

Black Body: Rereading James Baldwin's "Stranger in the Village"

By Teju Cole

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Then the bus began driving into clouds, and between one cloud and the next we caught glimpses of the town below. It was suppertime and the town was a constellation of yellow points. We arrived thirty minutes after leaving that town, which was called Leuk. The train to Leuk had come in from Visp, the train from Visp had come from Bern, and the train before that was from Zurich, from which I had started out in the afternoon. Three trains, a bus, and a short stroll, all of it through beautiful country, and then we reached Leukerbad in darkness. So Leukerbad, not far in terms of absolute distance, was not all that easy to get to. August 2, 2014: it was James Baldwin's birthday. Were he alive, he would be turning ninety. He is one of those people just on the cusp of escaping the contemporary and slipping into the historical—John Coltrane would have turned eighty-eight this year; Martin Luther King, Jr., would have turned eighty-five—people who could still be with us but who feel, at times, very far away, as though they lived centuries ago.

James Baldwin left Paris and came to Leukerbad for the first time in 1951. His lover Lucien Happersberger's family had a chalet in a village up in the mountains. And so Baldwin, who was depressed and distracted at the time, went, and the village (which is also called Loèche-les-Bains) proved to be a refuge for him. His first trip was in the summer, and lasted two weeks. Then he returned, to his own surprise, for two more winters. His first novel, "Go Tell It on the Mountain," found its final form here. He had struggled with the book for eight years, and he finally finished it in this unlikely retreat. He wrote something else, too, an essay called "Stranger in the Village"; it was this essay, even more than the novel, that brought me to Leukerbad.

"Stranger in the Village" first appeared in *Harper's Magazine* in 1953, and then in the essay collection "Notes of a Native Son," in 1955. It recounts the experience of being black in an all-white village. It begins with a sense of an extreme journey, like Charles Darwin's in the Galápagos or Tété-Michel Kpomassie's in Greenland. But then it opens out into other concerns and into a different voice, swiveling to look at the American racial situation in the nineteen-fifties. The part of the essay that focusses on the Swiss village is both bemused and sorrowful. Baldwin is alert to the absurdity of being a writer from New York who is considered in some way inferior by Swiss villagers, many of whom have never travelled. But, later in the essay, when he writes about race in America, he is not at all bemused. He is angry and prophetic, writing with a hard clarity and carried along by a precipitous eloquence.

I took a room at the Hotel Mercure Bristol the night I arrived. I opened the windows to a dark view, but I knew that in the darkness loomed the Daubenhorn mountain. I ran a hot bath and lay

neck-deep in the water with my old paperback copy of “Notes of a Native Son.” The tinny sound from my laptop was Bessie Smith singing “I’m Wild About That Thing,” a filthy blues number and a masterpiece of plausible deniability: “Don’t hold it baby when I cry / Give me every bit of it, else I’d die / I’m wild about that thing.” She could be singing about a trombone. And it was there in the bath, with his words and her voice, that I had my body-double moment: here I was in Leukerbad, with Bessie Smith singing across the years from 1929; and I am black like him; and I am slender; and have a gap in my front teeth; and am not especially tall (no, write it: short); and am cool on the page and animated in person, except when it is the other way around; and I was once a fervid teen-age preacher (Baldwin: “Nothing that has happened to me since equals the power and the glory that I sometimes felt when, in the middle of a sermon, I knew that I was somehow, by some miracle, really carrying, as they said, ‘the Word’—when the church and I were one”); and I, too, left the church; and I call New York home even when not living there; and feel myself in all places, from New York City to rural Switzerland, the custodian of a black body, and have to find the language for all of what that means to me and to the people who look at me. The ancestor had briefly taken possession of the descendant. It was a moment of identification, and in the days that followed that moment was a guide.

“From all available evidence no black man had ever set foot in this tiny Swiss village before I came,” Baldwin wrote. But the village has grown considerably since his visits, more than sixty years ago. They’ve seen blacks now; I wasn’t a remarkable sight. There were a few glances at the hotel when I was checking in, and in the fine restaurant just up the road, but there are always glances. There are glances in Zurich, where I am spending the summer, and there are glances in New York City, which has been my home for fourteen years. There are glances all over Europe and in India, and anywhere I go outside Africa. The test is how long the glances last, whether they become stares, with what intent they occur, whether they contain any degree of hostility or mockery, and to what extent connections, money, or mode of dress shield me in these situations. To be a stranger is to be looked at, but to be black is to be looked at especially. (“The children shout *Neger! Neger!* as I walk along the streets.”) Leukerbad has changed, but in which way? There were, in fact, no bands of children on the street, and few children anywhere at all. Presumably the children of Leukerbad, like children the world over, were indoors, frowning over computer games, checking Facebook, or watching music videos. Perhaps some of the older folks I saw in the streets were once the very children who had been so surprised by the sight of Baldwin, and about whom, in the essay, he struggles to take a reasonable tone: “In all of this, in which it must be conceded that there was the charm of genuine wonder and in which there was certainly no element of intentional unkindness, there was yet no suggestion that I was human: I was simply a living wonder.” But now the children or grandchildren of those children are connected to the world in a different way. Maybe some xenophobia or racism are part of their lives, but part of their lives, too, are Beyoncé, Drake, and Meek Mill, the music I hear pulsing from Swiss clubs on Friday nights.

Baldwin had to bring his records with him in the fifties, like a secret stash of medicine, and he had to haul his phonograph up to Leukerbad, so that the sound of the American blues could keep him connected to a Harlem of the spirit. I listened to some of the same music while I was there, as a way of being with him: Bessie Smith singing “I Need A Little Sugar In My Bowl” (“I need a little sugar in my bowl / I need a little hot dog on my roll”), Fats Waller singing “Your Feet’s Too Big.” I listened to my own playlist as well: Bettye Swann, Billie Holiday, Jean Wells, “Coltrane Plays the Blues,” the Physics, Childish Gambino. The music you travel with helps you to create your own internal weather. But the world participates, too: when I sat down to lunch at the Römerhof restaurant one afternoon—that day, all the customers and staff were white—the music playing overhead was Whitney Houston’s “I Wanna Dance With Somebody.” History is now and black America.



Photograph by Teju Cole

At dinner, at a pizzeria, there were glances. A table of British tourists stared at me. But the waitress was part black, and at the hotel one of the staff members at the spa was an older black man. “People are trapped in history, and history is trapped in them,” Baldwin wrote. But it is also true that the little pieces of history move around at a tremendous speed, settling with a not-always-clear logic, and rarely settling for long. And perhaps more interesting than my not being the only black person in the village is the plain fact that many of the other people I saw were also foreigners. This was the biggest change of all. If, back then, the village had a pious and

convalescent air about it, the feel of “a lesser Lourdes,” it is much busier now, packed with visitors from other parts of Switzerland, Germany, France, Italy, and all over Europe, Asia, and the Americas. It has become the most popular thermal resort in the Alps. The municipal baths were full. There are hotels on every street, at every price point, and there are restaurants and luxury-goods shops. If you wish to buy an eye-wateringly costly watch at forty-six hundred feet above sea level, it is now possible to do so.

The better hotels have their own thermal pools. At the Hotel Mercure Bristol, I took an elevator down to the spa and sat in the dry sauna. A few minutes later, I slipped into the pool and floated outside in the warm water. Others were there, but not many. A light rain fell. We were ringed by mountains and held in the immortal blue.

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In her brilliant “Harlem Is Nowhere,” Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts writes, “In almost every essay James Baldwin wrote about Harlem, there is a moment when he commits a literary sleight-of-hand so particular that, if he’d been an athlete, sportscasters would have codified the maneuver and named it ‘the Jimmy.’ I think of it in cinematic terms, because its effect reminds me of a technique wherein camera operators pan out by starting with a tight shot and then zoom out to a wide view while the lens remains focused on a point in the distance.” This move, this sudden widening of focus, is present even in his essays that are not about Harlem. In “Stranger in the Village,” there’s a passage about seven pages in where one can feel the rhetoric revving up, as Baldwin prepares to leave behind the calm, fabular atmosphere of the opening section. Of the villagers, he writes:

These people cannot be, from the point of view of power, strangers anywhere in the world; they have made the modern world, in effect, even if they do not know it. The most illiterate among them is related, in a way I am not, to Dante, Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Aeschylus, Da Vinci, Rembrandt, and Racine; the cathedral at Chartres says something to them which it cannot say to me, as indeed would New York’s Empire State Building, should anyone here ever see it. Out of their hymns and dances come Beethoven and Bach. Go back a few centuries and they are in their full glory—but I am in Africa, watching the conquerors arrive.

What is this list about? Does it truly bother Baldwin that the people of Leukerbad are related, through some faint familiarity, to Chartres? That some distant genetic thread links them to the Beethoven string quartets? After all, as he argues later in the essay, no one can deny the impact “the presence of the Negro has had on the American character.” He understands the truth and the art in Bessie Smith’s work. He does not, and cannot—I want to believe—rate the blues below Bach. But there was a certain narrowness in received ideas of black culture in the nineteen-fifties. In the time since then, there has been enough black cultural achievement from which to compile an all-star team: there’s been Coltrane and Monk and Miles, and Ella and Billie and

Aretha. Toni Morrison, Wole Soyinka, and Derek Walcott happened, as have Audre Lorde, and Chinua Achebe, and Bob Marley. The body was not abandoned for the mind's sake: Alvin Ailey, Arthur Ashe, and Michael Jordan happened, too. The source of jazz and the blues also gave the world hip-hop, Afrobeat, dancehall, and house. And, yes, when James Baldwin died in 1987, he, too, was recognized as an all-star.

Thinking further about the cathedral at Chartres, about the greatness of that achievement and about how, in his view, it included blacks only in the negative, as devils, Baldwin writes that “the American Negro has arrived at his identity by virtue of the absoluteness of his estrangement from his past.” But the distant African past has also become much more available than it was in 1953. It would not occur to me to think that, centuries ago, I was “in Africa, watching the conquerors arrive.” But I suspect that for Baldwin it is, in part, a rhetorical move, a grim cadence on which to end a paragraph. In “A Question of Identity” (another essay collected in “Notes of a Native Son”), he writes, “The truth about that past is not that it is too brief, or too superficial, but only that we, having turned our faces so resolutely away from it, have never demanded from it what it has to give.” The fourteenth-century court artists of Ife made bronze sculptures using a complicated casting process lost to Europe since antiquity, and which was not rediscovered there until the Renaissance. Ife sculptures are equal to the works of Ghiberti or Donatello. From their precision and formal sumptuousness we can extrapolate the contours of a great monarchy, a network of sophisticated ateliers, and a cosmopolitan world of trade and knowledge. And it was not only Ife. All of West Africa was a cultural ferment. From the egalitarian government of the Igbo to the goldwork of the Ashanti courts, the brass sculpture of Benin, the military achievement of the Mandinka Empire and the musical virtuosi who praised those war heroes, this was a region of the world too deeply invested in art and life to simply be reduced to a caricature of “watching the conquerors arrive.” We know better now. We know it with a stack of corroborating scholarship and we know it implicitly, so that even making a list of the accomplishments feels faintly tedious, and is helpful mainly as a counter to Eurocentrism.

There's no world in which I would surrender the intimidating beauty of Yoruba-language poetry for, say, Shakespeare's sonnets, nor one in which I'd prefer the chamber orchestras of Brandenburg to the koras of Mali. I'm happy to own all of it. This carefree confidence is, in part, the gift of time. It is a dividend of the struggle of people from earlier generations. I feel no alienation in museums. But this question of filiation tormented Baldwin considerably. He was sensitive to what was great in world art, and sensitive to his own sense of exclusion from it. He made a similar list in the title essay of “Notes of a Native Son” (one begins to feel that lists like this had been flung at him during arguments): “In some subtle way, in a really profound way, I brought to Shakespeare, Bach, Rembrandt, to the Stones of Paris, to the Cathedral at Chartres, and the Empire State Building a special attitude. These were not really my creations, they did not contain my history; I might search them in vain forever for any reflection of myself. I was an

interloper; this was not my heritage.” The lines throb with sadness. What he loves does not love him in return.

This is where I part ways with Baldwin. I disagree not with his particular sorrow but with the self-abnegation that pinned him to it. Bach, so profoundly human, is my heritage. I am not an interloper when I look at a Rembrandt portrait. I care for them more than some white people do, just as some white people care more for aspects of African art than I do. I can oppose white supremacy and still rejoice in Gothic architecture. In this, I stand with Ralph Ellison: “The values of my own people are neither ‘white’ nor ‘black,’ they are American. Nor can I see how they could be anything else, since we are people who are involved in the texture of the American experience.” And yet I (born in the United States more than half a century after Baldwin) continue to understand, because I have experienced in my own body the undimmed fury he felt about pervasive, limiting racism. In his writing there is a hunger for life, for all of it, and a strong wish to not be accounted nothing (a mere nigger, a mere *neger*) when he knows himself to be so much. And this “so much” is neither a matter of ego about his writing nor an anxiety about his fame in New York or in Paris. It is about the incontestable fundamentals of a person: pleasure, sorrow, love, humor, and grief, and the complexity of the interior landscape that sustains those feelings. Baldwin was astonished that anyone anywhere should question these fundamentals, thereby burdening him with the supreme waste of time that is racism, let alone so many people in so many places. This unflagging ability to be shocked rises like steam off his written pages. “The rage of the disesteemed is personally fruitless,” he writes, “but it is also absolutely inevitable.”

Leukerbad gave Baldwin a way to think about white supremacy from its first principles. It was as though he found it in its simplest form there. The men who suggested that he learn to ski so that they might mock him, the villagers who accused him behind his back of being a firewood thief, the ones who wished to touch his hair and suggested that he grow it out and make himself a winter coat, and the children who “having been taught that the devil is a black man, scream in genuine anguish” as he approached: Baldwin saw these as prototypes (preserved like coelacanths) of attitudes that had evolved into the more intimate, intricate, familiar, and obscene American forms of white supremacy that he already knew so well.

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It is a beautiful village. I liked the mountain air. But when I returned to my room from the thermal baths, or from strolling in the streets with my camera, I read the news online. There I found an unending sequence of crises: in the Middle East, in Africa, in Russia, and everywhere else, really. Pain was general. But within that larger distress was a set of linked stories, and thinking about “Stranger in the Village,” thinking with its help, was like injecting a contrast dye into my encounter with the news. The American police continued shooting unarmed black men, or killing them in other ways. The protests that followed, in black communities, were countered

with violence by a police force that is becoming indistinguishable from an invading army. People began to see a connection between the various events: the shootings, the fatal choke hold, the stories of who was not given life-saving medication. And black communities were flooded with outrage and grief.

In all of this, a smaller, less significant story (but one that nevertheless *signified*), caught my attention. The Mayor of New York and his police chief have a public-policy obsession with cleaning, with cleansing, and they decided that arresting members of the dance troupes that perform in moving subway cars is one of the ways to clean up the city. I read the excuses for this becoming a priority: some people fear being seriously injured by an errant kick (it has not happened, but they sure fear it), some people consider it a nuisance, some policymakers believe that going after misdemeanors is a way of preempting major crimes. And so, to combat this menace of dancers, the police moved in. They began chasing, and harassing, and handcuffing. The “problem” was dancers, and the dancers were, for the most part, black boys. The newspapers took the same tone as the government: a sniffy dismissal of the performers. And yet these same dancers are a bright spark in the day, a moment of unregulated beauty, artists with talents unimaginable to their audience. What kind of thinking would consider their abolition an improvement in city life? No one considers Halloween trick-or-treaters a public menace. There’s no law enforcement against people selling Girl Scout cookies or against Jehovah’s Witnesses. But the black body comes pre-judged, and as a result it is placed in needless jeopardy. To be black is to bear the brunt of selective enforcement of the law, and to inhabit a psychic unsteadiness in which there is no guarantee of personal safety. You are a black body first, before you are a kid walking down the street or a Harvard professor who has misplaced his keys.

William Hazlitt, in an 1821 essay entitled “The Indian Jugglers,” wrote words that I think of when I see a great athlete or dancer: “Man, thou art a wonderful animal, and thy ways past finding out! Thou canst do strange things, but thou turnest them to little account!—To conceive of this effort of extraordinary dexterity distracts the imagination and makes admiration breathless.” In the presence of the admirable, some are breathless not with admiration but with rage. They object to the presence of the black body (an unarmed boy in a street, a man buying a toy, a dancer in the subway, a bystander) as much as they object to the presence of the black mind. And simultaneous with these erasures is the unending collection of profit from black labor. Throughout the culture, there are imitations of the gait, bearing, and dress of the black body, a vampiric “everything but the burden” co-option of black life.

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Leukerbad is ringed by mountains: the Daubenhorn, the Torrenthorn, the Rinderhorn. A high mountain pass called the Gemmi, another twenty-eight hundred feet above the village, connects the canton of Valais with the Bernese Oberland. Through this landscape—craggy, bare in places

and verdant elsewhere, a textbook instance of the sublime—one moves as though through a dream. The Gemmipass is famous for good reason, and Goethe was there, as were Byron, Twain, and Picasso. The pass is mentioned in a Sherlock Holmes adventure, when Holmes crosses it on his way to the fateful meeting with Professor Moriarty at Reichenbach Falls. There was bad weather the day I went up, rain and fog, but it was good luck, as it meant I was alone on the trails. While there, I remembered a story that Lucien Happersberger told about Baldwin going out on a hike in these mountains. Baldwin had lost his footing during the ascent, and the situation was precarious for a moment. But Happersberger, who was an experienced climber, reached out a hand, and Baldwin was saved. It was out of this frightening moment, this appealingly biblical moment, that Baldwin got the title for the book he had been struggling to write: “Go Tell It On the Mountain.”

If Leukerbad was his mountain pulpit, the United States was his audience. The remote village gave him a sharper view of what things looked like back home. He was a stranger in Leukerbad, Baldwin wrote, but there was no possibility for blacks to be strangers in the United States, nor for whites to achieve the fantasy of an all-white America purged of blacks. This fantasy about the disposability of black life is a constant in American history. It takes a while to understand that this disposability continues. It takes whites a while to understand it; it takes non-black people of color a while to understand it; and it takes some blacks, whether they’ve always lived in the U.S. or are latecomers like myself, weaned elsewhere on other struggles, a while to understand it. American racism has many moving parts, and has had enough centuries in which to evolve an impressive camouflage. It can hoard its malice in great stillness for a long time, all the while pretending to look the other way. Like misogyny, it is atmospheric. You don’t see it at first. But understanding comes.

“People who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster.” The news of the day (old news, but raw as a fresh wound) is that black American life is disposable from the point of view of policing, sentencing, economic policy, and countless terrifying forms of disregard. There is a vivid performance of innocence, but there’s no actual innocence left. The moral ledger remains so far in the negative that we can’t even get started on the question of reparations. Baldwin wrote “Stranger in the Village” more than sixty years ago. Now what?