James Baldwin and the Literary Constitution of Blackness

Seminar: Amerikanische Literatur und Cultural Studies, 5CP
050694 M.A. Studium

Lecturer: PD Dr. Stefan L. Brandt
Room and time: GB 5/39, Tuesdays, 14-16
First session: April 21, 2009

Short description:
Without a doubt, James Baldwin (1924-1987) was one of the most influential and innovative writers of the American 20th century. His oeuvre—which encompasses both fictional and non-fictional texts—deals with issues of ethnic and sexual identity. Here, Baldwin’s painful adolescence in Harlem is thematized, but also his emigration to Paris in the 1950s. This seminar will start with a close reading of Baldwin’s autobiographical bildungssroman Go Tell It On the Mountain (1953), then discuss the writer’s collection of critical essays, Notes of a Native Son (1955), and his controversial novel Giovanni’s Room (1956). Themes to be discussed in class include expatriation, hetero-, bi- and homosexuality, lynching, racial discrimination, and ethnic identity. We will look at the roots of Baldwin’s aesthetic concepts in the Harlem Renaissance and especially in Richard Wright’s oeuvre (e.g., his novel Native Son) as well as scrutinize the historical background of racism and segregation in the American Fifties and Sixties. For a general introduction to the topic, see Katharine L. Balfour’s The Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of American Democracy (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2001).

Grading: Quality of class participation counts 1/3; expert session 1/3; final paper of ca. fifteen pages 1/3. Poor attendance or class participation will negatively affect your grade.

Deadline for Final Papers: Friday, October 30, 2009. Note: There is no (!) extension of this deadline.

Syllabus:


28. April The (Failed) Promise of Democracy
“Notes of a Native Son” (1955) (available online)

05. May Ecstatic Religion and Blackness
Go Tell It on the Mountain (1955)

12. May What’s Wrong with Uncle Tom’s Cabin?
“Everybody’s Protest Novel” (1955)

19. May Exile in Paris
“Equal in Paris” (1955)
26. May  The Power of Mythology
   “Androclus and the Lion”, “The Sword of Damocles”, and “Damon and Tythias”,
   from Favorite Tales of Long Ago, Retold by James Baldwin (1955)

02. June  Pentecost Holiday (Pfingsten)
   Relax and enjoy!

09. June  Oppression and Homosexuality
   Excerpts from Giovanni’s Room (1956)

16. June  America vs. Europe: Two Forms of Experience
   “The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American” (1959) OR “The New Lost
   Generation” (1961)

23. June  Desire and Racial Conflict
   Excerpts from Another Country (1962)

30. June  Family Conflicts: Growing Up Black Near the Bronx
   “The Rockpile” (1965)

07. July  Harlem and Jazz Culture
   “Sonny’s Blues” (1965)

14. July  The Trauma of Lynching
   “Going to Meet the Man” (1965)

21. July  The New Black Imagination
   Poems from Jimmy’s Blues: “Stagger Lee wonders”; “The darkest hour”;
   “Imagination” (1979)

All texts (except the first one) are available in the course reader.