

## What's Coming on Down the Line!

*Jennifer De Vere Brody*

### Section A

#### Some days (for Paula)

1  
Some days worry  
some days glad  
some days  
more than make [drive] you  
mad.

Some days,  
 some days, more than  
 shine:  
 [when you] see what's coming  
 on down the line!

...

4

Some days leave  
 some days grieve  
 some days you almost don't believe.  
 Some days believe you,  
 some days don't,  
 some days believe you  
 And you won't.  
 Some days worry  
 some days mad  
 some days more than make you  
 glad.  
 Some days, some days,  
 more than shine,  
 witnesses, (making it, baby)  
 Coming on down the line!

I could not have imagined what was “coming on down the line,” when, in the fall of 1987, I entered graduate school: namely, the death of James Baldwin. I attended a local memorial for him where I remember hearing a rousing, eloquent eulogy by Howard University’s Dr. Eleanor Traylor—delivered with the theatrical flair only she could embody.

Above, we have the first and last stanzas from Baldwin’s “occasional” poem, “Some Days,” written for his sister’s birthday.<sup>1</sup> With simple diction, Baldwin delivers, as he does repeatedly in his vernacular vocabulary, profound philosophical ideas. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of his prose is its ability to twist the line, to have attentive readers feel as if they are witnessing his thoughts moving on down the line. His famously musical language repeats keywords, plays changes with subtlety, such that the lines deliver meaning in sparkingly original, unexpected ways. Baldwin’s genius to “queer” the line may be the goal of all great writers: but in this contribution, I want to highlight his understanding of “what’s coming down the line” as it signifies poetically and politically, leaving open hope for future manifestations both aesthetic and racial. I would have us listen and look for this key phrase which might join some of his better-known watchwords and catchphrases: “The Price of the Ticket,” “witness,” “memory,” “history,” “Birth-right and Inheritance,” and always, “love”—and to do so, not as an accounting, but rather as another wayward way of understanding his theoretical desire to keep the lines coming on down the line.

As noted, Baldwin wrote this occasional poem with love for his sister, Paula-Maria Baldwin (Whaley) on her birthday. Given Baldwin's understanding of one's historic entrance into such heritable racial legacies, the fact that this is a "birth" day poem seems all the more meaningful. He uses this personal event, as he ever does, to signify simultaneously the world-historical issue of racial succession as a global problem. Composing the poem on his typewriter in the study of his no-longer-standing home in St. Paul de Vence, he completed the work at 6:58 a.m. on July 28th.<sup>2</sup> We can imagine him there, after a night wrestling with the line, seeing the sun rise and shine through the small window casement—a freshly lit cigarette in the ashtray by his side.<sup>3</sup> He was, in his brotherly, familial, and avuncular way, looking forward to what's coming on down the line. He makes explicit the double connection between writing and reading the line.

## Section B

This resonant conception of the line is invoked on the final page of J. Reid Miller's study of ethics and race, entitled *Stain Removal*.<sup>4</sup> Here is the paragraph that concludes the book:

The custodian of an inheritance, which is what blacks have had to be, in Western culture, *must hand the inheritance down the line*. So, you, the custodian, recognize, finally, that your life does not belong to you: nothing belongs to you. This will not sound like freedom to Western ears, since the Western world pivots on the infantile, and, in action, criminal delusions of possession, and of property...

But the people of the West will not understand this until everything which they now think they have has been taken away from them. In passing, one may observe how remarkable it is that a people so quick and so proud to boast of what they have taken from others are unable to imagine that what they have taken from others can also be taken from them (*The Devil Finds Work*, emphasis added).

This un-analyzed quotation literally provides the last words in the book. Leaving readers with Baldwin's words serves as a provocation that punctuates the previous arguments. I want to highlight how Baldwin uses this phrase in conjunction with inheritance, which, for Baldwin, is that which is required to grasp one's birthright. Indeed, Reid's text shows Baldwin's understanding that what's coming down the line (for some) is "the curse" of one's *very* racial ethical inheritance, which is inescapable. To put it differently, "To bear the lineage of blackness is thus to be conscripted as the legatee of a racial curse that descends through generations. But Baldwin renders blackness not as a definite identity but a mobile passing down of a curse."<sup>5</sup>

Inheritance and birthright are key words that Baldwin deploys with frequency. They must be understood as a mutually constitutive dyad. For, as he writes, "My inheritance was particular, specifically limited and limiting: my birthright was vast, connecting me to all that lives, and to everyone, forever. But one cannot

claim the birthright without accepting the inheritance.”<sup>6</sup> Baldwin’s theories of the relationship between birthright and inheritance, race and ethics, profoundly shape our understanding of identity, which he posits as not one’s own, per se, but rather uncoupling the individual and reviving the riven idea of the indivisible (as Renaissance scholars among others understand as being distinct from having property). Again, there is no escaping our inheritance: indeed, such legacies provide the genesis of our humanity.

### Section C

The mere act of retyping these sentences makes me think about each word, each comma, since Baldwin wrote theoretical poetry with each phrase. In the decades that I have taught texts (and especially essays) by Baldwin, I tell the students to pay attention to the pronouns, the dynamic shifts in perspective, to each and every mark on the page.

When I began teaching as an Assistant Professor in 1992, it took four years of lobbying the English Department at the University of California Riverside before I could teach Baldwin’s oeuvre in the “single author” course slot that previously had been reserved for courses by Great Writers such as Chaucer, Milton, and Shakespeare. My colleagues had to be convinced to see the surrogation “coming down the line.”

Since that successful seminar in 1996, I have continued to teach classes centering Baldwin’s texts. Indeed, I am doing so now in an expanded class entitled “The Myriad Meanings of Love,” a course on Baldwin and Hansberry.<sup>7</sup> Baldwin, more than most, placed great value on his friendships and collaborations. Unwittingly, Baldwin’s work and life suggest that anticipation is a two-way street: “what’s coming down the line” is both antecedent and precedent. We are, all of us, looking and learning in Baldwin’s wake (to invoke the crucial phrase from Christina Sharpe).<sup>8</sup> From Sir Isaac Julien’s film, *Looking for Langston* (1989), inspired by “American writer James Baldwin’s [funeral],”<sup>9</sup> to Nicholas Boggs’s foundation work on *Little Man*, *Little Man* and new art work in every genre, Baldwin reveals to us the value of our unanticipated legacies.<sup>10</sup>

I hope this brief contribution radiates Baldwin’s interest in these ongoing questions of generation. His words are water, balm, and brew. Baldwin puts us, implicates us in his various genealogical glosses on the line. We are always already witnessing the rainbow, queerly bent, coming on down the line...

### Notes

- 1 Stanza excerpts from “Some Days,” in Nikki Finney’s important edition of Baldwin’s poetry, *Jimmy’s Blues and Other Poems* (Boston, Beacon Press, 2014).
- 2 The typescript is archived at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. The line changes in brackets above reflect the typed manuscript as opposed to the final printed work that appears in *Jimmy’s Blues and Other Poems*.

- 3 In a course I took when I was a junior at Vassar College entitled “Testimonies of the Past,” we learned to compare typescript or handwritten poetry with its published version, and to analyze various editions. I remember the significant issue of punctuation and capitalization in “bowdlerized” versions of Emily Dickinson’s texts, for example. These lessons in editing, printing, and publication taught me to be attuned to the unfixedness of language, and showed me that writing was a subjective process.
- 4 J. Reid Miller, *Stain Removal: Ethics and Race* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 171.
- 5 Personal correspondence with Prof. Miller, February 12, 2024. I am grateful for Prof. Miller’s conversation about these ideas.
- 6 James Baldwin, “Preface” (1955), in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1984), p. xii.
- 7 My colleague Professor Soyica Colbert includes Nina Simone in her course since, as we know, these three brilliant artists were close friends and shared similar ethical concerns. For more on Baldwin, youth, and ideas of protection, see Andrea Adomako, “‘She ain’t no boy’: James Baldwin, Relational Masculinity, and the Politics of Protection,” forthcoming in *The Routledge Companion to James Baldwin*.
- 8 See Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2016).
- 9 See Isabella Maidment (ed.), *Isaac Julien: What Freedom is to Me* (London, Tate Publishing, 2023), p. 12.
- 10 James Baldwin and Yorán Cazac, *Little Man, Little Man: A Story of Childhood*, eds. Nicholas Boggs and Jennifer DeVere Brody (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2018).

## Works Cited

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## Contributor’s Biography

**Jennifer DeVere Brody** (she/her) holds a BA in Victorian Studies from Vassar College and an MA and PhD in English and American Literature from the University of Pennsylvania. Her scholarship and service in African and African American Studies, Gender and Sexuality Studies, visual and performance studies have been recognized by a 2022 Guggenheim Fellowship, a 2023 Virginia Howard

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