



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures, Faculty of Arts,
Charles University

- Ms. Emanuela Maltese
- “*Blackness Next Time: James Baldwin’s Prophecies of Beauty and Love*”
- Doctoral Dissertation
- Opponent’s Report

Brief summary of subject: The thesis articulates the basic aspects of US author James Baldwin’s prophetic pronouncements on the categories of beauty and love.

Methodology and structure: The thesis contains a Linguistic Note, an Introduction, four principal chapters including 1: Critical “Afterlife”: Baldwin’s *This Time* with four subsections, 2: James Baldwin’s Prophecy: *blackness Next Time* with four subunits, 3: Prophecy I: The Beauty of *blackness* with four subsections, 4: Prophecy II: The Love of *blackness* with seven subunits, a Conclusion, and a Bibliography. To be clear, the thesis blends theoretical and historical informed approaches with rigorous close reading of its chosen textual objects of focus.

Achievements: The academic quality of the document and its contribution to research and originality may be discerned in such passages as the following ones; we read notably, “The study of *blackness* proposed in this thesis is influenced by two specific branches of Black radicalism: black optimism, as articulated by cultural theorist Moten, and Black Feminist Poethics, as presented by philosopher and artist Ferreira da Silva” (4). As such, “The [first] strand prioritizes the social energy and creative expression of Black life, by extending it to a model for all humanity. The second strand [. . .] advocates an alternative form of knowledge named Black Feminist Poethics, which combines creativity and responsibility, and draws from Black female science fiction” (4). The candidate continues to say that both accounts share a “desire to re-found the world from a new angle and question the rigid systems of categorization that uphold political and social capitalism, which is rooted in the historical subjugation of Black people via enslavement and racialization. This view corrects Marxism’s materialist consideration of capitalism and offers a critique of the poststructuralist turn in critical theory” (4). I also comment on this foregoing passage below in “Shortcomings”.

More crucially, we read: “Central to the thesis is my argument that Baldwin anticipated through his own exemplary life and oeuvre the desire to change the perception and knowledge of both the world and the word, as also shared by Black radicalism. As a result, he can be regarded as a prophet of *blackness*” (4). Also, Maltese writes: “Three literary devices will be employed in demonstrating this sophisticated re-reading project: contrapuntal reading, *augmentation*, and apposition, which are derived from musical language, translation, linguistics, and biology. Edward Said’s piano-based idea that texts might be understood as musical counterpoints that reciprocally convey the political and socio-cultural connections of the world’s texts inspired this strategy. Contrapuntal reading of earlier and later works will reveal Baldwin’s persistent exile sense [. . .]” (5). Another key point is how the thesis argues



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for: “a return to the world [for the Subject] as a Plenum (Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz), where all existing creatures are virtually and nonlocally interconnected and different but inseparable” (8). This tack inspires interest in the present reader. In addition, we learn that Baldwin “embodies a new kind of prophet, who envisions the termination of the socio-political arsenal that subtends institutions and systems of knowledge” (8). To be clear, “Baldwin’s Plenum stage, after Ferreira da Silva’s discussion on the plenum. In this stage, the beauty of blackness is expressed through the “implicancy” of all senses and an invitation to accept “exsense” (Harney and Moten): that which goes beyond sense and exists outside of it, thus eluding comprehension” (9). In sum, “What is at stake, and I seek to demonstrate it, is the writer’s desire to imagine and practice a revolutionary mode of living and knowing the world, both aesthetically and ethically” (10).

In Chapter 1 we learn that “By the 1960s, Baldwin clearly perceived his mission as a writer to be more “organic,” in the Gramscian sense of the word. He was a witness and, as a witness, he had to make change possible” (24). Baldwin’s multipronged complexity too we learn requires that his “unclassifiable vast corpus prevents criticism, as the one here proposed from adopting a single methodology, in favor of a multidisciplinary approach” (25). “[C]ontact zones between postcolonialism and Baldwin’s diasporic identity and intellectual commitment” (25) do exist moreover in truth. In two key Baldwin texts, *Notes of a Native Son* and *Nobody Knows My Name* we find that his “own experiences seek to build a bridge between personal suffering and general human pain to the necessity of hope for joy, love, and beauty” (35). For Baldwin, “Love should not only foster the endeavor to be responsible for each other’s lives, but also urge change for future generations, who are more important [. . .]” (44). We also learn that “Trans* also seeks to discard the ontological, theological, colonial, and patriarchal practice of naming” (50). Fascinatingly, “For Baldwin this energy, or power, is love. Baldwin’s love, as Field asserts, is a complex blend of sensuality and a responsible will to change. Against American Puritan prohibition and inhibition of spiritual and bodily contact, he emphasizes touch [. . .]” (55).

With Chapter 2 we learn that “Baldwin’s preference for using prophecy as a rhetorical technique echoes the abdication of politics as we know it” (71). In Chapter 4 we are taught to know that Baldwin’s major paper friends in the construction of his prophecy of love included “Pentecostal rhetoric, African American music, and his own readings of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Charles Dickens, Henry James, and the King James Bible, love becomes at once a blues melody, a work of the self (*Notes from the Underground*), a revolution (*A Tale of Two Cities*), a vehicle for gender hybridization (*Portrait of a Lady*), and a means of redemption (*King James Bible*)” (142).

In Chapter 3 we encounter the fascinating idea that Baldwin “was “strange” because no matter how “unsophisticated” he “of course” was as a child, he “understood *that*” the wor(l)d needed



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to be seen and looked *through*, and not at. Opacity was what he was reclaiming as his own right” (138).

One key quote of the whole thesis is this one from Chapter 4 from Baldwin:

I starved in Paris for a while, but I learned something: for one thing, I fell in love. Or, more accurately, I realized, and accepted for the first time that love was not merely a general, human possibility, not merely the disaster it had so often, by then, been for me—according to me—nor was it something that happened to other people, like death, nor was it merely a mortal danger: it was among *my* possibilities, for here it was, breathing and belching beside me, and it was the key to life. Not merely the key to *my* life, but to life itself. (160)

Most importantly, “In *Another Country*, Baldwin advances a spiritual rebirth which is also a denouncement of both American exceptionalism and Black nationalism” (169). Not only this but we encounter the idea of “Baldwin’s trans-cartography, which is also a cartography of solidarity and love, strongly rooted in Black radicalism, and anti-colonialism” (172). And from *A Dialogue* we read of “Giovanni: Love is a tremendous responsibility. Baldwin: It’s the only one to take, there isn’t any other” (173). Extraordinarily, the late style Baldwin though fallen out of favor in a neoliberal and a militantly reactionary era of time “still harbored revolutionary hope, and especially for the children of the world, as he implied in the ending of *If Beale Street Could Talk*” (186).

Shortcomings: The thesis should be according to the description online a minimum of 43, 000 words, and yet this one is to this reader at least excessive at 81, 018 words; this seems too many words over the limit frankly. So the thesis could have been on my view more succinct. It could be tighter in its construction as well accordingly. Also, a somewhat anti-Marxian rhetoric and tone [e.g., as abovenoted under “Achievements” where we read again to be sure of a “desire to re-found the world from a new angle and question the rigid systems of categorization that uphold political and social capitalism, which is rooted in the historical subjugation of Black people via enslavement and racialization. This view corrects Marxism’s materialist consideration of capitalism and offers a critique of the poststructuralist turn in critical theory” (4)] pops up on occasion in the thesis, something that a more nuanced, complete, and dialectical account would correct, especially given that historically the Marxist problematic opens up the pathway for the other theoretical approaches, including those engaged in the present document. In this regard then, a more dialectical and fully fledged account could have been deployed for engaging the category of materialism vis-à-vis such approaches as the foregoing; or, at least a more thorough clarification of the issues involved would have been productive and illuminating.



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Formal features (e.g., language & style, referencing, bibliography, formatting, abstracts): The formal aspects are good. There are some typos/errors in the language such as: “if recovering” from a quote should be “of recovering” (22), quote here should be checked where we read “to surmount and ed to surmount” (28), also this one should be checked “that emasculates the male and abused of the female” (35), this needs revising, “everybody (‘s body, soul, and flesh)” (53), also a space too many between “reveal the beloved” in a quote (53), “you could be said to be have been studying” (58, fn. 220 should be checked), “his main prophets” should be “its main prophets” (89), quote here should be revised “*chains fell of*” to “*chains fell off*” (106), this quote needs checking, “America than in all other Western nations” (116), this quote needs checking “from out from out there” (116), from a quote “Heros” should be “Heroes” (125), on p. 129 “Wells” is twice misspelled; it should be “Welles”, “wandered” should be “wondered” (137), “known revolution” should read as “known as revolution” (137), “breaths” should be “breathes” (140), “reveling” should be “revealing” (162), “although sounds utopian” should be “although it sounds utopian” (196), “notoriety” on p. 197 does not seem the right word if its dictionary definition is taken into account, “suggested me” should be “suggested to me” (198), and the syntax falls down here on the last page of the body of the text where we read, “However, they have the potential to prompt a reassessment on the *how* of knowledge has influenced the way we think and do” (200); I fail to understand this sentence.

Questions: What is the candidate’s elaborated position on this point, “Baldwin’s writing is certainly situated beyond any dialectics to imagine a more complex reality and an incommensurable identity” (40). Crucially it would seem that Baldwin’s preoccupation with the religious cannot be taken into sufficient account by the contemporary sensibility. What does the candidate believe would be one way to correct this state of affairs? Third question: “the word revolution, for Baldwin entails not only a change in the social and political structure of a nation, but also a change in how one feels, learns, and knows” (59). Can the candidate expand upon this matter? Fourth and related question to the previous three, for any Baldwinian project of individual and social transformation, what would be the approach and understanding to the notion of materialism?

Conclusion: I provisionally classify the submitted dissertation as “*Passed*”.

Prague, 29 vii 24
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