

**Emanuela Maltese, PhD.**

***blackness* Next Time: James Baldwin's Prophecies of Beauty and Love**

**Doctoral Thesis**

**Supervisor's Report**

The dissertation presents James Baldwin as “a prophet of *blackness*”— *blackness* understood as a notion influenced by Black radicalism (particularly the cultural theories of Fred Moten) on the one hand and Denise Ferreira da Silva's alternative epistemology of Black Feminist Poethics on the other. “Both streams of thought,” Emanuela Maltese argues, “converge in their common 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” (4). Prophecy is underscored as Baldwin's preferred modality because in Maltese's view it may convey the complexity of current events while at the same time opening the possibility of change. Propheying *blackness* as beauty and love in particular (“beauty and love are two of the primary emanations of his prophecy” [5]), Baldwin “hopes for a change in the perception and understanding of human life and language” (5). To illustrate the importance of the prophecy of *blackness* for the writer, Maltese relies on three interpretative techniques of his oeuvre: contrapuntal reading, augmentation and apposition.

Whereas the first two chapters, which are primarily though not solely historical and theoretical, consider the current resurgence of Baldwin's oeuvre (its “afterlife”) within various disciplinary frameworks that range from cultural studies and postcolonial criticism to feminism, LGBTQ+ and, centrally, Black radicalism, chapters three and four focus on selected non-fictional and fictional works. These include essays such as “The Fire Next Time,” “No Name in the Street” and “Notes of a Native Son” as well as the novels *Another Country* and *If Beale Street Could Talk*.

The entire dissertation is thoroughly researched, supported with criticism, and written in an intricate, sophisticated and challenging manner (at times, though, the prose could be perhaps more concise). Particularly in the first two chapters, Maltese often digresses into deeper explorations of the aforementioned theoretical perspectives but since she continues to link these with Baldwin's work, the writer emerges as a prophet of not only *blackness* but also as a prophet of postcolonialism, intersectionality, feminism and transness, among others. This creatively affirms current interpretations of Baldwin's oeuvre as more than retrospective impositions of contemporary

criticism. The third chapter likewise offers broader theoretical reflections on aesthetics, besides elaborating on Baldwin's vision and prophecy of beauty; the fourth chapter then includes a closer literary analysis of the two abovementioned novels, with the intention to argue that "the Harlem writer's words lead to and contain a profound philosophy of and for love: in other words, a loving knowledge of love" (142).

Since the beginning of her doctoral studies at Charles University, Maltese has continued to develop her academic profile by participating in a variety of exchanges and seminars, such as the European Graduate School seminar with Stefano Harney and Fred Moten. She has taught at the Dutch Art Academy and worked for Archive Books, translated several works (including Harney and Moten's *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*), copy-edited books and exhibition catalogues, and published numerous articles not solely on Baldwin but also on women in film, for example. Her work on Baldwin is nevertheless worth highlighting as Maltese not only published several articles about him but also received the Graduate Student Essay Award from the *James Baldwin Review* for the essay "'Love is the Key': James Baldwin's Poethics of Love." Needless to add, during her doctoral studies, she has proceeded exceptionally independently. The questions I have had for the most part suggested developing the dissertation into other—possible but not necessary—directions. Some of these could be addressed during the defense.

For example, several times the dissertation mentions Marxism. With reference to Cedric J. Robinson's work, Marxism is criticized for inadequately conceptualizing racialization of non-Europeans, excluding struggles that took place outside Europe, and most crucially for apparently relying on "the notion that capitalism terminated the old order, feudalism, and racism" (57). As a correction, Maltese advances Robinson's concept of "racial capitalism." To my knowledge, since the day of Marx, Marxism has (or, Marxisms have) developed to address race, gender and other forms of oppression more systematically, integral as they are to capitalism. Why should Marxism be considered "a European theory [... that] cannot fully account for the racialization of non-European people, or at least [...] its social struggle cannot be extended to the anti-racial one" (63)? What about non-European thinkers who have continued to develop Marxist theories?

Second, the idea that "in the hold of the slave ship, there was an experimental laboratory of fantasy, love, and beauty" (59) remains in my view problematic; if the struggle to survive in unbearable and inhumane conditions leads to a static entanglement of oppression on one side and "fantasy, love, and beauty" on the other, there is no hope of overcoming oppression. Although Maltese acknowledges this as a "delicate issue" (59) and the entire dissertation repeatedly considers



possibilities of fugitivity and resistance, there could have been more emphasis on the process by which “fantasy, love, and beauty” may negate and terminate the deplorable condition (rather than emerging and existing alongside). In that context, too, could there be a clearer articulation of the political dimensions of “poethics”; in other words, what could be the “poethics” of *blackness*, the tactics and strategies of “fantasy, love, and beauty”? When it comes to the reading of *Another Country* and *If Beale Street Could Talk*, for example, it remains unclear to me how love may redeem violence, destruction, anxiety, humiliation and sexual exploitation that permeate the characters’ relations. Also, what about justice, alongside love and beauty?

One last lingering question I have for the defense concerns translations of Baldwin’s work into other languages. Maltese argues: “If postcolonialism is meant to reconsider power relations, promote counternarratives, and transnationalism, and reread canonical texts not only ‘under Western eyes,’ then Baldwin anticipated postcolonialism” (18). To what extent is his work translated and how influential it is in non-Western contexts?

With these questions, as a supervisor, I hereby recommend to the board that the doctoral thesis be admitted to the next stage of the defense process. I suggest a pre-defense mark for the dissertation of “Pass.”



Pavla Veselá, PhD.

Prague, 15<sup>th</sup> August 2024