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ESSAY

The Great, Gray City of Light

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Abstract

This essay analyzes one of James Baldwin's least commented-upon essays, "Equal in Paris," through the lens of current debates about transatlantic differences regarding race, equality, and citizenship. In his essay, Baldwin narrates how he was imprisoned in Paris for several days a year after his arrival in France. Baldwin constructs his essay not as a political manifesto about race, citizenship, and equality. Rather, through a powerful and cinematographic description, he leads the reader to share the narrator's distressing experience of disjunction and terror he had while in prison. This literary choice can be understood in the context of Baldwin's rejection of theologies of damnation and redemption that, according to him, motivate protest writings.

Keywords: Paris; race; equality; colorblindness; American Black writers; prison; delusion

On November 30, 2021, the French presidency organized a regal ceremony for the burial of singer, civil rights activist, and World War II hero, Josephine Baker at the Pantheon. The French monument that sits atop of the Latin Quarter hosts the tombs of some of the most renown figures of French artistic, scientific, and political history, such as Victor Hugo, Pierre and Marie Curie, Victor Schoelcher, and Jean Moulin. Baker is the first Black woman to be buried in what the 1791 National Constituent Assembly called the "temple of the nation." After fleeing segregated America in 1925, Baker soon became one of the most acclaimed music hall singers in Paris. In the 2021 ceremony, French president Emmanuel Macron celebrated the artist who became a French citizen in 1937 and then enlisted in the Resistance forces as an embodiment of French values of universalism and humanism: "There is no one who is more French than you," he said.[1] Mario Stasi, the president of the Ligue Internationale Contre le Racisme et l'Antisémitisme, contended in a similar vein that Baker "loved universalism passionately" and was able to find in France a refuge from "a 'communautaurist' country where she was reminded of her origin and ethnicity."[2] Several prominent intellectuals and activists cringed at this stately absorption of Baker into France's

[1] "Josephine Baker Becomes First Black Woman to Enter France's Panthéon," *France 24*, November 30, 2021, https://www.france24.com/en/culture/20211130-live-josephine-baker-becomes-first-black-woman-to-enter-france-s-panthéon.

[2] Arno Pedram, "French Honor for Josephine Baker Stirs Conflict over Racism," *AP News*, November 29, 2021, https://apnews.com/article/business-france-paris-race-and-ethnicity-racial-injustice-b024ddcd939dfaabfe577e5a017bc745.

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celebration of itself as a model of equality and color-blindness. French writer and activist Rokhaya Diallo questioned the Republic's myth of universalism, saying that for "Black and non-white people, the Republic has always been a space of inequality, of othering through the processes triggered by colonization."[3] The decision to honor Baker in a majestic ceremony at the Pantheon did appear to be a noteworthy disavowal of presidential candidate Eric Zemmour's incendiary right-wing rhetoric about French white Christian identity. Yet the ceremony also helped reinforce the narrative of a color-blind, universalist French republic, standing in sharp contrast to the French narrative of the United States marred by a divisive politics of identity and race.

Baker's inclusion in the Pantheon came after two years of intense feuds between French and American intellectuals and politicians regarding racial and police violence in each country. The remarkable demonstrations of French solidarity with Black Americans protesting the murder of George Floyd that took place in Paris in June 2020 unsettled numerous French politicians and intellectuals. Inspired by George Floyd protests in the United States, large numbers of French youth took to the streets to denounce France's own history of police violence. French conservative pundits hastily tried to demonstrate at great length how different French and American histories of racism were. Admittedly, France had committed some mistakes in the colonies, they argued, but ultimately the universalist narrative of equality as color-blindness prevailed. French pundits and politicians blamed the United States for exporting divisive ideas about race and identity to France,[4] thereby sowing the seeds of "separatism" in an otherwise harmonious nation.[5] They launched a barrage of attacks against French academics for allegedly importing American theories about race to France. *New York Times* and *Washington Post* correspondents were attacked on social media and by political officials for supposedly bringing divisive views to France. In this context, the French establishment's appropriation of Baker, an American Black woman who had spent her life subverting gender, race, and family stereotypes and walked alongside Martin Luther King Jr. at the March on Washington, into the French myth of colorblindness came across to an American audience as particularly ironic.

Debates about competing understandings of citizenship, equality, and race have been a recurrent feature of the French-American relationship since the nineteenth century.[6] The question of how each nation has treated Blacks and immigrants from postcolonial countries has notoriously divided American writers themselves.[7] In the 1950s and 1960s, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and William Gardner Smith were three of the most prominent participants in this debate about the extent to which Paris was a utopian place of racial equality or, rather, a theater of oppression of anticolonial dissenters.[8] Wright was one of the most vocal proponents of Paris as racially liberal. "I tell you frankly that there is more freedom in one square block of Paris than in the entire United States of America," Wright contended in his unpublished 1951 essay "I Choose Exile."[9] Even though he later

[3] Pedram, "French Honor for Josephine Baker."

[4] See, for example, "Une centaine d'universitaires alertent: 'Sur l'islamisme, ce qui nous menace, c'est la persistance du déni'" ["A hundred academics warn: 'On Islamism, what threatens us is the persistence of denial'"], *Le Monde*, October 31, 2020, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/10/31/une-centaine-d-universitaires-alertent-sur-l-islamisme-ce-qui-nous-menace-c-est-la-persistance-du-deni_6057989_3232.html.

[5] Elizabeth Shakman Hurd and Nadia Marzouki, "Is There a Right to Heresy?," *Boston Review*, March 3, 2021, https://bostonreview.net/articles/elizabeth-shakman-hurd-nadia-marzouki-right-heresy/.

[6] Daniel Sabbagh and Maud Simonet, eds., *De l'autre côté du miroir. Comparaisons Franco-Américaines* [On the other side of the mirror: French-American comparisons] (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2018).

[7] See Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996).

[8] See Laila Amine, "The Paris Paradox: Colorblindness and Colonialism in African American Expatriate Fiction," *American Literature* 87, no. 4 (2015): 739–68. For more on Baldwin's experience of inequality in Paris, see Ursula Broschke-Davis, *Paris without Regret* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1986), chapter 1.

[9] Xabaka, "'I Choose Exile' by Richard Wright," blog post, *The Art of Sunday*, August 2019, accessed April 25, 2022, https://www.artofsunday.com/logs/i-choose-exile.

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acknowledged that postcolonial subjects from Algeria did not enjoy the same level of freedom as Black American writers, he held on to his vision of France as a nation committed to the idea of legal equalitarianism. Ned Harrison, the character of his novel *Island of Hallucination* argues, "you can't deprive people of their rights under French law."[10] Baldwin moved to Paris in 1948, two years after Wright, and promptly distanced himself from Wright's seeming lack of concern for France's violence against North Africans. Smith moved to Paris in 1951, where he stayed until his death in 1974. In *The Stone Face*—translated into French for the first time in 2021—Smith explores with the most nuance the plight of North Africans and the unequal treatment of postcolonial subjects and Black American artists in France, who were perceived primarily as Americans.[11]

Debates about and among African American artists' encounter with France are largely bound to the nation-state framework. Such debates focused on comparing and hierarchizing national histories, political models, and legal frameworks leave little space to think about which other forms of political community emerge from African Americans' experience in France in the 1950s and 1960s. Can we look at the trajectories of these African Americans in France not as mere symbols of competing forms of national entanglements with racism? Can we find instead in their writings seeds of forms of community and subversion that are not thinkable within the framework of the nation-state?

In this context, Baldwin's "Equal in Paris" stands out as an intriguing text that brings about a singular type of political critique, at once universal and intimate, that goes beyond the conventional performance of transatlantic critique. Published in 1955 in the volume *Notes of a Native Son*, "Equal in Paris" is an unusual text that does not quite fit in any existing genre.[12] Contrary to what may be suggested by the title—misleading in that regard—the essay is neither a political manifesto about the contrasted meanings of equality in France and in the United States, nor a theoretical rumination on the human condition and exile.

The short text tells the story of a misadventure that happened to the narrator about a year after he started living in Paris. In one of the cafés of the 6th arrondissement in which he used to write and find refuge from the cold, he met and befriended a fellow American who complained about the undignified hotel room in which he was staying. Baldwin tells how he invited his compatriot to move to his own equally dilapidated hotel. The American friend stole a pair of linens from his former hotel before moving out, and Baldwin ended up borrowing the stolen sheet for his bed. Soon after, both were arrested for stealing the bed linens and sent to prison.

The story of the *drap de lit* is structured around two distinct moments. The first part of the text sets the décor of the drama to follow—the ramshackle hotels, the cafés and streets of Paris—and introduces the protagonists of the story. Baldwin uses a light and witty tone to paint a satire of French culture and French bureaucracy. He ironically refers to his hotel as a "palace" guarded by an old Frenchman who never stepped away from his desk and who "looked as though the daylight would have killed him."[13] Baldwin's description of the pace of French bureaucracy is exquisitely amusing and accurate. "In Paris everything is very slow. Also, when dealing with the bureaucracy, the man you are talking to is never the man you have to see. The man you have to see has just gone off to Belgium, or is busy with his family,

[10] Amine, "The Paris Paradox," 748.

[11] See Alexa Weik von Mossner, "Confronting *The Stone Face*: The Critical Cosmopolitanism of William Gardner Smith," *African American Review* 45, nos. 1–2 (2012): 167–82. See also Adam Shatz, "'How Does It Feel to Be a White Man?' William Gardner's Smith's Exile in Paris," *New Yorker*, August 11, 2019.

[12] See Oana Cogeanu, "Travel in Black and White: James Baldwin's *Equal in Paris*," *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity* 5, no. 5 (2015): 422–28.

[13] James Baldwin, "Equal in Paris," in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 101–16, at 101. Hereafter all citations to "Equal in Paris" are parenthetical.

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or has just discovered that he is a cuckold; he will be in next Tuesday at three o'clock, or sometime in the course of the afternoon, or possibly tomorrow, or, possibly, in the next five minutes. But if he is coming in the next five minutes he will be far too busy to be able to see you today" (105). Soon after the policemen's visit to the two protagonists' hotel and their arrest, the light and sarcastic tone of the first section of the essay gives way to a very different and unsettling account of the narrator's intimate experience with terror. The emotional journey of the narrator is enabled by his physical displacement to the Paris prefecture: "Between nine and ten o'clock a black Citroën took us off to the Ile de la Cité, to the great, gray Préfecture" (107).

The paragraphs right before that turning point in the essay announce a shift toward a possibly more political and rebellious development of the text. Baldwin notes of the police station where he is initially taken that the policemen's "uniforms frightened [him] quite as much" as they would in the United States. He remembers that he "had seen, for example, what Paris policemen could do to Arab peanut vendors" (106). And he reflects on how his being a Black man is perceived differently in Paris and in the United States. "That evening in the commissariat I was not a despised black man. They would simply have laughed at me if I had behaved like one. For them, I was an American" (106–07). This paragraph seems like it could logically lead to a subsequent part of the essay that expands on Baldwin's political critique of the French violence against Blacks and Algerians, and how this violence compares to the United States' own history of segregation and violence. Instead, in what follows, Baldwin takes the reader in quite a different and more intimate direction.

The narrator's journey to the Prefecture opens up on a series of eloquent tableaux that express Baldwin's emotional descent into a place of inner terror and solitude. The description of his journey through the French bureaucratic jungle, and from cell to cell triggers an excursus into a place of deep and solitary anxiety. The sarcastic and detached tone of the previous paragraphs may have announced a denouement of the story of a much more confrontational tone. But Baldwin digressively pushes the reader into a very discomforting place where they are obliged to share the narrators' terrifying experience of physical and emotional loss. Baldwin denies the readers the comforting emotion of reading a protest manifesto, and forces them to experience some of the psychological distress caused by political and legal violence. Right before his descent into bureaucratic hell begins, Baldwin admits that the angry and resentful persona he has built in New York, although it "did [himself] a violence of which the world … would scarcely have been capable" (106), also provided a comforting defense mechanism, which did not work in Paris. "It was a strange feeling, in this situation, after a year in Paris, to discover that my weapons would never again serve me as they had" (106). At the Paris commissariat, Baldwin realizes that he perceived "merely as an "American." That different perception, though, does not provide him any sense of peace. Much to the contrary, it seems to profoundly unsettle him. "The question thrusting up from the bottom of my mind was not *what* I was, but *who*" (107). In the Citroën that takes Baldwin and his friend to the prefecture, Baldwin leads the reader into his terrifying and unwanted encounter with an elusive *who.*

Baldwin renders his journey with a cinematographic style built around an opposition between moments of confined stillness—when the narrator is immobile in the police car, in his cell, in the booth at mass—and a series of random movements in which he has no agency. Throughout the text, the narrator is moved up and down stairs, "through a maze of steps and corridors" (108), and from prison to prison. The colors grey and brown that dominate the scene exacerbate the feeling of sensory deprivation and disorientation. "Silence is really all I remember of those first three days, silence and the color gray" (112). While the essay's title, "Equal in Paris," seems to announce an account of Baldwin's musing about the alleged colorblindness of French law, his journey takes the readers to a different place. Instead of reading a political manifesto about law and equality, they experience how Baldwin's

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confrontation with law plunges him into a space of lawlessness, deprived of any recognizable norm and rule to cling to. His relationship to law is situated beyond and beneath a legal discussion about principles of equality. It is a visceral experience of dehumanization as disorientation.

The reader experiences Baldwin's "mental shifting, between lunch and dinner" (108), and how the dizziness caused by the lack of food turns into a terrifying delirium, the acme of which is the vision of an old man eating camembert near the cell's toilet: "There was a great hole in the center of this shed, which was the common toilet. Near it, though it was impossible to get very far from it, stood an old man with white hair, eating a piece of camembert" (109). The Bosch type of a purgatory that Baldwin paints is a suffocating and nauseating place with no consistency, no color, nothing to hang on to. "Old, old men, so ruined and old that life in them seemed really to prove the miracle of the quickening power of the Holy Ghost ... they were simply the clay which had once been touched" (109). Other old men are described as having "the consistency of oatmeal" and eyes the color of "stale *café-au-lait*" (109). This terrifying passage sheds a new light on the whole essay that can be read as a short key novel around how death haunts the narrator. The linen that was stolen can be read retrospectively as a shroud enveloping dead bodies. The police car's cubicle in which he is transported from cell to cell, and the wooden box in which he is locked to attend mass are coffins in which he is buried alive. The cellmate's bodies, deprived of belts and shoelaces, turn into mere "rag dolls" (112). Evoking Hans Christian Andersen's terrifying tale "the Little Match Girl," in which a little girl dies of cold imagining her grandmother's stove and roast, Baldwin depicts how every night, at ten thirty, he had the same nightmare "which always involved [his] mother's fried chicken" (112).

In this purgatory, Baldwin finds himself in a state of complete solitude. Before his New York friend is taken to a different cell, he admits feeling "murderous" at his constant chatter. Very early on in the essay, Baldwin establishes that this character—of whom the reader knows nothing except that he is from New York—is not material for real friendship. He insists that he had no part in making this connection. "[O]ne night, in one of the cafés of St. Germain des Près [*sic*], *I was discovered* by this New Yorker and only because we found ourselves in Paris we immediately established the illusion that we had been fast friends back in the good old U.S.A." (101–02; emphasis added). Once his colleague in crime is taken in a different cell, Baldwin confesses that he misses him but only because "he was the only person in the world who knew that the story I told was true" (110). Baldwin realizes that he is unable to connect with his cellmates, despite their shared misfortune. "The gap between us, which only a gesture I made could have bridged, grew steadily, during thirty-six hours, wider" (111).

Baldwin cannot make this gesture because his cellmates frighten him. And he finds himself in a state of petrifying solitude. His mental state shifts toward a form of delirium in which he feels both condemned and persecuted. The memory of his violent father resurfaces to reinforce his apparent conviction of a coming death. As Baldwin described in an interview, his father "was righteous in the pulpit and a monster in the house[,]" who did not use violence merely to punish Baldwin: "he was trying to kill [me]."[14] Meanwhile, his cellmates are "amusing themselves with [him] by telling terrible stories about the inefficiency of French prisons, an inefficiency so extreme that it had often happened that someone who was supposed to be taken out and tried found himself on the wrong line and was guillotined instead" (112).

[14] Eve Auchincloss and Nancy Lynch, "Disturber of the Peace: James Baldwin—An Interview," in *Conversations with James* Baldwin, ed. Fred L. Standley and Louis H. Pratt (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press), 64–82, at 78.

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Baldwin's fear and solitude places him in a state of psychological dissociation. Part of him hangs on the actual timeline of displacements between cells, and bureaucratic procedures. Baldwin's rendering of the arbitrariness and illegibility of this actual timeline suggests that there is nothing reassuring in his various encounters with law. In fact, another part of him gives in to a terrifying conviction that the incident of the *drap de lit* was in fact inscribed into his tragic destiny. His own story appears to him all the more dooming than it is at first sight insignificant and laughable. Indeed, he acknowledges at the end, "to paraphrase my mother, if this was the worst thing that ever happened to me I could consider myself among the luckiest people ever to be born" (115). Yet, just a few hours earlier, Baldwin had reached one of the strongest states of despair: "And it must have seemed to me that my flight from home was the cruelest trick I had ever played on myself, since it had led me here, down to a lower point than any I could ever in my life had imagined—lower, far, than anything I had seen in that Harlem which I had so hated and so loved, the escape from which had soon become the greatest direction of my life" (110). His symbolic lynching through the cold and inexorable French legal conundrum, in the absence of any witness, miles away from home, is the "cruelest trick" destiny could have played on him.

Baldwin's dissociative experience evokes what Italian psychoanalyst Franco De Masi has described as a bi-ocular type of vision. In his account of the treatment of one of his patient's psychosis, De Masi distinguishes between the bi-ocular vision and the binocular vision of reality. In the latter, the delusional and not delusional perceptions of reality balance each other in a process of "integration" and mutual adjustment. By contrast, in the bi-ocular vision of reality, "the two visions, one delusional and the other real, remain distinct and differentiated from each other because they both possess the same perceptual character, that of reality."[15] Baldwin's description of his prison experience evokes De Masi's patient's bi-ocular vision. Describing his reaction to his cellmates' teasing about how he would end up guillotined, Baldwin writes, "The best way of putting my reaction to this is to stay that, though I knew they were teasing me, it was simply not possible for me totally *dis*believe them" (112).

Unsettling and disorienting, "Equal in Paris" expresses the singularity and power of Baldwin's artistic and political intervention. The window this essay gives us to experience is not that of a Saïdian type of exile in which the loss of the homeland is compensated by the gain of a "double perspective" that enables a sort of binocular, synthetic vision. "Because the exile sees things both in terms of what has been left behind and what is actual here and now, there is a double perspective that never sees things in isolation."[16] Baldwin's position in this essay is neither that of the distanced intellectual nor that of the born again à la Wright, whose move away from segregated America allows a form of rebirth. Baldwin delivers here a raw testimony of a terrifying psychological experience that leaves him in a fragmented and dissociative state. Unlike the Saïdian secular critic who speaks truth to power or the transatlantic Black American "born again" in Paris, Baldwin does not develop through this experience a coherent political or existential agenda. The only resistance he is capable of throughout the text is a sensorial and visceral form of protest. He screams, cries, and tries not to vomit. There is no redemption or epiphany at the end. Baldwin's savior comes in the shape of an unnamed "older man … who had been arrested for some kind of petty larceny" (111). The day of his release, the "petty-larceny man went around asking if he could do anything in the world outside for those he was leaving behind" (115). Baldwin's recalls why his initial reply was

[15] Franco De Masi, "Delusion and Bi-ocular Vision," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 96, no. 5 (2015): 1189–211, at 1199.

[16] Edward Saïd, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 60.

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negative: "for I suppose I had by now retreated into the attitude, the earliest I remember, that of my father, which was simply (since I had lost his God) that nothing could help me" (115). It is only upon the man's insistence that Baldwin remembered the name of an attorney of his acquaintance. Just as Baldwin's redemption occurs almost by chance, thanks to a character who remains nameless, the end of the essay is quite abrupt and anti-climactic. Baldwin concludes by pondering over the laughter caused in the courtroom by the story of the linen's theft. "This laughter is the laughter of those who consider themselves to be at a safe remove from all the wretched, for whom the pain of the 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). In this haunting denouement, Baldwin's rebirth is immediately associated with a renunciation. In lieu of the typical dialectical overcoming, the essay ends with the acquiescent acceptance of the universality of cruelty and indifference. Paris is not a safe haven from the United States. It offers the same ills and evils in a different style. If there is no place to escape, then, why even move, why and how does one protest? The brilliance of Baldwin's political and artistic work in "Equal in Paris" lies precisely in the fact that he refrains from giving his readers a ready-made answer.

The essay's conclusion reveals all its strength when read in light of another essay in *Notes of a Native Son*, "Everybody's Protest Novel." In that essay, Baldwin critiques Wright's novel *Native Son* and deconstructs its main character, Bigger Thomas, whose life "is controlled, defined by his hatred and his fear."[17] Protest novels, Baldwin argues, are "both badly written and wildly improbable."[18] They cultivate the illusion that a new society deprived of inequalities and oppression is possible, when in fact "what the rejected desire is, is an elevation of status, acceptance within the present community."[19] This is why, for Baldwin, "[i]t must be remembered that the oppressed and the oppressor are bound together within the same society; they accept the same criteria, they share the same beliefs, they both alike depend on the same reality. Within this *cage* it is romantic, more, meaningless, to speak of a 'new' society."[20] "Equal in Paris" has the reader experience some of what it means to be in such a cage. Baldwin does provide a political critique when he shows how combined systems of racial and economic discrimination destroy the possibility of human connection at the most intimate level. Contrasting with Wright's celebration of French egalitarianism, the law—in Baldwin's essay—acts as the agent of dehumanization: "As far as I was concerned, once in the hands of the law in France, anything could happen" (112–13). The French legal system appears as the epitome of a blind, ineluctable and disorienting form of violence, quite distinct from the sheer brutality of the US violence often depicted by Black American writers, but no less dehumanizing: "And the fact, perhaps, that the French are the earth's least sentimental people and must also be numbered among the most proud aggravates the plight of their lowest, youngest, and unluckiest members, for it means the idea of rehabilitation is scarcely real to them" (114). Returning to "Everybody's Protest Novel," Baldwin juxtaposes a critique of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and a critique of Wright's *Native Son.* He argues that Bigger shares the same "theological terror," a "terror of damnation" as the one that animates *Uncle Tom's Cabin.*[21] "For Bigger's tragedy is not that he is cold or black or hungry,

[17] James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," in *Collected Essays*, 11–18, at 18.
[18] Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," 15.
[19] Baldwin, 17.
[20] Baldwin, 17 (emphasis added).
[21] Baldwin, 14.

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not even that he is American, black; but that he has accepted a theology that denies him life."[22] In "Equal in Paris," Baldwin visualizes an alternative theology that rejects the illusory hope for religious redemption and its secular translation as dialectical overcoming. That theology reveals the urgency of preserving our humanity through saving the possibility of human connections. As Baldwin writes in "Everybody's Protest Novel," "our humanity is our burden, our life; we need not battle for it; we need only to do what is infinitely more difficult—that is, accept it. The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended."[23] Under the seemingly pessimistic acceptance of the universal cruelty of laughter that concludes "Equal in Paris," lies a hopeful call for the acceptance of life, with all its uncategorizable mix of dread and beauty.

The French attempt at canonizing Josephine Baker into the secular sacred nation evokes the same pitfalls with which Baldwin took issue in his critique of the protest novel. The complexity of Baker's subversive figure on all levels—racial, gender, national—is denied by this grand gesture through which she was remade into a national hero of the French republic. By contrast, the spontaneous wave of protests that spread through the world after the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis points at the possibility of a different modality of humanity's togetherness, quite distinct from the French Republic's exclusionary mantra of *vivre ensemble.* Reacting to the inhuman act of Derek Chauvin, which evokes both the laughter's cruelty and the law's coldness that Baldwin describes, people took to the streets to express solidarity with African Americans and to condemn national forms of racism from Paris to Beirut and from Tunis to Baghdad. Symbols such as taking the knee or chanting "we can't breathe" have been reappropriated throughout different cultural contexts. The Palestinian street artist Taqui Spateen's painting of Floyd's face on a wall that separates populations in Bethlehem is just one example of the creative process of circulation, resignification, and hybridization that ensued. These gestures evoke the embrace of life and the rejection of categorization that Baldwin wrote about. They move beyond the simplistic comparison between France and the United States that Baldwin refused. In the summer of 2020, the Comité Adama, a movement of Black and Arab activists protesting the death of a young French Black man, Adama Traoré, while in police custody in 2016, took inspiration from the US protests to mobilize and raise awareness against French racism and French police violence. Prominent French politicians and intellectuals were prompt to counter the Comité with the mythical French color blindness. They sought to outbid one another in the media in explaining how different French colonial history was from US history of racial segregation. The grassroots appropriation and rethinking of historical knowledge upset them and complicated the comforting myth of transatlantic difference. In fact, the 2020 protests went further than what Baldwin could experience himself in Paris. They opened up a space for genuine encounters and solidarity between Blacks and North Africans. Such encounters seem out of reach in Baldwin's world. Although he regularly expresses his concern for how North Africans are treated in France, they come across mostly as a vehicle for his own introspection about the meanings of Blackness in different locations rather than as embodied characters who possess psychological depth. They are catalysts, shadows, and tropes of resistance. But they are not depicted as proper humans with whom one may fraternize. In a 1995 essay, Baldwin

[22] Baldwin, 18.
[23] Baldwin, 18.

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admitted himself his inability to fully empathize with North Africans' anger toward France:

> I once thought of the North Africans as my *brothers* and that is why I went to their cafés... . Their rage, the only note in all their music which I could not fail to recognize, to which I responded, yet had the effect of setting us more than ever at a division. They were perfectly prepared to drive all Frenchmen into the sea, and to level the city of Paris. But I could not hate the French, because they left me alone. And I love Paris, I will always love it, it is the city which saved my life. It saved my life by allowing me to find out who I am.[24]

In that sense, the 2020 international protests took Baldwin's lessons about the need to embrace people's humanity, beyond categorization, and implemented them beyond what Baldwin saw as possible by experimenting with the possibilities of interracial fraternity.

That being said, it is helpful to keep exploring the 2020 protests and their aftermath through the lens of "Equal in Paris." The essay reminds us of the need to remain wary of the temptation to fetishize movements and commodify heroes and spokespersons. Against the hasty injunctions often made that these fragmented protests need to better coordinate and produce an integrated strategy, "Equal in Paris" reminds us that the disjunctive, bi-ocular type of perception that placed Baldwin in a state of profound distress while in prison may also prove to be a source of lucid strength and acceptance of life as disjunction and imperfection.

[24] James Baldwin, "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon," in *Going to Meet the Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 143–93, at 156–57 (my emphasis).

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