

**A RACIAL CARNIVAL: JAMES BALDWIN'S "ENCOUNTER ON THE SEINE:
BLACK MEETS BROWN"**

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Abstract

In investigating one of James Baldwin's most underestimated essays, "Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown" (1955), this paper provides a close reading of Baldwin's unique and critically ignored representation of interracial relations in the African-American tradition, highlighting his argument of the relational nature of Black identity and emphasizing that alienation is proposed as the key term of a depthless identity which unites the African-American and the American beyond their historical wedlock.

Keywords: James Baldwin, Encounter on the Seine, African-American, relational identity

At twenty-four and after having completed two writing scholarships to no published consequence, James Baldwin left the United States for France and other European countries, where over a nine-year stay he reports of having discovered what it means to be a Negro American. Baldwin's paradoxical discovery of (black) America in Europe forms the substance of his first published volume, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955). The volume is divided into three parts and contains a total of ten essays plus an introduction; most of the essays were written for magazines, some obviously on assignment, yet each of them is wholly transfigured through the rhetoric of a spokesman. The first part of *Notes of a Native Son* takes literature as reference and establishes Baldwin as a polemicist committing an oedipal assassination of his literary father (for Baldwin cannot choose his father, as much as he might prefer Henry James over Richard Wright). The second part takes society as reference in razorblade-like unravelling the oppressive social fabric of post-Renaissance Harlem. The third part takes travel as reference and thus continues Baldwin's concentric approach to the discourses conditioning the self. The four texts in Part III, "Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown", "A Question of Identity", "Equal in Paris" and the more famous "Stranger in the Village", all deal with Baldwin's European encounters and subsequent (re)conceptualization of blackness and are all worth careful reading for both literary and cultural purposes. The present paper will focus on the first of Baldwin's underestimated European essays.

The first text in Part III, "Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown", promises to deal with a central moment of travel, the encounter. The place and the actors are referred to indirectly in the title, the former through a common synecdoche, the latter by means of a color metonym loaded with metaphorical significance. Hence the title invokes a type of discourse in which immediate referents are always already abstracted into cultural schemata: meeting the foreigner signifies an ethnographic encounter, Paris is represented by the tourism-marked

Seine, the individual is referred to by means of a racialist concept. But what does “brown” stand for? Let us look for its reference in the analysis below.

“In Paris nowadays it is rather more difficult for an American Negro to become a really successful entertainer than it is rumoured to have been some thirty years ago” (NS:103), reads the incipit. From the very beginning, the implied author passes a conclusion on the changed state of Parisian fact; his “rumoured” reference must be the Parisian dream, a reversal of the Europeans’ American dream, projecting Paris as the site where the black American can achieve freedom and success. The imperfect overlapping of the author’s and the tradition’s Paris is assigned to the passing of time, which serves in a way to justify both the myth, framed in an illud tempus revelry (“champagne has ceased to be drunk out of slippers” (NS:130)), and the author’s more sober perception: “The musicians and singers who are here now must work very hard indeed to acquire the polish and style which will land them in the big time.” (NS:130). Yet the “tantalizing” possibility remains and is certified by the figures of Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong who occasionally pass through, uniting the past myth with the present. It seems so far that *Encounter on the Seine* is about black performers achieving success (or not) in Paris; the first page, at least, is completely devoted to the topic; the author calls on proper names of performers and performances, revealing himself as a connoisseur and proposing new ingredients (e.g. Chez Inez, “which specializes in fried chicken and jazz”) for an updated, yet nevertheless mythical version of the Parisian dream.

But the turn of page reveals a change of topic. The change is introduced within a transitional paragraph beginning with “In general, only the Negro entertainers are able to maintain a useful and unquestioning comradeship with other Negroes.” (NS:104) And this is where the black performer theme reaches its end, for it is a different kind of performance that interests Baldwin: that of inter- and intra-racial relations. “Their non-performing, colored countrymen are, nearly to a man, incomparably more isolated, and it must be concealed that this isolation is deliberate.” (NS:104) There follows a socio-psychological explanation not without standing, accounting that the black individual’s separation from the black communities in the U.S. prompted an association of past humiliation “not only with one’s traditional oppressors but also with one’s traditional kinfolk.” (NS:104) In the next argumentative move, Baldwin reads into the gaze of Negroes in Paris: “Thus the sight of a face from home is not invariably a source of joy, but can also quite easily become a source of embarrassment or rage.” (NS:104) In an epic text, this would be read as an instance of omniscience; in an argumentative text, it means manipulating a conclusion: Baldwin derives his generalized interpretation of the individual gaze from an otherwise undeveloped sociological argument, and not vice versa.

The next thesis is disconnectedly making one step further towards the point: “The American Negro in Paris is forced at last to exercise an undemocratic discrimination rarely practiced by Americans, that of judging his people, duck by duck, and distinguishing them one from another.” (NS:104) Discrimination, together with its “undemocratic” determiner, makes an interesting choice of words, since its meaning of comprehensively distinguishing between individual entities, to which Baldwin is resorting here, is overwhelmed by its ideological implications of oppressively distinguishing between communities. In spite of the author’s claim of “duck by duck” distinction, it is the latter kind of discrimination that the American Negro in Paris makes, and so does Baldwin in writing the African-Americans in

Paris in so general terms. Given his isolation, scarcity in number and overwhelming need to be, as it were, forgotten, “the American Negro in Paris is very nearly, the *invisible man*.” (my emphasis, NS:104) Again, the thesis jumps far from the previous one, throws in an undeveloped idea, and retreats. One might expect next a study in invisibility, but Baldwin zigzags into a different ideatic direction.

The next paragraph appears to be quite disorganised, conflating several half-ideas: the repetition of the American Negro’s extension of the weariness directed on his countrymen to weariness of his kin, the postulate of exaggerated expectancies about the French, and the justification of the Americans’ less acute color perception in Paris, to the concessive conclusion that “there remains, nevertheless, in the encounter of white Americans and Negro Americans the high potential of an awkward or an ugly situation.” (NS:105) When one thinks that the title’s promise of an encounter will finally be met, the essay subsequently delves into juxtaposed portraits of the American, the Negro, the French and the African. Indeed, encounter was a good lexical choice: Baldwin dwells in cultural generalization and abstraction, and the encounter he proposes is not that of people, be they mere referents of such collective identities, but of concepts. It seems there is a carnival on the Seine, where the American, the Negro, the French and the African are stock masks on indiscriminate faces, acting out in an eternal present tense a set of prescribed socio-psychological situations. This artificial Parisian staging of the racial performance does not render Baldwin’s orderly description of each mask less relevant, but it feeds the suspicious frustration that the encounter will be postponed beyond the end. Eventually, an encounter is a climactic event of identity, forcing the realization of the individual’s (lack of) adherence to the others and the same. But in Baldwin’s essay there is no Parisian encounter; in fact, there hardly is a Paris, save for the Seine in the title and a touristic Eiffel Tower somewhere in the text.

In his portrayal of the interracial relations of the African-American, Baldwin begins, how else, from the centrality of whiteness. “The white American regards his darker brother through the distorting screen created by a lifetime of conditioning.” (NS:105) This affirmation is not only true and insightful; it can also apply meta-textually to Baldwin himself. And it continues with “the American is more than a little intimidated to find this stranger so many miles from home” (NS:105). The black as both brother and stranger is only an apparent contradiction in terms and the idea of taking the racial rapport from its usual whereabouts and observing it on foreign grounds is promising, yet undeveloped. The description of the (idea of the) encounter focuses on the American’s side and swirls into a host of psychological descriptors (intimidated, instinctive, personal honour and good will, generosity at once good natured and uneasy), as the racial showdown is eventually mellowed into the question “And how do you feel about it?” An implicit uneasy recognition of difference transpires from the cautious phrasing of the alterity of the black in the white’s attempt to establish communication.

Next, Baldwin moves orderly to the portrait of the Negro, discussing how the latter relates to the white American. It seems that the abstract encounter develops through an enunciation of positions rather than through dialogue, and this lack of actual, albeit ideatic, interaction is mirrored by the structuring of the text into neatly juxtaposed paragraphs. This impossibility of communicating himself to the white is exactly what the Negro’s position is: “He has had time, too, long before he came to Paris, to reflect on the absolute and personally

expensive futility of taking anyone of his countrymen to task for his status in America, or of hoping to convey to them any of his experience” (NS:105). Since in Baldwin’s Parisian carnival the white and black American are not freed of their preconditioning masks on the French soil, any encounter fails into touristic pseudo-talk.

Then comes the European’s turn; his mediated (mis)representations of the black are dedicated a sentence whose irony stretches beyond the author’s rhetoric: “The European tends to avoid the really monumental confusion which might result from an attempt to apprehend the relationship of the forty-eight states to one another, clinging instead to such information as is afforded by radio, press and film, to anecdotes considered to be illustrative of American life, and to the myth that we have ourselves perpetuated” (NS:106). This envelope of high diction directs its superior irony on the European’s disinterest in profound perception, on the confusion that might arise of such perception, on the superficiality of clinging to the simulacra of the media, etc.; it also hints at the risks of taking generic and simplified representations for granted, self-representations included. It is worth noting here that Baldwin participates in this latter category of myth perpetuators by means of his (in)famous use of a first person plural pronoun that identifies him as American; but as the text continues undisturbed, he obviously fails to realize the irony of his essayistic perpetuation of illustrative images and masks.

Having nailed the European to his presuppositions, the author compares their result, in a masterful image, to “seeing one’s back yard reproduced with extreme fidelity, but in such a perspective that it becomes a place which one has never seen or visited, which never has existed, and which never can exist” (NS:106). This is an inspired picture of the estrangement of representation; forced to see himself as apparent to the foreigner, the African-American becomes foreign to himself. That is because he can neither acknowledge, nor deny the different narrative made out of his narremes: “the Negro is forced to say Yes to many a different questions, and yet to deny the conclusion to which his answers seem to point.” (NS:106). Indeed, the African-American in Paris “finds himself involved, in another language, in the same old battle: the battle for his own identity.” (NS:106). This is another promising idea thrown in, phrasing identity as the loot of a battle that takes place on the grounds of language, but it is only employed here as a transition to a vaguer conclusion on the necessity for the Negro to accept the reality of his being an American, “for only by accepting this reality can he hope to make articulate to himself or to others the uniqueness of his experience.” (NS:107)

In one more transitional move, this thesis fades into the next: the ambivalence of the Negro American’s status is thrown into relief by the encounter with Negro students from the French colonies. An interesting observation follows on the dissimilarity of American blacks and Africans: the African has “a homeland to which his relationship, no less than his responsibility, is overwhelmingly clear: His country must be given – or it must seize – its freedom.” (NS:107) It is not so much the fight for freedom and the sense of collective purpose, but the existence of a homeland that must be emphasized in this description. In the end, the Negro American’s homeland should be Africa, too. Yet, since this point follows the one about the necessity for the Negro to accept his Americanness, it is rather the American that perceives the colonial African here (“yet what the American is seeing...”). The same Negro-now-American perceives by extension the little picturesque poverty of “all students” in the Latin Quarter as a sign of the economic gap between Europe and America. And in another

case of curious refraction (like in the argument that the displaced African-American comes to hate the blacks because he hates the whites), he meditates on the gains and losses of his long American sojourn.

If one was wondering throughout the essay if Baldwin's persona is to be found anywhere within these mind encounters or whether he remains their directing sociologist, I think it is here that he comes closest to an embodiment in the text: the American Negro, desirous to return to the familiar American terrain, feels momentarily "the echoes of a past which he has not yet been able to utilize, intimations of a responsibility which he has not yet been able to face" (NS:108); but this spectre of the common African homeland only serves to accentuate the difference: "The African before him has endured privation, injustice, medieval cruelty; but the African has not yet endured the utter alienation of himself from his people and his past." (NS:108) The previous American overflow gives way to the present Negro chasm, and no balance is attainable yet. As the African and the American Negro gaze at each other in a trans-human staging over the unconquerable gap of time and space, what the Negro sees in the African mirror is his own alienation. "This alienation causes the Negro to recognize that he is a hybrid", Baldwin forces again an ideatic connection. (NS:108) This psychological hybridity may remind of W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double-consciousness, but it designates alienation rather than ambivalence: the African echoes have faded, and the cultural memory of Baldwin's Negro only goes down as far as the auction block. In spite of the subsequent emphasis that the Negro is not seeking to forfeit his birthright as a black man, blackness is not conceived here as a value in itself but in its non-divorceable correlation with its white counterpart.

The nature of the roles whites and blacks have played in each other's lives is beginning to fall into perspective for Baldwin – a perspective which will be developed upon in "Stranger in the Village", but is already summarized here: "Now he is bone of their bone, flesh of their flesh, they have loved and hated and obsessed and feared each other and his blood is in their soil. Therefore he cannot deny them, nor can they ever be divorced." (NS:108) While this image of the union of white and black is historically true, psychologically viable and poetically expressive, one cannot but stop and ponder, mildly irritated, on the future quality of such a marriage. A concrete vision of that future Baldwin cannot provide: "Yet one day he will face his home again; nor can he realistically expect to find overwhelming changes" (NS:109) – home means America, a curious starting definition in the African-American tradition – and the author continues in the vaguest of manners: "What time will bring Americans is at last their own identity." (NS:109) This sentence makes little sense unless correlated with a previous statement, which encapsulates not the conclusion – for there is no argument really, but one of the most significant ideas proposed in Baldwin's self-encounter on the Seine: "Perhaps it now occurs to him that in this need to establish himself in relation to his past he is most American, that this depthless alienation from oneself and one's people is, in sum, the American experience." (NS:109) Aside from this obsession with acknowledging Americanness, the Negro's identity, it is suggested, dwells not in the African past beyond memory, nor in the slave past whipped into memory, but in his *relation* with a rejective and rejected past. Alienation, the breaking of the bonds to the community and to one's self, is proposed by Baldwin as the key term of a depthless identity – which unites the Negro and the American beyond their historical wedlock. The identity of both Negroes

and Americans thus appears to be not a substance, but a relation, and this is a unique idea in the African-American tradition. The essay concluded, but the question of who Brown is remained. Is it the African mirror in which one catches a glimpse of the non-substantiality of the racialized soul?

Since a strategy repeated is a strategy revealed, at least one thing is starting to become apparent in what concerns Baldwin's rhetoric. There is in "Encounter on the Seine" a frustrating manner(ism) of presenting ideas that are obviously the conclusion of some previous thought unreported in the text and which could open up a world of meanings never developed upon. It is only the promise of argumentation that Baldwin presents the reader with by flaunting the conclusions of unknown premises and the premises of unreached conclusions, knitted into the dense ideatic network of the essay. This is faulty by the standards of the species, but only as faulty as are fireworks compared to a fire. And Baldwin's style, as one can assess so far, is much like fireworks. In fact, one distinguished critic was so inflamed by "Baldwin's fireworks" (Dupee 1986:15), which he qualified as a nexus of inconsequential, rash ideas, that he began collating and retorting to them, declaring himself outmoded by the failure of Baldwin's argumentative work to achieve what it (should) set out to do. One need realize, however, that fireworks are the result of a controlled explosion serving an aesthetic purpose. Baldwin's essays are not maieutic; they do not aim at bringing forth the truth, for the truth precedes and imbues them with pretextual ideas. These ideas reoccurring in different guises throughout the essays, the rhetorical twists and turns, the pretext of argumentation all seem to serve an aesthetic purpose. The aesthetic, however, is not the final purpose for Baldwin, but an intermediary stay between knowing and being. Literature is the speech or the *logos* in which *doxa* becomes *epistemos*, the opinion gains validity, and this is exactly Baldwin's strategy of passing personal experience and judgement as general truth; the source and product of this *logos* is *ontos*, and the ontological question lies at the core of Baldwin's writing through his ongoing preoccupation with identity. Thus, literature can serve as the double-certifying source and product of identity, and this is as much Baldwin's intuition as of the entire African-American writing tradition.