

Copyright

by

Laura Knowles Wallace

2016

**The Dissertation Committee for Laura Knowles Wallace Certifies that this is the
approved version of the following dissertation:**

**QUEER NOVELTY:
READING PUBLICS AND CANON FORMATION IN 20TH
CENTURY US FICTION**

Committee:

Brian Bremen, Supervisor

Chad Bennett

Ann Cvetkovich

Jennifer Wilks

Janet Staiger

**QUEER NOVELTY:
READING PUBLICS AND CANON FORMATION IN 20TH
CENTURY US FICTION**

by

Laura Knowles Wallace, BA, MA

Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at Austin
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

**The University of Texas at Austin
August 2016**

Dedication

For who else but my students, whose insistent presence served as persistent reminder of
the stakes of this project?

The many ways contemporary queer readers and critics have invested pre-Stonewall writing and images with romance or nostalgia or distaste all point to the funny communicability of shadow-relations and secret emotions across time, as if they acquire heft only in the long term, where the difficulty of the problems they want to solve (like historical isolation and suffering) can emerge in their full intractability.

Christopher Nealon, *Foundlings*, 2001

*I don't have to wonder whose group I'm in today.
Certainly the people who always think the public problem is theirs are gay.*

Eileen Myles, "To Hell," *Sorry, Tree*, 2007

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my committee (Brian Bremen, Jennifer Wilks, Chad Bennett, Ann Cvetkovich, and Janet Staiger) for your time, your enthusiasm, and your questions.

Thank you to the other faculty members whose teaching and encouragement shaped this project, especially Hannah Wojciehowski, Eric Darnell Pritchard, Mia Carter, and Heather Houser. And thank you to Amy Stewart and Patricia Schaub for their behind-the-scenes assistance.

Thank you to the instructors who shaped my undergraduate mind at Kenyon College, and sowed the seeds of this project: Judy Smith, Sara Clarke Kaplan, Laurie Finke, William Klein, Joseph Adler, and most of all, my thesis advisor, Ted Mason.

Thank you to the students in my two semesters of teaching Gay and Lesbian Literature and Culture at the University of Texas at Austin in Fall 2014 and Fall 2015. You challenged me, humbled me, made me laugh a lot, and kept me honest.

Thank you to my domestic partner, Billy Callis, and our dog, Maggie, for your love and support, and for reminding me every day that there is more to life than grad school.

Thank you to the friends, colleagues, and family who supported me during the writing process, especially Margaret Rieley, Rhiannon Goad, Emily Lederman, Meredith Coffey, Anne Stewart, my parents, and my sister, Grace.

Thank you to the baristas at Thunderbird, Flightpath, Monkey Nest, La Tazza Fresca, Genuine Joe, and the Caffè Medici on the Drag. I truly could not have done this without you.

Most of all, thank you to my writing companions: Jenn Shapland, Jenny Howell, and Kendall Gerdes, who are not only intellectual and creative fellow travelers, but dear friends. To describe my debt to you, I've got to crib from Sedgwick: "The greatest gift from all these people has been encouragement: not only in the sense of narcissistic supply, though there's no substitute for that, but in the root sense—they gave courage. On the whole there isn't a vast amount of courage available to those who feel they want it, in the fairly protected (though notionally left-leaning) academic milieux in which scholars have today, when we're lucky, the privilege of doing sustained intellectual work. [...] courage of even the most spectacular nature isn't after all a spectacle, an arena with fixed sightlines, but instead a kind of floating permeable rialto of common lending, borrowing, extravagant indebtedness, and exchange" (x).

Queer Novelty: Reading Publics and Canon Formation in 20th Century US Fiction

Laura Knowles Wallace, PhD

The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

Supervisor: Brian Bremen

Queer Novelty investigates the reception histories of four mid-twentieth-century novels that are now read as LGBTQ+ fiction in order to demonstrate how popular reading contributes to and complicates the constitution of gay and lesbian literature as a category in the academy and how early- to mid-twentieth-century print networks provided a framework for today's digitally networked LGBTQ+ culture. *Queer Novelty* tracks the reception histories of four novels: *Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes, *Two Serious Ladies* by Jane Bowles, and *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin. The archive for these histories encompasses scholarly analyses; reviews from newspapers and magazines; and online discussions on Goodreads and Amazon. *Queer Novelty* argues that reception studies demonstrate the force and effects of literary texts more fully than close reading, literary theory, or historical context alone, because reception study includes and accounts for shifts and variations in public reading practices and literary circulation. *Queer Novelty* brings together the investments of queer theory and affect theory, the methods of reception studies, and the writing practices of feminist criticism to demonstrate the possibilities of fiction reading in contemporary US culture. Chapter 1, "Thinking We Know Them, What Do We Know?" establishes the methodological framework for the project, focused on my theory of reading as public. Chapter 1 examines arguments for LGBTQ+ literature as a

category, from Donald Webster Cory's *The Homosexual in America* to discussions on Twitter and Tumblr in the 2010s. Chapter 2 reveals the feedback loop between popular and academic reception through the history of *Nightwood*, a canonical modernist text and a central text for queer female counterpublics. In Chapter 3, my analysis of *Two Serious Ladies*' publication and reception histories is an investigation into the changing horizons of expectation that make yesterday's odd novel today's cult classic. In Chapter 4, I analyze the reception history of *Giovanni's Room* and of Baldwin as a public intellectual to demonstrate how expectations about "gay literature" as a category have changed. *Queer Novelty* demonstrates that mid-20th century public cultures around books performed the groundwork necessary to keep them circulating, so that canons could be expanded when LGBTQ+ studies reached universities.

Table of Contents

List of Figures	xii
Chapter 1: Thinking We Know Them, What Do We Know? : An Introduction	1
My Archive	4
Reading in Public, Feeling Public.....	10
Identity as Genre: A Brief History of “Gay and Lesbian Literature”	15
The Politics of Fiction: Diversity and Canon	24
Why Reception Studies: Feminist Expansions	32
Why Reception History.....	37
Why Queer Reception History	43
Queer Novelty	46
Chapter 2: “My History, Finally Invented”: <i>Nightwood</i> and Its Publics	49
Genres, Categories, and Paratexts.....	51
A Forgotten, Difficult Classic.....	55
Modernist Difficulties and Early Reviews of <i>Nightwood</i>	59
Lesbians, Feminists, Queer Theory, and Djuna	65
Conclusion: “One of Ours, but Not Our Own”	74
Chapter 3: “The Dangers of Flirtation”: <i>Giovanni’s Room</i> and James Baldwin in Contemporary Culture	78
“The Dangers of Flirtation”: <i>Giovanni’s Room</i> in the 1950s	80
After Gay Liberation, Before Queer Theory.....	95
<i>Giovanni’s Room</i> and the Academy	101
<i>Giovanni’s Room</i> in (White Normative) Literary Publics	107
James Baldwin and the Academy	114
James Baldwin in Public in 2016.....	118
Conclusion: Studying and Teaching Baldwin in the “Queer-Inflected Mood of the Black Lives Matter Era Now”	126
Chapter 4: “Visions of a Nutty America”: Legends of <i>Two Serious Ladies</i>	131
1943 Reviews of <i>Two Serious Ladies</i>	138

“Up from Underground”: <i>Two Serious Ladies</i> in the Sixties	141
Bowles’s Underground Reputation in the 21 st Century	149
“Only Feelings and Feminist Obsessions” : Jane Bowles and the Second Wave	153
Lesbian Sensibilities, Lesbian Bookshelves	159
<i>Two Serious Ladies</i> and Internet Feminism.....	164
Conclusion: One Queer Book	169
Coda: What Do We Know?	178
Bibliography	181
Goodreads Reviews of Nightwood	190
Goodreads Reviews of Giovanni’s Room.....	191
Goodreads Reviews of Two Serious Ladies	192
Vita	193

List of Figures

Figure 1: Goodreads statistics for Baldwin's major works, as of October 2015.	107
Figure 2: Goodreads statistics for <i>Giovanni's Room</i> compared to other major African American novels as of October 2015.....	108
Figure 3: Goodreads statistics for <i>Giovanni's Room</i> compared to other major novels about male/male sexuality, as of October 2015.	108
Figure 4: Tumblr post of Baldwin-inspired protest sign.....	120

Chapter 1: Thinking We Know Them, What Do We Know? : An Introduction

Several years ago, I was at a reading at a bookstore when someone asked what books the visiting author recommended. “*Two Serious Ladies* by Jane Bowles,” she replied. The only thing this author said about the book, aside from praising its beautiful and surprising sentences, was that its author and her husband, fellow fiction writer Paul Bowles, were “both gay.” At that moment, this sentence popped into my brain, a quotation from Carolyn Dinshaw’s *Getting Medieval*: “thinking we know them, what do we know?” (12). “They,” in Dinshaw’s book, are people living in Medieval England who experienced same-sex desires and performed queer sexualities and genders.¹ Desiring “a touch across time,” Dinshaw excavates not only historical traces, but contemporary assumptions about that history. We cannot know these people centuries or millennia dead. We can, however, trace them in writing and visual art that survive from their time to ours. Knowing or seeking to know about them, we can know something about us. We can discern something about what we want from them, what we expect from each other. Thinking we know them, what do we know? This became a guiding question for my dissertation project. It might seem as if Dinshaw’s medieval queers exist in an entirely different realm from the readers and texts I examine in the pages that follow, twentieth- and twenty-first century readers and modern

¹ You will notice that throughout this project I use the word ‘queer’ as a catch-all identifier for LGBTQ+ people and communities. This is partly disciplinary convention—most of my theoretical sources use ‘queer’ to define their field—and partly convenience, but also reflects my own identification with and commitment to the anti-normative political investments of ‘queer’ as opposed to the various acronyms or the less inclusive ‘gay and lesbian.’ I have tried to be as specific as possible when referring to actual individuals or groups, since I recognize that, although much of the power of the ‘queer’ comes from its history as a reclaimed slur, it still is a violent slur in many places, and connotes a set of political stances that not all LGBTQ+ individuals share.

novels. Yet present-day readers, too, reach across time, and these readers often feel as if they also know them—with the third-person plural pronoun here referring to that nebulous chimera of author and characters conjured by fiction.

This project began with difficulty. To be more specific, it began with Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, a book I felt simultaneously compelled and frustrated by. A book that I have come to really like, but didn't always. I originally sought out *Nightwood* as the Holy Grail of queer modernist women's writing. Coded into that image are so many expectations about the novel: that it would tell me something about myself, that it would be different from other modernist literature by virtue of its author's identities, that it would speak to me more intimately than they did, call out to me more specifically. In some ways, all those things ended up being true. But as I researched *Nightwood*'s reception history and the ways people have read it—as a cautionary tale about inverts; as a tract against fascism; as a pretentious, decadent throwback; as a bohemian accessory; as a lesbian Bible—I came to recognize that my expectations for the book and the different contexts in which I read it had shaped my understanding of the text inside it, a contingent understanding that changed over time.

Perhaps it is obvious that not all literary texts fulfill our expectations; that readers' interpretive lenses influence how they see texts, that there will always be static on the line between author and reader. Yet readers persist in reaching out to texts for what Dinshaw calls "a touch across time" and Roland Barthes calls "someone to love" (*Getting* 21; *Sade* 9). In *The Faraway Nearby*, Rebecca Solnit examines the idea that "Books are solitudes in which we meet" (54). She articulates a central paradox driving my research: even though reading is a solitary activity, most often done in silence, readers experience it as social and feel, in Michael Warner's terms, as if they are entering into a public. Reading is a particularly charged act for marginalized or lonely readers, who seek recognition,

understanding, connection, a sense of history and belonging in the public spaces created by the circulation of texts. What makes such affective experiences possible? What makes readers believe they could or should find these things with distant strangers, in written texts?

What readers think they know about others through texts is partially framed by their encounter with the text itself, those marks on the page, but also by preconceptions: by readers' assumptions or knowledge about the author and the context; theories about reading; by how that reader discovered a given text; by the book's cover. Like Dinshaw, I am particularly interested in the expectations and attachments that swirl around queer authors and characters, especially when they come from LGBTQ+-identified readers. To demonstrate the effect of such expectations, I make case studies of the reception histories of three novels that have usually or sometimes been included in LGBTQ+ canons.² I chose books that were published when the idea of a gay and lesbian literature course was barely on the horizon in U.S. universities: *Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes (1936/7), *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin (1956), and *Two Serious Ladies* by Jane Bowles (1943).

At a time when the humanities are in jeopardy, it is more important than ever to connect scholarly practices with cultural work occurring outside the academy. My methodology itself is an argument, making the case that reception studies demonstrate the force and effects of literary texts more fully than close reading, literary theory, or historical context alone, because reception study includes and accounts for shifts and variations in public reading practices. *Queer Novelty* brings together the investments of queer theory,

² I use the open-ended acronym 'LGBTQ+' to refer to the umbrella category of gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans and queer that is often considered as a single public. At times, I use 'LGB' rather than 'LGBTQ+' to refer to my specific archive, to acknowledge a difference between sexual orientation and gender: while I am researching authors who are considered gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or queer, none of them is widely read as trans.

the methods of reception studies, and the writing practices of feminist criticism to demonstrate the possibilities of fiction reading in contemporary US culture.

This project takes a few ideas as axiomatic: (1) that reading is a social act; that to read a published book is to enter into a public; (2) that human identities are socially constructed and thus gayness, lesbian-ness, bisexuality, and queerness only gain definition in public; and (3) that publics are socially constructed: they are affective structures constructed through the historically-situated circulation of texts, ideas, and material culture. I elucidate each of these concepts further in this chapter. First, I lay out the basics of the project's archive. Then I summarize the theory of publics that frames it and think through the idea of gay and lesbian and queer literature as categories, which leads into an examination of the relationship between identity politics and literary canon, which culminates in an analysis of the theories of reading that drive canon expansion and movements for literary diversity. Finally, I provide a brief genealogy of my methodology's roots in reception studies, feminism, and queer historicism.

MY ARCHIVE

For my case studies, I have chosen three novels whose reception histories demonstrate different aspects of queer reading publics. *Nightwood* has been considered a difficult text since the 1930s, but has become canonical as a modernist and a lesbian novel. *Giovanni's Room* was originally seen by many as a distraction from what should have been its author's primary concern, the black Civil Rights Movement, and became a cornerstone of gay literature as the category coalesced in the 1970s. *Two Serious Ladies* is usually seen as a cult novel by a forgotten literary wife, being rediscovered in the twenty-first century. My decision to write about both female and male, white and black writers reflects the way

queer studies and gay and lesbian studies have developed as intersectional, interdisciplinary fields. Rather than regarding these fields as fixed or finalized, my case studies illuminate the process of their construction, and in each chapter, I meditate on the most productive reading practices and critical methodologies for bringing historical texts together under the sign of LGBTQ+ or queer. If we are committed to critical and pedagogical practices that value anti-normativity, we must practice radical specificity in our language and radical open-endedness in our interpretation, and we must always historicize.

Each of these books invites an equation between the author's biography and the novel's narrative through a smattering of autobiographical connections, yet none exactly performs the positive, progressive sort of LGB representation mass audiences so often clamor for: *Nightwood* and *Giovanni's Room* are both quite tragic, featuring characters full of self-hatred; *Two Serious Ladies* is bizarre, and its characters' sexualities are not entirely clear. Though *Nightwood* and *Giovanni's Room* are included on most lists of queer novels (and many syllabi), *Two Serious Ladies* is not often read in LGB reading contexts. The authors, all now deceased, made various provocative statements about their own sexual orientations, from Djuna Barnes proclaiming, "I'm not a lesbian, I just loved Thelma" to James Baldwin insisting that homosexual should be a verb rather than a noun (Barnes, qtd. in Field 37; Baldwin, qtd. in Goldstein 183). Whether the texts themselves are "actually" gay or lesbian or bisexual or queer is an open question.

Each of the mid-twentieth-century novels I analyze here arrives in the twenty-first century wrapped in layers of biographical mystique, the authors known as much through reference and association as through their writing. Amidst alarms about how no one reads anymore, these books circulate and public conversations about them continue. Each of these novels is old enough to have a storied reception history, yet young enough to be

accessible to many twenty-first-century readers. My project deals with novels that are decades rather than centuries old, but their shelf lives encompass a time of rapid change in public understandings of (and vocabularies for) race, gender, and sexuality; in technologies of reading and industries of publishing; in literary theories; in popular subcultures, and aesthetic movements; in the position of the university in society. Until recently, novels from the 1950s would have been considered contemporary, and today they inhabit a netherworld somewhere between late modernism and the contemporary period. These authors speak the same vernacular spoken in the US today and in many ways, their characters' lives seem much like ours. In other ways, their frames of reference might as well be medieval. These texts do not always fit into the identity frameworks or answer the political demands that more recent readers have placed on them.

We begin with *Nightwood*, first published in the UK in 1936 and in the US in 1937, at a historical moment defined by economic depression, the Spanish Civil War, and the rise of fascism in Europe. Together, these three novels' publication dates span a period that encompasses World War II and the Kinsey Reports, and that ends before the allegedly liberating sixties begin. Writing about roughly the same period, Julie Abraham situates it as "post-Wilde and pre-Stonewall" (xiv). While it is conventional to regard the 1969 Stonewall Riots as the birth of the gay rights movement, gay and lesbian subcultures and print cultures flourished in many US cities in the early twentieth century and the 1950s saw the rise of the two most prominent US-based gay rights organizations thus far, the Mattachine Society, founded in 1950, and the Daughters of Bilitis, in 1955. Although homosexuality would remain in the DSM as a disorder until the 1970s, some psychiatrists and sexologists began to openly describe it in more neutral terms, and to encourage the public to accept gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. In the US, public discourses about sex and sexual identity exploded in the postwar period, with Alfred Kinsey publishing his

widely-read reports in 1948 and 1953. Though Kinsey's research was far from comprehensive or unbiased, it suggested that same-sex desire and sexual experience were relatively common, and that human sexual desires and practices in general were much more polymorphously perverse than most Americans previously assumed. As public discourses about sex and sexuality changed, LGB sexuality moved from being a paraphilia to a political identity, and the freedom to speak and write about homosexuality, along with sex more generally, became a particularly charged issue.

Each of these novels has been considered American literature. The authors are all US-born, but it is hard to make a strong case for a national focus when studying widely-circulated books moving around in a robust transnational print circulation, with authors who also migrated in transnational expatriate circles for much of their lives. The relative scarcity of explicitly gay and lesbian content or publicly LGB authors pushed these books further in their circulation, ensuring that they would pass from hand to hand with more urgency. None of the novels is set wholly in the US, and each thematizes travel and movement. It is noteworthy that most of the same-sex sex in these books takes place outside the US: in Panama, France, and Germany. Does expatriation make these novels' gay and lesbian content more palatable and/or more legible to American readers? France and colonies were already associated in many literary Americans' minds with homosexuality, since the most celebrated explicitly gay literature of the early twentieth century (aside from Oscar Wilde's oeuvre) was the work of Nobel laureate André Gide and the more radical Jean Genet, both French authors. One of Gide's most famous and gayest works is *L'immoraliste* (1902), which deals with pederasty in North Africa. Not only does this novel depict homosexual activity at a remove from the metropole, it also situates that activity within the colony, making what might otherwise seem like decadent deviance intelligible as an imperialist practice. After Panama declared independence from Colombia in 1903, it

was brought into the US sphere of influence, as demonstrated by the US control over the Panama Canal Zone after the canal opened in 1914. Meanwhile, Paris and Berlin were centers for gay culture (as well as bohemianism more generally) in Europe in the early twentieth century. Thus each of these novels in its own way vexes any fixed national categorization, and their reception histories may demonstrate the fluidity of national boundaries when it comes to literary circulation.

These novels circulate within multiple publics—scholarly, popular, and everywhere in between—each with its own reasons for selecting a particular text. The authors are all known as queer writers, and each of these texts has been, in some contexts, described as queer. Many readers choose to read these books precisely because of their purported queerness, because these readers identify as queer or because they seek to understand the experiences of queer people or queer history. It is equally true that many read them for reasons that they would assert have nothing to do with the books’ or authors’ queerness: historical significance, stylistic innovation, other literary associations, race, gender, geography. In each of my case studies, readers find interpretive challenges. These involve decentered forms, bizarre allusions, unusual turns of phrase, and frustrations in trying to map a fiction onto an author’s life.

In reconstructing the reception histories of these novels from the mid-twentieth century, I seek not to fix the significance of the texts or to construct a definitive image of the authors, but to tell a story about each book’s life, about the various uses to which it has been put, the worlds into which it has traveled. I bring the methodology of reception studies to bear upon current debates within queer studies and recurring theoretical questions that vex all of literary studies. In each case study, along with thinking about how the book is categorized by readers, compare readers’ responses from scholarly journals, newspapers and magazines, memoirs and diaries, blogs, and social networking websites like

Goodreads. Theories about what makes a good or significant book differ across these genres. I decenter scholarly interpretations, lay them alongside assessments from the popular press and from diffuse, non-professional sources, giving all of these publics equal weight in the conversation. Literary scholars make pronouncements all the time about how identity and identity politics work in literary texts, and reception study is crucial to understanding how books actually work on the ground.

In the chapters that follow, I construct reception histories for the three novels based on published responses to those novels. I use the word ‘published’ here in its broadest sense, including any text submitted into public circulation, presented in what Warner calls a “venue of indefinite address” (86), whether in books, scholarly journals, the popular press, blogs or online reviews. I am particularly interested in reviews from the Goodreads, rather than from Amazon, because Goodreads presents itself as a social network rather than a bookstore, although as Lisa Nakamura notes, “Goodreads is an exemplary Web 2.0 business: it is grandly imperial, inviting participants to comment, buy, blog, rank, and reply through a range of devices, networks, and services” (239). Goodreads encourages users to link their Goodreads accounts to their Facebook and Google accounts to connect with people they already know, and to follow, like, and comment on the reviews of strangers. While the website serves commercial interests as much as Amazon does, it maintains a veneer of pure sociality, community-mindedness, and literary appreciation. For my purposes, Goodreads provides a means to eavesdrop on informal public conversations readers have among themselves, outside of classrooms, bookstores, or conventional mass media. Most Goodreads reviews reveal that contemporary readers’ investments are remarkably similar to those of professional reviewers in the mid-twentieth century: they profess a preference for fiction that affects their emotions, that connects to their own experience, and that can be read as reflecting and supporting liberal values like equality,

tolerance, individual liberty and fulfillment, and the nuclear family with the romantic couple at its center. The commonality of monogamous romantic love is central to liberal arguments for the recognition, acceptance, enfranchisement, and representation of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people in the general public of the twenty-first-century US, exemplified by the repetition of the slogan “Love is love” in the wake of the 2016 Pulse shooting in Orlando.

READING IN PUBLIC, FEELING PUBLIC

Thinking we know them, what do we know? Canonical literary theory instructs us to pay no attention to the man behind the curtain, that it is inappropriate (and impossible) to speculate about authorial intention when the author is metaphorically dead.³ However, the provocation of Dinshaw’s question, its gnomic potency, is a reminder that most of us, most of the time when we read, believe we are encountering the intentionally-made marks of a sentient writing subject and that through language we can see and hear something of that person’s experience, even if it is mediated by their and our imagination. As Stanley Fish puts it, almost every form of literary interpretation, at its heart, concerns “the succession of acts readers perform in the continuing assumption that they are dealing with intentional beings” (161), that those words or images were placed on a page by a person or series of people who were trying to say or do something. Whether we read medieval mysticism or modern fiction, we feel that someone is trying to communicate with us, someone we think we can know. When reading fiction, we additionally imagine that we observe the actions, thoughts, feelings, desires, and personalities of characters with whom we might experience empathy, sympathy, identification, recognition, attachment, or

³ See Wimsatt and Beardsley, “Intentional;” Barthes, “Death;” Miller; Walker.

insight—that is, with other beings who, while imagined, have some relationship to others in the world outside the text, whether they are based on actual individuals or merely reveal some truth about human nature.

Dinshaw details her “queer historical impulse” toward making connections across time between, on the one side, lives and texts left out of sexual categories back then and, on the other, those left out of normative sexual categories in the present, an impulse that “extends the resources for self- and community building into even the distant past” (1). For her, the quest for historical queerness begins in personal, affective desire and becomes an explicitly political project, investigating the construction of LGBTQ+ identity and of sexuality in general, both of which gain meaning in historically-embedded public discourses. Dinshaw’s description of the desire behind her work echoes Christopher Nealon’s description of the mid-twentieth century gay and lesbian poetry, pulp novels and bodybuilding magazines he examines in *Foundlings*. Within the diffuse publics imagined by these works, Nealon traces the development of a theory of queer identity driven by “an overwhelming desire to feel historical, to convert the harrowing privacy of inversion into some more encompassing narrative of collective life” (8). Feeling historical means feeling public, feeling as if you belong, as if you’re seen.

Nealon and Dinshaw emphasize that queer cultural productions seek and build counterpublic worlds because queer people in heteronormative culture so often feel isolated and singular. Many LGBTQ+ people grow up thinking they are the only ones, since queerness, unlike race or class, is not clearly tied to heredity or home environment; same-gender desire is still framed in many places as disease or sin, something anomalous and private. As Nealon puts it, “certain kinds of strong emotion could make some early- and mid-twentieth century lesbian and gay writers “‘feel historical’ despite the daily problem of feeling pathological” by “representing homosexuality as a secret relation to others, rather

than a gendered inversion of the self” (177). In response to Nealon’s arguments about feeling historical, Love titles her book *Feeling Backward*, where backwardness refers to feelings like “shame, depression, and regret” that do not fit into a “linear, triumphalist view of history” (8, 3). She cautions against thinking that we can touch queer figures of the past: “Contemporary critics approach these figures from the past with a sense of the inevitability of their progress toward us [...]. Our existence in the present depends on being able to imagine these figures reaching out to us. [...] it remains difficult to hear these subjects when they say to us, ‘Don’t touch me’” (Love 40). Love reminds us that reaching into the past must involve “embracing loss, risking abjection” by touching unwelcoming texts and problematic historical figures without fitting them neatly into our own definitions of sexuality or proving that they share our belief systems (30). The secret relation among queer people is not always a safe space, nor simply a circle of trust and affirmation.

We might, along with Warner, see the secret relation among queer readers and texts as participation in a counterpublic. He describes how, even when individuals read silently, alone, they imagine themselves as part of a larger audience: “public speech is not just heard, it is heard (or read) as heard, not just by oneself, but by others” (Warner 81). A public or a counterpublic is partly defined as “an ongoing space of encounter for discourse” into which members can opt (90), and because a public or counterpublic is necessarily “a relation among strangers,” many public encounters occur on the page or the screen, often temporally as well as geographically out of sync. Reading is a social act that makes readers feel public as they experience imagined connections with authors, characters, and other readers, sometimes across vast distances of times and space. Nealon, Dinshaw, and Love each describe a relation between texts and readers that in some ways fits Warner’s definition of a counterpublic. Like any larger public, a counterpublic is “the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse,” but “counterpublics are defined by their

tension with a larger public” (Warner 90, 56). Thus they are not merely thematically-organized sub-publics, like Warner’s example of the public of *Field & Stream* magazine. Not all counterpublics are explicitly political, but the very counter-ness of a counterpublic distances it from the loci of power in the general public: “A counterpublic, against the background of the public sphere, enables a horizon of opinion and exchange; it remains distinct from authority and can have a critical relation to power [...] it is not based on precise demography but mediated by print, theater, diffuse networks of talk, commerce, and the like” (Warner 56-57).

Miranda Joseph demonstrates that while publics develop theories and narratives about the identities that define them, “communal subjectivity is constituted not by identity but rather through practices of production and consumption” (viii). A public or counterpublic is defined by the actions and relations of its members—anyone who participates in the reflexive circulation of discourse, in the practices of production and consumption that comprises that public. Every public has its own affective structures, which make some identity-based publics feel intimate. As Lauren Berlant puts it, “What makes a public sphere intimate is an expectation that the consumers of its particular stuff *already* share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience. A certain circularity structures an intimate public, therefore [...] expressing the sensational, embodied experience of living as a certain kind of being in the world, it promises also to provide a better experience of social belonging [...]” (viii). That is, in Berlant’s analysis of “women’s culture,” while those who participate in or consume women’s culture already identify as women, this participation or consumption promises to pull them into a more collective kind of womanhood. Publics and counterpublics, asserts Warner, “mediate the most private meanings of gender and sexuality” along with other identities (57). For Warner, queer gender and sexuality are

public: “Homosexuals can exist in isolation; but gay people or queers exist by virtue of the world they elaborate together” (57). Queerness *is* a counterpublic, a “relation among strangers,” a “scene of association” (Warner 74, 57). To read published texts, then, is to enter into that relation, into that association; to imagine that others are reading or have read the same text; and to imagine that another produced it. Reading, often figured as a private activity, is profoundly public.

Publics are leaky, “porous,” in Berlant’s words (viii). No reader or writer is a member of just one public, and each particular public is defined in difference from other publics. For example, members of the queer literary counterpublic have usually read texts from the (straight) canon. Much of the discourse within such counterpublics centers on whether particular canonical texts or authors belong in the counterpublic. It can certainly be said that Willa Cather’s name and works circulate within queer reading publics, that her work is read and discussed by people who self-identify as LGB or as queer critics, because they seek or believe they have found queer content in Cather’s books or biography. Locating these texts within the reflexive circulation of such counterpublics offers a way of reading Cather or her work as queer. Even when Joan Acocella argues that we should not and in fact cannot consider Cather to be a lesbian author, Acocella submits her own arguments about Cather to the queer reading counterpublics she argues against. Just because an author or text is read by a queer counterpublic does not mean that the counterpublic unilaterally decrees her to be a queer or lesbian author. Instead, the porous, contingent nature of publics means that a given public’s relationship to or interest in particular authors and texts will change over time, and that public’s methods for evaluating texts will also change.

IDENTITY AS GENRE: A BRIEF HISTORY OF “GAY AND LESBIAN LITERATURE”

As mass culture developed through print networks, queer counterpublics made use of these networks to connect individuals. Queer counterpublic spaces and published material about homosexuality offered opportunities for LGBTQ+ people to feel public, if only for the ephemeral moments of reading or presence, and fueled their desire to feel more and more public. Literature, particularly novels, has often facilitated information-sharing and world-making for queer counterpublics. In 1977, critic Roger Austen recalls how

Forty years ago, about the only way one had of discovering what it meant to be a homosexual—especially if one were in the closet—was to somehow find a copy of an underground gay novel. One man recalls that in those years “the classic Gay Novel” was passed around like the Eucharist, with moist eyes and a warm endorsement. In high school or the first year of college, you were likely to be introduced to somebody with great knowledge and experience who kept a bookshelf of forbidden or “particular” books. (221)

Although theater, pornography, periodicals, popular film, bars, gyms, sex work, and other media, spaces, and occupations also connected LGBTQ+ individuals before the internet existed, novels were specifically situated to facilitate a particular form of publicness. Julie Abraham emphasizes the primacy of the novel in lesbian representation: “First cousin to the case study, and more accessible than scientific texts, novels remained over the first half of the twentieth century easier to produce and harder to censor than theater or film. So for a combination of formal, cultural, and material reasons, the novel has been the genre in which representations of lesbianism have been recognized” (xiii). In the mid-twentieth century, novels were cheap to produce and consume, available everywhere (unlike pornography), and reading was usually a silent, therefore private, activity (unlike theater or film in the pre-television, pre-home video era). It was easy to hand or mail a book to a friend or stranger, while live performances or experiences could only be described or re-enacted. Reading feels private and public at the same time; the mass circulation of print

materials creates a public out of far-flung readers and writers. Thus print circulation was crucial in the movement toward gay and lesbian personal and political recognition. Nealon tracks a material shift “from isolated [...] queer subcultures to a subculture networked across urban centers, then to a ‘national’ queer culture linked by lesbian and gay print media [then] most recently—to a globalized queer culture facilitated by tourism, migration, and Internet communications” (9).

As LGBTQ+ print networks expanded, gay and lesbian activists recognized the particular importance of fiction and poetry for opening hearts and minds. Two writer-activists in particular, Donald Webster Cory and Jeannette Howard Foster, both writing in the 1950s, emphasize the political significance of imaginative literature in helping “homosexual” or “sex variant” individuals understand themselves and helping the public understand homosexuality. Neither Cory nor Foster identifies a discrete genre of gay or lesbian literature, but both delineate reasons why literature by and about LGB people is important privately and publicly, and begin to shape gay and lesbian canons, respectively. This section explores theories behind the construction of identity-based genres, as expressed by Cory and Foster and by others since.

In his widely read book *The Homosexual in America* (1951), Cory (a pseudonym for Edward Sagarin) wrote openly about his own experiences as a homosexual. A leader in the Mattachine Society, Cory advocated for the acceptance of gay men while arguing that they should strive to live heterosexual lives, since he believed homosexuality was neither normal nor ideal. In *Sex Variant Women in Literature: A Historical and Quantitative Survey* (1956), Foster demonstrates that she is not convinced of homosexuality’s abnormality. Acknowledging that most people accept that adolescents experience same-sex desire and “expression” but should “grow out” of it, Foster recognizes the social construction of such norms, and uses the neutral phrase “sex variant” to describe a wide

variety of individuals and experiences, from emotional attachments to sexual “action” between women. She chooses the term “sex variant” to indicate only difference from a perceived norm of “adequate heterosexual adjustment.” Foster’s precise description avoids any suggestion that heterosexuality is more natural than homosexuality or even more fulfilling. Foster follows psychiatrist George W. Henry’s definition of sex variance as “persons having emotional experience with others of their own sex” (11). She carefully explains why she prioritizes emotion over action and “‘relations’ is substituted for experience” in her definition of the term: “Because of the comparative sex reticence prevailing in our culture, few details of sexual action are reported in nonscientific writing, and in the peculiarly discredited field of sex variance, authors often avoid even implying action. For this reason scientists tend to disparage studies based on literature, but where women are concerned, a lack of specific detail is not too serious” (12). This definition motivates Foster to focus on literature rather than sexology or sociology, because fiction and poetry prize the kinds of affects and attachments left out of “objective” accounts: “this study includes not only women who are conscious of passion for their own sex, with or without overt expression, but also those who are merely obsessively attached to other women over a longer period or at a more mature age than is commonly expected” (12). Imaginative literature offers space for ambiguity, subtlety, and speculation. Foster and Cory both suggest that fiction, because it is not bound by the same strictures as the sciences, can more fully explore the realities of gay life. Precisely because it is subjective, Cory contends, fiction can help break the silence around sex variance. He suggests that the freedom found in belles-lettres allows literary writers to explore topics that others would be afraid to and to be honest about their own experiences and observations in a way that even psychiatrists cannot always be. Literature, Cory contends, can inspire gay individuals to accept themselves and encourage others to accept gay people:

[...] a fictional portrait of homosexuality [...] can enlighten, encourage, and offer suggestion for the ultimate solution of the individual's dilemma. [...] it can impart knowledge and insight for the benefit of both the public at large and the homosexual in particular; [...] and finally, [...] it can show all readers that the invert's life is not that of a hopeless person doomed to defeat. (172)

If fiction can change people's minds about homosexuality, then the sorts of gay representation that appear in literature are extremely important: fiction about gay people should, in Cory's view, be aesthetically "good," but must also be optimistic and politically persuasive (172).

Conversely, Foster is equally interested evaluating positive and negative, accurate and inaccurate representations of sex variant women. She focuses solely on literature (while Cory covers a range of gay-related topics), and strives to offer a complete picture of the ways people understood women's sexual variance throughout European and US history by looking at fiction and poetry, mostly in English, French, and German. In contrast to Cory's work, her research suggests that there is no "silence" to be "broken," that sex-variant women have appeared in Western literature since ancient Greece. Like the texts Nealon describes, Foster's project aims to help queer women feel historical rather than pathological. Her work is more quantitative than qualitative, subtly making arguments about who writes the most accurate lesbians. For example, assessing the nineteenth century, she observes that male writers tend to depict lesbian lives as tragic, while women writers are more cynical about heterosexuality (115).

As the gay and lesbian liberation movement became more visible after the Stonewall riot of 1969, more and more self-identified gay and lesbian readers engaged in canon-construction projects, opening bookstores, making lists, and publishing criticism

that brought books together into the categories of gay or lesbian literature. For example, Jane Rule's *Lesbian Images* (1975), performs a cataloguing similar to Foster's, but is much more explicitly subjective to its author's own experience. Rule explains that she writes "a statement of my own attitudes toward lesbian experience as measured against the images made by other women writers in their work and/or lives" (ix). An out lesbian, Rule reveals a deep hunger for recognition, to see herself in literature and for the public to see complex, accurate lesbian representation. Like Cory, she sees literature as crucial to individual self-acceptance and political advocacy; like Foster, she seeks a lesbian history. Rule asserts that art is useful for conveying minoritarian experience to the public because "the bias of art is still to see truth in the rich particular rather than in the lowest common denominator of a hundred case histories. Social scientists too often reduce human experience in order to understand it [...]" (ix). Literature, conversely, offers "insight into the complexities of life," because "the reality of lesbian experience transcends all theories about it" (Rule ix). Although she seeks her own image in literature, Rule doesn't expect all lesbian images to be identical. She recognizes that diverse representation is crucial to her own and other lesbians' survival (11).

Similar motivations drive the LGB literary anthologies and sourcebooks of the 1980s and '90s, even as queer theory leads scholars to question such identity categories. For example, the preface and introduction of *Contemporary Gay American Novelists: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook* (1993), edited by Emmanuel Nelson, emphasize a deep need for gay literature even as they evince discomfort with the idea of gay literature as a genre and with the possibility of a stable gay canon. In his preface, Nelson notes that,

as a gay man of color, he felt “uncomfortable and impatient” with the straightness and whiteness of the canon he encountered in graduate school, whose homogeneity was “profoundly alienating” (xi). What was missing was “reflections of my own realities” (Nelson xi). Working on his dissertation in the early 1980s, Nelson felt a constant need to defend the “academic merit or intellectual validity” of his research on James Baldwin and John Rechy, which many of his professors and colleagues viewed as a “scholarly perversion” (xii). This flip dismissal contains several different ideological messages: that a focus on sexuality is vulgar or reductive; that it is inappropriate for a scholar’s work to be obviously motivated by personal experience or identity; that disciplined scholarship is not personal, sexual, or affective. Such dismissals often include implications about the pedagogy or classroom style that might emerge from such scholarship. Scholars of all sorts of minoritarian cultures face similar challenges, and all owe a serious debt to their forebears in ethnic studies, who demanded ethnic studies departments in the 1960s and ‘70s, and to feminist theorists who interrogated the politics of the public/private and personal/political binaries. Nelson acknowledges that his own labor and that of many other academics throughout the 1980s led to the acceptance of Gay and Lesbian Studies as a legitimate field of study, which set the stage for anthologies and sourcebooks like this one which treat “gay literature” as a concept with which readers will already be familiar.

In the introduction to Nelson’s sourcebook, Gregory W. Bredbeck works through the confusion inherent in such a category: “When we say ‘gay literature,’ are we talking about ‘gay’ in the form of literature or ‘literature’ that happens to be ‘gay’?” (xvi). Bredbeck thinks through the motivation behind books like this one that presume the

existence and significance of “gay literature.” Bredbeck wonders if the gayness of literature is actually in the eye of the reader, asking, “When ‘I,’ as a ‘homosexual, queer, gay, white male’ read Hamlet, does it become ‘gay literature’? When Jesse Helms reads Andrew Holleran’s *Dancer from the Dance*, is he reading ‘gay literature’ or reading a heterosexual and, possibly, homophobic fantasization of what ‘gay’ means?” (xvi). Gay literature is politically important at the height of the AIDS crisis: as the ACT UP slogan goes, silence equals death—literally. Public understanding of the realities of gay life is, in this historic moment, crucial to individual gay survival. As Bredbeck puts it,

One of the primary purposes behind speaking of ‘gay/literature’ is to posit the possibility of an ‘us’ that is not simply a heterosexual fantasy of who ‘we’ should be. Modern American gay novels that begin with the assumption of gay identity, either in the reader or in the text, may obscure the complexity of material sexuality—but they also begin to imaginatively produce the possibility that ‘we’ are ‘we’ and, in the process, have begun to question the tacit and repressive heterosexual assumptions that have underpinned the construction of the homosexual in modern cultures. (xviii)

After having been written about for so long, gay and lesbian scholars and readers began establishing a canon, contending that rather than reading about LGBTQ+ people or even finding queer subtext in canonical supposedly straight texts like *Hamlet*, LGBTQ+ and straight readers alike should turn to the work of actual LGBTQ+ authors to find LGBTQ+ lives reflected. Imaginative literature, particularly fiction, is valuable to Bredbeck because it does not simply document reality but offers space for exploration: “‘Gay/literature’ ... provides a space where we can both find the ‘we’ that is ‘us’ and at the same time ask the equally important question, should this ‘we’ be ‘us’?” (xix). Bredbeck differentiates between activist advocacy, which necessarily regards identity as axiomatic in order to

perform its political work, and imaginative literature, which can ask questions, be playful, and allow for multiple perspectives because its purpose is less defined and its exigency less immediate. This sense that fiction, novels in particular, offers readers and writers a chance to slow down and be experimental is central to the theories of diversity and canon formation that I'll explore in the next section, and it also drives my own project's focus on novels. The freedom to play does not mean identity is meaningless. What this sourcebook suggests, claims Bredbeck, is that "there may be a voice that is not heterosexual, an imagination that is not homophobic, and a life that is nondiscriminatory and, indeed, liberational" (xix). Here he acknowledges the one major criterion for inclusion in Nelson's book: that each author profiled is himself gay—whatever that means.

Even this seemingly obvious identification—gay writer—comes into question in more recent sourcebooks and anthologies, for example, the 2009 collection *50 Gay and Lesbian Books Everyone Must Read*, edited by Richard Canning. As Canning puts it in his introduction, "each piece argues for GLBTQ resonance in the work in question" (xiii). Each chapter is written by a different contemporary writer (most but not all of them GLBTQ-identified), who advocates for a particular book, ranging from the epic of Gilgamesh to *Moby-Dick* to *The Terrible Girls* (1990) by Rebecca Brown. Canning begins with the statement, "This book is *not* a canon!!!" (xi). He goes on to point out all the ways this book fails as a canon-forming project: it skips over two millennia, and its only guidelines are that each writer pick a book that meant something to them, but that no author be represented more than once. The volume's audience is, as the title says, everybody, not just GLBTQ readers. Like Warner and Berlant, Canning recognizes that publics are porous,

and that everybody has something to gain from GLBTQ literature. By its very title, Canning's book suggests that "gay and lesbian books" is a recognizable category. For him, the category is not defined by an author's identity or even characters' identities, but by "resonance." This is the language of affect, not information exchange.

Berlant argues that affect connects identity to cultural forms. She has this to say about identity as genre: "To call an identity like a sexual identity a genre is to think about it as something repeated, detailed, and stretched while retaining its intelligibility, its capacity to remain readable or audible across the field of all its variations. For femininity to be a genre like an aesthetic one means that it is a structure of conventional expectation that people rely on to provide certain kinds of affective intensities and assurances" (4). Regardless of their gender identity, all who come to femininity as a genre expect certain kinds of affective intensities and assurances: assurances about what this identity-genre is, about its stability, its difference from masculinity. In the case of LGBTQ+ texts, the affective intensities and assurances for straight cis readers are often tied to the idea of queer sexuality or gender as transgressively heroic; the idea of queerness as beautifully tragic and affectively intense; the idea of themselves as not homophobic, absorbing some of the tragic-heroic political cachet of queerness while defining themselves against it, or experiencing recognition in that difference. In any case, fitting a text into a genre, however loosely defined, is often an imperfect exercise: the text may be intelligible within the genre, but still fail to deliver the promised intensities or assurances. The idea that gay and lesbian literature ought to evoke particular affective responses recurs again and again in the reception histories I survey.

THE POLITICS OF FICTION: DIVERSITY AND CANON

I asked the students in my Gay and Lesbian Literature course in Fall 2014 what the phrase “gay and lesbian literature” meant to them. My students, surprisingly, came to a consensus that a text needed to have not just a gay author or gay characters, but some sort of political message about LGBTQ+ rights. They insisted that gay literature should clearly advocate a liberal political position or represent a positive gay identity. My own criteria for the course’s syllabus and for this project have more to do with a text’s reception history, whether it shows up on lists and syllabi, in anthologies: that is, whether others have already identified it as gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, or queer literature. In the few cases when I’ve included texts that are not canonical, I frame the text as a case study, asking students why they think we’re reading it and whether I should include it on future syllabi. Discussing syllabus and canon construction with my students reveals the deep hunger that LGBTQ+ readers have to experience recognition and feel public, a hunger that reverberates throughout the reception histories of *Nightwood*, *Giovanni’s Room*, and *Two Serious Ladies*.

As Timothy Aubry describes it, a dominant paradigm for reading fiction in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries developed out of the “therapeutic turn” in culture. Broadly, this phrase refers to the way that middle- and upper-class Americans and Western Europeans have come to regard individual fulfillment and happiness as the goals of human life, and to the industries that have sprung up to support or capitalize on this ideology, from the widespread acceptance of psychotherapy and psychiatry to the rise of yoga, meditation, life coaching, and recovery movements. Most interesting to Aubry are the ways the therapeutic turn has affected popular understanding of the novel. Due to the therapeutic turn, and other factors (including literary modernism, printing technologies, and changes in education), the novel has come to be seen as the liberal humanist art form. If narrative

film is the medium that most defines the twentieth century, it arguably bases its form on the novel, and the novel offers an experience of interiority that film is rarely imagined to do. Many kinds of novels and reading practices are still seen as sensational stimulation for all manner of vices (lust, bloodlust, *schadenfreude*), just as they have been since the eighteenth century. Although some forms of reading are maligned, many critics have suggested that the contrasting cultural form of the literary novel fosters and manages certain affects and identities in a way that benefits individuals and society. Everyone from Oprah Winfrey to Jean-Francois Lyotard suggests that, in the uncertain world of global capitalism and postmodern skepticism, literature offers, in Kenneth Burke's phrase, "equipment for living." Following such beliefs in the power of literature and mass media in general, much has been written, in the scholarly and popular press, about the need for diverse representation in media, and about the need for individuals to recognize themselves and their own identities in the media they consume. Diversity is read and measured in the bodies and biographies of fictional characters and the writers and artists who create them. Calls for canon expansion and literary diversity often make wide-reaching claims: that relating across difference will save individuals; that it will ameliorate bigotry; that a culture's literary canon should reflect that culture's demographics. Debates around identity-based canon expansion within and around the university came to a watershed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, although they were inspired by the social movements of the '60s and continue into the present. I begin this section by examining the rhetoric from some arguments for canon expansion and diversity from the 1970s and the 2010s, then examine theories behind academic canon expansion.

Writing in *College English* in 1971 and 1974, Elaine Showalter and Ron Schreiber initiate a project of canon expansion by sharing their syllabi for women's and gay literature courses, respectively. Both instructors state that these courses are necessary because their

students are not represented in traditional humanities curricula. Only women are admitted to Showalter's women's literature course, while Schreiber's gay course ends up educating LGB students about gay and lesbian history and providing a safe space for them to be openly gay, while introducing straight students to LGB literature and people. Both courses are inspired by feminist consciousness-raising groups and both instructors argue that identity politics and subjective responses to culture have hitherto gone largely unacknowledged in the university.

Black lesbian critic Barbara Smith articulates the deeply personal stakes of canon expansion in her 1977 manifesto, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" when she writes,

I finally want to express just how much easier both my waking and my sleeping hours would be if there were one book in existence that would tell me something specific about my life. One book based in Black feminist and Black lesbian experience, fiction or non-fiction. Just one work to reflect the reality that I and the Black women whom I love are trying to create. When such a book exists then each of us will not only know better how to live, but how to dream. (27)

The canon expansion Smith envisions involves not only more diverse syllabi, but also a network of critics and publishers committed to advocating black lesbian writing. Adrienne Rich expresses similar utopian yearnings in her classic essay "When We Dead Awaken," arguing that the "re-vision" of canon through a feminist lens is crucial for social change: "this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society" (18). As Rich describes it, readers should be able see themselves reflected in literature and welcomed into the public; limited canon limits minds and opportunities. Thinking we know them, according to Smith and Rich, we know ourselves.

In *Uses of Literature*, Rita Felski articulates the two forms of recognition that underlie such theories of reading: the deeply personal recognition, often called identification, that contributes to individual subject formation and the political recognition of and by others that folds individuals into the general public. The private experience of recognition involves seeing yourself clearly while learning more about yourself than you already knew:

Recognizing aspects of ourselves in the description of others [...] we become aware of our accumulated experiences as distinctive yet far from unique. The contemporary idiom of ‘having an identity’ owes a great deal to such flashes of perceived commonality and shared history. It is not especially surprising then, that the writing and reading of fiction has often fueled the momentum of social movements. (Felski 39)

The sense that a single work of fiction stands in for an encounter with a public—or *the* public—makes reading feel more social than a one-on-one conversation. The very existence of a published, circulating text points to a public who might recognize you (even if those people exist far away, across the world, deep in the past or far in the future). The politics of recognition take many forms. Often public or institutional acknowledgment of group oppression is the first step toward redress. Public recognition of an identity’s validity can engender wider acceptance of difference. Felski contends that the kind of recognition marginalized groups demand in the public sphere is not so different from the individual recognition of reading fiction: “The moment of self-consciousness, of individual insight, is simultaneously a social diagnosis and an ethical judgment; a response to a work of art interfuses personal and public worlds; the desire for knowledge and the demand for acknowledgment are folded together” (36).

Throughout the still-ongoing Culture Wars, critics on both sides have worried over the conflation of individual affective recognition and political recognition, artistic and political representation. They have also argued about the purpose of humanities education and the theory behind teaching any historical canon, debating whether schools and universities are the place for literary encounters that provide personal recognition, and whether the purpose of literary education to expose young people to the “masterworks” of their culture or to provide a fully representative snapshot of that culture. Paul Lauter contends that “the literary canon [...] expresses what a society reads back into its past as important to its future” (94).

Thinking we know a culture’s greatest or most significant texts, what do we know? Feminist literary scholar Lillian Robinson contends in a 1983 polemic that “the rationale for a new syllabus or anthology⁴ relies on a very different criterion [than excellence]: that of truth to the culture being represented, the whole culture and not the creation of an almost entirely white male elite. [...] no one seems to be proposing—aloud—the elimination of *Moby-Dick* or *The Scarlet Letter*, just squeezing them over somewhat to make room for another literary reality, which, joined with the existing canon, will come closer to telling the (poetic) truth” (89). Expanding the canon, in the view of feminists like Robinson, will provide a richer understanding of the past and lead students to examine the aesthetic standards that have canonized some texts at the expense of others, citing criteria like

⁴ Anthologies and institutional academic publishing corporations often regulate the accessibility of texts to teachers and students. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. puts it in his essay “The Master’s Pieces,” in reference to the *Norton Anthology of African-American Literature*, “Once our anthology is published, no one will ever again be able to use the unavailability of black texts as an excuse not to teach our literature. A well-marked anthology functions in the academy to create a tradition, as well as to define and preserve it” (31).

“complexity.” Robinson and Lauter claim that canon expansion is good for all students, straight white middle-class US-born cis men included, because it provides them with a fuller understanding of the cultural heritage that they share with classmates of all races, genders, and creeds. In this model, literature functions as a historic document, provides evidence of representative experience: thinking we know them, we know our (collective, shared, plural) cultural heritage, which helps us understand the present and empathize or identify across difference. Such theories put enormous pressure on fiction to be representative. As Felski puts it, “While we do not usually mistake books for persons, we often think of them as conveying the attitudes of persons, as upholding or questioning larger ideas and collective ways of thinking.” An underlying tenet of the historicism that informs much contemporary pedagogy in literary studies is the idea that literary texts, even avant garde ones that were not popular in their historical moment, encapsulate a time and place, a zeitgeist.

Some gay and lesbian critics and queer theorists argue for a sustained engagement with the old canon, rather than a wholesale rejection of dead white males and their alienating cultural productions. Rich and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick both advocate a queer feminist re-vision of the literary canon that takes reception into account and renders canon-formation transparent. Rich argues that “We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us” (19). Early feminist criticism, like Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* (1969) and Gilbert and Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), do just that, examining representations of gender in canonical literature. Similarly, many seminal works of queer

theory engage with the canon, revealing the ways that sexuality structures literature. Discussing the canon in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Sedgwick writes that “Canonicity itself then seems the necessary wadding of pious obliviousness that allows for the transmission from one generation to another of texts that have the potential to dismantle the impacted foundations upon which a given culture rests” (54). In her early works, Sedgwick seeks not to expand the literary canon itself, but to expand what can be said about it. Although Sedgwick may not call her work reception studies, it bears a similarity to reception history as envisioned by Hans Robert Jauss, whose theory, as I’ll explain below, is central to my project. Like Jauss, Sedgwick advocates defamiliarizing widely-read texts to reveal the tensions that underlie them and to recognize anew their political potential.

Scholarly debates reflect and shape how people think and talk about reading outside of the classroom. In the spring of 2014, Ellen Oh and Malinda Lo, both Asian American writers who work in the young adult genre, founded We Need Diverse Books (WNDB), a crowd-funded media campaign and curriculum, and also a hashtag (#WeNeedDiverseBooks on Twitter and Tumblr). That many people recognize the need for such a movement suggests that the culture wars are far from over; that literature of all genres is still overwhelmingly white, straight and cisgender in the twenty-first century; and that the identities of characters and authors still matter to readers. WNDB’s website urges children’s and young adult publishers, educators, and parents to highlight “diverse, non-majority” voices. Its mission statement declares that, “We Need Diverse Books is committed to the ideal that embracing diversity will lead to acceptance, empathy, and ultimately equality.” This one sentence articulates the political imperative for canon

expansion and epitomizes an ideology that echoes throughout contemporary culture: the intertwined beliefs that, within a pluralistic society, individual “hearts and minds”⁵ can be opened by empathetic emotional encounters with Others, that mass media can provide opportunities for such encounters, and that books are especially well-suited to teach such empathy, since they offer readers an opportunity for sustained, often deeply interior, engagement with individuals from different backgrounds. For example, in their call for readers to take a diverse books pledge in 2015 (vowing to read 5-100 “diverse books” in the upcoming year), WNDB encourages readers to seek out “Books where people of color can be first-page HEROES rather than second-class citizens. Books in which LGBTQIA characters can represent social CHANGE rather than social problems. And books where people with disabilities can be just ... people.” This statement asserts that not just any representation will do: rather, WNDB demands that minoritarian characters be both heroic and complex. The campaign’s main concern is specifically character representation. Authorial identity is not a major focus on their website, although the language of “diverse voices” appears throughout.

A politics of recognition demands legible representation. Legibility here means readability: it means audiences should be able to “correctly” read identities, which must then be somehow stable and visible. The identities that must be legible, readable, visible and stable are those deemed diverse in the first place. Straight white male writers have come out the other side of canon expansion largely unmarked by their race, gender, or

⁵ WNDB uses this phrase explicitly in their January 2015 diverse books pledge.

sexual orientation; they are rarely shelved, marketed, or anthologized as straight, white, or male. While colleges regularly offer African American or Gay and Lesbian Literature courses, specifically marked Men's Literature or Straight Poetics courses are still few and far between. Even as women authors, queer authors, and authors of color are added to the syllabi of literature surveys, the tendency to see straight white male experience as universal persists. Whatever victories can be chalked up to canon expansion, feminist, critical race studies, and queer studies projects of marking the unmarked categories of the so-called universal remains unfinished, and many readers still find institutionalized literary canons to be exclusive and elitist.

WHY RECEPTION STUDIES: FEMINIST EXPANSIONS

This project positions itself within a lineage of reception study that foregrounds the decentering potential of the methodology. I draw particularly on the feminist work of Janice Radway in literary studies and Janet Staiger in film and media studies. Radway and Staiger both argue that understanding reception is crucial to understanding culture. Each finds her own way to include the responses of readers, whether in interviews with individual readers, in published texts from the popular press, or in the critic's own experiences, and to compare these responses to scholarly interpretations and theories. Feminist critics investigate how and why readers choose texts, how they make meaning out of those texts, and how they use those texts and interpretations in their everyday life.

Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984) is a pivotal example of both reception and feminist cultural studies. Radway interviews a community of romance readers in order to question standard feminist critiques of the genre as a tool of the hegemony that keeps women in patriarchy's thrall. Radway's argument extends beyond romance or even genre

fiction as she makes her case for reception study over close reading in isolation: “The behavioral explanations and sociological theories the romance critics advance to account for the genre’s popularity have been produced, then, by a process that is hermetically sealed off from the very people they aim to understand” (7). Radway writes against universalism, formalism, and the “belief in the irreducible givenness of the literary text and in the coercive power of its features to control reading [and] permits the romance critics to maintain that they can account for why people read romances by reading those romances themselves” (7). She denies that a text reads and means the same for any reader who picks it up, and contends that the conventional method in which a critic close reads a text to make a single argument about its significance “consequently discounts what readers do with texts and the various statements they make about them as irrelevant or mistaken. The condescending treatment of the mass-culture audience is, in the end, the final, logical consequence of a theoretical position that reifies human activity, ignores the complexities of sign production or semiosis, and transforms interactive social process into a confrontation between discrete objects” (8). Radway decries a unidirectional view of mass culture in which cultural products work on passive consumers, injecting them and “imposing alien ideologies upon unsuspecting if not somnolent readers.” Such a theory suggests that meaning is obvious and static, always available in more or less the same form to any reader, and Radway vehemently disagrees. She claims that her own close reading will not reveal how romances work for their fans. Instead, she asks those fans how they think about the books they love (and hate). She proposes that “The analytic focus must shift from the text itself, taken in isolation, to the complex social event of reading where a woman actively attributes sense to lexical signs in a silent process carried on in the context of her ordinary life” (8). The word ordinary is important here: literature is not only read by scholars for purposes of analysis, or by students in order to receive course credit, but by

many other readers for many other reasons, and if we are to make the case that literature does or could affect people's identities and emotional states, or effect social change, it might be useful to consider those readers directly.

While she flips the script and interviews non-academic readers, Radway recognizes her own positionality, and describes her task as translating readers' responses into scholarly language. Radway carefully negotiates her own position vis-a-vis her romance readers, whom she obviously values but also represents as quite different from herself. She considers herself an anthropologist who is in a position to see the "covert or tacit meanings" in "cultural rituals" she observes (Radway 9), and accepts the traditional ethnographer's belief that outsiders can see things in a different way, more objectively than insiders. Radway says that these women feel "motives and desires" that are "not admitted to consciousness because they accept patriarchy as a given, as the natural organization of sex and gender" (10). Radway's methodology preserves a role for the critic as expert interpreter, articulating things readers do not recognize about themselves and their reading practices, even as she criticizes other critics for ignoring readers' own practices. However, it is also true scholarly readers are interested in those reading practices in ways most readers aren't, and possess the means and resources to examine them to a degree most readers might not care to.

In my project, I am not interested in analyzing the ways readers veer from my conception of how they *should* think about themselves or their reading practices: I am interested in how they *do* think about themselves and their reading practices, and in how understanding their actual theories and practices can inform teaching and criticism. Radway, too, is conscious that this sort of critical work may seem condescending. She emphasizes that "I have always worked first from their conscious statements and beliefs about their behavior, accepted them as given, and then posited additional desires, fears, or

concerns that complement rather than contradict those beliefs and assertions” (Radway 10). Rather than insider/outsider or native/observer, Radway describes the difference between her subjects’ perspective and her own as a difference in proximity: her own critical “distance” allows her to see “the unseen cultural ground” beneath the romance readers’ feet (10). I contend that much of this cultural ground is not unseen at all, that many readers directly describe the desires, fears, and concerns that swirl around their reading practices. I am more interested in looking for themes in the aggregate of readers’ responses than in pulling the rug out from under them.

I must also acknowledge that my position in relation to the reading practices I describe is quite different from Radway’s. Many feminist academics would count themselves as romance readers, but Radway, at the time of her writing, is not one of them. By contrast, I came to queer fiction as a queer teenager, and count myself as part of the public I research here. The film scholar Janet Staiger warns against the sense that, in analyzing interpretations by others, the researcher of reception sits above or outside the practices of interpretation and reception. We, too, filter texts and reception through interpretive frameworks and put them to our own uses.

Staiger’s work is the most cohesive, portable reception study model I have found. Reception studies is necessarily interdisciplinary. While it pays attention to genre and form and to audience expectations thereof, it is not genre-bound or medium-specific. And while the immediate reception of films as opposed to books may seem, on the surface, to be more public and more immediately social, since films tend or tended to be shown first in public theaters, both media depend upon circulation of criticism among print publics (and virtual publics).

Staiger makes clear that reception study differs from traditional criticism in that the object under analysis is not the text itself, but the series of encounters between that text and

its audiences, encounters that are historically situated even if the text's circulation continues in the present moment. The critic/historian analyzes "traces" of this event. The goal is to describe the readings and "give an initial account of what might explain that range" (Staiger, *Perverse* 173). Thus reception study is "not an analysis of the text, although it might include an analysis of what textually might be facilitating the reading" by examining "interpretations or affective experiences produced by individuals from an encounter with a text or set of texts within a social situation" (Staiger, *Perverse* 163). Staiger, like other reception scholars, emphasizes that a text's reception and interpretations are shaped by audiences' frames of reference and other extra- or pre-textual factors. As she puts it, "contextual factors, more than textual ones, account for the experiences that spectators have watching films and television and for the uses to which those experiences are put in navigating our everyday lives" (Staiger, *Perverse* 1)—which does not mean that all readings are hegemonic. Indeed, Staiger is especially interested in what she calls negotiated, resistant, and/or perverse readings.⁶ Case studies, in Staiger's reception studies, begin with the event and its traces, not from theory. The goal is not to synthesize an optimal interpretation, but to analyze responses for the biases, frameworks, and theories that constitute them. The resulting set of readings illuminates theories already in play in everyday interpretation what viewers and readers want and expect from those films and books, how they select and evaluate them, as well as theories about gender, sexuality, history, and sociality. Like Radway, Staiger sees mass culture as a part of everyday life, influencing and influenced by audiences' working theories about the world.

As Staiger masterfully demonstrates, the reception historian herself must be present, transparent, in her scholarship. If she researches recent or contemporary reception,

⁶ These categories are spelled out in more detail in Staiger, *Media* and in Hall, "Encoding/Decoding."

she must recognize her position within the public under investigation, not as someone outside it. While she cannot privilege her own readings above those of other readers, she can include them in the range of readings. I follow Radway and Staiger in questioning the hierarchies and binaries that structure literary distribution and reception, most obviously distinctions between academic and non-academic publics; between criticism and review; between professional and amateur; between author and reader; between teacher and student; between literary and popular fiction; between the mainstream, the subculture, and the cult.⁷

WHY RECEPTION HISTORY

This project follows a lineage of feminist reception studies that illuminate contemporary culture, but it also draws upon scholarship that investigates reception in the past. In this section, I engage with Hans-Robert Jauss's reception aesthetics, Jane Tompkins's reception history, and Stanley Fish's theory of interpretive communities to further demonstrate the necessity of reception study in general and reception history in particular to thinking through the relationship between identity and fiction.

Reception aesthetics questions the assumptions of all criticism focused on textual interpretation, even that which purports to take socioeconomic context into account. Jauss imagines himself intervening into "the unresolved dispute between the Marxist and formalist schools [and their respective] Historical and aesthetic approaches" (7). He notes that both "stop" at the published text, analyzing production and representation but not "reception and impact" (7), and thus cannot offer a full account of literary history or explain changes in aesthetic evaluation. Formalism sees the reader as "a perceiving subject who

⁷ In foregrounding positionality, I am inspired by feminist, queer, and critical race scholarship, especially the work of Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, Ann Cvetkovich, Kathleen Stewart, and Sandra K. Soto.

follows the directions in the text” (7): the text constructs an experience for the reader, who could be anyone and receive more or less the same form, so the text, correctly read, will have more or less the same significance for any reader. Formalism thus implicitly imagines that poets write for an ideal reader well-versed in philology and literary interpretation. Jauss argues that Marxist criticism similarly imagines that all readers share the concerns and techniques of Marxist literary scholars, “seek[ing] to discover relationships between the economic base of production and the literary work as part of an intellectual superstructure” (7). He suggests that neither of these approaches “recognizes the true role of the reader to whom the literary work is primarily addressed” (8). Instead, Jauss imagines the life of a literary work as “a relation of work, audience and new work which takes the form of a dialogue as well as a process, and [...] can be understood in the relationship of message and receiver as well as in the relationship of question and answer, problem and solution” (8). He shifts the focus of interpretation to the ongoing “dialogue between work and public” (9), and attempts to expand the focus of literary criticism from examining conversations within academic publics to considering the general public as he seeks to account for the persistence of certain texts and the disappearance of others from the canon, accounting for changes within literary aesthetics. To do this, Jauss asserts, a reception historian must consider how texts actually work for historically-situated readers and reading publics, how they fulfill or challenge readers’ expectations—in his terms, what question the text answers.

The Jaussian reception historian determines the “artistic nature” of a literary work by the “distance between ... the familiarity of previous aesthetic experiences and the ‘horizon change’ demanded by the response to new works” (14). A small distance leads the work to be considered “‘culinary’ or light reading” (Jauss 15), a text that doesn’t challenge or surpass expectations but fulfills them to the letter. It is easy to think, with the

perspective of time, that many classic works are “culinary,” but if we go back and “read them ‘against the grain’ [...] their artistic nature becomes evident again” (Jauss 15). Some works don’t have an audience in their own moment, but their audience “gradually develop[s]” (Jauss 16). Reconstructing the original horizon of expectations reveals “the questions which the text originally answered and thereby to discover how the reader of that [time] viewed and understood the work” (19). Jauss’s methodology, therefore, includes analysis of the text itself, though he does not believe in objective meaning available to any reader who picks up a text in any time or place (19).

I argue along with Jauss that while a public’s horizons of expectation define a text’s initial reception, texts themselves can act to alter those horizons and to expand that public’s interpretive conventions. I am particularly interested in how literary texts expand understanding of identity and difference. I argue that the circulation of texts about same-gender eroticism in the early and mid-twentieth century shifted a horizon of expectations around sexuality and literature that allowed for the construction of gay and lesbian literature as a category in the 1970s, which in turn allowed for the construction of queer reading practices in the 1990s. In order to understand the dialogue between work and public, literary historians must consider the horizons of expectation or understanding that define the work’s reception. Horizons of expectation are not individual, but social. Jauss handles the question of subjectivity by acknowledging that horizons of expectation are not generated spontaneously within the individual—they are “transsubjective” (13). I claim that transsubjective horizons of expectation develop within publics and counterpublics, often expanding out from counterpublics to more institutional or more expansive publics.

The methodology of reception aesthetics includes reading other texts with which the author would have expected the audience to be familiar, to contextualize the horizon of expectations, while acknowledging that works may find audiences in different

times. Revisiting the moment when a work appeared only tells part of the story: what is simultaneous or contemporary changes with context. Works of the past become “for readers who perceive them as works of *their* present” (Jauss 30). Each work’s reception history requires its own particular chronology. Reception aesthetics combines diachronic and synchronic analyses: diachronic examines developments across time, comparing the same text’s reception in two or more different moments, while synchronic analysis takes “cross-sections” of particular moments in that history to examine networks, and often to compare similar works in order to understand why some have stood the test of time, while others have been forgotten. The methodology of reception studies, as I practice it, recognizes that significant reception can occur after a text has already been received into a canon, when a text is recovered and brought into the canon, or when a text drops out of canon.

Another critic with similar interests who inspires my methodology is Jane Tompkins. Tompkins works at the crossroads of reader-response criticism and reception studies. She edited a major anthology of reader-response criticism in the 1980s and that theory, including the work of her longtime partner Stanley Fish, the most well-known American reader-response critic, informs her work, particularly *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860*. Tompkins brings together reception history and feminist concerns, while developing the idea of interpretive communities that Fish made famous. Fish’s discussion of interpretive communities attempts to account for interpretation and ultimately for aesthetic evaluation, while reader-response criticism looks at the dialectic between an individual reader and a text. Although Fish argues that it is impossible for any reader to have an unmediated encounter with a text, his reader-response criticism begins with the text, usually imagining the interpretive acts of an ideal and/or universal reader who often bears a curious resemblance to the critic himself (and I gender

this critic advisedly). Reception aesthetics, in contrast, begins from existing readers' judgments, also asserting that no reader experiences a pure encounter with an unknown text and that every text arrives wrapped in layers of preconceptions, defined by pre-existing horizons of expectation, even if the literary text ultimately pushes those horizons.

Tompkins does not share Jauss's belief that some works are more artistic than others, merely that some works *appear* more artistic in some contexts. Like Fish, she asserts that texts actually look different to different readers. Readers usually assume that formal features do not change with interpretation, but Tompkins demonstrates that they do, using the example of Nathaniel Hawthorne. He has supposedly endured in the American canon because of the psychological complexity of his fiction, but when Tompkins investigates reviews of his work, she finds that the qualities most early-nineteenth-century readers admired in Hawthorne were the same ones they appreciated in sensational writing like that of Susan Warner, whose books were wildly popular at the time. So why was Hawthorne granted an enduring place in the canon, while Warner had to be recovered in the late twentieth century, usually read as an example of popular fiction rather than a masterwork? Tompkins hypothesizes that social networks played a role in the two authors' circulation, from where they chose to publish to what associations their texts took on. As she puts it, "The fact that an author makes his or her appearance in the context of a particular publishing practice rather than some other is a fact about the kind of claim he or she is making on an audience's attention and is crucial to the success of the claim" (24). In the case of Hawthorne and Warner, authorial identity, particularly gender, is part of the context. Tompkins emphasizes the political valences of interpretation, beginning from the axiom that "literary reputation could never be anything but a political matter" (4).

Tompkins and Fish each expand on the idea that interpretation and interpretive communities establish criteria for interpretation and set limits on the possibilities of that

interpretation. Fish writes, “Whereas I had once agreed with my predecessors on the need to control interpretation lest it overwhelm and obscure texts, facts, authors, and intentions, I now believe that interpretation is the source of texts, facts, authors, and intentions” (17). Many critics fear that if we recognize interpretation as subjective, then anything goes, but Fish contends that “if the self is conceived of not as an independent entity but as a social construct whose operations are delimited by the systems of intelligibility that inform it, then the meanings it confers on texts are not its own but have their source in the interpretive community (or communities) of which it is a function” (335). Fish asserts, and I agree, that neither the self nor the text can exist outside of context. Within communities and publics, the formal features of not only texts, but also selves, take shape and accrue definition. Context shapes not only how texts are interpreted, but also how readers describe such seemingly objective features as tone, style, pacing, and characterization. What counts as context when it comes to a literary text? It may be the situation in which a reader encounters a book (whether it was assigned by a teacher or discovered on a forbidden shelf in the library) or the ways others describe it before we read it (how different might E.L. James’s reception be if *Fifty Shades of Grey* were not so often framed as *Twilight* fanfiction?), what the cover looks like or what other books it is compared to. It may also be what we know about the author—for example, when we learn that Jane Bowles “was gay” and was also married to a man, who also happened to be a famous author. These are just a few examples of the ways that publics might guide and limit a text’s possible interpretations. As I research the reception histories of novels, I compare how different these texts look to different publics across time. While Barnes’s, Baldwin’s, and Bowles’s queer sexualities seem self-evident to many readers today, they did not to readers in the mid-century. Many late twentieth-century readers and critics laud these writers’ openness about sexuality and nuanced representation of LGBTQ+ characters, but *Nightwood* and *Giovanni’s Room* were

both interpreted by some reviewers as grotesque cautionary tales about the lesbian and gay life.

WHY QUEER RECEPTION HISTORY

An urgent desire to connect with the past has motivated queer theory since its inception, but the question of how to engage with that history has been controversial from the beginning. In the early 1990s, in *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick surveys the position of history within queer studies and commends recent historicist work in the field for recognizing

(1) that the differences between the homosexuality “we know today” and previous arrangements of same-sex relations may be so profound and so integrally rooted in other cultural differences that there may be no continuous defining essence of “homosexuality” to be known; and (2) that modern “sexuality” and hence modern homosexuality are so intimately entangled with the historically distinctive contexts and structures that now count as knowledge that such “knowledge” can scarcely be a transparent window onto a separate realm of sexuality but, rather, itself constitutes that sexuality. (44)

Despite this commendation, however, Sedgwick takes the most prominent queer historicists to task for “counterposing against the alterity of the past a relatively unified homosexuality that ‘we’ *do* ‘know today’” (45). Thinking we know them, suggests Sedgwick, can be a dangerous delusion, leading historicists to draw sharp lines between past and present, to construct teleological, progressive narratives of LGBTQ+ history. To make this argument, Sedgwick singles out David Halperin’s *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, contending that Halperin unwittingly uses the term ‘homosexuality’ to refer to the contemporary concept of gay identity even when discussing male-male

sexuality in the ancient past. This contemporary gay identity represents “the ‘straight-acting and -appearing gay male,’ a man distinct from other men in absolutely no other respect besides that of his ‘sexuality’” (Halperin, qtd. in Sedgwick, 46), an image of homosexuality that, according to progressive gay history, superseded earlier models like inversion.⁸ The problem with such discourse, claims Sedgwick, is that “these historical projects [...] still risk reinforcing a dangerous consensus of knowingness about the genuinely unknown, more than vestigially contradictory suturings of contemporary experience” (45). How can we think we know them when we may not even know us? Knowledge, Sedgwick suggests, is often a discourse that obscures the “unrationalized coexistence” of contradictory models for understanding the world (47). The progressive narrative of homosexuals finally coming out of the closet obscures many not-so-progressive aspects of contemporary attitudes toward non-normative sexualities and genders.

Responding to Sedgwick in *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*, Halperin “acknowledges the force” of Sedgwick’s claim that there is no single, monolithic “homosexuality as we understand it today” and appreciates her “promot[ion of] an atemporal approach to contradictions in sexual discourses” (18). He particularly admires how Sedgwick resists drawing a clear line between past and present, between history and the contemporary. “Otherwise,” argues Halperin, “historical temporality itself will function as a strategy of exclusion, and as a figure for the assertion of social privilege” (18), allowing

⁸ ‘Inversion’ refers to the medical and psychological idea, popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that homosexuality was caused by an inversion of gender identity or traits, that, for example, a gay man had a in a male body but a feminine soul and (heterosexual) feminine desire for men.

scholars in the present to judge the past from a supposedly more enlightened vantage point. Instead, he suggests, we should “insist on the contemporaneity of all historical subjects” and, like Sedgwick, question the idea of a paradigm shift between pre- or early modern times and our own. Halperin finds Dinshaw’s work to be an especially provocative and effective example of historicism because she recognizes the continuity between early modern and contemporary sexuality. Thus she follows Halperin’s revised version of how to do the history, which requires that we begin at the end, at the present. By rigorously examining “homosexuality as we know it today,” we can see within it traces of contradictory ghosts of (homo)sexualities past.

While Halperin and Sedgwick quibble about particulars of methodology and rhetoric, both urge queer critics to recognize that the past not only intersects with the present, but is contiguous with it. Heeding this call, my reception histories of texts associated with queer sexuality (either by virtue of author or content) touch discussions about difference and literature in the present. I attend to the ongoing conversation about history and historicism in queer and literary studies. Literary history, as I construct it, is, like all history, non-linear, full of jumps, associations, gaps we can only fill with guesses and imaginings. Literary history can be written on both synchronic and diachronic timelines, in Jauss’s terms. Recognizing the queerness of chronology does not require us to sacrifice rigor for the kind of affective, boundary-less queer “unhistoricism” that Valerie Traub warns against in the pages of *PMLA*.⁹ I contend, along with Jordan Alexander Stein,

⁹ Traub uses ‘unhistoricism’ to refer to early modern historiography that draws on affect theory and queer theory and foregrounds the historian’s own emotional attachments; Dinshaw’s work exemplifies this trend for Traub.

that the most rigorous literary history takes note of lacunae, follows fanciful paper trails, and makes speculative connections. Stein passionately argues for the value of queer approaches to literary studies, asserting that queer theory, much more so than literary criticism generally or even American literary studies, “has taken up the challenge of thinking reflexively about chronology,” recognizing that a “chronology of publication, obscurity, and recovery” based around linear time may be less generative and informative than a historical narrative “organized around slow, recursive, and minor temporalities, where publication is less an event than a condition of access, where readership is not contemporary with publication but at some remove, and where a single author’s lifetimes straddles different emergent and residual possibilities for voluntary social affiliation” (864, 863). Stein makes a powerful argument for synthesizing a reconstructed historicism with “unhistoricism,” and demonstrates the productivity of an encounter between queer studies and the theory and methodology of literary history. As Stein describes it, literary history is reception history, and reception history is necessarily diffuse, marginal, and rife with inappropriate attachments, irrational passions, and temporal jumps and lag. Therefore, reception history, as a methodology, is more than a bit queer.

QUEER NOVELTY

The queer temporality and geography of reception history leads me, in this project, to trouble literary categories that are usually taken for granted, not just categories defined around sexuality, gender, or race, but also those defined by nation, period, and literary style, since the circulation and reception of *Nightwood*, *Giovanni’s Room*, and *Two Serious Ladies* are not bound to one time or place, and all have been interpreted in wildly divergent

ways. Reception studies illuminates how literary representation works because reception studies recognizes the complexities of history, and because it emphasizes that literature is social. Submitted to a public, a book lives or dies in public. While it lives, a book does cultural work. This project investigates where texts live, how they move, what work they do, and how they do it.

In keeping with the anachronistic, queer temporality of circulation and reception, I have ordered my chapters not in chronological order. I begin with *Nightwood*, the oldest book in my archive, then examine *Giovanni's Room*, which was published twenty years after *Nightwood*. I close with my case study of *Two Serious Ladies*, which was published in the time between the other two novels. This order reflects the relative canonicity of *Nightwood* and *Giovanni's Room* when compared to Bowles's novel, which is just finding a wide reception in the twenty-first century. Each chapter follows several themes in a book's reception history, beginning with contemporary reviews from the popular press at the time of initial publication, and ending by situating each book within reading publics in the 2010s. Each history reflects that readers have consistently experienced novelty in these books. Again and again, they have recirculated, become literary in the Jaussian sense—they have pushed up against existing horizons of expectations. *Nightwood* and *Giovanni's Room* both circulated as, respectively, lesbian and gay novels in the decades prior to Stonewall, the gay liberation movement, and the widespread establishment of lesbian and feminist bookstores. The circulation of LGBTQ+ books helped lay the groundwork for such identity-, public-, and canon-building projects. Books like *Nightwood* and *Giovanni's Room* opened up discourses about sexuality and made LGBTQ+ readers feel public. Meanwhile, *Two Serious Ladies* circulated in underground literary publics, and is only now beginning to really emerge in queer and feminist publics.

In Chapter One, I argue that *Nightwood* has become a key lesbian and a central modernist text because it feels, to readers, both canonical and radical. The book was widely read and reviewed upon its publication, kept in print, and repeatedly rediscovered by LGB women readers, but it has often frustrated and alienated readers because of its difficulty. Those who develop attachments to the book must find queerer and queerer ways to read it.

In Chapter Two, I track the academic and popular reception histories of *Giovanni's Room* the book and James Baldwin the icon. The case of *Giovanni's Room* illuminates that 1950s readers were well aware of “homosexual fiction” as a category, but they did not see a self-evident connection between a book’s content and its author’s identity, though later readers took Baldwin’s gayness for granted and ignored his own ambivalent statements about such identifiers. Baldwin’s work was canonized as African American and gay literature in the 1970s and ‘80s, but readers in the former public tended to downplay his sexuality, while many in the latter ignored his race. By the turn of the century, however, Baldwin became an icon of intersectionality, a quality that has made him an important figure for many publics in the 2010s and led to what Jacqueline Woodson calls a Baldwin “revival.” Baldwin is finally being read in all the complexity and specificity that he himself argued for beginning in 1940s essays like “Everybody’s Protest Novel.”

My final chapter, Chapter Three, follows the circulation of *Two Serious Ladies*. I demonstrate that readers have struggled over the years to categorize Bowles, often shoehorning her into categories that did not quite fit. In this chapter, I track three major threads in her reception: the first values the book for its bizarreness and underground reputation, the second values it for her female and lesbian identities, and the third treats her work to a radical queer reading, synthesizing and going beyond the other two readings. I argue that queer readings of Bowles’s work model a radical reading practice also evident in the most generative and affectively engaging readings of Barnes’s and Baldwin’s.

Chapter 2: “My History, Finally Invented”: *Nightwood* and Its Publics

While hardly a household name, Djuna Barnes is nonetheless name-checked in Woody Allen’s *Midnight in Paris*. Owen Wilson plays Gil, a struggling twenty-first century writer who idolizes the Lost Generation and travels back in time to meet his heroes. In a Paris cafe, Gil dances with a tall woman. Afterward, a friend informs him that she was Barnes. “That was Djuna Barnes?” quips Gil, “No wonder she wanted to lead.” This slightly funny, slightly lesbophobic allusion epitomizes the contemporary image of Barnes: first and foremost a lesbian (although in her lifetime she scorned the label), indelibly associated with 1920s Paris and its romanticized Bohemianism, yet marginal enough not to merit a speaking role (as opposed to that other famous lesbian expatriate, Gertrude Stein, portrayed by Kathy Bates). This allusion fits nicely into Allen’s film: some viewers will recognize the name and chuckle, even as it flies over others’ heads. Doubtless, too, there are those who seek out Barnes’s work after seeing *Midnight in Paris*, even as the film itself gently mocks the idolatry of modernism.

Barnes’s name and the neologism ‘Nightwood,’ the title of her most famous work, have become Shibboleths for lesbians as well as modernist disciples. In 1987, Lambda Award-winning novelist Katherine V. Forrest titles the second book in her mystery series *Murder at the Nightwood Bar*. None of Forrest’s other novels have particularly lesbian titles, but this one would immediately stand out to those in the know, even if the book were not shelved in the lesbian section. Long before bookstores or libraries had lesbian sections, *Nightwood* was recognized as a lesbian book. In *Susan Sontag: The Making of an Icon*, biographers Carl Rollyson and Lisa Paddock relate an anecdote about how Sontag and her lover Harriet Sohmers met:

In the spring of 1949, Harriet Sohmers, then a junior at Berkeley working in a bookstore, watched as a stunning [sixteen-year-old] Susan Sontag walked in. The male staff [...] were gay. They looked at the gorgeous Susan, then they looked at

Harriet and said: “Go get her.” Harriet walked over to Susan, picked up a copy of *Nightwood*, and said: “Have you read this?” It was a classic lesbian pickup line that had worked on Harriet earlier at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. Of course, Susan had read it [...]. (27)

Nightwood haunts these two women as they fall in and out of love. Describing a night out with Sohmers and her friends, teenage Sontag writes in her journal, “At one point C began to laugh and asked us if we realized what a parody of *Nightwood* this all was... It was, of course, and I had, with much amusement, thought of it many times before” (32). Nine years later, she quotes the novel to describe her relationship with Sohmers as it falls apart (189, 191-2).

In *Midnight in Paris*, Barnes’s name carries meaning across lines of nationality and generation when a straight white male twenty-first century American recognizes it. The book’s very publicness smuggles it into the hands of furtive queer readers like Sontag. Each of these readers feels public while reading Barnes—she feels herself recognized, pulled out of the closet and into literature. A sense of publicness is crucial to the development of queer counterpublics, social and print networks whose covert operation over the course of the twentieth century led to major shifts in popular understanding of sexuality and gender as well as LGBTQ political recognition. Although *Nightwood* feels as if it contains arcane lesbian knowledge, it is readily available in libraries and bookstores, its queerness never really a secret. *Nightwood* has lived intersecting lives as canonical avant-garde modernist novel and radical queer and/or lesbian novel, inside and outside the academy. These readings have at times been at odds but have also fed each other. This chapter demonstrates the continuing interplay of the forces that keep *Nightwood*

circulating publicly: appeals to the cultural capital of the underappreciated cult classic and the difficult work of art, the supposed universal applicability of modernism, and the specificity of identity-based recognition make the book feel both canonical and radical. I trace *Nightwood's* reception, staging a conversation between literary scholars, reviewers in the 1930s popular press, lesbian writers of the 1970s and '80s, and online reviewers from the early twenty-first century in order to decenter academic interpretations and to foreground the popular reading practices that contribute to literary circulation and canon formation.

In my early twenties, I sought out *Nightwood* as the Holy Grail of queer modernist women's writing. Coded into that image are so many expectations: that the novel would tell me something about myself, would be different from other modernist literature by virtue of its author's identities, would speak to me more intimately than they did. In some ways, all those things ended up feeling true. But as I researched *Nightwood's* reception history and the ways it has been read—as a cautionary tale about inverts; as a tract against fascism; as a pretentious throwback; as a bohemian accessory; as a lesbian Bible—I recognized how much my expectations for the book had shaped my experience of *Nightwood*, which I'll discuss in more detail at the end of this chapter.

GENRES, CATEGORIES, AND PARATEXTS

Whether appearing in a Woody Allen film, a teenager's diary, or the title of a mystery novel, the allusion does not require that one read *Nightwood* to get the reference, but depends upon an association with one or both of two distinct yet related genres: modernism and lesbian literature. Lauren Berlant describes genre as “a structure of

conventional expectation that people rely on to provide certain kinds of affective intensities and assurances” (Female 4). In these cases, merely mentioning a title or name activates such intensities and assurances, and expectations about author and character identities, historical period, and literary style. Generic classifications are determined not only by an author’s own biography or how she thought of her own work; they accrue over time. Publishers, editors, journalists, advertisers, scholars, teachers, and now online communities each have a hand in reinscribing or subtly shifting a book’s classification. The process is equally institutional and diffuse, explicit and osmotic. Often, limiting information is conveniently available in or on the book itself, while the mere fact that it has been published implies that someone professional has vetted the text. In 2012, Goodreads user Jennifer Doerr writes of *Nightwood*: “I fully admit that if this text were not bound with a cover illustration, championed by T.S. Eliot and published, it would never have passed muster in any of my writing workshops.” It is not just writing; it is a book that comes with a seal of approval by one of the biggest “high” literary names of the twentieth century.

The current US edition of *Nightwood*, the 2006 New Directions, begins with a preface by Jeanette Winterson, followed by Eliot’s original 1937 introduction, and features a quotation from William S. Burroughs (“One of the greatest books of the twentieth century”). The nesting of these legitimating documents illustrates the change in image that *Nightwood* has undergone in the past seventy years, more of a layering of genres than a shift between them. In 1937, *Nightwood* was vouched for by the reigning modernist poet and critic. In the twenty-first century, it is a seminal lesbian novel, presented by one of the most respected lesbian novelists of our time—another author associated with high art, who writes what is variously called literary fiction, postmodern fiction, or experimental fiction. Her preface works not to correct Eliot’s introduction, but to corroborate it. The two pieces overlap in their insistence on *Nightwood*’s universality, and their assertion that it requires

a slow, sustained reading practice. One wonders if Winterson's preface was added because her endorsement might appeal to a market demographic over whom Eliot's name has no sway, either because they have not heard of him, or because they associate him with things they have no interest in reading (modernism, high school English class, Catholicism, etc.). As much as Winterson might wince at the thought, her name immediately suggests that the book has some sort of queer or feminist bent. Winterson voices the conventional wisdom about *Nightwood*'s underappreciated status and advocates for its artistic merit:

more people have heard about [*Nightwood*] than have read it. Reading it is mainly the preserve of academics and students. Others have a vague sense that it is a Modernist text ... that the work is an important milestone on any map of gay literature—even though, like all the best books, its power makes nonsense of any categorization, especially of gender or sexuality. (ix)

Winterson argues that anyone who actually reads the book will recognize that it is “more” than a gay novel or a modernist text. Eliot states that to focus on the characters’ homosexuality would be to “miss the point” of *Nightwood* (xxii). He does not celebrate the novel’s queerness, but warns against “regard[ing] this group of people as a horrid sideshow of freaks” (Eliot xxii). Both Eliot and Winterson address reading practices. Eliot states that it took him many readings to “[develop] intimacy with” *Nightwood* and “come to an appreciation of its meaning as a whole,” which for him meant seeing that all the different chapters do belong in the same book, recognizing Matthew as the linchpin (xvii). His reading experience leads Eliot to contend that “only sensibilities trained on poetry can wholly appreciate it”—*Nightwood* is not for the general public (xvii-xviii). Winterson agrees that it forces readers to slow down, which we’re increasingly disinclined to do in a fast-paced world focused on instant gratification. In Winterson’s

eyes, *Nightwood* pays for the work it requires of readers. While “there is no consolation in *Nightwood*, it is “a book for introverts, in that we are all introverts in our after-hours

Nightwood haunts the major works of twenty-first-century queer literary history. Both Christopher Nealon, in *Foundlings*, and Heather Love, in *Feeling Backward*, mention the novel in their introductions in connection with degeneracy and inversion but do not analyze it in the chapters. Nealon distinguishes his archive (the works of Willa Cather and Hart Crane, bodybuilding magazines, lesbian pulp novels) from “the emerging canon of lesbian and gay literature in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, which thus far has been drawn primarily from cosmopolitan literatures of England and Europe, most of them in a modernist vein,” including “Oscar Wilde, Thomas Mann, Marcel Proust, Andre Gide, Virginia Woolf, or Djuna Barnes” (9). Nealon characterizes the protagonists of these authors’ novels as “wandering cosmopolites, expatriates who traffic [...] in the language (and the narrative arc) of degeneracy. None of these decadent texts reaches toward anything like a ‘community’ that outpaces the hostile language of inversion” (9). In describing the concept of “backward modernism” she analyzes, Love states that, “queers have been seen across the twentieth century as a backward race or as individuals in a state of arrested development. Perverse, immature, sterile, and melancholic: even when they provoke fears about the future, they somehow still recall the past. They carry with them, as Djuna Barnes writes of her somnambulist heroine Robin Vote in *Nightwood*, “the quality of the “way back”“(6). In Love’s argument, *Nightwood*, in depicting its backward “heroine” provides evidence of the way a queer author herself depicted backward modernism in a canonical text of backward modernism

(note that Nealon and Love disagree in passing about which character is *Nightwood*'s heroine). The only other direct reference to Barnes in *Feeling Backward* comes in the form of a chapter epigraph taken from *Nightwood*: "Take history at night: have you ever thought of that, now? Was it at night that Sodom became Gomorrah? It was at night, I swear! A city given over to the shades, and that's why it has never been countenanced or understood to this day" (qtd in Love 31). Both quotations Love chooses echo her own theory—or her theory echoes Barnes's words. Barnes's words support and enhance Love's own statements about the past (*Nightwood*'s present). If nothing else, these persistent references demonstrate the book's canonicity. secrets and deepest loves" (Winterson xvi, xv).

Along with Winterson's introduction, Nealon's and Love's allusions demonstrate that, by the early 2000s, *Nightwood* was firmly ensconced in queer canon. Even if the text itself doesn't depict or "reach toward" "community," as Nealon fears, its continued circulation suggests networks of readers. This chapter tracks those networks.

A FORGOTTEN, DIFFICULT CLASSIC

Nightwood's advocates have consistently described the book as forgotten, although it has been hiding in plain sight since its initial publication. In 1957, twenty years after *Nightwood*'s first printing and a decade after it was re-released by New Directions, Walter Sutton introduces the novel as a "neglected masterpiece" (113). In 1962, Barnes's *Selected Works* was published, inciting a flurry of press on "The Barnes," as she told reporters she liked to be called. One Time reviewer summed up her reputation: "Djuna Barnes has long been the dark lady of the New Directions anthologies [...] . Every earnest Lit.

undergraduate read the New Classics edition, with its foreword by T. S. Eliot” (“Lost” 110). *Nightwood* is “difficult” and “shadowy,” which this writer assumes makes it all the more appealing as an accessory denoting high-minded taste. In the Village Voice review of Selected Works, Roger Shattuck makes a similar claim: “In some circles just before World War II, you had to have read two underground novels to establish your literary culture: Nathanael West’s ‘Miss Lonelyhearts’ and Djuna Barnes’ ‘Nightwood’” (10). Douglas Messerli introduces his book-length 1975 Barnes bibliography “not as another attempt at ‘rediscovery,’ but as a statement of Barnes’ great artistry. For what Djuna Barnes has written is in one sense ‘undiscoverable’” (xvi). Messerli’s bibliography demonstrates that Barnes is, in fact, being rediscovered with some regularity. However, he describes her as a “shadowy figure,” and “a legend who is unknown” (xiv). Messerli contrasts Barnes’s early notoriety among expatriate writers with her current reception: “Janet Flanner’s 1972 assessment of Barnes as the most important woman writer in Paris in the 1920’s is strangely incongruous with the fact that, even in universities, few have ever heard of Djuna Barnes or know anything of her rich career” (xiv). This may be true for academic readers and straight readers, but the book and Barnes’s reputation regularly circulated in queer women’s networks. Surveying Barnes’s career in the 1980s, Andrew Field contends that *Nightwood* is “still a novel known to all serious writers and poets [that] eventually achieved the considerable distinction of managing to stay in print for nearly fifty years as a result of a small but steady cult demand of several thousand copies a year” (20).

In the 1970s and ‘80s, canon-expanding instructors looking for women or queer writers knew of *Nightwood*’s reputation and added it to syllabi. Elaine Showalter and Ron Schreiber write about teaching the novel in their respective women’s and gay literature courses in the early ‘70s. Barnes biographer Phillip Herring added Barnes to his syllabus, “when, in 1988, I was looking for more novels by women for my Modernism course” (xv).

Herring admits that the addition had more to do with his desire to expand his canon than with his own preference for the novel: “I wanted to teach *Nightwood* but felt frustrated by my futile attempts to understand it” (xv-xvi). Like many readers, Herring expresses an attachment to the novel based on its reputation, deepened by a desire to master the text or at least get something out of it. In her introduction to the 1991 anthology *Silence and Power: A Reevaluation of Djuna Barnes*, Mary Lynn Broe asks, “Who was this ‘famous unknown’ whose cultural portrait is so legendary, yet whose place in literature has been until recent years a long ellipsis?” and contends that *Nightwood* “had been canonized as the emblematic male modernist text” (3, 7). Broe and her fellow critics intend the volume as a corrective, since “much contemporary criticism still privileges Barnes’ production of writing over her radical sociopolitical views” (7). In each of these biographical, bibliographical, pedagogical, and critical interventions, readers are invested in the idea of recovery. They seek to bring Barnes to a wider, younger audience or to rescue her from the errors of other readers. Similar discourse has recurred in every decade since the novel’s publication, suggesting that, critics like to think of themselves as saving an author from obscurity, but they recontextualize more than they rediscover. *Nightwood* was reprinted in the US by New Directions, an independent publisher unusually committed to keeping books in print in visually striking, inexpensive paperback editions, so the book has been accessible to teachers and students, at least in a material sense. Yet the cultural capital that labels like “forgotten” and “underappreciated” carry remains potent.

Readers who seek out or stumble upon *Nightwood* today tend to be aware that they are supposed to recognize difficulty as a mark of literary merit. Many readers who fail to comprehend it locate that failure in themselves rather than in Barnes. Goodreads user Rob writes in 2011, “There’s a lot in this book that I just completely failed to grasp, and I think I need to return to it when I’m a better reader, but even I can appreciate the beauty here.”

Others blame the book itself. Philip Lane writes in a 2012 Goodreads review: “Well perhaps I am just an ordinary novel-reader but I just found it too difficult to enjoy. I do feel any writer needs to take the reader into consideration and I am not quite sure what is the [justification] for making meaning so obscure that only an elite group of academics or intellectuals can access it.” Glosses of individual words and allusions only go so far; confusion often comes simply from reading a text outside its historical or geographic context. *Nightwood* certainly requires homework. It is not enough for that reader to know about Paris and Americans in 1920s. She must also recall details of fifteenth century Roman anti-Semitism and medieval literature, read a sentence in French and German, intuitively understand Matthew’s euphemisms for sex and penises, and know the street-level geographies of Paris and Vienna. The New Directions edition, the most widely available, contains no annotations. The first bar to access for the casual reader or struggling student is just to understand the literal meaning of the words on the page.

Few twenty-first century readers, either on Goodreads or in literary journals, concern themselves much with Barnes’s allusions. Today’s readers are most likely to express frustration with *Nightwood* because it is difficult to tell what is happening. Tyler, on Goodreads in 2009, sighs, “Problem was: too much style, not enough substance. ... Maybe I’m just not one for oblique turns of phrase anymore (god forbid); but personally I find it comforting to know at least something of what is going on line by line.” Both Matthew and the narrator of *Nightwood* often assess people using curious metrics and illustrate abstract ideas with bizarre metaphors. For example, consider that famous first description of Robin Vote as “[a]n eland in a bridal veil” (41). Even if you know that an eland is an African antelope, Barnes is asking you imagine a composite image you would probably never think of otherwise. And once you have the visual image, you must take it further: what does it mean about Robin? What does it mean to be “the infected carrier of

the past,” and are readers supposed to think of her this way, or to judge Felix negatively for doing so?

Sometimes, even if a reader understands enough of the words on the pages, she still experiences what critic George Steiner calls “contingent difficulty:” “We have done our homework, the sinews of the poem are manifest to us; but we do not feel ‘called upon,’ or ‘answerable to’ [...] And it is just because this failure of summoning and response can lie wholly outside the categories of ‘liking’ or ‘disliking’: that it is not, or not only, a question of taste.” (29) It is intimately personal, this way texts have of interpellating readers. There is only so much work a reader can do. Wanting to understand or like a book is not enough. Every work of literature calls upon and/or is answerable to some, not all, readers, and textual difficulty is not the only factor in that failure. Assumptions about genre, period, nationality, gender, race, and sexual orientation combine with past reading experiences and readers’ assumptions about themselves, both their demographic identifications and what kind of readers they imagine themselves to be, to make certain readers more open to seduction by certain texts. The context of reading changes the valence of a text: reading a text for historical significance can have a vastly different effect than reading for personal significance.

MODERNIST DIFFICULTIES AND EARLY REVIEWS OF *NIGHTWOOD*

Critic Jane Marcus implies that the number of reviews of *Nightwood* demonstrate the book’s perceived importance in its moment, writing that “it was given the kind of press coverage which only cookbooks get today” (“Mousemeat,” 195). While it would be nice to think that *Nightwood* made a huge splash, archival research suggests that any book from a major publisher in the ‘30s received high-quality press on both sides of the Atlantic,

including many books that are now forgotten,¹⁰ and that much of this attention was the result of the association with Eliot and of Barnes' hustling on the part of Barnes and her friends. Her letters to Charles Henri Ford and Lady Ottoline Morrell evince an obsession with getting the book reviewed.

With all the panache one might expect from Dylan Thomas, his review, published in the Oxford and Cambridge journal *Dark and Light* in May 1937, encapsulates all the major themes that appear in the early reviews of *Nightwood*. He writes:

There should be two reviews of this book, and both written with the intention of selling it: the first to attract the intellectual flippity-gibbits, who read everything new and nasties have read it before (sic); and one to attract by quotation, the honest people who like beautiful writing. The first review should say what an evil book it is, that it's about homosexuality, and that it's very bawdy; also that Mr. Eliot, certainly not new or nasty, has written an enthusiastic preface to the American edition [...] The second review, is, I think, this review. "Night Wood" was turned down by every publisher in America. It can't be called a novel, because it only has a sort-of-a-plot; the characters don't as in the actual life of fiction, develop and change from mood to mood, sentence, etcetera; they talk witty, passionate dialogues on dirty mountaintops (making, that is, the comparative unimportance of the fact of level dirt into mountainous truth). It isn't a lah-de-dah prose poem, because it's about what some very real human people feel, think, and do. It's "Nightwood," by Djuna Barnes, and one of the three great prose books ever written by a woman. (199-200)

What the other great prose books by women are, Thomas does not say. He does, however, touch upon the novel's homosexual content, its bawdiness and moral implications, its form, and its realness, all of which recur throughout reviews from 1936 and '37, and reverberate in contemporary online reviews.

¹⁰ For example, in the *Spectator*, Peter Burra reviews *Nightwood* alongside several books and authors that I, a PhD in literature and longtime voracious reader of obscure twentieth-century fiction, have never heard of: *Foster-Girl* by John Metcalfe, *Song of Friendship* by Bernhard Kellerman, *Somewhere in Silence* by Patrick Brand, *Level Crossing* by Phyllis Bottome, *Cross-Double-Cross* by Lewis Masfield and *Two Exiles* by Julian Hall.

Early reviewers tend to agree with Winterson that, “there is no consolation in *Nightwood*” (x). Philip Rahv’s review in the American Marxist magazine *New Masses* demonstrates how the novel has always been problematic for readers who expect an experimental novel about lesbian love to be politically oppositional. Rahv writes, “That ‘to think is to be sick’ [...] is the intrinsic meaning of this novel, which reads like the transcript of a nightmare” (32). To Rahv, *Nightwood* depicts “the shifting sands of decadence at its most absolute” (32). The novel’s negative message and its unrealistic, decadent style go hand in hand for Rahv. “Decadence” ambiguously describes both a literary style associated with writers like Huysmans, and Wilde; and the idle, privileged bohemian lifestyle of Barnes’s characters. Literary and material decadence are equally undesirable in a 1930s leftist context: judging by *New Masses*’ content and advertisements, readers’ main concerns were assumed to be the Spanish Civil War effort, the rise of fascism in Europe, and economic conditions in the US. More recent readers repeat similar criticisms: Sonya Feher writes on Goodreads in 2010 that she tried to read the book but “It didn’t work. Too white. Too privileged.” Other present-day readers share Rahv’s concern with the novel’s negativity. Dan muses on Goodreads in 2012: “i’m not entirely sure why this book didn’t knock my socks off, exactly. i’d say it’s the pre-occupation with existential nothingness (decidedly NOT the way i look at the world).”

Peter Burra, in the *Spectator*, reviews *Nightwood* along with six other new novels, most of which are forgotten today. Burra devotes roughly two-thirds of his one-page review essay to Barnes. Although conscious of *Nightwood*’s limited popular appeal, Burra contends that it stands head and shoulders above the rest in its complexity and ambition:

“everything else in this list is the nice comfortable version of normal existence [...] we are allowed to remain on the level without being required to disturb our posture or rearrange our way of thinking” (962). In his opinion, *Nightwood* is noteworthy precisely because it is difficult. Burra iterates a deeply modernist sentiment that many fans will echo into our present moment: the book is not for everyone. It is for good readers, readers who are not afraid to face some ugly truths about life.

Many readers have found Barnes’s difficulty tedious and self-aggrandizing rather than enlightening, using that old chestnut “pretentious” to describe *Nightwood*. In the *Post* of London, Osbert Burdett complains that the book is “Written in pretentious and sometimes meaningless prose” (196). To call a book pretentious is to suggest that it is clear, often from the writing itself, that its author takes it quite seriously and imagines her work as important, but the text misses the mark, is overly stylized with too little attention to story and meaning. To be pretentious is to be more invested in impressing the literati than in creating real art. One of the most powerful arguments about *Nightwood*’s pretentiousness comes from Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Mark Van Doren in *The Nation* in 1937. While Van Doren praises its prose, he wonders about the novel’s substance:

Miss Barnes has strained rather than enriched our sensibilities. ‘Nightwood’ is more fascinating than interesting. [...] ‘Nightwood is mouse meat at which we nibble page after page with a special kind of joy. But great fiction is more ordinary than this, and ultimately more nourishing. Beefsteak and apple pie. (199)

Van Doren hints that one message of the book might be to enlarge readers’ sympathies toward “the third sex,” in which he lumps “the three chief persons” of the novel. Like many reviewers, Van Doren assures us that he does not turn his nose up at the characters’ sexual

orientations. Instead, his critique, using a phrase (“mouse meat”) from *Nightwood*, hinges on the idea that reading the book requires work, but doesn’t reward it. Van Doren comes to *Nightwood* with the idea that good fiction offers insight. Although he devours the novel with “a special kind of joy,” it is the shallow joy of “fascination” rather than a slower, less flashy “interest.” As Goodreads user Summer put it in 2007, “The prose is beautiful and I read this book in one sitting, but I still didn’t take much from it.” Pretentiousness may be, ironically, what saves *Nightwood*: it fits the rubric of modernism, even if we all agree that modernism is a joke.¹¹

Many reviewers consider lack of substance to be endemic to experimental writing. One writer, reviewing Barnes’s 1962 *Selected Works* for *Time* magazine, contends that, ““*Nightwood* suffers from that most irritating offense of difficult writing—the mysterioso effect that hides no mystery, the locked box with nothing in it” (“Lost” 110). Even reviewers writing in the 1930s associate a sense of substanceless mystery with modernism as a genre. By 1936 and ‘37, when the book was released in the UK and the US, respectively, high modernism seemed dated. As I have already noted, for leftist critics, literature worthy of attention evinced concern with material and political immediacies. Burra favorably compares Barnes with high modernism, arguing that, “one can safely say

¹¹ Leonard Diepeveen demonstrates that contemporary critiques and parodies of modernist pretension had an ethical dimension, one deeply invested in the idea that books should be sincere and serious. Even if a writer wrote fiction, readers expected her to be honest about the truths she expressed. If the text revealed signs of its own deliberate construction, its artifice, “One need not engage because trust was not possible. For these readers, trust was the opening gambit in any aesthetic experience” (Diepeveen 169). Modernist experimentation, with its attendant self-consciousness, “was not just an aesthetic failing. It was an ethical failing for its fraudulence” (Diepeveen 168). Although literature throughout history has been deliberately constructed, most early twentieth-century readers did not want that constructedness to be apparent in the text itself.

that she belongs temperamentally to the elder generation of living writers who present life in its essential nakedness and seeming hopelessness, rather than the younger ones who are bravely trying to dress it up in a colored shirt” (962). For him, Barnes’s nihilism is preferable to the supposedly realistic writing of her contemporaries. Others, like Rahv, view her modernist sensibility as regressive.

Nightwood dramatizes modernity’s failure and degeneracy. Readers are quick to categorize it within that genre, sometimes favorably: one 2012 Goodreads user calls it “queer Ulysses”—and this is a compliment (Richard). Sometimes not: another Goodreads user Zach quips in 2010, “I suggest that future printings of this book be given the subtitle ‘I am a bourgeoisie, and I am in a cafe, and I am sad (because of love).’” Most readers bring, at minimum, a vague sense of modernism to their reading of *Nightwood*. The expectation provides a context for the book, even if that context is just an image of American writers sitting around in Paris cafes, drinking endless bottles of wine (as in *Midnight in Paris*). To some, this means that the novel should be good, or at least stylish, possibly experimental. The modernist tag also situates *Nightwood* among “the classics” of twentieth-century literary canon. On the website *Literary Manhattan*, Eric Chase writes, “In my mind there are three seminal novels of the Lost Generation: Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, and *Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes. [...] Comparatively, *The Sun Also Rises* & *The Great Gatsby* are safe novels.” Chase begins his campaign to convince us to read *Nightwood* by invoking two other modernist expatriate novels we have probably read, and have definitely heard of. Modernism, like queerness, relies on the idea of itself as an avant-garde or counterpublic, as a group of individuals set

against a larger public that misunderstands and marginalizes them. Yet modernists, bohemians though they may have been, are still required to appeal to a wide audience and to represent an entire period, if they are to survive in twenty-first century canons.

LESBIANS, FEMINISTS, QUEER THEORY, AND DJUNA

To many readers, the question of historical reality is central to literary merit. In an oft-quoted review of Barnes's *Selected Works*, William Boyd asserts that *Nightwood* "belongs to that small class of books that somehow reflect a time or an epoch" (144). Novelist Bertha Harris describes how, in 1959, she shadowed Barnes around Greenwich Village, imagining that the famously reclusive author "would stop and take my hand to thank me for all the flowers I daily stuffed in her mailbox in Patchin Place and then tell me how it was to be a dyke in Paris in the Twenties" (77). Reading queer women writers was, for Harris, "read[ing] my censored history," discovering "our family bloodline ... these women our fathers stole from us" (78-79). Other lesbian readers express similar experiences. Literary scholar Elizabeth A. Meese registers both the rush of recognition in the text and its alienating style: "How could [radical lesbian writers] admire such a throwback to masculinist, repressive, negative images of lesbians [...] ? When I first read *Nightwood*, I was a lesbian without knowing it. But I recognized a world in it—a scene over the edge, the night world of the different, my world. I wonder if a lesbian exists who didn't, at one time or another, begin here" (46). Meese emphasizes both Barnes's negativity and her central place in lesbian canon.

As second-wave feminism grew, women began to imagine themselves as part of a women's and/or lesbian public with a culture distinct from heteronormative, male-dominated media and history, which had not only marginalized but erased women writers, lesbians in particular. Women hungered to feel recognized, to feel public instead of feeling

pathological. They cobbled together secret canons through friends' recommendations and through their own detective work.¹² Lee Lynch remembers her adolescent practice of looking for women writers with unusual or masculine names, assuming this might indicate lesbianism—a practice that led her to Radclyffe Hall and Djuna Barnes. Meese emphasizes the constructed nature of such canons when she writes, “I need a long catalogue of women’s names ... My history, finally invented. A lesbian genealogy” (46). By the early 1970s, personal canons began to be institutionalized and commercialized, as women’s studies and women’s literature courses became more common, and feminist bookstores appeared in US cities. Readers could order books from feminist catalogues like *Ist Things Ist*, available in the feminist magazine *Off Our Backs*, which advertised *Nightwood* as a “Classic Lesbian novel. Very sophisticated language.” Even if it was not what they expected, this “classic” represented something important to young mid-twentieth century lesbian writers like Lynch, Meese, and Harris. Lynch explains why *Nightwood* is important to her, even if it is not her story: “Although her lesbians were remote to me ... as distant in terms of class as Radclyffe Hall’s—Barnes’s writing was brilliant. If I couldn’t imagine knowing her characters, or creating a world like hers [...], I could at least dream [...] of writing as poetically” (45). Barnes might not consider herself a lesbian, but she artistically depicted lesbian experience in way that made Lynch value her own. Because of their shared identity, Lynch saw herself in literary history. Harris expresses a similar sense of history. Although she acknowledges the same class issues that Lynch registers, her utopian sense of universal lesbian identity also overrides any distinction of class or nation, valuing lesbian modernists “despite all material difference between us,” recognizing lesbians as women whose

¹² The idea of the secret canon comes from writers’ conversations in *No Regrets*, edited by Dayna Tortorici. Carla Blumenkranz says, “Whenever you’re put in a university or even just in a group of people, there’s always a secret canon that everyone’s referring to. [...] It’s just a reference point. There’s a collection of books that will tell you so much about the microculture you’re in, and that’s the secret canon.”

“father’s nationality [is] in effect wiped out by the more profound nationality of their lesbianism” (Harris 78-79). The sense of publicness that these texts offer underscores the historic erasure of women authors. Meese, Harris, and Lynch each describe an unmistakable sense of recognition found in the pages of *Nightwood*, and they unequivocally classify Barnes’s novel as lesbian literature, based in their understanding of Barnes’s identity and the novel’s depiction of lesbian desire, love, and angst.

Mid- to late-twentieth century readers seek the novel out for what they hope will be its verisimilitude. Like Meese, Lynch, and Harris, many imagine *Nightwood* as a document revealing not only the world of 1920s and ‘30s lesbian life in Paris, but also transhistorical lesbian experience. Some even contend that the novel’s lesbian content provides a key to interpreting its difficulties. Annette Kolodny argues that *Nightwood* might be considered a seminal feminist novel because its defamiliarizing prose presages similar confusion in novels by Margaret Atwood and others. Kolodny writes that, “ironically” *Nightwood* “places its readers in precisely that situation in which the main characters of more recent women’s fiction find themselves: [...] embroiled in the hopeless task of trying to decode or decipher a strange and incomprehensible reality” (82). Some of today’s readers account for Barnes’s difficulties in a similar way: Keith Michael writes in his 2010 Goodreads review that, “[T]he novel builds up this oppressive atmosphere where men are omnipresent [...] all of this creates a deafening noise around Nora & Robin’s relationship [...] Barnes keeps the reader off-balance throughout [...] in every positive sense, this is certainly a woman’s text; it completely lacks the linearity and rationalism and aggression of a man’s approach to writing.” For both these readers, the opacity and negativity of *Nightwood* make it effective feminist fiction.

Some mid-century feminist critics, however, reject *Nightwood* because of the same qualities. Although they mention the novel in their surveys of lesbian representations and

women writers, Jane Rule in *Lesbian Images* and Ellen Moers in *Literary Women* decree the book “pretentious and embarrassing” and “no longer [...] so impressive a work” (Rule 192, Moers 108). Rule registers the “decadence” issue, at once activating its class and generic connotations in order to suggest that this text is irrelevant to contemporary lesbian readers, but “[t]here is no mystery about why it should have found acceptance, for its decadent elegance removes it far from ordinary experience” (191). Rule and Moers recognize *Nightwood* as significant in its moment, but it does not quite fit their present-day canon construction projects. Critics of the novel’s negativity tend to suggest that negative representation is not accurate representation. For Moers and Rule, *Nightwood* is not a representative but an outlier. They include it because of its entrenched place in the secret lesbian canon, but dismiss it, suggesting that it has been superseded by more positive representations. Lillian Faderman writes in a 1981 history of lesbian literature that *Nightwood* reinscribes outdated stereotypes: “The nineteenth-century views of lesbian narcissism and frustration are delivered up whole here” (qtd. in Meese 44). Faderman includes a long excerpt from *Nightwood* in her 1994 anthology *Chloe Plus Olivia*. The book is divided into thematic sections organized to tell a teleological narrative about how Western society has moved from discourses of romantic friendship and inversion to the “Flowerings” of the present day. Faderman places Barnes in the middle, in the “Carnivorous Flowers” section, what she defines as “the literature of exotic and evil lesbians,” texts in which “inevitably, the lesbian’s wicked ways destroy not only others but herself also” (xiii, 297). Like Moers and Rule, Faderman includes *Nightwood* in her canon not as a good example but as a cautionary tale, evidence of the negative, inaccurate representation that is finally being redressed in the 1990s. The question of accurate representation is, for many readers, the primary factor in deciding whether *Nightwood* is a bad memory to get beyond, or an important text to keep on the lesbian bookshelf.

For others, the latent political potential of the text is of paramount importance. Mary Lynn Broe applauds Jane Marcus in 1991 because she “challenges any residual notion of *Nightwood* as a lesbian cult novel or as a text of high (male) modernism.” (19). The fact that Barnes is a woman writing (about same-sex romance!) leads many to fold her into feminism, to the degree that Henry Raymont can casually refer to Barnes in the *New York Times* in 1971 as “an author who was a feminist and a rebel against Puritanism before Kate Millett and Germaine Greer were born” (24). Raymont may be referring to Barnes’s journalism more than her fiction. However, for feminist critics, it was imperative that her most famous work be read as foregrounding issues of gender and sexuality. “Lesbian” and “queer” are, for these critics, labels that describe oppositional political positions, not just the sexual and emotional happenstance of loving other women. Barnes herself might have identified with the latter category. Although she was open about her relationships with women and her place in Natalie Barney’s social circle in Paris, and her most famous works reflect this comfort, Barnes refused to label herself, famously stating, “I am not a lesbian, I just loved Thelma” (qtd. in Martins 108). This line is quoted in nearly every piece of scholarship written about Barnes since the 1990s, whether critics deploy it as an expression of Barnes’s repression and shame or of her radical queerness and refusal to accept identity categories. In her letters to Charles Henri Ford in the mid-1930s, Barnes worries that her drafts of *Nightwood* are too “invert” for a major publisher, but shows no intention of censoring the text. After the book’s publication, she writes to Lady Ottoline Morrell in a letter dated 12 November 1936: “I was not offended in the least to be thought lesbian—it’s simply that I am very reticent about my personal life.” *Nightwood* itself is not so reticent: the book explicitly details relationships between women, and “the invert” is discussed, by name, throughout. While its author may have been private, the novel is public.

Queer and feminist readers continue to claim Barnes, even if Barnes might not have wanted to be claimed by them. As Heather Love writes of Willa Cather, “she is ‘one of ours’ but she is not our own” (25). For lesbian readers like Lynch and Harris, knowing that a woman wrote a novel about her love for another woman in the 1930s was revolutionary enough. Her existence proves that they are not crazy or sick. Validation originates in the reader’s need as much as in the text itself. To return to Steiner’s terms, texts call out to readers, but readers also call out to texts. There is always static on the line—and for some readers of *Nightwood*, the static overpowers the voice. It is significant that Meese, Harris and Lynch consider *Nightwood* part of their personal canons. Each read the novel when she was fairly young, and had read few, if any, other lesbian novels. Neither encountered the novel in a classroom or as part of a scholarly project. By contrast, because of the bibliographic function of their projects, Rule, Moers, and Faderman must justify why readers should spend their time on these books, which may be quite difficult to do with *Nightwood*, even if one personally appreciates it.

With its dense verbiage, arcane allusions, its queer and otherwise marginalized characters, its gender play, and its intense emotional tone, *Nightwood* has proven a nearly inexhaustible playground for the poststructuralist and psychoanalytic methodologies favored by late-twentieth century critics. Such critics refuse the idea of universality altogether, valorizing difference. Teresa de Lauretis, Jane Marcus, and Judith Lee each argue that to read this novel, in particular, is to recognize how reading fiction unhinges identity. In her 1988 essay, “Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation,” de Lauretis argues that *Nightwood* stages the problem of lesbian representation. It is Barnes’s howl of “resistance to what *Nightwood* both thematizes and demonstrates, the failure of language to represent, grasp, convey her subjects” (160). According to de Lauretis, Barnes uses language to show that language is inadequate to describe the previously untold tale of

lesbian desire and reveals the failures of language to represent more generally. For de Lauretis, *Nightwood*'s stylistic strangeness is a response to a repressive context, an idea that echoes Kolodny's characterization of the novel's disorienting style as feminist. Even if Barnes considered her work of a piece with Eliot or Joyce, her identity markers, or at least those of her characters, position them as marginal to patriarchy and heteronormativity. For readers approaching it with this frame, there is much in the text to support the reading that *Nightwood* dramatizes the failures of hegemonic discourse to account for non-normative subjects. After all, it begins with Felix, grappling with his Jewishness, and ends in Nora's atavistic communion with her dog in the chapel. When Matthew describes lovers who, like Nora, wait for their beloved at night, he says "they begin to have an unrecorded look" (101), connecting "night" to non-normativity in general and queer love in particular.

Like de Lauretis, Jane Marcus and Judith Lee argue that Barnes foregrounds difference, although they take the premise in divergent directions, neither focused directly on queer sexuality. Instead, reflecting the concerns of poststructuralism and psychoanalysis, they foreground difference more generally. These two essays represent the most in-depth analyses of *Nightwood* included in *Silence and Power*, which set the tone for the re-evaluation of Barnes in the 1990s. In "Laughing at Leviticus," one of the most often cited pieces on the novel, Marcus reads *Nightwood* as an antifascist text. For Marcus, *Nightwood* is not only or even primarily a lesbian text. She argues that *Nightwood* draws on the French tradition of carnivalesque literature. Marcus focuses on the image of the tattooed black circus performer Nikka as an image of Barnes's criticism of Levitical prohibitions against writing on the body, which prohibitions she sees as a form of gender policing. In its radical hybridity exemplified by Nikka, *Nightwood* challenges Leviticus and, in doing so, challenges the ethics of separation at the heart of Hitler's fascism. Marcus synthesizes this critique with Barnes's parody of psychoanalysis to contend that *Nightwood*

levels a charge against all normalizing forces and concludes that, “*Nightwood* reminds us that the human condition is a sister- and brotherhood of difference, and that ideologies that seek to erase those differences and define only themselves as human are indescribably dangerous” (250).

Lee similarly focuses on difference. In “The Sweetest Lie,” she argues that *Nightwood* “exposes the inadequacy of our cultural myths” by troubling the (Freudian) narrative of sexual difference as the fundamental experience of difference (208). Barnes deconstructs sexual difference, Lee contends, “because it does not define the most fundamental experience of difference: the difference between the identity one imagines (the self as Subject) and the identity one experiences in relationship with someone else (the self as Other),” which she says Barnes defines as both mother/child and the relationship between lovers (208). Unlike both psychoanalysis and assimilationist minority literatures, *Nightwood* describes the struggle not “to overcome difference to the struggle to establish difference” (212). While Lee sees promise in this trajectory, she is not satisfied by the novel’s conclusion. It ends “with Robin’s silence replacing Matthew’s speech and her lack of differentiation prevailing despite his experience of separation” and so, according to Lee, *Nightwood* “remains a virtuoso performance that denies, in the end, the possibility of giving voice to (feminine) silence” (217). The text refuses to provide a model for political change, utopian romance, or self-actualization. Lee suggests like many that that the novel’s difficulty is intended to draw attention to that performance itself. However, even as a performance or an experience, Lee contends that *Nightwood* demonstrates something about gender, about difference.

Twenty years after “Sexual Indifference,” de Lauretis returns to *Nightwood* to similarly advocate the queer reading practice it requires. In “*Nightwood* and the Terror of Uncertain Signs,” she is forthcoming about her own resistance to the book:

I approached this text several times over the years, but it was not until I read Barthes that I understood why I could not go on reading *Nightwood* [...]; the chain of signifiers would not [...] find a resting point where meaning could temporarily congeal. And it was not until I read de Man that I could let myself sustain the traumatic process of misreading—not looking for the plot [...] but going instead with the figural movement of the text and acquiescing to the otherness in it, the ‘inhuman’ element in language. (118)

De Lauretis finds language to describe *Nightwood*’s images in poststructuralism and psychoanalysis, contending that both “night” and Robin represent not a specific kind of sexuality, but sexuality as a drive, a “traumatic, unmanageable excess of affect leading to abject degradation” (120). De Lauretis uses similar diction to describe her experience reading *Nightwood*. The chaotic center necessitates the novel’s impenetrable, meandering style. It can only circle around and stab at its meaning. De Lauretis focuses on the moments where Robin interacts with animals as “expressive less of conscious emotions than of intensities of affect [...] entirely outside the symbolic and imaginary registers” (126). Why does the lioness cause Robin to leave the circus with Nora? What is going on with the dog in the final scene? These are questions that cannot be answered in words. Although some would argue that the novel has its own symbolic language, for de Lauretis, it is a series of intentionally disconnected, diffuse images that do not cohere, that have no internal logic but deploy a similar charge. Reading in this way, de Lauretis mimics Nora’s “reading” of the opera in *Nightwood*: “in her eyes [...] that mirrorless look of polished metals which report *not so much the object as the movement of the object*” (Barnes 57, italics mine). De Lauretis outlines a productively idiosyncratic reading practice that accounts for the peculiar structure and difficulty of Barnes’s text, a difficulty most critics elide. In order to read the novel, de Lauretis must relinquish her expectations for lesbian texts and her image of

herself as a good reader who can master any text. She must admit to the readers of *Critical Inquiry* that she really didn't know what she was talking about in her earlier published criticism on *Nightwood*. She must surrender to "traumatic misreading." But she needs other readers to help her do it. She needs to read the same text in another context.

CONCLUSION: "ONE OF OURS, BUT NOT OUR OWN"

A few other readers share de Lauretis's feeling that the proper way to read *Nightwood* is to drop your expectations and surrender to it. Jamie begins his 2010 Goodreads review,

Can't quite speak to why I loved this book. The reviews on here don't appear too kind; likewise, my classmates were befuddled and frustrated by *Nightwood*. Admittedly, it's sort of amusing to watch a group of budding-scholars with the arrogance to believe they can dissect any text [...] encounter one that leaves them cross-eyed and faint. Which isn't to say that I wasn't often confused, but that when I realized it was pointless to try and 'answer' what this novel was trying to articulate, I decided to sit back and enjoy the ride.

As Jamie observes, *Nightwood* makes palpable the gulf between different kinds of reading. There are things a novel can do or say criticism cannot. A novel can work as a "holy spoon," Matthew's name in *Nightwood* for the ritual performance that mixes private emotions with public legend. Most readers who love the book do not feel they need critical theory or psychoanalysis to experience the novel. Even when readers admit to not understanding, sometimes they still feel attached. They feel a pull, a combination of Dinshaw's "touch across time," Nealon's "feeling historical," and what I call feeling public. Sometimes the feeling of attachment is based on shared identities. That is certainly what drew me to *Nightwood*. Like de Lauretis, I came up short the first time I read the book. I was frustrated that it did not offer immediate, positive recognition even though the author and I are both, ostensibly, auburn-haired bisexual women. I returned as a graduate student in the hopes of

mastering it—by which I mean, experiencing the recognition I felt the book owed me, acquiring the cultural capital a difficult text represented, and wresting control of the narrative about the book away from others with less personal attachments. The more times I read it, the more I felt like it belonged to me, even though it had frustrated my expectations. I returned older, more cynical, having loved and lost. In an inexplicable way, I was ready to surrender to *Nightwood*'s strangeness, my senses sharpened to hear the song of heartbreak under the static of its strangeness.

Literary criticism and theory suggests that these texts, like the fiction they analyze, imagine themselves to have a trickle-down effect, if they are to find any resonance outside academic enclaves. Do academics verbalize what readers think and feel but do not know how to say? When Jane Marcus argues that *Nightwood* is anti-fascist, does she describe the experience most readers have with the book? Does *Nightwood* persuade us to question fascism? Or are its effects vaguer, more affective for most readers? Few would argue that Barnes is pro-fascist, but few reviews mention or acknowledge the historical political context of Europe in the 1930s except to mock Americans sitting in cafes in Paris. The pressures of academia push scholars to say something new about a work, but non-academic readers rarely feel the same compulsion. The book itself is already new to them. Nor do they seek out or echo the more arcane scholarly readings. Reading hundreds of reviews of *Nightwood* corroborates the conventional wisdom that academic conversations about particular texts have little resonance outside academic journals and conferences. Yet, given the continually growing archive of online conversations about the novels I investigate, this is not because people do not care about books anymore.

Most of *Nightwood*'s critics in the first decades of its life were straight white men. They tend to take Barnes's depiction of tragicomic inverts as exemplary of a more universal human condition. For many readers, even now, "universalism" is the goal of literature, and

the hallmark of great literature. The specificity of marked identities, like queerness and even womanhood, must not hinder the appeal to universality. Such a definition of literary value is sometimes at odds with, sometimes allied with, readers' desire for recognition, both personal and political. On one hand, an appeal to universality supposedly underlies much rhetoric about democratic citizenship; on the other, concerns about special interests loom, with suspicion about including books on a syllabus using any criteria other than "literary merit." *Nightwood* has remained in the canon because it has long been recognized to appeal to the demands of both New Critical modernist cultural capital and minority recognition. It offers many of "assurances and intensities" expected of a modernist novel: existential angst, stylistic strangeness and fragmentation. Brought into the canon for her association with Eliot and modernist Paris, Barnes became one of a scant number of major women modernists, along with Stein and Woolf, also queer. Thus even those who reject the bourgeois machismo of Hemingway and Fitzgerald may feel compelled to give Barnes a chance, rather than throwing her out with the high modernist bathwater. *Nightwood* has been consistently read and studied since the 1930s and '40s because it appeals to both canonical periodizing and canon expansion. In addition, its difficulty, for those who dare to attempt it, adds another layer of cultural capital—implying that it is for the chosen few. For all its idiosyncrasies, it is a novel capable of jumping genres, from typical outmoded modernism to radical queer fiction and so much in between.

Nightwood's excessive speech ends in an untranslatable moment of nonverbal communication, illustrating the limits of language even as it relies on language as a medium. It demands a subjective, experiential reading practice. People who love *Nightwood* love this about it. See these Goodreads users: "It's modernist, it's insane, it's poetic [...] it's elusive. This book, a cult classic of modernist and lesbian literature, defies categorization. The characters seem to be nothing more than hallucinations, and yet they

are somehow very real, very believable. It's mysterious. You should read it;" "I'd say don't force it if you don't like it; when NIGHTWOOD is ready to be of use to you in your own life's narrative, it will make itself very clear. And if not, that's obviously OK, too" (Abby, Watson). These Goodreads users, along with professional writers like Harris and scholars like de Lauretis, demonstrate that, to many (perhaps most) readers, a book's greatness inheres in its applicability to their own lives, in the aesthetic and affective pleasures and intensities it provides, which have everything to do with identity politics and historical context. Although frames of reference affect how readers approach the text, those who are willing to jettison some of their own expectations seem to have the best time with *Nightwood*. It is these readers who keep the book in public circulation.

Chapter 3: “The Dangers of Flirtation”: *Giovanni’s Room* and James Baldwin in Contemporary Culture

In *Vanity Fair* in May 2016, Jacqueline Woodson states that, “On the 60th anniversary of the publication of the groundbreaking novel *Giovanni’s Room*, America seems to be in the throes of a Baldwin revival.” In a recent *New Yorker* essay, Thomas Chatterton Williams asserts, “James Baldwin is having a glorious moment” in “the decidedly queer-inflected mood of the Black Lives Matter era now.” Williams argues that “[w]here his cosmopolitan, nonconformist interests and way of life rendered him suspect to many in his later years, he now appears prescient, too enlightened for his own time.” Woodson and Williams are but two voices in a chorus that claims Baldwin belongs as much to our time as to the past. As Woodson puts it, “I, like so many writers of color I know, now believe that we’re writing because Baldwin wrote, that history repeats itself and continues to need its witnesses.” His current relevance reveals that the horizon of expectations around blackness in the US has not shifted drastically enough since the 1960s, particularly when it comes to the affects and psychological experience of race; conversely, horizons of expectation around what can be said about gender and sexuality have shifted radically. Public conversations about the embodied experience of race, sexuality, and myriad forms of intersecting difference have exploded even in the past decade. Baldwin is a crucial figure for African American, LGBTQ+, and black queer publics in 2016, central to these overlapping publics’ understanding of their own histories. Baldwin the man had a vexed relationship with sexual identity politics, but never hid his sexuality; rather, he was one of the most famous American writers writing about male homo- and bisexuality in the 1950s and ‘60s.

Attending to the politics of Baldwin’s reception histories demonstrates that identity-based categories for literature are constructed, often after the fact, and not self-

evident, particularly when it comes to sexuality. Yet the teaching, scholarship, and circulation of texts under these categories, a slippage from category to canon, connects readers with texts, and texts with readers: thinking we know them, what do we know? My case study of *Giovanni's Room*, troubles any simple categorization of the author and his work, while demonstrating the affective and political utility (at times, necessity) of such categories for readers. I argue that the divergence between the gay canonicity of *Giovanni's Room* and more radical queer readings of its text demonstrates that Baldwin helped create the conditions for his own future reception.

In this chapter, I track how interpretation and categorization of *Giovanni's Room* has changed over the 20th and 21st centuries. I begin with the book's initial reception in the 1950s, and demonstrate that expectations for what could be said in public about literature and sexuality changed drastically from the 1950s to the 1970s. Then I consider the position of *Giovanni's Room* in contemporary literary canons within and adjacent to the academy, closely analyzing several significant essays on Baldwin from the 1990s and several very recent books, published since 2014. After discussing the reception history of this book in particular, I analyze Baldwin's position in contemporary popular culture and political discourse, as demonstrated by sales rankings, online reviews, and social media posts. This analysis reveals that Baldwin is invoked as a historical touchstone in contemporary discourse on blackness, for the cultural capital of his queerness, and because of individual attachments to his persona and style. I use this chapter to think, again, about the relation between popular and scholarly reception. Like *Nightwood*, *Giovanni's Room* circulated in gay counterpublics from the 1950s on, was included in the category of gay literature as it was constructed in the early 1970s, which made it available for queer readings in the 1990s, which reintroduced the book to the larger public as a queer novel by a gay or bisexual black writer. My analysis of these overlapping archives focuses on how

writers in both popular and scholarly media identify Baldwin and his work in terms of race and sexuality, particularly zooming in on the conflation of author and text, a tendency which is more intense for writers who are already marked subjects by virtue of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or nationality. I focus on the problem of labeling: there's a powerful political exigency to labeling important people from the past as gay, bisexual, or queer—but specificity often gets erased. Attending to specificity, to complexity, is exactly what Baldwin asks us to do in almost all his writings. In the final sections of this chapter, I explore Baldwin's significance online, in the Black Lives Matter movement, and for individual black and/or queer readers, and advocate recent methods for discussing, studying, and teaching Baldwin that emphasize complexity and specificity, rather than treating blackness or queerness as generic.

“THE DANGERS OF FLIRTATION”: *GIOVANNI'S ROOM* IN THE 1950S

Although James Baldwin continued publishing throughout the 1970s and '80s, he was indelibly associated for many with the Black Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and '60s. The headline for his *New York Times* obituary underscores this association: “James Baldwin, Eloquent Writer on Behalf of Civil Rights, Is Dead” (Daniels).¹³ Baldwin was much more peripheral to and ambivalent about the gay rights movement. Throughout his career, Baldwin referred to his black identity regularly in his speeches and essays, yet refused to label his sexual orientation.¹⁴ In 1956, Baldwin, previously known for his essays

¹³ Baldwin's actual relationship with the Civil Rights Movement and its leadership was often ambivalent: Williams and Field emphasize this ambivalence; Baldwin's involvement with the Movement is detailed by Leeming.

¹⁴ For Baldwin's thoughts on sexuality and his own sexual orientation over the years, see Goldstein; Eckman 31-32, 111; Leeming 358; and Baldwin's own “The Male Prison” and “Here Be Dragons.”

and one autobiographical¹⁵ novel, queered any easy equation of life and art by writing a second novel that ostensibly contains no black characters. Knopf, which had published his widely acclaimed first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, refused to publish Baldwin's sophomore effort, *Giovanni's Room*. The author claimed that his agent told him to burn the manuscript, which was eventually published by Dial Press (Eckman 137).¹⁶ The first edition's jacket copy insists that "David's problem—'the dilemma of many men of his generation'—was not so much 'sexual ambivalence as a crucial lack of sexual authority'" (qtd in Austen 150).¹⁷ Baldwin did not frame the novel using the rhetoric of homosexuality and heterosexuality; nor did Dial in the book's marketing. Although subsequent editions have featured shirtless men, Paris cafes, or Baldwin himself on their covers, the cover of first edition is almost abstract, offering little information about sex or race in the book: it features a tight close-up photograph of what appears to be a statue's face, a face whose race and gender are impossible to read, laid over with a greenish tint. The image does not convey "gay book" but "serious book."

While many readers today read *Go Tell It on the Mountain* as a gay novel, too, interpreting John's scenes with Elisha as homoerotic, most 1950s reviewers did not. By contrast, no matter how they identify its protagonist David or its themes, or whether they think the book portrays homosexuality positively or negatively, almost every reader of *Giovanni's Room* recognizes that David and Giovanni have a sexual relationship, that other characters like Jacques and Guillaume are represented unequivocally as effeminate gay men, and that much of the book takes place in the gay milieu of 1940s or '50s Paris. In the

¹⁵ Usually read as such because it is set in Harlem, where Baldwin grew up, and because Baldwin, like his protagonist John Grimes, was deeply religious in his youth.

¹⁶ Eckman records Baldwin's struggles to publish the book—his former agent Helen Straus denies telling him to burn the manuscript, but Baldwin remained incensed about the paltry deal he got with Dial for US publication of *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country*—a \$2,000 advance for the two books, compared to the \$125,000 Norman Mailer received from Dial eight years later.

¹⁷ Baldwin himself may have written this copy, but I haven't found a source to verify that claim.

text, Baldwin never uses any denotative English synonyms or euphemisms for ‘homosexual,’ except for the slur ‘fairy.’ David uses the word to describe a man who was court-martialed for their affair, while David went free (20). Giovanni uses it to describe Jacques, Guillaume, David “and all your disgusting band of fairies” (140). Toward the end of the novel, David uses the word to describe Giovanni when he sees him after their breakup and notices that he has “a fairy’s mannerisms” (147). Later, he informs his girlfriend Hella that, although the murdered bar owner Guillaume has become “a symbol of French manhood” he was really “just a disgusting old fairy” (150).¹⁸ At times, characters use French slang for ‘gay,’ as when Guillaume greets Jacques as “vielle folle” (31). By contrast, in some other texts of the era, lesbian and gay characters define themselves using less derogatory terms associated with scientific discourses on sexuality: in *Nightwood*, the gender non-specific label ‘invert’ and, Gore Vidal’s *The City and the Pillar* (1948), ‘homosexual.’ Nevertheless, it has been obvious to readers since 1956 that homosexuality is a central theme in *Giovanni’s Room*. This was never one of those cases where readers didn’t see the male-male eroticism in the book. What has changed, as this chapter demonstrates, is whether readers imagine that these gay and bisexual characters reflect their author.

In 1997, Myriam Chancy asserts that *Giovanni’s Room* is “a clear declaration of [Baldwin’s] own identity as a gay author” (173). Yet, as my research demonstrates, many reviewers in 1956 and ‘57 saw the book as cashing in on a trend of “homosexual” fiction and some saw it as anti-gay, but none explicitly connected the novel to Baldwin’s own identity, at least not in print. What seems self-evident now—about the book’s message, the

¹⁸ In all these cases, the word refers more to gendered mannerisms than to sexuality per se—David can have a fling with a “fairy” or cohabitate with Giovanni, but uses the word to distance himself from them, as Giovanni himself does, to contrast himself with the doomed fairies of le milieu (of whom he, in the end, becomes the poster boy).

characters' sexual orientations, and the author's own sexual orientation—didn't then. Baldwin's blackness, however, was taken for granted by US-based reviewers of *Giovanni's Room*. While many of his early essays, published in predominantly white publications, obscured Baldwin's race,¹⁹ his first two books, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Notes of a Native Son*, established him as a black writer writing about black people and racial issues. The African American focus of both books was visible on the covers of their first editions: *Go Tell It on the Mountain* features an illustration of a black family standing in front of a storefront church, and *Notes of a Native Son* bears a black and white photo of a pensive, dark-skinned young man with a pencil mustache, white shirt collar poking out of a baggy sweater. If it were not clear that this man is the titular "native son," a caption below the book's title marks him as "The Author," tying together the title, the photo, and the name James Baldwin. 1950s readers took as a given that "Negro author" was a category, as was "Jewish author," a category invoked by several reviewers of *Giovanni's Room*. By contrast, reviewers refer to "homosexual novels" rather than "homosexual authors." The idea that "homosexual novels" were or should be written by homosexual authors was rarely suggested except through the most indirect language. Their circumspection may have been partly due to fear of libel accusations. Even in the early 2010s, "In numerous jurisdictions [in the US], false allegations of non-heterosexuality are still actionable" under defamation laws (Kreis).²⁰ Unless someone has openly declared themselves to be gay, or lesbian, or

¹⁹ For example, in "Many Thousands Gone," first published in the *Partisan Review* in 1951, Baldwin's pronoun use ambiguously aligns him with the mostly white audience: "The ways in which the Negro has affected the American psyche are betrayed in our popular culture and in our morality; in our estrangement from him is the depth of our estrangement from ourselves" (665). If a reader did not have outside knowledge of Baldwin's race, the magazine only told her that he was a "young American novelist now living in Paris" (610).

²⁰ In 2012, a midlevel appeals court in New York state issued a historic ruling on the issue of defamation in the case of *Yonaty v Mincolla*, declaring that previous laws were "based on a false premise that it is shameful and disgraceful to be described as lesbian, gay or bisexual" and that such description should no longer be considered defamatory (Associated Press A25).

bisexual, in many places in the US, they can sue anyone who uses those terms to describe them. In the 1950s, this was very much a matter of etiquette as well as legal protection for journalists.

Critics in the 1940s and '50s occasionally declared that there was a boom in the publishing of literature about homosexuality. For example, in the *Kenyon Review* in 1948, Leslie Fiedler discusses *The City and the Pillar* alongside Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, asserting that both books are both examples of "the emergence of homosexual love in the recent novel,"—the "traditional subject" of fiction, erotic love, is "metamorphosed into homosexual love," as if homosexual love was the next step in the evolution, as if heterosexual romance was passé and writers turned to homosexuality to keep things interesting (521). Fiedler suggests that these queer love stories are iterations of a universal story, rather than representing a specific homosexual experience, and contends that a good homosexual love story will appeal to readers universally, rather than just to LGB audiences. Conversely, in a 1948 *New York Times* review, C.V. Terry calls *The City and the Pillar* a "case study of a standard homosexual" which "adds little that is new to a groaning shelf" of such studies (BR22). By slipping a novel onto the "groaning shelf" of nonfiction "case studies," Terry implies that there is no difference between the two genres, which share a purpose: to describe a psychological type. Both Fiedler and Terry imply that, when homosexuality appears in literature, it is a topic strategically selected, rather than flowing inevitably from a writer's actual life.

Sexuality and race were often figured in mainstream public discourse as subjects a writer could choose to write or not write about, not as central facets of their identities, axes across which they live and could never not write, as readers and writers tend to see it now. Whether directly or indirectly, "homosexual" fiction was read in the context of supposedly objective texts on homosexuality, including work in medicine, psychiatry and psychology,

and the social sciences. As I mentioned in my introduction, mid-century writers about gay and lesbian literature, including Donald Webster Cory, Jeannette Foster, and Janet Rule all contrast literature with social science, a distinction that reviewers like Fiedler and Terry echo. Mid-century LGBTQ writers write within a context in which homosexuality was discussed as a problem, often alongside other social ills, like drug addiction and juvenile delinquency, that were also linked in the popular and scientific imagination with mental illness and degeneracy. For most 1950s reviewers, used to associating gay content with problem novels and pulps, there was no direct connection between LGB experience and homosexual literature. Many of the most prominent novels to deal with gay characters in the early to mid-20th century were written by ostensibly straight authors.²¹ Framing is crucial, and genre is relevant: in many '50s critics' eyes, pulps and problem novels can be gay, but high art is assumed to be straight. Writers like Baldwin, Barnes, Vidal, and Capote helped change this. Yet contemporary reviewers of *Giovanni's Room* felt comfortable using the terms of Baldwin's "choice" of "subject matter," his "handling" of a "delicate," "controversial" "topic" with sympathy rather than "sensationalism." They may have been concerned about libel, or perhaps it does not occur to these reviewers that Baldwin himself could practice homosexuality because they consider the categories of "gifted writer" and "homosexual" to be mutually exclusive, because the characters seem so different from their author, because Baldwin is black and an outspoken champion of African American civil

²¹ See Austen's catalog of plot summaries in *Playing the Game*: in some cases, he doesn't identify the authors' sexual orientations, although he tends to look more favorably upon books that are by gay or bi authors, much as Foster argues that women write more critically of heterosexuality and more convincingly of lesbianism than men. There is also the issue that, if an author was canonical, they were almost always assumed to be straight, even if their work suggested otherwise. While many individual readers recognized queer content in *Billy Budd*, *The Turn of the Screw*, or "Paul's Case" it wasn't until the 1960s and '70s that mainstream literary scholars would suggest in print that Herman Melville, Henry James, or Willa Cather might have been, to use the mid-century term, 'engaged'—even though the queer sexuality present in their texts had never exactly eluded the reading public.

rights, because he frames the novel in its jacket copy and in the first chapter as a case study examining the problem of “sexual authority” for white men.

The language of choice and sensationalism permeates early reviews of *Giovanni's Room*, which appeared on shelves in late 1956. David Karp, in the *Saturday Review*, begins by stating that Baldwin “has chosen the special, tortured world of the homosexual as the subject of his second [novel]” (34). Allan Thomson’s brief review in the *English Journal* summarizes: “This is no cheap, sensational novel, but an honest handling of a controversial subject” (56). The rhetorical separation of author and text allows reviewers to laud the book’s prose while rejecting its subject matter. In the most extreme example of this rejection, James W. Ivy, editor of *The Crisis*, the official magazine of the NAACP, briefly reviews the novel for that publication, under the title “The Faerie Queenes.” Like other reviewers, Ivy sees homosexuality as the topic of *Giovanni's Room*. He begins by noting that “James Baldwin portrayed religious passion in his first novel [...] but in his second, *Giovanni's Room*, he tackles the scabrous subject of homosexual love” (123). Ivy’s review is at once cosmopolitan and disturbingly homophobic: he calls Guillaume a “fag” in quotation marks, though the word does not appear in the novel itself. Ivy describes the setting as “the brutal homosexual world of Jean Genet,” suggesting that he has read Genet’s far more explicit representations of gay sexuality, or at least knows of Genet’s reputation, since the publicity around the French writer probably informs reviewers’ conception of homosexuality as a trendy topic. This combination of critiques constructs an authorial ethos worldly enough to know that homosexual desire exists but wise enough to see that it is ultimately self-indulgent and self-destructive. Ivy rejects the novel as grotesque in the same terms that reviewers used to pan *Nightwood* twenty years earlier. He concludes that

It seems a pity that so much brilliant writing should be lavished on a relationship that by its very nature is bound to be sterile and debasing. Frustration, despair, and death are usually tragic, but in *Giovanni's Room*, where these elements are served up in a homosexual romance, they strike the reader as incongruous and therefore crudely comic rather than tragic. (123)

Ivy does not claim that homosexuality is morally wrong, but that it is not a subject for serious literature. Other reviewers echo this theory, including Granville Hicks at the *New York Times*, who acknowledges that “one is dismayed by Mr. Baldwin’s materials,” preempting the reading public’s expected response to the book (BR3). Few critics evince shock. Like Ivy, almost all take pains to imply that they are familiar with “homosexual literature.” In the *New Yorker*, Anthony West includes allusions to Krafft-Ebing and Sacher-Masoch in his dismissive review (219). The arch, world-weary tone of reviews like Ivy’s, Hicks’s, and West’s distances these critics from their audiences, the people they assume will be shocked and dismayed by homosexual content.

British reviewer Maurice Richardson, writing in the *New Statesman*, also suggests that homosexuality is a trendy topic: “*Giovanni’s Room* is one of those painstakingly sincere homosexual novels—I feel we may be in for a spate of them—that somehow just fail to connect” (509). By grouping the book with “homosexual novels,” Richardson ambiguously includes author as well as subject in his critique, which would account for the book’s “painstaking sincerity.” The category is ambiguous—what makes a novel itself homosexual?—since we in the 21st century are inclined to see identity-based categories for media as reflective of the creator’s identity as well as the characters’. This is in large part due to canon-expanding and diversity-building projects that prioritize, specifically, the inclusion of voices and perspectives. As I noted earlier, 1950s critics tended to frame

“homosexual literature” within a context of case studies, rather than seeing gay literature as the self-expression of a repressed minority group.²² Richardson uses the language of the case study to evaluate *Giovanni’s Room* and find it wanting because “David’s case-history simply does not hang together. At one moment he is too much of an habituated homosexual to behave as he does, at another too little” (510). Richardson’s critique focuses on David’s in-betweenness, which many contemporary scholars contend is the central issue of the novel—that this is not a bug, but a feature. David is both masculine and attracted to men, is closeted at the beginning of the novel but spends most of his time with gay men in gay bars, and his expatriation renders him nationally liminal. All of these qualities reflect the ambivalence of the white American men that many critics, and Baldwin himself, insist that *Giovanni’s Room* intends to represent; yet they vex contemporary reviewers. Richardson’s comments reveal his expectations for “homosexual novels”: the protagonist should be either a screaming queen or a confused straight man.

Other reviewers are impressed by the “great artistry and restraint” with which Baldwin explores his topic (Karp 34). They expect readers to dismiss a novel about gay men, so they defend Baldwin as a writer who is aware of his audience’s delicate sensibilities and shares their belief that great literature should have universal appeal. Though “he is franker about the physical aspects of male love than other writers,” Karp claims, “he manages to retain a very delicate sense of good taste so that his characters never really offend us even when they appear most loathsome [...]” (34). Hicks agrees that

²² What Nealon calls the “ethnic model” for sexuality (6-7).

Giovanni's Room stands apart from most novels dealing with “these matters.” He acknowledged that “[t]he theme [...] is delicate enough to make strong demands on all of Mr. Baldwin’s resourcefulness and subtlety.” However, readers should not dismiss the novel for its indelicacy, because

Mr. Baldwin writes of these matters with an unusual degree of candor and yet with such dignity and intensity that he is saved from sensationalism [though] the novel is laid in scenes of squalor with a background of characters as grotesque and repulsive as any that can be found in Proust’s ‘Cities of the Plain,’ but even as one is dismayed by Mr. Baldwin’s materials, one rejoices in the skill with which he renders them. Nor is there any suspicion that he is working with these materials merely for the sake of shocking the reader. On the contrary, his intent is most serious [...].

In this formulation, Baldwin’s motivation is not to share his own experience or to enlarge readers’ sympathy toward gay and bisexual men; rather, Baldwin’s intention, according to Hicks, is to demonstrate “the rareness and difficulty of love.” Though Hicks ultimately argues that the novel transcends any gay-specific focus and stops short of identifying Baldwin with his characters, phrases like “unusual degree of candor” and “dignity and intensity” imply that Baldwin may hold an authorial stake in “these matters.” Like Hicks, William Esty sees the universal theme of love as central to *Giovanni's Room*. Writing for the *New Republic*, Esty agrees that Baldwin has done more than he expected with a cliché theme: “*Giovanni's Room* is the best American novel dealing with homosexuality I have read. The plot sounds awful [...],” since novels about American sexual confusion and self-discovery in Europe tend to be depressing and sensational but *Giovanni's Room* avoids the worst of these pitfalls: “this sounds like a painful novel, which it certainly is. It also sounds like a meretriciously fashionable-sensational one, which it is not” (26). This is because,

according to Esty, Baldwin does not use sexual ambiguity as a symbol, and does not indulge in campy caricatures or glorify gay men as bohemian rebels. In Esty's reading of *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin treats gay characters as ordinary, neither vilifying nor glorifying queerness or otherness, "avoid[ing] the cliché literary attitudes [toward homosexuality]: overemphasis on the grotesque and use of homosexuality as a facile symbol for the estrangement which makes possible otherwise unavailable insights into the workings of 'normal' society and 'normal' people; in short, the Homosexual as Artist." (26). Esty's review ends with an allusion that it's difficult not to read as innuendo: "The problem of love is not 'resolved' at the end of the book. Like Yeats, David knows finally that Love can rear his tent in the place of excrement; but he possesses at least the degenerate Jacques' bitterly won humility: 'the way to be really despicable is to be contemptuous of other people's pain'" (26). The idea that love is an ordinary, universal concern allows critics to avoid extrapolating about the specifics of Baldwin's own experiences of love while still grounding their assessment of the novel in the author's emotional honesty.

At first, it appears that the *Saturday Review*'s Karp, like other reviewers, believes Baldwin has "chosen" this "special" theme as a case study. However, the novelist and later Emmy-winning television writer admires the "intense sincerity" Baldwin brings to the task, his "genuine ability to understand and to pity the wretches involved." It is hard to tell whether this is a coded, equivocating way of suggesting that Baldwin himself is homosexual or bisexual, or whether Karp genuinely believes that Baldwin merely draws from his observations as a tourist in le milieu. Unlike other 1950s reviewers, Karp explicitly acknowledges that Baldwin must have firsthand knowledge of this world. He

opines that “The author evidently knows the homosexual world of Paris and renders it with precision, but not with clinical detachment,” which, according to Karp, is a testament to Baldwin’s artistry and leads to the book’s relative success, since

A clinical report of the world of Giovanni and David, after all, would require a strong stomach, a sure set of nerves, and a highly developed capacity for finding objects of pity. Of all the ills and vices of men, it would seem homosexuality is the one least demanding of patience and consideration, but Mr. Baldwin has managed to instil [sic] in one reader, at least, a greater tolerance, a fresher sense of pity. (34)

Karp, like other reviewers I’ve discussed, reads this book against a framework of scientific writing about same-gender sexuality. In his estimation, Baldwin’s novel has performed a feat that a “clinical report” could not have, expanding readers’ pity (he uses the word at least three times), tolerance, and perhaps even empathy toward pitiful non-heterosexual humans. In characterizing “the wretches involved,” Karp uses a curious construction: the “illness”/“vice” of homosexuality is “one least demanding of patience and consideration” (*italics mine*). I wonder if this is a typo, since “least deserving” is a more common phrase—as written, the sentence suggests that LGBTQ people tend not to demand understanding from the straight world which, from the perspective of mid-’50s mainstream US culture, was certainly true.

In *Commentary*, Charles Nichols observes the difference between *Giovanni’s Room* and Baldwin’s previous published work, particularly *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. *Giovanni’s Room* “represent[s] two new departures in Baldwin’s work [...]: its locale is France, and there are no Negroes in it.” This is one reason why Nichols sees the book as lacking the “substantiality and conviction” of Baldwin’s first novel:

While I am not urging Baldwin to flee Paris for Harlem, and I certainly do not mean to imply that he should write only about Negroes, it is my feeling that *Go Tell It on the Mountain* has a substantiality and conviction lacking in *Giovanni's Room*. The latter's characters are on the periphery of the society in which they live, and though Baldwin attempts to make them symbolic of a universal malaise, they are like roots out of dry ground. It is difficult to take them very seriously. No character here has an inner and outer world as fully realized as Gabriel's in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. (95-96)

When he says that *Giovanni's Room* lacks the "substantiality and conviction" of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, he implies that this is because *Giovanni's Room* less obviously resembles its author's biography. Analyzing Baldwin's entire oeuvre, Nichols sees race as central to Baldwin's perspective, contending that, "Baldwin's devastating experiences of race hate are at the bottom of his whole view on life" and diagnosing him as "tormented by self-hate" and "acceptance of the damnation of the black man" (96).

In a famous review in the *New Leader*, Leslie Fiedler unabashedly categorizes Baldwin a "Negro writer" and pathologizes him accordingly. His review opens,

For what seems a long time but surely can be no more than a few years, I have been watching James Baldwin's work—not merely reading it, but watching it, warily, hopefully—a little incredulously. I have had the sense that here for once was a young Negro writer, capable of outgrowing at the same moment both qualifications and becoming simply a writer. *Giovanni's Room*, whatever its limitations, is a step in this direction—that is to say, a step beyond the Negro writer's usual obsession with his situation as a Negro in a white culture, an obsession which keeps him forever writing a first book. (Fiedler 16)

Fiedler represents Baldwin as an example of a type, not as an individual. The way Fiedler formulates it, it's as if blackness (or consciousness thereof) is a neurosis from which black individuals must heal before they can become real, serious writers. Fiedler quickly points out that Baldwin had "treated those passions and conditions" of his experience as an

African American man from Harlem, so that now Baldwin can “take a crucial step and break through, find ways of registering his identity and outsideness through other symbols than the accidental, autobiographical ones of skin color” (16). Fiedler argues that the absence of black characters detracts from the book’s verisimilitude. It “troubles” him that David “encounters no black faces in his movements through Paris and the south of France, that not even the supernumeraries are colored; so that one begins to suspect at last that there must really be Negroes present, censored, camouflaged, or encoded” (16). He, like other readers of the day, finds them in the book’s symbolism: if there are no black characters, the book must still somehow be about blackness. It rarely goes the other way: no one has, to my knowledge, ever said that the characters’ blackness in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is symbolic of homosexuality. Instead, the suggestion is that homosexuality is a symbol for Baldwin’s own experience of racial “outsideness,” as if one kind of “outsideness” can stand in for another in a simple arithmetic. Although Fiedler acknowledges David’s whiteness and frets about the novel’s whiteness, it never seems to occur to him that this whiteness could also be symbolic. Nor does Fiedler acknowledge that homosexuality might be another “passion” or “condition” of Baldwin’s life, intersecting his race. Fiedler’s review makes two contradictory arguments: that Baldwin should get over race and that a black writer can never really get over race.

It was not only white critics who thought Baldwin should “move beyond” race: in early 1956, Langston Hughes reviewed *Notes of a Native Son* for the *New York Times Book Review*, declaring that “When the young man who wrote this book comes to a point where he can look at life purely as himself, and for himself, the color of his skin mattering not at

all, when, as in his own words, he finds ‘his birthright as a man no less than his birthright as a black man,’ American and the world might well have a major contemporary commentator” (9). Hughes declares that Baldwin’s “incompletely fused” “half-American, half Afro-American” perspective “is a hurdle which Baldwin himself realizes he still has to surmount” (10). Hughes uses language similar to Fiedler’s to suggest that while Baldwin possesses a considerable talent, there is something unhealthy or immature about his relationship to blackness; such rhetoric will persist in Baldwin criticism, at least until the 1990s (perhaps it goes without saying that I have yet to find a mid-century source that says anything similar about sexuality). For example, in 1989, Horace Porter looks back on Baldwin’s career and laments that his literary gifts had to be used in the service of politics: “It seems as though the gods conspire against Baldwin. On the one hand, they grant him the rare and priceless gift of supreme literary intelligence. On the other, they provide a set of personal circumstances, including the historical moment, that leads him to assume the arduous task of illuminating and seeking to solve the so-called American dilemma” (165). Porter continues a long tradition in Baldwin criticism of distinguishing between universal, eternal art and the specifics of history and politics.

There is precedent for this line of argument in Baldwin’s own self-reflective writing, most famously in “The Discovery of What It Means to Be American:” “I wanted to prevent myself from becoming merely a Negro; or, even, merely a Negro writer. I wanted to find out in what way the specialness of my experience could be made to connect me with

other people instead of dividing me from them” (171).²³ This statement reflects on the paradoxical situation in which marginalized artists often find themselves: seeking the widest possible audience while not diluting the specificity of their experience and perspective. As we will see, many readers and critics in the twenty-first century contend that if any artist can succeed at maintaining their specialness and specificity while appealing to a universal audience, Baldwin does.

AFTER GAY LIBERATION, BEFORE QUEER THEORY

As gay literature coalesced into a category closely tied to gay community-building projects based on a sense of gayness as a minority identity, straight critics also began to recognize that gay literature might reflect gay authors’ experiences and identities. By the early 1970s, Baldwin’s queerness was a given for many scholars and critics who were finally willing to connect “homosexual novels” to their authors’ own sexual identities, but many still expressed ambivalence about queer representation.²⁴ In 1973, in an African American literary context, Stanley Macebuh argues that David, in *Giovanni’s Room*, “is, despite his color, just as unmistakable a surrogate for Baldwin as John Grimes [the protagonist of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*] is.” (72). Macebuh’s matter-of-fact connection between Baldwin’s life and *Giovanni’s Room*, not to mention his acknowledgement of John and Elisha’s relationship in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* as “homosexual love,” demonstrate the change that was occurring in popular understandings of sexual orientation as an identity, as part of the spectrum of human diversity. However, like his 1950s counterparts,

²³ Baldwin perhaps unintentionally echoes the “promising” young poet of Hughes’s “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” who tells Hughes that “I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet” which Hughes translates as “‘I want to write like a white poet’; meaning behind that ‘I would like to be white’” (692).

²⁴ I want to underscore that critics might just as convincingly call Baldwin or his novels “bisexual,” yet rarely do.

Macebuh considers homosexuality more as an individual psychological experience than a political identity, and he was more personally invested in Baldwin as a Black writer than a “homosexual” one. Although the gay liberation movement had already begun, for many in this period, blackness was politically exigent, while queerness was still merely personal. Then as now, most critics outside of LGBTQ-specific contexts saw *Giovanni’s Room* as a gay anomaly in the work of a black writer and spokesman.²⁵

However, in gay communities in the 1970s, *Giovanni’s Room* was central to an emerging literary canon, and Baldwin’s race was often downplayed or ignored. In 1973, the three founders of Philadelphia’s iconic gay bookstore chose to name their business after Baldwin’s novel. In 1977, in one of the first book-length catalogues of gay literature, Roger Austen refers to *Giovanni’s Room* as “gayish,” and to its position on homosexuality as ambiguous. Together, these two moments exemplify the asynchronous process of gay canon formation: while the bookstore’s founders ostensibly chose the name because it would be immediately recognizable to their target demographic, Austen is more ambivalent, implicitly comparing it the book unfavorably to more overtly celebratory gay texts. The website for Giovanni’s Room calls it “the oldest and very best gay and lesbian bookstore in the country.”²⁶ The store’s current website does not mention Baldwin by name²⁷ but does refer to a lineage of white male gay literary icons: “If you can get a staff member of the store to kiss you, then you will be in the direct succession of Walt Whitman’s kiss, which flows from Walt to Edward Carpenter to E.M. Forster to Allen

²⁵ In contexts outside literary criticism, Baldwin was known to be gay, and not regarded as a major black writer. Woodson remembers, “For many in the worlds I moved in—both that of my childhood and young adulthood—Baldwin was not yet a household name. We saw him at the edges of black-and-white videos of the civil-rights movement, heard his name lumped together with other ‘gay’ writers—Lorde, Capote, Williams, Cather, Baldwin...”

²⁶ Giovanni’s Room closed in 2014, but has now been reopened by the charity Philly AIDS Thrift.

²⁷ Though the physical store may bear traces of the association with Baldwin: recently, on the teen website Rookie, Annie Mok describes seeing a Baldwin quotation on the bathroom door at Giovanni’s Room.

Ginsberg to Bern Boyle, one of the founders of Giovanni's Room.” The store's association with the novel is purely identity-based: a gay bookstore named after a gay novel, whose name is conveniently already a place. To readers of the novel, however, the name takes on bizarre, less celebratory connotations. Douglas A. Martin points out “[t]he potential oddness in naming a bookstore—once Mecca for the like-minded—after the place David before long begins to obsess upon escaping, not being swallowed alive by [...]” (194). Like *Nightwood*, the name has become separated from the book itself—and, significantly, in the case of *Giovanni's Room*, separated from its association with blackness or racial critique.

Yet often, even in gay insider contexts, Baldwin was seen as a black writer first, a gay or bisexual writer second. For example, in *Playing the Game*, Austen includes *Giovanni's Room* in a section on “Traditional” Gay Fiction of the Fifties. Austen contends that Baldwin was able to publish such a “gayish” novel in the conservative ‘50s because he had already established a reputation as a black writer, a designation that was “especially fashionable,” “establish[ing Baldwin] as someone whose ‘difference’ has to be respected, as someone who was saying incisive and worthwhile things to the American reading public” (149). Austen downplays the more radical aspects of Baldwin's writing on race, suggesting that the writer's blackness granted him an authority that made the (white) reading public trust his judgment even when he chose to write about a less respectable form of difference—that is, homosexuality. According to Austen, *Giovanni's Room* was made palatable by its ambiguity, since “it allowed for multiple interpretations, not all of them definitively gay or pro-gay” (150)—remember that at least one 1950s reviewer argued that *Giovanni's Room* had a heteronormative message (though they didn't use that word)—and by its distance from its author's biography. As Austen puts it, Baldwin “removed himself from immediately identifiable commitment” by marking David as different from himself (150). Austen claims that gay readers were never so “confounded.” They knew

immediately that “no outsider could have so successfully captured the electric atmosphere” of *le milieu*. Austen recognizes that, along with the novel’s verisimilitude, its Whitman epigraph (“I am the man—I suffered—I was there”) worked as gay code, alerting sensitive readers to a connection between the two authors and their respective texts, but Austen repeatedly asserts that David’s whiteness, bloneness, and masculinity are part of Baldwin’s strategy to “play the game” and keep reviewers guessing about his own sexuality, rather than because Baldwin wanted to say something specifically to or about white, blond, masculine Americans. *Giovanni’s Room* does not have the central place in Austen’s canon that it does in most other gay canons, even of his era. Austen’s ambivalence about a text most other gay readers praise is due in large part to his recognition of its earlier reception: Austen was all too aware that the book had not captivated all its readers with its queer romance, that in a sense *Giovanni’s Room* had been used by critics to support anti-gay views.

A similar sense of ambiguity permeates criticism on *Giovanni’s Room* until the advent of queer theory. Most ‘60s and ‘70s critics have no problem diagnosing Baldwin’s characters as homo- or bisexual, but are not quite sure that Baldwin’s portrayal of homosexuality is positive or even sympathetic. Literary scholars Charlotte Alexander and Donald Gibson both see Baldwin as “critical” of “sexual ambivalence” and of the gay scene. Their own frames of reference—psychoanalysis and the newly established field of African American literature, respectively—lead them to see Baldwin’s portrayal of gay men as negative. Writing in *Psychology and Literature* in 1968, Alexander describes David and Giovanni’s “homosexual relationship” and David’s sexual “ambivalence” (77, 78). She borrows a phrase from *Notes of a Native Son* to describe homosexuality in *Giovanni’s Room* and *Another Country* as a “truce with reality” that still “leaves something unresolved” (93). For Alexander, the only appropriate reality is one in which “men co-exist

harmoniously with women” rather than being troubled by their sexuality (95). It is unclear whether she means these men and women will engage in sexual relations, or that they will all have let go the anxieties caused by heteronormativity. In his 1977 essay on Baldwin’s political positioning, Gibson, who also wrote about Baldwin in his 1970 book *Five Black Writers*, contends that the explanation for Baldwin’s decision to write characters “who are, more precisely, not black” stems from “the author’s politics, a conservative politics whose nature leads him to take the least *ostensibly* political road and to withdraw into the ‘normality’ and tensionlessness of the *status quo*” (8). For Gibson, homosexuality is not a political issue or identity; not a “race or socio-economic class” (8). He concedes that “the treatment of homosexuality in the novel, however, *seems* radical” because it goes against prevailing norms against depicting homo- or bisexuality at all, but concludes that “Baldwin’s attitude toward homosexuality is decidedly critical” (Gibson 8-9). Like some earlier reviewers, Gibson sees the negativity and despair in the novel as Baldwin’s representation of the limitations of homosexuality, rather than the limitations of homophobia and heteronormativity. He contends that characters like Jacques and Guillaume reflect the “disgust” of an author who valorizes masculine characters like David and Giovanni and that “the book is about decent behavior and is heavily weighted—understanding and sympathetic as the author might be—against homosexuality; although his treatment is subtle, it is as vividly negative as any religious sermon might be” (Gibson 9, 10). Though most readers today see Jacques’s statements about how and why homosexuality feels degraded or degrading (because people *think* of it as dirty, not because it is) as an expression of Baldwin’s own attitude, Gibson ignores those portions of the book, quoting only the scene where David gazes at the sailor on the street—which, again, most readers and critics today see as a depiction of David’s internalized homophobia and/or anxiety about his own masculinity—as a “rather clear negative [judgment] of

homosexuality” (9-10). He reads *Another Country* as more “liberal” toward homosexuality, suggesting that, in Gibson’s view, Baldwin’s attitude is changing along with social norms. It is bizarre to read evaluations like these in 2016, when Baldwin is regularly described as a gay writer, and one of the first people to write openly and positively about male-male sexuality. The disparity between interpretations like Gibson’s and Alexander’s and what is taken for granted about Baldwin now underscores that the context of reading affects interpretation, not only of the text’s overall message, but of the basic “facts” of character and plot. Engaging seriously with arguments like Alexander’s and Gibson’s, which seem absurd in a post-gay literature, post-queer theory era, might defamiliarize *Giovanni’s Room* for readers who believe they know where and how to situate it because they understand Baldwin to be a gay or queer author who wrote gay or queer fiction.

In spite of his refusal to be a spokesperson for the emerging gay liberation movement, Baldwin became a central figure on gay bookshelves as gay literature emerged as a category. Advocates of gay literature did not see Baldwin’s position on sexuality as ambiguous. For example, in Stephen Adams’s 1980 study *The Homosexual as Hero in Contemporary Fiction*, only three authors get their own chapters: Jean Genet, Vidal, and Baldwin. In 1993, Emmanuel S. Nelson dedicated the sourcebook *Contemporary Gay American Novelists* to Baldwin’s memory: “In gratitude to James Baldwin, who shared with us his pain, his courage, his vision of another country.” Nelson and other gay critics at the time in the 1980s and ‘90s were invested in a community-oriented identity, and although Baldwin himself was not, his work opened a space for gay readers, particularly gay readers of color, to imagine themselves in literature. Nelson writes about how difficult it was for him, as a gay graduate student of color in the early 1980s, to convince other academics that non-white gay writers like Baldwin and John Rechy were worthy of scholarly attention. As I related in my introduction, Nelson found himself constantly arguing against the idea that

his interest in such authors was a “scholarly perversion” based in his own personal proclivities rather than literary merit. For him, and for many advocates of counter-canon and canon expansion, such individual attachments and utopian visions were the precise reason why authors like Baldwin should be studied and taught. The desires, attachments, and reading practices of gay readers were what made Baldwin a gay icon.

GIOVANNI’S ROOM AND THE ACADEMY

From the 1960s on, Baldwin’s work was central to the developing field of African American studies and to scholarly and popular black canons; from the 1970s on, his work, particularly *Giovanni’s Room*, became central to the emerging field of gay studies and to gay popular culture. While *Giovanni’s Room* was central to a popular gay counter-canon beginning in the 1950s, it was not widely taught or researched until the advent of queer—not just gay—studies. Over the 1990s and early 2000s, Baldwin’s work also became central to the emerging fields of black queer studies, queer of color studies, (unmarked, white-normative) queer studies, and to intersectional analyses of the relationship between race, gender, and sexuality. In such contexts, *Giovanni’s Room* proves to be a wildly generative text, and critics laud the novel for exemplifying the complexity, ambiguity, and iconoclasm that are so often treated as essential signs of great literature and also of queer possibility. The same ambiguity that allowed 1950s readers to see the book as a judgment of the homosexual lifestyle or as a universal tale also makes the book appealing as a non-normative queer text.

Since its publication, critics have considered *Giovanni’s Room* an outlier in Baldwin’s oeuvre. More recently, as scholars have revisited the novel from the perspective of queer studies, they have often accounted for what they see as its previous neglect by

suggesting that other readers and scholars couldn't fit a queer novel into the black canon. In his 1996 essay "Tearing the Goat's Flesh," Robert Reid-Pharr calls the novel "Baldwin's anomaly," and describes how it "has been neglected by both students of Black and gay literature, many of whom assume Baldwin had to first retreat from his Blackness in order to explore homosexuality and homophobia" (387). In her 1997 essay "Brother/Outsider," Myriam Chancy refers to *Giovanni's Room* as an "oft-belittled" novel that has "survived as a significant piece of gay literature," but whose "author's race [has been] refashioned as universal and rendered invisible in the process" of its canonization (156). In assessing this book's reception, Reid-Pharr and Chancy both register critical anxieties about focusing on the one all-white novel in a black author's oeuvre, particularly since both their essays first appeared in contexts that are not specifically African American: Reid-Pharr's in the journal *Studies in the Novel*; Chancy's in the edited collection *The Gay '90s*. While paying lip service to racial difference, the fields of formal literary studies and queer studies have both long been criticized for eliding, erasing, or not knowing how to deal with race. Writing in such spaces, both scholars carefully define their work against previous criticism that treated the book's whiteness (and its queerness) as an excuse not to address race, as an indication of the book's universality compared to the raced specificity of characters in Baldwin's other fiction, or as Baldwin's distancing himself from the issue of race. While *Giovanni's Room* may appear to be an anomaly, Reid-Pharr and Chancy both argue that it is as much about race as any of Baldwin's other novels. Reid-Pharr argues that race is an absent presence in the book, "that the question of Blackness, precisely because of its very absence, screams out at the turn of every page" (387). Because readers know Baldwin as a black author, the question of race haunts this novel more intensely and persistently than it might a similar novel by a white author. Knowledge of Baldwin's identity leads readers to attend to the subtle power differences between the characters. The book emphasizes the totalizing

nature of ideologies of white supremacy, and Giovanni's "ghost-like non-presence, his non-subjectivity, parallels the absence of the Black from Western notions of rationality and humanity while at the same time pointing to the possibility of escape from this same Black-exclusive system of logic" (Reid-Pharr 387). Meanwhile, as I mentioned earlier, Chancy contends that *Giovanni's Room* is "a clear declaration of [Baldwin's] own identity as a gay author" (173). She argues that "[t]hrough David's amalgamated raciosexual self, we are brought squarely into the realm of the Black gay experience": although David is not black, by the end of the book, he identifies completely with Giovanni, who is coded as racially other and therefore, in some sense, black (Chancy 185). Because of the semiotic codes embedded in the novel and because of their knowledge of the author, readers are "compel[led] to make connections between Black and gay identity" and the binaries structure them both (Chancy 185). They move *Giovanni's Room* into the foreground of Baldwin studies, demonstrating that the book requires intersectional reading practices, since it challenges racial and sexual categorizations for texts. These late '90s essays lay the groundwork for further analyses of Baldwin's work and *Giovanni's Room* in particular in African American and gay and/or queer studies, positioning Baldwin at the crossroads of the two disciplines, pointing to exclusions and erasures in both fields.

In some cases, *Giovanni's Room* serves as a prime example of black gay literature. In the introduction to the 1999 collection *James Baldwin Now*, Dwight McBride describes Baldwin as a public intellectual who fought against racism, "elitism," and "heterosexism" (1). Of the fifteen essays in *James Baldwin Now*, six titles include the words 'gay,' 'queer,' 'sexual,' or 'sexuality,' and three specifically include the word 'queer.' One of the essays focuses on *Giovanni's Room*: "White Fantasies of Desire: Baldwin and the Racial Identities of Sexuality," in which Marlon Ross compares the content and reception of Baldwin's novel with Chester Himes's *Cast the First Stone* (1952) to examine why the former is

usually considered gay literature while the latter is not. The two books are similar in several significant ways: both authors are black, but their protagonists are white man who have sex with darker-skinned men; *Cast the First Stone* is set in a prison, removing homosexuality from everyday American life, just as *Giovanni's Room* does in its French setting. Himes is less canonical than Baldwin in African American literature, due partly to genre: Baldwin wrote literary fiction and essays mostly focused on race, while Himes is best known for writing mystery novels.

When it comes to gay and lesbian literature, Ross observes, “because Himes was reputedly straight, his novel was not prone to canonization under the cult of gay personality, which identifies gay literature as the production of writers who must be identifiably (or arguably) gay” (22). Gay literature, under this rubric, does not just deal with gay themes or characters, it reflects its author’s life and identity, and in this sense, popular understanding of gay literature in the 1990s differs greatly from the ideas about “homosexual fiction” in the 1950s. To be considered “gay literature,” the literary text must align with the author’s biography or public persona and both must contain “arguable” evidence of same-gender eroticism. In such discourse, life and work are seen as mutually reinforcing, though ultimately life—that is, biography—is more significant. For a text to be gay, the archive of the writer’s life must include enough romances, attachments, or suggestive letters, even if the literary work is sketchy or evasive when it comes to sexuality. Conversely, no amount of homoerotic content in his books can make a decidedly straight writer like Himes into an author of “gay literature.” Rather than labeling one writer as gay and the other as straight, Ross contends that readers should be “attuned [...] to the kinds of cultural knowledge that enable Baldwin and Himes to write these texts as fantasies of white male desire” (24). Race is often an unspoken component of desire, empathy, and identification, and vice versa. By comparing *Giovanni's Room* and *Cast the First Stone*,

Ross makes a powerful argument about the relationship between fiction, fantasy, and cultural knowledge: that is, fiction is fictional, but based in cultural knowledge not only about human behavior and culture, but about fantasy and desire. The cultural knowledge imparted by fiction is based in imagination as well as in empirical experience. It does not always flow directly from the author's biography; the connection between the life and the text is not always self-evident. As Ross puts it, in the case of *Giovanni's Room*, "[t]he whiteness of Baldwin's characters splits the author's identity from the author's fantasy, the author's authority from the author's projected desire" (26). The novel does not map directly onto Baldwin's life, but its narrative authority and affective charge comes from his fantasy, his affective experience—and from how readers understand such ephemeral phenomena.

According to Ross, *Giovanni's Room* and *Cast the First Stone* demonstrate "the capacity for these writers to [...] identify with another through the axis of desire. Does sexual difference look more like racial difference, than we'd suppose, they ask, not so much in its historical formation as in its structure of felt experience?" (24-25). Ross suggests that, although race and sexuality are not actually as neatly analogous as they are sometimes made to seem in popular and scholarly discourse, the analogy works because they are affectively similar: the structure of felt experience of sexual difference bears a resemblance to that of racial difference. The resemblance is no accident, since race and sexuality, along with other kinds of difference, are inextricably entangled.

Because of the demands readers place on authorial identity, Ross argues, "The reception to *Giovanni's Room*, then, has disallowed Baldwin's attempt to bracket the question 'What does Baldwin want?'" (25). In spite of any distance the actual Baldwin may have wanted to put between himself and the text of this novel, Baldwin the author is front and center for most readers of *Giovanni's Room*. Ross concludes that "what Baldwin wants" is to prove that a black writer "has something to say" about whiteness as well as

blackness, to turn the white gaze that so often scrutinized him back on itself. Paraphrasing Du Bois, Ross argues that, “Baldwin makes the central problem of the twentieth century the strange meaning of being white” (25). Reading whiteness in the book as whiteness, Ross focuses on positive, surface-level content in the novel, performing a reparative reading that nevertheless questions the idea that the book is simply a sympathetic character study of man figuring out his gay identity, a man who just happens to be white, as proponents of a raceless “gay literature” might have it.

Other post-queer theory readings of the novel similarly foreground the idea of empathy and imagination, underscoring the book’s queer relationship to Baldwin’s life. In “James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*: Expatriation, ‘Racial Drag,’ and Homosexual Panic,” Mae G. Henderson contends that, through *Giovanni’s Room*, “[b]y literarily crossing the racial divide, and literally crossing the national divide, [Baldwin] repositions himself at a site that interrogates the borders and boundaries of nation, gender, and sexuality,” using specular and spatial “symbolic modes” (298, 316). In the single sentence that inspired most of my undergraduate honors thesis on Baldwin, Henderson sums up her analysis of the novel’s opening passage: “It is a moment of self-contemplation that constructs subjectivity as a site of mediation between the present and the past, the personal and the historical, the self and the other” (303). Although David strives to embody the ideal of inviolable straight white American masculinity, “the narrative ultimately decenters [a] modernist and/or binary conception of identity” based on the opposition of false surfaces and true depths for a sense of identity “closer to a postmodern paradigm based on the notions of self-difference, or the ‘otherness’ of the self” similar to that articulated by feminist theorists like Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray (Henderson 306). Thus *Giovanni’s Room* demonstrates that all identity is intersectional.

***Giovanni's Room* IN (WHITE NORMATIVE) LITERARY PUBLICS**

It may be seen as an anomaly in African American fiction, because the characters are white, but, as we have seen, in gay fiction, *Giovanni's Room* is not an outlier, but is one of the most canonical texts there is, by one of the most canonical gay authors. Today, *Giovanni's Room* is hardly Baldwin's most forgotten work, though in the fall and winter of 2015-2016, *The Fire Next Time* sold exponentially better on Amazon than *Giovanni's Room*. *Giovanni's Room* ranks tens of thousands of points higher than Baldwin's other fiction on Amazon Best Sellers, and comes second only to *Go Tell It on the Mountain* in number of ratings on the literary social networking site Goodreads, with a significantly greater number of actual reviews written, suggesting more affective engagement or personal investment. Below, I've included graphs that show statistics for *Giovanni's Room* compared to Baldwin's other major works, to other major African American novels, and to other major novels about male-male sexuality (Figs. 1-3).

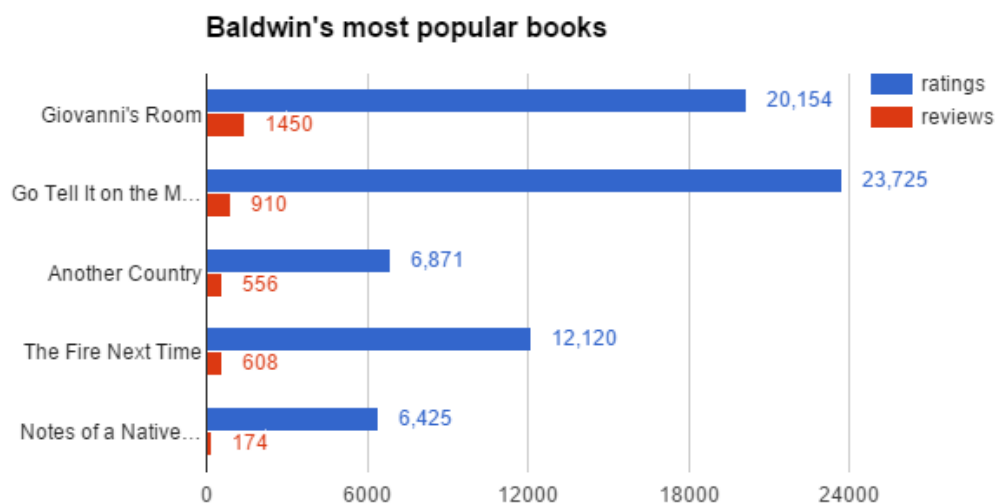


Figure 1: Goodreads statistics for Baldwin's major works, as of October 2015.

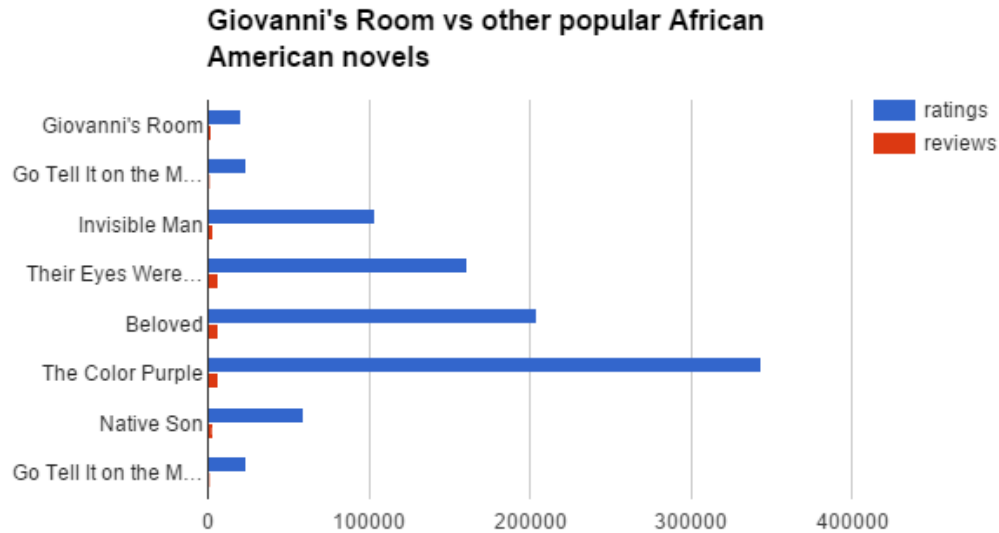


Figure 2: Goodreads statistics for *Giovanni's Room* compared to other major African American novels as of October 2015.

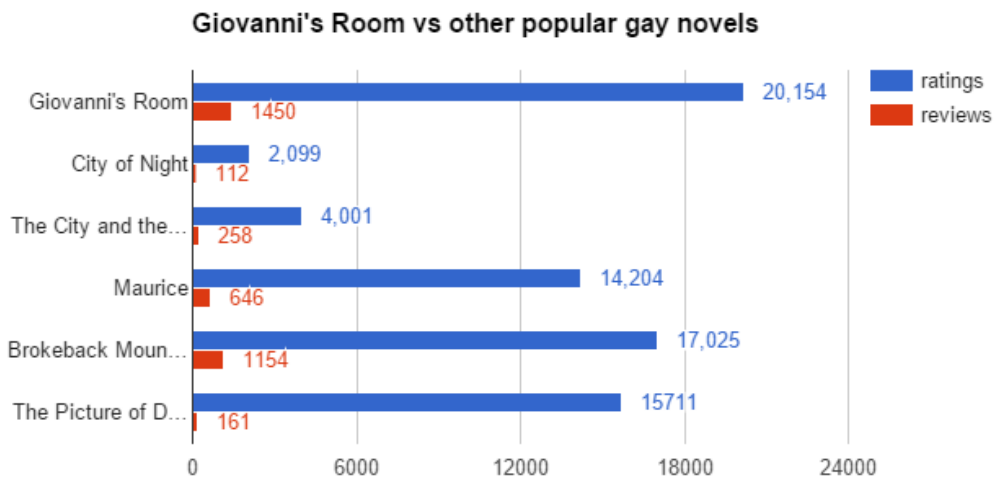


Figure 3: Goodreads statistics for *Giovanni's Room* compared to other major novels about male/male sexuality, as of October 2015.

Amazon statistics are harder to represent visually since the most revelatory numbers are the Best Sellers rankings, which update hourly. As of this writing on 15 January 2016, for example, the paperback edition of *Giovanni's Room* is ranked #2,728 in Books, but #23 in Books > Gay & Lesbian > Literature & Fiction > Fiction > Gay.²⁸ By comparison, the paperback edition of *The Fire Next Time* ranked #842 in Books and was #1 in social science books on “race relations,” while the mass market paperback of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (the most popular edition of that book) ranked #9,860 in Books, thousands of points lower than *Giovanni's Room*.²⁹ As these graphs and rankings demonstrate, *Giovanni's Room* is a widely known and read work, one of the most central, foundational books in the category of gay literary fiction. *Giovanni's Room*, particularly, is central to Baldwin's gay canonicity. Informally polling his Bennington students in 2015, Benjamin Anastas notes that, if students had read Baldwin's work before taking his Wright and Baldwin seminar, they were most likely to have read “*Giovanni's Room*—a queer classic—or had been assigned his more canonical essays.” Because of scholarly work from Nelson's to Reid-Pharr's and Chancy's to Henderson's, as well as the work of many unnamed instructors who assigned the book and friends who passed it on to each other, *Giovanni's Room* has circulated continuously in universities since the 1990s, when gay and lesbian studies and gay and lesbian literature were ensconced in the academy and queer theory was ascendant.

²⁸ The other Best Sellers in this category are mostly Kindle-only romance novels or erotica, with shirtless men on the cover—and also *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

²⁹ In the Kindle store, all of these books rank tens of thousands of places lower (*Giovanni's Room* at #30,396, *The Fire Next Time* at #25,191, and *Go Tell It on the Mountain* at #34,844). The disparity between paper and e-books speaks volumes about how readers see these books: as serious literature—or they may be purchasing them for school, or they may not have access to e-book reading technologies. Most bestselling Kindle books are genre fiction, many of them written specifically and published only for Kindle (often self-published in some sense), and many of them are marketed as romance or erotica. E-readers have made it much more comfortable for readers to enjoy erotic fiction in public, since no one will see the shirtless man on the cover, while readers often elect to publicly perform their reading of more supposedly highbrow books. Additionally, Kindle-only books are often very inexpensive, compared to the e-book versions of in-print books.

Thus the book has been available to readers not only because it has been in print but because it has been labeled by previous readers as a “gay” novel and included on shelves and lists, while James Baldwin has been labeled as a gay African American writer.

To find a cross-section of contemporary readings of *Giovanni's Room* outside of queer counterpublics and academic enclaves, I closely read dozens of Goodreads reviews. As I have observed previously, the users are mostly white and Asian American, highly educated, and between the ages of 18 and 34 who identify as serious readers. In the aggregate, Goodreads reviews of *Giovanni's Room* are similar to those of *Nightwood* in their invocation of “universal appeal” and relatability as the most important qualities for fiction. In defining great literature as universally appealing, these reviewers echo 1950s critics, demonstrating the continuing dominance of liberal ideology and the therapeutic paradigm.³⁰

While some readers praise Baldwin for writing a universal tale that doesn't seem dated, others emphasize the historical significance of the novel, placing it in a gay literary lineage. In most of the examples I found, “gay”—not “queer”—literature is still the operative term. Whitaker argues that the book's bad feelings are a necessary reminder of the struggles of gay men in the past, while not encapsulating all of the affects of gay history:

The sheer amount of self-loathing, pain, and destruction depicted in the book was very hard to take. Like those fallen soldier monuments with their mottos of ‘Never Forget’, we do need to remember though what life was like for those that came before us. And just how hard the struggle is for many, even today. [...] at the same time, the reality it depicts was not the be all and end all of gay life then. The events of this novel take place at around the same time Milk was a young man, finding out about himself. Real life did not have to be so bleak. That we have to remember too.

³⁰ Aubry persuasively argues that the therapeutic paradigm that motivates such reading practices is a reaction to and a result of the affective environment of late capitalism.

Although Whitaker contends that the bleakness of *Giovanni's Room* is realistic, he also argues that actual gay life in the mid-20th century might not have been so one-note. His allusion to Harvey Milk is somewhat ambiguous, suggesting that, although the 1940s and 1950s seem dark and sad, the seeds of gay liberation were planted in those years.

Many readers who consider *Giovanni's Room* as part of a corpus of gay literature argue that it is better than conventional gay literature. Goodreads user David prefers *Giovanni's Room* to more recent gay literature, self-consciously written and marketed within that category:

Baldwin's artistry is formulating a novel about same-sex love that isn't an absurdly supportive utopia nor a bland coming-out story (see: all LGBT literature, most of which is aimed at young adults, and is stylistically reflective of that audience). *Giovanni's Room* is the dusk to E.M. Forster's dawn in *Maurice*. Baldwin's real achievement is to make his story universal. The love between Giovanni and David is not a "homosexual love" or "same sex love" - it's just love, and Baldwin tells us that is all love needs to be to be real. Perhaps it is the effect of reading Barthes that I find myself disdainful towards the self-bulwarking of gay "otherness" - newspaper stories which send the overt message of "gays can do it too!" actually serve to reinforce that gays are something other than normal. Those stories do not change the perception that 'gays cannot' but rather reinforce it by providing the exception to the rule. [...] Baldwin refuses to let his novel be about gay men in love, and instead makes it about two people in love.

David implies that *Giovanni's Room* belongs outside the enclave of gay literature, in a broader category of fiction, and for him that is a good thing, because he argues that a discourse of difference, even when it seems celebratory, reinscribes marginalization and otherness. Readers who value universal applicability as a sign of great literature tend to see the designation "gay literature" as a "limiting" label, using rhetoric similar to Baldwin's own famous line that he did not want to be "merely a Negro writer." Readers express concern that labels limit the audience of a book that they believe everyone should read.

For example, Tosh Berman insists that the novel is “[n]ot only essential read for those who are into African-American literature or gay lit - but just great writing.” Jeffrey Keeten agrees, “Sure this book makes the list of best gay/lesbian books ever written, but it also makes the list of many BEST BOOKS ever written [...] To say this is a gay novel certainly is not an attempt to denigrate the book, but it does seem to limit the scope of the vision. [...] Every reader will find something of themselves in this book [...]” Cheryl explains her reasons for lauding the book’s universal applicability: David’s queerness represents but one way a person might feel alienated or confused. She writes that “David’s story of self-actualization is told in such a way that makes it relatable; to think of this vast world of ever-changing spectrum and to wonder wherein one can really find oneself.”

Rather than expressing concern about the difference between the author’s race and his characters’, many reviewers laud Baldwin’s universal appeal and colorblind approach to literature. For example, a user named Pink writes that

there was some controversy that Baldwin, a black male, was writing about white characters. Complaints came from all sides, whites thinking he had no right to talk for them and blacks thinking that he’d abandoned people of his own color. I think it’s great that Baldwin didn’t limit himself to only writing about the experiences of one race. He certainly didn’t shy away from tackling the issues of racism, neither in his writing or his activism, but that didn’t mean that every book had to confront these issues.

As Keeten argued about the “gay” label, Pink argues that a focus on race would “limit” Baldwin’s imagination. Most Goodreads reviewers do not talk about race in the book at all. Those who do often rationalize its purported whiteness by reading sexuality as an analogy for race. For example, one writes, “the need for gays to ‘pass’ as straight is revealed to be as much a corrupting a force as blacks [...] passing as white not so long ago.

And the phenomenon of internalized racism has its close parallel with the self's importation of society's disgust with same-sex relations over much of history" (Michael). Such comments echo liberal ideologies that flatten differences, suggesting that all identity categories are infinitely mappable onto each other. Readers are skeptical of a writer who distances himself from his identity, since the therapeutic paradigm dictates that, although art should appeal universally, it flows directly from and reveals intimate details about an artist's own experience.

Readers like having feelings. They like feeling transgressive and open-minded, but many also feel the need to come out as straight, perhaps because they assume that publicly posting a review of a "gay book" might be read as a different kind of coming out. In the middle of his review, Keeten says, apropos of very little, "I'm going to come out of the closet and say I'm a heterosexual male [...]." Another reader, Chrissie, writes, "Being straight myself, I am out on weak ground, and yet I feel I understand the characters [...]. They and I are both very different AND the same. This is remarkably well done. They are not foreign to me. I feel anger, attachment, compassion and understanding for them. [...] This is for me the best part of the book. [...] I think I understand homosexuality, bisexuality and even my own heterosexuality better" (Chrissie). Keeten and Chrissie readers underscore their difference from David and Giovanni, while also emphasizing how they related to the book anyway, how it expanded their understanding of sexuality. In the *New Yorker*, which circulates in some of the same literary publics who use Goodreads, Williams depicts *Giovanni's Room* as Baldwin's gay book, writing that the book "taught me, a black man who'd never really had to think about the subject before, to comprehend in the clearest

human terms the reality and naturalness of one man's love for another man." For him, the book serves as a complement to Baldwin's writing on race, which has more direct bearing on his own life as a straight black man.

JAMES BALDWIN AND THE ACADEMY

Many academics and educators note that Baldwin, Wright, and Ellison once made up the core African American twentieth-century canon, yet have been displaced.³¹ In 2015, literature professor Benjamin Anastas writes that he recently taught a seminar on Wright and Baldwin specifically because "I imagined it as a chance to revisit the work of two writers who loomed large in African American literature of the twentieth century but who had fallen, in recent years, out of favor and off of syllabi." Baldwin's history within canon and curriculum shed light on how the teaching of literature, and of race and sexuality, has changed over the decades, and reveals the effects of education reform. While one sort of canon is measured by scholarship and teaching on the college level, middle and high school reading lists also demonstrate and affect whether an author is deemed generally necessary for cultural literacy. Henry Louis Gates Jr. sums up Baldwin's place within today's educational landscape: "On one hand, he's on a U.S. postage stamp; on the other, he's not in the Common Core," Gates told *New York Times* reporter Felicia Lee, referring to the national K-12 education initiative. Lee suggests that Baldwin has fallen out of favor because his work is "too controversial and complex," because there are a limited number

³¹ Although this trio is now the most commonly mentioned when critics reference the "old" mid-twentieth-century African American literary canon, it's worth mentioning that, for example, the 1978 St. Martin's Press sourcebook *Black American Writers*, edited by Inge et. al., devotes its entire second volume to Wright, Ellison, Baldwin, and Amiri Baraka. Baraka falls out of this canon in later years, which demonstrates the way that the Black Arts Movement and Black Nationalism have been marginalized in literary scholarship and pedagogy.

of slots for black writers on syllabi, and because talking about LGBTQ identities and issues with minors is still controversial in many places.

Narratives of Baldwin's reception tend to depict his career as a dramatic trajectory: meteoric early rise, mid-career slump, posthumous recovery, and canonization. In the mid-2000s, McBride asserts that, "the critical legacy regarding Baldwin's work has been relatively sparse when viewed in proportion to his voluminous contribution to African American letters. This is not to say that Baldwin 'the man' has not been of great interest or that he has not often appeared in aphoristic ways" ("Straight" 73). McBride refers to Baldwin's central place in the LGBTQ pantheon, a field where Baldwin is sometimes the only person of color represented or mentioned and to the ways he is conversely tokenized in African American studies. McBride contends that "Baldwin was read in part because of his exceptionalism, aberrance, or difference from other black writers," which implicitly refers to Baldwin's intersectional black non-heteronormative identity and his ambivalent relationship to Christianity as well as the "complex ways" his characters embody race, sexuality, and class ("Straight" 74). The same qualities that might marginalize Baldwin within African American canon—or LGBTQ+ canon, for that matter—also make him stand out. Within LGBTQ literary syllabi and anthologies, Baldwin is often the sole black author, often the only non-white writer mentioned. In this sense, his name stands in for a whole excluded tradition.

The idea that Baldwin is both central and peripheral, representative and singular, has permeated Baldwin scholarship since its beginnings. For example, in the introduction to the 1974 volume *James Baldwin: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Kenneth Kinnamon summarizes the complexities of Baldwin's career so far when he writes that, "James Baldwin was too exceptional to be wholly the black spokesman that many whites took him to be" (1)—while Baldwin was received as a black spokesman by white audiences in the

early 1950s, black audiences saw how ambivalently he fit into that role. In one of the most recent books on Baldwin, *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin* (2014), Consuela Francis argues that Baldwin's reception history "has been equal parts critical devotion and critical neglect" (1). Although Baldwin is on most lists of great African American authors, Francis emphasizes his exclusion not from the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* itself, but from the teacher's guide for that anthology, and also from Manning Marable's anthology *Let Nobody Turn Us Around*, which purports to be a comprehensive collection of black political writings. These examples serve as Francis's proof that "Baldwin is both significant to our understanding of the African American literary tradition yet remains on the periphery of that tradition" (2). At first glance, it is hard not to be skeptical of such claims—don't critics always claim their subjects are neglected? And after all, what twentieth-century black author is more canonical than Baldwin? Yet Francis and McBride demonstrate that Baldwin receives more lip service than close reading, more popular acclaim than scholarly attention or classroom discussion, and that Baldwin the man may be iconic but his work is not exactly canonical. Their arguments further the centering of his work and thought, not just his name or image, in African American and queer canons, and in American letters and political discourse.

Scholars in both queer studies and African American studies utilize Baldwin to bridge the gap between the two disciplines. For example, the seminal 2005 anthology *Black Queer Studies*, edited by E. Patrick Johnson and Henderson, features three essays with Baldwin's name in their titles: Henderson's essay, which I previously discussed, along with "Straight Black Studies: On African American Studies, James Baldwin, and Black Queer Studies" by Dwight A. McBride, and "On Being a Witness: Passion, Pedagogy, and the Legacy of James Baldwin" by Maurice O. Wallace. Although other writers like Audre Lorde and Essex Hemphill are also referenced repeatedly in the text of the essays in this

anthology, no other author's name appears in more than one essay title. I began my own foray in Baldwin studies in 2005, when I wrote my undergraduate honors thesis. In my research in the college library and on JSTOR, I found a treasure trove of scholarly analyses of Baldwin's work. I wrote about all of his novels, but found more sources on *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country* than the others. It was comparatively difficult to find scholarly essays that paid sustained attention to *If Beale Street Could Talk* or *Just Above My Head*. The work on *Giovanni's Room*, however, was wide-ranging, incorporating many different theorists and perspectives. Most of these chapters and essays were written by black scholars, mostly women and gay men: Reid-Pharr, McBride, Ross, Henderson, Chancy, Yasmin DeGout, and Cyraina Johnson-Roullier. All of these critics read *Giovanni's Room* not just as a gay or queer novel, but also as a novel deeply concerned with race, nation, and gender, and with identity in the broadest sense possible. I came to Baldwin studies at a watershed moment: James Baldwin Now was still recent and the *Black Queer Studies* collection was brand new. LGBTQ+ perspectives on Baldwin seemed to be everywhere, and everyone seemed to be reading *Giovanni's Room*. The book was also being taught in a broad range of contexts, if my own experience reading it in an American Victorian literature course focused on the body is any indication. The number of books on Baldwin published in the past few years demonstrates continuing interest.³²

³² In 2014: Brim's *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination*, Francis's *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin, 1963-2010: "An Honest Man and a Good Writer"* along with a Melville House edition of *The Last Interview* and a reprint of Baldwin's *Jimmy's Blues*; in 2015: the *Cambridge Companion* edited by Elam, Field's *All Those Strangers: The Art and Lives of James Baldwin*, and a Library of America volume of Baldwin's later novels; and already in 2016: Edward Pavlić's *Who Can Afford to Improvise? : James Baldwin and Black Music, the Lyric and the Listeners*.

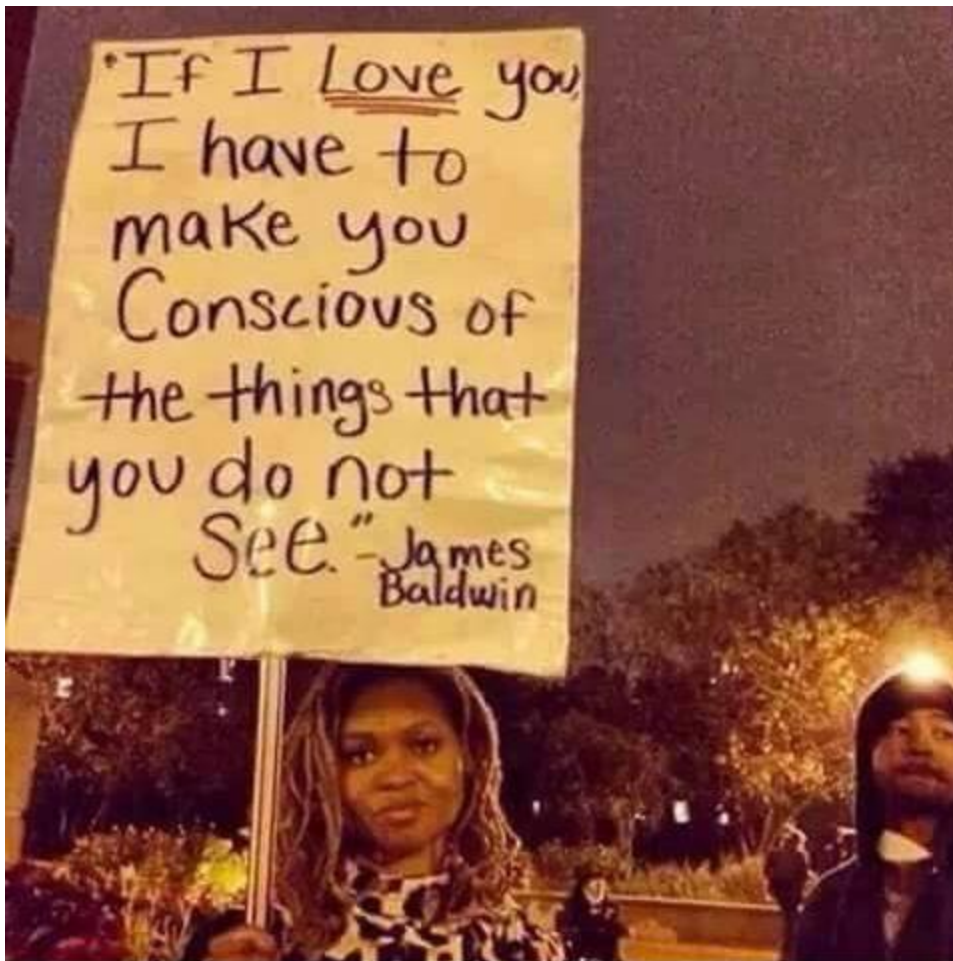
JAMES BALDWIN IN PUBLIC IN 2016

Williams, in his *New Yorker* essay, and Francis, in her recent study of Baldwin's reception, imply that Baldwin might have been forgotten by now, or regarded as a relic of the past, were it not for the cultural capital that his queerness affords him. Queerness combines with a strong reputation as a '60s-era Civil Rights icon and the accessibility of his rhetoric to make him an appealing icon for 2010s discourses around race, sexuality, and love. In addition to being a viral icon, Baldwin is also, as we have seen, still actually being read, and influencing a new generation of writers across races and sexual orientations. There is *something about* Baldwin that makes him and his work feel contemporary for many publics, and that makes readers feel an intimate connection with this dead author from the past.

To give just one example of Baldwin's virality in the contemporary moment: last year, Black Lives Matter activist Shaun King received hundreds of likes on Facebook when he shared a 1968 clip of Baldwin on *The Dick Cavett Show*. Inspired by King's post, Zeba Blay shared the same video on *Huffington Post*. Both posts caused the almost 50-year-old video to go viral in 2015. The interview becomes news all over again, and Baldwin circulates to an even larger audience. The internet has broadened access to culture, which is now not only constantly accessible but constantly recirculated. It is no longer necessary to go to a library or bookstore to find images of an author in a biography, or to catch a live broadcast of a talk show appearance or purchase a ticket to a film screening. Images and videos are only a click away on a phone or computer. As Williams puts it, "Like a black Joan Didion, or, to a lesser degree, Camus, his iconic image, with or without shareable quotes stripped of context, comes ready-made for Tumblr and Pinterest in a way that an image of, say, Ellison [...] does not." According to his logic, although Ralph Ellison may be a conventional point of literary reference for Baldwin (and not that Ellison is not,

actually, quite quotable), that sort of comparison belongs to a time when Baldwin's name was associated with canonical African American literature, taught in schools, referenced in the spaces of so-called high culture. Today, even an avid reader of paper books is just as likely, if not much more likely, to learn about authors' reputations and to find out about books to on social media, on blogs, or in online stores as in physical classrooms, libraries, or bookstores. Identities and associations matter more in this context, since author's name or image comes to stand in for all of the context that cannot fit into a Facebook meme, Tumblr post, Tweet, or Instagram photo. Increasingly, a reader or viewer is expected to always already know an author's reputation, associations, or to look them up herself.

Baldwin has become an icon, a brand, associated with literature but not bound to it. For example, in the literary world, the dust jacket of Ta-Nehisi Coates's best-selling memoir-polemic *Between the World and Me* (2015) features a testimonial from Toni Morrison, who says, "I've been wondering who might fill the intellectual void that plagued me after James Baldwin died. Clearly it is Ta-Nehisi Coates." Coates has acknowledged Baldwin's influence on the book, but Morrison's statement indelibly links Coates with Baldwin in the popular imagination, and positions both writers, through their association with each other and with Morrison, as leading African American public intellectuals, speaking embodied truth to power. Baldwin is also invoked in the title of the web presence *Son of Baldwin* maintained by the Brooklyn-based writer Robert Jones Jr. As Son of Baldwin, Jones shares news articles and radical, emotional commentary about police brutality, racism, homophobia, and gender with 71,000 followers on Facebook, 28,900 followers on Twitter, and an unknown number on Tumblr. The name Son of Baldwin immediately identifies Jones to audiences as black and gay. Baldwin has been cited by other activists affiliated with the Black Lives Matter movement.



— 1 month ago with 1553 notes
#jamesbaldwin

Figure 4: Tumblr post of Baldwin-inspired protest sign.

Some protestors even quote Baldwin on their signs, which are photographed and recirculate online. For example, one protestor at the Ferguson Action on October 12, 2014 quoted Baldwin's famous 1973 *Black Scholar* interview on her poster: "If I love you, I have to make you conscious of the things that you do not see" (pictured above).³³ The same

³³Another photograph of the sign was posted on a Wordpress blog, and appears to be original to that blog <https://patchworkperceptions.wordpress.com/>

image continues to recirculate and resurface on Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, and Pinterest. In December 2015, Tumblr user aintisnotaword reposted the photo in a post that has received over 1,500 notes indicating that the post was liked or reblogged. The sign's quotation resonates in the context of Michael Brown's death and the ongoing Black Lives Matter Movement. In its original context, Baldwin explains the role of the artist in society, which is "exactly the same ... as that of the lover." Like a good lover, an artist is there "not to give you answers, but to ask you questions" (Baldwin, "Black" 41). While Baldwin recognizes the broader social implications of art—"the people produce the artist ... [and] the artist also produces the people"—he frames the interaction between artist and audience as an intimate, one-on-one affective encounter that can, on a large scale, inspire social change (41). This message is echoed in the guiding principles of Black Lives Matter, which draws connections between structural racism and individual lives, addressing issues from policing to microaggressions. Black Lives Matter is a deeply intersectional movement that foregrounds the concerns and contributions of queer and trans black people as well as straight black men. Three women created the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter: Opal Tometi, Alicia Garza and Patrisse Cullors; the latter two identify as queer. The movement explicitly draws inspiration from black writers like Baldwin and Audre Lorde in its physical protests and its online social networks.³⁴ Lorde identified as a lesbian, and Baldwin is widely recognized as gay, bisexual, or queer. Both represent not only the intersectional nature of the Black Lives Matter movement, but also its focus on the everyday, emotional experience of difference and oppression, since both writers often focus on the interpersonal, emotional aspects of racism, sexism, and homophobia.³⁵

³⁴ See Garza and King for more in-depth discussion of the ideology and history of Black Lives Matter.

³⁵ While Lorde is perhaps most often remembered for "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," her essays on "The Uses of Anger" and "The Uses of the Erotic" are also often taught, as is her "autobiomythography" *Zami*.

Although Baldwin is associated with social critique, and *The Fire Next Time* is one of his most widely read works, he has become an icon not only of black rage, but also of black joy and black freedom. If you type in “James Baldwin” on Google Image Search or Tumblr, you won’t have to scroll too far to find photos of Baldwin dancing with Maya Angelou, laughing with Nina Simone, or smoking a cigarette in Paris. In a 2016 essay for BuzzFeed, writer Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah’s *BuzzFeed* describes how a visit to Baldwin’s old house in St. Paul de Vence, France enhances her understanding of Baldwin, reminding her that her deep love for Baldwin as a writer and as an icon has to do with the *joie de vivre* that he embodies, as well as his forceful rhetoric. Ghansah remembers how “after I got back from seeing his brown typewriter, I wrote down the word ‘joy’ and underlined it three times, like it was an obligation, a chore, something that I would have to find, if not fight for.” The colorful objects left behind in the now-uninhabited house embody Baldwin’s complexity and singularity, which remind her of the richness of black culture and the diversity of black experience. “In the 21st century, black history must shirk any oversimplification. What I unfortunately realized late in the game was that I had allowed myself to understand Baldwin through a series of abstractions, one that was principally based upon how strangers, outsiders, and gatekeepers had interpreted his life” (Ghansah). The complex, embodied Baldwin she discovers is an even more powerful role model for Ghansah, who reminds her that, “we must be brilliant and big enough to be ourselves. To have pink teacups and brown typewriters.”

Baldwin’s devotees do not just appreciate his work on a cerebral level, but feel a deep intimacy and recognition in his books and in their imagined versions of the man himself. In her introduction to the 2015 *Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin*, Michele Elam observes that “there is something poignantly different about the way people speak about Baldwin” (16). Elam explains that Baldwin’s reputation is different from other

famous authors': for fans, "he is not simply a canonical figure from the past [whose work] one 'should' read. Rather, he is profoundly transformational. Again and again, I heard [...] 'his works changed my life' [...] For so many, Baldwin is associated with coming of age—sexually, racially, politically, spiritually" (16).

In almost every scholarly work on Baldwin, and also in his own writings, his race is represented as central to his work and understanding of himself: the autobiographical reality of blackness motivates Baldwin's art, granting him the authority, in the eyes of white readers, to bear witness to the white supremacy and anti-blackness that structured U.S. culture, while connecting him deeply to black readers. Many African American writers mark their reading of Baldwin as a pivotal moment in their intellectual history. For example, Gates remembers the sea change that occurred when he added Baldwin to his commonplace book as an adolescent, a book that had previously only contained white, mostly European, authors "from H.H. Munro to H.G. Wells—I mean, some of the popular literature that we had on the shelves at home—to Dickens and Austen, to Hugo and de Maupassant" ("Master's" 20). He writes that "[f]inding James Baldwin and writing him down [in his commonplace book] at an Episcopal church camp during the Watts riots in 1965 (I was fifteen) probably determined the direction of my intellectual life more than did any other single factor" (Gates, "Master's" 21). In one of the first scholarly monographs on Baldwin, in 1973, Macebuh, a Nigerian journalist living and teaching in US, describes Baldwin as "one of those who guided me through the peculiar traumas of blackness" although he was also "the most difficult black writer in all the world" (vii). Both Gates and Macebuh describe an encounter of recognition that guided their own careers and understanding of themselves, because Baldwin expanded the public image of what a black man could be. Gates and Macebuh describe a connection not just with a text, but with a writer.

Benjamin Anastas and Douglas Field also emphasize that readers love James Baldwin as a *person*—the sense of the person they get from his writings, from photographs, and from his recorded speeches and television appearances. Anastas observes that, although the students in his Baldwin and Wright seminar claim to prefer Wright or more often agree with Wright's arguments and positions, Baldwin has a deeper stylistic and formal influence on their writing. There is something about Baldwin's writing style that invites readers in, perhaps because so much of his oeuvre is personal essays, because he constructs in those works particularly a vulnerable ethos, unafraid to both stand up for his beliefs and reveal his own inner conflicts. On the sentence level and in its emphasis on introspection, personal growth, empathy, and a tough, expansive kind of love (as evinced in the quotations from his *Black Scholar* interview), Baldwin's writing often echoes the Bible, black spirituals, and evangelical sermons. All of those religious genres make deeply emotional appeals, like much of Baldwin's writing.

Like Anastas, Field observes that “[r]eaders of Baldwin often have more affection for his life and work than those reading the works of Richard Wright or Ralph Ellison, two writers with whom he is frequently grouped” (1). It may be that readers simply have more of a sense of Baldwin's as a person than they do of Wright or Ellison, because they have seen more photographs or videos of him. Field chalks the preference for Baldwin up to personality: “On a simple level, given the choice, most people would rather spend an evening carousing with Baldwin than a more formal and cerebral evening with Wright or Ellison” (1). Field's statement conveys much about the images associated with the three writers: Baldwin the party boy, the lover, the raconteur, Wright and Ellison the serious, straight race men. While all three writers are represented as angry black men, Baldwin's effeminacy is often emphasized, tempering the anger, blackness, and maleness of his public image, and tapping into stereotypes of gay men as hedonistic and emotive. Queerness is

peculiarly connected to intimacy in contemporary US public discourse. Knowing that someone is LGBTQ+ sometimes makes them seem vulnerable or accessible partly because, under the paradigm of the closet, queer sexuality is still framed as a tragic secret, and the disclosure thereof, through actual coming out or through other performances of queerness, as a brave and intimate act.

Baldwin is also considered a sexy writer, which most authors of canonical literature about social issues are not. In 2016, the website Literary Hub (AKA LitHub) held their own highly competitive version of March Madness: an online tournament to find the best literary sex scenes as evaluated by a panel of writers. In the final rounds, Philip Roth squared off with Jeanette Winterson and D.H. Lawrence with James Baldwin. The straight men lost those match-ups, and the final round pitted a passage from Winterson's *Written on the Body* against the scene from *Giovanni's Room* where a teenage David spends the night with his friend Joey. Baldwin ended up winning. One of the judges, the poet John Ashbery, explains Baldwin's win in terms of authenticity: he "writes of 'just things as they happen', 'another person's body, [...] another person's smell'. In other words, chances are this really happened" (Literary Hub). Although this book is fiction, readers want to feel as if it actually happened, and as if the fictional text connects them to a real person.

Woodson, who connects with Baldwin across the axes of race and sexuality, describes the physicality of her admiration for Baldwin. She read his work, particularly *Giovanni's Room*, as a young black lesbian writer and was inspired to learn about Baldwin the man—specifically, Baldwin the body, his image, his gestures, his voice:

I knew well the gapped-toothed smile sometimes veiled over by cigarette smoke. I knew the eternal cigarette dangling almost absently between his fore and middle finger. I knew the head thrown back in laughter, the deeply furrowed brow, the rage behind the poetically nuanced answers he gave to deeply uninformed questions about race, economic class, sexuality. (Woodson)

Woodson's image of Baldwin echoes the joy, freedom, and singularity of Ghansah's, and both women, like Gates and Macebuh, see Baldwin as a guide for living.

CONCLUSION: STUDYING AND TEACHING BALDWIN IN THE "QUEER-INFLECTED MOOD OF THE BLACK LIVES MATTER ERA NOW"

Many 2000s and 2010s scholars align Baldwin with the word "queer." They usually acknowledge that Baldwin himself rejected and questioned terms like "homosexual," "bisexual," and "gay," but not that Baldwin never referred to himself as queer or explicitly aligned himself with the position attached to queerness in our present moment. Scholars also do not often acknowledge that queer is a reclaimed slur that still carries violent homophobic baggage for many LGBTQ+ people. In many cases, the use of the word "queer" elides more a specific identification that may be difficult to make with certainty. Many people on social media today identify Baldwin as bisexual, though it is more common to see him considered a gay writer. Since he regularly used neither of these terms, both are up for grabs, and both are more or less included in "queer." Because "queer" also has a philosophical, theoretical meaning, calling a writer queer, in an academic context, is not the same as calling them gay or bisexual. It does not have the same explicit connection to their sexual identity or sexual practices. Yet tracking literary critics' and scholars' actual use of the word "queer" in relation to Baldwin reveals that, even within a discipline focused on the minutia of diction and syntax, we often obfuscate when we most intend to be precise. Douglas Field, one of the founding editors of the *James Baldwin Review*,³⁶ explains his use of the term in *All Those Strangers* (2015): "By using the term 'queer,' my aim is to signal that Baldwin's writing disrupts and calls into question the rigid categories that he found so

³⁶ The *James Baldwin Review*, edited by Field, McBride, and Justin Joyce, is an open-access online journal that published its first issue in 2015.

stifling, rather than suggesting his sexual orientation or preference. In other words, I use the term ‘queer’ in relation to Baldwin as a radical dis-position through which a deep examination of his work may take place” (10). Field claims that the term “queer” is more a political or philosophical alignment than an identity marker, and also that he uses it to refer more to the cultural work that Baldwin’s writing does than to the cultural identity of its author. It is one thing to state that an author’s work performs a radical disruption of identity, but it is another to describe it using a word that might ambiguously identify the texts or their author, a word that author did not regularly use to describe himself or his work.

In *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination* (2014), Matt Brim describes the write as “a black queer male writer,” “the central figure in black gay literature,” “a standard-bearer for queer culture” and “a totem figure for [the] notoriously rowdy discipline” of queer theory, yet a “surprisingly untroubled queer signifier” (1). Noting the lip service paid to Baldwin as a queer icon, Brim generalizes that “indeed, one almost inevitably passes through Baldwin in the queer academy” (22). Brim differentiates gay literature from queer culture, queer theory, and the queer academy implies that gay literature might be a broad category that includes writers from a variety of political positions, while “queer” connotes anti-normativity and social critique. In this context, when he identifies Baldwin as a “black queer male writer,” he seems to align Baldwin the man with queer culture, queer theory, and the queer academy, but he may also just indicate the ambiguity of Baldwin’s sexual orientation. Throughout the book, Brim emphasizes that for many scholars, ‘queer’ necessarily includes race, along with sexuality, gender, and class, as a category of analysis, rather than “foreclosing” those categories or “recentering whiteness” (20). Still, queer as a category of cultural analysis has historically tended to elide, supersede, or even erase race, and Brim himself argues that “many scholars and cultural arbiters have ‘known’ Baldwin

only by deferring [...] racial/sexual knowledge, holding it at bay, making it someone else's problem" (9). Yet Brim acknowledges that "black" isn't in his own book's title, although "queer" is. Within the book's chapters, though, Brim offers multiple interpretations of the same text, comparing queer analyses to readings performed through other lenses. For example, in his chapter on *Giovanni's Room*, Brim reads it as a gay novel, a queer novel, and a trans novel. Brim's argument is that queer, gay, and trans readings of the book are all available and valid, but that switching between the three makes you recognize the productive friction between those categories. The queer reading of the book, that identity (in particular gender and sexual identity) is too complex to be contained by labels, contrasts Brim's initial understanding of David as simply gay, which he argues is also valid. As Brim puts it, "we do not need to queer David to liberate him" (75). He makes the case for a trans reading by examining David's struggle with gender and his body in the novel, and his encounters with gender nonconforming people. Through this argument, Brim reveals that queer studies often conflates gender and sexual orientation, usually by ignoring or erasing trans-ness and trans people, since even though a trans reading is available in the text, most critics do not see a possibly trans character in *Giovanni's Room*, although they do see a possibly gay or possibly queer character. By offering multiple readings of the same novel, Brim does not limit himself or other readers to one category or lens for Baldwin's texts, instead demonstrating that thinking about a book or an author in multiple contradictory ways at once can be quite productive.

Some other recent critics further the argument that Baldwin's work disrupts identity, but use their language more advisedly, avoiding the use of "queer" as a blanket term while acknowledging same-gender desire, sexuality, and attachments in Baldwin's life. Such a critical move requires precision and radical specificity. For example, neither the word "queer" nor the word "gay" appears in the table of contents for the brand new

2015 *Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin*. In her introduction, Michele Elam refers to Baldwin's "homosexuality" and flags the "complicated legacy of Baldwin's work for queer studies" (11-12). Her precise language separates Baldwin and his work from these labels, while not ignoring or erasing his sexuality. The one essay in the book that focuses on *Giovanni's Room* is Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman's "'As Though a Metaphor Were Tangible': Baldwin's Identities." Abdur-Rahman is interested in the ways Baldwin "politicize[s] identity" in general and she states from the outset that her reading "combin[es] a critical race and queer analytical framework" (166, 165). When describing the events and significance of the novel, Abdur-Rahman uses specific language that straightforwardly and specifically denotes "romance between men," "sexual variance," or David's homosexuality rather than categorizing Baldwin or the book (166). Similarly, in his essay on James Baldwin for the Wiley-Blackwell *Companion to African American Literature*, Guy Mark Foster refers to Baldwin as "both an African American and sexually different" (395). "Sexually different," like "queer," is at once a capacious term and a vague one. Foster goes on to explain his choice of diction, arguing that "the identity labels 'homosexual' and 'gay' are simply too reductive to use when referring to this author and his writings" (395). In both the *Cambridge Companion* and the Wiley-Blackwell *Companion*, scholars do not to call Baldwin or his work queer, but frame them within queer studies and within ongoing debates about whether to regard LGBTQ+ identities as fixed, knowable identities. Together with Brim, they demonstrate a novel approach LGBTQ+ writers and texts, making their own lenses transparent and performing radical specificity and undecidability on the sentence level.

In my own experience teaching *Giovanni's Room* in Gay and Lesbian Literature courses, the book still resonates deeply with young LGBTQ-identified people (and self-identified straight students as well). At least in Texas, the book's angst doesn't seem dated.

My students are quick to identify *Giovanni's Room* both as a gay novel and as queer literature. Recently, I have had multiple students argue that we should read Giovanni and/or David as bisexual, rather than gay, or that we shouldn't label characters in ways they didn't label themselves. My students are usually confused when they find out Baldwin is black and do not know whether we should even talk about race in relation to the book. Given the limitations of the lower-level literature courses I've taught, I am hesitant to assign Baldwin's longer novels, although I would love to teach *Another Country* or *Just Above My Head*, texts that address black queerness more directly. When teaching *Giovanni's Room*, I reference this reception history, and with Baldwin's biography in the classroom in order keep categories like gay literature dynamic and open. The complexity of Baldwin's writing lends itself naturally to this kind of pedagogy.

Chapter 4: “Visions of a Nutty America”: Legends of *Two Serious Ladies*

I began Chapter 1 with an anecdote that I’d like to return to now: a moment in the question and answer portion of a reading at a bookstore, when a visiting author recommended the novel *Two Serious Ladies* and remarked that its author, Jane Bowles, and her husband, fellow writer Paul Bowles, were “both gay.” A single categorizing identifier, like the (in this case) gender-neutral “gay,” stands in for a whole set of unspoken intensities and assurances that can make readers feel as if we already know something about the person so identified, and if we are queer readers, to feel, perhaps, the possibility of a more intimate experience of recognition. The person doing the categorizing hopes that her brief description of the book and author will compel at least a few audience members to seek them out later, perhaps recommend them to others. The categorization of *Two Serious Ladies* as a book by a gay author might be an attempt to set the book apart from stodgy, prudish old midcentury novels by straight people; might suggest that the book is edgier or more liberal than its 1943 publication date suggests; might entice readers looking to diversify their bookshelves or participate in a literary recovery project. In addition to one author’s sexual orientation, in this example, we receive another tantalizing tidbit of information: that Jane Bowles, a “gay” writer, was married to another “gay” writer, which suggests that the Bowles marriage was unconventional, if not a complete sham, and might make readers assume that the Bowleses were tragic closet cases or that they had scandalous extramarital affairs. In the context of an off-the-cuff recommendation, such information might be intended as a gossipy footnote. Regardless of intention, the identifier sticks. One can imagine an audience member later approaching a bookseller and asking for “that book by the lesbian writer who was married to the gay guy.” For those who read the book, biographical snippets like “gay” and “married to Paul Bowles” become part of a set of

enabling conditions for interpretation, opening up possibilities that might not be obvious from the text itself.³⁷ Knowing that Jane Bowles “was gay” and was married to a male writer who was arguably much more successful and productive (and also “gay”) offers readers a set of lenses through which to read the book, a set of categories to fit it into: mid-century lesbian literature, queer underground literature, the literature of women writing under a repressive form of early-twentieth-century heteropatriarchy.

In 1999, Jennie Skerl surveys the “three interrelated legends” that have come to define Jane Bowles’s legacy: “the bohemian legend of artistic genius, the legend of self-destruction, and the legend of the glamorous couple” (Skerl, “Legend” 262). Each of these legends is deeply gendered, often intimately tied to representations of Bowles’ (and her husband’s) sexuality. Even when her writing is mentioned, her biography tends to draw more attention. The widely-agreed upon facts of Jane Bowles’s life and literary career are these. She was born Jane Auer in New York in 1917 and grew up in a secular Jewish family. She was disabled as a teenager by tuberculosis of the knee and spent time recuperating in Europe. Most of her romantic and sexual relationships were with women and she used the word ‘lesbian’ to describe herself, often self-deprecatingly (many sources report that Bowles occasionally referred to herself as “Crippie the Kike Dyke”). However, in 1938, she married the writer and composer Paul Bowles, who would become famous for his 1949 novel *The Sheltering Sky*. The Bowleses mostly lived outside the US, mainly in Tangier. Jane had a stroke at the age of forty, probably due to her alcoholism. She published one novel, *Two Serious Ladies*, in 1943, and one play, *In the Summer House*, first produced in 1953. Her collected works were first published in a single volume in 1966 with an

³⁷ The term comes to me from Carolyn Allen. Allen uses Katherine Cummings’ definition of “enabling conditions” for sexualities as “the set of available discourses, contemporary events, communal norms, institutional context, and other sociohistorical factors which make it possible for a sexual representation to appear when, where, and in the form that it does” (qtd. in Allen, “Narrative” 36n). Allen categorizes the idea as “Foucauldian.”

introduction by Truman Capote. She died in Spain in 1973 and was buried in an unmarked grave in Malaga. Since that time, her work has fallen in and out of print.

This chapter traces Bowles's legacy as it relates to the reception history of *Two Serious Ladies*, the most often read and mentioned of her works. *Two Serious Ladies* tells the only-slightly-related stories of two acquaintances, Christina Goering and Frieda Copperfield. From an early age, Miss Goering is eccentric and obsessed with religion. She inherits her family's estate, but sells it in order to "live in some more tawdry place" (28), moving to the wilds of what most readers believe to be Staten Island with her lady companion Miss Gamelon, Arnold (a man who once tried to pick her up at a party), and Arnold's elderly father. When this proves too domestic, Miss Goering takes a ferry to a seedier town, where she meets a variety of odd characters at the local bar, moving in with one man, Andy, until an even more sinister man, Ben, mistakes her for a prostitute and invites her to go for a drive. Meanwhile, Mrs. Copperfield travels with her husband to Panama, a place she finds overwhelming until she meets a young prostitute named Pacifica, with whom she becomes infatuated. Eventually, she and her husband part ways, and Mrs. Copperfield brings Pacifica back to New York. In the novel's final scene, Miss Goering invites Mrs. Copperfield to a hotel bar, where Mrs. Copperfield drinks to excess and declares that she has "gone to pieces [...] a thing I have wanted to do for years," while Miss Goering contemplates her own proximity to sainthood (197).

As far as it is possible to tell from print sources, *Two Serious Ladies* was not passed around among LGBTQ+ readers in the mid-twentieth century the way *Nightwood* and *Giovanni's Room* were, as texts that offered an experience of queer recognition. *Two Serious Ladies* seems not to have been passed around by much of anyone, except those who considered themselves seriously literary. Its reception history has followed a more idiosyncratic path, based on the vicissitudes of publishing and on the interest of particular

researchers, with watershed moments in the publication of Bowles's collected works in the 1960s and of Millicent Dillon's Bowles biography *A Little Original Sin* in the early 1980s; on the value of its underground cultural capital and associations (particularly the cachet of mainstream gay icons like Truman Capote); the reading public's desire to recover or discover weird non-normative cult classics from the past; particularly, the desire of feminist women readers and writers who are sometimes straight and sometimes not.

Even if Bowles is considered a lesbian, bisexual, or queer author, *Two Serious Ladies* is not central to lesbian or gay canons the way *Nightwood* and *Giovanni's Room* are. Its name has not become code for lesbianism or queerness. *Two Serious Ladies* is still emergent in a way the other two books could not be said to be, although their reception has changed and grown over the years. The history of *Two Serious Ladies* is, to recall Jordan Alexander Stein's description of queer literary history, "organized around slow, recursive, and minor temporalities, where publication is less an event than a condition of access, where readership is not contemporary with publication but at some remove, and where a single author's lifetimes straddles different emergent and residual possibilities for voluntary social affiliation" (864, 863). The voluntary nature of such affiliation is demonstrated by the various uses to which Bowles's life and work has been put; the importance of certain affiliations (from woman to lesbian to underground) is demonstrated by the persistence with which *Two Serious Ladies* emerges and re-emerges. This book's reception history parallels the lives of other cult novels of the early twentieth century, particularly those by women. Advocates tend to lead with Bowles's gender, her sad decline, perhaps including her sexual orientation as a salacious footnote. The ways critics discuss—or avoid—Bowles's attraction and attachments to women demonstrate persistent confusion about how to discuss LGB people of the past; persistent discomfort with bisexuality; a persistent sense that an erotic orientation toward women complicates conventional feminist

narratives about women artists; a persistent desire to take refuge in the all-encompassing, equal-opportunity term queer to ambiguously describe any and all non-normative lifestyle and/or literary style.

Jauss argues that a literary work “can continue to have an effect only if future generations still respond to it or rediscover it—if there are readers who take up the work of the past again or authors who want to imitate, outdo, or refute it” (11), yet a reception history like that of *Two Serious Ladies* demonstrates that many readers feel compelled not to imitate, outdo, or refute in their own writing but to simply recirculate the historical literary work, to restage the moment of its reception. The history of *Two Serious Ladies* is not a series of phases or periods like those I constructed for *Nightwood* and *Giovanni’s Room*. Both *Nightwood* and *Giovanni’s Room* circulated widely in the time between their publication and the institutionalization of gay literature circa Stonewall. They were part of a corpus of texts that constructed the midcentury gay and lesbian counterpublics that would create gay and lesbian bookstores and gay and lesbian literature courses in the 1970s and ‘80s. These texts established the conditions for their own reception: defining what that genre or category of gay literature is, they are still compared to it, read against it. Because *Two Serious Ladies* spent much of time between the 1940s and the 1980s in relative obscurity, it was not swept into gay canon in the 1970s or into queer canon in the 1990s, although it did receive scholarly attention when women’s studies and queer studies became institutionalized.

The reception history of *Two Serious Ladies* comprises a tangle of divergent threads that weave together in its twenty-first-century reception, demonstrating the reading public’s desire to find new, weird books and to fit them into pre-existing categories like “forgotten literary wives” or “lesbian modernism.” Its strangeness separates *Two Serious Ladies* from less ambiguous representations of women and LGBTQ+ characters. Mid-

twentieth-century readers could interpret *Nightwood* and *Giovanni's Room* as grotesque cautionary tales about the dangers of the homosexual lifestyle or as tragic fables about the struggles of LGB people against the evils of homophobia, because characters in *Nightwood* refer to themselves and each other as inverters and those in *Giovanni's Room* struggle internally with their sexuality. However, even if you definitively read Mrs. Copperfield's relationship with Pacifica as sexual and Miss Goering's relationship with Miss Gamelon as a Boston marriage, neither character is portrayed as a lesbian or bisexual type. Both have ambiguously romantic or sexual relationships with men as well: Mrs. Copperfield's rejection of her husband appears to have less to do with sexual proclivities than with her anxiety about travel; Miss Goering shacks up with Andy more as a challenge to herself than out of sexual desire. Both ladies' motivations throughout the novel are somewhat inscrutable, and it is difficult to slot them into types or categories. Even when they have sexual or romantic attachments, the narrator and the characters themselves often suggest that this is more a bizarre plan that they've chosen to commit to than any reflection of their deep character or desire. More than one critic over the course of the book's seventy-year lifespan has suggested that the sexuality in the book is not really that sexual; but most critics emphasize the gender politics of the book.

This chapter in particular is shaped around absences: lacunae in archives, the problematic of print sources, and an awareness that many unrecorded readings must have occurred synchronously with the sources I cite and in the silences between them. While at times I speculate about who might have been reading a book and how they might have been reading it, I want to flag the unknowability of those readings as I focus on more mainstream, public, accessible responses. I begin with the book's first reviews in the early 1940s, when most reviewers were confused and irritated by it. I then follow several different threads of discourse in the reception history of *Two Serious Ladies*, each of which

is evident throughout reviews and criticism on Bowles and the book since its republication in her *Collected Works* in 1966. Mainstream media responses to the *Collected Works* suggest that there was a small but mighty reading public that had heard of Jane and Paul Bowles. Jane's death in 1973 and another edition of her collected works, published in 1978 as *My Sister's Hand in Mine* kept interest alive throughout the decade. In 1981, the definitive biography of Jane Bowles, Dillon's *A Little Original Sin* appeared, drawing even more attention to the writer and her work. Throughout these events, I follow three related but distinct threads of reception, all of which are very much still in play in 2016. The first is the narrative of the underground or cult novel, part of a discourse that downplays the specificities of gender and sexuality to emphasize the book's other countercultural qualities. The second is the narrative of feminist recovery, played out in academic publics and in popular literary and feminist publics. Feminist recovery projects put books back into circulation, while representing the writer's life and historical context as integral to her work and foregrounding work she did not write or could not complete. The narrative of the feminist recovery of *Two Serious Ladies* includes arguments about whether the book is gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer, but feminist readings tend to privilege gender over sexuality as a categorization or interpretive method. The third strand of narrative about *Two Serious Ladies* might be considered a synthesis of the underground and feminist recovery narratives in its valorization of the book's radical queerness, which is related but not limited to its representations of sexuality and to its narrative strangeness. This model of reception treats certain texts as *sui generis*. In this version of the book's history, the text doesn't need to be recovered because it has always been available to those who would read it. The encounter between the radically queer text and its ideal reader activates a kind of individual recognition, not based precisely on any axis of identification or affiliation with a community but on the uncanny, magical singularity of the strange. While identity-based

literary recovery and recirculation projects are both productive and limiting, I argue, queer feminist reading practices have allowed *Two Serious Ladies* to emerge in all its complexity in the twenty-first century.

1943 REVIEWS OF *TWO SERIOUS LADIES*

Published by Knopf in late spring 1943, *Two Serious Ladies* was reviewed in several mainstream publications. Responses were mixed. Those who rejected it used the discourse of pretentious modernism similar to that with which their colleagues had rejected *Nightwood* half a decade before, while those who saw potential in *Two Serious Ladies* read it as a psychological case study. The latter group was more likely to acknowledge lesbianism in the book. Both sets of reviewers used realism as the metric for evaluating the book.

Two female reviewers, Katherine Gauss Jackson for *Harper's* and Edith H. Walton for the *New York Times*, accuse *Two Serious Ladies* of having too much wit and not enough heart. Both implicitly align the reviewer with the “naïve” majority of humanity, against the pretentious literati. Jackson quotes the book’s jacket, which states that Bowles “has stripped from her curious characters all artfulness and guile, all that passes for manners, and, above all, all inhibitions” (188). She asserts that, for most readers, this freedom will not be a selling point: “To be among people who are stripped of their inhibitions tends to be at best only faintly and momentarily amusing, as the old pie-throwing comedies used to be. It is much more apt to be embarrassing and distressing if one cares at all for the human race” (Jackson 188). Jackson follows many of the models we’ve seen in reviews of other unconventional fiction: she praises the “brilliant writing” of the book, but considers the book overall to be “contrived” and unrealistic, although she

does this self-deprecatingly, calling herself a “naive reader.” Jackson positions herself among common readers who “care for the human race,” against literary elites who write jacket copy. She admits that the book is “not, for me, the ‘gorgeously funny’ book it is supposed to be.” That “supposed to be” represents the judgments of the literati, who value such modernist wit over realistic character and psychological depth. Such positioning is still performed by readers in the 2010s. One Goodreads user, Denise Kruse, writes in 2016, “Not for me. I’m not ‘cool’ and don’t value a book that shocks. [...]” Her review seems defensive at first, but the use of the word “cool” in scare quotes suggests that literary hipsters might just be pretending to like this book to gain social capital. Another Goodreads user, Tony, writes in 2016, “I’m sure the cultists got much more out of this than I did. [...] There’s a feeling here of experimentation, for experimentation’s sake. (You could read this as allegory, but you should be ashamed of yourself if you did so.)” (Tony). Like Jackson and Kruse, he moves from defensively positioning himself against the “cultists,” whoever they are, to defensively calling out his audience using the second person, drawing a clear line between acceptable and unacceptable (“shameful”) reading practices.

In the *New York Times* in 1943, Walton’s tone is less moralistic, but no less dismissive, than Jackson’s, Kruses’s, and Tony’s. Like Jackson, Walton appreciates Bowles’s cleverness and verbal skill at times, but concludes that “‘Two Serious Ladies’ is intermittently funny and certainly original, but I also felt that it all too often is just merely silly” (BR14). Walton’s main complaint is confusion: “[...] it is not often that one comes across a novel that makes as little sense as this one,” she writes. “To attempt to unravel the plot [...] would be to risk, I feel sure, one’s own sanity” (BR14). Readers throughout *Two Serious Ladies*’ history have made similar judgments. It is not always clear exactly why they are confused. In many ways, *Two Serious Ladies* fits the genre of the realist novel: the plot follows a linear timeline, the narration reads like conventional free indirect discourse,

and the characters and settings are clearly described. However, the motivations behind the titular ladies' actions and choices are indecipherable, and their dialogue often feels bizarre, full of non-sequiturs and abstract, religious language. Bowles's experimentation is not like Stein's, Joyce's, Woolf's, or Barnes's. That is, *Two Serious Ladies* would not be seen by most readers as experimental in its temporality, language, genre, or metaphor; rather, Bowles stages social and psychological experiments with her characters. Many readers, Jackson and Walton included, find this more jarring than they might other kinds of experimentation. Walton attributes her confusion to the author's mental state, asserting that, "My feeling is that Mrs. Bowles has developed—and exploited—her own brand of lunacy" (BR14). Walton does not acknowledge that certain women characters' relationships might be sexual, though she mentions that Miss Goering "is companioned by the sinister Miss Gamelon." However, Walton's insistent use of the language of deviance—Mrs. Copperfield has "a weird set of friends," the characters all display "bizarre aberrations" and "eccentricities"—might flag the book for queer readers in the 1940s.³⁸

Other 1943 reviewers also vaguely imply that the book has LGB content. In *Book Week*, George Freitag describes *Two Serious Ladies* as a "truly psychological novel, a continuation of where *The Well of Loneliness* left off, a little masterpiece of character analysis" (qtd. in Allen, "Narrative" 21). The comparison is not made in terms of sexual orientations, but rather in terms of genre. *The Well of Loneliness* itself was explicitly presented as a character study, with its preface by sexologist Havelock Ellis. Such a presentation demonstrates the overlap between the genres of the modernist novel and the

³⁸ To those close to Bowles, the book's lesbian content was all too obvious. According to Dillon, Jane's lover Helvetia Perkins, to whom *Two Serious Ladies* is dedicated, "didn't approve of the book, Paul remembers. She thought it was too obviously lesbian. So did Jane's family and Paul's family" (111). Jane's mother said to Paul "I'm not proud of my little daughter. But maybe she'll do better next time" (qtd. in Dillon 111). Paul himself "admired the book enormously" though he felt that Jane "made me out to be a complete idiot in it" (qtd. in Dillon 112).

psychological case study: novels were seen as a useful addition to psychology and vice versa. Comparing the book to case studies rather than realist novels allows for flexibility in terms of its believability. Because character studies and case studies usually focus on unusual or deviant individuals, it is not as imperative that they make sense to average readers or that those readers should identify with them. N.L. Rothman in the *Saturday Review* goes further, calling *Two Serious Ladies* “a kind of psychotherapy acted out in fable” (qtd. in Allen, “Narrative” 21). In Rothman’s formulation, the book is not just a case study of a character, but perhaps an act of therapy for the writer. Both therapy and fables rely on imaginative associations and affective responses. When they do try to contextualize the book in literary history, reviewers’ points of comparison are disparate. Freitag favorably categorizes *Two Serious Ladies* next to *The Well of Loneliness* as an ambiguously lesbian psychological novel, a comparison based ostensibly on genre but perhaps also on sexuality. Walton, on the other hand, focuses on the book’s oddness and “gingerly” compares Bowles’s writing to that of Ronald Firbank, Carl Van Vechten, and William Saroyan—though Bowles is “nowhere near so witty” as these male writers—and to “the lost days of Dada,” connecting it to the absurdity of that short-lived artistic movement (Walton BR14). Most critics, however, struggle to place Bowles in any literary context, more often praising or damning the book because of its perceived uniqueness.

“UP FROM UNDERGROUND”: *TWO SERIOUS LADIES* IN THE SIXTIES

The qualities that caused some reviewers to reject *Two Serious Ladies* in 1943 compel others to regard it as an underground classic twenty years later. In 1966, the book was reprinted in the Farrar, Straus and Giroux edition of Jane Bowles’s *Collected Works*,³⁹

³⁹ I’ve found little detailed information on how FSG came to publish the *Collected Works*. In her biography, Dillon doesn’t delve much into the business of publishing, but notes that “Early in the spring of

a thick hardcover volume with a red and pink dust jacket and an introduction by Truman Capote.⁴⁰ The definitive review of the *Collected Works* was a long piece by the poet John Ashbery, published in the *New York Times Book Review* under the headline “Up from the Underground.” Ashbery’s review, among others, situates Bowles in a literary underground and calls her a “writer’s writer’s writer,” suggesting that Bowles’s name and work had circulated within some literary circles in the decades between 1943 and 1966.

While for some readers, an underground reputation is a selling point, such a reputation makes others immediately skeptical. Reviewing the book for the liberal Catholic journal *Commonweal*, Geoffrey Wagner sneers that, “blurbs about ‘an underground reputation’ usually euphemize minor talents [...]” (494). He implies that the reputation itself, not the quality of the text, is the reason for the book’s reprinting. Wagner introduces Bowles through her relationship with Paul: “Married to a writer of existential thrillers, who enjoyed a vogue in the fifties, Jane Bowles ‘has written a great deal,’ we are told, ‘and offered only a part of it for publication’” (493). In 1943, Paul Bowles was known as a composer and music critic, but not as a writer, and his name does not come up in the first reviews of his wife’s work. However, almost no article on Jane Bowles published after the 1950s exists without some reference to Paul. Even before he has mentioned Jane herself, Wagner has alerted his readers with buzzwords linking the Bowleses to a philosophical movement (existentialism) and a literary genre (the thriller), both of which, presumably, were in “vogue” a decade ago but are not anymore. While others represent Jane Bowles’s

1966, Jane received a letter from Farrar, Straus, and Giroux” offering to publish her collected works, and that summer Jane sailed to New York to meet with her editor, Harold “Hal” Vursell (Dillon 371-2). Vursell was famous at FSG for shepherding queer works by queer Francophone writers, like Marguerite Yourcenar’s *Memoirs of Hadrian* and “the entire oeuvre of Colette” (Kachka 60-1). Vursell was openly gay himself, described by FSG chronicler Boris Kachka as “natty, catty Hal Vursell (who looked a little like John Waters)” (147).

⁴⁰ 1966 might be the peak of Capote’s celebrity, since in January, the book version of *In Cold Blood* was published, and in November he hosted “the party of the century,” his famous Black and White Ball, held at the Plaza Hotel in honor of *Washington Post* publisher Katherine Graham.

short list of publications as a tragedy, Wagner uses this information to suggest that Bowles's previous obscurity is the reason for her current underground reputation. He does not hesitate to evaluate *Two Serious Ladies* as "incredibly bad" (Wagner 493). Where others praise the book's uniqueness, Wagner complains that, "Since the book is about nothing, few norms can be applied to it, except that of a self-conscious naivete reeking of the rue du Bac and unclean underwear spilling out of Louis Seize commodes, the sort of thing written on the left bank thirty years ago and at places like the Yaddo and McDowell colonies now" (494). In rejecting this one book, Wagner casts aspersions on almost all of contemporary literature, while suggesting that *Two Serious Ladies* is in a class of badness all its own. Wagner even includes what might be read as coded lesbophobia and homophobia, quoting Capote's description of "'that modern legend named Jane Bowles' with her 'cropped curly hair' and 'boyish clothes'" and ending his review by classifying all of Bowles's work as "fairy stories in all senses of the word" (494). We may infer that some of the related senses of "fairy stories" might include "fanciful childish whims" and "homosexual nonsense"—in either case, apparently not the kinds of stories that comprise good, serious literature in Wagner's estimation. If Wagner's vague use of "fairy" carries the connotation "homosexual" for readers (and it undoubtedly would in the 1960s, especially appearing that close to the word "Capote"), it might ambiguously describe Bowles, her characters, or the style of the writing.

In the flurry of reviews and interviews published in the wake of her *Collected Works*, no one directly states that Bowles's reputation in literary circles is, in fact, a reputation particularly in gay literary circles. Ashbery implicitly acknowledges that he is one of several gay male writers to praise her work publicly: "With the present publication of her 'collected works,' which comes with an introduction by Truman Capote and blurbs by Tennessee Williams ('my favorite book') [...] and others, Jane Bowles has at last

surfaced” (BR5). He famously states that, “Jane Bowles is a writer’s writer’s writer. Few literary reputations are as glamorous as the underground one she has enjoyed since her novel ‘Two Serious Ladies’ was published in 1943. The extreme rarity of the book, once it went out of print, has augmented its legend” (Ashbery BR5). However, Ashbery asserts, “[...] she is not quite the sort of writer that her imposing list of Establishment admirers seems to suggest” (BR5). He considers Capote, Williams, and the English novelist Alan Sillitoe as Establishment. Certainly, they were in the sense that they had a lot of literary clout. They were public and popular enough not to also be regarded as underground, figures of culture proper and not just subculture, yet they are not entirely “Establishment” in the sense of “square.” Part of Ashbery’s point is that Jane’s work is still weird in relation to these better-known and better-selling writers: “Her work is unrelated to theirs, and in fact it stands alone in contemporary literature, though if one can imagine [Chicago humor columnist] George Ade and Kafka collaborating on a modern version of Bunyan’s ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’ one will have a faint idea of the qualities of ‘Two Serious Ladies’” (BR5). Some of what differentiates Bowles has to do with gender, too, with Bowles’s focus on “nervous, domineering women given to ruthless but inaccurate self-analysis” (Ashbery BR5). Her work may be odd and singular, but, Ashbery argues, it is not unrealistic. Quite the opposite—in her weirdness, Bowles offers “visions of a nutty America that we have to recognize as ours” (BR30). Ashbery praises Bowles’s entire oeuvre for just this quality of strange, singular truthfulness: “As in all her work, it is impossible to deduce the end of a sentence from its beginning, or a paragraph from the one that preceded it, or how one of the characters will reply to another. And yet the whole flows marvelously and inexorably to its cruel, lucid end; it becomes itself as we watch it. No other contemporary writer can consistently produce surprise of this quality, the surprise that is the one essential ingredient of great art. Jane Bowles deals almost exclusively in this rare commodity” (BR30). Surprise

is a quality that many readers have noticed independently, that fans of Bowles always mention. It is precisely the quality of surprise that will lead readers in the 1990s and 2000s to consider Bowles's work queer, from its sentences to its subject matter to its author herself.

Other reviews of the *Collected Works* also praise Bowles's iconoclasm. In *NOVEL*, James Kraft reads *Two Serious Ladies* as a revolt against normativity: "The novel is about this pursuit of self against the forms that are laid down for us. [...] until we throw them away [...] trying to be what we are" (274). In *Life* magazine, Webster Schott waxes poetic when describing Bowles: "Brilliant as a meteor, she flashed across the wartime desert of US fiction with *Two Serious Ladies* [...]" (17). Her brilliance, Schott contends, was disregarded by most American readers but, "Now, at 49, Mrs. Bowles publishes these few writings, her total output, and one understands why James Purdy⁴¹ calls her 'the eagle woman of American letters' and the British light candles to her gift. Mrs. Bowles has talons and she uses them to claw open the feminine mystique" (17). Schott suggests that Bowles's primary subject is gender, and implies that this may be one reason she has been so neglected.

In the *New York Review of Books* (NYRB), Charles Thomas Samuels also bemoans Bowles's previous neglect, calling her *Collected Works* "[a]s important a rediscovery as [Christina Stead's] *The Man Who Loved Children* [...]" That book's life parallels *Two Serious Ladies*. It was first published in 1940 to little fanfare, then reissued in 1965 with a laudatory introduction by Randall Jarrell. Samuels reviews Bowles's *Collected Works* alongside Stead's new novel *Dark Places of the Heart* (1966) and a new book by Hortense

⁴¹ Yet another gay writer who is often tagged as underappreciated and underground.

Calisher.⁴² “Christina Stead and Jane Bowles are genuinely quirky writers,” asserts Samuels, unlike Calisher, whose “oddness” is “cultivated.” Although all of these writers are women, Samuels does not foreground their gender, but their iconoclasm. While the NYRB is not an explicitly feminist publication, since its inception, it advocated women writers in a way few other midcentury literary journals did. Two of the magazines four founders were women: Barbara Epstein, its longtime editor, and Elizabeth Hardwick, whose strong critical voice is indelibly associated with the NYRB. In such a context, both the underground reputation and the gender of writers like Bowles and Stead were points in their favor. Samuels states that Bowles’s writing is “not modish” and points to the asynchrony of reception. Bowles’s anti-normative weirdness was too radical for 1940s audiences, Samuels contends, and “[w]hen that book first appeared here, reviewers could damn it with a clear conscience: modernism had not yet become obligatory mass fashion.” 1960s audiences, though, share Miss Goering and Mrs. Copperfield’s dissatisfaction with the lives laid out for them: “Today in the United States, where the cultivated reader feels duty-bound to be affronted, Mrs. Bowles’s controlled derision is likely to seem the definitive force of civilized disgust.”⁴³

None of these reviewers draws a clear line between such rebellion and queer sexuality, or uses the words ‘lesbian’ or ‘bisexual,’ but they acknowledge that certain relationships between women in the book are romantic. Ashbery says that Mrs. Copperfield “finds herself perversely happy with Pacifica” with whom she “is now in love” (BR28). His focus on her strong female characters might also code the book as lesbian for conscious

⁴² Like Bowles, Stead is often still regarded as a cult writer or a writer’s writer. In the mid-2000s Stead, like Bowles, was rediscovered in a sense: *The Man Who Loved Children* was included on *Time*’s list of 100 Best Books from 1923-2005, and in 2010, Jonathan Franzen, long a Stead evangelist, wrote an essay about the novel for the *New York Times*. Yet in spite of periodic praise from male “Establishment” writers, both books have maintained their underground reputations into the 2010s

⁴³ Samuels even compares Jane favorably to Paul: “Though her tales lack his intellectual clarity, they have greater charm.”

readers. Schott, drawing upon the model of the “feminine mystique,” states that Mrs. Copperfield “swims through gin to her destiny. After years of companionate marriage, she dumps her pinch-penny husband in Panama, picks up an enterprising half-breed Latina and brings her to the US for a life of ambiguous pleasure” (17). Both reviewers use language-- “perverse,” “ambiguous”—that makes Mrs. Copperfield relationship with Pacifica sound mysterious and slightly sleazy without labeling either character herself as a deviant. Samuels states simply that Mrs. Copperfield “takes up with” Pacifica. Though he does not exactly say that Miss Goering and Miss Gamelon are lovers, he includes her in a list of Miss Goering’s sexual exploits: “Out of strange charitable impulses, Christina takes a female companion, a succession of male lovers, and becomes a Samaritan of polite promiscuity.” The inclusion of “female companion” next to “male lovers” suggests that a woman might have lovers who are not male—that their gender needs to be specified, especially since she has previously had a woman as a “companion.” This language, too, might alert readers to the book’s queer content.

Jane Bowles is associated with many great twentieth-century artists who are now considered gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer, but were not, in their lifetimes, identified primarily as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer artists by themselves or the public. As I discussed above, Capote wrote the introduction to her collected works, and Williams’s blurb often appears on her book covers. Williams is also usually credited with getting her an obituary in the *New York Times*. Additionally, Jane and Paul famously lived for a time in the same Brooklyn house as Carson McCullers and W.H. Auden, among others.⁴⁴ That all of these writers were LGB is not something Ashbery, Capote or Williams acknowledges

⁴⁴ See Tippins, *February House*.

in their published writing as a point of connection between themselves and Bowles or between Bowles and other writers. Rather, they tend to focus on her quirky sensibility.

Analyzing responses to Bowles's work from Ashbery to John Waters (who I'll get to in a moment), I argue that 'underground' is not just a euphemism for 'gay.' The discussion around not only Bowles's work, but around that of successful writers and public intellectuals like Capote, Vidal, and Baldwin demonstrates that the relationship between sexuality and identity, art and identity, was figured differently in the early to mid-twentieth century than it usually is now. If someone like Bowles or Baldwin was not explicitly called a "lesbian writer" or a "gay writer," it was not just because people were afraid to say the word, but because readers in the general public did not take for granted that a queer writer wrote queer books, or that queerness in books directly reflected or expressed its author's own sexuality. Between the 1940s and the 1960s, *Two Serious Ladies* became part of the secret canon of a queer camp underground that is associated with homosexuality but not defined by sexuality, although many of those who read, wrote, and circulated the texts that defined this underground public were themselves gay, lesbian, bisexual, or otherwise queer.⁴⁵ This secret canon is not identical to the category of gay literature that emerges around the time of Stonewall and gay liberation, which prioritized narratives of legible, positive representation, although, as we have seen with *Nightwood* and *Giovanni's Room*, the secret popular canon feeds into the formal category of gay literature presented in gay bookstores, in anthologies and on syllabi.

⁴⁵ In her journals, Susan Sontag chronicles a 1965 visit to Tangier during which she spent time with the Bowleses and other expatriate writers. She compares the experience directly to a very specific LGB literary canon: "The world of [Evelyn Waugh's] *Decline + Fall* + [Ronald] Firbank + [James Purdy's] *Malcolm* + [Jane Bowles's] *Two Serious Ladies* is a real world! People like that exist, live those lives! (The Bowleses, Alan Ansen, Gordon Sager, Bob Faulkner, etc., etc.)! And I thought it was all a joke—that obsessiveness, that heartlessness, that cruelty. The international homosexual style—God, how mad + humanly ugly + unhappy it is" (Sontag, *As* 110).

BOWLES'S UNDERGROUND REPUTATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

In the 1960s and '70s, Bowles's underground reputation appealed not only to queer public intellectuals, but also to young artists still struggling in the underground themselves. When these artists became tastemakers themselves toward the end of the century, they evangelized the weird icons they admired in their youth. Essential to *Two Serious Ladies*' continued circulation in artistic publics that are not quite academic has been the admiration of two artists, the cult filmmaker John Waters and the novelist and critic Lynne Tillman, who herself might be considered a writer's writer.

Waters, the patron saint of the marginalized, transgressive, campy, and just plain weird, emphasizes the book's underground cachet, as well as the actual effects of its text upon the reader. Although he writes in the 2010s, Waters retains a certain 1960s sensibility about queerness, forged in the queer camp counterculture. He focuses on the queer qualities of Bowles's writing rather than the details of her biography or identity. He includes *Two Serious Ladies* on a list of "John Waters's Five Books You Should Read to Live a Happy Life If Something Is Basically the Matter with You" in his 2010 book *Role Models*, a memoir told through cultural icons and touchstones that creates a reading list or syllabus for Waters's fans (164).⁴⁶ In his discussion of Bowles's novel, Waters does not mention Jane's or Paul's sexual orientation. In fact, he never mentions Paul at all. Instead, he focuses on Jane's other transgressive qualities: she "was an alcoholic and spent a lot of time in mental hospitals" (Waters 174). Waters also emphasizes the book's underground reputation and underappreciatedness as selling points: "Originally published in 1943 to confusion [...] and then trapped in out-of-print limbo for years, this peculiar piece of fiction's street cred never quite faded" (Waters 174). Waters himself discovered the book

⁴⁶ The other books on the list are: *In Youth Is Pleasure* by Denton Welch, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* by Lionel Shriver, *The Man Who Loved Children* by Christina Stead, and *Darkness and Day* by Ivy Compton-Burnett.

on the recommendation of Elloyd Hanson, the co-owner of the Provincetown Bookshop. Hanson gave the book to Waters in 1966, when it was rereleased, and he was immediately transformed: “Once I read it, I felt insanely grateful to have gone beyond the door of literary lunacy into a world of complete obliviousness to emotional reality. I’ve never come back. *Two Serious Ladies* made a real reader out of me, and if you give it a chance, it will do the same for you” (Waters 174). Waters now owns a hardcover copy of the book’s rare first edition, and confesses that, “Sometimes when I want to feel smarter, I sneak up on this volume on my bookshelf and kiss it” (Waters 174). Bowles has no doubt found many readers based on the recommendations of such iconic gay Bohemian tastemakers. Many Goodreads users even specifically credit Waters with recommending the book. Association with gay men like Capote and Waters gives Bowles’s writing a level of cool that most “lesbian literature,” associated however unfairly with feminist seriousness, does not have.

However, Bowles has also been cited by women writers with feminist sensibilities in the literary underground of the late twentieth century. Lynne Tillman remembers that her first novel, *Haunted Houses* (1987), featured a blurb from the writer Kathy Acker on the back, calling her “Lynne Tillman, daughter of Jane Bowles” (“Nothing” 40).⁴⁷ Bowles’s name was familiar enough in the literary world Tillman and Acker circulated in that, although Tillman and Bowles were not related except by literary style and Bowles actually had no children, acquaintances and reviewers took Acker’s remark literally “and it was a problem” (Tillman, “Nothing” 41). The confusing association linked Tillman to Bowles and to Acker in a humorous, plagiaristic way that mimicked Acker’s own writing process: “It was ironically appropriate that she inadvertently bestowed a legend upon me, a fictitious literary genealogy. On bad days I imagined it was the best thing about me”

⁴⁷ Tillman visited Paul in Tangier in 1987, to talk about adapting *Two Serious Ladies* into a film—not the last time someone would have this idea, though it has not yet come to fruition. She wanted Lily Tomlin to play Miss Goering.

(Tillman, “Nothing” 41). Tillman had discovered the Bowles’s work in the 1970s, when she was also an expatriate and was compiling an anthology of expatriate American writers. As Johanna Fateman puts it, “the stakes are higher when Tillman writes about Jane” than about Paul. Tillman writes that, “I loved and respected Paul Bowles’s [work]. But Jane Bowles’s novel shifted the ground for me—she made the world of writing move. Move over and sigh” (“Nothing” 40). Tillman echoes other critic’s statements about how unusual Bowles’s language is, and how her use of language, particularly in *Two Serious Ladies*, reflects a singular mind, a particular way of thinking. She also echoes Waters’s statements about how the book made him a real reader, because it was unlike anything he’d read before, although in Tillman’s case, she uses the word “writing,” not reading, emphasizing that Bowles affected her craft, not just her outlook on the world in general. Tillman describes *Two Serious Ladies* as

a revelation—a work of genius, unique, subversive. These terms are overused, and usually misused, but are true of this [...] novel, this masquerade, comedy, tragedy, with its anarchic, singular views of sexuality, marriage, femininity, masculinity, American culture, exoticism. Jane Bowles ignored the worn lines between conscious and unconscious life; she beggared the realist novel with writing indifferent to prosaic notions of reality. Her dialogue is the most particular and idiosyncratic in American literature, as peculiar and condensed as speech in jokes and dreams.

Through her weirdness and idiosyncrasy, Tillman, like Ashbery and Waters, asserts that Jane Bowles captures real life in a way most writers do not. It should perhaps be noted that Tillman is in a decades-long relationship with a man, so her point of connection here is probably not queer sexuality, precisely (though I do not know exactly how she identifies). Tillman’s attachment to Jane may be partly due to gender, or to Bowles’s particular perspective on gender and sexuality, since Tillman mentions these ideas in

passing. However, her focus is particularly on Bowles's queer relationship to language, especially spoken dialogue, and on the way Bowles redefines what it means for a novel to be real or "realistic." Tillman does not overemphasize Bowles's critical neglect or underground reputation, though she does state that, "Jane Bowles is often and usually forgotten" ("Nothing" 39).

In our contemporary moment, underground reputation has much to do with biography and personality, and for both Bowleses, assumptions about gay literature and expatriate literature are often used to entice readers. The recent *Rough Guide to Cult Fiction* contains an entry on Jane as well as Paul. Jane's level of underappreciation is notable even in a book on cult fiction: "Few writers of any note have written, or published, less than Jane Bowles" (Simpson et al 30). The book's writers contextualize *Two Serious Ladies* culturally and biographically thus:

Comic, sad, farcical and moving, it has dialogue that makes you laugh out loud and applaud. And *Two Serious Ladies* is, to a small body of enthusiasts, one of the key works of 20th century fiction. The book is loosely based on Jane's honeymoon with Paul in Central America and Paris. The couple split, briefly, in France, and a year later Jane, who'd previously only had relationships with women, declared their sexual life should cease. From then on both Jane and Paul resumed their homosexual affiliations, while remaining devoted companions. (Simpson et al 31)

This brief biography plays up the unconventional nature of the Bowles marriage and the Bowles's intercontinental lifestyle, both hallmarks of a kind of bohemianism often associated with underground and cult literature. The editors of the *Rough Guide to Cult Fiction* struggle to define the boundaries of their own subject, not just by the obscurity of text or author but by the attachment they inspire: "The term cult fiction implies lengthy and irrational devotion probably, though not necessarily, by an ardent minority, to an author or

book. [...] Cult fiction moves people, often in unexpected ways,” to perform actions, dress certain ways, etc. (Simpson et al 5). The *Rough Guide* functions as a syllabus, guiding readers to particular works by and about each author, but also providing capsule summaries and talking points, so a reader might feel familiar with the books and authors even if she does not read them on her own. Many books become cult books because of their authors’ reputations and personalities: “If the true cult book should be out of print for ten years, the truly cult author, ought to have written one seminal novel, behaved abominably in public and then died tragically young” (Simpson et al 6). Thus many of the writers included in the *Rough Guide* were addicts, suffered from mental illness, or were regarded as deviants by society. Though “cult” is not quite the same as “underground” and “underground” is not quite the same as “queer,” in practice the three concepts are often intertwined.

“ONLY FEELINGS AND FEMINIST OBSESSIONS” : JANE BOWLES AND THE SECOND WAVE

By the mid-1960s when *The Collected Works of Jane Bowles* was published, the category of “feminist writer” was available to be applied to Bowles. As we have seen, in the pages of Life magazine, Webster Schott could casually state that “Mrs. Bowles has talons and she uses them to claw open the feminine mystique” (17). Although Betty Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique* was published in 1963, two decades after the first edition of *Two Serious Ladies*, Schott retroactively applies Friedan’s title to Bowles’s work. He explains that “[h]er finest writing [...] brings visions of prim women thwarted by family, wasted by frustration, and made just slightly nuts by liberation” (Schott 17). Of course, Miss Goering and Mrs. Copperfield have not been liberated by any organized Women’s Lib movement or consciousness raising group, and Bowles herself did not explicitly identify herself or her motives for writing as feminist. Nevertheless, Schott repeatedly uses

the concept of feminism to both belittle and compliment her work. He asserts that, “Mrs. Bowles has little range. Only feelings and feminist obsessions. And a childlike forthrightness that turns them into a unique art” (Schott 17). Bowles’s work continues to be categorized as feminist literature to this day, a categorization that often becomes marginalizing, as in 1981 when *Booklist* recommended Dillon’s biography of Bowles only to “libraries where feminist literature is popular. It is recommended only on those grounds” (qtd. in Skerl, “Sallies” 14). In many cases, literature is considered feminist as long as the author is considered to be a woman, and, as is apparent in the example from *Booklist*, the label is often used to suggest that a literary work is valuable only politically, not as a work of literature per se. Many deeply feminist critics simultaneously argue that women’s writing has been undervalued because it was assessed against patriarchal standards and that women’s writing actually was repressed by patriarchal limitations—that is, some women’s writing should be considered great literature and included in canon, but we must also recognize that sexist limitations on women’s work and education, masculinist artistic standards, and domestic expectations have prevented many women from writing at all, or from writing to the best of their ability. Reading from such a perspective, a critic might argue that Bowles would have written more explicitly lesbian characters and relationships if she were not hampered by fears of censorship and judgment.

In *Silences*, a groundbreaking work of feminist literary criticism published in 1978, working class-identified writer Tillie Olsen examines why women writers fail to produce more and why so few women write or publish at all. Although *Silences* performs the work of literary history and criticism, its tone is often deeply personal. In her chapter on “Enablers” Olsen writes, “I am haunted by the writer-wives (or long-time wives) of notable literary men: Eleanor Clark, Janet Lewis, Caroline Gordon, Jane Bowles, Elizabeth Hardwick, Mary Ellmann, Diana Trilling, Hope Hale Davis, Ann Birstein, Helen Yglesias.

Nearly every one, in their own distinguished way, evidencing quality, vision, capacity to contribute to literature, greater or as great as that of their men—but with marked contrast in productivity, influence, recognition” (219). In a footnote, Olsen identified these women’s respective partners: “The husbands: Robert Penn Warren, Yvor Winters, Allen Tate, Paul Bowles, Robert Lowell, Richard Ellmann, Lionel Trilling, Robert Gorham Davis, Alfred Kazin, Jose Yglesias” (219n). This list is notable in that, to this literary scholar in 2016, many of these male writers are as forgotten as their wives. Of the women, only Jane receives her own footnote, an unsourced, unframed quotation: “In the last 20 years that we’ve lived here [in Morocco], I have written only two short stories and nothing else. It’s good for Paul, but not for me” (qtd. in Olsen 219n). Several decades later, Jennie Skerl uses the repeated citation of these particular lines as evidence of the way decontextualized quotations have been used to create the legend of Jane Bowles’s victimization and self-destruction (“Legend” 269). Skerl observes that those who use this line as evidence of Bowles’s repression rarely acknowledge that “[w]hen Bowles wrote this statement in the fall of 1967, she had recently been hospitalized for depression, and was about to be hospitalized again” (“Legend” 269). Skerl does not mention Olsen specifically in her critique of the Bowles legend, but considering the circulation of feminist interventions like *Silences* in scholarly and popular feminist publics, Olsen was no doubt responsible for many discoveries of Bowles’s work. Olsen only mentions Bowles in this one instance—and, significantly, does not mention sexuality one way or the other. But the importance of *Silences* suggests that Olsen’s work contributed to Bowles’s recirculation in feminist literary publics and to the legend of Bowles as an underappreciated underground writer, overshadowed by her literary husband. For feminist canon expansion projects like Olsen’s, a writer’s female gender was the only qualification. Whether or not the work itself makes feminist arguments, the feeling was, more women should write, be published, and

be read. Popular discourses about feminism in the 1960s and '70s, represented here by Schott's brief comments in his *Life* review, suggested—whether they intended to or not—that it was a powerful feminist act to write fiction focused on women's experiences, especially experiences that went against prevailing norms for women's lives.⁴⁸

In 1978, Ecco Press released an expanded edition of Jane Bowles's collected works, in their series Neglected Books of the Twentieth Century, under the title *My Sister's Hand in Mine*.⁴⁹ Even the addition of this title speaks to the feminist context in which Bowles's works were recirculating. The book was reviewed in the *New York Times* by journalist and novelist Francine du Plessix Gray. Gray considers Bowles to be experiencing a literary recovery, heralded by *My Sister's Hand in Mine* and Dillon's then-forthcoming but long-awaited biography. Gray compares Bowles's career to those of Kate Chopin and Jean Rhys, who are similarly “consummate artists who have each spent several decades buried in oblivion” (BR3), but whose work was rapidly becoming essential on feminist bookshelves in the late 1970s. Gray credits recent social movements for the recovery of these women writers' work, writing that, “one is most grateful to the feminist movement for creating a psychological climate that has favored the republication of these three important writers” (BR3). By referring to “psychological climate” change rather than the development of women's literature curricula or feminist bookstores, Gray suggests that a sea change has occurred in individual reading practices. For Gray, this change has occurred specifically on the axis of gender, and she expresses suspicion of those who would read lesbianism in Bowles's work.

⁴⁸ As I briefly discussed in Chapter 2, many 1960s and '70s reviewers also identified Barnes as a feminist.

⁴⁹ Ecco began as a small press, financed by a Heinz heir, created in 1970 to publish the journal *Antaeus*, co-founded by Paul Bowles (Deahl). *My Sister's Hand* would subsequently be reprinted, as far as I can tell, under this title by FSG in 1988 and again in 2005 with a new introduction by Joy Williams, and by Noonday Press in 1995.

Gray observes that at least one 1940s reviewer compared *Two Serious Ladies* with *The Well of Loneliness*, a comparison to which she strenuously objects. She implies that the association reflects the paucity of women's and lesbian literature in general, characterizing Hall's novel as "perhaps the only novel in the English language to have previously touched on the issue of lesbianism" (BR28) and implying that if more women were read and published, more apt comparisons might be available. As for Bowles, "Neither are her heroines' precipitous declines caused by any preference for lesbianism, for they seem as asexual as they are independent and nomadic, turning to the flesh as a symbol of independence without appearing to enjoy one moment of it" (BR28). She characterizes their pleasures instead as "childlike playfulness" (BR28). In remarks like these, Gray seems limited to a definition of lesbianism that prioritizes particular kinds of sexual desire and activity; as we have seen, many readers in the 1960s described Mrs. Copperfield's relationship with Pacifica as a romantic partnership motivated by "ambiguous pleasure" without addressing the question of whether the two women actually have sex in the book.⁵⁰ Gray is equally skeptical when addressing the question of the writer's own sexuality, repeating that in a recent *Rolling Stone* interview, Paul Bowles talked about his wife's "passionately dependent relationship with a Moroccan woman servant" he suspected of poisoning her (BR 28). However, Gray treats this information as tangent or trivia, not as a central facet of Bowles's identity of experience, the way her gender is. This is the moment when literary feminists claim Bowles, not as a lesbian writer, but as a woman writer.

⁵⁰ Critics who argue that they do point to the scene when Pacifica teaches Mrs. Copperfield to swim. In the ocean, Mrs. Copperfield feels "happy and sick all at once" as "[s]he [holds] on hard to Pacifica's thigh with the strength of years of sorrow and frustration in her hand" (97). While this scene is not without ambiguity, and perhaps Mrs. Copperfield is not exactly "enjoy[ing] one moment of it," neither is it childlike or playful exactly. Few critics who address this particular scene describe it as "asexual," even if they do not read it as a coded sex scene.

For some critics, categorizing Bowles as a woman rather than lesbian writer has less to do with rejecting her queerness than with reaching for a “common womanhood,” shared by women of all races, classes, and sexual orientations. Reviewing *My Sister’s Hand* for *Ms.* magazine, Muriel Haynes excitedly connects Bowles’s work with a new kind of feminist woman reader who will recover Bowles because they recognize themselves in her work: “I believe Bowles’s rescue will very likely be her discovery by a new generation of women readers—well educated, worldly, and with a heightened sense of themselves as independent and social beings. There is much in these pages that speaks to them” (35). While Gray focused on the literary and historical significance of women writers, Haynes emphasizes the effect Bowles’s words might have on readers, the relationship readers might form with the text. She argues passionately for the feminist content of Bowles’s work:

Clearly Bowles is not doing missionary work on the subordinate condition of women. Her outlook is actually more radical. As she pictures them, women are simply not emotionally dependent on men, who have no entry into female inner life. Love and its bitter fruits—jealousy, dependency, manipulation, and even violence—are found in women’s relations with one another, as friends, mothers and daughters, sisters, lovers. Men exist as objects of physical passion, but the ravages, the theatrics, of love have their roots in another place. (Haynes 35)

Haynes’s language here places sexual relations between women as part of a spectrum of relationships and attachments women might have with other women, in order to make the argument that Bowles’s work is first and foremost woman-identified and woman-centered, not lesbian *per se*. Writing in *Ms.* in late 1970s, Haynes may be toeing a line: not wanting to make it seem as if feminist literature has to be lesbian; not wanting to turn off feminist readers who are uncomfortable with lesbian sexuality and with the association of

lesbianism and feminism;⁵¹ while also including erotic love between women as part of the everyday life of woman-centered women and women's or feminist culture. By using the language of "women as lovers" rather than identifying individual women as lesbian or bisexual, Haynes does not exclude women who use those identifiers, but she includes their erotic relationships in a spectrum that also includes women who do not identify as lesbian or bisexual but who have sexual or emotional attachments to other women.

LESBIAN SENSIBILITIES, LESBIAN BOOKSHELVES

In early works of lesbian canon-building, Bowles is sometimes mentioned but rarely foregrounded. For example, in *Sex Variant Women in Literature*, Jeannette Foster mentions Bowles only briefly, in a section called "Another War's Shadow." In her summary of *Two Serious Ladies*, Foster focuses on Mrs. Copperfield. Foster's entire description of the book is:

an inhibited Brooklyn housewife finds her first experience outside the States so inebriating that she defies her husband and lingers in the prostitutes' quarters of Colon, determined to 'learn all the things she didn't know,' even though she realizes they will not make her happy. (324-5)

Perhaps because she does not see the book as a tale of lesbian attachment and fulfillment, Foster spends more time on other texts.

⁵¹ Which in some sense is both popular misconception and actual fact: many of the founders of the disparate movements known today as Second Wave Feminism were lesbians, and considered their lesbianism central to their feminism (see Hogan, among others), yet the presence of lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women is under constant threat of erasure in feminist histories.

Lillian Faderman includes Jane Bowles in her exhaustive 1994 lesbian literature anthology *Chloe Plus Olivia*. In the introduction to the entire volume, Faderman explains that “Many women who had lesbian affairs, such as Vita Sackville-West, Virginia Woolf, Jane Bowles, and Carson McCullers, believed they also needed to be married to a man—for the sake of appearances, for the promise of permanent companionship (which they despaired of achieving with other women in a world that was hostile to homosexuality), in order to have children, or simply because of a profound attachment to a particular male” (ix). Because Faderman strives for completism, she ends up making broad generalizations. A sentence like this, similar to Olsen’s lists, clumps a disparate group of writers on one side and a disparate list of motivations on the other, not linking any individual directly to a specific motivation, while suggesting that all might be in play for any given writer. Later, Faderman describes Jane and Paul’s relationship as a “marriage of convenience,” comparing Jane Bowles’s sexuality to Vita Sackville-West’s: “While both women saw themselves as preferring a sexual relationship (and all its concomitant adventures) with another woman, their husbands apparently represented to them a kind of safety and stability that lesbians in the pre-lesbian-feminist era had little reason to believe they could find with another woman” (517). Faderman bases such statements more on the cultural context of the historical period than on specific evidence about these particular women’s marriages. In *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, her social history of twentieth century lesbian life published a few years earlier, Faderman is more specific, using Bowles as an example of “wealthy women who [...] married not for the sake of setting up a front, but rather for male companionship. [...] Jane and Paul] agreed to lead separate sexual lives, but she relied upon

him for stability and continuity” (176). Because the *Chloe Plus Olivia* is organized chronologically, Bowles’s work—some letters and the short story “Everything Is Nice”—appears in the section called “In the Closet: The Literature of Lesbian Encoding.” In the headnote to the section, Faderman writes that, “One reason that ‘lesbian literature,’ [...] has been so difficult to identify is that we have been conditioned to be oblivious to it” (441). Faderman contends that these texts often reveal themselves through their “lesbian sensibility” if not ambiguously lesbian content (444). “Everything Is Nice” fits into this paradigm, since the story centers on the fascination between a white American woman and a Moroccan Arab woman, but is not explicitly romantic or sexual.

In academic contexts, scholars often read *Two Serious Ladies* as engaging with the impossibility of lesbian representation in the mid-twentieth century. For example, in an essay for the 1991 collection *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters: Unmarried Women in the Twentieth-Century Novel*, Andrew M. Lakritz quotes extensively from Adrienne Rich’s “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” to make his argument that, through the character of Mrs. Copperfield, Bowles thematizes the condition of the lesbian in a culture based on patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality. Lakritz contends that the two serious ladies are differentiated based on their respective sexual orientations: “Copperfield has no theory that might guide her through her particular form of resistance, while Goering has theorized her course of action” (221). The difference is that Copperfield “has not sufficient intellectual or communal resources to make coherent resistance a possibility. This lack [...] has its origins in the intellectual poverty of her culture” (Lakritz 222). Lakritz

argues that *Two Serious Ladies* is a lesbian novel because it explores the question of lesbian identity, not simply that the book has a lesbian author or a lesbian sensibility.

In another 1990s essay collection entitled *RePresenting Bisexualities*, Marcy Jane Knopf makes a similar argument about the book's representation of bisexuality. Knopf argues that while most critics read Goering as a spinster and Copperfield as a lesbian, "[l]ike Bowles, both serious ladies are attached to another person in a life-long partnership but strive for a way to negotiate living as bisexual beings in 'open' relationships" (146). In its representation of bisexual relationships, "[...] *Two Serious Ladies* teaches us how to read (and decode) bisexuality in a text" and "offers a possibility for reading bisexually which does not collapse racial and class differences but instead requires readers to work through such complexities in their reading practices" (Knopf 144, 158). Lakritz and Knopf both argue that sexuality is a central theme of *Two Serious Ladies* and a crucial lens through which to read it.

In spite of her circulation in certain queer literary publics and her recurrence in academic work organized around sexuality, Bowles's work is still absent on many a lesbian or queer women's bookshelf or book list. A search for "jane bowles" on major lesbian websites--more accurately described as queer women's websites or woman-focused LGBTQ+ websites—like AfterEllen and Autostraddle yields no results. Even on The Lesbrary, a blog whose tagline is "The humble quest to read everything lesbian," the search comes up empty. *Two Serious Ladies* appears once on the website for the lesbian magazine *Curve*, on a 2010 list of the "10 Most Underrated Lesbian Books." The list's author, Kathleen Bryson, does not explain what she means by lesbian, and includes a nonfiction

book by a male author on her list. The use of the word “lesbian” in the title does not exactly describe the books or the authors—in all probability, it was chosen for search engine optimization.

Many readers in the 2010s, even avowedly LGBTQ+-friendly readers, see the label “lesbian literature” as an unappealing one. For example, in a 2014 *New Yorker* essay, writer Negar Azimi, the senior editor for the Middle Eastern arts and culture magazine *Bidoun*, describes how she came to Jane’s work after Paul’s: “I encountered ‘Two Serious Ladies’ through a friend who claimed Jane as a distinguished literary lesbian—thankfully, she has not yet been reduced to that caricature [...]” While we may all intuitively understand what this caricature looks like, I confess that I struggle to think of which lesbian writers actually fits it. None seems mainstream or generic enough to be reduced to a type, nor does the mainstream marketplace feel so inundated with lesbian writers that they have become an indistinguishable genre. It is the paradox of the marginalized caricature: she is everyone and no one. Maggie Nelson relates an anecdote about a college freshman who declared, after reading one Anne Sexton poem, “that he’d rather die than read another poem about a woman’s uterus or period” (*Art* 65). Nelson observes “purporting to know in advance what difference a difference might make—or purporting to be sick and tired of it before it has elaborated itself—is one fast way of being rid of it” (*Art* 65). Readers may not even realize they are doing this when they dismiss, for example, “literary lesbians” out of hand. And would it be such a tragedy if Bowles were “reduced” to such a type? Mightn’t it mean her work would reach more (women, lesbian, queer, weird) readers who could recognize themselves in her books?

***TWO SERIOUS LADIES* AND INTERNET FEMINISM**

Jane Bowles may not yet have been reduced to the caricature of the literary lesbian, but she is often still reduced to the archetype of the woman writer. Although conversations about gender disparities in literary reception were somewhat mainstream by the late 1970s, the problem of male dominance in the literary world has not really been solved. Just to name a few examples: conversation and controversy has been sparked by Rebecca Solnit's 2008 essay "Men Explain Things to Me," by Marie Calloway's 2011 short story "Adrien Brody," and Claire Vaye Watkins's 2015 essay "On Pandering," each of which addresses different facets of gender dynamics in writing and publishing, from the microaggression of "mansplaining" to sexual harassment to internalized misogyny, and by the annual VIDA Count, which tallies diversity in literary reviewing and publishing. Such literary-specific conversations represent a microcosm of discourses about gender, power, and marginalization currently going on in US culture. In spite of a nearly half century of feminist literary criticism, many women readers in the 2010s still find it necessary to seek out underappreciated women writers of the past, both to find the sense of recognition that is still missing in much of mainstream media and to construct a literary lineage outside masculinist canons.

While the book is still largely absent from lesbian- or queer-focused spaces, in a 2010s literary environment where perhaps most women writers and readers now identify as feminists, *Two Serious Ladies* has accrued a cult following, evinced particularly by the 2012 founding of the online magazine *Two Serious Ladies*, and by the discussion around Kate Zambreno's 2012 book *Heroines*. All of these cultural projects take part in discourses about [women and experimental writing in a larger literary landscape; the relationship between art and life] It can hardly be a coincidence that Bowles' *Two Serious Ladies* was reprinted yet again as a stand-alone novel in February 2014 by Ecco Press, now an imprint

of HarperCollins. The 2014 edition is a paperback with a retro, cartoony cover showing the titular ladies, with the title in cursive. It boasts an introduction by novelist Claire Messud. The covers of the book prominently feature previously published praise from Williams (front) and Capote (back). Ecco thus presents the book as chick lit with a historical, literary veneer and queer associations, a recovered cult novel from the mid-century bohemian vanguard. In this new edition, the book is more accessible than ever. In the few years leading up to this new edition of *Two Serious Ladies*, Bowles and her novel were mentioned more and more in feminist literary circles.

Founded and edited by Lauren Spohrer, the website *Two Serious Ladies* describes itself as “small, irregular online magazine to promote writing and art by women.” Bowles’s gender—and by extension, her marriage—precedes her. Bowles’s sexual orientation (and her husband’s) and their time in North Africa add a tantalizing gossipy footnote with a hint of witchcraft: on the *Two Serious Ladies* magazine’s “About” page, Spohrer adds the postscript, “P.S. Jane Bowles was in love with her Moroccan housekeeper, Cherifa. Once Cherifa hid a packet of blood and pubic hair under a plant and asked the plant to ‘talk to Jane and tell her that I’m in charge here.’”⁵² Biographer Dillon traces the origin of the rumor that Cherifa’s magic or poisons caused Bowles’s 1957 stroke, concluding that for both Moroccan neighbors and expatriates, the rumor that Cherifa “poisoned Jane to gain power over her was a way of making sense of a relationship no one had been able to comprehend and a way of making sense of Jane having a stroke at forty” (287). Whether

⁵² I could write a whole chapter just on references to and descriptions of Cherifa. She was a Moroccan woman the Bowleses met in Tangier in 1948. As Dillon chronicles, Jane pursued Cherifa intensely and the two spent time together over many years; they later lived together, with Cherifa working for Jane as a paid housekeeper. Jane also gave Cherifa a house she owned. Sources disagree on whether their relationship was ever sexual. Extrapolating from interviews with Paul and Cherifa, Dillon explains that although Cherifa had had relationships with Moroccan women and Jane had had relationships with white women, they had no model for a lesbian relationship between a Moroccan and an American other than the financial power exchange modeled by male European colonists who kept young North African men (Dillon 251-2).

or not 2010s readers still struggle to make sense of intercultural relationships between women, stories of witchcraft and lesbianism are certainly more exciting than stories of depression and alcoholism. Such a racially exoticizing rumor helps identify Bowles as an underground, cult author. While stories of expatriate writers, alcoholic writers, and women writers' sad declines are commonplace, the postscript about Cherifa works as a mnemonic, emphasizing that Bowles is too weird to fit into a type or category. While Spohrer does not go into detail about the political or historical motivations for her project at *Two Serious Ladies*, like *Heroines*, it is designed to put women writers front and center, implicitly because they were not read or rewarded or respected in the past—a literary journal focused on women's writing is, in this sense, a reparative project.

Jane Bowles's attachment to the more famous and more widely read Paul leads many to associate her with a group of modernist literary wives and women partners who also wrote, women like Vivienne Eliot and Zelda Fitzgerald who have become icons for many late twentieth and early twenty-first century feminists. These literary wives form a kind of sub- or crypto-canon, lying directly alongside or between the lines of the canon recognized by Norton anthologies and survey courses. Closely tied to feminist literary recovery projects, popular fascination with literary wives was galvanized by Nancy Milford's Pulitzer Prize-winning 1970 biography *Zelda*, and again in the 1990s by literary films like *Tom and Viv* (1994), about the Eliots, and *Henry and June* (1990), about Henry Miller, June Miller, and Anais Nin.⁵³ *Zelda*, *Viv*, and *Jane* are connected not only by their more famous spouses, but by their own reputed madness. All were treated and hospitalized for mental illness, and their lives are sometimes used as evidence for the way women artists

⁵³ Not to mention Bernardo Bertolucci's 1990 film adaptation of *The Sheltering Sky* and David Cronenberg's 1991 film adaptation of Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*, both of which, as Skerl points out, draw visually and narratively upon the legend of Jane and Paul in a way neither book does.

were pathologized while men were canonized for similar behavior. Kate Zambreno's 2012 book *Heroines* explores this argument.

Heroines originated in Zambreno's blog, *Frances Farmer Is My Sister*. Part memoir, part literary biography, part cultural criticism, *Heroines* begins with an invocation of and identification with the Sibyl of Eliot's *Waste Land*, and an allusion to Jane and Paul Bowles:

The rhythm of my madwomen's lives: a long scream followed by absolute silence. At the beginning, I think of endings. The mad wives of modernism who died in the asylum. Locked away, rendered safe. Forgotten, erased, or rewritten. [...] Jane Bowles stroked out, later buried in an unmarked grave in Malaga, Spain, while her husband Paul never stopped writing.⁵⁴ Sitting at the mouth of my cave, I string together fragments on paper. My scraps scattering to the wind if unread. Out of this narrative will emerge a chalk outline. It is the body of a woman. (Zambreno 8-9)

Zambreno connects her own struggles with depression, anxiety, boredom, and creativity with the lives of twentieth century women writers in whose work and lives she recognizes herself. Zambreno contends that they were on some level victims of the discourse of hysteria, which pathologizes women for traits and behaviors that would connote an artistic temperament or even genius if a man manifested them, and that such discourses persist: "A difference of privilege, the male modernists who could cultivate this aesthetic of madness, and still be viewed as sane, and these women, who were criminalized" (131). By associating Bowles with this tradition, Zambreno and others portray her as a martyr, a

⁵⁴ Note the way Zambreno makes Paul Bowles seem immortal. I have anecdotal reason to doubt whether we can even still describe him as canonical, judging by the number of blank looks I've gotten when I mention his name.

cautionary tale, a lost genius ripe for recuperation. That is, as someone to know, not necessarily someone to read.

Neither Spohrer nor Zambreno identifies Bowles as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer. Like Spohrer, Zambreno mentions her attraction to women and attachment to women only in gossipy asides. Zambreno daydreams about “how I once idealized the apparently open marriages of modernism [...] the Bowles who shared everything except their beds. [...] In Paris during the second leg of the Bowles’ honeymoon, Jane goes out alone at night, prowling the streets, the lesbian bars. Jane Bowles who loved to slum like Baudelaire, like Vivien Leigh channeling Blanche DuBois” (22). A few pages later, she references “witchy Cherifa” without explaining who or what she means (27). Zambreno treats Jane’s queerness as merely a sexual proclivity, secondary to her marriage because the project is definitively heteronormative, framed around wives of famous authors. Zambreno does not acknowledge that Bowles’s life and work might be defined in relation to others, not just her husband; that perhaps the Bowles’s marriage, non-sexual and companionate as it was, might be seen as categorically different from the Fitzgeralds’ or the Eliots’. While there is much to admire about Zambreno’s project, the specific portrait she paints of Jane Bowles is problematically sketched out.

Like earlier feminist recovery projects, *Heroines* is a work of mythmaking, focused on engaging emotionally with the icon of Jane Bowles, rather than on analyzing her work or accurately representing her biography. The project is as much about what Bowles didn’t write, about her death and absence, as about the work that exists. In this regard, Zambreno echoes Olsen, whose *Silences* is also about writing that did not happen

and does not exist, and follows a tradition of feminist criticism focused on absence and loss. Even Faderman shares this focus, suggesting that Bowles and others were repressed, didn't really write their lives or feelings, and thus suggesting that their work in a crucial way *does not* fully reflect their identities, attachments, desires or experiences, it can only offer clues or signposts, a trail of breadcrumbs. Bowles's work fits this paradigm because it is so bizarre that it feels coded. Conversely, though both *Nightwood* and *Giovanni's Room* represent the repression of LGBT people in a patriarchal homo- and transphobic culture, they are not usually considered as simultaneously hiding and revealing those authors' repressed natures or sexualities.

CONCLUSION: ONE QUEER BOOK

Since the 1940s, there have been advocates who assert that Jane Bowles's writing is idiosyncratic, singular, absolutely not generic underground literature, women's literature, or lesbian literature. Such readers contend that Bowles's creativity was not hampered by repression or the fear of censorship, and thus transmits directly some crucial information, some Jane Bowles-ness, across the decades, through the static of patriarchy and heteronormativity. They argue that *Two Serious Ladies*, for example, could not be swapped for any other underground, women's, feminist, or lesbian novel and have the same effect. As we have seen some do with *Nightwood* and *Giovanni's Room*, these readers reject prior categorizations and see the book as singular, universal, or somehow both at once. Singularity and universal appeal are both widely regarded as hallmarks of great literature, though they seem like opposites. Whether because it is completely distinct from all other literary works or because its applications are universal, both attributes suggest that

a work transcends generic and periodic categorization. Since the advent of queer theory, critics have used the word “queer” to encapsulate this paradox. Bowles’s work is considered queer in terms of homo- or bisexuality and in the sense that it questions notions of identity and normativity more broadly.

Carolyn Allen opens a 1997 essay on the book by asserting that, “*Two Serious Ladies* is a queer little novel” (19). Allen argues that the book is queer in every sense of the word:

It’s not just that the characters sometimes refer to each other as queer to suggest both their ventures outside the heterosexual and their odd, quirky sensibilities. For the contemporary reader, the novel’s combination of modernity’s preoccupation with the psychological and postmodernity’s attention to surfaces also make it a peculiar novel. [...] the narrative tension between modernist content and postmodern spirit destabilizes sexuality so that the novel resonates as an anomalous queer theory text; that is, it questions stable sexual identities and easy assumptions about sexual pleasure and speaks to the complexities of erotic investments across class and racial difference. (19)

Allen performs a close reading of the opening scene where, as a child, Miss Goering forces her sister’s friend to play a peculiar game involving religion and nudity. Allen argues that this scene, along with Jane’s biography, “becomes part of the novel’s enabling conditions for a reading of the narrative dynamics” (20). Because readers might know that Jane Bowles had sexual relationships with women and because this scene is, if not actually sexual, certainly odd and saturated with eroticism, this opens them to or guides them to the possibilities that the book itself is queer, that Miss Goering is queer (if not lesbian or bisexual), and that Mrs. Copperfield’s interest in Pacifica is sexual. Allen argues that these conditions enable, indeed invite, “the lesbian reading effect, the desire to find desire

between women” (35), but her argument also suggests that the text combined with these enabling conditions might satisfy other sorts of reading effects and desires as well.

Addressing the desires of a broader LGBTQ+ public, the May 1999 issue of *Out* magazine features the headline “Lady in Exile: Stacey D’Erasmus goes in Search of Jane Bowles.” A photo of designer Todd Oldham dominates the cover, along with headlines about a new AIDS vaccine, South Beach, gay *Real World* cast members, and “a lesbian fan’s mash note” to *Sesame Street*’s Big Bird (actually an essay by Michelle Tea about her lifelong fascination with celebrity). The largest and brightest headline invites readers to learn “How to Stuff a Wild Bikini” by viewing a fashion spread of swimwear for men. Inside the magazine, readers will also find a paean to film icon Frances Farmer and a profile the 16-year-old actress who plays Tammy Metzler in *Election*. This laundry list provides a snapshot of mainstream gay US culture at the turn of the twenty-first century. *Out* is aimed at a male audience, but as you can see, also includes a few queer women.

D’Erasmus’s article, in the pages of one of the most widely read gay magazines in the world, is part of the disparate collections of projects that recirculate Jane Bowles. The profile opens with a glamorous photograph of Bowles sitting in a cafe in a sun hat and pearls, burning cigarette in hand. The opening blurb chirps,

From New York to Tangier, wild, witty Jane Bowles ruled over a bright artistic circle from the 1940s to the 1960s. Championed by the likes of Tennessee Williams and Truman Capote, she published only one novel and one play before descending into a private nightmare of drugs, drink, and illness. What went wrong?

Necessarily sensational, this hook associates Bowles with the two major gay literary icons of the American twentieth century, without mentioning her husband Paul who, while

famous among literary circles, may be less of a household name for *Out*'s readership. In two sentences, it pithily tells a narrative of potential unfulfilled, of tragic literary loss. "What went wrong?" The question leads directly into D'Erasmus's essay proper, which sets up a slightly different problematic: "She takes up barely two boxes in the archives of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin, filed under 'Paul Bowles: Misc'" (69).⁵⁵ One answer to the question of what derailed Bowles's career may be her husband's overshadowing literary reputation. From the outset, D'Erasmus's deep desire to know Jane Bowles is apparent: "I open the boxes expectantly. There is so much about her that remains mysterious, not least the source of her suffering" (69). As she pages through the "traces of a lost era," D'Erasmus admits that "I'm not sure [...] whether I'm looking for a reason to continue loving her or a reason not to love her anymore, to be done with her once and for all" (69-70). D'Erasmus acknowledges that Bowles is different from other self-destructive women writers in repressive marriages: "Like Sylvia Plath, Bowles is surrounded by an aura of genius and pain, although unlike Plath there is no clear villain in the piece—no Ted Hughes, no stifling domestic conformity. She suffered despite, and within, her freedom" (71). Of the Bowles marriage, D'Erasmus is circumspect, acknowledging its idiosyncrasy, that "It is a difficult relationship to understand, neither a conventional marriage nor a comradely union of convenience, but

⁵⁵ Six months later, Tara Wenger, a research librarian from what was then called the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center writes to the editors of *Out* to inform readers that, although D'Erasmus reports her own experience at the Center accurately, the Jane Bowles materials have since been re-catalogued as their own collection, separate from Paul Bowles's papers. This is how those collections are organized to this day. Wenger is careful not to say that the re-cataloguing of Jane's materials came about because of D'Erasmus's article, suggesting that it occurred because of the Center's acquisition of Dillon's research materials.

something deeper, darker, and probably no longer possible in our identity-driven era. [...] their mutual dependence in both life and art is plain” (71). At times, D’Erasmus wants to save her subject, steer her toward a better path: “You know, Jane, I think with sourness [...] it might have been better if you had stopped drinking” (70).

“Bowles’ work is similarly both hidden and deeply queer” (D’Erasmus 73). As is common, D’Erasmus conflates the multiple meanings of that overdetermined word: “Because she is one of the great, underrated writers of the 20th century, Jane Bowles is an ongoing cause for me, as important a figure as Gertrude Stein or Djuna Barnes: lesbians who reconfigured language in shocking, queer, groundbreaking ways” (69-70). This sentence draws attention to the lesbian-ness of Bowles’s, Stein’s, and Barnes’s writing, but also to its brilliance, its importance, its shocking and groundbreaking qualities—all of which are deepened and echoed by the use of the word queer, which is both confrontational and vague. D’Erasmus groups these lesbian writers together in their queerness, suggesting that each writer’s work is queer in different ways. Going into detail about Bowles’s particular queerness, D’Erasmus describes her discovery of Bowles’s work at twenty: “I felt I had at last found the writer who spoke of the gap between fantasy and reality, interior and exterior, blindness and sight. [...] I knew I was a lesbian; what I didn’t have was a word for my strangeness” (70). For D’Erasmus, the word ‘queer’ describes the space between “lesbian” and “strangeness.” Her connection to Bowles is in part based on a shared identity category, but the recognition she feels in Bowles’s writing is the recognition of individual strangeness.

Jessa Crispin, founder of the popular literary blog Bookslut, agrees that “[t]he best way to describe this book might be queer” (“Two). The word describes the author’s sexuality—“[c]ertainly it’s written by a gay woman who married a gay man”—but Crispin

also mean[s] by ‘queer’ all of those inappropriate, singular weirdnesses that got smashed out of us in elementary school, anything that stood out as too angular and too bizarre and so made us a target. We shed most of that stuff, so desperate we were not to stand out. Jane Bowles and her strange ladies had the strength to retain it. The result is a reminder of the divinity of the inappropriate, which we so willingly relinquish in the name of being understood. Or at least understandable.

Crispin asserts that this text is not queer only in the sense of sexuality—but also in the sense of sexuality. Her use of the first-person plural includes Crispin and her audience in this definition of ‘queer,’ implying that her definition is ‘queer’ is a nearly universal experience of “singular weirdness” (or that it’s at least universal to readers like her). We saw critics make similar moves with Barnes and Baldwin, arguing that a writer, who happens to be recognizably gay or lesbian also happens possesses those positive (perhaps utopian) non- or anti-normative qualities of the outlaw, the complicated, the queer. In applying the double meaning of ‘queer’ to *Two Serious Ladies*, Crispin echoes the argument D’Erasmus made about the book fifteen years earlier.

Several Goodreads users follow similar lines of thought, using the word ‘queer’ ambiguously to describe both the sexuality and the narrative style of *Two Serious Ladies*. Sara (2014), whose profile says she likes “weird gay books,” shelves the book as “queer” and gives it 5 stars. Another Sara (2015) writes, “Going to go all Nick Lowe on this one and say it’s the cruelest and yet kindest, and definitely the queerest (in both senses of the world) novel I’ve read in long time, and unfortunately, her only one” (referring to the

classic power pop tune “Cruel to Be Kind” by the English singer-songwriter Nick Lowe). Both Saras use “queer” in the same way D’Erasmus and Crispin do: to suggest that this book is not just weird, gay, or antinormative, but perhaps all at once, yet they do not explain exactly what they do mean. Eugene describes the book as “a lightning strike, a revelation.” It’s a “proto-beat novel [...] but otherwise totally *sui generis*”—a term more than one critic has used to describe *Two Serious Ladies* (Eugene).⁵⁶ Stephanie similarly describes the book as a visceral revelation, and describes her response to the book as an attachment to the author herself: “strange and sublime [...]. I felt, like, exhilarated when I read it [...] I feel like I am shell-shocked in the best possible way. [...] It may come as no surprise that I am head-over-heels for Jane Bowles at the moment [...].” The queer singular-and-universal reading is a synthesis of some strands in the underground and feminist readings of the book, valuing its weirdness as the underground readers did, and seeing its author’s and/or characters’ identities as relevant to the book’s interpretation or value, but the readers who call the book queer go beyond those readings to suggest that those two qualities are indistinguishable and inextricable. I have qualms about the rhetorical slippage between queer sexuality and queer literary style. Obviously there are biographically straight writers who write queer books in the stylistic sense and LGBTQ-identified writers who, arguably, write in ways that could be seen as normative and not queer. Queer style, if we’re to continue using this term, has some historic origin in the antinormativity of LGBTQ+

⁵⁶ Comparing late-twentieth-century biographies of Jane and Paul, Skerl observes that Jane’s writings are described as *sui generis* works of genius, without influence or lineage, while Paul’s work is read into literary genealogies, as, for example, modernist or proto-Beat. Skerl persuasively argues that such assessments are deeply gendered, fitting male writers into literary traditions and treating women writers as anomalies.

communities but isn't tethered to that origin. In literary circles, the word 'queer' is more often applied to literature that is antinormative in its style or narrative than to literature that advocates a particular political program or platform.

Though she does not use the word "queer," Maggie Nelson reads Jane Bowles's work as deeply antinormative in its content, style, and meaning. In *The Art of Cruelty* (2011), Nelson surveys contemporary debates about the gender of violence and argues that,

If one really wants to step out of this dead-end dichotomy, which poses a regrettable equality ("women can be just as violent as men") on the one side, and an equally regrettable difference ("women are essentially victims and men are essentially aggressors") on the other, one has to develop a sharper ear for dissonance, for artistic instances and tonal nuances that do not derive their charge from making pit stops at well-trod narrative stations. (60-61)

Her first example of such an artistic instance is Bowles's short story "Plain Pleasures."

Nelson writes that, "one of the most remarkable things about Bowles's stories is that more often than not they leave the reader not knowing how they should feel" (62).

Particularly, in "Plain Pleasures," it seems as if the protagonist, Mrs. Perry, may have been raped, but afterwards, she appears to be in a good mood. This leaves Nelson, as a reader, unsure of whether to accept the character's emotional response or question it.

Nelson appreciates the "freedom" of a writer who puts her readers in such a position. A similar freedom underlies many readers' confusion and exasperation with *Two Serious Ladies*, whether they are annoyed by Miss Goering's capricious whims or by the ambiguity of Mrs. Copperfield's attachment to Pacifica. Nelson argues that Bowles's work does not aim to teach readers lessons. Rather, it offers experiences (and a certain pleasure). Nelson concludes that

It isn't so much that Bowles is out to tell us that the world is a cruel and cold place, and isn't it a pity. Like many artists of cruelty, she is no philosopher. She is roaming a world of balloons, armed with a pin. This sly debunking, accompanied by an unnerving inscrutability, is often a sign that something new is happening. It is the dissonant sound of a new territory being entered, a new story being told. It isn't feminist in the sense of serving some predetermined aim of empowerment or equality; certainly, if there were a litmus test of such, "Plain Pleasures" would fail. (63)

While Bowles's work is not feminist in the sense that it empowers its readers with positive representations. But perhaps serves Nelson's feminist aim of "stepping out of dead-end dichotomies," of disrupting tired narratives through cruelty and defamiliarization, experiences that most readers report in their reading of Bowles, whether they find those experiences jarring, unsettling, hilarious, or revelatory.

Coda: What Do We Know?

Thinking we know them, what do we know? What has persistently drawn readers from the 1990s, the 2000s, the 2010s to queer texts of the not-so-distant but distant enough past in the early twentieth century? As my research demonstrates, some books were kept available through consistent republishing and repackaging, and by circulation of names and titles, as well as actual books, within local and global publics. Much of the work of this circulation is untraceable in print, but clues are available, references to a book's cultural positioning in later published responses. In the US, the idea that "gay literature" and "lesbian literature" were distinct categories within literature grew up with homophile and gay liberation movements beginning in the 1950s, which themselves grew out of previously-established LGBTQ+ communities and print networks. Thus the history of the concept of LGBTQ+ literature parallels that of women's literature and ethnic literatures.

Categorizing and circulating literary works as feminist, gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, or all of the above creates reading publics, spaces that where readers can feel public, feel historic, and feel recognized communities. But it can also be oddly limiting, if such categories are assumed to be stable, legible, or authenticatable. As Maggie Nelson asks in *The Argonauts*, "How does one get across the fact that the best way to find out how people feel about their gender or their sexuality—or anything else, really—is to listen to what they tell you, and to try to treat them accordingly, without shellacking over their version of reality with yours?" (53). It is of crucial importance when we approach texts and figures from the past, as Sedgwick warned us, not to assume we already know

the historical narrative or that we are positioned at the end of a progressive trajectory. We must, as Dinshaw and Love emphasize, recognize difference across time, that even when we feel we can touch it, it wriggles out of our grasp. Though we as critics and teachers are uniquely positioned to affect public reading practices, when I say “we” here, I do not mean just critics or teachers. I see queer reading practices developing in many different cultural locations, in the continuous chains of recommendation and association in widely accessible online spaces like Goodreads, in the intersectional analysis in politically-defined counterpublics like the Black Lives Matter movement, and, yes, in the work of scholars and teachers who attend to history, affect, and reception. As university instructors, we know that most of our students will not go on to be professional humanities scholars. They do, however, already participate in publics, and humanities education shapes how they approach such participation, informs how they understand history and culture.

As I argued in my previous chapters, the most productive, most affectively engaging, the most politically effective, and certainly the most pleasurable reading practices for work by LGBTQ+ writers do not make them into interchangeable types or tokens, but engage with both the singularity and the broad applicability of their work, reading at once specifically and expansively, letting the text do its work on the reader even as the reader acknowledges their own frames of reference and positionality in relation to text and author. Some diverse examples of such queerly receptive reading practices from my case studies include: Teresa de Lauretis’s reading of *Nightwood*; Lee Lynch’s and Elizabeth A. Meese’s disidentification with Djuna Barnes and *Nightwood*;

Henry Louis Gates's, Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah's, and Jacqueline Woodson's deep love for James Baldwin; Marlon Ross's reading of *Giovanni's Room*; John Ashbery's, John Waters's, Lynne Tillman's, Stacy d'Erasmus's, and Maggie Nelson's relationship to Bowles and *Two Serious Ladies*. Thinking they know the texts or writers they write about, what do these readers know? Perhaps they simply reiterate, in infinite variations, Sedgwick's first axiom, that "people are different from each other" (22). And they always have been. The readings I just mentioned are each, in their own ways, testimonies about the importance of not just reading and writing, but of publication and circulation—and of feeling public.

Bibliography

- Abdur-Rahman, Aliyyah I. “‘As Though a Metaphor Were Tangible’: Baldwin’s Identities.” In Elam, pp. 164-179.
- Adams, Stephen. *The Homosexual as Hero in Contemporary Fiction*, Barnes and Noble, 1980.
- Alexander, Charlotte. “The ‘Stink’ of Reality: Mothers and Whores in James Baldwin’s Fiction.” *Literature and Psychology*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1968, pp. 9-26. Rpt in Kinnamon, pp. 77-95.
- Allen, Carolyn. “The Narrative Erotics of Two Serious Ladies.” In Skerl, *Tawdry*, pp. 19-36.
- Anastas, Benjamin. “Teaching the Controversy: James Baldwin and Richard Wright in the Ferguson Era.” *New Republic.com*, 15 May 2015.
- Ashbery, John. “Up From the Underground.” *The New York Times*, 29 January 1967: BR 5, 28, 30.
- Associated Press. “Label of Gay Is No Longer Defamatory, Court Rules.” *The New York Times*, 1 June 2012, p. A25.
- Aubry, Timothy. *Reading as Therapy: What Contemporary Fiction Does for Middle-Class Americans*, U of Iowa P, 2011.
- Austen, Roger. *Playing the Game: The Homosexual Novel in America*, Bobbs-Merrill, 1977.
- Azimi, Negar. “The Madness of Queen Jane.” *New Yorker*, 12 June 2014.
- Badia, Janet. *Sylvia Plath and the Mythology of Women Readers*, U of Massachusetts P, 2013.
- Baldwin, James. “*The Black Scholar* Interviews: James Baldwin.” *The Black Scholar*, vol. 5, no. 4, 1973–1974, pp. 33-42.
- Baldwin, James. “The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American.” *The New York Times*, 25 January 1959. Rpt. in Price, pp. 171-176.
- Baldwin, James. *Giovanni’s Room*, Delta—Random House, 2000 [Dial P, 1956].
- , “Here Be Dragons.” As “Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood.” *Playboy*, January 1985. Rpt. in Price, pp. 677-690.
- , “The Male Prison.” As “Gide as Husband and Homosexual.” *The New Leader*, 13 December 1954. Rpt. in Price, pp. 101-105.
- , “Many Thousands Gone.” *Partisan Review*, vol. 18, no. 6, November-December 1951, pp. 665-680.
- , *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948-1985*, St. Martin’s P, 1985.

- Barnes, Djuna. Letters to Charles Henri Ford. Box 12, Folder 3, Charles Henri Ford Papers, The Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
- . Letters to Ottoline Morrell. Box 2, Folder 1, Ottoline Morrell Collection, The Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
- . *Nightwood*, New Directions, 2006. [Faber and Faber, 1936; Harcourt, Brace, 1937; New Directions, 1946].
- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author," trans. Richard Howard. *Aspen*, no. 5+6, 1967.
- . *Sade / Fourier / Loyola*, translated by Richard Miller, U of California P, 1976 [1971].
- Berlant, Lauren. *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Duke UP, 2008.
- Blay, Zeba. "Watch James Baldwin Break Down Our Present Day Race Problem in 1968." *Huffington Post*, 21 October 2015.
- Bowles, Jane. *Two Serious Ladies* in *The Collected Works of Jane Bowles*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966, pp. 1-297 [Alfred A. Knopf, 1943; Ecco, 2014].
- Boyd, William. Review of *Selected Works of Djuna Barnes*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 1984. Rpt. in Boyd, *Bamboo*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005.
- Bredbeck, Gregory W. "Introduction: Gay/Literature—Crossing the Divide." In Nelson, pp. xv-xx.
- Brim, Matt. *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination*, U of Michigan P, 2014.
- Broe, Mary Lynn, ed. *Silence and Power: A Reevaluation of Djuna Barnes*, Southern Illinois UP, 1991.
- Bryson, Kathleen. "The 10 Most Underrated Lesbian Books." *CurveMag.com*, 1 February 2010.
- Burdett, Osbert. Review of *Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes. *Post* (London), 3 November 1936. Rpt. in Marcus, "Mousemeat," p. 196.
- Burra, Peter. Review of *Nightwood*. *Spectator*, vol. 157, no. 5657, 27 November 1936, p. 962.
- Canning, Richard, ed. *Fifty Gay and Lesbian Books Everybody Must Read*, Alyson Books, 2009.
- Chancy, Myriam J.A. "Brother/Outsider: In Search of a Black Gay Legacy in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*." *The Gay '90s: Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Formations in Queer Studies*, edited Thomas C. Foster, Carol Siegel, and Ellen E. Berry, New York UP, 1997, pp. 155-190.
- Chase, Eric. Review of *Nightwood*. *Literary Manhattan*, 4 March 2012, <http://www.literarymanhattan.org/2012/03/book-review-nightwood/>.

- Cory, Donald Foster. *The Homosexual in America: A Subjective Approach*, Castle Books, 1960 [Greenberg: Publisher, 1951].
- Crispin, Jessa. "Two Serious Ladies." *Christian Science Monitor* online, 6 March 2014.
- Daniels, Lee A. "James Baldwin, Eloquent Writer on Behalf of Civil Rights, Is Dead." *The New York Times*, 2 December 1987, p. A1.
- Deahl, Rachel. "Halpern Reflects on 40 Years of Ecco." *PublishersWeekly.com*, 25 November 2011.
- DeGout, Yasmin Y. "Dividing the Mind: Contradictory Portraits of Homoerotic Love In *Giovanni's Room*." *African American Review* vol. 26 no. 3, 1992, p. 425-435.
- De Lauretis, Teresa. "Nightwood and the 'Terror of Uncertain Signs.'" *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 34, suppl., 2008, pp. S117-S129.
- , "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 2, 1988, pp. 155-177.
- D'Erasmo, Stacey. "The Exiled Heart." *Out*, May 1999, pp. 68-73, 118, 120.
- Dillon, Millicent. *A Little Original Sin: The Life and Work of Jane Bowles*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981.
- Dinshaw, Carolyn. *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*, Duke UP, 1999.
- Eckman, Fern Marja. *The Furious Passage of James Baldwin*, J.B. Lippincott, 1966.
- Elam, Michele, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin*, Cambridge UP, 2015.
- Eliot, T.S. "Introduction." In Barnes, pp. xvii-xxiii.
- Esty, William. "The Cities of the Plain." *New Republic* vol. 135 no. 25, 1956, p. 26.
- Faderman, Lillian, ed. *Chloe Plus Olivia: An Anthology of Lesbian Literature from the Seventeenth Century to the Present*, Viking, 1994.
- Faderman, Lillian. *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in the Twentieth Century*, Penguin, 1992 [Columbia UP, 1991].
- Fateman, Johanna. "A Fan's Notes." *Artforum International*, April/May 2014, p. 57.
- Felski, Rita. *The Uses of Literature*, Blackwell Publishing, 2008.
- Fiedler, Leslie A. "The Fate of the Novel." *The Kenyon Review*, vol. 10, no. 3, 1948, pp. 519-527.
- , "A Homosexual Dilemma." *New Leader*, vol. 39, no. 50, 10 December 1956, pp. 16-17.
- Field, Andrew. *Djuna: The Formidable Miss Barnes*, The U of Texas P, 1985.

- Field, Douglas. *All Those Strangers: The Art and Lives of James Baldwin*, Oxford UP, 2015.
- 1st things 1st. "The first official catalog of titles supplied by 1st things 1st—books for women—fe-mail order house," *Off Our Backs*, vol. 4, no. 5, 1974, pp. 1-10.
- Fish, Stanley. *Is There A Text In This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, Harvard UP, 1980.
- Forrest, Katherine V. *Murder at the Nightwood Bar*, Naiad Press, 1987.
- Foster, Guy Mark. "African American Literature and Queer Studies: The Conundrum of James Baldwin." *Companion to African American Literature*, edited by Gene A. Jarret, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, pp. 393-408.
- Foster, Jeannette H. *Sex Variant Women in Literature: A Historical and Quantitative Survey*, Vantage Press, 1956.
- Francis, Consuela. *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin, 1963-2010: "An Honest Man and a Good Writer"*, Camden House, 2014.
- Garza, Alicia. "A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement," blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. "The Master's Pieces: On Canon Formation and the African-American Tradition." *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 89, no. 1, 1990, p. 89. Rpt. in *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars*, Oxford UP, 1992, pp. 17-42.
- Ghansah, Rachel Kaadzi. "The Weight of James Arthur Baldwin." *BuzzFeed*, 29 February 2016.
- Gibson, Donald B. "James Baldwin: The Political Anatomy of Space." *James Baldwin, a Critical Evaluation*, edited by Therman B. O'Daniel, Howard UP, 1977, pp. 3-18.
- "Giovanni's Room: An Introduction." Philly AIDS Thrift @ Giovanni's Room. www.queerbooks.com and www.phillyaidsthriftatgiovannisroom.com.
- Goldstein, Richard. "'Go the Way Your Blood Beats': An Interview with James Baldwin (1984)." In *James Baldwin: The Legacy*, edited Quincy Troupe, Simon & Schuster, 1989, pp. 173-185.
- GoodReads.com, <http://www.goodreads.com>.
- Gray, Francine du Plessix. "The Literary View: Jane Bowles Reconsidered." *The New York Times*, 19 February 1978, pp. BR3.
- Hall, Stuart. "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse." Centre for Cultural Studies, U of Birmingham, CCS Stencilled Paper, no. 7, 1973. Rpt. as "Encoding/Decoding," *The Cultural Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., edited by Simon During, Routledge, 1999, pp. 507-517.
- Halperin, David M. *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*, U of Chicago P, 2002.

- Harris, Bertha. "The More Profound Nationality of Their Lesbianism: Lesbian Society in Paris in the 1920's." *Amazon Expedition: A Lesbian Feminist Anthology*, edited by Phyllis Birkby et al., Times Change Press, 1973, pp. 77-88.
- Haynes, Muriel. "The Toughness of Jane Bowles," *Ms.*, April 1978, pp. 33-35, 65.
- Henderson, Mae G. "James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*: Expatriation, 'Racial Drag,' and Homosexual Panic." Johnson and Henderson, pp. 298-322. Rpt. of "James Baldwin: Expatriation, Homosexual Panic, and Man's Estate." *Callaloo*, vol. 23 no. 1, 2000, pp. 313-327.
- Herring, Phillip. *Djuna: The Life and Work of Djuna Barnes*, Penguin, 1995.
- Hicks, Granville. "Tormented Triangle." *The New York Times*, 14 October 1956, p. BR3.
- Hogan, Kristen. *The Feminist Bookstore Movement: Lesbian Antiracism and Feminist Accountability*, Duke UP, 2016.
- Hughes, Langston. "From Harlem to Paris." *The New York Times*, 26 February 1956, p. BR26. Rpt in Kinnamon, pp. 9-10.
- , "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." *The Nation* vol. 122 no. 3181, 23 June 1926, pp. 692-694.
- Inge, M. Thomas, Maurice Duke, and Jackson R. Bryer, eds. *Black American Writers: Bibliographical Essays Vol. 2: Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Amiri Baraka*, St. Martin's P, 1978.
- Ivy, James W. "The Faerie Queenes." *The Crisis*, vol. 64, no. 2, 1957, p. 123.
- Jackson, Katherine Gauss. Review of *Two Serious Ladies* by Jane Bowles. *Harper's*, 1 June 1943, pp. 188.
- Jauss, Hans Robert. "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," translated by Elizabeth Benzinger. *New Literary History*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1970, pp. 7-37.
- Johnson, E. Patrick and Mae G. Henderson, ed. *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*. Duke UP, 2005.
- Johnson-Roullier, Cyraina. "(An)Other Modernism: James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, and the Rhetoric Of Flight." *Modern Fiction Studies* vol. 45 no. 4, 1999, p. 932.
- Joseph, Miranda. *Against the Romance of Community*, U of Minnesota P, 2002.
- Kachka, Boris. *Hothouse: The Art of Survival and the Survival of Art at America's Most Celebrated Publishing House*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013.
- Karlan, Sarah. "27 Must Have Queer Summer Reads." *BuzzFeed* 27 May 2013.
- Karp, David. "A Squalid World." *Saturday Review*, 1 December 1956, pp. 34-35.

- King, Jamilah. “#blacklivesmatter: How three friends turned a spontaneous Facebook post into a global phenomenon.” *The California Sunday Magazine*, 1 March 2015, CaliforniaSunday.com.
- Kinnamon, Kenneth, ed. *James Baldwin: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Prentice-Hall, 1974.
- Knopf, Marcy Jane. “Bi-nary Bi-sexuality: Jane Bowles’s *Two Serious Ladies*.” *RePresenting Bisexualities: Subjects and Cultures of Fluid Desire*, edited Donald E. Hall and Maria Pramaggiore, New York UP, 1996, pp. 142-164.
- Kolodny, Annette. “Some Notes on Defining a ‘Feminist Literary Criticism,’” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1975, pp. 75-92.
- Kraft, James. “Jane Bowles as Serious Lady.” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 1, no. 3, Spring 1968, pp. 273-277.
- Kreis, Anthony Michael. “Lawrence Meets Libel: Squaring Constitutional Norms with Sexual-Orientation Defamation.” *Yale Law Journal Online*, vol. 125, 2012.
- Lakritz, Andrew M. “Jane Bowles’s Other World.” *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters: Unmarried Women in the Twentieth-Century Novel*, ed. Laura L. Doan, U of Illinois P, 1991, pp. 213-234.
- Lauter, Paul. “History and the Canon.” *Social Text*, vol. 12, 1985, pp. 94-101.
- Lee, Felicia R. “Trying to Bring Baldwin’s Complex Voice Back to the Classroom.” *The New York Times*, 24 April 2014, p. A1.
- Lee, Judith. “Nightwood: The Sweetest Lie.” In Broe, pp. 207-218.
- Leeming, David. *James Baldwin: A Biography*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1994
- The Lesbrary. <https://lesbrary.com/>
- Literary Hub. “The Tournament of Literary Sex Writing: And the Winner Is...” *LitHub.com*, 8 April 2016.
- “Lost In Still Water,” *Time*, vol. 79, no. 16, 1962, p. 110.
- Love, Heather. *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, Harvard UP, 2007.
- Lynch, Lee. “Cruising the Libraries.” *Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revisions*, edited by Karla Jay and Joanne Glasgow, New York UP, 1990, pp. 39-48.
- Macebuh, Stanley. *James Baldwin: A Critical Study*, Joseph Okpaku—The Third Press, 1973.
- Marcus, Jane. “Laughing at Leviticus: *Nightwood* as Woman’s Circus Epic.” In Broe, pp. 221-250.
- , “Mousemeat: Contemporary Reviews of *Nightwood*,” in Broe, pp. 195-204.

- Martin, Douglas A. "Giovanni's Room by James Baldwin." *Fifty Gay and Lesbian Books Everybody Must Read*, edited by Richard Canning, Alyson Books, 2009, pp. 189-195.
- Martins, Susana S. "Gender Trouble and Lesbian Desire in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, no. 20, vol. 3, 1999, pp. 108-126.
- McBride, Dwight A., ed. *James Baldwin Now*, New York UP, 1999.
- . "Straight Black Studies: On African American Studies, James Baldwin, and Black Queer Studies." *Why I Hate Abercrombie and Fitch: Essays on Race and Sexuality*, New York UP, 2005, pp. 35-58. Rpt. in Johnson and Henderson, pp. 68-89.
- Meese, Elizabeth A. *(Sem)erotics : Theorizing Lesbian : Writing*, New York UP, 1992.
- Messerli, Douglas. *Djuna Barnes: A Bibliography*, David Lewis, 1975.
- Midnight in Paris*, directed by Woody Allen, Sony Pictures Classics, 2011.
- Miller, Nancy K. "Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing, and the Reader." *Feminist Studies / Critical Studies*, edited by Teresa de Lauretis, U of Indiana P, 1986, pp. 102-120.
- Moers, Ellen. *Literary Women*, Oxford UP, 1977 [1963].
- Mok, Annie. "The Song of the Lark: On Willa Cather and the Desire to Be Seen." *RookieMag.com*, 11 January 2016.
- Nakamura, Lisa. "'Words With Friends:' Socially Networked Reading on Goodreads." *PMLA*, vol. 128, no. 1, 2013, pp. 238-243.
- Nealon, Christopher. *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion Before Stonewall*, Duke UP, 2001.
- Nelson, Emmanuel S., ed. *Contemporary Gay American Novelists: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, Greenwood Press, 1993.
- Nelson, Maggie. *The Argonauts*, Graywolf P, 2015.
- . *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning*, Norton, 2011.
- Nichols, Charles H. "The New Calvinism." *Commentary*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1957, pp. 94-96.
- Olsen, Tillie. *Silences*, Delacorte Press, 1978.
- Porter, Horace. *Stealing the Fire: The Art and Protest of James Baldwin*, Wesleyan UP, 1989.
- Radway, Janice. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*, U of North Carolina P, 1984.
- Rahv, Philip. "The Taste of Nothing." *New Masses*, vol. 23, no. 7, 1937, pp. 32-33.

- Raymont, Henry. "From the Avant-garde of the Thirties, Djuna Barnes." *The New York Times*, 24 May 1971.
- Reid-Pharr, Robert F. "Tearing the Goat's Flesh: Homosexuality, Abjection and the Production of a Late Twentieth-Century Black Masculinity." *Studies in the Novel* vol. 28, no. 3, 1996, pp. 372-394.
- Rich, Adrienne. "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," *College English* vol. 34, no. 1, 1972, pp. 18-30.
- Richardson, Maurice. "New Novels." *New Statesman*, vol. 54, 19 October 1957, p. 509.
- Robinson, Lillian S. "Treason Our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1983, pp. 83-98.
- Rollyson, Carl and Lisa Paddock. *Susan Sontag: The Making of an Icon*, Norton, 2000.
- Ross, Marlon. "White Fantasies of Desire: Baldwin and the Racial Identities of Sexuality." In McBride, *James Baldwin Now*, pp. 13-55.
- Rule, Jane. *Lesbian Images*, Pocket Books, 1976.
- Samuels, Charles Thomas. "Serious Ladies." *New York Review of Books*, vol 7 no. 10, December 1966.
- Schott, Webster. "A Shriek from Wasted Women." *Life*, 16 December 1966, p. 17.
- Schreiber, Ron. "Giving a Gay Course." *College English*, vol. 36, no. 3, 1974, pp. 316-323.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*, U of California P, 1990.
- Shattuck, Roger. "'Nightwood' Resurrected." *The Village Voice*, vol. VII, no. 31, 24 May 1962, p. 10.
- Showalter, Elaine. "Women and the Literary Curriculum." *College English*, vol. 32, no. 8, 1971, pp. 855-862.
- Simpson, Paul, Michaela Bushell, and Helen Rodiss ed. *The Rough Guide to Cult Fiction*, Penguin, 2005.
- Skerl, Jennie. "The Legend of Jane Bowles: Stories of the Female Avant-Garde," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 41 no. 3, Fall 1999, pp. 262-279.
- , "Sallies into the Outside World: A Literary History of Jane Bowles." *A Tawdry Place of Salvation*, edited by Skerl, pp. 1-18.
- Skerl, Jennie, ed. *A Tawdry Place of Salvation: The Art of Jane Bowles*, Southern Illinois UP, 1997.
- Smith, Barbara. "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism." *Conditions*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1977, pp. 25-44. Rpt. In *The Radical Teacher* vol. 7, 1978, pp. 20-27.
- Solnit, Rebecca. *The Faraway Nearby*, Viking, 2013.

- . "Men Who Explain Things." *TomDispatch.com* 13 April 2008. Rpt. in *Men Explain Things to Me*, Haymarket Books, 2014.
- Sontag, Susan. *As Consciousness Is Harnessed to Flesh: Journals and Notebooks 1964-1980*, ed. David Rieff, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012.
- . *Reborn: Journals and Notebooks 1947-1963*, edited by David Rieff, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.
- Spohrer, Lauren. *Two Serious Ladies*, <http://www.twoseriousladies.org>
- Staiger, Janet. *Media Reception Studies*, New York UP, 2005.
- . *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception*, New York UP, 2000.
- Stein, Jordan Alexander. "American Literary History and Queer Temporalities." *American Literary History*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2013, pp. 855-869.
- Steiner, George. *On Difficulty and Other Essays*, Oxford UP, 1978.
- Sutton, Walter. "The Literary Image and the Reader: A Consideration of the Theory of Spatial Form." *The Journal of Aesthetic and Art Criticism*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1957, pp. 112-123.
- Terry, C. V. Review of *The City and the Pillar* by Gore Vidal. *The New York Times*, 11 January 1948, BR22.
- Thomas, Dylan. Review of *Nightwood*. *Light and Dark*, March 1937. Rpt in Marcus, "Mousemeat," pp. 199-200.
- Thomson, Allan. Review of *Giovanni's Room*. *The English Journal*, vol. 46, no. 1, 1957, pp. 55-56.
- Tillman, Lynne. *Haunted Houses*, Serpent's Tail—High Risk Books, 1987.
- Tillman, Lynne. "Nothing Is Lost or Found: Desperately Seeking Paul and Jane Bowles," *Tin House* vol. 1 no. 3, 2000, pp. 122-29. Rpt. in *What Would Lynne Tillman Do?* Red Lemonade, 2014, pp. 37-48.
- Tompkins, Jane P., ed. *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, Johns Hopkins UP, 1980.
- . *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860*, Oxford UP, 1985.
- Tortorici, Dayna, ed. *No Regrets: Three Discussions*, n + 1, 2013.
- Traub, Valerie. "The New Unhistoricism in Queer Studies." *PMLA*, vol. 128, no. 1, 2013, pp. 21-39.
- Troupe, Quincy, ed. *James Baldwin: The Legacy*, Simon & Schuster, 1989.
- Van Doren, Mark. Review of *Nightwood*. *The Nation*, 3 April 1937. Rpt in Marcus, "Mousemeat," p. 199.

- VIDA: Women in Literary Arts. "The 2015 VIDA Count: The Year of Intersectional Thinking," 30 March 2016, <http://www.vidaweb.org/category/the-count/>.
- Wagner, Geoffrey. Review of *The Collected Works of Jane Bowles*. *Commonweal*, vol. 85, no. 17, 3 February 1967, pp. 493-4.
- Walker, Cheryl. "Feminist Literary Criticism and the Author." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1990), pp. 551-571.
- Wallace, Maurice O. "On Being a Witness: Passion, Pedagogy, and the Legacy of James Baldwin." Johnson and Henderson, pp. 276-286.
- Walton, Edith H. "Fantastic Duo." *The New York Times*, 9 May 1943, pp. BR14.
- Warner, Michael. *Publics and Counterpublics*, Zone Books, 2002.
- Waters, John. *Role Models*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010.
- Watkins, Claire Vaye. "On Pandering." *Tin House.com*, 23 November 2015.
- We Need Diverse Books. <http://weneeddiversebooks.org>.
- Wenger, Tara. Letter. *Out*, November 1999, p. 36.
- West, Anthony. "At Home and Abroad." *New Yorker*, 10 November 1956, pp. 219-226.
- Williams, Joy. Introduction, *My Sister's Hand in Mine: The Collected Works of Jane Bowles*, 2nd Ed., Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005, pp. vii-xii.
- Williams, Thomas Chatterton. "Breaking into James Baldwin's House." *NewYorker.com*, 28 October 2015.
- Wimsatt, W. K. Jr., and M. C. Beardsley. "The Intentional Fallacy." *Sewanee Review*, vol. 54, 1946, pp. 468-488.
- Winterson, Jeanette. "Preface." In Barnes, pp. ix-xvi.
- Woodson, Jacqueline. "Why James Baldwin Still Matters." *Vanity Fair.com*, 2 May 2016.
- Zambreno, Kate. *Heroines*, Semiotext(e), 2012.

GOODREADS REVIEWS OF NIGHTWOOD

- Abby. Review of *Nightwood*, *Goodreads*, September 21, 2014
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/207154188>.
- Dan. Review of *Nightwood*, *Goodreads*, February 1, 2012
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/268345748>.
- Doerr, Jennifer. Review of *Nightwood*, *Goodreads*, February 28, 2012,
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/285878254>.

- Feher, Sonya. Review of *Nightwood*, *Goodreads*, January 13, 2010, <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/84922816>.
- Jamie. Review of *Nightwood*, *Goodreads*, April 17, 2010, <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/49102304>.
- Lane, Philip. Review of *Nightwood*, *Goodreads*, January 11, 2012, <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/257747883>.
- Michael, Keith. Review of *Nightwood*, *Goodreads*, August 30, 2010, <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/109026816>.
- Richard Reviles Censorship Always in All Ways. Review of *Nightwood*, *Goodreads*, February 19, 2012, <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/280568845>.
- Rob. Review of *Nightwood*, *Goodreads*, May 3, 2011, <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/165043067>.
- Summer. Review of *Nightwood*, *Goodreads*, September 10, 2007, <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/798000>.
- Tyler. Review of *Nightwood*, *Goodreads*, March 20, 2009, <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/49894195>.
- Watson, Elizabeth. Review of *Nightwood*, *Goodreads*, January 19, 2012, <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/264388386>.
- Zach. Review of *Nightwood*, *Goodreads*, April 24, 2011, <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/161650108>.

GOODREADS REVIEWS OF GIOVANNI'S ROOM

- Berman, Tosh. Review of *Giovanni's Room*, *Goodreads*, 31 March 2008, <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/8057311>.
- Cheryl. Review of *Giovanni's Room*, *Goodreads*, 20 February 2015, <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1167154096>.
- Chrissie. Review of *Giovanni's Room*, *Goodreads*, 15 June 2015, <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/22916517>.
- David. Review of *Giovanni's Room*, *Goodreads*, 13 January 2014, <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/560793360>.
- Keeten, Jeffrey. Review of *Giovanni's Room*, *Goodreads*, 19 August 2015, <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/876509365>.
- Michael. Review of *Giovanni's Room*, *Goodreads*, 24 June 2014, <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/959998412>.

- Pink. Review of *Giovanni's Room*, *Goodreads*, 5 July 2015,
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/773738102>.
- Whitaker. Review of *Giovanni's Room*, *Goodreads*, 10 March 2009,
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/48799999>.

GOODREADS REVIEWS OF TWO SERIOUS LADIES

- Eugene. Review of *Two Serious Ladies*, *Goodreads*, 9 April 2012,
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/307754647>.
- Kruse, Denise. Review of *Two Serious Ladies*, *Goodreads*, 6 April 2016,
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1602883189>.
- Sara, Review of *Two Serious Ladies*, *Goodreads*, 4 May 2014,
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/927964386>.
- Sara, Review of *Two Serious Ladies*, *Goodreads*, 18 May 2015,
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1272130036>.
- Stephanie. Review of *Two Serious Ladies*, *Goodreads*, 16 April 2016,
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1609143457>.
- Tony. Review of *Two Serious Ladies*, *Goodreads*, 31 March 2016,
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1593924650>.

Vita

Laura K. Wallace received a BA from Kenyon College in 2006 and an MA from The University of Texas at Austin in 2012.

Permanent email: laura.k.wallace@utexas.edu

This dissertation was typed by Laura K. Wallace.