BORGESIAN BALDWIN: *GIOVANNI'S ROOM*, "THE ALEPH," AND QUEER TRANSLATION PRACTICES

BALDWIN BORGIANO: *GIOVANNI'S ROOM*, "O ALEPH" E PRÁTICAS TRADUTÓRIAS *QUEER*

ABSTRACT

This essay draws on the subversive publication history of the first Spanish and Russian translations of James Baldwin's sophomore novel *Giovanni's Room* to highlight Baldwin's own capital of resistance and the multifarious ways in which receiving (sub) cultures mobilize this disruptive potential. The essay approaches these dynamics by way of an anecdotal but productive metaphor: the 'Aleph.' Jorge Luis Borges' short story of the same name was dedicated to Estela Canto, an unconventional Argentinian woman who would go on to write the first Spanish-language translation of *Giovanni's Room*. Much like the Aleph in Borges' story is constantly buried and (re-)excavated through ritualized practice, Baldwin's multifarious, Aleph-like queer potential can only be achieved by foregrounding its underground, excavational, and posthumous statuses—not least by way of queer translation practices. The essay illustrates this through case studies of the novel's underground circulation in the USSR and in Francoist Spain. A final section considers the novel's status in contemporary Russia, as its recent withdrawal from Russian bookstores provides an important reminder of the persistent precarity of Baldwin's queer literature in the face of authoritarianism, but also recognizes that it is precisely 'going underground' that invigorates Baldwin's Aleph-like potential as a literary ally to political praxes of resistance.

Keywords: James Baldwin. Queer translation practices. *Giovanni's Room*. Literary censorship and underground circulation. Borges and "The Aleph".

RESUMO

O presente ensaio parte da história subversiva de publicação das primeiras traduções de *Giovanni's Room*, de James Baldwin, para o espanhol e o russo, com o objetivo de evidenciar tanto o capital de resistência do autor quanto as múltiplas formas pelas quais culturas marginalizadas mobilizam esse potencial disruptivo. Para abordar tais dinâmicas, recorremos à potência narrativa e criativa da metáfora do Aleph borgiano. O conto homônimo de Jorge Luis Borges foi dedicado a Estela Canto, figura excêntrica da cena literária argentina que viria a realizar a primeira tradução de *Giovanni's Room* para o espanhol. Tal como o Aleph borgiano, continuamente enterrado e reescavado por meio de práticas ritualizadas, o potencial *queer* e multifacetado da obra de

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Baldwin só se revela plenamente quando são ressaltados seus aspectos subterrâneos, escavatórios e póstumos, especialmente através de práticas tradutórias dissidentes. O ensaio desenvolve essa perspectiva por meio de estudos de caso sobre a circulação clandestina do romance na então União Soviética e na Espanha sob o franquismo. Por fim, analisamos a recepção contemporânea do livro na Rússia, onde sua recente retirada das livrarias reacende o alerta sobre a persistente precariedade da literatura *queer* de James Baldwin diante de contextos autoritários, ao mesmo tempo em que se reconhece que é justamente esse movimento de retorno à clandestinidade que reativa a potência borgiana do Aleph na obra do escritor afro-americano como aliada literária das práticas políticas de resistência.

Palavras-chave: James Baldwin. Práticas tradutórias *queer*. *Giovanni's Room*. Censura literária e circulação clandestina. Borges e "O Aleph".

Introduction: "A captive of culture first and last"?

James Baldwin's sophomore novel *Giovanni's Room* (1956) is routinely considered a canonical text of twentieth-century gay literature, a literary canon that itself both functions to "suppor[t] individuals' identities" and has "served to elaborate a common culture for [its] respective communities and subcultures" (MCCALLUM & TUKHANEN, 2014, p. 3). This essay uncovers how Baldwin's queer identity and dissident potential have been both literally and figuratively translated into receiving cultures that are controlled by homophobic authoritarian regimes through the clandestine circulation of translations of *Giovanni's Room* in Francoist Spain and the USSR. In both territories, translations of the novel were suppressed by authoritarian censorship and would only be officially released once the fascist or communist dictatorship had come to an end. However, during these totalitarian reigns, Argentinian and Russian translations of Baldwin's queer fiction would be broadly disseminated through underground channels.

This essay draws on *Giovanni's Room*'s subversive publication history to highlight Baldwin's own capital of resistance—and the multifarious ways in which receiving (sub)cultures mobilize this disruptive potential. Crucially, these weaponizations of Baldwin's potential for acts of resistance have been consistently highlighting the *underground* and *excavation dimensions* of their acts of recovery. Since Baldwin's death in 1987, they also foreground an additional explicit *posthumous* dimension which ties in with Carolin Amlinger's observation on the processes of repopularization in the contemporary German book market: "the 'dead books' are to be resurrected" (AMLINGER, 2024, p. 107). Drawing on the work of queer translation scholars such as William J. Spurlin, Aarón Lacayo, and Marc Démont, I consider literary translation not only a key component of weaponizations of Baldwin's disruptive potential, but one that is itself routinely marked by an inherent *queerness*, especially in relation to notions of disruption and indeterminacy. Following Spurlin's conjecture that "[the] disruptive, subversive space of indeterminacy between source and target languages, the space of *l'intraduisible*, is a queer space, one that challenges any normative idea

of straightforward, untroubled translatability" (SPURLIN, 2014, p. 207) and Lacayo's considerations of translation as "a queer force that signals towards a future community of unknown encounters" (LACAYO, 2014, p. 221), I read the first Argentinian and Russian translations of *Giovanni's Room* through a queer translation prism. Moreover, these translations explicitly operate in what Marc Démont identifies as "queering translation," a mode of translation that "focuses on acknowledging the disruptive force [of the source text] and recreating it in the target language" (DÉMONT, 2018, p. 163).

The essay maps these underground, excavational, and posthumous dimensions of Baldwin's career onto an anecdotal metaphor that offers a productive vantage point: the 'Aleph.' As it turns out, *Giovanni's Room*'s first Spanish-language translation was written by Estela Canto, Jorge Luis Borges's one-time muse and frequent interlocutor. Borges dedicated his seminal short story "The Aleph" to Canto, and the titular device, "a small iridescent sphere" with "universal space… contained inside it" (BORGES, 1998, p. 283) provides a useful metaphor to approach Baldwin's *world* literary value.[1] Despite the fact that the Aleph is "the place where, without admixture or confusion, all the places of the world, seen from every angle, coexist," it can only be accessed under specific conditions: "dorsal decubitus is essential, as are darkness, immobility, and a certain ocular accommodation" (BORGES, 1998, p. 281).[2] In an ancient cellar in Buenos Aires, Borges's Aleph is constantly buried and (re-)excavated through ritualized practice—much like Baldwin's multifarious, Aleph-like queer potential can only be achieved by foregrounding its underground, excavational, and posthumous statuses.

The afterlife of *Giovanni's Room* serves as a productive case in point. In a revealing turn of phrase, Baldwin's biographer Bill Mullen writes how the novel "has been *recovered* as a landmark in queer writing in the U.S., and an *avatar* of contemporary gay literature" (MULLEN, 2019, p. 65, emphases mine). The book is simultaneously turned into a sacrosanct—and thus *static*—object of contemporary LGBTQ+ literature and is described as a precarious entity that can only resurface through an act of *recovery*, just like the Aleph embodies an underground (posthumous) status and processes of excavation.

To strengthen this argument, the essay compares *Giovanni's Room*'s underground circulation in Francoist Spain and the USSR to contemporary Russia. Genadii Shmakov, who wrote the novel's first Russian translation, was once described by his compatriot and fellow exile Joseph Brodsky as "a captive of culture first and last" (VOLKOV, 1998, p. 277 *apud* BAER, 2011, p. 36). Brodsky used this phrase to stress that Shmakov placed his commitment to high-brow literature above his own poetic and sexual preferences, but it can also denote Baldwin's 'entrapment' in respective host and receiving cultures—as

1 "[U]na pequeña esfera tornasolada… el espacio cósmico estaba ahí" (BORGES, 2007, p. 753). To highlight the translational dimension of the essay and allow multilingual readers to perceive the stylistic nuances of Borges's Spanish source text vis-à-vis Hurley's translation, I have included the original Spanish quotes from "El Aleph" in footnotes.

2 "[E]l lugar donde están, sin confundirse, todos los lugares del orbe, vistos desde todos los ángulos… el decúbito dorsal es indispensable. También lo son la oscuridad, la inmovilidad, cierta acomodación ocular" (BORGES, 2007, p. 750-751).

was the case under fascist and communist censorship and is at present again evident in Vladimir Putin's Russia.

"You could go around the world with that thing down there in the basement": *Giovanni*'s Cellar

Elsewhere, I have argued that in the Danish, French, German, and Dutch translations of *Giovanni's Room* "a plurality of strategies have been employed to transmit notions of queerness in Baldwin's novel—informed both by socio-political and ideological discrepancies between the various receiving cultures, and linguistic tendencies specific to the respective languages" and that "[u]ltimately, the plurality of translation strategies exemplifies *Giovanni's Room*'s inherent destabilizing queer qualities as these diverging translations, too, invoke the tensions and contradictions which are intimately bound up with the inevitable multifariousness of queer reading practices" (VERDICKT, 2023, p. 8). Whereas the novel was quickly translated into these languages in the late 1950s and early 1960s, several other European territories would only allow the publication of translations decades after the novel's original release. This belatedness was frequently tied to active censorship executed by communist authorities and the book would only be officially released in most of these territories *after* the disintegration of the USSR. However, prior to these official publications, clandestine translations of the book would occasionally be circulated underground, the so-called *samizdat* (BAER, 2011). It is this underground circulation and its productive potential which connects to Jorge Luis Borges's image of the Aleph: a "secret, hypothetical object" (BORGES, 1998, p. 284) that is hidden in a cellar and allows its select audience to access untapped knowledge and *imagery*.[3]

In the Soviet Union, the first translation of *Giovanni's Room* by Genadii Shmakov could only circulate through an underground circuit, comparable to the distribution of the novels of the best-known queer Soviet writers (BAER, 2014, p. 432). Brian James Baer has written extensively on Shmakov, a queer literary scholar and translator who emigrated from the USSR in 1975, after which he translated several canonized works of queer literature, including Baldwin's novel (BAER, 2011, p. 33). Shmakov searched for a Russian publisher, to no avail, so his translation was distributed clandestinely for decades. It was officially published in 1993, five years after Shmakov's own death and the same year that male homosexuality was decriminalized in post-communist Russia (BAER, 2011, p. 25; 33).

During the Cold War, censorship not only played a crucial role in Baldwin's reception in Europe's communist states. On the opposite end of the political spectrum, Francisco Franco's fascist dictatorship in Spain and the military junta in Greece applied comparable techniques of censorship and literary nationalization (BOTSIOU, 2008; CORNELLÁ-DETRELL, 2015). In Spain, publishers had to acquire the State's permission

3 "[E]se objeto secreto y conjetural" (BORGES, 2007, p. 754).

to publish translations, which often would only be granted under the condition of severe editing. Jordi Cornellá-Detrell's insightful research on Baldwin's circulation in Francoist Spain (1938-1978) lays bare several requests for publication that were refused—especially in the case of *Another Country*, as the censor repeatedly lambasted the novel's frank discussions of sexuality, queerness, racism, and even Franco himself (CORNELLÁ-DETRELL, 2015, p. 38-39; 43-47).[4] By the early 1970s, censorship was less severe (at least when the texts only marginally dealt with homosexuality) but translations of Baldwin's work were still modified to the regime's pious standards (CORNELLÁ-DETRELL, 2015, p. 52-54).[5] Comparable to his *samizdat* circulation in the Eastern Bloc, some of Baldwin's forbidden books were passed around through underground channels. Usually these translations had been published officially in South America and made it to Spain from there.[6]

One of these Argentinian translations is Estela Canto's *El Cuarto de Giovanni*, which was first published in Buenos Aires in 1969, but was not officially reprinted in Spain until 1980. Canto (1915-1994) was a translator, journalist, and author with extensive ties to the literary scene in Argentina, and she was the one-time muse and frequent interlocutor of renowned short story writer (and translator) Jorge Luis Borges. Borges dedicated "El Aleph" (1945), one of his most celebrated short stories, to Canto. As this essay argues, the Aleph functions as a productive metaphor to not only approach Canto's translation of *Giovanni*, but also Baldwin's world literary value in general.

In her memoir *Borges a Contraluz*, Canto narrates how Borges first told her of his intention to dedicate a story to her about "a place that contained 'all the places in the world'" (CANTO, 1989, p. 94). The story revolves around the titular device. The narrator, also named Borges, mourns the death of his lover Beatriz—a clear nod to *The Divine Comedy*, and Canto recounts how Borges saw himself as Dante and her as Beatrice/Beatriz (CANTO, 1989, p. 95)—and is approached by her first cousin, Carlos Argentino Daneri, a failed poet. Daneri tells Borges that he will soon complete a monumental poem that will encompass every location on earth thanks to a mysterious device in the cellar of his ancestral home: the Aleph. As a child, Daneri was forbidden by his aunt and uncle to enter the cellar, "but somebody said you could go around

4 As the minor character Lorenzo exclaims at one point in the novel: "Oh Franco's an asshole, he doesn't count" (BALDWIN, 1998, p. 641).

5 In the case of *Nobody*, the sole cut comprised of leaving out 'God' from Baldwin's admission "I had said that I was going to be a writer, God, Satan, and Mississippi notwithstanding." In the translation of *Go Tell It*, however, the censor requested the omission of several passages that contrasted the Grimes's piety with their sexual desires (CORNELLÁ-DETRELL, 2015, p. 53-54).

6 Gayle Rogers describes a similar trajectory for Richard Wright's Spanish circulation, as his novels were banned under Franco's government, but Wright claimed to have found an underground translation of *Black Boy*. Furthermore, *Pagan Spain*'s first Spanish translation was published in 1970 in Argentina but not officially circulated in Spain until 1989, from which Rogers concludes that "Spain could only acknowledge its versions of blackness in a new, multicultural light after the end of the Franco regime, when a modern marketing campaign ('Spain is different') coincided with the country's return to the global stage" (ROGERS, 2016, p. 197).

the world with that thing down there in the basement" (BORGES, 1998, p. 280).[7] Later he would find out that the speaker was simply referring to a steamer trunk, but nonetheless the young Carlos snuck into the cellar and discovered the Aleph, a "magical contraption," of which "[t]he child could not understand that he was given that privilege so that the man might carve out a poem" (BORGES, 1998, p. 281).[8] The fictional Borges gives little credence to Daneri's story, but eventually he visits the cellar and is shown the Aleph:

> Under the step, toward the right, I saw a small iridescent sphere of almost unbearable brightness. At first I thought it was spinning; then I realized that the movement was an illusion produced by the dizzying spectacles inside it. The Aleph was probably two or three centimeters in diameter, but *universal space was contained inside it, with no diminution in size*. Each thing (the glass surface of a mirror, let us say) was infinite things, because I could clearly see it from every point in the cosmos. I saw the populous sea, saw dawn and dusk, saw *the multitudes of the Americas*, saw a silvery spider-web at the center of a black pyramid, saw a broken labyrinth (it was London), saw endless eyes, all very close, *studying themselves in me as though in a mirror*, saw all the mirrors on the planet (and none of them reflecting me)... (BORGES, 1998, p. 283, emphases mine)[9].

Canto's direct connection to the short story made me consider the Aleph a useful metaphor to approach Baldwin's posthumous world literary career. Baldwin's legacy is routinely presented as a buried, nearly-forgotten object—not unlike a small iridescent sphere hidden in a cellar—which has been spectacularly revived. Before his visit, the narrator Borges skeptically asks how this device might properly function in the darkness of the cellar. Daneri answers: "Truth will not penetrate a recalcitrant understanding. If all the places of the world are within the Aleph, there too will be all stars, all lamps, all sources of light" (BORGES, 1998, p. 281).[10] When they approach the cellar, he elaborates on the prerequisites to 'see' the Aleph: "dorsal decubitus is

7 "[A]lguien dijo que había un mundo en el sótano" (BORGES, 2007, p. 750).

8 "Se refería, lo supe después, a un baúl, pero yo entendí que había un mundo. [...] El niño no podía comprender que le fuera deparado ese privilegio para que el hombre burilara el poema" (BORGES, 2007, p. 750).

9 "En la parte inferior del escalón, hacia la derecha, vi una pequeña esfera tornasolada, de casi intolerable fulgor. Al principio la creí giratoria; luego comprendí que ese movimiento era una ilusión producida por los vertiginosos espectáculos que encerraba. El diámetro del Aleph sería de dos o tres centímetros, pero el espacio cósmico estaba ahí, sin disminución de tamaño. Cada cosa (la luna del espejo, digamos) era infinitas cosas, porque yo claramente la veía desde todos los puntos del universo. Vi el populoso mar, vi el alba y la tarde, vi las muchedumbres de América, vi una plateada telaraña en el centro de una negra pirámide, vi un laberinto roto (era Londres), vi interminables ojos inmediatos escrutándose en mí como en un espejo, vi todos los espejos del planeta y ninguno me reflejó..." (BORGES, 2007, p. 753).

10 "La verdad no penetra en un entendimiento rebelde. Si todos los lugares de la tierra están en el Aleph, ahí estarán todas las luminarias, todas las lámparas, todos los veneros de luz" (BORGES, 2007, p. 751).

essential, as are darkness, immobility, and a certain ocular accommodation" (BORGES, 1998, p. 281).[11]

Like the Aleph, Baldwin's writing, activism, and literal image shed light on vastly different contexts and cultures, from the "multitudes of the Americas" to the "broken labyrinth that is London" or the self-improvement mantras adopted by social media influencers—"endless eyes… studying themselves in me as through a mirror." At the same time, the Aleph forever remains out of reach; Borges's story ends in an anti-climax, as the narrator denies his transcendental experience to deliberately confuse Daneri and then takes his leave. Baldwin's Aleph-like status, too, never reaches its full potential, and encounters constant processes of reduction that distill a two-dimensional avatar—even as its resistant potential is weaponized by dissident voices.

This is evident from the underground circulation and translations of *Giovanni's Room*. The operations of Borges's Aleph, through which iridescent sphere "[e]ach thing […] was infinite things," sound remarkably comparable to Aarón Lacayo's understanding of translation as "a queer encounter to the extent that it is not a difference between male and female but always a difference between a bodily text and an infinite number of unknown others-yet-to-come" (LACAYO, 2014, p. 219). The translations by Shmakov and Canto represent two examples of these "unknown others-yet-to-come," and both translators adopted diverging translation strategies to adapt the novel's inherent destabilizing queer qualities. Shmakov's *samizdat* translation continued to enjoy success in post-Soviet Russia, which Baer attributes to the translator's own profile and to his decision to explicitly *gender* Baldwin's text. While these elements contribute to Baldwin's capital of resistance and recontextualize him within Russia's own queer history, they also inevitably lead to a new 'flattening' of Baldwin's localized legacy. Canto's translation, for her part, enters a complicated dialogue with Borges's translation politics. In the following sections I read both translations as belonging to what Marc Démont identifies as "queering translation," a mode of translation that "impl[ies] two different types of queering practices," namely a critique of the suppressive or assimilative techniques of older translations "in order to expose the source text's specific manifestation of queerness" and an attempt to "develop techniques to recreate in the target language the queerness of the text" (DÉMONT, 2018, p. 163). Crucially, both Shmakov's and Canto's translation strategies intersect with their respective approach to another American literary icon whose disruptive *queer* potential has only become unlocked through posthumous *acts of recovery*: Walt Whitman.

From 'Gendered' Translation to a 'Canto of herself'

When Genadii Shmakov's translation of *Giovanni's Room* was finally officially published during the Yeltsin administration, Alexander Shatalov and Yaroslav Mogutin

11 "[E]l decúbito dorsal es indispensable. También lo son la oscuridad, la inmovilidad, cierta acomodación ocular" (BORGES, 2007, p. 751).

wrote a foreword in which they argued that "[u]nquestionably, the sharply defined personality of the translator transformed James Baldwin's novel by introducing into it contemporary nuances, making the work closer to the Russian reader and the image of Baldwin himself, thanks to that, more human and profound" (MOGUTIN & SHATALOV, 1993, p. 14, *apud* and transl. in BAER, 2011, p. 33). Baer notes how Aleksandr Radashkevich later translation, published in 2005, was less commercially successful, and he hypothesizes that Shmakov's "status as a gay man and his own personal suffering—he died of AIDS at the age of 48—lends [his] version a certain authenticity in the eyes of Russian readers for its blending of life and art" (BAER, 2011, p. 34).

Baer argues that Shmakov's translation strategies "appea[r] to encourage such a reading," which he illustrates through Shmakov's translation of the novel's epigraph, a line from Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself": "I am the man, I suffered, I was there" (BALDWIN, 1998, p. 219):

> The first clause presents a challenge for the Russian translator in that it could be translated in a number of ways: broadly, i.e., "I am Man/humankind", which would reflect the poem's theme of the individual's dissolution into or union with the whole of humanity; or narrowly, i.e., "I am the captain", referring to the metaphor of a boat developed earlier in the poem; or the translation could be gendered, i.e., "I am a male". [...] Shmakov [...] explicitly genders his translation—"Ia muzhshchina" [I am a man/male]—suggesting a "queer" reading of Baldwin's novel by tying the motif of suffering to the male experience of homoerotic desire (BAER, 2011, p. 34).

Radashkevich's later translation opts for "'Ia chelovek' [I am a person/human being]" (BAER, 2011, p. 34), rejecting Shmakov's gendered translation. On his personal website, Radashkevich explains some of his diverging translation strategies, and he notes how Shmakov translated the novel in the 1960s or early 1970s, when the older translator had not yet mastered English and had to use a dictionary, which resulted in the translation being "despite its undoubted artistic merits, replete with inaccuracies, omissions and outright errors" (RADASHKEVICH, 2007, no pagination). Radashkevich points out several of Shmakov's alleged errors, as when "No one can stay in the Garden of Eden" (BALDWIN, 1998, p. 239) becomes "No one is given the opportunity to find their own paradise" where "the meaning is completely distorted, because Baldwin is talking about the fact that the heroes found their paradise, but could not save it" (RADASHKEVICH, 2007, no pagination). In the novel's most controversial scene, the narrator David encounters a transvestite character who "straightened, as though he were a princess and moved, flaming away" (BALDWIN, 1998, p. 253), but Shmakov translates this as "pederastic princess" (RADASHKEVICH, 2007, no pagination), a curious parallel to the pederast allusions that are also present in the novel's first Dutch translation (VERDICKT, 2023, p. 15). Perhaps most notable is the translation

of David's invocation of Corinthians at the very end of the novel: "*When I was a child, I spake as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things*" (BALDWIN, 1998, p. 359). Shmakov paraphrases the quotation "in his own words, which changes the entire tone of the epilogue" (RADASHKEVICH, 2007, no pagination).

Interestingly, Radashkevich also objects to Shmakov's decision to leave Baldwin's occasional French phrases untranslated, and he seems unaware that the "gross typos, absence of superscripts etc." originate with Baldwin's original manuscript rather than the translation. He states that Shmakov's decision to leave the French untranslated "could probably have been afforded at the beginning of the last century, when the entire Russian intelligentsia spoke French, but today, for obvious reasons, such snobbery is unforgivable and undemocratic" (RADASHKEVICH, 2007, no pagination).[12] He concludes his blog post with the observation that Shmakov's translation was republished in 2004: "Of course, the author has died, the translator has died, no one needs to pay. Why not profit? This is the 'morality' of today's book market. Market morality" (RADASHKEVICH, 2007, no pagination).

Baer concedes that Shmakov's translation contains several errors, but he sees its re-publications not simply as evidence of opportunistic publishing decisions, but rather as proof of Shmakov's enduring popularity. He notes how "the openly gay writer, editor, photographer and performance artist" Yaroslav Mogutin uses Shamkov's "gendered" translation of the Whitman verse in his own autobiographical essay to "inscrib[e] himself within an illustrious tradition of queer literature that includes Shmakov, Baldwin and Whitman" and "within a tradition of queering Whitman, whose works have been controversial since the nineteenth century for their sensuality and unabashed celebration of the (male) body" (BAER, 2011, p. 34). Mogutin, for his part, recollects in an interview the post-communist Moscow of the early 1990s:

> It was a very exciting and euphoric time of *Perestroika* and *Glasnost*, and I was like a sponge, absorbing all the books that were previously banned in the USSR—Nabokov, Bukowski, Henry Miller, Jean Genet, Georges Bataille, Michel Foucault, and, of course, James Baldwin and William S. Burroughs, whose first Russian editions of *Giovanni's Room* and *Naked Lunch* came out with my introductions... While exploring my own sexuality, I was exploring Moscow's gay underground, with its first speakeasy bars, discos and bohemian salons [...] . It was my initiation into the queer underground and the very beginning of my own artistic path. In retrospect, Moscow of the early 1990's reminds me of Weimer Berlin of the 1920's. It was a fleeting moment of freedom before the brutal crackdown that followed with Putin coming to power (O'HANIAN, 2014, p. 10)[13].

12 It is of note that Radashkevich himself has lived in France since 1983, as he states on his website.

13 As discussed in the final section, Vladimir Putin's regime has recently instigated a "crackdown" that impacts Baldwin's contemporary Russian circulation.

Mogutin's slotting together of Foucault and Baldwin is not without precedent in discussions of censorship. Baer draws on Foucault's *Histoire de la sexualité* as he quotes Francesca Billiani's observation that "if we establish a sine qua non affiliation between censorship and social and cultural transformations, we can argue for the importance of looking at censorship simultaneously as a repressive and 'creative' power, one which lies both in the hands of the translator and the censorial body" (BILLIANI, 2007, p. 10 *apud* BAER, 2011, p. 22). Interestingly, Baer also notes how under Soviet rule references to homosexuality and queer people were frequently censored with "words like 'fairy' [...] routinely deleted or replaced in translation by more general terms" and that "[i]f mentioned at all, same-sex desire was referred to by euphemisms, such as 'eti spetsificheskie otnosheniia' [those particular relations]" (BAER, 2011, p. 26). Although Baer does not directly discuss Shmakov's translation here, the first (West) German translators of *Giovanni's Room* also applied "more general terms" to Baldwin's use of "fairy" (VERDICKT, 2023, p. 17-18) while the narrator David also refers to homosexuals that are being arrested after Giovanni has murdered Guillaume as being "picked up on suspicion of having what the French, with a delicacy I take to be sardonic, call *les gouts particuliers*" (BALDWIN, 1998, p. 343). Censorship and euphemism clearly do not only apply to authoritarian regimes, as individual translators in the West, as well as the French authorities in the novel, engage in comparable practices.

However, the additional "creative" power of Shmakov's translation is to be found in its *samizdat* history and Shmakov's own queer biography—elements which continued to attract audiences from its official publication in 1993 onward. The translation's underground status is elevated by an additional excavation, as it now officially sees the light of day, and a *posthumous* dimension, with Shmakov's death of AIDS bestowing the translation with "a certain authenticity in the eyes of Russian readers for its blending of life and art" (BAER, 2011, p. 34). These elements tie in with the connection to Walt Whitman, another author whose queerness only becomes centered through underground, excavating, and posthumous processes. Whitman is of course already present in Baldwin's original text, and while both Whitman's poems and *Giovanni's Room* are now considered persistent literary classics of same-sex desire (MCCALLUM & TUKHANEN, 2014, p. 3), the connection is further amplified in Baldwin's Russian circulation through mobilizations such as Mogutin's example.

The divergent translation strategies applied to "Song of Myself" also intersect with those applied to *Giovanni's Room* when considering the novel's first Argentinian translation. As Cornellá-Detrell remarks, the South American Baldwin translations that circulated underground in Francoist Spain occasionally also contained certain biases. This was the case with *Another Country*, of which the initial Argentinian translator wanted to "de-normalize" Baldwin's depictions of homosexual intimacy (CORNELLÁ-DETRELL, 2015, p. 48).[14] After Franco's demise in 1975 and the end of the dictatorship in 1978, *Giovanni*, *Another Country*, *Beale Street* and *Just Above*

14 A similar dynamic can be discerned in the earliest Brazilian translation of *Giovanni's Room*, as Jânderson Albino Coswosk observes that the relationship between David and Giovanni was substantially 'softened' in this translation to appease the Brazilian censor (COSWOSK, 2025).

would all be circulated officially in Spanish translation—a development comparable to the post-junta translations of *Giovanni* and *Another Country* in Greece, which were officially released in 1985 and 1981.[15] However, the new Spanish edition of *Another Country* was only slightly updated from the Argentinian translation, retaining many of its questionable modifications (CORNELLÁ-DETRELL, 2015, p. 48-49).[16] Likewise, when the 1972 translation of *Go Tell It* was republished by Círculo de Lectores in 2001, the publisher did not consider the many modifications and deletions that had been applied to the book during the censorship-era (CORNELLÁ-DETRELL, 2015, p. 52-53), which was a more general tendency in post-Francoist Spain: by continuing to simply reissue these faulty translations, publishers were and are hampering Baldwin's appeal to contemporary audiences. The case of Baldwin serves as an important reminder that, if left unchecked, modes of censorship may distort or prevent a foreign author's reception well past the actual period of censorship; the afterlife of censorship frustrates Baldwin's literary potential in contemporary Spain and obscures the relation between his past circulation and Spain's fascist legacy.

Cornellá-Detrell focuses on *Another Country*'s first Argentinian translation, which was clandestinely circulated in Francoist Spain, as an example of how various translation strategies were aimed at "de-normalizing" the novel's treatment of same-sex intimacy.[17] Cornellá-Detrell does not include Estela Canto's first Spanish-language translation of *Giovanni's Room* but a close reading of this translation uncovers vastly different strategies from the ones that publisher Sudamericana's anonymous translator applied to *Otro País*'s depictions of queerness.[18]

Rather than "de-normalizing" Baldwin's prose, Canto stays remarkably close to the original text. For instance, Baldwin's replete use of the term "boy" is consistently translated as "muchacho" (BALDWIN, 1983, p. 14; 18; 43; 62; 112). This term mirrors Baldwin's ambivalence as it can refer either to children or young men or be used affectionately, and stands in marked contrast to the Dutch translation from 1965, which frequently used the unambiguous diminutive "jongetje" (VERDICKT, 2023, p. 15). Baldwin's frequent use of masculine terms—such as "years later, when I had become a man" (BALDWIN, 1998, p. 229) or "a man like myself" (BALDWIN, 1998, p. 223)—also remain gendered: where the first German translation erases this subtlety

15 Although the military junta fell in 1974, Konstantina Botsiou points out how anti-American sentiments persisted in Greece and Greek-American relations would not be normalized until the 1980s (BOTSIOU, 2008, p. 281, 297).

16 Cornellá-Detrell notes for instance how several passages that describe same-sex cohabitation have been excised from this translation. As not all of these passages have sexual content, "the aim was not only to suppress their amorous dalliances, but to prevent their relationship from appearing to the reader as perfectly normal, which is in fact how Baldwin presents it" (CORNELLÁ-DETRELL, 2015, p. 48).

17 This case study brings to mind the Danish police officer Aage Lotinga's afterword to the first Danish translation of *Giovanni's Room*, as Lotinga read the novel's plot as a confirmation of his homophobic theories that queerness is inherently linked to acts of violence and crime (ZABOROWSKA *et al.*, 2020, p. 219-221).

18 As Coswosk uncovers, the first Brazilian translation of *Giovanni's Room* adopted self-censoring strategies comparable to those of Sudamericana's anonymous translation of *Another Country* (COSWOSK, 2025), see footnote 14.

through terms such as "erwachsen" or "als meinesgleichen" (VERDICKT, 2023, p. 14), here "man" is consistently translated as "hombre" (BALDWIN, 1983, p. 24, 29).

In fact, none of the diverging translation strategies that previous research on the Dutch, German, Danish, and French translation has uncovered (ZABOROWSKA *et al.*, 2020; VERDICKT, 2023) find a counterpart in Canto's translation. Whereas "vileness" is criminalized in the original 1957 Danish translation by the judicial connotations of the Danish term "lastefuldhed" (ZABOROWSKA *et al.*, 2020, p. 220), Canto simply renders it as "vileza" (BALDWIN, 1983, p. 19). The first German translation toned down the sexual connotation of David's soliloquy of "how this could have happened *in* me" (VERDICKT, 2023, p. 11) but Canto leaves that implication intact ("cómo esto podia haber sucedido *en* mí"—BALDWIN, 1983, p. 19). The first Dutch translation added several religious and judicial overtones to Baldwin's more neutral prose by using Dutch equivalents of terms such as "salvation" and "guardian angel" (VERDICKT, 2023, p. 10) but these terms are absent from Canto's translation, as is the German tendency to tone down Baldwin's graphic language (VERDICKT, 2023; p. 11), as "vomit" and "regurgitated" are consistently translated with "vomitar" or "el vómito" (BALDWIN, 1983, p. 115; 139; 141; 202). When Giovanni reproaches David for "want[ing] to be *clean*," the Dutch, first German and both French translations use transitive verbs that suggest that David wants to "remain" clean, as if he is not yet 'tainted' by queer sexuality. In Canto's translation the phrase is rendered as "quieres ser *limpio*" (p. 186), which stays much closer to the original meaning. French homophobic slurs "tapette" and "folle" are left untranslated (BALDWIN, 1983, p. 40; 47; 143; 196), while their English counterparts "fairy" and "silly old queen" are translated as "marica" (BALDWIN, 1983, p. 34; 141; 194; 198; 203), a Spanish slur which holds the same derogatory connotation of effeminacy.

One final example of how close Canto's translation stays to the English prose is its rendition of the novel's infamous "mummy" scene, where David repeatedly describes a crossdressing character by way of the pronoun "it" and various offensive terms, such as "It looked like a mummy or a zombie" (BALDWIN, 1998, p. 251). The first French translation from 1958 switched Baldwin's constant identification of the cross-dressing character through the neutral "it" with the French male pronoun "il," which achieved a significantly less blunt effect of objectivation, while the second French translation from 1997 tried to stay more faithful to Baldwin's approach by opting for the demonstrative pronoun "cela" (VERDICKT, 2023, p. 16-17). Spanish, like French, traditionally does not have neutral (personal) pronouns. Unlike French, however, Spanish allows for the subject pronoun to be omitted from a sentence and Canto's translation uses this grammatical freedom to great effect. First it renders "It looked like a mummy or a zombie—this was the first, overwhelming impression—of something walking after it had been put to death" as "Parecía una momia o un zombie—ésta era la primera impression abrumadora—, *algo que se mantenía* en pie después de estar muerto" (BALDWIN, 1983, p. 56, emphasis mine). "Algo" is a literal equivalent of "something," and it directs the reader's interpretation of all the following verbs, as these are consistently devoid of subject pronouns; by cleverly omitting these subject pronouns, the translator retains some of Baldwin's gendered objectivation.

These examples illustrate how Canto stays much more faithful to the novel's inherent destabilizing queer qualities than her Dutch, Danish, German, and French colleagues in the 1950s and 1960s. Comparable to Shmakov's queer focus, Canto's *underground* sensibilities allow for more overt sexuality in the translation choices. Canto's affinity with queer literature is evident from her own fiction, which is characterized by a subversion of traditional gender stereotypes (ROSA LOJO, 1999, p. 907-8), and in her personal life, which was "deliberately anti-conventional" (ROSA LOJO, 1999, p. 908). In the 1940s, Canto's uninhibition attracted Jorge Luis Borges, who at one point proposed to her. In her memoir *Borges a Contraluz,* Canto recalls how she replied: "I'd be happy to, Georgie. But don't forget that I'm a disciple of Bernard Shaw. We can't get married if we don't sleep together first" (CANTO, 1989, p. 98). Ever the inhibited prude, Borges recoiled in horror, and Canto adds that "he knew that I was not of those girls leaning out of pink and light blue balconies that his sister Norah used to paint."

Although never consummated, Borges's and Canto's relationship continued from there on. There is a direct connection between Borges and Canto's translation of *Giovanni's Room*, which goes against the conservative translation practices of her contemporaries, as exemplified in the 1965 translation of *Another Country*. As we have already seen with the Russian translations, translators have adopted diverging strategies to render *Giovanni*'s epigraph, which is lifted from Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself." Borges was infamously involved in a feud over how to translate the poem with Spanish translator León Felipe, whose translation came out in 1941. Borges immediately criticized Felipe's translation in the Argentinian magazine *Sur* (to which Canto would also frequently contribute from the mid-1940s onward), claiming: "La transformación es notoria; de la larga voz sálmica hemos pasado a los engreídos grititos del cante jondo" (*apud* KRISTAL, 2002, p. 156).[19] Felipe responded in kind and the pair argued across the Atlantic over their vastly divergent poetics of translation (SHAMES, 2017, p. 38-40). Shames concludes that, whereas Felipe reconstructs "the dualistic borders—self and other—in Whitman's entropic structure of self, Borges conceives of Whitman as a dynamic system in flux, of a subjectivity that first forks and then becomes tripartite over time" (SHAMES, 2017, p. 46). Importantly, Borges had already announced his intention to translate *Leaves of Grass* in its entirety in 1927, but would not publish his translation until 1969 (KRISTAL, 2002, p. 47; SHAMES, 2017, p. 46)—the same year that Estela Canto's *El Cuarto de Giovanni* was published in Buenos Aires. However, Canto's translation of the epigraph is not lifted directly from Borges's translation: in her version "I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there" becomes "Yo soy el hombre: sufrí, allí estuve." Canto again clearly favors the most literal approach, whereas Borges writes "Yo fui ese hombre, sufrí, y estuve allí" ("I *was that* man) and Felipe's contested version from 1941 reads "yo fui el hombre que sufrió y que estuvo

19 Interestingly, translations of Borges's diss differ greatly themselves. Efraín Kristal renders it as "The transformation is notorious; from the psalm-like voice "of Walt Whitman" to the spoiled little cries of an Andalusian deep song" (KRISTAL, 2002, p. 24), while David Shames translates it as "The transformation is clear; we have moved from the long psalmic voice to the little self-important cries of flamenco" (SHAMES, 2017, p. 38).

allí" ("I was the man that suffered and who was there"). Borges called his translation "an interpretative recreation" (KRISTAL, 2002, p. 51), as opposed to the "self-important" transformation of Felipe's, but Canto enters the debate by offering her own version, independent of her former beau's concurrent effort—a "*Canto* of herself" indeed.

Such anecdotes may seem circumstantial, but they highlight the enduring connections between Borges and Canto, especially in relation to the poetics of translation. Baldwin's Alephian status is activated here through the translations of the text-within-the-text, Whitman's epigraph, and the various ways in which he, and by extension Baldwin, is *excavated* through the process of translation. If Borges favors "an interpretative recreation," Felipe stands for "self-important" transformation (or is at least framed in that light by Borges), and Shmakov adopts a "gendered" vocabulary, then Canto's translation foregrounds a literal approach that stays as close to the original as possible. As Shmakov's and Canto's translations reposition Whitman's lamentation in their receiving (gendered) cultures, the underground dimension remains firmly in place. Shmakov's translation could only circulate clandestinely for decades. Canto's translation was published officially in Argentina in 1969, but it stood at odds with the heteronormative translation practices of her fellow Argentinian translators of Baldwin's work. In Spain, meanwhile, the translation could only circulate underground until 1980, after which it was officially reprinted by the Barcelonian publisher Bruguera. Even when it was officially published, *El Cuarto* stood in marked contrast to the other, *censored* translations that continued to circulate in post-Francoist Spain, such as the only slightly altered reprint of *Otro País* and the heavily censored translation of *Go Tell It* that was first published under Franco in 1972. However, the underground circulation of Canto's and Shmakov's translations did not take place in a vacuum. It was heavily dependent on the involvement and response of underground networks—the so-called minority readers.

"In the shadow of the translator": The Agency of Minority Readers

Brian James Baer accentuates the importance of the readers' role in "interpreting and disseminating translated texts under conditions of censorship," as he argues that Shmakov's *samizdat* translation could only "assume a presence in Soviet society" thanks to "the willingness of minority readers to reproduce, circulate and interpret the text" (BAER, 2012, p. 98). He concludes that

> Censorship is rarely a simple act of erasure that quietly removes a text from the reader's purview. It often represents a very complex—and semi-covert—negotiation of meaning involving a host of state and minority readers in various official and unofficial capacities. Acknowledging the role of the minority reader brings into view the unofficial interpretive subcultures, the alternative canons, and the subversive hermeneutics that are an inevitable consequence

> of repressive censorship. But most importantly, it makes visible the agency of those who dare to read against the grain of official aesthetic policy and who have in our theoretical constructs lived, perhaps, too long in the shadow of the translator... (BAER, 2012, p. 98).

Minority readers were equally important to Baldwin's circulation in Francoist Spain. Cornellá-Detrell writes that "the select minority that had access to the backrooms of 'specialized' booksellers and could afford to pay slightly higher prices [...] could get their hands on banned books" as "interested readers were well aware of where to obtain a copy of the novel" (CORNELLÁ-DETRELL, 2015, p. 42). While Cornellá-Detrell is referring to the Argentinian translation of *Another Country*, he stresses that "this was not a unique case." Canto's translation of *Giovanni's Room* likely enjoyed a comparable underground circulation in Spain until the dictatorship ended, and the novel was officially republished by the Barcelonian Bruguera in 1980. It is only then that the queer Baldwin appears 'above ground' in post-Franco Spain, followed by the official publication of *Otro País* in 1984.

As stated earlier, Cornellá-Detrell stresses the importance of recognizing (trans) national histories of censorship and their lasting impact on translated literature—such as when publishers uncritically republish older censored texts, as was the case with the Spanish translation of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. In Baldwin's case, *Giovanni's Room* has seen a spectacular proliferation of official translations, both in Spanish and Russian: to date, four different translations have been published in Spain and three in Russia. Moreover, the novel's underground queer status during the Cold War era is further explored in book culture, such as in German-Polish author Tomasz Jędrowski's acclaimed novel *Swimming in the Dark* (2020). In Jędrowski's novel, two young men in the Polish People Republic of the early 1980s discover their love for another while reading a clandestine Polish translation of *Giovanni*. The book's narrator Ludwig first overhears two gay men speak of "that unpublished Baldwin book" (JĘDROWSKI, 2020, 21) and soon sets out on a quest that closely resembles Cornellá-Detrell's description:

> I found his name in a catalogue of the foreign literature department. Baldwin. James. There was a list of his works, and only one of them had no official translation: Giovanni's Room. This had to be it, I thought. I shut the catalogue, tried to forget about it. But the title wouldn't leave me in peace, tantalizing like a loose tooth. I set out for it. And after weeks of searching, weeks of questions to suspicious-looking shop attendants who'd tell me there was no such book, that it had never been translated, I got lucky. It was just a few days before camp, in a tiny *antykwariat* bookshop that specialized in art and history, run by a man who could have been a friend of those men in the bar. He shot me a meaningful, almost amused look, then walked off to a back room and returned with a rustling brown-paper package (JĘDROWSKI, 2020, 22).

In Jędrowski's novel, not only do the events from *Giovanni's Room* prefigure the relationship between Ludwig and his lover. On a metatextual level, the 'forbidden' status of Baldwin's book also mirrors the protagonists' relationship—just like the Polish translation of *Giovanni*, they are only allowed mobility through underground channels and coded rituals. Minority readers pick up on these codes and help to disseminate them, establishing an underground network strengthened by countercultural artifacts such as Baldwin's novel. *Giovanni's Room*, then, acquires Aleph-like qualities, illuminating a queer romance in 1980s Warsaw while hidden underground in the back room of a tiny *antykwariat* bookshop. The novel is not only *literally* translated into Polish, its story of a forbidden love between an American and an Italian expatriate in the Paris of the 1950s is figuratively translated to the cultural context of communist Poland three decades onward—David and Giovanni are now driven underground, and it is up to *samizdat* translators and readers to excavate their romance and Baldwin's silenced queer identity.

A Dialogue with *All* the Images of Baldwin?

The underground queer circulation of *Giovanni's Room* and the mobilizations in the wake of Baldwin's funeral exemplify the 'either/or' paradigm that has been applied to his reception for a number of years: either accentuating his queer or his African American identity. Douglas Field refers to Andrea Lowenstein's pioneering essay "James Baldwin and His Critics" (1980) in which Lowenstein wonders "whether, if Baldwin were *either* black or gay, more reviewers might be able to actually address his work itself" (LOWENSTEIN, 1980, p. 11 *apud* FIELD, 2009, p. 5). Lowenstein was the first to put forward Baldwin's "double minority" status, and Field notes, in 2009, that "[a]lthough there are still some remarkable silences on Baldwin's sexuality," the renewed academic attention to Baldwin's work since the turn of the century "ha[s] done much to reinvigorate and establish a treatment of Baldwin's race *and* sexuality" (5). The emergence of queer theory in the 1990s contributed heavily to this development, as scholars such as Emmanuel Nelson and Robert Reid-Pharr highlighted "the ways in which Baldwin's work explores the complex traffic of race, sexuality and masculinity, in particular foregrounding the 'double minority status' that Lowenstein addressed in Baldwin's racial and sexual identities" (FIELD, 2011, p. 44) while Yasmin DeGout championed him as "progenitor of many of the theoretical formulations currently associated with feminist, gay, and gender studies" (DEGOUT, 2000, p. 134 *apud* FIELD, 2011, p. 44). Over the past twenty-five years, Baldwin has been increasingly studied through a (proto-)intersectionalist framework, but the focus has primarily shifted to what Lowenstein already dubbed his "double minority status" from a point of view that is still predominantly situated in the US.

This frame of reference severely limits our understanding of Baldwin's contemporary *world* literary value, and leaves, amongst others, his European

reverberations almost entirely out of the equation. This essay mobilizes the Aleph to paint a more multifarious picture of Baldwin's posthumous career as a conduit of queer acts of resistance, but the metaphor has its limits. These case studies each mobilize Baldwin's status to fortify, refracture, and reflect back the outside world in multidirectional ways, dependent on whatever the onlooker wants to project on, and see projected from, this "iridescent sphere." This, of course, does *not* equal "universal space" or "infinite things," nor does it contain its projected space "with no diminution in size" (BORGES, 1998, p. 283).[20] Borges's alter ego "saw the Aleph from everywhere at once, saw the earth in the Aleph, and the Aleph once more in the earth and the earth in the Aleph, saw my face and my viscera, saw your face, and I felt dizzy, and I wept, because my eyes had seen that secret, hypothetical object whose name has been usurped by men but which no man has ever truly looked upon: the inconceivable universe" (BORGES, 1998, p. 283-284).[21] His use of the term "hypothetical object" already suggests the unreliability of both the event and his memory, and in a postscript (a typical Borgesian device) he adds that he believes it to have been "a *false* Aleph," while retaining the believe "that there is (or was) another Aleph" (BORGES, 1998, p. 285).[22] The postscript concludes:

> Does that Aleph exist, within the heart of a stone? Did I see it when I saw all things, and then forget it? Our minds are permeable to forgetfulness; I myself am distorting and losing, through the tragic erosion of the years, the features of Beatriz (BORGES, 1998, p. 286).[23]

Both the author and narrator Borges are playing here on their obsession with Beatriz/Estela—the postscript is followed by the author's dedication to Canto—and earlier in the story Daneri has lured the narrator to his cellar with the promise to "[g]o on down; within a very short while you will be able to begin a dialogue with *all* the images of Beatriz" (BORGES, 1998, p. 282).[24] Crucially, even before his introduction to the titular device, Borges is already reminded of Beatriz everywhere. He studies her many photographs upon his visits to her ancestral home and as he is waiting on a

20 "El diámetro del Aleph sería de dos o tres centímetros, pero el espacio cósmico estaba ahí, sin disminución de tamaño. Cada cosa (la luna del espejo, digamos) era infinitas cosas, porque yo claramente la veía desde todos los puntos del universe" (BORGES, 2007, p. 753).

21 "[V]i el Aleph, desde todos los puntos, vi en el Aleph la tierra, y en la tierra otra vez el Aleph y en el Aleph la tierra, vi mi cara y mis vísceras, vi tu cara, y sentí vértigo y lloré, porque mis ojos habían visto ese objeto secreto y conjetural, cuyo nombre usurpan los hombres, pero que ningún hombre ha mirado: el inconcebible universe" (BORGES, 2007, p. 754).

22 "[Y]o creo que hay (o que hubo) otro Aleph, yo creo que el Aleph de la calle Garay era un falso Aleph" (BORGES, 2007, p. 756).

23 "¿Existe ese Aleph en lo íntimo de una piedra? ¿Lo he visto cuando vi todas las cosas y lo he olvidado? Nuestra mente es porosa para el olvido; yo mismo estoy falseando y perdiendo, bajo la trágica erosión de los años, los rasgos de Beatriz" (BORGES, 2007, p. 756).

24 "Baja; muy en breve podrás entablar un diálogo con todas las imágenes de Beatriz" (BORGES, 2007, p. 752).

telephone call from Daneri, he is "offended that that device, which had once produced the irrecoverable voice of Beatriz, could now sink so low as to become a mere receptacle for the futile and perhaps angry remonstrances of that deluded Carlos Argentino Daneri" (BORGES, 1998, p. 280).[25] In marked contrast, when he finally views the Aleph and dedicates a page-long description to its contents, he mentions only two Beatriz-related images: the "obscene, incredible, detailed letters that Beatriz had sent Carlos Argentino" (it is heavily implied that Beatriz had an affair with her first cousin) and "the horrendous remains of what had once, deliciously, been Beatriz" (BORGES, 1998, p. 283).[26] For all its splendor, the Aleph seems to offer only a few images of Beatriz, both of them heavily tainted by the narrator's obsession.

At the start of the story, the narrator remarks that Beatriz's death allows him to "consecrate [himself] to her memory" (BORGES, 1998, p. 274).[27] This notion ties in with the *posthumous* dimension of Baldwin's career, as Baldwin's death has become a central part to his Aleph-like afterlife and is routinely ritualized in the process. Right before he starts his page-long description of the Aleph's infinite content, the narrator remarks that he has come "to the ineffable center of [his] tale" where "a writer's hopelessness begins" (BORGES, 1998, p. 282). Since "[e]very language is an alphabet of symbols the employment of which assumes a past shared by its interlocutors," he finds it impossible to convey the Aleph's infinity, as "the central problem—the enumeration, even partial enumeration, of infinity—is irresolvable" (BORGES, 1998, p. 282).[28]

Ultimately, as in Borges's story, Baldwin's Aleph-like qualities remain dependent on the agents, processes, and *languages* that engage in the converging acts of burial and excavation. These acts are inherently tied to a 'flattening' of Baldwin's Aleph-like potential, as they consistently also lead to a restrictive, limiting perception of Baldwin—no matter how multifarious these interpretations may be. From this angle, Canto's fidelity to Baldwin's source text obstructs a multiplication of its inherently destabilizing queer qualities, which we have seen in other European translations. Shmakov's "gendered" translation, for its part, shuts off the novel's universalizing potential that other translation strategies, such as Radashkevich's, allow. In a sense, each choice in each reception process leads to an 'avatar-like' flattening of Baldwin's world literary value, to invoke Eddie Glaude's claim that Baldwin has become "an avatar of supposed seriousness" (GLAUDE, 2016, no pagination).

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25 "Me indignaba que ese instrumento, que algún día produjo la irrecuperable voz de Beatriz, pudiera rebajarse a receptáculo de las inútiles y quizá coléricas quejas de ese engañado Carlos Argentino Daneri" (BORGES, 2007, p. 749).

26 "[V]i en un cajón del escritorio (y la letra me hizo temblar) cartas obscenas, increíbles, precisas, que Beatriz había dirigido a Carlos Argentino, vi un adorado monumento en la Chacarita, vi la reliquia atroz de lo que deliciosamente había sido Beatriz Viterbo" (BORGES, 2007, p. 754).

27 "[M]uerta yo podía consagrarme a su memoria, sin esperanza, pero también sin humillación" (BORGES, 2007, p. 743).

28 "Arribo, ahora, al inefable centro de mi relato; empieza, aquí, mi desesperación de escritor. Todo lenguaje es un alfabeto de símbolos cuyo ejercicio presupone un pasado que los interlocutores comparten [...] el problema central es irresoluble: la enumeración, siquiera parcial, de un conjunto infinito" (BORGES, 2007, p. 752-753).

Baldwin's avatar-like configurations take on many forms, which itself indicates his Aleph-like potential, and they are by no means exclusively passive tools or simply digital badges of honor for their users to wear. Restrictive or incomplete as these representations may be, they are articulated in public discourse, in social justice activism and as countercultural leverage against homophobic censorship. An essentially two-dimensional take on Baldwin might still help foreign queer communities to foster new elective affinities; a normative or censoring translation strategy might bring into view "the subversive hermeneutics that are an inevitable consequence of repressive censorship" (BAER, 2012, p. 98). Ultimately, Baldwin's contemporary world literary value finds itself on the intersection of these Aleph- and avatar-like qualities, and it is precisely the consistent tension between the two concepts that has proven to be so productive for his posthumous career.

Coda: Re-burying Baldwin

While the recent proliferation of official translations of *Giovanni's Room* in Spain and Russia suggests the novel's enduring appeal with international audiences, Baldwin's seminal text remains a prime example of the subversive yet precarious potential of queer practices—not least in relation to translation. As Baer argues, Russian queer translations help "deconstruc[t] the myth of a single, unified West, as well as the mutually defining opposition of Russia and the West," so that "the translation of foreign gay/queer texts appears not as a simple act of borrowing or appropriation from a dominating language by a dominated one but rather as a complex act of cultural negotiation, resistance, and world-making" (BAER, 2018, p. 53-54).

This becomes especially relevant again in contemporary Russia, where over the past years, Vladimir Putin's regime has steadily eroded LGBTQ rights in Russia, cumulating in a law targeting "LGBTQ propaganda" in 2023. Several Russian publishers and libraries co-founded a so-called expert center of the Russian Book Union, tasked with checking the compliance of each publisher's catalogue with the legislation. This expert center primarily consists of members of the Orthodox Church, military personnel, and legal and historian advisers with close ties to the Kremlin (SAFONOVA, 2025).

After a negative advice from the expert center, one of the country's leading publishers, ACT, decided to withdraw three of its fiction titles, including *Giovanni's Room*.[29] The announcement came on April 22, 2024, only a few hours after the publisher had posted in celebration of Vladimir Nabokov's 125th birthday—another author who had been censored in the USSR. ACT's *Giovanni's Room* was already the third Russian edition of the book, translated by the prolific translator and drama expert Valeria Ivanovna Bernatskaya. Capitalizing on the name recognition of *Beale Street*, both

29 The other two banned works were Michael Cunningham's *A Home at the End of the World* and the latest novel by Vladimir Sorokin, an outspoken critic of Putin and the invasion of Ukraine.

thanks to Jenkins' upcoming film and the fact that it was the most widely translated and circulated Baldwin novel in the USSR, ACT had first released its re-translation of *Giovanni* in 2018, in a single tome together with Bernatskaya's re-translation of *Beale Street*. *Giovanni* was republished separately the following year, suggesting its enduring popularity with Russian readers.

Although the Kremlin denied that it was actively pursuing censorship—arguing instead that this was the publisher's own choice—ACT announced the following day that it was also withdrawing the production and sale of Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* and Madeleine Miller's *The Song of Achilles*, following an official warning from the Muscovite District Attorney that the books, based on their online synopsis, might promote non-traditional sexual relationships and preferences (YUZEFOVICH, 2024; SAFONOVA, 2025).

After three decades without censorship and the publication of as many unique—Shmakov's, Radashkevich's, and Bernatskaya's—translations, the Russian circulation of *Giovanni's Room* is again forced to go underground. This latest development serves as an important reminder of the persistent precarity of literature, especially Baldwin's, in the face of authoritarianism. At the same time, it is precisely that clandestine circulation which has also strengthened Baldwin's enduring (counter)cultural status as a literary ally to political praxes of resistance. Like Borges's Aleph, he awaits his audience underground, enabling them "to begin a dialogue with *all* the images" their desire can conjure up (BORGES, 1998, p. 282).

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ISSN: 1807 - 8214
Revista Ártemis, vol. XXXIX nº 1; jan-jun, 2025. pp. 59-81