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Belonging in Exile: James Baldwin in Paris

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Abstract

James Baldwin's autobiographical story, "Equal in Paris," is a perceptive and often amusing account of the American writer's first visit to Paris. An aspiring novelist who left America in rage over his experience of the country's injustice and contempt towards Black Americans, Baldwin is acutely aware of racial prejudice in majority white societies. He tells of his experience of staying in a dilapidated hotel, of being wrongly accused of theft and then imprisoned for a few days in a Paris jail over Christmas. Baldwin's astute observations of Parisian life and its institutions, show how as a Black American, he struggles to understand this new cultural environment which like most western societies, has its own form of racism. But this is also a story of an artist's search for a new intellectual home where he can breathe freely and write. His new friendships with other artists and observations about cosmopolitan European life, allow him to assess what it means to be an American in Paris. This includes exploring those social attitudes which divide America and Europe as well as those which are universal.

Keywords: James Baldwin, African American, racism, migration, home, belonging

James Baldwin's autobiographical reflections can be read like short stories where the author is both the central figure and the observer of life. The story "Equal in Paris" is part of a collection of ten essays published in 1955 under the title *Notes of a Native Son*. These essays reflect in varying ways Baldwin's personal views on being Black and American in both America and abroad; the collection became a classic of the autobiographical genre.

The events in “Equal in Paris” are set in the context of his first visit to France in 1948, a country which eventually became his second home. The story describes his arrival in Paris and a series of encounters which led to an eight day incarceration in a Parisian prison in December 1949 when he faced charges of receiving stolen goods, in this case, a hotel bedsheet. Baldwin is arrested, interrogated, fingerprinted and imprisoned some twelve kilometers outside of Paris. When he is eventually tried, his case evokes laughter from the courtroom, and the judge dismisses the charges against him completely. While this is a story about how an African American man experiences the frustrating, even cruel bureaucracy of the justice system in France, it is also a candidly written tale about the writer’s personal vulnerabilities in his search for a new life.

By 1949, Baldwin had been living in Paris for a year in a rather grim hotel. He lived and worked in the heart of the Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Paris, a district which, during the late ’40s and early ’50s, was the centre of a thriving artistic and literary community and a place “where nightclubs and bars of varying reputations flourished, allowing Baldwin to openly explore both his literary craft and his sexuality.”¹ Having arrived in Paris with only \$40 on him and unable to speak French, he spent much of his time writing in cafes and meeting with fellow American expatriates. Early on in the story, in an amusing yet depressing observation, we are told why cafes were preferable: “The moment I began living in French hotels, I understood the necessity of French cafes” (101).² Those who have visited certain districts in Paris will recognise many of the details of Baldwin’s descriptions, especially of fading grandeur, a façade of gentility which can mask decaying structures and institutions. The hotel where he stays is run by an elderly gentleman who “had really stopped breathing around

¹ Ellery Washington, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/19/travel/James-baldwins-paris.html>

² James Baldwin, “Equal in Paris,” *Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 101-16. Citations to Baldwin’s essay are parenthetical.

1910,” and who it was said had not gone outside for thirty years as “[H]e looked as though the daylight would have killed him”(101).

We know Baldwin as the Black writer and intellectual born in Harlem, New York, but he was also a twenty-four year old gay man when he arrived in France as an immigrant. Immigrant here does not refer to someone who has been forced to migrate, but it was a refuge of sorts, a search for a new life. This was his first stay abroad, an escape from the social and racial injustices of life in America, an escape that he believed literally saved his life and made it possible for him to write. He understood that he needed to flee from America because he understood how powerful hatred could be. These feelings did not emerge in a social and political vacuum; they were part of the daily hostility and contempt felt by many African Americans who were regularly denied access to public places, denied being served in cafes and restaurants and made to feel that they didn't belong. It is not surprising to learn that feelings of resentment and anger grew to the point where one night in New Jersey, when yet another waitress said to him, “we don't serve Negroes here,” Baldwin snapped and hurled a mug half full of water at her across the room. The jug misses and shatters on the floor, and at that moment, Baldwin writes, “with that sound, my frozen blood abruptly thawed.” As he runs to safety, he realises that not only could he have been murdered, but more disturbingly for him, that “I could have been ready to commit murder...my real life was in danger, and not from anything other people might do but from the hatred I carried in my own heart.”³ Towards the end of that story, Baldwin reflects on his father's words, that what was important was “to hold onto the things that mattered.” For Baldwin this did not mean accepting injustice as

³ James Baldwin, *Notes of Native Son*, (1955; Boston: Beacon Press) 98-99.

commonplace. The struggle had to continue but he had to keep his heart “free of hatred and despair.”⁴

The expatriate experience in Paris therefore saved Baldwin from self-destruction and allowed for new experiences in the quest to find his identity in a new land. In his analysis of the two-way migration between Europe and America, the historian Lloyd Kramer explains the significance of the movement of creative, literary, and artistic people to America who wished to escape fascist, racist, or communist regimes in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s. They sought refuge in the self-identified freedom of American society. But Kramer writes that this focus on migration to America “made it difficult for analysts of exile migrations to see the movement of creative artists and intellectuals who chose to *leave* America after World War II because they felt deprived of freedom, equality or opportunities for a literary career.”⁵ This expatriation included a significant number of African-American writers, musicians and artists who lived in Paris during the early decades of the Cold War, “when France seemed to offer an attractive alternative to racial barriers and exclusions in the United States.”⁶ While the groups migrating into and also out of America meant new audiences and new opportunities for writers and artists, it also gave them experience of what it was to live as an alien, a migrant, or an expatriate, all terms which imply a leaving and searching for new horizons.

In his 2014 *New York Times* article, the writer Ellery Washington embarks on retracing Baldwin’s steps in Paris, frequenting the cafes and clubs where Baldwin ate, drank, and socialised. He writes that in spring 1984, “during an interview for *The Paris Review*, a nearly

⁴ Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 114 -15.

⁵ Lloyd Kramer, “James Baldwin in Paris: Exile, Multiculturalism and the Public Intellectual,” *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques*, 27, no.1(2001), 27-47, 27.

⁶ Kramer, “James Baldwin in Paris,” 28.

60-year-old Baldwin was asked why he had chosen to live in France, to which he replied: ““It wasn’t so much a matter of choosing France — it was a matter of getting out of America.””⁷

For Baldwin, France not America was the place where an intellectual like him could be free because in France, he would not be noticed. Ellery explains his fascination with Baldwin, ““the fact that he, a gay black man had written so boldly and lived so openly at a time when there was such deep social hatred and opposition aimed at those of us who shared either Baldwin’s race or sexual identity, let alone both. What’s more, the fact that he had found a way to live and write freely in Paris made the city feel like an essential destination for me.””⁸

Baldwin’s experience of being an American in Paris allows him to write with the acute consciousness of a stranger who can reveal the internal contradictions of French life and culture. Culture however remains a contested notion embodying different meanings. These can range from culture as a way of life, a definition which relies largely on manifest markers, rituals, values, and behaviours, to culture viewed largely as artistic activity. These approaches to culture rely on that which is visible in society. But culture is also what is hidden, quietly residing in institutions and symbols, a certain style of language and manners. It’s what stays unseen and unspoken, and which continues to keep outsiders feeling like outsiders. It is in this sense that Baldwin is an outsider to French culture. Unable to speak the language, he is more aware of his racial and national heritage as an American citizen. Baldwin sees the French as an ““intelligent”” and ““cultured”” race, but their manners are unfamiliar. People may recognise gestures and expressions, but communication is generally culturally specific. And when jailed

⁷ Ellery Washington, “James Baldwin’s Paris,” *New York Times*, January 19, 2014.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/19/travel/james-baldwins-paris.html>.

⁸ Ellery Washington, “James Baldwin’s Paris,” *New York Times*, January 19, 2014.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/19/travel/james-baldwins-paris.html>.

and brought to court on the charge of theft, he also acknowledges that one pays a heavy price for culture which lies in people's personalities and institutions. While the concept of "institutions" has a ring of safety around it, it was not till you came into contact with them that you understood how "outmoded, exasperating, completely impersonal and very often cruel"(102) they can be. Although authorities everywhere can exercise control and coercion, as an outsider, one often remains unaware of the different "techniques their cruelty [can take]" (105-06).

Baldwin was a writer, a traveller, and a migrant in Paris and in Europe more generally. It is reasonable to contend that all migrants are looking for some kind of escape or refuge, whether it be physical or intellectual, but leaving one's home country always comes with personal challenges and costs. People travel far and arrive in a new country with no proper idea of what it means to be physically and psychologically dislocated, and their daily experiences can bring hope and distress in equal measure. The diaspora experience is not necessarily a shared intellectual experience, but for a writer like Baldwin, "from the vantage point of Europe, he [the American] discovers his own country."⁹

Baldwin's desire to write out of his own experience means that racism remains a central issue in his works whether he is in France or the US. For him, the right to criticize a place, in this case, America, is a right born out of both intense rage and love for his country, "I love America more than any other country in the world, and exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually."¹⁰ This sentiment has been echoed by many African American scholars and public intellectuals. Cornel West, often hailed as a leading authority on issues of race and democracy, writes, "My efforts to understand myself are inseparable from understanding what it means to be human, modern, American, black, male and straight in global and local contexts."¹¹ West's ideals are developed

⁹ Baldwin, "A Question of Identity" in *Notes of a Native Son*, 139.

¹⁰ Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 9.

¹¹ Cornel West, Preface to *The Cornel West Reader*, (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999).

in dialogue with American values and directed specifically at urging American citizens to re-imagine a more complete humanity in the remaking of America.¹² As a Christian, West also critiques the historical direction of his faith and says that “modern Christianity is thoroughly shot through with white supremacy like every other institution in modernity.”¹³ In his analysis of the close relationship between the political and the spiritual in Baldwin’s writings, Michael F. Lynch writes that “While on the one hand many African Americans have found solace and inspiration in Christian ideals and spirituality, they also have been scandalized by many acts of inhumanity committed by professed Christians.”¹⁴ Baldwin too represents this tension. At the age of seventeen, Baldwin abandoned his role as a preacher in a Harlem fundamentalist church, but as Lynch writes, “his investment in Christian ideals and themes did not end.” Rather, Lynch contends that “Although Baldwin bitterly attacks Christianity over the course of his career for what he sees as its condoning of racism and injustice toward African Americans, he develops a theology based on Christian ideals and on his individual quest for a loving God.”¹⁵ In migrating to another country, people are often compelled to negotiate their relationship with the place where they choose to live, to evaluate their emotional and cultural hybridity. Our identities as citizens are always in conversation with the language, cultures, and people around us and how they make us feel. But it is not necessary to migrate to feel an outsider. If the cultural and material memory of your own nation does not contain your history, then a sense of belonging becomes even more challenging. Yet, there is no other heritage one can use. Recognising himself to be a kind of “bastard of the West,” Baldwin does not find himself in Europe but in Africa. Thus, he writes: “And this meant that in some subtle way, in a really

¹² James Conlon, “Cornel West’s Pragmatic Understanding of America,” *Journal of Black Studies*, 28, no.1, (2017), 26 - 42, 27.

¹³ West, 31.

¹⁴ Michael Lynch, “Just Above My Head: James Baldwin’s Quest For Belief,” *Literature and Theology*, 11, no. 3, (1997), 284-298, 284.

¹⁵ Lynch, “Just Above My Head: James Baldwin’s Quest For Belief.” 285.

profound way, I brought to Shakespeare, Bach, Rembrandt, to the stones of Paris, to the cathedral at Chartres, and to the Empire State Building, a special attitude. These were not really my creations, they did not contain my history. I was an interloper; this was not my heritage.”¹⁶

While Baldwin’s personal story can encapsulate much of the African American experience, each story of migration and human diaspora is unique. Today, in Europe and in the West generally, migration tends to be discussed in statistics rather than in human terms. Concerns about migration do not always bring up issues of race and colour, but being a person of colour in nations premised on predominantly white cultures, means that the non-white citizen can never really be complacent about society’s attitude or expectations. Despite Europe being home to millions of non-white citizens, the sense of belonging is never settled. In political terms, the nationalist perspective argues belonging can only happen when there is a common history, common cultural roots, and even common religious beliefs among a people. The expression of faith in private and in public can be problematic to perceptions of cultural homogeneity and unity. It is no exaggeration to say that in recent years, the visibility of minority religions, especially Islam, in relatively secularised western countries, has created a new level of toxicity to identity politics.

Migration has become politically charged with a growing sense that citizenship and multiculturalism are not simply matters of cultural integration, of legal rights and obligations, but also a public issue and, a test of faithfulness to society. More recently, the political focus on refugees and asylum seekers from North Africa and the Middle East, has created a divisive and even fearful environment in which those fleeing to a new country are often met in a climate of fear rather than hospitality. As a result, many migrants find it difficult to nurture a sense of belonging and faithfulness to the host country even though they want to feel accepted.

¹⁶ Baldwin, *Notes*, 6-7.

Faithfulness requires endurance for it is about the preservation of bonds and depends on a mutuality of right relationships. It is in the web of human interaction, of social relations where one can elevate feelings of cohesion and hope in the civic space, especially for those arriving into a new country. When we replace the language of resentment with the language of mutual recognition and gratitude, we allow for greater empathy and sociability in our fractured relationships.

Thus, our moral visions for life are most compelling when they say something about how all of us relate to one another as citizens, neighbours, and friends in the spaces we share. All moral life is relational and its struggles require that we open ourselves to others and cultivate virtuous relationships. There is no alternative to co-existence. In the modern age, with the processes of migration and renewed interest in identity formation, in the complex urban societies of today, concepts of friendship have assumed a new significance and say as much about our attitudes to cultural boundaries as they do about our desires and preferences as human beings.

The subtext for moral sources lie in using our imagination to bring all aspects of life into an intricate whole, thereby showing us the strength and complexity of human interconnectedness. For educationalists like the American Irving Babbitt, the true purpose of education was to assimilate the wisdom of the ages through the right use of the human imagination: art was essential to creating community. As commentator Glenn Davis writes about Babbitt's theory of education, "What creates community—what advances civilization and the happiness of the human person—is that which takes the individual away from his impulsive, natural, self-conceit and offers a larger reality revealed through the lessons of the ages. These lessons, exemplified in great works of literature and history, communicate the larger world and

stimulate the moral imagination of the student with reference to a shared, humane center.”¹⁷ Thus, the higher purpose of all education is the expansion of one’s emotional as well as intellectual horizons.

While migration to Paris could be seen as imperative to Baldwin’s survival, his travels compelled him to explore the accompanying questions of belonging and identity. Paris and Europe more generally, became the places where he could think more deeply about himself and the country he loved and kept leaving - America. He realised that the real struggle of travel and migration does not lie in concerns around employment or citizenship, important as they are, but what a person discovers about themselves in the process. Writing is largely a solitary experience allowing the writer to dwell on their interior life. In Baldwin’s case, the escape to Europe is inextricably tied to a search for intellectual and emotional freedom which Baldwin, as a Black American, finds lacking in America. He writes that the reason why the American writer “keeps running off to Europe” is because “He needs sustenance for his journey and the best models he can find. Europe has what we do not have yet, a sense of the mysterious and inexorable limits of life, a sense, in a word, of tragedy. And we have what they sorely need: a new sense of life’s possibilities.”¹⁸ This search for an intellectual home in which white and Black Americans can reassess their lives while remaining psychologically unsettled, pervades his reflections on his time in Europe.

¹⁷ Glenn Davis, “,” *The Imaginative Conservative*, August 5, 2010.

<http://www.theimaginativeconservative.org/2010/08/irving-babbitt-moral-imagination-and.html>.

¹⁸ James Baldwin, ‘Nobody Knows My Name’ in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison, (1998; New York: Library of America), 142.

The meaning of home appears frequently in Baldwin's writings but is best described in *Giovanni's Room* as "perhaps. . . not a place but simply an irrecoverable condition."¹⁹ For Baldwin, the differences between home and place, suggest that neither is really about geographical space. Home remains a paradoxical concept and feeling. It does not necessarily rely on the quest for rootedness but rather on friendships, community, and all those relationships with people and institutions which form part of our daily lives. For many, wherever one lives, it can be the struggle of a life-time to settle, to make friends, and to be accepted for who you are or desire to become personally and professionally.

The events narrated in "Equal in Paris" are told with a sharp and unsettling discernment about his experience of a different culture in a city which became his second physical and intellectual home. While Baldwin is a stranger in Europe, he also belongs in Europe in a way that he did not belong in America. For Baldwin, both worlds assumed a contradictory sense of home and exile at the same time. Exile too can be a state of mind, an experience which can happen anywhere and one that is not limited to geography. But physical exile, the voluntary crossing of borders, occupying a different cultural space, can create new inspiration for any artist. Even with modest means, one can observe and live life in new ways. Baldwin may have felt he did not truly belong anywhere, even though alienation in Paris felt different from alienation in America. In Paris, he is still a Black American and faces the prejudices that many black people do in predominantly white societies. But here he cultivates and inspires a new sense of community and forges new friendships. Paris has a sophistication and an indifference which is beguiling, and for Baldwin, maybe this is what makes it easier to cultivate a personal sense of home.

¹⁹ James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* (1956; London, Penguin, 1991), 88.

In many of his works, Baldwin's fundamental lament is the insanity of the state of affairs where the white American citizen is unable to find a way of co-existing with Black American citizens. And yet, he never relinquished his American passport because in all his travels, he carried America within him. He is a victim of racism but as a writer, he is also conscious of his moral duty to his audience. In spite of the prevalence and dehumanising effects of racial prejudice, the job of the writer is to give us a sense of new possibilities, new justices as captured in the lines of the British Nigerian poet and novelist, Ben Okri who wrote "There's always a new way, a better way that's not been tried before."²⁰ Artists cannot simply linger on the pain of the past and present because they must also point to a more hopeful future. Baldwin's works reveal the struggle of a novelist whose anger and anguish became a prophetic voice, and whose search for belonging and justice never obscured the gratitude he felt for the gift of writing.

²⁰ Ben Okri, "A New Dream of Politics," *The Guardian*, October 12, 2014.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/oct/12/ben-okri-politics-poem-jeremy-corbyn>.