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RÉSUMÉ – L'article étudie deux œuvres afro-américaines, *Stranger in the Village* de Baldwin et *The Bern Book* de Carter, qui provincialisent l'Europe par une vision interne de la Suisse rurale des années 1950. Il examine comment ces textes inversent le regard ethnographique sur “l'autre” et imaginent l'Europe comme étant historiquement arriérée. Bien que les auteurs aient des intentions différentes, les deux actes de provincialisation ne contestent pas la supériorité culturelle de l'Europe.

MOTS-CLÉS – provincialisation de l'Europe, regard ethnographique, Suisse (post)coloniale, littérature afro-américaine, appropriation culturelle

ZOCCO (Gianna), « Provincialiser l'Europe “par l'intérieur”. Les ouvrages de James Baldwin et Vincent O. Carter sur la Suisse »

ABSTRACT – This article studies two African American examples of provincialising Europe “from the inside”, James Baldwin’s essay *Stranger in the Village* and Vincent O. Carter’s *The Bern Book*, both set in 1950’s Switzerland. It investigates how these texts reverse the ethnographic gaze at the “other” and use the rural Swiss scenario to imagine Europe as historically backward. While the authors differ in their intentions, both acts of provincialisation leave the superiority of European high culture intact.

KEYWORDS – provincialising Europe, ethnographic gaze, (post)colonial Switzerland, African American literature, cultural appropriation

PROVINCIALISING EUROPE “FROM THE INSIDE”

James Baldwin’s and Vincent O. Carter’s Writings
about Switzerland¹

INTRODUCTION: PROVINCIALISING EUROPE “FROM THE INSIDE”

The attempt of sketching “Black Europe” by studying the literary imaginations of the continent and its inhabitants in the narratives of African and African diasporic writers is not without its risks. One of the dangers of the endeavour undertaken in this special issue is the problem that focusing on Europe in the Black imagination might be seen as adding to a Eurocentric conception of the world. It could propagate the idea that the European continent, which liked (and to some extent still likes) to imagine itself as the cradle of civilisation setting “the heading towards a state of peace, freedom and well-being for all humanity”,² is still such a significant point of reference that it cannot be evaded in Black literature.

This Eurocentric perspective, however, has been deconstructed by many Black and post/decolonial intellectuals, who have employed various strategies of decentring or provincialising Europe. As Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it, “the region of the world we call ‘Europe’” has “already been provincialised by history itself”³ when its worldwide

1 This publication is part of a project that has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 786281.

2 Simon Glendinning. *Europe. A Philosophical History, Part 1: The Promise of Modernity*. London and New York: Routledge, 2021, p. xvi.

3 Dipesh Chakrabarty. *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008 (2000), p. 3.

influence has been surpassed by other regional and global configurations since the middle of the twentieth century. In contrast, Chakrabarty's own contribution to the project of provincialising Europe relates to the "imaginary figure"⁴ of the continent. He proposes to provincialise this figure by asking "how and in what sense European ideas that were universal were also, at one and the same time, drawn from very particular intellectual and historical traditions that could not claim any universal validity"⁵. Another way of decentring Europe through an African/Kenyan perspective is exhibited in Nanjala Nyabola's recent collection of essays *Travelling While Black* (2020).⁶ Here, Nyabola discusses experiences such as migration, asylum, xenophobia, racism, or our capacity for empathy with distant others in global and inner-African configurations, going beyond the Eurocentric or Global Northern scope that these experiences are typically framed into.⁷

Thus, decentring or provincialising Europe can mean a shifting of the emphasis to other global configurations. It can be a tackling of "universal" questions from perspectives such as that of the female middle-class African from Kenya⁸ or the Bengali middle-class man migrated to Australia.⁹ However, there are also some texts by African, African diasporic, and African European writers which deal with European configurations as one of their core topics while undertaking acts of provincialising Europe "from the inside". What I mean by this different strategy, which is possibly complementary to Chakrabarty's or Nyabola's, is that these texts undermine the image of Europe as enlightened cradle

4 *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

5 *Ibid.*

6 See also Lindokuhle Shabane's review in this issue, pp. 219–223.

7 For example, Nyabola reflects about the xenophobia against African foreigners in South Africa, and approaches the question why someone in New York is not "as devastated by a terrorist attack in Baghdad or Mogadishu as they are by one in London or Paris" by comparing it to an inner-Kenyan setting, i.e., the imagined distance felt by the inhabitants of Nairobi and Kenya's other major towns to spatially dislocated Garissa, the location of a disastrous terrorist attack in 2015. Nanjala Nyabola. *Travelling While Black. Essays Inspired by a Life on the Move*. London: Hurst, 2020, p. 215.

8 Nyabola extensively reflects about her particular perspective and the way her Africanness, Blackness, femaleness, and middle-class background affects her experiences as a traveller. See for example *ibid.*, pp. xv–xvii.

9 In the preface to the 2008 edition of *Provincializing Europe*, Chakrabarty provides some considerations on the way his own "being-from-a-place is what gave the critique both its charge and its limitations". Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe, op. cit.*, p. xviii.

of civilisation and origin of ideas of universal validity in a twofold – imaginative and rhetoric – way: by combining a thematic interest in Europe’s more provincial, remote, and “uncivilised” parts and customs with the use of a colonial-style rhetoric of reversal that otherises Europe and its inhabitants, and normalises the Black gaze. Most prominently, this implies that, as in Caryl Phillips’ eponymous *The European Tribe* (1987), European nations are described as “tribes” – a form of reverse terminology which replaces the “neutral or even desirable political unit”¹⁰ of the nation by a term that was used by the colonisers to express the inferiority of the natives. It is a term connected to acts of “taxonomic violence” executed by “sorting people according to criteria that make no sense to the categorized and only serve the political power of the person doing the categorizing”.¹¹ The Afro-German writer and activist Noah Sow, who has written *Deutschland Schwarz Weiß*, a standard work on everyday racism in Germany, employs this form of provincialisation “from the inside” in her book’s preface, which is entitled “*meine eigene Herkunft*” (“my own origin”).¹² Here, she describes her grandmother as a native inhabitant of her country of origin, explains that her country is divided into several partially sovereign tribal areas, and admits that ethnic conflicts, landline networks, and economic dependency from more advanced countries were common there a few decades ago. Finally, she reveals that this country is – of course – Germany, more specifically Bavaria. In nearby Austria and Switzerland, it was even customary to collect and paint the skull of the deceased up until the twentieth century.¹³

Sow’s strategy of a rhetoric reversal, which mimics the gaze of a colonial ethnographer, opens up a number of questions. What is the intention of her employment of colonial dichotomies in relation to the Bavaria of her grandmother’s childhood? In what way does this rhetoric relate to the experiences of being looked at and being racialised, stereotyped, or exoticised that she – as a Black person living in Germany – regularly encounters? How does she approach, reflect, or strategically use the fact that the author/narrator of a reverse ethnography comes to occupy a position of intellectual superiority equivalent to that of the ethnographer

10 Nyabola, *Travelling While Black*, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 152.

12 Noah Sow. *Deutschland Schwarz Weiß. Der alltägliche Rassismus*. Norderstedt: BoD, 2018, p. 20. My translation.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

collecting material about “barbarian” tribes? Is this a gesture that is simply ironic and provocative, or does Sow use it to seriously claim a particular authority or expertise, and – if so – on what grounds? Finally, does the text adopt the essentialist, static, or organistic conceptions of culture characteristic of colonial ethnographies and merely reverse them – or is a more hybrid, relational, or transcultural understanding of culture employed?

Given that Sow’s book is a twenty-first century non-fiction work targeted at a broad audience and informed by recent cultural and intersectional theory it is possible to provide a rather straightforward answer in her case. The purpose of her rhetoric reversal, which is continued in other passages of the book and culminates in an “*Ethno-Lexikon*”¹⁴ as the final chapter, is clearly educational. She uses humour, reverse stereotyping, provocation, and reverse acts of “taxonomic violence” as a means of letting her white German readers “für ein paar Sekunden in ein paar Zumutungen hineinschnuppern, die Schwarze Menschen in viel umfassenderer Form ständig erleben” (“for a few seconds get a whiff of some of the impertinences that Black people experience more extensively all the time”).¹⁵ In other words, she expects that the emotional reaction triggered by her rhetoric will provide an impetus for reflection and, eventually, change. Additionally, she accentuates the expertise that Black people inevitably acquired in the field of critical whiteness studies given that they needed to scrutinise white people as a strategy of survival for centuries,¹⁶ and she expresses a transcultural understanding of culture by reflecting about multiple national belongings and her own identity as both Black and German.

While these issues are relatively clear in Sow’s book, the questions listed above are more difficult to answer in the case of texts which are

14 *Ibid.*, p. 309. This chapter of Sow’s book provides explanations of “ethnic” phenomena using the example of German “tribes”. It includes terms such as “*Buschmann*” (“bushman”, p. 310), “*Eingeborene*” (“native”, p. 312), or “*Häuptling*” (“chief”, p. 315), which are related to German customs and traditions (especially rural ones).

15 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

16 Here, Sow’s argument resonates with that of bell hooks who noted that “black folks have, from slavery on, shared with one another in conversations ‘special’ knowledge of whiteness gleaned from close scrutiny of white people. [...] its purpose was to help black folks cope and survive in a white supremacist society”. bell hooks. “Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination”. In: *Cultural Studies*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler, New York: Routledge, 1992, pp. 338-346 (338). See also Sandra Folie and Gianna Zocco’s introduction to this issue, p. 30.

significantly older and less educational in purpose. In this article, I would like to study two of them: James Baldwin’s essay “Stranger in the Village” (1955) and Vincent O. Carter’s *The Bern Book. A Record of a Voyage of the Mind* (1973). The authors of these texts are both African Americans – both of them born in 1924 –, who came to Europe in the 1940s/50s seeking to find a way of living as expatriate writers that spared them from the racist discrimination and segregation they were faced with in the U.S.¹⁷ Like Sow, they have chosen the (predominantly) German-speaking part of the Alpine region for their literary acts of provincialising, but move slightly more westwards: to Switzerland, a country characterised both by a remote “other-worldliness”¹⁸ due to its Alpine landscape as well as by its central position in Europe. One thing that makes these texts so interesting in this context is the fact that they were written as early as in the 1950s,¹⁹ i.e., in a decade

17 Baldwin, who came to Paris in 1948 where he joined the “rive noire” (Michel Fabre) populated by writers such as Richard Wright and Chester Himes, has written extensively about his reasons for coming to Europe in many of the essays included in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) and *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961). For example, he states that “I left America because I doubted my ability to survive the fury of the color problem here. (Sometimes I still do.) I wanted to prevent myself from becoming merely a Negro; or, even, merely a Negro writer.” James Baldwin. “The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American”. In: James Baldwin. *Collected Essays*, edited by Toni Morrison, New York: The Library of America, pp. 137-142 (137). Carter made his first experiences in Europe, including Paris, in 1944 as a soldier serving in the U.S. army. His memory of being welcomed in the City of Light as “the conquering hero, the ‘great liberator’, the object of friendly smiles and earnest entreaties” motivated him to save money for a more permanent stay in Europe. He managed to arrive in Paris for a second time in 1953. See Vincent O. Carter. *The Bern Book. A Record of a Voyage of the Mind*. New York: The John Day Company, 1973, pp. 11-12. All subsequent quotes from *The Bern Book* are from the 1973 edition and not from the 2020 edition by Dalkey Archive Press, to which I only refer for Jesse McCarthy’s preface.

18 The Nigerian-American author and photographer Teju Cole, who has published a book of images taken over a period of six years during multiple trips to Switzerland, describes the country as entailing “a magical world, a world within a world, as calm as something enclosed in amber”. Teju Cole. *Fernweh*. London: Mack, 2020, n.p. In this regard, Cole’s characterisation of Switzerland is in line with the entry in Beller and Leerssen’s *Imagology Handbook*, which states: “While the Swiss self-image tended to stress civic matters like local autonomy and urban self-government, poets like Haller, Gessner and Bodmer – but also English travellers impressed with the new aesthetic taste for the Sublime – fixed the iconography of towering mountains, Alpine meadows, wholesome pastoral life in the clear air, and moral-environmental regeneration.” Peter Schnyder and Manfred Beller. “Swiss”. In: Manfred Beller and Joep Leerssen (eds.). *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters. A Critical Survey*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007, pp. 251-254 (252).

19 Before its publication in *Notes of a Native Son*, “Stranger in the Village” appeared in the magazine *Harper’s* in October 1953. Although Carter’s book was first published only in

when the majority of African countries were still ruled by European colonial powers and when an essentialist understanding of culture and a colonial-style representation of Africa were the norm. Furthermore, Baldwin's and Carter's texts deserve particular attention given their status as precursors within the Black literary tradition of provincialising Europe "from the inside". Baldwin's essay had a significant impact on the works by writers²⁰ such as Caryl Phillips, Johny Pitts, and especially Teju Cole, whose own essay about a 2014 journey to Leukerbad was modelled upon the one of his self-proclaimed "ancestor".²¹ In contrast, Carter's book, whose first edition was soon out of print, was initially lost in the "shadow archives"²² of African American literature, but has recently been reclaimed in the endeavour of writing a more inclusive, not only white literary history of Bern and Switzerland.²³

1973, it was mostly written between 1953 and 1957. See Jesse McCarthy. "Preface". In: Vincent O. Carter. *The Bern Book. A Record of a Voyage of a Mind*. Dublin: Dalkey, 2020 (1973), pp. vii-xiii (xi).

- 20 The fact that the authors listed here are all male should not give the impression that only male authors have contributed to the project of provincialising Europe "from the inside". Works such as Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977), Bernardine Evaristo's *Soul Tourists* (2005) and *Blonde Roots* (2009), Jackie Kay's *Red Dust Road* (2011), or Noah Sow's *Die Schwarze Madonna. Afrodeutscher Heimatkrimi* (2019) also show an interest in Europe's more provincial parts and employ a reversed ethnographic gaze. However, it seems that Baldwin as an intertextual precursor is less important to these works. An exception to this observation is the anthology *I Will Be Different Every Time*, which tells the stories of Black women living in the Swiss city of Biel, and starts with Baldwin's observation that most people in early 1950's Switzerland had never seen a Black person. Fork Burke, Myriam Diarra, and Franziska Schutzbach, eds. *I Will Be Different Every Time. Schwarze Frauen in Biel / Femmes Noires à Bienne / Black Women in Biel*. Biel: Verlag die brotsuppe, 2020. The reference to "Stranger in the Village" can be found in the blurb of the book.
- 21 Teju Cole. "Black Body". In: Teju Cole. *Known and Strange Things*. New York: Random House, 2016, pp. 3-16 (5).
- 22 For this term, see Jean-Christophe Cloutier. *Shadow Archives. The Lifecycles of African American Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.
- 23 See Martin Bieri. "Black Bern". In: Vincent O. Carter. *Meine weiße Stadt und ich. Das Bernbuch*. Trans. by pociao and Roberto de Hollanda. Zürich: Limmat, 2021, pp. 422-443 (434). A recent contribution to the project of diversifying the literary history of Switzerland is a review essay by Mark D. Morrison-Reed. Morrison-Reed confronts Baldwin's, Carter's, and Cole's reflections about Switzerland with the recent book *Der Sommer, in dem ich Schwarz wurde* (by the Black Swiss journalist Angélique Beldner and the Swiss writer with Indo-Trinidadian roots Martin R. Dean, 2021), as well as with his own autobiographical experiences as an African American, who – growing up in the 1960's – spent several years of his childhood and early youth in Switzerland. See Mark D. Morrison-Reed. "Ruminations on Being Black in Switzerland". *The German*

“INVERTING THE RACIAL AUTHORITY
OF THE ETHNOGRAPHIC GAZE”²⁴

While they may have come to Europe for similar reasons, Baldwin’s and Carter’s motives of going to Switzerland as well as the length of their stays in the country vary significantly. In Baldwin’s case, it was the chalet owned by the family of his friend Lucien Happersberger that allowed him to initially spend two weeks of the summer of 1951 and later two winters in the remote Swiss mountain village Leukerbad – hoping to “find some peace of mind and a quiet place to work”²⁵ on his still unfinished first novel. In *The Bern Book*, Carter finds it necessary to answer the question ““Why did you come to *Bern*?””²⁶ by dedicating separate chapters to “Why I Did Not Go to Paris”, “Why I Left Amsterdam”, and “Why I Left Germany”, and by tentatively providing several explanations in a dialogue with an unnamed interlocutor.²⁷ Eventually, he came to spend 30 years of his life in the Swiss capital – dying there in 1983. Despite these differences, Baldwin’s 13 pages essay and Carter’s 297 pages book share a rhetoric feature: both extensively use the reversal of the gaze at the Other, which playfully casts the Black author/narrator into the superior position of a colonial-style ethnographer.

In Baldwin’s case, this rhetoric of a reversal is accompanied by the employment of strong dichotomies. In colonial ethnographies, such dichotomies are typically used to accentuate the cultural distance between societies and to cast the ethnographically studied culture into

Quarterly. A Journal of the American Association of Teachers of German, vol. 95, no. 4, 2022, pp. 455-468.

24 McCarthy, “Preface”, *op. cit.*, p. xi.

25 David Leeming, *James Baldwin. A Biography*. New York: Arcade, 2015 (1994), p. 78.

26 Carter, *The Bern Book*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

27 This dialogue, which spans over several chapters, reads like the condensed junction of several conversations, and it shows the narrator as jokingly satisfying and repeating, but also subverting and confuting, the expectations of his interlocutor. Among the reasons provided are his characterisation of the Bernese as “among the most interesting people on earth”, his interest in “study[ing] the decadence of European culture”, Switzerland’s alleged primitiveness, an American writer’s wish of “gain[ing] a perspective, a distance from which to look at his country, his countrymen and himself”, and the belief that “I could learn more about Europe if I stayed in one city, got to know it very well, and lived with its people”. *Ibid.*, pp. 8, 50, 51 respectively.

the role of a radical Other living in an ahistorical past.²⁸ In “Stranger in the Village”, Baldwin characterises himself as a well-educated and well-travelled American and as one of the “city people”.²⁹ In contrast, he notes the inaccessibility of the Swiss mountain village and the “white wilderness”³⁰ that surrounds it. Although the village “is only four hours from Milan and three hours from Lausanne”,³¹ Baldwin’s description of his voyage to the village has the “sense of an extreme journey, like Charles Darwin’s in the Galápagos or Tété-Michel Kpomassie’s in Greenland”.³² Baldwin also emphasises the backwardness of Leukerbad’s inhabitants, who appear to live in a distant, almost (but not fully) precolonial past: they seem to have never seen a Black person before; they put their hands “on my hand, astonished that the color did not rub off”;³³ and they innocently paint their faces black at carnival. The unbreachable cultural and educational distance between himself and the villagers is rhetorically accentuated in sentences like the following: “In the village there is no movie house, no bank, no library, no theatre; very few radios, one jeep, one station wagon; and, at the moment, one typewriter, mine, an invention which the woman next door to me here had never seen.”³⁴

Although Carter – whose rhetoric is less characterised by such hard dichotomies – finds himself in a more urban setting, his initial descriptions of Bern and the Bernese show many similarities to Baldwin’s. The town – after all the capital of Switzerland – is not only exceptionally clean and quiet, but it is most notably small, “a little elf land”, inhabited by “dwarfy old men who sold the Berner Tagblatt with their big hats, barking that strange, monotonous jargon – and the wiry twisted ones, with the beards that hung down to their knees!”³⁵ Later chapters of *The Bern Book* provide detailed “ethnographic” insights into specific customs and moods of the Bernese – among them the relations between men and women, eating habits, the role of class distinctions, religion, and

28 See Hans Peter Hahn. *Ethnologie. Eine Einführung*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2013, p. 43.

29 James Baldwin. “Stranger in the Village”. In: Baldwin. *Collected Essays, op. cit.*, pp. 117-129 (117).

30 *Ibid.*, p. 118.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 117.

32 Cole, “Black Body”, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

33 Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village”, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 117.

35 Carter, *The Bern Book, op. cit.*, p. 99.

the Bernese's preference for the words “insurance” and “control”.³⁶ Like Leukerbad, Bern also appears to be located in a distant, premodern past. Here, however, this impression is particularly fuelled by a coincidence connected to the date of Carter's arrival: June 1953 is also the date of the city's 600th anniversary as a member of the Swiss federation. The Bernese celebrate this occasion with a historical pageant, on which they dress up in folk costumes. Witnessing this parade, which is attended by 150.000 people,³⁷ Carter feels “catapulted [...] into another world” “[f]or I beheld from the window in the form of a pageant the history of the city of Bern”.³⁸ This “feudal world” makes him feel like an observer to “a chapter torn from the same old book, which is the history of Europe”.³⁹ In Carter's eyes, even the Bernese are endowed with a certain historicity for “[t]he faces and attitudes of the people resembled to an unnerving degree the faces which I had seen in illustrated history books and in historical museums”.⁴⁰ Thus, not unlike the Europe described by nineteenth-century American writers such as Henry James, Baldwin's Leukerbad and Carter's Bern represent an “old world”, in which the premodern past is still very much part of the present. Astonishingly, the inhabitants of this old world are “young” and “old” at the same time, making them appear like children from the past, who are only partially aware of the historical weights they carry, whereas Europe's long and intricate history lays bare to the traveler from the new world.

While Baldwin and Carter similarly use the inversion of the ethnographic gaze at the Other as one of their “signal strategies”,⁴¹ this method is, in both cases, accompanied by a caveat: the authors make it clear that their rhetoric is unable to achieve a complete reversal since their author/narrator figures cannot adopt a position of absolute congruency with the white European ethnographer's gaze. The reason for this is that the taking of discursive power exercised in their writing does not extend beyond the text. Only ethnographers associated with the colonial power or white persons in a white supremacist society are able to “safely” imagine that they are invisible to black people

36 *Ibid.*, p. 221.

37 See Bieri, “Black Bern”, *op. cit.*, p. 423.

38 Carter, *The Bern Book*, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 70.

40 *Ibid.*

41 McCarthy, “Preface”, *op. cit.*, p. xi.

since the power they have historically asserted [...] accorded them the right to control the black gaze”.⁴² However, this privilege of imagined invisibility is not available to Baldwin and Carter. Quite to the contrary, their power of provincialising Europe is weakened because they find themselves in a racist environment where they are hyper-visible. They both recount how “Everybody, Men, Women, Children, Dogs, Cats, and Other Animals, Wild and Domestic, Looked at Me – ALL the Time!”,⁴³ how the children shout the German N-word when they see them,⁴⁴ and how the Swiss even “pointed with extended forefingers and laughed at me when they looked”.⁴⁵

In this sense – and similar to Sow’s intention of letting her white readers get a whiff of the impertinences experienced by Black people – Baldwin’s and Carter’s ethnographic gazes at the Swiss are not actions happening in a blank space, but reactions: “They want to observe me, I thought. And my attitude was, Well, let them. And while they’re observing me I can also take a few notes.”⁴⁶ Included in these ethnographic notes about the Swiss is a close examination of the particular gaze that is directed at the African American expatriate writer. On the one hand, this is a gaze which both Baldwin and Carter characterise as relatively innocent and childlike. They note that it is especially children – but also adults described in infantilising terms – that make them the subject of their gazes. They also almost excuse the Swiss for their stares and related irritating behaviour, which – today – would undoubtedly qualify as everyday racism, microaggression, or worse.⁴⁷

42 hooks, “Representing Whiteness”, *op. cit.*, p. 340.

43 Carter, *The Bern Book*, *op. cit.*, p. 76. The sentence is indented and printed in bold type.

44 Encounters with children screaming the N-word (and parents indulging in the children’s manners instead of correcting them) are described both by Baldwin and Carter. See Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village”, *op. cit.*, p. 118 and Carter, *The Bern Book*, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

45 Carter, *The Bern Book*, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 108.

47 This becomes strikingly clear when reading Baldwin’s and Carter’s texts together with the recent works by Afro-German/Swiss writers such as Noah Sow, Grada Kilomba, Alice Hasters, or Angélique Beldner and Martin R. Dean. All these works deal with the functioning of racism in a German or Swiss context and give examples which are often similar to the episodes recounted by Baldwin and Carter. They include, among others, the inadequate touching of hair, the use of the German N-word, the use of Blackface, or the tradition of collection boxes – in Switzerland “N*kässeli” (see Morrison-Reed, “Ruminations on Being Black in Switzerland”, *op. cit.*, p. 461) – with the carving of

Highlighting the overall peacefulness of the Swiss,⁴⁸ Baldwin emphasises apologetically that “they did not mean to be unkind”.⁴⁹ Carter even explains the “violent emotional reaction”⁵⁰ experienced when being referred to with the German N-word not with the insulting character of the word itself, but with the negative conditioning of his ears due to the similar sounding, much more hurtful American equivalent.

At the same time, however, Baldwin’s and Carter’s analyses of the Swiss gaze contradict their own estimations of it as innocent and relatively harmless. At times, they not only question the very innocence of this constant gaze, but also describe it with oppositional attributes such as knowing and harmful. It is knowing in the sense that the Swiss – although they have allegedly never seen a Black person before⁵¹ – instantly “know” what they see when encountering Baldwin and Carter. They know, for example, that they must be “African” not “American” for “black men come from Africa”.⁵² They also know – despite contrary evidence

a Black figure on top of them. Unlike Baldwin and Carter, these more recent works unanimously classify these habits as forms of everyday racism.

48 The overall peacefulness and harmlessness attributed to the Swiss by both Baldwin and Carter stands out against Phillips’ and Nyabola’s characterisations of Europe. Referring to Europeans West and East of the Iron Curtain, Phillips states: “Europeans squabble, they fight, they kill because of tribal affiliations”. (Caryl Phillips. *The European Tribe*. New York: Vintage, 2000 [1987], p. 132). Nyabola’s more recent reflections about hostilities between the communities of the Mediterranean make a similar point: “Remember: Europe has always been a violent place”. (Nyabola, *Travelling While Black*, *op. cit.*, p. 69).

49 Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village”, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

50 Carter, *The Bern Book*, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

51 In his afterword to the German edition of *The Bern Book*, Martin Bieri demonstrates that this claim is historically untenable. He not only refers to the embassy personnel of numerous countries and documented cases such as the jazz singer Norma Lederer, but especially to the infamous ethnological exhibitions (called “Völkerschauen”), finding that more than 50 events of this kind are documented in Bern’s “Bierhübeli” between 1834 and 1964 (Bieri, “Black Bern”, *op. cit.*, p. 425). Baldwin’s similar assertion is discussed in a written scholarly conversation based on a roundtable in Zürich. One of the participants, Paola Bacchetta, finds that “[f]rom a continental European perspective, Baldwin does indeed come dangerously close to reproducing the constant externalisation of people of color. Europeans of color have always existed in continental Europe, not only in the non-continental parts; there are examples of this within my own family” (Jovita dos Santos Pinto, Noémi Michel, Patricia Purtschert, Paola Bacchetta and Vanessa Naef. “Baldwin’s Transatlantic Reverberations: Between ‘Stranger in the Village’ and ‘I Am Not Your Negro’”. *James Baldwin Review*, vol. 6, 2020, pp. 176-198 (185), <https://doi.org/10.7227/JBR.6.12> [accessed 4th October 2023]).

52 Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village”, *op. cit.*, p. 118. For similar passages in *The Bern Book*, see Carter, *The Bern Book*, *op. cit.*, pp. 75, 80.

– that they behave and think in a way that is “naïf”, “childlike”, and therefore “quaint” and “fresh”.⁵³ In other words, their attitudes clearly show that the Swiss – despite the prevailing colonial amnesia that led to a self-image of Switzerland as an outsider within the European colonial power constellation – are affected by a colonialist ideology.⁵⁴ The effect this has on Baldwin and Carter is that of a “plantation memory”: they experience “a violent shock that suddenly places the Black subject in a colonial scene where, as in a plantation scenario, one is imprisoned as the subordinate and exotic ‘Other’”.⁵⁵ In both texts, the violence of this shock becomes visible in the intense emotional effort required by Baldwin and Carter when confronted with such behaviour. Following the assertion that “they did not mean to be unkind” Baldwin admits that “it is necessary, nevertheless, for me to repeat this to myself each time that I walk out of the chalet”.⁵⁶ Similarly, Carter describes his exposure to the German N-word as emotionally challenging, but reacts to the frequency of its use by trying to “unlearn” the hurt: while he initially feels “a violent churning in the pit of my stomach” he later “learned not to wince when I heard it, in polite society or upon the lips of innocent ladies or gentle old women who had come to be my friends”.⁵⁷

PROVINCIALISING EUROPE

So far, we have seen that Baldwin’s and Carter’s writings about 1950s Switzerland share many similarities: both employ a reverse ethnographic gaze at the Other as one of their signal strategies. Both also make it clear that this gaze does not come along with the privilege of invisibility, but instead reacts to a seemingly innocent, but emotionally shocking Swiss

53 Carter uses these attributes when describing how the Swiss receive his radio essay about his experiences in Switzerland. Carter, *The Bern Book*, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

54 For Switzerland’s relation to colonialism, see for example Patricia Purtschert, Francesca Falk, and Barbara Lüthi. “Switzerland and ‘Colonialism without Colonies’. Reflections on the Status of Colonial Outsiders”. *Interventions*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2016, pp. 286–302.

55 Grada Kilomba. *Plantation Memories. Episodes of Everyday Racism*. Münster: Unrast, 2019, p. 11.

56 Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village”, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

57 Carter, *The Bern Book*, *op. cit.*, pp. 58-59.

gaze that is constantly directed at them. Are their intentions of using this rhetoric strategy similar as well? As I will now show, Baldwin's and Carter's works differ quite substantially in this regard.

In Baldwin's case, the depiction of the Swiss villagers as people who are primitive and backwards, but think of themselves as knowing and superior, serves a clear cause. It allows him to make the argument that it is he, the Black American, whose ethnographic gaze can justifiably claim a particular authority: "What one's imagination makes of other people is dictated, of course, by the laws of one's own personality and it is one of the ironies of black-white relations that, by means of what the white man imagines the black man to be, the black man is enabled to know who the white man is."⁵⁸ This line of argument does not only connect him to the point made by Sow and, earlier, hooks, but it also resonates with W.E.B. Du Bois's 50 years older concept of "double-consciousness". This concept is best known for describing the feeling of inner two-ness experienced by African Americans because of their racialised oppression in a white supremacist society. Moreover, it also deduces from this experience a particular perceptive authority of Black Americans. For Du Bois, the Black American is "a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world"⁵⁹ – an idea which is echoed and globally expanded in Baldwin's belief that the African American's "survival depended, and his development depends, on his ability to turn his peculiar status in the Western world to his own advantage and, it may be, to the very great advantage of that world".⁶⁰

In the course of "Stranger in the Village", the claim of authority thus made by Baldwin becomes connected with a special rhetoric technique. Referring to a book by Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts, Cole describes this eloquently as "a literary sleight-of-hand", a "sudden widening of focus" similar to a movie camera that starts with a tight shot and then zooms out to allow for a wider view.⁶¹ It is such a zooming out that takes place when Baldwin – after several pages filled with anecdotes and observations about Leukerbad's inhabitants – suddenly writes: "For this

58 Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village", *op. cit.*, p. 123.

59 W.E.B. Du Bois. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York and London: Norton, 1999, p. 10.

60 Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village", *op. cit.*, p. 128.

61 Cole, "Black Body", *op. cit.*, p. 8.

village, even were it incomparably more remote and incredibly more primitive, is the West, the West onto which I have been so strangely grafted.”⁶² With these words, the Swiss village becomes a *pars pro toto* for the West, more specifically for Europe, with its inhabitants becoming prototypes of Europeans, who enjoy the privilege of what Baldwin calls “European innocence”.⁶³

The effect of this widening of focus is twofold: it not only implies that Baldwin’s claim of authority is also widened and now comes to encompass his ability of speaking about the larger entity of Europe (or the West), but it also transmits the particular characteristics of Leukerbad onto the European continent as a whole. In other words: Europe is provincialised. Most strikingly, this implies that “the cradle of civilisation and modernity” is now associated with a backwardness in time – a backwardness that echoes the literary *topos* of the village as a relict from primitive times,⁶⁴ and that lets the inhabitants of Leukerbad/Europe appear “as prototypes (preserved like coelacanths)”⁶⁵ of the simplest, earliest form of white supremacy. This ascription of European backwardness is strategically useful: it allows the African American writer to establish a contrast to his native country with its “more intimate, intricate, familiar, and obscene American forms of white supremacy”,⁶⁶ and to self-confidently demand to be treated in America not as a “stranger in the village” or a “visitor to the West, but a citizen [...], an American”.⁶⁷

From the perspective of today, Baldwin’s proclamation of a “European innocence” is one of the most irritating and risky rhetoric manoeuvres of “Stranger in the Village”. As pointed out by Jovita dos Santos Pinto, “[i]t might feed into the figure of the ‘stranger’, of the person of color being ‘an eternal newcomer’ to Europe”.⁶⁸ This is exactly the kind of figure that scholars such as Fatima El-Tayeb and Paul Gilroy have been working to deconstruct since the 1990s. In this regard, Baldwin’s essay

62 Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village”, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 128.

64 See Markus Twellmann. *Dorfgeschichten. Wie die Welt zur Literatur kommt*. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2019, pp. 119-144.

65 Cole, “Black Body”, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

66 *Ibid.*

67 Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village”, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

68 Dos Santos Pinto et al., “Baldwin’s Transatlantic Reverberations”, *op. cit.*, pp. 184-185.

requires to be historicised within the context of a pre-civil rights America. At his time of writing, the “separate but equal” doctrine was still fully intact and a critical examination of the country’s racist past and present was only in its initial stages – leading to a situation where, in Baldwin’s words, “anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster”.⁶⁹ Despite this risk, the Baldwinian figure of a Europe that is provincial and historically backwards can also have some critical potential beyond the U.S. context. As pointed out by Patricia Purtschert, the notion of European innocence has the ability of contributing to a productive dialogue about decentring and decolonising Europe. It “speaks to the complete amnesia of colonial history” in European countries such as Switzerland and offers “a powerful analysis of the careful crafting of such an innocence”.⁷⁰ To this reading, which is in line with Baldwin’s later reflections about the risks of involuntarily embracing the reassuring “national fantasy” of a foreign country,⁷¹ I would like to add that the Baldwinian dichotomy of a (German-speaking) Europe stuck in the Middle Ages versus the historically more advanced U.S. can similarly adopt a decolonial potential in a European context. In Sow’s book, this dichotomy is taken on – but with a twist: she makes the argument that Germany is an “*Entwicklungsland*” (“a developing country”)⁷² when it comes to the ability of dealing with its ethnic minorities. She points to the fact that the U.S. in comparison – despite ongoing practices of

69 Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village”, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

70 Dos Santos Pinto et al., “Baldwin’s Transatlantic Reverberations”, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

71 Baldwin makes this point in his essay “Alas, Poor Richard” (1961), which was written on the occasion of Richard Wright’s death. Here, Baldwin reflects on the role of Paris as a “city of refuge” for many African American writers, but carefully notes that Paris offered a positive welcome only to those “armed with American passports”. In contrast, “Paris was not a city of refuge for the French, still less for anyone belonging to France”. He then remarks that “[i]t did not seem worthwhile to me to have fled the native fantasy only to embrace a foreign one” – thereby referring to the French myth of color-blindness and its discrepancy with the discriminations faced by people from the (former) French colonies now living in France. See James Baldwin. “Alas, Poor Richard”. In: Baldwin. *Collected Essays*, *op. cit.*, pp. 247–268 (249). I have written more extensively about this subject in an earlier blog contribution, see Gianna Zocco. “Black Transatlantic Literary Studies and the Case of James Baldwin”. In: *Transatlantic Literary History: Notes | Essays | Documents*, edited by Kai Sina and Tanita Kraaz, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.17879/40009650202> [accessed 4th October 2023].

72 Sow, *Deutschland Schwarz Weiß*, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

institutionalised and everyday racism on both sides of the Atlantic – is more advanced given that it is the “cradle” of most Black and antiracist theory, which reached many European countries only later in time and is still less established.

In comparison to Baldwin’s use of “a European experience as a means of looking back at America”,⁷³ Carter’s employment of an ethnographic gaze is less clearly related to a particular political intention. Nevertheless, he undertakes a rhetoric manoeuvre similar to Baldwin’s widening of focus when proclaiming that Switzerland is both the “dead center” and “the heartbeat of Europe”, as well as the “host to the community of nations known as Europe”.⁷⁴ It is not exactly the transformation of Switzerland/Bern into a *pars pro toto* for Europe that we find here, but an imagery of Europe as composed of partially different, but related and dependent parts, similar to the parts of a body (or corpse) or to the members of one extended family. Within this imagined entity of Europe, Switzerland/Bern appears as “one of the most primitive countries in Europe”, but also as a centrally located point of connection and exchange: thanks to its central geographic location, altitude, linguistic diversity, economic prosperity, and policy of armed neutrality it is “an ideal spot from which to observe not only Europe, but the entire world”.⁷⁵ The consequence that Carter draws from this special position of Switzerland in Europe is different from Baldwin’s. Rather than using the Swiss variant of the European as a frame of contrast with the U.S., Bern’s proclaimed representativeness encourages him to give up distance and study the city more closely: “I thought I could learn more about Europe if I stayed in one city, got to know it very well, and lived with its people. Then, at least, I could know quite a lot about one variety of European, which might help me to understand, by comparison, some general attributes of all of them.”⁷⁶

With these words, Carter takes a position that deviates from the colonial-style ethnographer with an attitude of unquestioned superiority and a tendency of using dichotomies and generalisations to create cultural distance. Rather, he employs a method remindful of Bronisław

73 Leeming, *James Baldwin, op. cit.*, p. 78.

74 Carter, *The Bern Book, op. cit.*, pp. 51 and 210 respectively.

75 *Ibid.*, pp. 50 and 53 respectively.

76 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

Malinowski’s concept of participatory observation. This requires from the ethnographer a larger amount of time, the reduction of cultural distance, and the willingness to participate in the ethnologically studied culture at eye level – e.g., by learning the local language and by adopting a mode of living similar to the host society.⁷⁷ The effect of this more intense form of ethnographic observation is twofold. First, it results in numerous “thick descriptions” (Clifford Geertz) of specific traditions and behaviours ranging from the Swiss tearoom and the tradition of the fondue, via the Swiss–German relations, to the Swiss’ guilt for being spared from the world’s suffering over poverty and war. In his writing about these facets of Swiss life, Carter goes beyond surface appearances, distinguishing for example the Bernese’s general “‘sensitivity’ to persons, things or ideas that were ‘different’” from proper “racial prejudice”,⁷⁸ and referring in his analysis to Swiss writers such as Max Frisch. As Darryl Pinckney sees it, this manner of writing, which is at times remindful of Tocqueville’s classic *Democracy in America*, enables Carter to appropriate his adoptive city in a way that is remarkably thorough and exhaustive: “Bern belongs to him at last. He is territorial, having demystified the city, cut it down to size, turned the scrutiny away from his worry of what they think of him to his insistence that Bern hear what he thinks of its virtues and shortcomings.”⁷⁹

Second, however, Carter’s method of participatory observation results in a transformation of himself. Rather than remaining the detached, unaffected, and intellectually superior observer of “the barbarians”, he undergoes a “partial metamorphosis”, a “voyage of the mind”.⁸⁰ This resonates with Malinowski’s statement that the anthropologist “has to break down the barriers of race and of cultural diversity; he has to find the human being in the savage; he has to discover the primitive in the highly sophisticated Westerner of today, and, perhaps, to see that the animal, and the divine as well, are to be found everywhere in man”.⁸¹ In Bern, Carter comes to eventually discover the divine as well

77 For this brief characterisation, see Hahn, *Ethnologie*, *op. cit.*, pp. 72–74.

78 Carter, *The Bern Book*, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

79 Darryl Pinckney. *Out There. Mavericks of Black Literature*. New York: BasicCivitas Books, 2002, p. 95.

80 Carter, *The Bern Book*, *op. cit.*, p. xvi.

81 Bronisław Malinowski. “Introduction”. In: Julius Lips. *The Savage Hits Back or The White Man through Native Eyes*. London: Lovat Dickson Limited, 1937, pp. vii–ix (vii), <https://>

as the animalistic or primitive facet of human existence in himself. The metamorphosis he undergoes can be seen as “an inward-looking spiritual voyage that leads him to transcend race”,⁸² an experience “about ambivalence, escape, evasion, and the expatriate’s creed for noble procrastination, noble withdrawal”.⁸³ This experience would have been impossible without the exclusive, isolated existence that Carter is able to find in Bern – but would not have found in Paris or London.⁸⁴ At the same time, Carter’s metamorphosis is an experience of gradual approximation and ultimately identification with the Bernese and their mentality, which eventually provincialises the educated, African American writer himself: he, who is no longer referred to as “the N*” but as “Herr Carter”,⁸⁵ finally states:

For a year and a half now [...] I had suffered what had seemed to me the ironies of my position in Bernese society. I had flinched at every shadow and read disaster in the expression of every face. I had clashed head-on like a stubborn goat into the numberless little ways in which they did it differently over here, as compared to how they did it at home. Subjected to hunger, reduced to my essential self by the necessity of existing, I now began to see (forgive me if I offend thee) that the Bernese people were just like me!⁸⁶

WHO OWNS EUROPEAN CULTURE?

As I have just shown, there is a fundamental difference in Baldwin’s and Carter’s writings about Switzerland. Although they both employ an ethnographic rhetoric and find in the Swiss something they consider as distinctly European, it is only Carter who eventually gives up distance and allows that the line between himself and the Bernese gets blurred. In contrast, Baldwin takes the position of a detached, superior observer throughout the text and uses the imagery of the “village” as

archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.77152 [accessed 31st January 2023].

82 Morrison-Reed, “Ruminations on Being Black in Switzerland”, *op. cit.*, p. 467.

83 Pinckney, *Out There*, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

84 See *ibid.*, p. 65.

85 Carter, *The Bern Book*, *op. cit.*, p. 267.

86 *Ibid.*, p. 177.

a model for Europe⁸⁷ to draw a contrast with the U.S. However, this very gesture of marked intellectual superiority has an astounding counterpart: as noted by Cole, Baldwin’s initially bemused style – the sound of someone who “is alert to the absurdity of being a writer from New York who is considered in some way inferior by Swiss villagers” – later becomes more serious and “grim”.⁸⁸ He makes the observation that the inhabitants of Leukerbad – despite their intellectual inferiority – possess a sense of entitlement toward European culture that he will always miss:

The most illiterate among them is related, in a way that I am not, to Dante, Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Aeschylus, Da Vinci, Rembrandt, and Racine; the cathedral at Chartres says something to them which it cannot say to me, as indeed would New York’s Empire State Building, should anyone here ever see it. Out of their hymns and dances come Beethoven and Bach. Go back a few centuries and they are in their full glory – but I am in Africa, watching the conquerors arrive.⁸⁹

It is this facet of Baldwin’s essay that Cole finds most bewildering. He is irritated that “this question of filiation” and of the existence of some “distant genetic thread” is such a tormenting issue for Baldwin, noting that “[t]his is where I part ways with Baldwin”.⁹⁰ Although Baldwin is bold and courageous enough to write about Europe from the position of a colonial ethnographer and to attack the American racial hypocrisy with the sharpest rhetoric manoeuvres, he appears strangely submissive when he sadly accepts the racist logic that ascribes to him the role of an illegitimate “bastard” or “interloper”⁹¹ to works of “world art”.⁹² Moreover, he even reproduces the colonialist image of precolonial Africans as living in a passive, cultureless state of “watching the conquerors arrive”. In contrast, Cole expresses a more cosmopolitan, “carefree confidence” about questions of cultural ownership, making the assertive claim that “[t]here’s no world in which I would surrender the intimidating beauty of Yoruba-language poetry for, say, Shakespeare’s

87 See Leeming, *James Baldwin*, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

88 Cole, “Black Body”, *op. cit.*, pp. 4 and 10 respectively.

89 Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village”, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

90 Cole, “Black Body”, *op. cit.*, pp. 10, 9, and 11 respectively.

91 James Baldwin. “Autobiographical Notes”. In: Baldwin. *Collected Essays*, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

92 Cole, “Black Body”, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

sonnets, or one in which I'd prefer chamber orchestras playing baroque music to the koras of Mali. I'm happy to own all of it"⁹³

How can this difference be explained? Is it mainly the "gift of time"⁹⁴ that allows the Afropolitan Cole as well as contemporary Afropean writers such as Johny Pitts or the Swiss-Cameroonian Max Lobe⁹⁵ to abstain from conceiving the sphere of world culture as structured by a racist (and patriarchal) logic of filiation that excludes them from European high culture due to "distant genetic threads"? Is it the result of the "corroborating scholarship"⁹⁶ conducted in the decades between Baldwin's and Cole's writing that explains why Cole and many of his contemporaries find it easier to self-confidently claim their Black heritage? How important is their different connection to an African country, their education, or societal background for contemporary writers such as Lobe or Sharon Dodua Otoo, who have been able to even combine a Swiss or German setting of their novels with the use of elements from Bantu language and mythology or the Sankofa symbol from Akan philosophy?⁹⁷ While recent works such as *La Trinité bantoue* (Lobe) or *Adas Raum* (Otoo) creatively demonstrate "the circulation of elements of knowledge between different cultural spaces",⁹⁸ Baldwin – at least in the very early years of his career – not only finds that Western high culture "was not my heritage", but also sadly states that there is not much else to reach out to (exceptions, such as his expressed admiration for the music by Bessie Smith, do not seem to affect his argument): "At the same time I had no other

93 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

94 *Ibid.*

95 For example, the self-described Afropean flaneur Johny Pitts self-evidently claims in his travelogue: "As a member of Europe's black community, this Europe I speak of is all part of my inheritance, too, and it was time to wander and celebrate the continent like I owned it." (Johny Pitts. *Afropean. Notes from Black Europe*. London: Penguin, 2019, p. 7) In his novel *La Trinité bantoue*, Max Lobe similarly deconstructs and innovatively appropriates a logic of filiation by characterising the "Helvetians" and the Bantu peoples as members of the same extended family: "*Mais comme ma sœur Kosambela a l'habitude de dire, le français et l'italien, c'est un peu les Bantous et les Helvètes: ce sont des cousins éloignés et peut-être même proches.*" ("But like my sister Kosambela uses to say, French and Italian, that is a little like the Bantu and the Helvetians: they are distant and perhaps even close cousins." Max Lobe. *La Trinité bantoue*. Carouge-Genève: Éditions Zoé, 2014, p. 7. My translation)

96 Cole, "Black Body", *op. cit.*, p. 10.

97 See Mahamadou Famanta's article in this issue, pp. 62–66.

98 *Ibid.*, p. 49.

heritage which I could possibly hope to use – I had certainly been unfitted for the jungle or the tribe.”⁹⁹

To get a better understanding of how Baldwin’s thinking about these issues may have been shaped by the cultural atmosphere of the 1950s, it may, once again, be helpful to take a look at Baldwin’s contemporary Carter and his *Bern Book*. When Carter narrates how the initially positive experience of selling some of his writings about Bern to Radio Bern turns to the negative, he expresses a torment that resonates with many of Baldwin’s early essays. Carter learns that the Bernese are only interested in his take on themes such as the racial problem in America or the spirituals, i.e., in material which confirms their own image “of the suppressed but happy, suffering but profoundly religious Negro; a relatively primitive, simple-minded creature”.¹⁰⁰ As Baldwin would say, they are only interested in topics “concerning which the color of my skin made me automatically an expert”,¹⁰¹ and do not want Carter to appropriate themes beyond this narrow sphere.

However, the consequence drawn from this by Carter is a different one: rather than sadly resigning himself to his role as an illegitimate interloper to European high culture who will have to “accept my special attitude, my special place in this scheme”¹⁰² in order to have any place at all, he confronts the problem of (reverse) cultural appropriation from a radically cosmopolitan perspective. When a friend of his makes the claim that it is impossible for Marian Anderson to sing music from Bach as well as a German artist, Carter fervently disagrees, and states that “Bach belongs to the world. Any true and trained sensibility can interpret Bach”.¹⁰³ He then labels any restriction of an artist to draw only on works from “their own culture” as “intellectual prejudice”, and goes on to describe this narrow attitude as a form of “provincialism”, finding that the latter term

... is broader in scope, signifying a meaning which includes not only racial prejudice but any kind of limited point of view. Joy leaped through me as I vaguely realized the significance of my discovery. It opened the doors to many

99 Baldwin, “Autobiographical Notes”, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

100 Carter, *The Bern Book*, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

101 Baldwin, “Autobiographical Notes”, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

102 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

103 Carter, *The Bern Book*, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

emotional rooms which had heretofore been locked. The word “provincialism” lifted the burdensome weight of the feeling that I was isolated from my fellowman. It converted me into a mere member of a larger group of persons, the reaction to whom could be classified with a word which was valid in any limiting context.¹⁰⁴

With this passage, Carter’s inner metamorphosis and his transcending of race through his gradual identification with the Bernese finds its equivalent in the sphere of art. Throughout the 297 pages of *The Bern Book*, he strictly avoids what he labels as provincialism and maintains a provocatively universalist perspective. Thus, he demonstrates his self-confident claim of “owning” Western high culture in the same way a white artist would do by numerous references to white European and American authors, musicians, and visual artists – ranging from Homer and Goethe, via Faulkner and Dostoevsky, to the Swiss Max Frisch, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, and Ferdinand Hodler. Nevertheless, one wonders if this seemingly self-confident take on European high culture does not come along with its own form of submissiveness. As noted both by Pinckney and Morrison-Reed,¹⁰⁵ Carter’s wide range of literary references does not include any Black voice at all, and he mentions neither Baldwin nor the (at the time ubiquitous) Richard Wright.¹⁰⁶ Carter’s seemingly carefree cosmopolitanism is, therefore, quite far from Cole’s gesture of carefree confidence, which assesses Yoruba-language poetry and Shakespeare’s sonnets as equally valuable products of world culture. Rather it seems to be an implicitly colonialist, Eurocentric cosmopolitanism which would have consented to Baldwin’s sad finding that – apart from Western high culture – there is almost nothing else an aspiring writer can reach out to. In other words, Baldwin’s and Carter’s acts of provincialising Europe “from the inside” both reach their limits when it comes to European high culture, which – rather than being decentred – remains intact as their central intellectual benchmark. But

104 *Ibid.*

105 See Pinckney, *Out There, op. cit.*, pp. 99-100; Morrison-Reed, “Ruminations on Being Black in Switzerland”, *op. cit.*, p. 465.

106 There are only two exceptions to this. The one is the writer Langston Hughes, who is mentioned as a Swiss acquaintance refers to him. The other are African American (jazz) musicians, many of whom are valued highly by Carter, who even proposes “to compare the creative process, as exemplified in jazz, [...] with the higher intuitive process, as described by no less a personage than Immanuel Kant”. Carter, *The Bern Book, op. cit.*, p. 151.

while Carter attempts to solve this problem in a “resolutely apolitical”,¹⁰⁷ radically individualist, and therefore more light-hearted way, Baldwin’s sense of political responsibility and his identification with the role of a “native son” obliged to contribute to change in the U.S. make it impossible for him – even in the years before his participation in the Civil Rights Movement – to aim for such an isolated intellectual existence.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have studied two African American early examples of the Black literary tradition of provincialising Europe “from the inside”. James Baldwin’s essay “Stranger in the Village” and Vincent O. Carter’s *The Bern Book* were both written in the 1950s and they share a focus on the German-speaking part of Switzerland. The texts similarly describe how the authors/narrators find themselves constantly exposed to a seemingly innocent, but emotionally shocking Swiss gaze directed at them, to which they react by employing a reverse ethnographic gaze at the Other and by imagining Switzerland as stuck in a feudal, almost precolonial past. While Baldwin and Carter both find in the Swiss something they consider as distinctly European, their works differ substantially in their intentions. Only Baldwin maintains the position of a detached, superior observer and adopts the style of a colonial ethnographer throughout the text. This position allows him to instrumentalise the image of a rural and exclusively white Europe characterised by an attitude of “European innocence” to draw a contrast to the U.S., and to demand to be treated there not as a “stranger in the village”, but as a citizen and “native son”. Unlike Baldwin’s, Carter’s text does not aim at a strategic comparison with the U.S. Rather, his approach is remindful of the ethnographic method of participatory observation, which not only implies that he studies the Bernese and their traditions and behaviours more closely, but also means that he eventually gives up distance and undertakes a “voyage of the mind”. Through this inner metamorphosis the line between himself and the Swiss gets blurred. This process of gradual

107 Morrison-Reed, “Ruminations on Being Black in Switzerland”, *op. cit.*, p. 466.

identification with the Swiss was even continued after the completion of *The Bern Book*, when Carter remained in Switzerland, found a Swiss partner, and lived in Bern as a teacher of English and a practitioner of meditation until his death in 1983.

Baldwin's and Carter's ways of provincialising Europe through the Swiss scenario reach their limits at a certain point: while they are provocative and innovative in their choice of employing a reverse ethnographic gaze at the Other, they both refrain from provincialising and decentring European high culture and do not question its predominant, intellectually superior status in the world. But Carter's apolitical and individualist orientation makes it possible for him to employ a gesture of self-evident, "natural" appropriation towards this culture, which allows him to argue for a markedly light-hearted, but implicitly Eurocentric cosmopolitanism. Although he shares Carter's appraisal of European high culture, Baldwin phrases his decision of "appropriat[ing] these white centuries"¹⁰⁸ in a more troubled and ambiguous manner, which is overtly conscious of his special position as a perceived interloper towards European culture. While this leads him to accentuate his Americanness and restrains him from gradually embracing a European (Swiss or French) identity during his extended stays in Europe, his inner trouble about this issue is visibly connected to his felt sense of obligation and commitment towards the American racial situation – a sense which, a few years later, contributed to his becoming one of the most visionary and courageous voices of the Civil Rights Movement.

Studying Baldwin's and Carter's texts about Switzerland almost 70 years after they were written has proved an insightful, but also a challenging experience. It is an experience that demonstrates the importance of rigorously historicising and contextualising these works. They are contributions which relate to the cultural climate of the 1950s in both subversive and affirmative ways; they are shaped by their authors' identities as persons of colour, Americans, and males of different sexual orientation; and they are also works, which anticipate why one of the authors became a permanent resident in Bern whereas the other first chose to be a "transatlantic commuter"¹⁰⁹ and later settled down in the

108 Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes", *op. cit.*, p. 8.

109 James Baldwin. "Letters from a Journey". In: James Baldwin. *The Cross of Redemption. Uncollected Writings*, edited by Randall Kenan, New York: Vintage, 2010, pp. 233-244 (241).

French St. Paul de Vence. The more thorough and exhaustive this work of contextualisation is done – and I hope to have contributed to this effort in at least some ways – the clearer it becomes how these texts continue to speak to recent and pertinent issues. These issues range from, to name only a few, the literary hetero-image of Switzerland and the connections between African American and Afropean literatures, via the colonial amnesia of some European countries, to the currently pressing topics of world heritage and cultural appropriation.

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