

The Evidence of Things Not Seen

It feels like a long time ago, yet it's less than a month since Michael Brown Jr., an unarmed teenager, was shot dead by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. It was a while before I got to around to rummaging through my books. The images and reports from Ferguson had reminded me, of course, of all the other similar incidents, all those black people – mostly young and male – killed over the last decades, whose names had now been forgotten by most; the brutal repression of the 1960's black civil rights movement, the COINTELPRO program used to combat the Black Panther movement; the many films depicting the injustice of discrimination against the black population. But it also put me in mind of something else.

Ferguson reminded me of the books by the great black author James Baldwin in which he describes White History, the history of the whites: "History is a hymn to White People, and all us others have been *discovered*—by White people, who may or may not (they suppose) permit us to enter history". In the books he points to us Europeans, "those cousins, the English and the German", who are marked by "a kind of culmination of arrogance and mediocrity", arguing that what unites us is not the color white but the color black: "They do not care about each other at all, never have, and it is inconceivable that they ever will". "The Evidence of Things Not Seen", Baldwin's account of an Atlanta murder trial, does more than just describe the reality of 1980's America. It also applies to present day Germany, as reflected in the results of the EU elections in May and more recently the state elections in Saxony – the cynical electioneering strategies exploiting the idea of foreigners and the 'other', played out by nationalist, populist and right wing parties and intellectuals all over Europe.

In his foreword to the German edition of Baldwin's book ("*Das Gesicht der Macht bleibt weiß*"), the late German journalist Dagobert Lindlau referred not only to the questionable circumstantial evidence produced in the 1982 trial against black defendant Wayne B. Williams and the racism of US society. Such an approach was too cheap and lazy for the former chief reporter of the Bavarian broadcaster Bayrischen Rundfunks (sic!). Instead he referred to the impact of the book in Germany in the wake of the neo-Nazi murders in the early 1990's and the various responses, including the *Lichterketten*, silent candle demonstrations. Lindlau described these as "demonstrations of good will" but also as sentimental PR moves intended to improve Germany's poor image abroad and perhaps boost exports. He sees them as organized displays of self-examination that only serve to conceal the real motivations behind them. As if we didn't know what Baldwin was talking about, the foreword concludes.

We should do less pointing to the USA and stop trying to whitewash our own problems. Instead we would do well to draw the relevant lessons for our own work and follow the example of the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR), the New York based civil rights organization. CCR succeeded in getting a court to declare the New York City Police Department's 'Stop and Frisk' program to be unlawful. Under Stop and Frisk, a police practice borne out by statistical evidence, young black people were stopped and checked at a hugely disproportionately rate and sometimes subject to abuse during arrest or, in the case of Michael Brown, killed. In Germany the Federal Court of Justice in Karlsruhe is currently hearing argument in the case of Oury Jalloh, an African man arrested without good cause who burnt to death in a police cell in Dessau on 7 January 2005. It's clear that there is plenty of work to be done here at home. For my part, meanwhile, I've been rediscovering Greenwich Village, Harlem and the jazz of the post-war era as depicted in *Another Country*, James Baldwin's most beautiful novel.