

The Poetics of Beautiful Blackness: On Baldwin and Négritude
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The mid-century black Atlantic moment was diverse, fraught, and full of complicated theorizations of diaspora, identity, and the future of racialized thinking. It was at once nationalist, pan-African, pan-global South, and all sorts of mixtures and variations on those themes. With good reason: centuries of enslavement, colonialism, and segregation all fractured memory, cultural connection, and the meaning of being a part of a racial group in most, if not all, senses beyond a shared suffering of violence. So much of the middle-twentieth century in the black Atlantic was dedicated to reckoning with those centuries and gesturing, then working concretely, toward some sort of repair by retrieving redeemable pasts, rethinking racial mythologies, articulating traditions and counter-traditions. Few if any moments in the history of ideas have been as compelling and productive.

But across that series of disputes – disputes crossing so many traditions, geographies, and languages – is a commitment to developing a poetics that affirms, draws out, and develops blackness as a site of beauty. A poetics, that is, developed out of shared or parallel experiences of colonialism in Africa and the Caribbean, segregation and racial persecution in the United States, and so a poetics concerned, time and again, with articulating a sense of place and home. What is the relationship between blackness, poetics, beauty, and place? This question draws James Baldwin's work, work dedicated from its very outset to questions of abjection, beauty, and home, close to the Négritude movement, a mid-century black Atlantic theory dedicated to the same questions and bearing enormous metaphysical and aesthetic ambitions. Between Baldwin and Négritude, all of the big mid-century questions about blackness and place are raised. Who is Baldwin to Négritude? And what is Négritude to Baldwin?

This raises a first pair of questions, beginning with Baldwin's work. Who were Baldwin's interlocutors? And what emerges out of those conversations, conflicts, and disputes both profound and petty?

There are some easy answers here, for sure. Richard Wright, his greatest foil, is the most prominent, but Baldwin's critical essays also engage major writers and thinkers and political figures of his day. We can think here of his impatience with Norman Mailer's musings on race and masculinity or his deep and meaningful criticisms of William Faulkner's vision of the South. Or his friendship with and adoration of Lorraine Hansberry. The late essay in praise of Angela Davis. The public debate with William F. Buckley. Critiques and admiration both for the Black Power and Black Panther figures. Raoul Peck's film *I Am Not Your Negro* reminds us, too, of the long contemplation of the legacies of Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. in Baldwin's fiction and non-fiction. And there are more names we could mention. There were

few thinkers of race in the United States with whom Baldwin did not converse with substance, subtlety, and always profound insight.

There are few surprises and the geography is in some ways predictable. Baldwin's deepest concern as a writer was always with the United States, sometimes extended to the Americas as a whole. The time of the Americas is always a racial time: conquest and mass displacement or genocide, then enslavement, colonialism, segregation, and persistent anti-black violence across each long moment. But the meaning of *new* is always part of the black Atlantic dispute; a new sense of blackness relates the past to another, post-emancipation future. For the Négritude movement, whether on the continent of Africa or in the Americas, retrieval of the past is the salve for a painful past and its long shadow. What does this retrieval mean in relation to Baldwin's work, even as it forges a very different relation to the past?

When we raise the issue of Baldwin and the Négritude movement, we are immediately met with real limitations. The term "Négritude" does not appear in the essays collected in either *The Price of the Ticket* and *Cross of Redemption*, and Léopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire appear in name on only a few occasions. This, despite having spent a short bit of time in Senegal and living for quite some time in exile in Paris, where the Négritude movement, largely a francophone phenomenon, circulated with enthusiasm. In the black Atlantic world, few names carried the same fame and significance as Césaire – a poet and essayist engaged in creative and analytical work just like Baldwin. This peculiarity is consistent with Baldwin's writing in general. The black Atlantic tradition gets short treatment at best, and even an important historical and intellectual figure like Kwame Nkrumah, for example, does not appear in that work. The same can be said about any number of African and Caribbean theorists of pan-Africanism and anti-colonial liberation struggle.

At the same time, there is a strikingly parallel set of concerns if we set Baldwin alongside Césaire's twist on Négritude. The continental versions of Négritude, Senghor in particular, are strongly animated by atavistic concerns and sensibilities not found in the Caribbean tradition. In the Americas, Négritude has to come to terms with fragmentation and fractured memories. In that coming to terms, Baldwin and the Négritude of the Americas develop a poetics of blackness attuned to a beautiful future. Not as messianic or apocalyptic, but as a particular kind of interpretation of racial history, memory, and time that opens to black flourishing. Who is Baldwin to Négritude? And what is Négritude to Baldwin?

Baldwin's non-fiction commentary on the movement is limited to the 1956 essay "Princes and Powers," a long meditation on the 1956 Paris Conference of Negro Writers and Artists. The conference gathered together some of the most important intellectuals from the black Atlantic, including most prominently Senghor, Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Richard Wright, George Lamming, and Alioune Diop. The task of the Congress was simple: articulate the

metaphysical, epistemological, and cultural thread that holds together the African diaspora. This task was connected to a particular moment. The 1955 Bandung Conference raised the political question of the unity across the colonized global South. Those questions stepped outside matters of race and racism, of necessity; the historical experiences of colonized Asia were importantly different from those in Africa and the diaspora. Bandung argued for political unity in the shared experience of colonialism. But questions of cultural identity and its existential, historical roots remained outside the scope of Bandung. The 1956 Conference shifted focus to matters of racial identification, gathering black Atlantic intellectuals for discussion of the most urgent question: Is there a unity to the diaspora? What is the common, even *universal*, characteristic of black people across geographical and cultural difference?

The 1956 Conference offered a variety of responses and is interesting for that reason alone; there is an unifying thread to the gathering, though the thread is also contested by figures such as Lamming, Wright, and Fanon. The two key presentations reflecting the spirit of the gathering were by Césaire and Senghor. Césaire and Senghor focused on mature articulations of the idea of Négritude and they themselves, as artists and critics, embody the highest aspirations of the movement. Négritude first appeared as a term in Césaire's epic poem *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, published in a few different draft versions in the decade-plus prior to the 1956 Conference, and Senghor's early work as a poet and cultural critic evoked the term regularly. For both Césaire and Senghor, Négritude embodied the *past* and the *future* of African thinking, revolution through retrieval and reactivation. It is a theory of the past and how that past is capable of transforming the future *after* colonial domination. Négritude is a name for racial liberation, an embrace of blackness as beautiful and all the poetic implications of that embrace.

Senghor's version of Négritude builds on the remainders of African culture after colonial domination. We see this in his earliest work, which argues for a range of cultural interventions against colonialism from translation of oral traditions to larger, more ambitious arguments for a new aesthetic reflecting the suppressed life-philosophy of Africanness. That sense of retrieval is local and rooted; Senghor writes on the very ground of reactivation. For Césaire, Négritude tells a story about cultural formation and its foundations *from a distance* and *with difference*. The Americas reactivate differently because the geography of racial time is different. Resistance to European values and aesthetic sensibilities come from elsewhere, arriving through the work of the poet. The poet makes culture through a relation to the African past elsewhere, a trans-Atlantic passage, to and fro, in the word. Césaire writes:

I think that it is quite true that the only culture is national culture.

But it is immediately apparent that national cultures, as particular as they are, are grouped by affinities. And these great cultural relationships, these great cultural families, have a name: they are *civilizations*. In other words, if it is self-evident that there is a French national culture, an Italian, English, Spanish, German, Russian national culture, etc. . . . it is no less evident that all these cultures display among them, alongside real differences, a certain number of striking resemblances which make it the case that if one can speak of national cultures particular to each of the countries that I have just listed, one can just as much speak of a European civilization.¹

Césaire's introduction of a distinction between *culture* and *civilization* nuances the plainly racial and anti-colonial sense of Négritude evoked in *Notebook* (blackness as resistance and revitalization) and begins to account for the facts of cultural difference in relation to a political and ethical idea of pan-African black unity. This difference is negotiated at the level of aesthetics and localized collective identity (expressive culture as beauty and affirmation of life), while also holding on to invariant characteristics of racial geography. Africa transforms from continent to trans-Atlantic *élan vital*. Césaire's model here is Europe. Europe is a model, not for imitation, but for how it has theorized its own intertwined identity and difference: France and Germany, for example, embody deep cultural differences, yet draw on a (common) European civilizational spirit. Césaire extends this model in order to think a *future* of the diaspora, writing:

In the same way, one can speak of a great family of African cultures, which deserves the name of Negro-African civilization, and which includes the different cultures of each of the countries of Africa. And we know that the misadventures of history have caused the field of this civilization, the area of this civilization, to exceed today Africa itself. And it is in this sense that we can say that there are if not centers then at least margins of this Negro-African culture in Brazil or in the Caribbean, as much in Haiti as in the French Antilles, or even in the United States.²

Césaire's hesitation – “or even in” – when he names the United States is interesting, and this ambivalence opens the space for seeing Baldwin's intervention in the debate. The African in the construction “Negro-African” carried all the critical decisions about history, memory, and identity. Can the hyphen hold?

When read in this context, we can see why and how it is that Senghor comes to name Richard Wright one of the great living African novelists. Senghor's Négritude sensibility draws him to the secret, even unconscious, African motifs in Wright's fiction – evidence of the fragments and pieces of

Africa at work in diasporic expressive culture. Meant as a compliment, Senghor's remark nevertheless shocks Baldwin in "Princes and Powers," who is then drawn into what is for him a strange commentary: defense of Wright, particularly defense of his Americanness and (interestingly) Southernness. Does the African travel the Atlantic so seamlessly? Do fragments speak so boldly in the unconscious of the writer and artist? Is every black poetics also an African poetics?

On Césaire's account, the question of a poetics *after* or even *outside of* anti-black racism turns on the foundational question of where the *energy* for black cultural production is rooted, a basic matter of whence and whither. "Princes and Powers" takes up this problematic directly, and in it we can begin to discern key elements of Baldwin's break with Négritude thinking. Baldwin writes:

Césaire spoke of the energy already proved by black cultures in the past, and, declining to believe that this energy no longer existed, declined also to believe that the total obliteration of the existing culture was a condition for the renaissance of black people.³

This observation draws out an important point of tension between Césaire and Baldwin as thinkers of blackness, one derived from a broader interpretation of history. For Césaire, the fragments of African civilization persist and endure *in the midst of* and *after disaster*. However much of an apocalyptic sense of cultural renewal structures Césaire's thought – *Notebook* declares "the End of the World" – the imperative to love the beauty of blackness is rooted in a movement of retrieval. Retrieval destroys the anti-black order, specifically the effects and affects of that order on/in the black imagination. The vitality of devastated bodies and cultures is *already there*. It simply remains dormant and hidden. *Nascent blackness, nascent beauty, nascent poetics*. And so black Atlantic history itself, at least in significant part, is the passage of the memory of African civilization – passage from memory *and* a passage through time in trace and fragment that makes another future possible. Négritude, then, is just this approach to past and future: a redemptive project. "The spirit of African Negro civilization," Senghor wrote in 1956, "animates the best Negro artists and writers of to-day, whether they come from Africa or America" – consciously or unconsciously.⁴

The presentation of "Culture and Colonization" at the Paris Congrès enthralls Baldwin, describing Césaire as a "schoolteacher" figure who, at the moment he speaks about blackness and possibility, becomes something different while at the same time provoking a crucial pause. It is a quick sequence of emotional twists. His pause tells most of the story of Baldwin's drawing close to, then away from, the impulses of Négritude. He writes:

Césaire had spoken for those who could not speak and those who could not speak thronged around the table to shake his hand, and kiss him. I myself felt stirred in a very strange and disagreeable way. For Césaire's case against Europe, which was also a very easy case to make. The anatomizing of the great injustice which is the irreducible fact of colonialism was yet not enough to give the victims of that injustice a new sense of themselves.⁵

This “new sense of themselves” is the power of art to introduce a new aesthetic through the charisma of presentation – something Baldwin notes about Césaire – and in the content of critique and reconstruction. A poetics of beautiful blackness is possible yet blocked by something in Césaire's theorization. Baldwin's retort, the content of his “strange and disagreeable way,” is not an intervention in theorizing colonialism, but instead a shift in reckoning with one and the same history. What if the experience of anti-black racism made not just cultural difference possible, but first and foremost the transformation of the very identity of a people? Césaire, Baldwin writes,

had not raised the central, tremendous question, which was, simply: What *had* this colonial experience made of them and what were they now to do with it? For they were all, now, whether they liked it or not, related to Europe, stained by European visions and standards, and their relation to themselves, and to each other, and to their pasts had changed.⁶

History makes impurity. Does impurity make its own world, irreducible to versions of purity in Senghor and Césaire, or does it demand purification through aesthetic and metaphysical return? For Baldwin, this is the crucial question and places impurity at the center of blackness. It takes the time of racial history – *racial time* and *racial memory* – seriously as a site of beginning. In returning time to Césaire, Baldwin makes his own declaration about the time of the Americas.

This peculiar time – from the slave ship to independence and desegregation – is the time of home, place, beauty, and possibility. It is also the time implicated by the actuality of black presence and life. Baldwin evokes the stain of Europe as an existential condition of the black Americas – to have been transformed by the history of racial oppression, survived this history, and, paradoxically, found a sense of home *in relation to this history*. We see this in Césaire's distinction between culture and civilization, which affirms difference alongside the corrective path of an originary civilization. Home is for Césaire forged in that double movement: an Africanization of the Americas, an Americanization of African-descended people.

Baldwin moves in a very different direction in affirming without qualification the *right* to place, to home. In “Princes and Powers,” Baldwin declares key differences between the colonial experience and the experience of being black in the United States. The first move articulates the infrastructure of American identity *as such*. What makes racial subjects? To what are black bodies subjected in making black subjects? This is a geographically specific question. The experience of American identity, Baldwin writes,

results in a psychology very different – at its best and at its worst – from the psychology which is produced by a sense of having been invaded and overrun, the sense of having no recourse whatever against oppression other than overthrowing the machinery of the oppressor. We had been dealing with, had been *made* and *mangled* by, another machinery altogether. It had never been in our interest to overthrow it. It had been necessary to make the machinery work for our benefit and the possibility of its doing so had been, so to speak, built in.⁷

This is a painful passage, describing the particular pain of African-American identity formation. It marks the necessity of America’s terrifying racial history for saying yes to what is beautiful and world-historically significant about African-Americans.⁸ A pair of related moments in Baldwin’s work also thematize the tension between trans-Atlantic racial identity and the American experience. Baldwin is revealing in “The Discovery of What It Means to be an American” (1959). Upon seeing a white American in Paris, Baldwin realizes that that man, too, is estranged and not at home, despite being surrounded by white people. Frenchmen are not white, strictly speaking. They are French, and the white man is American. Identity does not travel the Atlantic with purity, if any sense at all. Consider too how the gaze is turned to himself in “Encounter on the Seine” (1950), in which Baldwin reflects on his own estrangement from African colonials in Paris; skin and a parallel traumatic history is *not* an identity, but only occasionally solidarity.⁹ In both examples, Baldwin breaks apart the racial identifiers at work in Négritude in order to reassemble those identifiers in the context of the United States. What we learn is that whiteness is constructed in relation to blackness, blackness in relation to whiteness, and those constructions do not travel. A return to the cruel machinery that made such identities is a return to home. There is no need for an elsewhere. All the beauty of blackness is already in the poetics of this home.

“Princes and Powers” puts Baldwin’s insights into Americanness in a tense relation to diasporic thought. Baldwin’s subtle rejection of the diasporic imagination at times turns on anecdotes, as when he recalls the U.S. delegation being mistaken for a multi-racial group because of the range of shades of brown skin, or in his descriptions of the peculiarities of gesture, sensibility, posture, and

general bearing. The key moment in “Princes and Powers” is found in a reflection on the labor of making home. The New World is stolen land. Neither black nor white Americans have an ancestral claim to place. And yet, belonging *happens*. Sometimes that belonging is gruesome and exploitive; the racial schema that makes identities in the United States is anti-black from the outset. Sometimes that belonging is the assertion of rights to place, or what Baldwin plainly calls “the title to the land.” He writes:

For what, at bottom, distinguished the Americans from the Negroes who surrounded us... was the banal and abruptly quite overwhelming fact that we had been born in a society, which, in a way quite inconceivable for the Africans, and no longer real for Europeans, was open, and, in a sense which has nothing to do with justice or injustice, was free... Moreover, the land of our forefathers' exile had been made, by that travail, our home. It may have been the popular impulse to keep us at the bottom of the perpetually shifting and bewildered populace; but we were, on the other hand, almost personally indispensable to each of them, simply because, without us, they could never have been certain, in such a confusion, where the bottom was, and nothing, in any case, could take away our title to the land which we, too, had purchased with our blood.¹⁰

This passage tells most of the story of Baldwin's break with Négritude, and also his critical intervention in theorizing blackness *in place* rather than measured by an elsewhere. It returns Baldwin to his critical question: What had colonialism made Négritude theorists? Were they hybrid thinkers? Was colonialism a death blow to purity, a compromise of Négritude's utopianism? Is it possible to think home, place, belonging, and beauty without return? What would it mean to take title to the land seriously?

This is a question to which Césaire and new world Négritude has only a partial answer: cultural difference as the inflection of place. Such inflection is always subordinate to civilizational force; Africa dwarfs the meaning of the Americas. Baldwin, however, makes the decisive break and his non-fiction is in many ways a long meditation on title to land. Like Césaire, Baldwin understands the core sense of this title to be expressed in black cultural production. Blackness comes into its beauty, or already has its beauty, in those spaces – social, cultural, personal, memorial, historical – opened by the exchange between black people, outside the white gaze. Césaire could not imagine this Americas. Colonialism is too much, too compromising, too total as a project. The crashing wave of African civilization returning to the archipelago promises to wipe away the impurities and let the black Caribbean begin anew. For Baldwin, there is no need for the new; vernacular traditions already operate outside (and inside) the racial dynamics of the United States. Baldwin sits with impurity while also shifting

away from the reach of the white gaze. He is plain when he names this as *tradition*. In “Many Thousands Gone,” Baldwin defends impurity. Like so many of Baldwin’s profundities, this arises in a debate with Wright about the black body. Wright understands that body in Césaire’s terms: abject, immobilized. But there is more to the life of that body, which Baldwin captures when he writes:

What this means for [*Native Son*] is that a necessary dimension has been cut away; this dimension being the relationship that Negroes bear to one another, *that depth of involvement and unspoken recognition of shared experience which creates a way of life*...[Wright’s novel] creates its climate of anarchy and unmotivated and unapprehended disaster; and it is this climate, common to most Negro protest novels, which has led us all to believe that in Negro life there exists no tradition, no field of manners, no possibility of ritual or intercourse...For a tradition expresses, after all, nothing more than the long and painful experience of a people.¹¹

Baldwin’s double move affirms the impulse of Négritude in an appeal to “the relationship that Negroes bear to one another” and pivots with an evocation of tradition. This articulates an extant project of black cultural production. Such production exists in a broader impure space, the space of the Americas, and a space of intra-racial development and expression. Négritude imagines these spaces in need of a salve, of transformation. And yet there is Baldwin’s question: *are we not already a people?* Does our language not already express a world? These questions, manifest in Baldwin’s double move, anticipate what becomes, after Césaire in the anglo- and francophone Caribbean world, the movement to affirm creoleness as identity and expressive possibility.

In close, then, let me return to the opening motif of the present essay. The question of beauty and blackness dominated mid-century black Atlantic thought, and for good reason. Centuries of anti-black racism produced, and continues to produce in neo-colonial forms, a tie between blackness and abjection that inspired both the opening scenes of scattered bodies, limp and lifeless, in Césaire’s *Notebook* and Baldwin’s many descriptions of the despairing landscape of Harlem. What is blackness outside that abjection? This is a question for theorists, but Césaire and Baldwin were just as much aware that it is really a question for every black person in relation to themselves and to fellow folk. Answering this question, though, requires an ante-chamber inquiry into beginning. What does it mean to begin? With what resources can black cultural liberation struggle begin? This is a question of the reach of anti-black racism in the Americas, a reach that has worked itself out through enslavement, colonialism, segregation, and ongoing state-sponsored terror. Is anti-black racism a total project? Does it produce what Orlando Patterson famously called “social death”¹² or what Fanon described as the zone of non-being? Of course it does.

Yet, just as production of social death and the zone of non-being draws boundaries on human possibility, there is also the companion question of forms of human belonging, world-making, and thriving that exceed economies of suffering, resistance, and survival. Baldwin's complex relation to the Négritude movement works on these boundaries, affirming the despair produced by anti-blackness while also asking about the lives of black people in community with other black people. A poetics of *that* beauty, this life and community and its tradition, is Baldwin's great and enduring contribution to his diverse, fraught, and complicated mid-century moment.

¹ Aimé Césaire, "Culture and Colonization," trs. Brent Hayes Edwards, *Social Text* 103, volume 28, no. 2 (2010): 128.

² Césaire, "Culture and Colonization," 128.

³ Baldwin, "Princes and Powers," in *The Price of the Ticket* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 53.

⁴ Léopold Senghor, "The Spirit of Civilisation, or the laws of African negro culture," *Presence Africaine* nos. 8-9-10 (June-September 1956), 64.

⁵ Baldwin, "Princes and Powers," 53.

⁶ Baldwin, "Princes and Powers," 54.

⁷ Baldwin, "Princes and Powers," 45.

⁸ On the question of saying "yes" to painful history, see Marisa Parham's *Haunting and Displacement in African-American Literature and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 28-49.

⁹ See also Baldwin's short story "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon" in *Going to Meet the Man* (New York: Vintage, 1995) for a dramatization of this drawn out complexity of trans-Atlantic identity.

¹⁰ Baldwin, "Princes and Powers," 45.

¹¹ James Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," in *The Price of the Ticket*, 72-73.

¹² Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).