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The Return of/to Otherness:

A Reading of James Baldwin's "Encounter on the Seine", "A Question of Identity", and "Equal in Paris"

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Abstract

James Baldwin migrated to France in 1948 'because he doubted [his] ability to survive the fury of the color problem' in the United States of America, his 'native' country. This attempt to escape from his racial otherness (which translated into literary otherness for the aspiring writer), however, resulted in Baldwin's experience of new forms of otherness in France: national, linguistic, as well as racial. Baldwin's experience in France provided impetus for meditations upon his experience in America. His escape from America, indeed, became a meditative return to it in the form of his writings. This paper attempts to understand the construction of otherness in three such writings in Baldwin's Notes of a Native Son (1955): the essays "Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown", "A Question of Identity", and "Equal in Paris", which were written during his stay in Paris. This paper locates Baldwin's meditative return to his otherness and selfhood in America in his experience of otherness in France, which involves both being othered by and othering others.

Keywords

- otherness
- return
- nativity
- race
- nationality

Introduction

So that any writer, looking back over even so short a span of time as I am here forced to assess, finds that the things which hurt him and the things which helped him cannot be divorced from each other; he could be helped in a certain way only because he was hurt in a certain way; and his help is simply to be enabled to move from one conundrum to the next—one is tempted to say that he moves from one disaster to the next.

- James Baldwin ("Autobiographical Notes", Notes of a Native Son)

The title of James Baldwin's first essay collection *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) is significant in two ways. One, it alludes to Richard Wright's novel *Native Son*. Two, and more significantly, it suggests Baldwin's consciousness of himself as America's Native Son. There are four essays in the closing section of *Notes of a Native Son* which deal with Baldwin's experience of Europe after his migration to France in 1948. Three of them deal with his life in Paris: "Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown" (1950), "A Question of Identity" (1954), and "Equal in Paris" (1955). The fourth essay, entitled "Stranger in the Village" (1953), deals with his experience of the Swiss village Loèches-les-Bains where he was probably the first black person to arrive. The major thematic convergence of the four essays is that they deal with the black American expatriate's experience in the Old World, which perhaps explains why Baldwin placed them in the same section.

Baldwin's own migration to France was an attempt to escape from his racial otherness (which translated into literary otherness) in America.

> I left America because I doubted my ability to survive the fury of the color problem here. (Sometimes I still do.) I wanted to prevent myself from becoming *merely* a Negro; or, even, merely a Negro writer. I wanted to find out in what way the *specialness* of my experience could be made to connect me with other people instead of dividing me from them. (I was as isolated from Negroes as I was from whites, which is what happens when a Negro begins, at bottom, to believe what white people say about him.) ("The Discovery of What It Means To Be an American" 137)

However, Baldwin encountered new forms of otherness in France: national, linguistic, and racial (which was different from what he had experienced in America). His experience of otherness in Europe provided an impetus for meditations upon his experience of otherness in America. His escape from America, indeed, became a return to it (i) meditatively in the form of his writings, and (ii) geographically in the form of his physical return to the States in 1957. Several critics have directly written about or hinted at Baldwin's return to and revision of his 'Americanness' in response to his European experience. E Savoy (1992), whose essay is primarily concerned with the convergences between Henry James's and James Baldwin's cultural critiques of America from the 'vantage point' of Europe (336), notes that America 'is not something that one [i.e., the American expatriate in Europe] leaves behind, but rather demands investigation with increasing urgency in response to reductive European myths of the promises and possibilities of the new world' (337). Tracing the 'theoretical convergences' between Baldwin's 'multicultural insights in post-war Paris' and the contemporary critical theorists' 'accounts of diasporic cultures, postcolonialism and the public sphere' (47), Lloyd Kramer (2001) observes that '[l]eft alone in the streets and cheap hotels of Paris, he [Baldwin] found himself reconstructing his American experience and identity in ways that were disorienting as well as liberating' (31-2). James Miller (2008) views Baldwin's 'Paris essays' as 'endeavours to resolve the contradiction between his sense of himself as an individual and the determinations of an alienated and alienating racial identity by affirming his American citizenship' (52). Discussing "Equal in Paris", Oana Cogeanu (2015) terms Baldwin's meditations upon America as the 'paradoxical discovery of black America in white Europe' (422). Savoy's and Kramer's essays do not employ the close-reading method to examine Baldwin's individual essays at length. They generously

draw on the biographical details of Baldwin's life, which my essay avoids. Miller's essay recognises the lack of 'close attention to the texts themselves' (52) in critical work on Baldwin's stay in Paris and employs close-reading to examine some of the Paris essays, however, he leaves out "Equal in Paris". Cogeanu recognises the scant critical attention paid to "Equal in Paris" and devotes her whole essay to it, however, her terming of Baldwin's meditations (including other essays) as the 'paradoxical discovery of black America in white Europe' seems to overlook the hybridity (which Baldwin suggests in the subtitle of one of the essays as "Black meets Brown") which Baldwin considers central to American experience (even if it is often denied). Interestingly, none of these critical essays pay much attention to the titles of Baldwin's essays.

My essay closely reads the three Paris essays in *Notes of a Native Son*, "Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown", "A Question of Identity", and "Equal in Paris" and examines how Baldwin's meditative return to his otherness and selfhood in America (for which his experience of otherness in Europe provides an impetus) involves *both* othering and being othered by others. Baldwin's return is, indeed, a movement from escaping to embracing his otherness. This return is not a single, isolated journey, rather Baldwin meditatively returns to America several times, and each time the return and the returnee changes. The presence of others and otherness is crucial to this return. As noted above, this otherness operates along racial, national, and linguistic axes, though it is not entirely reducible to these. My essay also refers to Du Bois's notion of double consciousness and assigns it a role in the escape/return schema.

As a point of departure, I quote from the essay "Of Our Spiritual Strivings", in which Du Bois notes that for the black American America is –

> a world which yields him no true consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. (*The Souls of Black Folk* 3)

Part of what Baldwin wished to escape from through expatriation is this double consciousness – which really is the black Americans' internalisation of their otherness. Baldwin's escape from America could be seen as his 'longing' to attain 'self-conscious manhood' (Du Bois 4). What Badlwin's Paris experience taught him that this 'self-conscious manhood' is only possible through embracing, rather than escaping, both an American and a black identity.

In Paris, Baldwin encountered Africans from French colonies and other American immigrants (both white and black), apart from the Parisians. All these others are present in "Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown" and Baldwin's encounters with each of them are underwritten by different contours of otherness. The black American's 'escape' from America is re-enacted in escaping all other American (whether black or white) immigrants in Paris. We are told that the black American immigrants live in 'isolation from each other' because 'past humiliations … [have] become associated with not only one's traditional

oppressors but also with one's traditional kinsfolk' (86). This 'wariness' is extended to and returned by his 'white countrymen', with whom his conversation does not 'discuss the past' and instead focuses on 'the considerably overrated impressiveness of the Eiffel Tower' (87). The black man deliberately attempts to distance himself from his American experience in the quest for an individual self which is not defined by his American past (which, being a racial past, operates at a collective level). This distancing fails because physical distance from other Americans does not translate into psychic distance from them. Moreover, the Parisian insists on viewing the black American as an American. Indeed, the Parisian considers the black American as one bearing 'unutterably painful' scars, pitying him as a 'victim', renewing the black man's 'battle for his own identity' (88): reducing the black man to a mere racial, national, and linguistic other, an object of 'ready sympathy' but never a complex human subject. This is partly similar to the black man's reduction to an inferior status vis-à-vis the white man in America, which Baldwin describes in another essay as a denial of 'his human reality, his human weight and complexity' ("Stranger in the Village" 127). The black American expatriate's attempt to escape from this denial (his denial of this denial) ends up in returning to it.

The black American is also isolated from, if not wary of, the 'French African', with whom his racial affinity is complicated by national and historical gulfs. In contrast to the 'ambivalence' of the black American's relationship to either America or Africa, the 'French African' has an 'overwhelmingly clear' relationship to his homeland ("Encounter on the Seine" 88). Unlike black Americans in Paris who live in 'isolation' from each other, the French African lives with his fellow countrymen, and though he too 'has endured privation, injustice, medieval cruelty … [, he] has not yet endured the utter alienation of himself from his people and his past' (89). The alienation from one's own past separates both the black and the white American from the African and the European respectively: the Americans' perceptions of their whiteness or blackness are reconfigured as being uniquely tinged by their American experience. The black American (read Baldwin) becomes conscious of the 'role' that the white and the black Americans 'have played in the lives and history of each other' (89). In seeing his alienation 'thrown into relief' (88), the black man realises his Americanness: 'this depthless alienation from oneself and one's people is, in sum, the American experience' (89). The American is on a 'dangerous voyage' to discover his 'own identity' and the black American could 'make peace with himself' only if he is 'in the same boat' (90). This voyage is, indeed, a voyage of return (though it crucially changes what is returned to). The subtitle "Black Meets Brown" suggests the change in the self-perception of Baldwin from seeing himself as a black American as defined by and in opposition to the white American to seeing himself as well as the white American as inevitably brown, i.e., ambivalent and hybrid (this also exposes the notions of mutually exclusive whiteness and blackness as myths). The black American, whom Baldwin calls the 'Negro', is the distinct product of the deep inter-involvement of the white and the black Americans in each other's past and present. This constitutes the black American's (as well as the white American's) brownness, which comes into 'relief' for him when he becomes conscious of his difference from the French African, with whom his racial affinity is alienated by 'a gulf of three hundred years' (89), during which a 'new black man' as well as a 'new white man' was being formed on the American continent ("Stranger in the Village" 129). This does not imply that the racial differences between the black and the white Americans are insignificant. The consciousness

of Americans as hybrid does not unwrite their history of racial relations, even if it emerges from them.

In "A Question of Identity", Baldwin talks about the American student's experience in Paris. Throughout the essay, there is no reference to the racial identity of the generic American student, and Baldwin seems to be talking about both white and black American students, whose Americanness is their common 'identity'. As noted above, their Americanness sets them apart from the white people and the people of colour of other countries. The American student is in Europe to seek 'the terms on which he is related to his country, and to the world': an attempt 'to consider the person apart from all the forces which have produced him' (100). This is an attempt to observe oneself, as it were, from the outside – or perhaps in a laboratory. This is precisely the escape from the native land which becomes a return to it, because (i) one carries one's nativity with one to the place of one's dislocation, and (ii) the others one encounters in that place perceive one in relation to their idea of one's native land. The American student arrives in Paris with a romanticised idea of the city: 'a city which exists only in his mind' (93). The romanticisation is due to French 'movies', admired 'at home', and now sought in the reality which escapes that romanticisation: 'the difference, simply, between what one desires and what the reality insists on' (93). However, the American student refuses 'to recognize Paris at all' and instead clings to its 'image' (93): the city of Paris (and its inhabitants) become(s) an other for the American student, who prefers the simplicity of the romantic to the complexity of the real since the latter would involve a revision of how he perceives himself, which is not unconnected to how he perceives the world. The romantic image of Paris is, crucially, devoid of people. The 'legend' of Paris as a city 'where all become drunken on the fine old air of freedom' is an 'unlivable' legend, which ignores the city and as well as its natives (93), but also prevents any attempt on the part of the American to understand his own peculiar situation in Paris. However, the American student is forced to confront the question of his identity as he experiences alienation (read otherness) in the city whose 'people don't want him in their lives' (94). The 'thoroughly exasperating innocence' of the Parisian confuses the American with 'the Marshall Plan, Hollywood, the Yankee dollar, television, or Senator McCarthy', stereotyping and denying him his personhood: 'the American wishes to be liked *as a person*' (95), but for that he has to be recognised as a person. This confrontation with how others view him 'is the moment … when one leaves Paris of legend and finds oneself in the real and difficult Paris of the present' (95). Here, one would expect a meaningful meditative return to problems of identity, however, the American student's reaction is to embrace either 'Home' or 'The Continent' in a way that each is 'singularly devoid of contact' (read 'others') (98). Baldwin describes the process of romanticisation by the American student as one that involves no 'imagination' (98), and does not attempt to engage with the native other (and his own self) as a complex person: the Parisians become 'a cloud of faces, bearing witness to romance' (98). In both the 'romantic' embraces, the American does not engage with his past (and, which is far worse, his present). However, for Baldwin, the journey to Paris would only be complete if the American student realises that '[it] is the past lived on the American continent, as against that other past, irrecoverable now on the shores of Europe, which must sustain us in the present' (100). The journey outward would only be complete if he returns inward: this return is the desirable stage to which the American student 'must' evolve.

Equal in Paris" is a slightly different 'essay' in that it reads like a story narrated in the first-person. Cogeanu rejects the label 'essay' for it and reads it as a 'travel sketch' in the 'epic genre' (423). My essay is not primarily concerned with generic classification, and, thus, does not attempt to situate "Equal in Paris" generically. "Equal in Paris" tells of Baldwin's brief imprisonment in France due to the alleged theft of a bedsheet. His alleged accomplice is a New Yorker (a white American, though Baldwin does not state so in the essay), upon meeting whom in a café they 'immediately established the illusion that [they] had been fast friends back in the good old U.S.A.' (102). The irony is too apparent: the good old U.S.A. is as much an illusion as their friendship. However, as in the other two Parisian essays, the American expatriate in France finds something in common with his countrymen (black as well as white) in the face of otherness with regard to native Parisians, thus, the American expatriates, represented by Baldwin and his white 'friend', are Equal in Paris. As we shall see, by the time of their release from prison, Baldwin and his friend do not remain Equal in Paris.

The otherness between the French and the American is bidirectional: if the French simplifies the American to 'the Marshall Plan, Hollywood, the Yankee dollar, television, or Senator McCarthy' ("Question of Identity" 95), then the American also reduces the French to being a member of a romanticised 'ancient, intelligent, and cultured race' ("Equal in Paris" 102). Baldwin's assessment of the French evolves as he comes to read 'fatigue', 'paranoia', and inflexibility into the French character (102): "Equal in Paris" also traces how this evolution happens, and at each point in the encounter with the French (and the other others), Baldwin meditatively returns to America. Baldwin describes his own situation as one of 'familiar poverty and disorder of that precarious group of people of whatever age, race, country, calling, or intention which Paris recognizes as *les étudiants* and sometimes, more ironically and precisely, as *les nonconformistes*' (104). Despite their otherness in relation to each other (for instance, the mutual otherness of the French African and the black American, outlined in "Encounter on the Seine"), the students are equally poor and precarious. Later, when Baldwin encounters people of other nationalities in prison, he realises the 'gap' between them and him, which both they and he 'put … down … to the fact that [Baldwin] was an American' (111). There is an interplay between, as it were, Baldwin's recognition of equality with and otherness from the others he encounters. The French, however, are completely other. Baldwin's arrest puts him 'in the hands of a people [he] did not understand at all' (106): this proceeds from not just racial and national but also linguistic difference. He confesses that 'I began to realize that I was in a country I knew nothing about' (105-6). This confession is immediately followed by a meditative return to America –

> In a similar situation in New York I would have had some idea of what to do because I would have had some idea of what to expect. … I had become very accomplished in New York at guessing and, therefore, to a limited extent manipulating to my advantage the reactions of the white world. … I did not know what they [the French] saw when they looked at me. I knew very well what Americans saw when they looked at me and this allowed me to play endless and sinister variations on the role which they had assigned me[.] (106)

To put it differently, in America, Baldwin was able to tap his double consciousness, his otherness as a black American vis-à-vis the white, to his 'advantage'. However, since the French view him as an 'American' instead of 'a despised black man' (106-7), he is encountering a new form of otherness, which he does not know to manipulate. Later, Baldwin's interrogation is 'chillingly clipped and efficient (so that there was, shortly, no doubt in one's own mind that one *should* be treated as a criminal)' (107-8). The denial of any agency to define himself takes Baldwin's mind 'back to that home from which [he] had fled' (109): a denial exacerbated by his 'uncertain' hold over the French language. He memorably writes, 'it must have seemed to me that my flight from home was the cruelest trick I had ever played on myself' (110; my emphasis).

In prison, Baldwin is placed together with 'the very scrapings off the Paris streets … [and] North Africans' (109). The consciousness of his Americanness results in a 'gap' between him and two North Africans being held with him: 'I was unable to accept my imprisonment as a fact, even as a temporary fact. I could not, even for a moment, accept my present companions as my companions. And they, of course, felt this and put it down, *with perfect justice*, to the fact that I was an American' (111, my emphasis). The sense of equality with other prisoners, thus, reaches its limits – which, as Baldwin outlines in "Encounter on the Seine", is due to a 'gulf of three hundred years' between black Americans and north Africans (89). Later, Baldwin and his New Yorker friend are made to return from the court without being tried because there was 'no interpretor in the court' since '[t]he arresting officer had forgotten to mention [their] nationalities' ("Equal in Paris" 114). A few days later, when the case against them is finally dropped, the 'merriment' in the courtroom elicits different responses from Baldwin, who is 'chilled', and from the New Yorker, who 'decided that the French were "great"' (116). Their equality breaks down, as only Baldwin seems to remember –

> [the] laughter I had often heard at home … the laughter of those who consider themselves to be at a safe remove from all the wretched, for whom the pain of living is not real. I had heard it so often in my native land that I had resolved to find a place where I would never hear it any more. In some deep, black, stony, and liberating way, my life, in my own eyes, began during that first year in Paris, when it was borne in on me that this laughter is universal and never can be stilled. (116)

Baldwin is, in one sense, left standing alone with no Equal in Paris, which is a testament to the uniqueness of each individual's experience and methods of responding to that experience:

> [I]t becomes impossible, the moment one thinks about it, to predicate the existence of a *common* experience. The moment one thinks about it, it becomes apparent that there is no such thing [as a common experience]. That experience is a private, and a very largely speechless affair is the principal truth[.] ("Question of Identity" 91)

Nevertheless, this uniqueness of individual experience exists side-by-side by the larger racial, national, and linguistic contours of experience, and Baldwin recognises that the 'laughter' he once heard or even 'elicited' (" Equal in Paris" 116) in his native land would never leave him because he, as a black American man, carries it within him as historical inheritance (which is collective and public): as memory of his racial otherness. His escape from America, thus, returns him to it. Baldwin's black identity is 'the status which myth, if nothing else, gives me in the West', a myth which he could not escape and 'must accept' before he could 'hope to change the myth' ("Stranger in the Village" 128). This too is a return engendered by his experience of otherness: the self is recoverable/discoverable only through a negotiation with, rather than an escape from, otherness.

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