

Black Transatlantic Literary Studies and the Case of James Baldwin

James Baldwin's notion of »European innocence« may seem ignorant at first glance. Gianna Zocco (Leibniz Center for Literary and Cultural Research) objects. In her essay, she traces a reverse colonial gaze at supposedly »white« Europe – and explains en passant the significance of Black Transatlantic Literary Studies.

By Gianna Zocco

When I think about what brought me into the field of Transatlantic Literary Studies, I recognize that much of it is connected to my reading of one particular author: James Baldwin. I read my first Baldwin-novel – *Giovanni's Room* – around 2012, and committed myself to the initially private project of getting to know most of his published novels and essays finding myself both suffering from the hardships and enjoying the privileges of being a post-doc. Why this period of regained liberty to pursue new research paths (which was also a time of questioned professional orientation and increased self-doubt) culminated in my involvement with the ›Black Atlantic‹ from a (white) German/European perspective, is, I think, much related to the complex and far-reaching questions my reading of Baldwin opened up. Baldwin, a self-described »trans-Atlantic commuter« (Terkel 1961: 15), said that he left the U.S. for Paris as a 24-year-old aspiring writer »because I knew two things. I knew that if I went on like that I would go under, if I stayed I would certainly kill somebody« (Binder 1980: 202). One of the most striking consequences of his prolonged stay in Paris was the transformative effect this had on his perception of the U.S.: »I began to see this country for the first time. If I hadn't gone away, I would never have been able to see it; and if I was unable to see it, I would never have been able to forgive it.« (Terkel 1961: 15)

Although my ongoing research does not solely focus on Baldwin and his transatlantic experiences, it does – in a change of perspective comparable to expatriate Baldwin's reflections on the U.S. – study the role of my own home country, Germany, as both an imagined space and a ›physical‹ place of connection and exchange in African-American and Black diasporic literature. I will use Baldwin as a case in point for the purposes of this essay. With him as example in what follows, I wish to reflect on some of the key areas of study and research that I see within Transatlantic Literary Studies when it takes into account the experiences of African-American and ›Black Atlantic‹ writers, whose ancestors typically were forced into their first Atlantic crossing along the course of the Middle Passage. As you will note, the areas I suggest do not only relate to my reading of Baldwin, but also to my background in ›classical‹ comparative literary studies as taught and studied in the German-speaking countries of Europe, with its traditional self-conception as ›complementary‹ to the national philologies and with its central focus on different forms of literary ›contact‹ across national and linguistic borders.

Images

»Someone, some day, should do a study in depth of the role of the American Negro in the mind and life of Europe, and the extraordinary perils, different from those of America but not less grave, which the American Negro encounters in the Old World.« (Baldwin 1961, 249) This sentence, set in parenthesis, appears in an essay about the untimely death of the African-American writer Richard Wright, who had supported Baldwin as a friend and mentor in his early years, while the relationship had later suffered from Baldwin's criticism of the novel *Native Son* in his seminal essay »Everybody's Protest Novel« (1949). Forming the end of a paragraph that discusses how Wright, also an expatriate living in Paris, considered his adopted home the »city of refuge« (ibid.), this somewhat cryptic passage entails much of why I think imagology – to use the traditional designation of a specialism in comparative literature that studies literary »representations of national character« as »discursive objects: narrative objects and rhetorical formulae« (Leerssen 2016: 16) – might gain insights from researching the images of Europe as a continent and European nations as individual entities in African-American and Black diasporic literature.

First, such a perspective reverses the traditional colonialist gaze of the white subject towards the Black ›Other‹ and complements the still more frequent research focus on representations of Black people in Western culture. By paying attention to the literary and cultural productions of racialized subjects, such a reversal considers the active roles that Black protagonists have taken when engaging with Europe. This does not only foster an understanding of how Black influences »have either changed Europe directly or enabled a revision of certain aspects in Europe« (Raphael-Hernandez 2004: 2), but also points to the aesthetic, political, or otherwise strategic *uses* of Europe in Black literature. Baldwin's essay »Stranger in the Village« is a prime example. It employs the notion of a »European innocence« (1955: 128), which may appear disturbing given Europe's responsibility for the horrors of two world wars and colonialism. However, Baldwin's use of this phrase is clearly strategic. It relates to his stay in a remote Swiss mountain village where inhabitants had purportedly never seen a Black person before him, and which, in his essay, came to represent (pre-colonial) »prototypes (preserved like coelacanths) of attitudes that had evolved into the more intimate, intricate, familiar, and obscene American forms of white supremacy that he already knew so well.« (Cole 2016: 12) In other words: Baldwin's ›ethnographic‹ image of the European villagers as uncivilized, child-like, and historically backwards says less about Europe's actual innocence than about America's definite lack of innocence, as it uses that concept to make the argument – remindful in style and content of Henry James's elaborate accounts of the Old World/New World-dynamics – that America with its 400-year-old history of slavery and racial oppression cannot afford to claim itself free of guilt and responsibility in relation to its Black population.

But this is not the only insight for imagology we can draw from the above passage in Baldwin's 1961 essay. While Baldwin admits that Wright's description of Paris as »city of refuge« is certainly true »for

the likes of us« – meaning those »armed with American passports« – he names the question of »the meaning of Europe for an American Negro« to be »one of the things about which Richard Wright and I disagreed most vehemently.« (1961: 249) The reason he gives for this disagreement is the realization that »Paris was not a city of refuge for the French, still less for anyone belonging to France« (ibid.). This can be read as an allusion to the discriminations that people from the (former) French colonies and especially those from North Africa encountered in Paris during Baldwin’s years there, which partly coincided with the Algerian War. The first insight we can draw from this resonates with David D. Kim’s plea for Transatlantic Literary Studies to be part of a global literary history. The need to pay particular attention to cultural, linguistic, religious, and international diversities, which Kim emphasizes in the inaugural [contribution](#) to this blog, means in this case that our understanding of African-American images of Europe can become more precise when we are attentive to ›internal‹ and ›external‹ differences. This requires us to relate those images to diversities in terms of gender, sexual orientation, religion, or class within a homogenous national, ethnic or ›racial‹ group, and to put them in juxtaposition with the often diverging representations of Europe we can find in, for example, African diasporic or so-called ›migration literature‹.

A second insight is more general. As Baldwin proceeds to write that »[i]t did not seem worthwhile to me to have fled the native fantasy only to embrace a foreign one« (ibid.) and before he concludes the paragraph with the above quoted warning of »the extraordinary perils« for African-Americans in the Old World, it seems that by »perils« he refers to the dangers of misperceptions and false projections that are characteristic of the transatlantic relationship on the level of ›images‹. Does it seem too far-fetched to find in this warning a clarification of the earlier notion of »European innocence«? After all, »European innocence«, just as the French myth of color-blindness – which is probably the main point of reference when Baldwin writes of »foreign« fantasies – runs the danger of functioning as a reassuring European self-image, welcomes the comparatively positive experiences of African-Americans in the Old World as a comforting confirmation, but is blind to Europe’s own overlooked responsibilities in other contexts.¹ This dynamic of misappropriations and projections is one of the most fascinating, but also most intricate, characteristics of transatlantic images of self and other – and, as we should not forget to keep in mind, it is a dynamic to which not only our researched objects are susceptible, but also we as their scholars.

Intertexts

As should have become clear at this point in my contribution, the study of national auto- and hetero-images (sometimes also called »ethnotypes«) is a highly complex, often ambiguous endeavor that – as Joep Leerssen puts it – »can be rubricated as intertextual, contextual, and textual« (2016: 20). This

¹ In addition, »European innocence« runs the risk of »reinstat[ing] the narrative that people of color cannot really be from Europe because originally there were only white Europeans.« See Pinto, Jovita dos Santos et al.: »Baldwin’s Transatlantic Reverberations: Between ›Stranger in the Village‹ and *I Am Not Your Negro*.« In: *James Baldwin Review* 6/1 (2020), pp. 176–198, here p. 185, <https://doi.org/10.7227/JBR.6.12>.

means that one of the things their understanding requires is particular attention to intertextuality, since »[t]he characterological profile of a given ethnotype is the end result of a long accumulation of individual textual instances, and this accumulation in turn is the sounding board against which the individual instance reverberates.« (ibid.) While intertextuality is important for comprehending the complex ›conversation‹ of Baldwin's images of Europe with those by Henry James, Richard Wright, and others, I want to expand Leerssen's argument to the role of intertextuality in (Black) Transatlantic Literary Studies more broadly.

In the years after my first encounter with Baldwin's books, my reading of most of his published writings quickly developed into a larger project of getting to know the works of many more – African-American and other – writers (and also filmmakers, visual artists, musicians, etc.) who were mentioned somewhere in Baldwin's texts: Charles Dickens, Toni Morrison, Eldridge Cleaver, Simone de Beauvoir, the King James Bible, Lorraine Hansberry, William Styron ... (not to speak of my much longer list of unread, but notable authors whose names I have also stumbled upon while reading Baldwin). But while the influence of ›canonical‹ writers on Baldwin and the intertextual relations between Baldwin and other African-American authors are rather traditional, well-established fields of study, I think that the role of Baldwin as a model, inspiration, and intertextual conversation partner for (Black and white) European writers (and artists) of his own and later generations deserves more academic attention.

Although I cannot claim to have an overview of all protagonists such a project would have to encompass (and am most qualified to speak for the German context only), I am certain that one could begin as early as the 1950s when – ten years before the first German translation of one of his books was published in 1963 – a German version of the essay »Everybody's Protest Novel« appeared in the multilingual journal *Perspektiven* and was translated by a young writer named Paul Celan (cf. Zocco 2016: 135–137). And while it was one of the consequences of Baldwin's prolonged stays in Europe that he became a conversation partner for European writers, filmmakers, and artists as different as Ingmar Bergman, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Pierre Koralnik, Yan Kai Nielsen, Caryl Phillips, and Fritz Raddatz, the ›world literary value‹ that Baldwin has recently reached makes it probable that there are many more intertextual and intermedial relations to discover in the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

In this sense, I am rather sure that Eddie Glaude's recent diagnosis that »James Baldwin is everywhere« (2016) is not only true for the spheres of popular culture, social media, literary production, and the Black Lives Matter movement in the U.S., but that there is a transatlantic, if not global »Baldwin brand« (Zaborowska 2020: 200). My own, only superficial research on German writers, revealed, for example, the intertextual presence of Baldwin in Yadé Kara's novel *Selam Berlin* (2003), his influence on the author and journalist [Carolyn Emcke](#), and him being quoted in the motto of Sasha Marianna Salzmann's recent novel *Außer sich* (2017). I have no doubt that there are many more fascinating cases to discover. And while I find it important to preserve an openness for unexpected, surprising connections that might

be, literally, »everywhere«, I want to direct your attention to one particularly intriguing case of Transatlantic Literary Studies: intertextual relations between African-American and Afro-German writers. Leroy Hopkins has described some characteristics of Afro-German literature as remindful of established traditions in African-American literature: »Without suggesting slavish imitation, it is noteworthy that in attempting to find their own voice Afro-Germans employed a discursive strategy also used by the emerging Black communities in the Atlantic world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: autobiography.« (2005: 186) When it comes to naming African-American writers of particular influence to their Afro-German counterparts, it is certainly the poet and activist [Audre Lorde](#) who should be mentioned first. That the case of Baldwin, however, is also worth studying is confirmed by Raja Lubinetzki, one of the Afro-German women whose experiences are described in the groundbreaking volume [Farbe bekennen](#) (1986), to which Lorde contributed the foreword. Lubinetzki, a poet and painter, says of her own schooldays in the GDR: »I've always read Afro-American literature, which I discovered in libraries. Richard Wright's *Native Son*, for example, and James Baldwin – that was the beginning of the ›Black is beautiful‹ movement. Around that time I once wrote something about my feelings and thoughts, and it came out in the form of a poem.« (Lubinetzki 1992: 218).

Reception and archives

The attention that the fields of book studies and transatlantic literary archives already receive in the blog contributions by Corinna Norrick-Rühl and Tim Sommer will hopefully compensate for the brevity with which I introduce this field as a third area for Black Transatlantic Literary Studies. In an older project on the initial reception of Baldwin in Germany, I was surprised to learn about his success and prominence in the 1960s: His novels and essays – most of them published by Rowohlt, and some of them also by publishers such as Volk und Welt and Aufbau in the GDR – sold well; he went on reading tours; there were extensive reviews in many German newspapers and magazines, his plays were staged by various theaters in the German-speaking countries ... Compared to this astounding degree of popularity, it seemed difficult to explain why Baldwin's name was almost forgotten and his books out of print in Germany until very recently when – stimulated by his renewed worldwide popularity – the [dtv Verlagsgesellschaft](#) committed itself to the endeavor of republishing Baldwin in German. Since 2018, three books were published and two more are announced to come out in 2021, all of them newly translated by Miriam Mandelkow.

Aside from comparisons of the translations and their reception in the 1960s and the 2010/20s, and from the study of specific regions such as the GDR or Switzerland, I think that the whole field of ›invisible‹ communications (letters, telegrams, publisher's contracts, preliminary versions of translations, unrealized projects, etc.) and ›invisible‹ protagonists (editors, literary agents, translators, journalists, etc.) holds great potential within Black Transatlantic Literary Studies. When I researched [the relation between Baldwin and his German editor Fritz Raddatz](#), my time at the *Deutsches Literaturarchiv* in

Marbach was limited, but the archive's staff was kind enough to allow me a quick glance at the Baldwin papers in the Rowohlt publisher's archive. In a few hours, I flipped through letters exchanged between Baldwin, Raddatz, Heinrich Maria Ledig-Rowohlt, Baldwin's German agent Ruth Liepman, and others, which – among other topics – address questions concerning the staging of Baldwin's plays in Germany with white characters only, tensions between Baldwin and his publishers and agents in different countries, the translation of African-American English, the organization of a reading tour, and the fate of some Marzipan sent by Ledig-Rowohlt to Baldwin's family in New York. Considering that my research concerned only one author and that Marbach is only one archive where material can be located – another one worth exploring is, for example, the [Vera Heyer Archiv](#) in Berlin-Wedding – I am convinced that the research of Black transatlantic archives offers a lot to teach us about American and European societies, their changing self-conceptions, and the precarious positions of African-Americans and African-Europeans within these societies.

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Illustrations

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