



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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 *bildungsroman* *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:

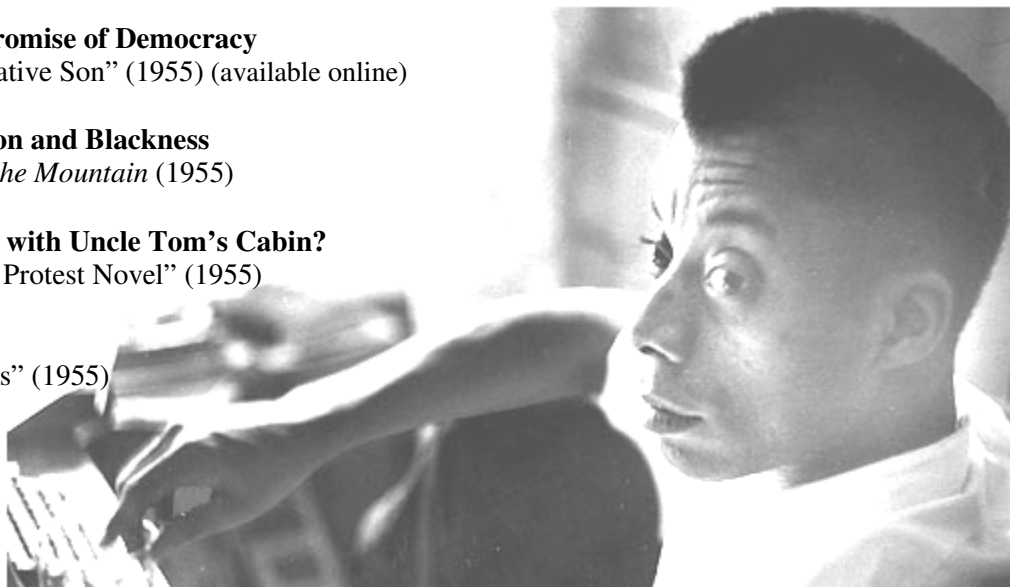
**21. April**      **Introduction: James Baldwin—An American Novelist**

**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.

