

DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS SQUARED: JAMES BALDWIN AND THE MINORITIES OF WORLD LITERATURE

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72 James Baldwin occupies a minor position in world literature in different ways. As an African American writer commuting between the US, France, and Turkey, he is a prime exponent of what Paul Gilroy has dubbed “the Black Atlantic” (4, 19)—a cultural constellation that self-consciously unsettles received accounts of Western modernity. Baldwin’s queer identity, central to his fictional work but markedly absent from most of his autobiographical essays, has made him a popular literary subject of queer theory, even if this dimension has mostly been erased from his activist persona.¹ At the same time, on both sides of the Atlantic, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement draws inspiration from Baldwin’s political commitment, while film adaptations of his work and the circulation of televised interviews and quotes on social media strengthen his presence in popular culture (Verdickt and Vermeulen). Thus, Baldwin’s recent consecration as a major twenty-first-century author, in terms of the prestige, circulation, and adaptation that his works enjoy, remains explicitly connected to what Andrea Lowenstein already in 1980 labeled as Baldwin’s “double minority status” (Field, “Introduction” 5): his African American ethnicity and queer sexuality.

In this article, I suggest that Baldwin’s affinity with and influence on the literatures of queer and Black minorities are two prominent, although not exclusive, manifestations of Baldwin’s central position in a variety of modes of ‘minor’ literature, and that invocations of Baldwin’s minority status(es) are strategized as assets that enhance Baldwin’s circulation—and that of his invokers.² My aim here is not to apply a restrictive and dogmatic theoretical straightjacket to Baldwin’s writings, but to situate his work, and that of some of the writers who explicitly affiliate themselves with him, within a broad and flexible framework in which minor strands of literary production circulate in a dynamic that is irreducible to the hierarchies of minor and major.³ In

this dynamic, explicit acts of affiliation, both his own and those of contemporary world literary authors that invoke him in their writings, impact Baldwin's contemporary minor world literary status. I draw here on Edward Said's concept of affiliation, which establishes a "compensatory order that, whether it is a part, an institution, a set of beliefs, or even a world-vision, provides men and women with a new form of relationship" (19). As Said argues, authors strategically negotiate such an affiliative "new order to reinstate vestiges of the kind of authority associated in the past with filiative order" (19). Baldwin's infamous denunciation of early-twentieth-century African American literature constitutes a breaking-away from an ethnically based filiative order, for which Baldwin substituted an explicitly constructed affiliation with Henry James. As we shall see, Baldwin's refusal of filiation allowed him to mobilize a variety of modes of minor literature on the intersections between class, race, sexuality, and literary tradition.

Despite Baldwin's disfiliation from African American precepts, several critics have noted how his political thought builds on W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of "double-consciousness" (Du Bois 364-365; see Balfour; Hardy; Ross). Du Bois originally applied this term to denote African Americans' debarment from "true self-consciousness," as their white oppressors only allowed them to see themselves "through the revelation of the other world," leading them to "ever fee[l] [their] two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings" (364). Without directly equating Du Bois's African American context to other forms of minoritization, I argue that the term can also be of use to denote the inherent multiplicity of Baldwin's "two-ness"; as sexuality, ethnicity, social standing, and other factors each come to occupy the position that Du Bois assigns to African American identity, Baldwin's multifarious modes of the minor at once exemplify the flexibility of the concept and suggest that these various applications reinforce one another. In doing so, the 'double' becomes doubled itself—a double consciousness squared, so to speak.⁴

I argue that this multiplicity allows contemporary authors to mobilize Baldwin for their own strategic positionings in the world literary field and to convert minority into prestige. After my discussion of Baldwin's own acts of affiliation and resistance to external subjugation-through-filiation, most notably his strained relationship to 'protest' literature and the legacy of W.E.B. Du Bois, I exemplify this dynamic by turning to two strategically chosen contemporary world literary authors: Didier Eribon and Alain Mabanckou. Eribon is a key literary figure in global academic circles, and his queer sexuality overtly informs several of his sociological and philosophical writings. Mabanckou is a prominent Black Francophone author whose work is routinely categorized as postcolonial fiction. Although both authors invoke Baldwin in discourses that are decidedly marked by notions of social and cultural minoritization, they move beyond the paradigm of Black and/or queer literary affinity, thus enhancing the circulation of Baldwin's interlocking and mutually reinforcing minor positions.

“SIMPLY MORE EXALTED VICTIMS”: BALDWIN’S MODES OF AFFILIATION

74 The onset of James Baldwin’s literary career was marked by an explicit instance of what one might call ‘disfiliation’ (cf. Said 20), as in his landmark essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel” (1949), he publicly disavowed any filial relationship to the ‘protest fiction’ of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Richard Wright. The essay inaugurated a well-documented feud between Baldwin and Wright, who had previously acted as a mentor to the former. Rosa Bobia’s insightful study on Baldwin’s reception in France reveals how he would only become *the* African American writer in the eyes of the French public after Wright’s death (16), while Douglas Field states that in the 1950s, “in sharp contrast to Wright, Baldwin seemed to avoid alliances with other intellectual communities, whether African American, black Francophone or other expatriate writers” (*James Baldwin* 16-17). “Everybody’s Protest Novel” is at once Baldwin’s literary declaration of independence and a calculated gamble to gain notoriety by publicly attacking the one writer who was automatically assumed by intellectual Paris—and beyond, as Gilroy considers Wright “the first black writer to be put forward as a major figure in world literature” (146)—to be Baldwin’s filiative point of reference. The literary patricide paid off, as Baldwin’s career as a prominent and highly visible essayist was launched on the strength of this essay (Field, *James Baldwin* 15).

While Baldwin publicly distanced himself from Wright’s literary example, he turned elsewhere to position himself within the writing field. Second perhaps only to the *King James Bible*, it is Henry James who is a continuously cited literary voice throughout Baldwin’s oeuvre.⁵ Field notes that “Baldwin’s emphasis on Henry James is a striking and constant feature in interviews and writings on his development as a writer,” with Baldwin even insisting that James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Princess Casamassima* are the books that helped him “break out of the ghetto” (*All* 18). Although there is a strenuous biographical connection between Baldwin and James—both were American writers who developed their craft and careers in Europe⁶—Baldwin’s affiliation with the latter primarily operates on a different level, as he considered James “the only American writer [...] who seemed to have some sense of what was later to be called the American dilemma” (Leeming 49). Several critics have reflected on why Baldwin so explicitly affiliates himself with James. Thus suggestions that Baldwin’s “appreciation of the urgency of the everyday” might lead him to James, that “master of finding social revelation in the quotidian” (Elam 7); or that James offers Baldwin “a language with which to talk about what he felt were the two dominant markers for the (white) American personality: freedom and innocence” (Hardy 95) consistently link Baldwin’s sociological critique to James’s poetics. French critic Michel Fabre adds a transnational dimension to these readings, as he sees a novel like *Giovanni’s Room* first and foremost as an inversion of “the Jamesian paradigm” of American innocence being gradually corroded by European mores (55).

Colm Toibín, himself a renowned world literary author, also observes more strategic considerations in Baldwin's process of affiliation.⁷ He cites a *New York Times* piece, written in December 1962, in which "Baldwin used the occasion to position himself ambiguously in two of the central pantheons of American beauty" (Toibín 53). In this piece, Baldwin insisted that he didn't want to compare himself to artists whom he "unreservedly admire[d]" but he did believe that some fans of his novel *Another Country* responded in a similar way to "when Miles [Davis] and Ray [Charles] are blowing." He continued: "I think I really helplessly model myself on jazz musicians and try to write the way they sound... I am aiming at what Henry James called 'perception at the pitch of passion'" (Toibín 53-54; ellipsis in original).

According to Toibín, Baldwin thus claims for his prose style and story structure the "soaring, melancholy beauty" of Davis and Charles, "[b]ut just in case anyone reading him wanted thus to place him as a primitive, [...] a writer not steeped in a writerly tradition, Baldwin needed to invoke as well the high priest of American refinement, an author known [...] for the rigor of his controlling imagination" (54). Baldwin's reconstruction of James's moral themes, updated for the contexts of racial equality and social justice, becomes an unexpected tool of self-positioning in the cultural field. Baldwin 'minoritizes' the canonical James by slotting him together with the African American music tradition, while at the same time he strategically fashions his own position in the literary field as a singular artist nonetheless engaged in social issues.

Baldwin's public attacks on Wright and equally explicit affiliation with James both heavily contributed to his literary reception, essentially allowing the author not to be pigeonholed as only a 'Black' writer. At the same time, Baldwin's emphasis on African American musicians finds an important antecedent in Du Bois's essay collection *The Souls of Black Folk*, which influentially placed "black music as the central sign of black cultural value, integrity and autonomy" (Gilroy 90). It is in this collection that Du Bois introduced his theory of double consciousness. Critics have noted how Baldwin echoes (Balfour 24), revises (Ross 25), and extends (Hardy 88) the concept of double consciousness, yet in spite of this overt influence, Du Bois remains for Baldwin a "logical predecessor [...] about whom Baldwin has little to say" (Darsey 194). Indeed, the mere handful of references Baldwin dedicates throughout his non-fiction writing display little sign of affiliation.⁸ Only later in his career would Baldwin occasionally invoke Du Bois in this manner, most notably in two interviews. In 1969, he told a Turkish interviewer that "the only black writer who had really influenced [him]" and who he "had read much, much later and who had a sense of history and a sense of style was W.E.B. Du Bois" (Blint and Büyüm 118). Two years later, in a roundtable conversation with poet Nikki Giovanni, he offered more generous praise:

Now I can see what I owe to Richard [Wright] and what I owe to Chester [Himes], what I owe to Langston Hughes and what I owe to W.E.B. Du Bois and what I owe to Frederick Douglass. But I could not see that when I was twenty. I don't think anybody can see that

at twenty. But you see they were, on one level, simply more exalted victims. (Baldwin, *A Dialogue* 78-79)

The phrasing “simply more exalted victims” is of special note. At age 47, Baldwin is quick to recognize the literary standing of his African American antecedents. Nonetheless, he readily acknowledges these authors to be “simply” more Black icons which he had to ‘victimize’ in order to position himself within the broader literary field and the white power structures that dictated its heteronormative set of rules. If anything, Baldwin’s strategies of affiliation and disaffiliation embody a form of Du Bois’s “double consciousness”: “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois 364).⁹ As we will see, it is this multifarious applicability and concurrent multiplication of double consciousness—the ‘squaring’ of modes of minority—that contemporary authors draw upon in their own strategic invocations of Baldwin.

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TWO AUTHORS, MULTIPLE MINORS

Didier Eribon is a French sociologist and philosopher who has written extensively on queer subjectivity and contributed to the belated popularization of queer studies within French academia in the late 1990s (*Insult* xix-xx). Despite Baldwin’s by then well-established position as a major figure in queer literature, he remains unmentioned in Eribon’s book-length discussions of the subject, such as in the landmark *Réflexions sur la question gay* (1999), translated into English in 2004 as *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*, and *Théories de la littérature: système du genre et verdicts sexuels*.¹⁰ Instead, Eribon includes Baldwin briefly in his treatise on racialized minority subjectivity (*Morale* 85, 168), while a much more personal, class-conscious affiliation takes a prominent place in Eribon’s successful memoir *Retour à Reims*.

Alain Mabanckou is a French Congolese novelist, essayist, and poet. In 2007, on the twentieth anniversary of Baldwin’s death, Mabanckou published *Lettre à Jimmy*, his self-described “lettre d’amour” (*Lettre* 170), in which he recounts Baldwin’s life while increasingly intervening in the narrative, eventually drawing extended parallels between Baldwin’s and his own artistic opinions. The same year, *Le Monde* published “Pour une ‘littérature-monde’ en français,” a manifesto advocating for the French language to be “libérée de son pacte exclusif avec la nation, libre désormais de tout pouvoir autre que ceux de la poésie et de l’imaginaire, n’aura pour frontières que celles de l’esprit.” One of the 44 authors to sign the manifesto, Mabanckou has been a vocal advocate for a new understanding of Francophone world literature. In “‘The Song of the Migrating Bird’: For a *World Literature in French*” (2009), he clarifies his position through a close and explicit affiliation with some of Baldwin’s statements on Black writers’ need for creative independence, making Baldwin a crucial interlocutor in the relation between French and world literature.

Through the choice of these authors, I move beyond the most obvious minorities of (world) literature that are regularly ascribed to Baldwin, and are thus instrumental in the majoritization of Baldwin's status through these forms of minority: race and queerness. According to Douglas Field, in the past, Baldwin's "reputation has suffered from his refusal to adhere to a single ideology and his continued resistance to, and suspicion of, labels and categories" ("Introduction" 4). He cites Andrea Lowenstein, who already in 1980 wondered "whether, if Baldwin were either black or gay, more reviewers might be able to actually address his work itself" ("Introduction" 5). I argue that it is precisely this "double minority status" (5) which has now become an asset to Baldwin's circulation, as a variety of present-day writers affiliate themselves with Baldwin through either one of these notions, or, since the emergence of Black queer theory, through both.¹¹ Moreover, authors such as Eribon and Mabanckou expand on this understanding by negotiating a multiplication of Baldwin's minorities—both writers mobilize a subsequent 'doubling' of Baldwin's already double minority status.

Ostensibly, Eribon and Mabanckou each fit one of these evident 'minor' categories: Eribon is openly homosexual, with queer subjectivity being an important recurring topic in much of his work and research; as a Black man, Alain Mabanckou operates from a racially minoritized background within the grander framework of Francophone world literature. As we will see, however, their articulations of affiliation also bring into play other dimensions—most notably, class consciousness and the struggle for creative independence. In this way, the cases of Eribon and Mabanckou not only illustrate the complexity of the relation between the minor and world literature, but also the need to pay close textual attention to different cases that are too easily pigeonholed—as Black, as queer, as French-speaking, as combinations of these. As we will see, Eribon's and Mabanckou's affiliations with Baldwin are parts of sustained efforts to resist such reduction. Instead, they negotiate an opening-up of the Du Boisian concept of double consciousness into a plurality of minor statuses that they assign to Baldwin and, in turn, to themselves.

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RETURNING TO HARLEM: BALDWIN, ERIBON, AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

In *Retour à Reims* (2009), Didier Eribon notes how the entire first section of his earlier work *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self* could be read as "une autobiographie transfigurée en analyse historique et théorique, ou, si l'on préfère, comme une analyse historique et théorique ancrée dans une expérience personnelle" (*Retour* 22). In *Retour*, Eribon continues down this path, this time invoking Baldwin's autobiographical essay "Notes of a Native Son" (1955) within the context of class consciousness. Born in Reims to a working-class, homophobic family, Eribon sought refuge in the world of academia, building a distinguished career in philosophy and the social sciences in Paris. After his father's sickness and death, Eribon starts the process of

reconciliation with his mother, ‘returning to Reims’ after an absence of thirty years. Here, he begins to wonder whether his estrangement from his family was not as much a break with the class background he came from as with the rampant homophobia of his upbringing.

Upon rereading Baldwin’s essay, which recounts the death and funeral of his own father, Eribon finds striking similarities between their ordeals. Both writers had fled a proletarian environment, displaying a similar reluctance to visiting the deathbeds of their estranged, rough, and taciturn fathers. Yet, like Baldwin, Eribon comes to realize his past hatred has made way for understanding and cautious compassion, and he contemplates the importance of Baldwin’s return to his origins:

Et, peut-être, en s’engageant dans ce processus d’intellection historique et politique, devenir un jour capable de se réapproprier émotionnellement son propre passé, et parvenir non seulement à se comprendre lui-même mais surtout à s’accepter lui-même. On conçoit que, obsédé par cette question, il ait affirmé avec tant de force dans une interview sue “éviter le voyage de retour, c’est s’éviter soi-même, éviter la ‘vie.’” (*Retour* 34)

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Like Baldwin before him, Eribon begins to understand that everything he had held against his father “avait été façonné par la violence du monde social” (*Retour* 34), “le poids d’une histoire écrassante qui ne pouvait que produire des dégâts psychiques profonds chez ceux qui l’ont vécu” (35). While acknowledging their contexts to be “quite different,” Eribon affiliates with Baldwin both as a biographical antecedent—the working-class kid leaving home in order to be able to become a writer, eventually forced to reconnect with that past—and as a sociological predecessor who is equally concerned with rootedness and upbringing.¹² Both authors come to terms with a tenuous re-filiation with genealogy—their deceased fathers—precisely through acts of affiliation: Baldwin takes on a writerly cosmopolitanism that allows him to scrutinize the Harlem ghetto; Eribon directly invokes Baldwin’s example. Although Eribon cannot make similar claims of ethnic filiation as contemporary Black Francophone artists, like many of them he repositions Baldwin in a framework that is ultimately socially and sociologically motivated: Baldwin becomes a fellow critic of “la violence du monde social,” a world in which the lives and subjectivity of both their fathers “furent déterminées par une double inscription dans un lieu et dans un temps dont la dureté et les contraintes se démultiplièrent en se combinant” (*Retour* 34-35).

Eribon’s process of affiliation transcends a merely perceived shared status of class and oedipal anger-turned-compassion. By basing the affiliation on their class consciousness, rather than the sexual identity that has made him a household name in LGBTQ+ studies, Eribon strengthens—or ‘squares’—his double minority identity within academic circles, backed by a powerful, unexpected ally from beyond the grave. Moreover, the narrative of reconnecting with one’s origins exemplifies the importance Eribon attaches to a perceived world literary mobility associated with Baldwin’s multiple minorities—a move we will also observe with Mabanckou. Like Baldwin’s commuting between Harlem and the white (even transatlantic) world, Eribon’s explicit affiliation with this example allows him to move, both physically

and figuratively, between Reims and Paris, between humble origins and ‘the’ world literary capital.¹³ Tellingly, he explicitly refers to his previous refusal to acknowledge his class background in academic circles as “un autre type [...] de double conscience” (*Retour* 23)—thus directly linking his and Baldwin’s experiences to Du Bois’s account of African American alienation.

The affiliation with Baldwin is only one instance of Eribon’s newfound world literary affiliations. Whereas his earlier works centered on white French and British authors, in *Retour* he shifts to more transatlantic and ethnically diverse reference points. Two titans of twentieth-century French theory, Eribon’s friends Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, still feature heavily in the book, but when he mirrors his personal working class experiences to literary antecedents, the three main affiliations consist of the French writer Annie Ernaux, Baldwin, and the African American author John Edgar Wideman.¹⁴ Of these three, only Baldwin identifies as queer, but Eribon never explicitly traces their affiliation to a shared sexuality.¹⁵ Both Ernaux and Wideman come from working-class backgrounds as well and have written on this “class consciousness” in several memoirs. Wideman has written extensively on the different trajectories he and his brother Robert have undergone, with Robert serving a lifelong prison sentence after a botched robbery; he would eventually be released on parole in 2019, after 44 years served. Eribon recognizes his own filial unease in John Wideman’s professed estrangement from his brother.

As with the invocation of Baldwin, Eribon immediately acknowledges the difference between his own upbringing and the plight of working-class African Americans in the US of the early to mid-twentieth century (*Retour* 115-116). Still, he feels compelled to quote extensively from these two authors, claiming to recognize, on a level that brackets socioethnicity, his own experiences in their highly literary autobiographical observations. *Retour’s* mooring in autobiographical experience and its refusal of normative theorizations is predated by similar concerns in the introduction to *Insult*:

[T]his is, then, a book on the gay question. Yet there will be no theory of homosexuality to be found in it, not even of male homosexuality. I want merely to present a set of reflections, sometimes incomplete, provisory, and hypothetical. They will perhaps provoke further reflections; in fact they are intended to do so, without regard for borders—be they national, disciplinary, or sexual. This is an open book, open to debate, discussion, dialogue. (*Insult* 12)

As with *Insult’s* disinterest in rigid queer theory, *Retour* refutes any grand all-encompassing narrative of class consciousness. Thus Eribon’s gestures of affiliation model an alternative strand of queer theory that differs from the normative claims of sociology. Instead of mapping out a theoretical framework styled after his filiative mentor Pierre Bourdieu, Eribon traces shared human experiences in the autobiographical musings of Baldwin, Wideman, and Ernaux, as he continues to look for behavioural and institutional patterns. As he remarks in an aside, it is “comme si la généalogie individuelle était inseparable d’une archéologie ou d’une topologie sociales que

chacun porte en soi comme l'une de ses vérités les plus profondes, si ce n'est la plus consciente" (*Retour* 20).

Eribon's reflexive modes of affiliation literally manifest themselves here "without regard for borders" (*Insult* 12), as two of his three literary examples are African American. In doing so, Eribon contributes to the complex processes of world literary value creation through a championing—which in turn leads to a majoritization—of minor literature, especially and firstly in the Francophone literary sphere. By 2009, when *Retour à Reims* was first published, after several decades of relative neglect James Baldwin's oeuvre was receiving renewed attention in American academia, primarily within the fields of literary and cultural studies, but also extending to fields such as philosophy, political science, and legal studies (Scott 168-169). However, Baldwin's fame and availability among the general French public was still limited, as the last reissued translations of his work dated back to 1998 and 2004.¹⁶ Eribon, an academic with considerable ties to the Anglophone world, seems to have been perceptive of this renewed interest in Baldwin. In his book *Une morale du minoritaire* (2001), in which he wanted to "construire [...] une théorie de la domination et de la résistance, de l'assujettissement et de la subjectivation" (*Retour* 23), Eribon already briefly referred to Baldwin in the context of racial subordination in two footnotes (*Morale* 85, 168). By 2009, as Baldwin is once again gaining prominence among "les moralistes du minoritaire," Eribon judges these two footnotes sufficient grounds to include Baldwin in his summary of *Morale* (*Retour* 24)—this time, indeed, his affiliation with Baldwin informs his methodological position.

Although Eribon thus retroactively exaggerates Baldwin's presence in *Une morale du minoritaire*, the much more explicit personal affiliation in *Retour à Reims* still predates Baldwin's reemergence within popular culture, and especially its Francophone outlets, by a few years. The BLM movement would not rise to international prominence until July 2013, when the movement immediately catalyzed Baldwin's words (Gibson 128-129), while new translations and reissues of older translations of Baldwin's work would not circulate widely in France until 2015 (Verdickt 207-208). Given the critical and commercial success of Eribon's memoir, the book has certainly contributed to Baldwin's currency in France. Published at a time when the renewed academic interest in Baldwin was only just about to seep into mainstream readership, *Retour à Reims* shows an affiliation with Baldwin that takes the guise of a bridgehead figure, not all too different from the book's broader bridging function between Eribon's own academic position and the much more accessible style he adopts in this book, intended to seek a readership well beyond the traditional intellectual in-crowd. Through strategic rhetorical acts of affiliation and experiential narrative, Eribon thus maximizes the appeal and reach of his expressly "minoritaire" subject matters, hence furthering both his own and Baldwin's consecration. By invoking Baldwin in a work occupied with this "autre type [...] de double conscience" (23)—not unlike Baldwin's idiosyncratic mobilization of Henry James in the deconstruction of whiteness—he

signals the flexibility of Baldwin's minor positions as well as that of the concept of double consciousness itself.

LETTERS FROM ALAIN: BALDWIN AND AFRICAN WORLD LITERATURE

In *Lettre à Jimmy*, Alain Mabanckou addresses Baldwin in a studiously informal manner (as he consistently *tutoyers* him), recounting Baldwin's own life back to him. As the narrative progresses, Mabanckou's affiliations with Baldwin become more outspoken, political, and even polemical. Thus, Baldwin's argument with what he labelled "protest fiction" ("Everybody's Protest Novel" 11), itself the onset for his notorious feud with Richard Wright, is invoked as an antecedent for the French Congolese author's own quarrel with much of the colonial and postcolonial literary production in French-speaking Black Africa. Mabanckou laments how in many of these works "[l]'émotion que l'auteur insuffle dans ses oeuvres ruine peu ou prou l'indépendance et la distance nécessaires à toute activité de l'esprit." Of a Black writer, specifically, "on attend de lui qu'il place le 'problème noir' au centre de son oeuvre, que les personnages de couleur fourmillent, qu'il adopte un ton conflictuel, avec pour cible unique le Blanc" (*Lettre* 74). Against this reductionist tendency, Mabanckou favours the independence of the writer, as he is weary of 'herd-mentality literature.' To him, "[l]'écrivain devrait toujours donner sa propre version de la condition humaine, même à l'opposé de la pensée unique et moralisante"; after all, "qu'est-ce que l'engagement si celui-ci conduit à l'effacement des individualités?" (*Lettre* 76-77). His insistence that he, by nature, mistrusts "ceux qui brandissent des bannières" (77) is a direct echo of Baldwin's statement "I think that all theories are suspect" ("Autobiographical Notes" 9).

Ultimately, Mabanckou states that "la définition de son statut" imprison Black people and their imagination (*Lettre* 159-160). He sees this belief anticipated in Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. In the postscript he concludes: "Baldwin fondait son "rêve" sur la rédemption de la nature humaine, la reconquête de ce que nous avons perdu depuis longtemps: la beauté de la vie. Finalement quelle autre parole pourrait mieux nous inspirer que celle-ci..." (*Lettre* 174). Although Mabanckou brings the racial question back into focus, he insists that his initial attraction to—and eventual affiliation with—Baldwin was not inspired by their shared skin colour (*Lettre* 169). Despite their biographical similarities,¹⁷ Mabanckou sheds doubt on the importance of race for his perceived kinship to Baldwin, as he muses:

Cela suffisait-il pour que je lui voue mon admiration alors même que la plupart des écrivains que j'admire n'ont souvent rien à voir avec l'Afrique, la France ou l'Amérique? Était-ce tout simplement l'émerveillement devant un écrivain au parcours atypique et dont l'existence chaotique ne pouvait me laisser indifférent? (*Lettre* 169-170)

Mabanckou's actual act of affiliation is thus predominantly informed by a liberal approach to artistry and authorship—one in which artistic singularity might substitute for racialized minority as one half of Du Bois's "two-ness," with the other being one's inclusion in society at large. Mabanckou casts Baldwin in the role of lone prophet, leading future writers out of the wilderness through the sheer cultivation of their individual talent and life-affirming trajectories. Under the guise of a biographical homage, Mabanckou accentuates Baldwin's polemical stances against the then-dominant mainstream of African American literature and directly connects them to his own provocative and subversive status—which stands in marked contrast to Eribon's less polemical approach—a reputation he has carefully cultivated throughout his career.

Together with the violent subject matter of many of his novels, literary affiliation is a key component to the construction of that reputation. Thus the notorious anti-Semite Louis-Ferdinand Céline is referenced in the essay "The Song of the Migrating

82 Bird': For a *World Literature in French*":

People will never fully grasp the ambiguity I feel concerning my relationship with other African writers. For example, between the Nigerian Wole Soyinka and the Frenchman Louis-Ferdinand Céline, one of the two is a "foreigner" to me. And it is certainly not Céline whom I read in the original French, but rather Soyinka whom I discovered through the convoluted path of translation. We could argue over the fact that Soyinka and I "possess" Africa or that we are "possessed" by Africa, our continent, our native land. But that would be a different debate, and such a "continental" understanding of literature for a long time hindered the intelligibility and independence of art. (Mabanckou, "Song" 147)

Mabanckou's idiosyncratic strategies of affiliation and association—few writers would be inclined to invoke a right-wing author as controversial as Céline and a progressive icon like Baldwin almost within the same paragraph—trigger a calculated response of controversy, and it is precisely in the nondescript zone between the political left and right that Mabanckou wants to claim *intermediate* ground where the 'true' artist can reside as "[t]his is precisely the point at which world literature intervenes, establishing complicities beyond continents, nationalities, catechisms and genealogy in order to register the discreet way in which two seemingly disparate artists suddenly acknowledge one another" (147). Mabanckou calls for Francophone writers to "accept the building of a fortress" in order to decide what they could "contribute to the world" (147)—a militant yet undetermined stance that is decidedly removed from Eribon's restrained introspection.

"The Song of the Migrating Bird" voices many of the same concerns with African literature as *Lettre à Jimmy*, and Mabanckou again foregrounds Baldwin's creative independence. Here he quotes Baldwin to the effect that "the only real concern of the artist [is] to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art" (148).¹⁸ For African writers, Mabanckou claims that "the challenge comes from having to rethink one's position, since we have always been told that literature could only

serve for rebellion and had to draw its inspiration from the community, a burden of responsibility that has often been harmful to our development as writers” (148). Although Mabanckou by no means negates or minimalizes his African identity, he finds inspiration in Baldwin’s distrust of the demands and expectations of outward forces toward the minority artist’s craft, while he sides with Baldwin’s championing of ‘experience,’ as he remains convinced “that one is best equipped to reach out to the world, to attain the universal, starting from one’s local experiences” (148).

Ultimately Mabanckou invokes Baldwin and the “difficulty [...] of being a Negro writer” that Baldwin’s work thematizes to support his own move ‘toward’ a world literature in French, one where a multiplicity of experiences culminate and art is recognized as a powerful tool to make sense of life’s intrinsic messiness (149).¹⁹ Mobility is once again key here, not only in the literal sense—Mabanckou champions the idea of travel—but also as a figurative multitude of positions within the world literary field. Mabanckou thus mobilizes Baldwin, and the latter’s carefully selected minor positions, to assign himself a unique, fluid, outsider status while at the same time laying claim to a pioneering role in the (French-speaking) world literary debate. Within this discourse, the concept of “double-consciousness” itself undergoes a doubling of sorts, as the minoritized writer adopts a second level of “second-sight” (Du Bois 364) to retain his creative independence vis-à-vis his fellow minoritized subjects. Crucially, the most obvious minoritized connection to Baldwin, their shared ethnicity, is understated in Mabanckou’s argument. This is even more apparent in Eribon’s mobilization, as Eribon leaves their shared queerness unmentioned. These strategies might suggest that, by now, both authors consider Baldwin’s most obvious minor statuses sufficiently established to be taken for granted, allowing them to focus on more idiosyncratic strands of affiliation, opening up a more various and complicated understanding of Baldwin’s interlocking modes of the minor in the process.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have singled out two of Baldwin’s posthumous transnational affiliates, thus tracing the construction of Baldwin’s intersecting minorities as part of these authors’ negotiation of their own positions in the world literary field. Mabanckou invokes minor aspects of his antecedent to stress his own creative independence from a perceived predominant (filiative) order in his minor, postcolonial mode of world literature. Thus, his affiliation with Baldwin, at least in part, also leads to a posture of disfiliation, at times priding itself on its resistance to older forms of filiation—as he draws an explicit parallel to Baldwin’s refusal of African American ‘protest’ literature. Although Eribon is officially less concerned with literary identity construction in *Retour*—he precisely wants to trace his working-class origins, a milieu practically devoid of books—on a performative level his affiliation with Baldwin, and Baldwin’s class consciousness, helps create his world literary identity and global academic

standing. He, too, creates a “new order” (Said 19) that amounts to a highly personal, individualized vestige.

Baldwin’s own idiosyncratic modes of affiliation prefigure and inform those of these two authors. Despite a perceived indebtedness to the thinking of Du Bois, Baldwin refrains from crediting his predecessor until later in his career. In his influential essay, Du Bois wrote that the African American’s strivings would end by him being “a co-worker in the kingdom of culture.”²⁰ If we were to extrapolate that prognosis to minor literature, we see here three authors occupying minor—on the grounds of their ethnic, queer, and proletarian identities—positions, each ascending in the kingdom of culture by building unilateral alliances with already established precursors from various ethnic, sexual, and historic backgrounds.

84 Whereas Baldwin’s reputation had previously suffered from his refusal of monolithic ideology, resistance to rigid categories, and double minority status as a Black queer writer (Field, “Introduction” 4-5), in the past few decades—with the advent of Black queer studies, a general renewed critical attention to Baldwin’s work, and the suggestion that writers such as Mabanckou and Eribon by now hold this double status to be sufficiently established that they need pay scant attention to it in their mobilizations of Baldwin—these impediments seem overcome.²¹ Moreover, while minority is often perceived as an obstacle for circulation, the above-discussed affiliations suggest that the opposite holds true as well. The multiplicity of Baldwin’s “double-consciousness,” and the literary freedom, fluidity, originality, and ultimate unicity associated with it, promote his circulation in present-day world literature and provide useful affiliative anchors for current authors adopting prestige-building strategies.²² If a refusal of identitarian affiliation traditionally was considered problematic, these authors’ strategies exemplify how it now has become an asset. By substituting idiosyncratic modes of affiliation for more obvious ethnic and queer connections, they make Baldwin’s multiple minorities visible—lifting the “veil” (Du Bois 364) of multifarious double-consciousnesses one mobilization at a time.

NOTES

1. Only three of Baldwin’s essays (“Preservation of Innocence,” “The Male Prison,” and “Here Be Dragons”) directly address queer sexuality.
2. I draw here on Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s explicitly political theorization of “littérature mineure” as the literature “qu’une minorité fait dans une langue majeure” (29). Deleuze and Guattari attribute three characteristics to ‘minor literature’: “la déterritorialisation de la langue, le branchement de l’individuel sur l’immédiat-politique, l’agencement collectif d’énunciation” (33). They explicitly mention Black English in their discussion of the deterritorialization of language (30), while Baldwin’s essay “If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?” already raised similar issues in 1979, referring to the titular argument as having “nothing to do with language itself but with the *role* of language. Language, incontestably, reveals the speaker. Language, also, far more dubiously, is meant to define the other—and, in this case, the other is refusing to be defined by a language that has never been able to recognize him” (780). At the same time, Baldwin’s influence on Black and

- queer social justice activists firmly adds a political and collective, or at least community-building, dimension to his literary afterlife, although, as we will see, it is precisely this collective characteristic that Alain Mabanckou counters through his own idiosyncratic affiliation with Baldwin.
3. Baldwin's extensive discussions of the role that literature should play in bearing witness to the hardships that African Americans and other minorities faced in the US also make his oeuvre a far less controversial fit for this understanding of minor literature than that of Franz Kafka's. As we shall see, the risk of committing an anachronism here, "l'une des formes de l'ethnocentrisme littéraire des centres qui appliquent aux textes leurs propres catégories esthétiques et politiques" (Casanova 281), of which Deleuze and Guattari have been accused in their appropriation of Kafka for their theory, is directly refuted by Baldwin's own statements on the subject.
 4. Nicholas Boggs already noticed how Baldwin and the illustrator Yoran Cazac, in their children's novel *Little Man Little Man* (1976), "complicate Du Bois's seminal formulation of double consciousness by queering the 'twoness' of the black American experience into the *triple* consciousness of being black, American, and queer" (124; emphasis mine).
 5. At least seven different texts ("The Discovery of What it Means to be an American," "In Search of a Majority," "Alas, Poor Richard," *The Fire Next Time*, "The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King," "The White Man's Guilt," and *No Name in the Street*) directly cite James.
 6. It is of note that the image of James as a closeted homosexual was then not yet available.
 7. As mentioned before, Toibín is one of the most prolific and prominent literary admirers of Baldwin. Toibín's invocations of Baldwin explicitly draw on their shared queer sexuality, while he also casts Baldwin as a free, fluid, liberal subject—a consecration reminiscent of Mabanckou's strategies. See G.D. Naughton's "Confronting the 'Foreigner from Within': (Sexual) Exile and 'Indomitable Force' in the Fiction of James Baldwin and Colm Toibín" for a comparison of the two authors.
 8. Du Bois is briefly mentioned in "Princes and Powers" (146), "East River, Downtown" (183), *The Fire Next Time* (345), "The Fire This Time: A Letter to the Bishop" (267), and *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (67).
 9. On a similar note, Mabanckou's statements that African writers "write only by mandate, by delegation" and "have always been told that literature could only serve for rebellion and had to draw its inspiration from the community, a burden of responsibility that has often been harmful to our development as writers" ("Song" 148) update and revise this quote from Du Bois, now contrasting the artistic individual's self with that of his own politically minoritized community at large.
 10. It is of note that during the brief discussion of Black queerness in *Insult* (61-62), the only Black queer artist who is mentioned is the African American videographer Marlon Riggs.
 11. See several essays in Johnson and Henderson, *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, and especially Brim's *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination*, for extensive discussions of Baldwin vis-à-vis Black queer theory.
 12. As Eribon concedes, "[c]e à quoi l'on a été arraché ou ce à quoi l'on a voulu s'arracher continue d'être partie intégrante de ce que l'on est" (*Retour* 14).
 13. Cf. Pascale Casanova's *La république mondiale des lettres*.
 14. Bourdieu and Foucault are, of course, themselves omnipresent in the transnational literary field. See, for instance, Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States* (transl. Jeff Fort) and Sapiro, "Translation and Symbolic Capital in the Era of Globalization: French Literature in the United States."
 15. Although he briefly mentions how Baldwin took up "dans son oeuvre la *double* question de ce que cela signifie d'être noir et de ce que cela signifie d'être gay" (*Retour* 34; emphasis mine).
 16. Respectively, *Giovanni's Room* ("La Chambre de Giovanni") and *Go Tell It on the Mountain* ("La

Conversion”), cf. Verdickt, “The Evidence” 206. It is of note, too, that Eribon quotes from Baldwin’s original English texts. The first French translation of *Notes of a Native Son* (“Chroniques d’un pays natal”) dates back to 1973 (a new translation by Marie Darrieussecq was published in 2019), while *Conversations with James Baldwin* has not been translated into French.

17. As to their biographical similarities, Mabanckou and Baldwin share (in the case of Baldwin, distant) African ancestry and are both connected to France, while Mabanckou eventually relocated to Baldwin’s homeland, the US.
18. The quotation stems from Baldwin’s essay “Autobiographical Notes” (8).
19. Mabanckou draws a clear parallel between Baldwin’s “difficulty of being a Negro writer,” his struggles with the restrictive expectations and demands of outside forces, and the state of contemporary African literature: “It remains to be said, to finish with the question of the African author—since, let me remind you, I am after all an African author and any well-ordered charity always begins at home—that there is often no place for an individual itinerary, since this is seen as a kind of repudiation. The African author writes only by mandate, by delegation. In some ways he remains accountable to the community, and in most cases this same community decrees that his action is incomplete, insufficient...” (“Song” 148-149).
- 86** 20. The phrase also inspired the title of David Withun’s eponymous monograph on classicism and cosmopolitanism in Du Bois’s thought.
21. This renewed critical attention was kickstarted by Dwight McBride and D. Quentin Miller’s collections of critical essays *James Baldwin Now*, which contains Nicholas Boggs’s article, and *Re-viewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen*.
22. It should be noted that there is a marked difference between Baldwin’s world literary circulation at large and his social media presence, which is much more distilled into the singular image of a social justice warrior (cf. Verdickt and Vermeulen).

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