's troubled relationships into a female critique of heteronormativity and they use his interest in complex relationships among men to explore female coalescence. Uses of music, silence, complex sexuality, and a resistance to terms for identity all find their way from Baldwin to contemporary women writers. These authors put those strategies to new uses, turning their gaze away from Baldwin's male interracial relationships, and instead look toward the limits and possibilities of intraracial female friendship.

## James Baldwin and Gayl Jones

Although Gayl Jones's early fiction has not reached a place akin to that of Baldwin's novels as part of a gay and lesbian canon, we can look to sexual dynamics in Baldwin to better understand Jones's manipulations of language around sexual identity. Jones, like Baldwin, uses music as an extralinguistic form to create a flexible, complex portrait of sexual identity. However, the same strategy that made room for male same-sex desire in *Another Country* ultimately serves in *Corregidora* to consolidate heterosexuality.

Jones does not devote a chapter to Baldwin in *Liberating Voices* (1991), her study of orality in African American literature, but she does acknowledge Baldwin as an important part of this tradition. For Jones, music is central among the literary uses of oral and folk culture that characterize African American literature; she mentions Baldwin periodically throughout *Liberating Voices* as an author attuned to the significance of music in African American writing (51, 91, 154-55). She counts Baldwin among the authors who made "folk language flexible enough to enter the fabric of narrative to tell the whole story" (137). In his cover blurb for Jones's first novel, Baldwin writes, "*Corregidora* is the most brutally honest and painful revelation of what has occurred, and is occurring, in the souls of Black men and women." Jones celebrates Baldwin in similar terms: "contemporary writers have explored the social and psychological contradiction of sexuality. One finds this especially in the works of James Baldwin . . . in his most notable novel, *Another Country*, about sexual ambivalence, interracial duplicity, and forms of cruelty" (*Liberating* 117). "Brutally honest and painful revelation[s]" of interior lives appear in both Baldwin's and Jones's fiction. Jones understood this connection as it pertains to *Corregidora*; she notes that the "psychosexual ambivalences and contradictions in the American experience" she came to see as thematic in *Corregidora* connect it to "works by Baldwin" (Tate 145). Jones's description of relationships in *Another Country* as "forms of cruelty" pins down the psychosexual dynamics between Vivaldo and Rufus, but also speaks to Jones's own Mutt and Ursa in *Corregidora*.

For both authors, "forms of cruelty" are part of love and intimacy. These "forms of cruelty" are difficult to narrate; they call attention to the limits of language. Baldwin asserts, "Writers are obliged, at some point, to realize they are involved in a language which they must change. And for a black writer in this country to be born into the English language is to realize that the assumptions on which the language operates are his enemy" (*Cross* 114). As Cheryl Wall notes in her reading of *Corregidora*, "music is also a metaphor for the unspeakable: what cannot be said both because it is too painful or dangerous to express in words and because no one could hear or understand the words if they could be found" (17).<sup>10</sup> In full awareness of the limits of language and the possibilities of music, Jones remakes English through formal and thematic uses of the blues.<sup>11</sup> Keeping with a long tradition in African American literature, Baldwin and his descendants turn to music to resist "the assumptions on which the language operates."

Jones expands Baldwin's pairing of music and sexual interiority. Vivaldo and Rufus negotiate their relationship using Bessie Smith as a third member of the conversation; Jones's ambiguous closing dialogue in *Corregidora* is formatted as a blues stanza. In both cases, music works as both a "metaphor for the unspeakable" and a formal strategy. *Another Country* avoids "gay" and "homosexual" in order to expand the range of its characters' actions (rather than identities), on the one hand, while Jones finds a kind of potential power in refusing to name the act of castration that is possible at the moment of fellatio that concludes *Corregidora*. The sexual act is rich, ambiguous, and heterosexual in Jones's novel: "What is it a woman can do to

a man that make him hate her so bad he wont to kill her one minute and keep thinking about her and can't get her out of his mind the next? . . . A moment of pleasure and excruciating pain at the same time . . . a moment that stops before it breaks the skin" (184). Achieving satisfying heterosexual union is no small feat in *Corregidora*, given the history of Ursa's maternal line. Portuguese slaveholder Corregidora rapes at least two generations of women in Brazil before Ursa's great grandmother castrates him with her teeth. Ursa's grandmother and mother keep this final act a secret, but tell and retell the story of sexual abuse. As Ashraf Rushdy notes, given the ways slavery polices black sexuality in general and in *Corregidora* in particular, "sexuality for enslaved peoples" is "no longer only a domain of personal self-assertion or the terrain of accommodation, but rather a site for resistance to the system of slavery itself" (283). On the threshold between fellatio and castration, Ursa becomes aware of the power heterosexuality gives her; she says to Mutt, "I could kill you" (184).

This leaves us unable to settle on a single reading of sexuality in *Corregidora*. Although the novel is ambiguous about sex and sexuality, Ursa is decidedly homophobic. Keith Byerman writes, "Jones's narrators are uncomfortable with lesbianism, perhaps even homophobic, and this is a position that is not challenged within the texts" (260). Jones says, "Lesbianism exists, and that's the only way that I include it in my work. I'll have characters respond to it positively or negatively, or sometimes the characters may simply acknowledge it as a reality" (Tate 147). These dynamics shape Ursa's interactions with Cat Lawson and Jeffy in *Corregidora*. After conflicts with two men, Ursa relies on Cat for figurative and literal sustenance, but ends the friendship upon discovering Cat is gay ("Lesbianism exists," but goes unnamed). Ursa reacts to young Jeffy's advances with violence and disgust. When Cat briefly discusses her sexuality, she connects her desire for women to a failed heterosexual marriage. While *Corregidora* levels a serious critique of heterosexuality, the novel can imagine lesbians only as a reaction to a heterosexual world or as Ursa's stepping stone to heterosexual union.<sup>12</sup> That Cat has been a supportive friend makes Ursa's actions especially painful; her homophobia ends a sustaining same-sex alliance. Jones critiques opposite-sex alliances as entangled with patriarchy and a history of chattel slavery, but narrates no lasting female coalescence.<sup>13</sup> The "forms of cruelty" in Baldwin's novel play out in Jones's work as well, so that Rufus's suicide finds an echo in Cat's banishment from the setting and prose of *Corregidora*.

The use of music to open up a more inclusive identity depends on performance. The "verb" of Baldwin's imagining might denote not only sexual acts but also singing or playing an instrument. Rushdy suggests this: "Jones shows how *performance* is both a means of historical recovery and a strategy for resisting the patterns of identity formation in which inhere the residues of slavery in both the family and the nation" (274). The blues "constitute the cultural form best suited to that performance" because the blues does not deny a slave past, but rather offers "a different kind of re-enactment" to "accentuate the performed quality of desire, sexuality, and racial identity" (Rushdy 291-92). That these aspects of identity are "performed" means, following Judith Butler, that they can be altered. We see this in the blues performances of Baldwin's Ida and Jones's Ursa but also in the form of *Corregidora*. For example, Ursa and Cat's dialogue creates a blues stanza:

"If that nigger love me he wouldn't've throwed me down the steps," I called.  
 "What?" She came to the door.  
 "I said if that nigger loved me he would't've throwed me down the steps."  
 "I know niggers love you do worse than that," she said. (36-37)

Ursa calls the "A" line, repeats it with difference and Cat responds with the "B" line. Their dialogue forms a classic twelve-bar blues stanza. This performance of the blues lets the reader in on Cat's history of hurt at the hands of men; she has known men who "do worse" than throwing a woman "down the steps." Jones undercuts



Ursa's coming discomfort with Cat's lesbianism by first presenting this intimate performance of a shared blues. Because it adheres strictly to the AAB blues structure and meter, we might read this same-sex collaboration as more successful than Ursa's blues dialogues with Mutt. In the twenty-two years they are apart after Mutt "threw [her] down the steps," Ursa imagines conversations with him. In their dream-like dialogues, the AAB structure almost always gets interrupted or fails (90, 98-99). Not until the final scene of the novel are Mutt and Ursa able to perform a complete blues; Ursa and Cat seem to have no trouble collaborating on a blues performance. Ursa's blues serve thematically to consolidate her heterosexual identity, in part by closing off same-sex affinities. However, even as the content of the story rejects same-sex desire, the form of *Corregidora* establishes intimacy between women.

*Corregidora* teases out sexual identity through verbs (including blues performance) rather than nouns. This puts Jones in the same bind as Baldwin: the rejection of categorical language both creates and limits coalescence. Inheriting Baldwin's pairing of music and complex sexuality, Jones uses the tools of *Another Country* to open up opposite-sex relations as sites of resistance, just as Baldwin did for same-sex relations. Jones continues Baldwin's productive confusion of psychosexual identity as always formed in relationships. Her novel complicates and critiques heterosexuality, but does not establish a community because of the limited room for any kind of alliance among women in the novel. We see women connect in the blues form, but not the narrative content. Although women's encounters in *Corregidora* may be limited, Jones exposes "forms of cruelty" sometimes left out of Baldwin's *Another Country*. Gloria Naylor, too, uses Baldwin as a model for teasing out interpersonal dynamics in fiction.

## James Baldwin and Gloria Naylor

In a *Yale Review* article published in 1989, Naylor traces black female sexuality in African American literature as "overly chaste and virtuous," from William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853) through turn-of-the-century novels by Frances E. W. Harper and Pauline Hopkins, whose heroines bore the burden of impeccable "morals" and "sexuality" as "instruments in the cause of racial uplift" (21-22). Naylor sees a shift during the Harlem Renaissance to an equally damaging extreme whereby male authors played into "a voyeuristic desire on the part of white readers for excessive sexuality in blacks" (22), and women writers from Nella Larsen to Zora Neale Hurston restricted women's sexuality to "the safe confines of marriage" (23).<sup>14</sup>

For Naylor, the turning point comes with Baldwin, "the only established male voice in the literary tradition to dare to explore black sexuality . . . he gave us men in love with men and with women, black and white. He gave us women in love with men, white and black" (24). Naylor's omission of women loving women seems willful here. She celebrates Baldwin for liberating black women and men in terms of "sexuality." Men are free from a "silence" regarding "homosexuality" that haunted work by Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, and Wallace Thurman, but women are free to express only heterosexual desire. This liberation leaves no room for lesbians in its cosmology. Naylor chooses *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974) as her key example of love and sex in Baldwin's fiction. This is fitting, as *Beale Street* is Baldwin's only novel narrated by a female character and arguably his only novel to include no same-sex romantic relationships.<sup>15</sup> Naylor employs the word "homosexual," thus using more direct categorical language than Baldwin, but she does not include women in that category. Baldwin did not seem to have lesbians in mind when he warned of the "disastrously explicit medium of language," but wrote lesbians out of the literary imagination here precisely by avoiding that "language."

In her article, Naylor reads Morrison's *Sula* Peace as a hero for "taking pleasure in sleeping with other women's husbands without love or regret" (25), and celebrates Alice Walker's Celie and Shug Avery in one brief sentence without mentioning same-sex female desire. Naylor defends contemporary black fiction for portraying black women as strong and insisting on "affection between the sexes" (28). She goes so far as to assert that womanhood is predicated on a kind of endurance in heterosexual relationships: "In the writings of Afro-American women, the test of love is what the black woman stays *through*" (29). This heteronormative defense makes sense in a moment when writers including Ntozake Shange and Morrison had come under attack for their portrayals of African American men.<sup>16</sup> We must also attend to the ways in which an era of liberated literary sexuality limited and elided women's desire for women. There is just one moment in the *Yale Review* article when Naylor suggests romantic love between women: "In their novels black women writers have always wondered about our relationships to our men (sexual or not), and our relationships to each other (sexual or not)" (30). Here we see again the double-edged sword of the absence of terms. On the one hand, there is a broad field of possibility in "our relationships to each other (sexual or not)." On the other hand, the absence of the word "lesbian" suggests that Naylor is thinking only in terms of "or not."

Naylor, unlike Baldwin or Jones, uses specific terms for sexuality in her fiction, most prominently in the "The Two" in *The Women of Brewster Place*. Indications of same-sex desire between Theresa and Lorraine, two new residents of Brewster Place, first appear in amorphous terms: neighbors observe their "communion" and assume the women are "*that way*" (131). As this section progresses, the dialogue introduces more specific terms, particularly derogatory ones. As Naylor moves from the vague language of verbs to the concrete language of nouns, we can see why Baldwin considered such language "disastrously explicit." Labels have truly terrible results. The first occurrence of "butch" and "dyke" in the story comes from C. C. Baker and his "pack" of young men who are "greatly disturbed by the thought of Lorraine" (162-63). This linguistic violence has a clear effect on Theresa and Lorraine. Immediately after this incident, the couple fights over terms with Theresa insisting, "we're just a couple of dykes" and Lorraine responding, "that's a filthy thing to say" (164). Theresa also claims "lesbo" and "butch," arguing that using these terms signifies self-acceptance (165). Shortly after the argument, C. C. and his group rape and murder Lorraine, seemingly to assert their masculinity. Although this crime could happen without "disastrously explicit" labels for identity, readers of Naylor's "The Two" need Theresa's words to understand that these rigid words and violent deeds are intimately bound.

Naylor's move from verbs to nouns creates the possibility of a collective anger that was not on the agenda in the fiction of Baldwin and Jones.<sup>17</sup> Lorraine, like Rufus in *Another Country* and Cat in *Corregidora*, is sacrificed to the development of other characters. In *The Women of Brewster Place*, however, this is a sacrifice not in service of racial identity or heterosexual relationships, but rather of women's communion. Lorraine's death haunts the women of Brewster Place; she appears in their dreams. An unspoken bond brings the women together in "The Block Party," the final section of *Brewster* in which they destroy the wall that hides their neighborhood from the world. Their female community brings Theresa into this ritual of mourning and resistance.

This collective action is, however, too late to save Lorraine; female coalescence is a trade-off, not a cure for prejudice. As Barbara Smith puts it,

In the context of the novel, a lesbian relationship might well embody the culmination of women's capacity to love and be committed to each other. Yet both lesbian characters are ultimately victims. Although Naylor portrays the community's homophobia toward the lovers as unacceptable, the fate she designs for the two women is the most brutal and negative of any in the book. (55-56)

Lorraine's murder shows that the stakes of *Another Country* and *Corregidora* continue in Naylor's later novel; the battle over self-definition and self-articulation is still about survival. *The Women of Brewster Place*, however, does use the "disastrously explicit" medium of language to achieve some gains for women's same-sex desire in contemporary African American fiction.

Naylor locates lesbians on a continuum of love among women, much as Baldwin did for men in *Another Country*. Days before Lorraine's death, residents of Brewster Place argue about the female couple. While much of the language in this debate is homophobic and hateful, Mattie has the most authoritative word when she says to her friend Etta, "Well, I've loved women too. There was Miss Eva and Ciel, and even as ornery as you can get, I've loved you practically all my life." She goes on, "I've loved some women deeper than I ever loved any man" (141). Readers know how true this is at this point in *Brewster*, as we've seen Mattie caring deeply and patiently for the women of her neighborhood. Love among women is a central value of the novel and Mattie suggests that the love of friendship is not so different from romantic love.

Naylor works to make Baldwin's legacy of same-sex love productive for contemporary black women's fiction. She depicts female coalescence in a community of women who act to change their collective material conditions, but does not quite create a community that could include women's same-sex desire. In fact the community only coalesces in collective action after sacrificing a lesbian woman. Smith describes "the absence of a mediating position between complete assimilation and alienation" that leaves Theresa and Lorraine no room to be (57). In an all-black community, Naylor depicts "The Two" as opposites, pitting Lorraine's "desire for acceptance . . . based upon assimilation and denial" against Theresa's "healthier defiance" (Smith 57). Neither the rejection of "gay" in *Another Country* nor an explicit battle over "lesbian" in *Brewster* manages to save homosexual characters from death. *The Women of Brewster Place*, in its plot, characterization, and language illustrates that terms for identity are both necessary and "disastrously explicit." Toni Morrison's novels are also concerned with coalescence sustained by African American women, but her communities too are weakened by their inability to accommodate same-sex romantic love.

### James Baldwin and Toni Morrison

Baldwin and Morrison met in 1973 when Morrison was working as an editor at Random House (Library of America). They were born only seven years apart, but Morrison is a later writer in the canon of African American literature partly because her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, appears in 1970, a decade and a half after Baldwin's first published works, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) and *Notes of a Native Son* (1955). The two were well aware of each other's writings, and the influence was a two-way street.<sup>18</sup> As her eulogy for Baldwin indicates, Morrison sees her inheritance as one of language. In a 2001 interview, Morrison responds to a viewer e-mail asking about Baldwin's influence on her writing. She describes him as "about race," a race man whose same-sex desire does not define him, and cites the influence of Baldwin's "truth-telling manner" and his way of writing "that was both scathing and at the same time loving" (C-SPAN).<sup>19</sup>

If Baldwin is important to Morrison, if he opened up a new "truth-telling manner" for her to "dwell" in, where is all the same-sex desire that was foundational for that language? Charles Nero posits the most direct critique of Morrison on these grounds: "The acclaimed writer Toni Morrison has woven into her novels

these ideas of homosexuality as alien to African cultures, as forced upon black men by racist European civilizations, and the inability to acquire and sustain manhood” (401-02). Nero cites examples from *The Bluest Eye* and *Tar Baby* (1981), and takes *Beloved* (1987) to task in particular for the Sweet Home men, among whom “sex with farm animals is preferable to homoerotic sex.” As Nero asserts, “Morrison’s description is homophobic because it reveals her inability to imagine homosexual relationships among heroic characters” (402).

Some evidence for Nero’s claims can be drawn from a 1980 letter to Melvin Dixon, in which Morrison (as an editor at Random House) rejects Dixon’s manuscript for *Vanishing Rooms*. Morrison writes, “The complex and fascinating character to whom I was introduced sometime ago in the short piece (from ROOMS) did not seem to have evolved in the completed manuscript. Somehow sexuality is not only what they do it is what they are and that is not enough for me” (Letter n. pag.). I suspect that by “sexuality,” Morrison means male same-sex desire. After all, Sula and Hannah Peace of *Sula* are certainly defined largely by their heterosexual acts and desires.<sup>20</sup> Morrison’s sense that “sexuality” is “not enough” to create a full fictional character might also refer to an absence of black community, which is more central to Morrison’s novels than Dixon’s. Dixon’s three narrators in *Vanishing Rooms* are more than their sexuality. *Rooms* uses the intersecting and varied race, gender, sexuality, and politics of Jesse, Ruella, and Lonny to tell a story from multiple points of view. *Rooms* thus resembles Morrison’s *A Mercy* in its polyvocal, first-person structure that both insists on intersectionality and develops characters indirectly through layered narration.

E. Frances White illuminates the ways in which Morrison’s problematic depictions or erasures of same-sex desire might actually be part of the language she inherits from Baldwin. White writes that Baldwin wrote within “boundaries” created by an “enforced silence” about homosexuality (240). His reliance on male, interracial pairings as the nearly exclusive site of same-sex desire results in a limited definition of homosexuality, necessarily writing lesbians and black male couples out of narrative possibility. In other words, imaginative limits in his fiction exclude same-sex relationships among African Americans. White notices how Baldwin’s commitment to rejecting labels and his eagerness to show similarities between men of any race manifests in his fiction and essays as an erasure of sexual difference.<sup>21</sup>

White is interested not in offering a harsh critique but rather in seeing the legacy of a limited vision. In her analysis, Morrison suffers from a related “failure of imagination” that means there is no possibility that the “Sweet Home plantation men” in *Beloved* “might sexually comfort each other” (247) and the Harlem Renaissance of *Jazz* oddly portrays nothing of the “female homosocial network that included women connected by homosexual desire” that was crucial to fostering that historical literary moment (249). These are the stakes involved for White when she includes same-sex love in narrative. She writes of *Jazz*,

By failing to explore the possibility of homosexual bonds, Morrison leaves unveiled both the complexities of the black community’s internal relationships and the relationships between blacks and whites. With our view thus obstructed, we can neither explore the problematic relationship between emerging black and white gay and lesbian communities nor fully understand the ways that race influenced these relationships. (250)

This limit in Morrison’s fiction is one of the dangers of inhabiting Baldwin’s linguistic home. Relying on his rigidly masculine notion of same-sex desire limits the horizon of possibility for imagining relationships as sites for developing resistant identities. African American authors from Richard Bruce Nugent to Randall Kenan have privileged same-sex romance among men over that among women. Baldwin is the relevant influence here, however, not only because of Morrison’s self-declared debt to him, but also because she and her contemporaries use his literary strategies. In the

mid-1970s, Gayl Jones took up Baldwin's use of music as theme and form to convey complex sexual identity. In the 1980s, Gloria Naylor explored the "disastrously explicit medium of language" to extend Baldwin's themes and move toward female coalescence. Morrison, again the most vocal of these authors about Baldwin's influence on her writing, has no characters who we might easily identify as lesbians. Baldwin offers varied and mimetic depictions of sexuality; Morrison offers varied and mimetic depictions of black women. It is thus truly startling that neither of them depicts lesbians. Baldwin's novels of the 1950s and '60s cleared the space for Morrison's novels of the 1970s, '80s, and '90s. Along with his language, Morrison inherited the limits of his imagination.

Scholars interested in female relationships look at Morrison's 1973 novel *Sula*. Barbara Smith's 1977 essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" claimed *Sula* as a "lesbian novel," "Not because the women are 'lovers,' but because they are central figures, are positively portrayed, and have pivotal relationships with one another" (11). This claim, famously radical in its day and later contested by Morrison, has become crucial to the way scholars read *Sula*. Smith's intervention is also important for reading Morrison's canon. Smith classifies *Sula* as a "lesbian novel" "not only because of the passionate friendship between Sula and Nell, but because of Morrison's consistently critical stance toward heterosexual institutions of male-female relationships, marriage, and family" (11). Based on this definition, Gayl Jones and Toni Morrison were both writing lesbian novels in the early 1970s. Beyond that era, each of Morrison's novels has engaged a "critical stance toward heterosexual institutions" and claimed "passionate" female friendship as definitional for African American communities.

Three decades after *Sula*, Morrison's *Love* takes female friendship as a central concern. Like *Sula*, *Love* critiques heteronormativity, demands space for women's sexuality, and illustrates the complexity and fragility of Awkward's "female coalescence." Christine and Heed of *Love* are not the punished or banished lesbians we have seen in work by Naylor and Jones. Nor are they quite Baldwin's Vivaldo and Rufus, who cannot escape the confines of racial identity and make love, as it seems they both want to do. Rather, Christine and Heed share a deep womanbond that proves more important than any other relationships in their lives. This makes *Love*, by Smith's definition, a "lesbian novel." Morrison's language of friendship is binding, conflicted, and erotic. This is the "language to dwell in" that she inherited from James Baldwin.

Here are a few lines from *Love* that convey the texture of this language:

*The way I see it, she belonged to Christine and Christine belonged to her.* (105)

They shared stomachache laughter, a secret language, and knew as they slept together that one's dreaming was the same as the other one's. (132)

*It's like that when children fall for one another. On the spot, without introduction. . . . If such children find each other before they know their own sex, or which one of them is starving, which well fed; before they know color from no color, kin from stranger, then they have found a mix of surrender and mutiny they can never live without. Heed and Christine found such a one.* (199)

This friendship is intimate, embodied, and possessive. The work of *Love* is to show that it is also the primary friendship in these two women's lives. Morrison uses layered storytelling to delay the revelation that Heed and Christine were once as close as two people can be.<sup>22</sup> The love betrayed is not like that of the patriarch Bill Cosey. Rather, it's a love between girls. Before we read the lines above, Morrison describes the "fights" between the two now-aging women in which, "once-perhaps twice-a-year, they punched, grabbed hair, wrestled, slapped" (73). Even these conflicts, however, are something that will "allow them to hold each other" and are the stuff of sustained partnership: "Like friendship, hatred needed more than physical intimacy;

it wanted creativity and hard work to sustain itself” (74). Even in the worst of their conflicts, Heed and Christine read like a married couple in need of each other’s touch.

Late in the text, readers learn that all events in the novel are the fruits of a long-past childhood break between them, created by interference from both Bill Cosey, who takes Heed as his child bride, and Christine’s mother May, who discourages the friendship and teaches her daughter to look down on Heed’s unmannered ways and poverty (131). Bill’s choice to marry Heed when she is barely twelve is horrible not only because it is child abuse, but also because it broke a bond between girls. Heed expected the marriage to bring her close to Bill’s granddaughter Christine, imagining they would play together every day and that Christine would come along on her honeymoon (193). In fact, it meant, as Christine says in the words of a jealous lover, “He took all of you away from me” (194). In other words, the novel’s central relationship is not a heterosexual marriage, but a bond between women.

This story of Heed and Christine’s relationship is about two characters, but also signals the broader losses wrought by integration that Morrison charts in much of her fiction. These losses are, in part, the subject of *Love*, which Morrison prefaces with the words “Beneath (rather, hand-in-hand with) the surface story of the successful revolt against a common enemy in the struggle for integration (in this case, white power) lies another one: the story of disintegration—of a radical change in conventional relationships and class allegiances that signals both liberation and estrangement” (xi). *Sula* is an elegy for a lost black community; *Paradise* narrates desperate attempts to sustain an “all-black town worth the pain” (5) in the face of a changing world; *Love* maps the dissolution of all-black communities onto the fracture of a female friendship. Language expressing intimacy appears in Baldwin’s *Another Country* and Jones’s *Corregidora* primarily as dialogue, keeping the tale close to the tellers. Naylor loosens this focus, using dialogue and omniscient narration in a series of vignettes that portray a community in *The Women of Brewster Place*. Morrison uses description and semi-omniscient narration to make this concern for women’s connections far-reaching, significant in terms of the world beyond Heed and Christine. Indeed, the women remain so connected in their later years that when they finally talk about their breakup, the dialogue appears on the page without quotation marks, as if they are exchanging thoughts telepathically (184–85, 193) and continues in this manner even after Heed dies (198). Using Baldwinian language of intimacy and the strategies of Smith’s “lesbian novel,” Morrison renders communal concerns in close, heartrending terms.

Each of Morrison’s novels imagines a black community as a space of protection and care; this community depends on womanbonds like the one between Heed and Christine. Morrison says, “the black community . . . was always there, only we called it the ‘neighborhood’ . . . people were taken care of, locked up, or whatever. If they were sick, other people took care of them; if they needed something to eat, other people took care of them; if they were old, other people took care of them; if they were mad, other people provided a small space for them” (Stepto 10–11). Morrison does not reject integration or the civil rights movement, but asks readers to attend to the losses they wrought. Her past-tense statements about the community mourn strong, all-black “neighborhoods” eroded in the years of integration. Her preface to the 2005 edition of *Love* leaves no doubt that the novel’s central instance of female love connects to the lost protective function of community. She recalls a girlhood acquaintance who “didn’t like boys,” not because she was a lesbian as this phrase suggests, but because she had been sexually abused. Morrison laments the community’s failure to protect this “twelve-year-old” and writes a novel that shows that a deep respect for female bonds would have protected such a girl. In *Love*, privileging Heed and Christine’s bond over men’s desires, over marriage, over men, would have kept them both safe from a lifetime of hurt and betrayal and would have provided the grounds for sustaining a black community.

## Conclusion

Baldwin's legacy takes important turns in contemporary novels by black women writers. While Jones, Naylor, and Morrison all claim Baldwin as an influence, none of them explicitly states that this influence shaped her portrayal of women loving women. However, it is in fragile, limited, but also powerful female coalescence that his fraught legacy is most evident in their novels. It makes sense to read Baldwin as a key figure who opened up possibilities for African American writers in terms of love, desire, and sex. However, as we have seen, there are limits that black woman novelists inherit from Baldwin in this regard.

Jones, Naylor, and Morrison use Baldwin's troubled heterosexual relationships to level a female critique at heteronormativity and they remake his "celebratory expression of the male homoerotic" (Kaplan 31) in depictions of female coalescence. Uses of music, silence, complex sexual identity and a resistance to terms for identity find their way from Baldwin to these contemporary women writers. These authors put such strategies to new uses, turning from Baldwin's male interracial relationships toward the limits and possibilities of intraracial female friendship. From Baldwin's absent lesbians to Ursa's rejection of Cat to the murder of Lorraine, we can see the danger, power, and possibility in female friendships like the ones at the center of Morrison's literary universe: "They shared stomachache laughter, a secret language, and knew as they slept together that one's dreaming was the same as the other one's" (*Love* 132). This seems a fitting use of Baldwin's consistent assertion of the force of love, complete with the silences, absences, and violence that come with the territory.

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## Notes

I am grateful to Emily Lordi, Matt Sandler, Douglas Field, Rich Blint, participants in the 2011 Celebrating African American Literature Conference at Pennsylvania State University, and the two engaged and insightful readers at *African American Review* for their comments on this essay.

1. Harris argues that black women in Baldwin's fiction occupy "traditional" roles of "mothers, sisters, lovers, wives—and almost all of them are roles of support for the male characters" (5). Baldwin's female characters are defined by their "serving position in relation to the males and male images [including God] in their lives" (9). This supportive, instrumental function of women in Baldwin's fiction necessarily means they are not as complete or nuanced as his male characters.

2. Indeed, Awkward notes that *The Women of Brewster Place* fails to achieve "genuine coalescence" among its characters and does not provide a "concluding sense of unity" (127).

3. Jane, of *Another Country*, is an exception; as a white character, she falls outside the scope of Harris's study. Although the text suggests she is a lesbian, Jane's only romantic interactions that actually appear in the novel are with Vivaldo.

4. See Martínez and Kaplan.

5. Also see Maurice O. Wallace, "On Being a Witness: Passion, Pedagogy, and the Legacy of James Baldwin," in Johnson and Henderson 276-87.

6. His 1968 essay "Black Power," for example, focuses entirely on men, referring to African American women only as possessions of men (*Cross* 81). See Field for analysis of the pressures Baldwin felt as a public figure. Also see McBride's "Straight Black Studies," which reads Baldwin's comments in the documentary *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket* (1989) as a public "coming out." McBride notes that "This is not the same, of course, as saying that Baldwin embraces gay sexuality associations with the liberation movement, to which he had a rather complicated relationship" (72). I read this moment not as a "coming out" as McBride suggests, but rather as Baldwin maintaining a queer stance. I agree with McBride that Baldwin offers a "usable past for black queer studies" (71). It matters that *The Price of the Ticket* appears over twenty-five years after *Another Country* and after Baldwin's death. McBride quotes Amiri Baraka's comments in the documentary to illuminate Baraka's binary notion of gay men as either closeted or "running around proclaiming homosexuality" (McBride 75-76). All of Baraka's comments are in the past tense. This confirms for me that even the most limited and problematic admission that James Baldwin was gay appeared mostly only after his death, even among his contemporaries. Even the eulogies at his funeral appear to have

avoided reference to his sexuality. Smith writes of Baldwin's funeral, "In those two hours of remembrance and praise, not a syllable was breathed that this wonderful brother, this writer, this warrior, was also gay, that his being gay was indeed integral to his magnificence" (79).

7. White's characterization of Baldwin in this regard describes David of *Giovanni's Room*, who is disgusted by men in Paris who display any stereotypically feminine traits. David is especially horrified by transgender aspects of the LGBT Paris community as they threaten his very rigid notion of his own white, American masculinity (26-27). David has a very traditional idea of gender roles; for example, he regularly thinks to himself in phrases like "men can never be housewives" (88).

8. This dynamic is distinct from another key white man's struggle with identity in Baldwin's fiction. Vivaldo clings to words for identity; David of *Giovanni's Room* runs from them. David fears any label or name that would effectively shove him out of his semi-closeted Parisian life and utterly closeted American life. He tells Giovanni "People have very dirty words for—for this situation" (81). David cannot even name the "dirty words" and stutters to come up with the phrase "this situation" to refer to his love for and cohabitation with Giovanni. He struggles to get out even the vaguest of phrases for same-sex desire and love. David has yet to fully inhabit any terms for identity, partly because he can't see his white privilege. Vivaldo, on the other hand, has inhabited his identity and is considering what it would mean to exist without it. Both men, however, cling to their fragile whiteness.

9. I am referring to this dynamic in some African American fiction, but it appears in African American literary scholarship as well. For a number of productive examinations of the ways in which same-sex desire and LGBT identity can be invisible in African American Studies, see the contributions to *Black Queer Studies*, edited by Henderson and Johnson.

10. Jones's awareness of how language can reduce meaning appears in a 1982 interview with Charles Rowell in which she struggles to balance her work as a literary critic with her work as a creative writer. While she applies the language of literary scholarship to others' writings, she avoids saying much in this vein about her own work. Her resistance to analyzing her own writing indicates an effort to preserve the ambiguity and flexibility of language in her novels.

11. See Donia Elizabeth Allen, "The Role of the Blues in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*," *Callaloo* 25.1 (2002): 257-73; Jones's discussion of "ritualized dialogue" in Michael S. Harper, "Gayl Jones: An Interview," in *Chants of Saints: A Gathering of Afro-American Literature, Art, and Scholarship*, Michael S. Harper and Robert B. Stepto, eds. (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1979), 352-75; and Melvin Dixon's analysis of Jones's "ritualized dialogue" in *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1987). *Corregidora* is a crucial text for jazz studies and the tradition of the blues and jazz in African American literature from Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown to Nathaniel Mackey. We might consider Jones in a long line of blueswomen articulating sexuality in sound and music, in addition to text or lyrics. See Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Random, 1998), and the essays in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, Robert G. O'Meally, ed. (New York: Columbia UP, 1998), esp. Hazel V. Carby, "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues" (469-82). Also see *Uptown Conversations: The New Jazz Studies*, Robert G. O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin, eds. (New York: Columbia UP, 2004), esp. Farah Griffin, "When Malindy Sings: A Meditation on Black Women's Vocality" (102-25).

12. See Dubey 72, 76.

13. As Dubey observes, "the *Corregidora* matriarchy is the novel's only evocation of a collectivity" (74) and *Corregidora* is the story of Ursa breaking away from that "collectivity."

14. I take Naylor's claim as a misreading of Larsen. For more on the complex and queer sexuality of Larsen's female characters, especially Helga Crane of *Passing*, see chapter five of Deborah McDowell, "*The Changing Same*": *Black Women's Literature, Criticism, and Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995); chapter five of Ann duCille, *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993); and chapter three of Cheryl Wall, *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995).

15. My claim here depends on reading the relationship between Elisha and John in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) as a budding same-sex romantic relationship.

16. For an example of such criticism, see Mel Watkins, "Sexism, Racism and Black Women Writers," *New York Times* 15 June 1986, and Deborah McDowell's July 1986 letter to the editor in response to Watkins. Also see McDowell, chapter 7, "Reading Family Matters" in *The Changing Same*.

17. The shift to categorical language also allows Naylor to portray a lesbian relationship with the complexity and depth Baldwin reserved mostly for interactions between men. *Brewster* shows Lorraine and Theresa in the everyday intimacy of a relationship (134, 136, 164).

18. See *James Baldwin and Toni Morrison: Comparative Critical and Theoretical Essays*, Loyalie King and Lynn Orilla Scott, eds. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).



19. We can see this influence in Morrison's portrayals of Pauline and Cholly Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Morrison's characters demand a complex readerly response, in which disgust and sympathy are often simultaneous.

20. The only clearly gay couple in Morrison's novels are Willard and Scully of *A Mercy* (2008) but, like men in *Beloved*, they turn to one another only because there are no women available.

21. McBride offers a slightly different, useful analysis: "[A]lthough Baldwin's work challenges static notions of racial identity, his awareness of the hegemony of the category of race in black antiracist discourse still limits the terms of his possible identifications with his gay sexuality" (75).

22. This closeness depends on a pre-race, pre-class, and pre-sex self for both Christine and Heed in the passage above. This evokes the "region" without terms for identity that Vivaldo imagines in the passage I quoted above from *Another Country*.

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