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ESSAY

Preaching Without a Pulpit: Toward a Womanist Hermeneutic of Regeneration in *Just Above My Head*

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Abstract

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois discusses the historical and cultural importance of the Black preacher as “a leader, a politician, an orator, a ‘boss,’... the centre of a group of *men*.” I propose we reimagine Du Bois’s Black preacher figure—in his words, “the most unique personality developed on American soil”—as a Black woman. Additionally, we should examine the sermon in African American literature as we focus on womanist preachers and spiritual figures such as Margaret Alexander in *The Amen Corner*, the sisters in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, and most significantly, Julia in *Just Above My Head*. Coining the term, “womanist hermeneutic of regeneration,” this article demonstrates the affective power of examining blue note womanist preachers and spiritual figures in James Baldwin’s work.

Keywords: blues, womanist, preaching, *Just Above My Head*, Julia

“Sometimes, now that I’m out of the pulpit, I feel more *in* the pulpit than I did when I was preaching.”¹
—Julia, *Just Above My Head*

At the age of four, my ears perked and my eyes widened with anticipation as I witnessed, every Sunday, Tuesday, and Friday, poetic womanist preaching seasoned with gospel blue notes ascending through the air in song. Constant invocations of the names and literary works of womanist scholars and theologians, from Reverend Dr. Renita J. Weems’s canonical text, *Just a Sister Away*, coupled with sermons such as “God Said Breathe” from Bishop Dr. Barbara M. Amos to sacred compositions such as “I Hear the Music in the Air” from psalmist Reverend Dr. Sharon S. Riley, marked what I later came to know as the genesis of my engagement with sermons and songs of ascent in literature.² Literature and gospel music enveloped my consciousness at a young age, and I realized later in life that my exposure to womanist thought, sermons, and music at four years old was rare and unconventional. Bishop Dr. Barbara M. Amos and Reverend Dr. Sharon S. Riley were the first womanist blue note preaching figures to shape my theological and sonic consciousness and my introduction to the amalgamation of song and sermon. The impact of the Black woman’s *sermon* in African American literature, understood through a womanist lens, remains a glaring omission in literary conversation—for the “Black sermon is the mother’s milk of African-American discourse.”³

Preaching has been a fundamental part of Black life in America since slavery was established in the 1600s.⁴ Black preachers provided a realm for both leadership and authority within the space of a church. There, the performativity of the preacher could render the Black body and soul visible in a period when Black people and everything that characterized them were deemed invisible. Far from being a monolith, Black preachers as cultural figures embody many complexities and variances on how the preached Word can be delivered. Du Bois provides an example of this in the chapter, “Of the Faith of the Fathers,” in *The Souls of Black Folk*.⁵ Du Bois, though, only ever presents his preacher as a man. What nuances and varied possibilities are needed to imagine, instead, Black women as preachers and the epitomes of moral authority? In short, I argue here from a *womanist* perspective, which re-envision Black women and repositions them in the center of religious discourse, to unearth modes of transfiguration Black women evoke via sermon and song, in and outside of the pulpit.

To begin, it is important to solidly couch the term womanist *first* within its original literary context. Alice Walker’s use of the term “womanist” had its beginnings in her well-known collection of essays published in 1983, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*. Even before this collection was published, Walker also used the term in her short story “Coming Apart,” in 1979.⁶ In that story’s footnotes, Walker

defines a *womanist* as “instinctively pro-woman”; womanist or womanism has “a strong root in Black women’s culture.”⁷ According to Walker, the

advantage of using “womanist” is that, because it is from my own culture, I needn’t preface it with the word “Black” (an awkward necessity and a problem I have with the word “feminist”) since Blackness is implicit in the term; just as for white women there is apparently no felt need to preface “feminist” with the word “white,” since the word “feminist” is accepted as coming out of white women’s culture.⁸

As the term womanist is used extensively here, coupled with the terms I coin, such as “womanist blues consciousness” and “womanist blues preaching,” it is important to note the ways in which womanism has developed from its original literary roots to epistemologies among religious scholars and womanist theologians, such as Rev. Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon, Rev. Dr. Renita J. Weems, Rev. Dr. Jacquelyn Grant, Rev. Dr. Delores Williams, and many other scholars.

Despite varied connotations, most uses of womanist root their meanings in southern Black folk expressive culture. Many also share Walker’s womanist as a Black feminist or feminist of color and one who displays courageous, audacious, and *willful* behavior, particularly in one’s youth. Walker also defines a womanist as one who is “committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people, male *and* female,” and who loves music, dance, the moon, the Spirit, love, food, roundness, struggle, the Folk, and herself. *Regardless*.⁹ Womanism encompasses a subjective space that is both sacred and revolutionary. Womanism provides a lens through which liberation and justice are enacted for all. Womanism is inclusive, giving a sphere through which the consciousness of Black women is resuscitated, freed from patriarchal toxicity, and revived anew.

This article shifts attention from the male protagonists in the novel *Just Above My Head* (1979) to Julia, the gifted child evangelist turned preacher. In addition to considering the novel’s sermons and their seasoning with blues and gospel grace notes, this article theoretically positions what I call a “womanist hermeneutic of regeneration” in African American literature in order to investigate how James Baldwin in *Just Above My Head* democratizes a Black woman preacher. This hermeneutic not only calls for an element of regeneration in Black women preacher protagonists as they are portrayed in Black literature, but also for a hermeneutic of regeneration occurring within the *communities* of these protagonists.

The works of Trudier Harris, Lynn Orilla Scott, and Magdalena Zaborowska have presented various modes of literary analysis of Baldwin’s novels; this article, however, illustrates how Julia sustains a regenerative praxis in her blue-note-filled journey.¹⁰ Church is Baldwin’s armor for writing and the performances of the people are his tools for composing the text. As a Black woman preacher in *Just Above My Head*, Julia experiences revolutionary subjectivity, the power to speak the gospel through the art of the sermon; communal engagement that examines Julia’s own quest for physical liberation and conscious freedom; and a resurrecting love

of self that she, indeed, preaches and proclaims to her own community. A womanist hermeneutic of regeneration is one that is didactic. One who employs this hermeneutic: 1) recognizes the need for self and communal wellness; 2) vocalizes with power the truth that makes both self and soul free; 3) shares a testimony of said liberation to others for their self-healing; and 4) immerses self, soul, and community in infinite and unconditional love. These four tenets outline Julia's womanist hermeneutic of regeneration, marking specific moments in the novel that make viewing Julia's life through a womanist lens possible.

Amid these tenets that richly recapitulate Walker's womanism arises a revolutionary and sonic blues framework—what I term a “gospel blues ethno-aesthetic”—through which we can also view Julia. Baldwin provides his readers with a soundtrack of Black blues women from Bessie Smith and Esther Phillips to Dinah Washington. By using music and word—blues, spiritual songs, and gospel sermon—we, as readers, can flesh out the character of Julia in Baldwin's fiction, leading to new frameworks and transdisciplinary epistemologies in literature, music, and theology.

The musicality of Julia's sermonic text and its delivery within the novel's religious context are, again, suggestive of what I call a “gospel blues ethno-aesthetic.” *Gospel blues ethno-aesthetic* suggests the affective power blues and spiritual music exert in the novel, while recognizing the necessity to go beyond the traditional blues idiom of melancholic expressions to examine how joy, mobility, and agency are found in the blue note.¹¹ This gospel blues ethno-aesthetic, I argue, serves as an intersection between preached Word and melodic sound, and, while birthed in the church and advancing a sacred agenda, propels its effects on secular spaces and life *outside* of the church. Through the sermons of Julia, I extend the concept of a gospel blues ethno-aesthetic by providing a sense of the blue note as “other.”

An ethno-aesthetic is an artistic or musicological forum or movement that pertains to a particular culture or race of people. Blues music, with roots in African American music, theory-wise, does not belong to the natural scale; it is a minor or flattened “out note.” In a heptatonic scale with seven notes, the third, fifth, and seventh notes are flattened and do not belong to the natural scale. For example, in a heptatonic scale progression beginning with a natural C, the third (E flat), fifth (G flat), and seventh (B flat) notes are flattened blue notes. Blue notes are sounds that are dissonant and “don't belong.”¹² The blues provide a sonic framework for the structure of Julia's sermons; her sermons, like her life, are filled with blue notes—modes of not belonging, marginalization, denigration by white supremacy and by the men in her family, church, and community. Additionally, Baldwin's novel stresses the impact of Julia's prophetic voice *outside* the confines of the pulpit. Analyzing the ethno-aesthetics of gospel and blues, coupled with positioning the sermon as intellectual work within the Black literary canon, offers a new path to a transdisciplinary epistemology and an innovative way of knowing that turns the blue “othered” note that was meant to exclude into a grace note of belonging and agency.

A womanist hermeneutic of regeneration examines how Black women preachers in the pulpit—in those traditional sermonic spaces—create those same spaces

with their “work” outside of the church. However, the point of contention arrives when the spaces that Black women look to for healing and restoration in the church are not extant. In fact, the spaces within the church become the very same spaces they, in the end, must constantly fight against to prove their efficacy. Misogyny and patriarchy have been oppressive walls in Black churches, relegating Black women—who are the backbone of Black churches—to missionaries, speakers for “Women’s Day,” prayer leaders, and “pew warmers,” for fear their ingenuity would stifle male leadership. Using gospel blues as a sonic backdrop, Baldwin positions Black women blues heroines, Bessie Smith and Esther Phillips, as chief melodic cornerstones whose sonic repertoire marks the vicissitudes of Julia’s existence in the novel.

This article is not intended to present Black women preacher figures as sole epitomes of moral authority or as a monolith. I seek, instead, to foreground Julia, under a womanist lens, as a major figure, living an existence as a blue note womanist preacher in Baldwin’s fiction, rather than as a character too often examined peripherally. It is evident that there are other Black women and preacherly figures in the works of Baldwin that adhere to a womanist lens, from Florence in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) to Margaret Alexander in *The Amen Corner* (1954). To explicate each character thoroughly is beyond the scope of one article. I intend to save more in-depth analyses of Margaret and the sisters for a larger work.

Reviews of Baldwin’s Later Fiction

Of all of Baldwin’s works, his last novel is the least-discussed in contemporary literary scholarship. While using a musicological framework to understand Baldwin’s works, most references to *Just Above My Head* still center its male characters, giving very little attention to Julia’s impact. Lynn Orilla Scott, in *James Baldwin’s Later Fiction: Witness to the Journey*, writes a gripping and thorough review of Baldwin’s last novel, rightfully asserting Black music as “the vernacular language of *JAMH*.”¹³ Yet, in Scott’s book, Julia, a significant figure in the text, is more recapitulated than analyzed as a primary character in the novel. Generally, most scholarly commentary on Baldwin’s last novel focuses on queer gospel singer Arthur Hall, his family, and the effects of race and homophobia. These readings have made eminent, significant contributions to the discourse on Baldwin’s work. However, few if any readings focus on gender, the homiletical affective characteristics of the sermon in the novel, and Baldwin’s illustration of Julia as a vital Black woman preacher. The church stands as a prominent structure in Baldwin’s novels and plays; the traditions of church, specifically the Black church (i.e. preaching, elements of style in scriptural exegesis, the performance of the woman’s voice as she delivers her sermon), are salient for our analysis.

Few reviews exist of Baldwin’s last novel, and some have dismissed or discounted his later works. In the reviews of *Just Above My Head* from *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* that are extant, Julia’s character is either jarred by rasping clauses that position her as malevolent mistress to her father or she’s

not mentioned at all. In the first review of the novel, from September 1979, John Romano of *The New York Times* provides harsh criticism. Pointing to the novel's lack of plot organization, Romano aims successive, rapid, and fiery darts that put Baldwin's complex narrative in a category of artless books. Romano writes one complete sentence regarding Julia: "Later Julia emerges from a sordid relation with her weak, exploitative, father, becomes a prostitute, then a model, then the exalted lover of an African chief and finally a bright and lovable matron in Yonkers."¹⁴

I beg to differ with these latter writers, for if they focused solely on the length of the work and the obvious protagonists of Hall and Arthur Montana, they omit the jewel of Julia and the complex web of sacred, secular worlds steeped in a literary and religious context that cannot be overlooked. It is this amalgamation for which Baldwin is known—literature, music, and religion engaging the Black diaspora. I admonish readers to dive deeper into the "spiritual figures" of Baldwin's works—such as Julia—and excavate the regenerative Word that Baldwin ingeniously articulates.

Writing the Witness of James Baldwin

Just Above My Head is a complex narrative that tells the story of two families, the Halls and the Millers. While Baldwin writes the complicated stories of his male characters, particularly Arthur Hall, a gay gospel singer, it is Julia Miller—the child evangelist in the text—whose life marks significant vicissitudes and is of particular interest. Julia is a young preaching prodigy—a girl preacher—who delivers fiery sermons at her father's church and whose dynamic preaching captivates her congregation. As Julia matures, her life takes a turbulent turn. Her father rapes her, Julia stops preaching, and she drifts into the worlds of modeling and prostitution. She endures many tragedies, including the loss of her unborn baby because of her father beating the life out of her. Julia suffers much in the novel, but overcomes tribulation by the word of her testimony, affirming and seeing herself anew.

Text and sound, language and music are persistent topics in the study of James Baldwin's works. Having grown up in church as a young, Black boy preacher, literature and music, sermon and song became the mirrors of reflection for Baldwin's life and the life of his characters. From "Sonny's Blues" to *The Amen Corner*, blues music and gospel spirituals are intertwined in a sonic aesthetic that helps narrate and put into conversation the musical soundtrack of the lives of Baldwin's characters. In his book, *Who Can Afford to Improvise?*, Ed Pavlić details the ways in which Baldwin's knowledge of the blues connection to the Black experience becomes palpable in his novels.¹⁵ Baldwin's essay "The Uses of the Blues" examines the reality of what lies between joy and pain, triumph and chaos. Baldwin meaningfully articulates how the sound of the blues is interwoven in the Black experience of life:

[blues] does not refer to music ... it does refer to the experience of life, or the state of being, out of which the blues come... I want to talk about the blues not only because

they speak of this experience of life and this state of being, but because they contain the toughness that manages to make this experience articulate... And I want to suggest that the acceptance of this anguish one finds in the blues, and the expression of it, creates also, however odd this may sound, a kind of joy.¹⁶

In his chapter, “Dinah Washington’s Blues,” Pavlić continues analyzing Baldwin’s “Uses of the Blues” essay. As Baldwin offers the blues as an epistemological term that mirrors the real-life experiences of Black people, Pavlić defines joy as the sonic fluidity that comes from experienced pain. That mark of fluidity that emanates out of tribulation, chaos, or dissonance is the real joy, the authentic agency that one must find. Some people attain this joy, and some are too enmeshed in the web of the blue notes of life to even discover it.¹⁷

Naming all the blues-singing women, from Bessie Smith and Dinah Washington to Billie Holiday, who articulate the blue notes of the lives of Ida in *Another Country*, John Grimes in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, and Rufus in “Sonny’s Blues,” Pavlić asserts that Julia, Hall Montana, and Arthur learn how to extract joy from pain in their own ways. With Arthur and Hall as the most-mentioned protagonists in *Just Above My Head*, which blues woman sings the possibilities of Julia? Instead of looking for other blues women to sing her sighs, does Julia find her own song?

Baldwin’s connection to the blues and gospel music of Black women is of particular interest. Baldwin’s ears were raised on the sermons of Black women preachers and his life was guided by the soundtrack of Black women blues and gospel singers. The sonic ethno-aesthetics that shaped his life are evinced in his writing. Upon ringing the doorbell of Julia’s home in Yonkers, New York, Hall is greeted with the sounds of blues and gospel. Entering Julia’s house, Hall hears Esther Phillips’s 1971 song, “From a Whisper to a Scream.” Sung in a natural D minor scale with the minor sixth note flattened, Phillips opens this song with a melismatic blues moan seasoned with notes B, D, and F natural. Singing in *pianissimo* the lyrics, “from a whisper in the wind,” with heavy emphasis on “whisper,” to the increasing dynamics of *forte* as Phillips belts out “to a *loud*, loud scream,” mirrors the reflection and articulates the trajectory of Julia’s life from quiet child evangelist to a woman who eventually finds revolutionary self-love.¹⁸ The position of this song in the beginning of the novel as the first song performed by a Black woman blues singer illustrates the importance of Baldwin’s sonic framework for Julia’s entrance as a character. Baldwin strategically introduces readers to Julia first, not with language as preaching prodigy, but with the sound of the blues—the sound that mirrors her overcoming the vicissitudes of her life—joy and pain, triumph and tribulation.

The framework of a poetic, gospel blues ethno-aesthetic begins in Book One. The 1901 Christian hymn, “What Are They Doing in Heaven Today?,” is one of the first spiritual songs analyzed, as Julia reminisces with Hall over her last sermon, “Set Thine House in Order,” which she preaches at Mother Bessie’s funeral. Book One also marks the gathering of Hall, his family, and Jimmy at Julia’s house. She begins to play on her piano the spiritual—a song later referenced in Book

Two—that Arthur, Hall’s brother, sang. As this idea of heaven is fleshed out in *Just Above My Head*, Baldwin not only fantastically personifies Julia’s voice as a lone bird soaring as she sings this song before her final sermon, but he also describes performatively the way in which the music envelopes her body as she is performing the song. In retrospect, Arthur—the now deceased gospel singer—is singing the song for Mother Bessie’s funeral. At this point at the beginning of the novel, though, Arthur is dead, and Julia’s voice is heard in lieu of Arthur’s. She mimics the melisma, the dynamics of how Arthur sang the song before she preached her final sermon, “Set Thine House in Order.” The text becomes the music, and the music becomes the text. Her voice is compared to a bird singing before an impending storm. In addition, the bodies of her listeners become markers of affect. The gospel blues music of this hymn from Julia represents the introduction of music into Baldwin’s text. Not only is the performativity of Julia’s body described here, but the bodies of her listeners also signify the rise and fall, crescendos and diminuendos, that embody Julia’s voice. Julia sings,

I’m thinking of friends whom I used to know
 Who lived, and suffered, in this world below.
 They’ve gone up to heaven,
 And I want to know
 What are they doing there now?¹⁹

Baldwin uses the moment before the sermon in which Julia sings the Christian hymn “What Are They Doing in Heaven Today?” to signify the meaning of Julia’s voice and its attribution to nature. Baldwin eloquently describes Julia’s voice as a muffled moan or “subterranean roar, like the first faint warning of an earthquake.”²⁰ As Julia’s indistinct moan becomes coherent melody, the bodies of her listeners, their heads, arms, legs, and torsos, begin to mark the cadence and dynamics of her voice. Julia’s voice is compared to a bird whose melodious tone, its *fortes* and *pianissimos*, match the bodies of the congregants: “Only the voice is rising, like a lone bird against the coming storm... *Oh*, thunders the piano, and *Yes*, breathes the wind, and the voice, the lone bird, mounts.”²¹ Julia is no longer solely a person; she becomes a figure embodying the song before the sermon. Hall Montana witnesses Julia’s vocal ascension, and her fingers on the piano musically decode the lyrics of the hymn.

Music in Her Hands and Rhythm in Her Feet

Setting the gospel blues soundscape for his characters, Baldwin immediately transitions from a sonic to a sermonic framework, beginning Book Two with Julia’s first sermon as a 9-year-old evangelist, thirty years prior to the genesis of Book One. As a child, Julia is thrust into power, already given adult-like personality traits and characteristics. At the beginning of Book Two, Baldwin gives the reader a microscopic view of everything around Julia. The church itself is filled, not

another body can enter the congregation. All wait to hear Julia's words of fire pierce them with a spiritual current that shocks the body, mind, and soul. Julia, at 9 years of age, is a powerful figure born in the deep South—a space where pain, terror, and fear sweep Black communities. Her frame is small, and her eyes deny her actual age. People are mesmerized by the genius of this 9-year-old preacher. She is innocent, untouched, untainted, yet when she preaches, her voice is not that of a child.

The title of Book Two, which prefaces Julia's first sermon, "Twelve Gates to the City," references a song recorded by the renowned Black American gospel group from Philadelphia, the Davis Sisters. In *Just Above My Head*, Baldwin prefaces each sermon with songs sung by Black women blues/gospel musicians, such as Sister Rosetta Tharpe and the Davis Sisters. As Baldwin's novel is consistently told in a gospel blues mode, the hymns and spirituals that he uses to introduce each section illustrate his representation of gospel blues in both song and sermon. This is significant because Baldwin pens the blue note story of Julia's life as a young preacher with blues/gospel music as the soundtrack intermittently posited within the text. We continue witnessing a gospel blues ethno-aesthetic inflected in the sermons of Julia and in the narrative of her life in a racially charged country and environment. Amalgamating blues music structure with gospel lyrics essentially defines the gospel blues mode of the novel. Hall narrates the scene of Julia's first sermon, and it is Julia's *sermons* that carry magnetic power, turning dismal blues into gospel joy. The beginning of the first scene of Julia's sermon shows her elevated above her family, above her peers, as her father "boyishly" and rapidly takes out the platform contraption on which Julia stands. Baldwin illustrates Julia as a symbol of purity, innocence, and prodigiousness. Julia is on a collapsible platform/pulpit, positioned as the congregation sees her—she is a child preacher, a girl prodigy accoutered in white, symbolizing the highest form of purity and moral authority, standing ready to give the Word to her flock.

Christopher Z. Hobson's *James Baldwin and the Heavenly City: Prophecy, Apocalypse, and Doubt* examines the ways in which religion plays a significant role in Baldwin's works. In considering *Just Above My Head*, Hobson details Jimmy's account of his relationship with Hall's brother, Arthur.²² As a "meditation of Jimmy Miller" about Arthur, Jimmy asserts:

The song does not belong to the singer. The singer is found by the song. Ain't no singer, anywhere, ever *made up* a song—that is not possible. He *hears* something. I really believe ... that something hears *him*, something says, come here! and jumps on him just exactly like you jump on a piano or a sax or a violin or a drum... That sound you hear ... is the sound of millions and millions and, who knows, now listening, where life is, where is death?²³

Replacing the words "song" and "singer" with "sermon" and "preacher" and "he" with "she" in Jimmy's quote focuses, in ideal fashion, the performativity of Julia's sermons in the novel and its personified affect on the bodies of the congregants.

Such active replacement provides a clear indication of the importance of sermon and song in the novel:

The [sermon] does not belong to the [preacher]. The [preacher] is found by the [sermon]. Ain't no [preacher], anywhere, ever *made* up a [sermon]—that is not possible. [She] *hears* something. I really believe ... that something hears [her], something says, come here! and jumps on [her] exactly like you jump on a piano or a sax or a violin or a drum...²⁴

Baldwin uses the commingling of song into sermon and sermon into song, presenting the first text from which Julia preaches, Psalm 31, as a sacred hymn. Psalm 31 comes from a place of lament and fear. It is a plea from the writer to God to turn a listening ear to the trepidatious heart. The writer wishes to be heard, and it is as if the dissonance of the blues is screaming for joy on the other side. Psalm 31 is gospel blues, foreshadowing the trajectory of Julia's life even after she leaves the pulpit. It is in her departure from the pulpit later in life that Julia finds joy, but the lament and sorrow she feels even as a preaching prodigy is reflected in her first sermon. Baldwin places Julia's origins in the deep South—a place of racial terror, pain, and trepidation—to represent the place from which Julia preaches herself. Even as a child evangelist, Julia preaches from a place of fear, abuse, and pain. Observing Julia, Hall's eyes drink in the textured complexity of preacherly persona—a presence that does not seem to be real yet is presented in front of him. Julia's presence is something that Hall himself deems unfathomable. How can a 9-year-old evangelist's words make people respond so deeply? Julia is just above his head.

As the scene progresses, Julia is described as having dark, flashing eyes that seem unimaginably “ancient in [her] tiny, untouched face.”²⁵ Her voice as she preaches does not sound like a child's even if her diminutive frame displays a different story. Julia was a child evangelist whose position as a youth “spoke of the promise and the prophecy fulfilled.”²⁶ As Julia takes her stand on the platform, her body is in diminutive form but her eyes and spirit incessantly bellow, “Who will deliver me from this body of death?”²⁷ Julia preaches from the root of pain, fear, societal oppression, and violence brought on by life in the deep South—a blue note sermon that comes from the place of anguish and desolation seeking the other side of joy.

In a crowded church, with hats, suits, and dresses flooding the pews, the faces gathered wait in anticipation. Hall, with his mother, father, and brother, watch Julia mount the pulpit. The collapsible platform upon which Julia stands symbolizes her ultimate demise as a child preacher. Julia is presented as a prodigy lifted to the highest echelon of ecclesial authority. The platform described in the novel on which she stands is one that is built by Joel Miller, her father. It is her father who builds that platform for Julia only for it to be taken down again and again. This demonstration of Joel Miller and Julia is a representation that portends both Julia's demise as a preacher and Joel Miller's destruction as her father. Baldwin

presents two dichotomies here within the first few words of Julia's sermons before she begins. Julia is a child prodigy dressed in white, representing innocence, yet she stands atop a *collapsible* platform *hidden* by the pulpit. The platform is hidden by the pulpit, so it's unable to be seen. It just looks to other people as if Julia is lifted and exalted, but she is really standing on shaky ground—an unstable foundation that is sure to collapse.

Donned in white, Julia stands before the congregation on the pulpit as an exalted figure while her father reads the verse. After the reading, Julia stands head held high, like an exalted priestess, examining the congregation before she speaks, then letting a loud "Amen!" erupt from her mouth, she narrates the story of David and Goliath, a notable story in scripture where David as a young warrior kills the Philistine giant with stones. Julia's first sermon about David and Goliath is an epitome of the gospel blues, for this narrative moves from a place of anguish to a place of triumph. It delineates the importance of understanding the content of the sermon in African American literature as a literary genre in gospel blues form. Baldwin doesn't present Julia as a high priestess on a preaching platform without alluding to the pain and torment she eventually endures as the daughter of Joel Miller, symbolized by the instability of a hidden, collapsible platform.

Even though the way in which Julia delivers the narrative of David and Goliath appears to be from the perspective of a seasoned preacher, Julia is just 9 years old. Baldwin writes with a clear knowledge of the arc of the sermon—its crescendos and diminuendos, including the effect of call and response.²⁸ The personification of Julia's preaching performance from her hands, feet, arms, and torso is marked, illustrating the sentience of Julia's body throughout her sermon. Every flourish of Julia's hand, every swing of her arm, every motion of her feet and the fluidity of this first sermon demonstrates the fervor and resolute power of a Black woman preacher's voice, and the influence Baldwin himself often witnessed in Mother Rosa Artimus Horn. The music is in her hands, and the rhythm is in her feet.

Julia preaches with an effortless fluidity, peppering her sermon with points of emphasis and rhetorical questions. She marks her sermon with scriptural mantras from the psalms of David, ranging from Psalm 23 to Psalm 121, illustrating a clear representation of song integrating sermon.²⁹ The sentence structure of her sermon is continuous, not marked with periods, indicating the continuously fluid nature of her sermonic delivery. It is an address that progresses and climbs higher and higher with every step she takes. Julia's use of anaphora symbolizes her sermonic skill in the mechanics of her delivery. She continuously asks her congregation, "Do you know who David was? Who was this David?"

A steady crescendo ensues, and the pace of the sermon is rapid. Even though she cannot pace back and forth across the pulpit because of her diminutive frame, her movement is still palpable—strong and present. Her eyes, neck, and shoulders *all* move with her speech. The words of her first sermon are mapped onto the body of the congregation in a rhythmic cadence. Her movement is terrifying; her

voice is forceful, reminiscent of an earthquake. Julia constantly quotes the psalms and almost all the known passages David writes. Julia ends with an exclamation, and the church erupts in shouts of praise and celebration, thereby responding with, “He delivered me!” to her climactic call of, “I cried!” After the third call and response, a spiritual earthquake takes over the church. The floor beneath Julia’s feet shakes, and the church as a body moves to the tempo of the sermonic storm with swaying, ringing cries and shouts of jubilation. The church and Julia’s voice begin to work in unison:

The floor beneath my feet shook, the very walls seemed to rock, the storm burst in a thunder of hands and feet and the wrath of the piano, the racing—like horses!—of the tambourines, and the people started to shout. Julia stood there, above it, watching, like a high priestess. She had caused this storm, or it had come through her, but she was neither singing nor shouting, and her eyes might have been fixed on Egypt.³⁰

Julia has a terrifying presence; it isn’t just her preacherly voice that thunders across the church booming in the ears of the congregants, but her entire persona—her entire being—is “terrifying.” Julia’s sermonic performance transfixes her audience like the melismatic improvisations of a jazz musician. This sermon has found Julia. Each time she mentions David, her voice rises in pitch, modulating to higher keys, and as her voice moves higher, the congregation moves higher with her. Her voice has the ability to terrify silent stones into speaking and those who are dead to rise again. This is the essence of the preacherly “grain” in Julia’s voice.³¹

As a narrator, Hall Montana witnesses the sermonic storm coming through Julia, whose sermonic rains drench all who gather to hear her. Julia’s personified preaching is terrifying yet miraculous, forceful yet supernatural, melodious, and magical. Julia’s blues sermon depicting victory in battle is a clarion call of deliverance from oppressive power, from physical subjugation. She uses the story of David and Goliath as a blues tale preached with gospel shouting power. Baldwin uses this narrative and structures her way of delivering the sermon as our first preacherly introduction to Julia to show the unexpected transformative power of a preaching prodigy on the souls of individuals who were once sleeping but are now brought to life by her fiery tongue. The narrative of her first sermon presents itself as she becomes David fighting the Goliaths in her life.

While Julia’s first sermon is a blues psalm at age 9, her second sermon in Book Two is a potent prophecy at age 14. As Julia takes the pulpit to eulogize one of the elders of the church, Mother Bessie, she feels something entering her and something departing. The text she chooses for Mother Bessie’s funeral is the same text from which Margaret Alexander first preaches in *The Amen Corner*: Isaiah 38:1, “Set Thine House in Order.” Before Julia utters a word, she looks at every individual in the church. A particular cognizance envelopes Julia, and she notices the deacons, the pastor, and others around her waiting with bated breath for her first clause. After her last sermon, though, Julia’s mother, Amy Miller, passes away. What Julia preaches at Mother Bessie’s funeral and the last words of Amy on her

deathbed to Julia are equally reminiscent of what Hezekiah does in scripture after he prays to God for deliverance. As Julia weeps uncontrollably, Amy tells Julia to stop fasting and praying for her and fast and pray for her father. Amy has witnessed the way Joel's love for Julia supersedes his love for his wife. Joel Miller has a deleterious attachment to his daughter—one that is connected to labor rather than genuine, paternal love. As a child, Julia operates out of abnormal conditions. She is the breadwinner for the family and her gift supports the Miller household. Julia finds herself as the “mule of the world,” or in this context, the mule of the pulpit.³² Julia's genuine love for her mother is evident, but Amy dismisses her care, scolds Julia, and tells her the Lord isn't pleased with her actions:

“You start fasting and praying—*today*—for your father, and for *you*. The Lord ain't pleased with you. He going to make you both to know it. How come you think you can fool the Lord? You might done had *me* fooled. But I *wanted* to be fooled! How come you think the Lord don't see? When I see! ... Go home, daughter... Run. Pull the curtains, and fall down on your knees. And don't forget you got a brother. That's how you'll get the Lord's forgiveness.”³³

Amy's words to Julia leave Julia's wound of abuse open and exposed. To whom can Julia run for refuge? The home and church that she once knew become splintered pieces and the pulpit through which her ministerial gifts flourished becomes a desolate, dry valley of fractured bones.

On the day of Mother Bessie's funeral, Julia feels death's hands ready to grab her. As she walks to the pulpit to deliver her last sermon from Isaiah 38:1, “Set Thine House in Order,” a profound anguish bubbles in her belly. Julia is often accustomed to hearing her father read the announced scripture before she preaches. This time, there was a sense of delight in Joel's voice as he read—the same happiness he showed for Amy, his wife, Julia can now hear in his voice.³⁴ After her father ceremoniously reads the passage from Isaiah, Julia proclaims, “Amen! ... My text is: set thine house in order.”³⁵

Julia's sermon and the reality of her life were incongruous, for Julia's house was not in order. The first, explicit description of Joel Miller's abuse of Julia is mentioned after her last sermon at Mother Bessie's funeral and two days after her mother, Amy, passes away. It is not directly stated in the novel, but Joel's abuse of Julia could have been happening before her last sermon. In this context, “to set thine house in order” is a metaphor, constituting the body's physical and spiritual state. As a result of Joel's sexual abuse and flogging of Julia, both her body and soul go to a deep place of anguish. Her body bleeds blue.

As the novel progresses and despite the blue note cries in the valley of spiritual death around her, Julia's dark, flashing eyes speak a womanist hermeneutic of regeneration—a promise to live and *not die*:

Julia had become gaunt indeed, but death refused to prefer her over her mother: life, inexorably, sat in Julia's face and her eyes held the furious, driven repentance of the living.³⁶

“I Got to Find a Way”: Preaching as Process and the Power of Self-Definition

Many Black women writers agree that the power to save the self from an oppressed state is found by leaning on the power *within* to heal the grieved spirit from the inside out. As evidenced in literature, either from writing letters or from oral communication, telling their stories aloud, there are many forms of agency that Black women in particular use to regain a new sense of self.³⁷ Positioned within a womanist hermeneutic of regeneration is the indelible womanist tenet that one’s love of herself must always come first. *Regardless*. There are two moments in this text when Julia preaches outside of the pulpit: in her conversations with Arthur in Book Three when she sees him again after her mother’s funeral and in her last meeting with Hall Montana at the end of the novel. She expresses the renewal and transformation she feels not only in her physical body but also in her spirit. In a conversation, she and Arthur discuss why Julia hasn’t left the house of her father. Knowing that her father drinks heavily, Arthur tries to coax her to stay at his mother’s house. They both know safety is nonexistent in the Miller household for Julia. Julia tells Arthur, “Well—it’s hard—to know what to do when somebody drinking a lot—and you can’t talk to him. But I can’t just keep *staying* out. I’ve got to *get* out... I’ve got to find a way.”³⁸ Within a womanist hermeneutic of regeneration comes love of self and in the midst of tribulation, an overwhelming consciousness and desire to survive. Julia could have belligerently continued to assert her father’s “need” for her to stay in the Miller household, but she knew that what she was experiencing was malevolent, tearing at the very essence of her soul daily. Her need for survival and life superseded her current situation of drowning in the depths of her father’s evil sea.

An epiphany arises for Julia during her conversation with Arthur, and she realizes that when she was preaching in the pulpit, she believed what she was saying, but she didn’t know it. Now that she’s out of the pulpit, she knows what she was saying versus what she believed:

They walked in silence for a while. Then, Julia said, “Sometimes, now that I’m out of the pulpit, I feel more in the pulpit than I did when I was preaching.” [...]

“How could you preach it—if you didn’t know it was true?”

“Oh, I *believed* it—but I didn’t *know*. And now, maybe, I don’t believe it but I’m beginning to *know*.” She looked at him and smiled. “I know that sounds crazy.”³⁹

There is a marked difference here between believing and *knowing*. In her conversation with Arthur, Julia clarifies the difference between believing and knowing. She asserts, “Maybe I see the people better than I did. Maybe I see myself. When I was preaching, I don’t think I knew what I was saying. I didn’t know what it meant.”⁴⁰ To believe is to just accept something as true, but *to know* is to be *fully* aware of something and gain true knowledge through one’s own observation or experience.

The Preacher's Song: "Julia ain't dead. Julia far from dead."

In Book Four, Hall and Julia reunite after he notices Julia posing as a model in a magazine ad. He immediately calls the modeling agency to find her location. After reacquainting themselves, Julia and Hall go on their first date in the Village later in the novel. Studying Julia's face intensely, Hall realizes something has changed in her countenance. He acknowledges a miraculous newness in Julia as if she had risen from the dead:

I see Julia's face, that changing face; for a very long time, I could not take my eyes from her face. I saw the face of the child, and the face of the little girl preacher, the faces I had always seen—or never seen—and a new face, or faces, I had never before confronted. Everything she said and did that night was touched, for me, with the miraculous—it was as though she had come back from the dead.⁴¹

In the brief relationship Hall has with Julia, Julia's process of regeneration becomes heuristic. One's process of spiritual awakening or renewal not only affects that person but also his or her surrounding environment. It is a spiritual awakening for the woman and those who surround her. The people in Julia's presence, from Arthur to Hall, would always note a dynamic change in her. Whether it was her face, her clothes, her hair, her makeup, or even the timbre of her voice, change was written all over Julia.

Later in the novel when Julia returns from her trip to Abidjan and Paris in Book Five, the process of regeneration continues. Going to Abidjan, the sixth most populated city in Africa, was about going to a new space—a new realm of freedom—and bringing that sweet taste of freedom back with her to New York. Julia's entire appearance changes, from her accouterments to the texture of her hair and her complexion. Her skin is darker, her hair is coarser, her reflection changes. She immerses herself in this newness; this is a physical and spiritual baptism for her—washing away the old and reemerging with the new.

Julia's language noticeably changes, and a womanist hermeneutic of regeneration extends the meaning of the pulpit beyond the conventional position within the four walls of the church into her surrounding environment *outside* of ecclesia. A womanist hermeneutic of regeneration is not only didactic, it is self-defining, making one become authentically whole. A womanist hermeneutic of regeneration asserts that one finds one's *self*, too. The power and agency of herself that Julia regains is a part of what makes a womanist hermeneutic of regeneration palpable. Julia finds comfort, redemption, deliverance in the sermon *and* in herself—her own song of possibilities—words that she knows herself to be true. The most powerful displays of a womanist hermeneutic of regeneration in *Just Above My Head* come from what Patricia Hill Collins termed, "the power of self-definition."⁴² It's the application of the sermon to the life of the Black woman preacher that demarcates salvation from stagnation.

Julia is intangible, not able to be easily comprehended. With all her complexities and complications, though, Julia is a Black woman figure who stands above

the rest. Julia escapes the patriarchal strictures placed on Black women within the four walls of the church and creates her own epistemology of womanist regeneration anew. She preaches without a literal pulpit—without a patriarchal structure; her pulpit becomes metaphorical with a *womanist* structure—didactic lessons of an awakened consciousness that improve herself and all who encounter her. This regeneration must be seen through a womanist lens because of the ways in which Julia uses her transition from child preaching prodigy to one who uses her journey of blue notes to craft a revolutionary consciousness of regeneration where she “feels now more *in* the pulpit than [she] did when [she] was preaching.” Julia not only redefines herself, but she also redefines the meaning behind the term pulpit. She redefines the platform from which her life was based. The pulpit of her childhood was tinged with the weary blue notes of abuse, displacement, and abandonment, yet the pulpit of her adulthood holds a new relevance. The pulpit of her adulthood holds an enlightened consciousness of self-love, survival, and a pathway that molds her stage of becoming as a life-giving lesson to those around her.

Edmund White in the *Washington Post* has a more accepting view of the novel itself but mentions Julia disparagingly. While White’s readers may think he is drawing attention to Julia’s character in his literary review, he gratefully describes Julia as a hypocrite, “an eerily controlled monster of vanity and manipulation bent on destroying her mother and seducing her father.”⁴³ I find White’s portrayal of Julia problematic, forcing her character into an incestuous web that White implies is Julia’s fault. Is this all we dare say about Julia? Baldwin positions Julia as a Black girl preacher as the foremost voice of guidance and reason to show through the lens of the *sermon* a Black woman preacher’s narrative in literature as she preaches and *lives* the gospel blues.

Indeed, as Trudier Harris suggests, “Julia finally becomes the freest of Baldwin’s Black female characters.”⁴⁴ Through her soiled blue notes of turmoil and pain, the space which Julia creates for herself is too profound to be designated as safe, yet she has molded a space that revolutionizes, transforms, heals, redeems, and *lives*. It is with great purpose that Baldwin chooses to write a Black girl turned womanist preacher proclaiming truth. It is with great purpose that through Julia’s “fall from grace” her sermons serve as her milk and meat to nourish and uplift herself out of the abysmal valley. Having freed herself from the ecclesiastical, objectifying, and patriarchal limitations placed upon her in the church’s pulpit as a child preaching prodigy, Julia formulates her own womanist consciousness that regenerates, revives, reconnects, and restores herself, thereby allowing the blue, flattened, othered notes of terror in her life to become her seasoned symphony and authentic testimony of agency and grace.

The pulpit, with its regulations and requirements of order, confined Julia. Outside of the pulpit, Julia observes and learns more, for her trips to Abidjan and Paris become the distinguishing markers that turn Julia, the girl preacher, into Julia, the blues heroine. She is not only able to pass on the keys to the kingdom through her words to herself, but also to Hall. Julia lives, she finds her breath, a breath that

blows dissonant, blue notes into dust, and she finds *her* voice again. With words like a sermonic fire, she can hope again, she can love again, and she lives again.

Backwater Blues Heroines

When it rains five days and the sky turns dark as night
 When it rains five days and the sky turns dark as night
 Then trouble's takin' place in the lowlands at night...
 Back water blues done called me to pack my things and go.⁴⁵

In her book, *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage and Literary Tradition*, Cheryl A. Wall examines blues music's influence in the works of Black women writers. Describing what she calls a "blues-inflected line," Wall examines that space of improvisation where blues women singers, such as Bessie Smith, "sing ahead or behind the beat."⁴⁶ Smith's blues-inflected improvisation can be heard in her recording of "Backwater Blues."

Sung in the key of A minor with the bass hand on the piano repeatedly playing notes A, E, F#, and E, Bessie Smith's "Backwater Blues" mirrors the chaotic blue note waters in Julia's life. Home was never a safe space for Julia. To clearly understand why "Backwater Blues" is an important correlation in Julia's life, Backwater must be defined clearly. The backwater is a part of a river that is still and stagnant; it is also defined as a place or condition where progress is impeded. For the sake of reviving her own life, Bessie Smith's sonic blues preaching and backwater blues consciousness began calling Julia out of darkness into the redeeming light. Throughout this article, we have witnessed the influence of blues music and Black preaching most potently in Baldwin's last novel, *Just Above My Head*. Not only are themes of music and homiletics peppered throughout Baldwin's work, but the concepts of home and domesticity are also evinced in this text. For a brief beat, I would like to examine this concept of merging lyrical blues music within a safe space of home for all through a womanist lens. In *Me and My House: James Baldwin's Last Decade in France*, Magdalena J. Zaborowska brings the influence of blues music by Black women in Baldwin's writing to the forefront. In addition, though, Zaborowska examines *Just Above My Head* through a heterotopian lens—a loupe that looks at the ways in which Baldwin creates a sacred, safe space for a family to dwell outside of the heteronormative conventions society often places on familial spaces:

As a survivor who later uses her trauma and pain as building blocks for a new self—again, much in the tradition of Smith's blueswoman, but also going beyond it—Julia manages to create yet another alternative version of domesticity, one that, as the novel resolves, encompasses and gathers them all.⁴⁷

How does one go beyond creating a new self for the sake of others? Through a womanist hermeneutic of regeneration.

Zaborowska also claims that Julia's life as a survivor of trauma mimics the blues lyric singing of Bessie Smith, manifesting through blues music a "new self."⁴⁸ This alternative space of domesticity Zaborowska posits can also be viewed as another element of a womanist hermeneutic of regeneration where the self is renewed physically and spiritually, thereby creating a "clearing" or safe space of home that welcomes all—a home that is committed to the survival of an entire people.⁴⁹

The Black women preachers of which Baldwin writes don't remain preachers in the conventional sense; they evolve consciously into blues heroines who create their own "clearings" or pulpits not bound by normative strictures. Baldwin's last unpublished play is aptly named "The Welcome Table," and Julia's pulpit becomes a welcome table for all. Julia leaves the church, takes a trip to Abidjan, and comes back with her own sermon, telling Hall at the end of the novel what she's learned, preaching more at the end of the novel than she does in the beginning. Julia asserts, "sometimes now that I'm out of the pulpit, I feel more *in* the pulpit than I did when I was preaching."⁵⁰ There is an evolution of the preacherly position here, and Baldwin's critique of the church is reflected when Julia leaves the church and steps outside of her traditional role into her own womanist hermeneutic of regeneration. Baldwin shifts our level of thinking that is locked into traditions of believing that the man is the ultimate moderator of authority, and he brings in a Black woman—a Black woman who is often thought of as the mule of the world, who works, toils, travails assiduously, is castigated but is brought back as a renewed, powerful figure holding the "keys to the kingdom."⁵¹

Asserting that *Just Above My Head* is a "gospel tale told in the blues mode," Eleanor W. Traylor defines a blues hero as one "who is able to report the abyss while, at the same time, encouraging us of our possibilities."⁵² Scholars often discuss blues music in Baldwin's work—it is apparent that Baldwin incorporates the blues in his literary style and in his characters, but the way in which he prefaces the *sermons* of Julia with both blues and gospel is what distinguishes this character and text from other works.⁵³ Baldwin writes Julia's life as blue notes. Julia is a blue note heroine; we often speak of the blue note heroes in Baldwin's works, but what about the blue note women, the blue note womanist preachers, and the blue note heroines who embody a womanist blues consciousness and a womanist hermeneutic of regeneration for all—blue note women who sing our sighs and preach our possibilities, turning their mourning into melody and sorrow into song?

At the end of her essay, Traylor sketches with her words a "House of Tales," a great tabernacle that is reminiscent of the church. There is a welcome table down the aisle at the center of the church where three prominent figures stand. On one side of the aisle, elders stand with a song reminding others of the assiduity required to overcome hundreds of years of slavery. On the other side of the aisle stand the fruit of the slaves' children (their great-grandchildren). Traylor depicts *Just Above My Head* as a house or vision positioned within a city where plush fields plentiful with great harvests of cotton and corn are seen.⁵⁴ According to Traylor,

on the right-hand side the “ancient tellers of the tale” sit, and on the left “the new.” In Traylor’s words, these figures embody Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright, with James Baldwin standing at the center. As I recreate this illustration in my mind in the context of this article of blues preaching heroines, I see authors from the significant literary canon of Black women writers, Zora Neale Hurston standing on the right, Toni Morrison standing on the left, and Julia standing right in the center with her arms open telling everyone to, “come on in the Lord’s house; it’s going to rain.”⁵⁵

Just Above My Head illustrates, through the story of Julia, Black women preachers as blues heroines through a womanist hermeneutic of regeneration. Baldwin’s novel is composed as prophecy; it is a sermonic trajectory of the African Diaspora to the streets of Harlem, speaking to the twenty-first century. In learning the power of self-definition through a womanist hermeneutic of regeneration as a blues heroine, Julia learns to love God *and* love people. The verb love surrounding the nouns Spirit and Folk are italicized in the third definition of womanism, bringing emphasis to the importance of loving God *and* people. Julia learns this tenet in *Just Above My Head*, coupled with the necessity of loving herself wholly. *Regardless*.

Notes

- 1 James Baldwin, *Just Above My Head* (New York, Random House, 1979), p. 280.
- 2 Blue notes are notes that do not belong to the already-written natural scale. A blue note is also a flat fifth or flat third in a minor or major pentatonic scale, respectively. See “Learning the Blues Scale,” www.simplifyingtheory.com/blues-scale-blue-note/.
- 3 Dolan Hubbard, “Sermons and Preaching,” in Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (eds.), *Africana: The Encyclopedia of African-American Experience* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 728.
- 4 Katie G. Cannon, *Katie’s Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York, Continuum, 1995), p. 115.
- 5 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 128–39.
- 6 Alice Walker, “Coming Apart,” in Laura Lederer (ed.), *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography* (New York, William Morrow, 1979), p. 100.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), p. 1.
- 10 Literary scholars and cultural critics such as Dr. Farah Jasmine Griffin and Dr. Emily J. Lordi have written extensively about the Black woman’s singing voice in Black cultural history and African American literature. Dr. Griffin’s article, “When Malindy Sings: A Meditation on Black Women’s Vocality,” in Robert G. O’Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin (eds.), *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2015), pp. 102–25, and Dr. Lordi’s article, “James Baldwin and the Sound of Soul,” *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 16:2 (2016), 31–46, both encompass the ways in which scholars give voice to the importance of music’s

position in African American literature and culture. In addition, current scholarship on James Baldwin's later novels is exemplified by Lynn Orilla Scott's *James Baldwin's Later Fiction: Witness to the Journey* (East Lansing, Michigan State University Press, 2002), Magdalena Zaborowska's *Me and My House: James Baldwin's Last Decade in France* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2018), Ed Pavlič's *Who Can Afford to Improvise? James Baldwin and Black Music, the Lyric, and the Listeners* (New York, Fordham University Press, 2016), Joseph Vogel's *James Baldwin and the 1980s: Witnessing the Reagan Era* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2018), and Christopher Z. Hobson's *James Baldwin and the Heavenly City: Prophecy, Apocalypse, and Doubt* (East Lansing, Michigan State University Press, 2018). There is a subtle rise in centering Black women preachers within African American literature during the late 1970s into the 1980s, particularly in the works of Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and Ann Allen Shockley. Ann Allen Shockley's 1982 novel *Say Jesus and Come to Me*, written just three years after the publication of Baldwin's *Just Above My Head*, also features a Black preaching woman within blues music's significance. Ann Allen Shockley, *Say Jesus and Come to Me* (Tallahassee, The Naiad Press, 1987), p. 1.

- 11 Otis Moss defines Blue Note sensibility as the amalgamation of the "shout and moan," asserting that there must be a reclamation of this Blue Note sensibility in postmodernity in order for prophetic preaching to take place. Otis Moss, *Blue Note Preaching in a Post-Soul World: Finding Hope in an Age of Despair* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), p. 22.
- 12 In a regular major tonic scale, all notes are in harmony with each other; however, when a "blue note" is inserted, which is a flattened third or flattened fifth, it is considered as an "out note."
- 13 Scott, *James Baldwin's Later Fiction*, p. 130.
- 14 John Romano, *Just Above My Head* (review), *The New York Times* (September 23, 1979), www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-above.html (accessed June 11, 2024).
- 15 Pavlič, *Who Can Afford to Improvise?*, p. 155.
- 16 James Baldwin, "The Uses of the Blues" (1964), in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York, Pantheon, 2010), p. 70.
- 17 Many scholars have theorized the blues and have, indeed, connected it to the Black experience, including Albert Murray and Rev. Dr. Otis Moss, III, for example. Yet Pavlič has made clear that there is a fluidity in the lyric that projects joy. See "Dinah Washington's Blues and the Trans-Digressive Ocean," in Pavlič, *Who Can Afford to Improvise?*, pp. 149–61.
- 18 "From a Whisper to a Scream" was written by African American musician Allen Toussaint. The lyrics suggest a man's frustration with his wife/partner leaving him to be in relationship with another man. Allen Toussaint, "From a Whisper to a Scream," track 1 on *From a Whisper to a Scream*, Kent Records, 1985.
- 19 Baldwin, *Just Above*, pp. 43–4.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp. 43–4.
- 22 Hobson, *James Baldwin and the Heavenly City*, p. 48.
- 23 Baldwin, *Just Above*, p. 576.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- 26 *Ibid.*, pp. 64–5.

- 27 Romans 7:24–25: “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord” (NKJV).
- 28 Call and response is a form of musicality that is often used in the Black church between soloist and choir, or in this context, between preacher and congregation.
- 29 Psalm 23, Psalm 24, Psalm 37, Psalm 91, and Psalm 121 are marked near the climactic point of Julia’s sermon, giving a clear example of how song integrates sermon. Baldwin, *Just Above*, p. 66.
- 30 *Ibid.*, pp. 67–8.
- 31 The term “grain” refers to Roland Barthes’s description of the grain of the voice in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York, Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 188.
- 32 “Mule of the world,” in Zora Neale Hurston’s 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, denotes Black women’s connection to labor from slavery to the present. Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) (New York, Harper Collins, 2007), p. 14.
- 33 Baldwin, *Just Above*, p. 167.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 161.
- 35 Julia’s second sermon is Margaret’s first in *The Amen Corner*. “Set Thine House in Order” stems from Isaiah 38:1: “In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death. And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came unto him, and said unto him, Thus saith the Lord. Set thine house in order: for thou shalt die, and not live” (NKJV).
- 36 Baldwin, *Just Above*, p. 164.
- 37 Collins uses Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as examples of Black women writers writing the healing of Black women characters in different artistic forms, from narration to letter writing. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York, Routledge, 2000).
- 38 Baldwin, *Just Above*, p. 278.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 280.
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 354.
- 42 Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p. 113.
- 43 Edmund White, “James Baldwin Overcomes *Just Above My Head*,” *The Washington Post* (September 23, 1979), www.washingtonpost.com/archive/entertainment/books/1979/09/23/james-baldwin-overcomes-just-above-my-head-by-james-baldwin-dial-597-pp-1295/7ee65811-2b0e-46dc-b497-cf292078d888/ (accessed June 11, 2024).
- 44 Trudier Harris, *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin* (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1985), pp. 203–4.
- 45 Bessie Smith, “Backwater Blues,” www.genius.com/Bessie-smith-back-water-blues-lyrics.
- 46 Cheryl Wall, *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2005), p. 16.
- 47 Zaborowska, *Me and My House*, p. 262.
- 48 *Ibid.*
- 49 The term “clearing” is used in reference to Baby Suggs’s sermon space in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987). This is the space where all would gather to hear Baby Suggs’s (the Black woman preacher fictional character in Morrison’s novel) sermons. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York, Vintage, 1987), p. 101.
- 50 Baldwin, *Just Above*, p. 280.

- 51 “Keys to the kingdom” is a line from Baldwin’s Introduction to his 1954 play, *The Amen Corner* (New York, Vintage, 1968), p. xvi.
- 52 Eleanor Traylor, “I Hear Music in the Air: James Baldwin’s *Just Above My Head*,” in Quincy Troupe (ed.), *James Baldwin: The Legacy* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1989), p. 104.
- 53 *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- 54 *Ibid.*, pp. 105–6.
- 55 A traditional hymn that is noted as an epigraph in “Book Two: Twelve Gates to the City,” in Baldwin, *Just Above*, p. 61.

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