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Christopher Winks
CUNY Queens College

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Christopher Winks

Into the Heart of the Great Wilderness: Understanding Baldwin's Quarrel with *Négritude*

In great pain and terror one begins to assess the history which has placed one where one is and formed one's point of view. In great pain and terror because, therefore, one enters into battle with that historical creation, Oneself, and attempts to recreate oneself according to a principle more humane and more liberating; one begins the attempt to achieve a level of personal maturity and freedom which robs history of its tyrannical power, and also changes history. —James Baldwin, "White Man's Guilt" (1965)

The First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists, held in Paris from September 19 through 22, 1956 in the Sorbonne's Salle Descartes, both reflected and contributed to an important world-historical conjuncture. The previous year, the Bandung Conference in Indonesia had marked the entrance of twenty-nine independent, unaligned African, Middle Eastern, and Asian nations onto the global political stage. As such, this gathering represented a crucial moment in the post-World War II movement of decolonization and a potential breach in the ongoing Cold War polarization of the Soviet bloc and the so-called "free world" under the aegis of the United States, which itself was under the cloud of Red Scares and other political persecutions. As for the USSR, its ruling status quo had been shaken by Nikita Khrushchev's February 1956 "secret" speech denouncing Stalin's crimes. The Congress took place on the eve of the Battle of Algiers, the Suez crisis, the Hungarian Revolution against Soviet domination, and the full independence of Ghana from British colonialism. The revolutionary movement in Cuba that would eventually overthrow the U. S.-supported dictator Fulgencio Batista had been under way for three years. And in the United States, the Montgomery Bus Boycott had been in full swing for the better part of 1956.

During his inaugural speech to the Congress, Alioune Diop, founder of the journal *Présence Africaine*, explicitly hailed the event as a cultural counterpart, indeed a sequel to the Bandung Conference, wherein "we shall essentially enunciate together and measure the richness, crisis, and promise of our culture" (17).¹ Diop defined this culture as the sum total of the artistic achievements of the black world both in Africa and the diaspora, not an undifferentiated whole but a civilizational unity of diverse cultures with a common experience of the slavery and colonialism that Europe had perpetrated. The Congress also represented a signal culminating moment in the development of the Francophone black consciousness movement known as *Négritude*: its president was the venerable Haitian anthropologist Jean Price-Mars, and two of the poet-politicians who introduced and developed the ideas and imaginary of *Négritude*, Aimé Césaire from Martinique and Léopold Sédar Senghor from Senegal, were to play central roles in the Congress, as did the Senegalese historian and *savant* Cheikh Anta Diop. Prominent among the U. S. delegation was Richard Wright, who had traveled to pre-independence Ghana and participated in the Bandung Conference, publishing two major books about his experiences: *Black Power* (1954) and *The Color Curtain* (1956).

But there were also representatives of a younger generation both on the podium and in attendance: Jacques-Stéphane Alexis, Édouard Glissant, Frantz Fanon, René Depestre, George Lamming—and, covering the Congress for the journal *Encounter*,

the thirty-two-year-old James Baldwin. His account, “Princes and Powers,”² spread the news both to an Anglophone public and in French to the readers of *Preuves*, a monthly like *Encounter* funded by the Congress for Cultural Freedom (a front for the CIA, unbeknownst at that time to Baldwin and to many, albeit not all other contributors). Given this essay’s dissemination and repercussions over time, Baldwin is now considered by many, including one of the co-organizers of the 1956 Congress, Madame Yandé Christiane Diop (Alioune Diop’s widow), as having essentially been a participant in the Congress. At a gathering organized at the Sorbonne by *Présence Africaine* to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Congress, Mme. Diop cites Baldwin as one of “the friends who accompanied Alioune Diop in his quest for the recognition of African culture in the community of nations” (46). Indeed, in its critical approach, its willingness to address the often fraught complexities of the intellectual encounter between Africa and its diaspora, “Princes and Powers” remains exemplary, and arguably (as I note later) marks a turning point in Baldwin’s intellectual and political development.

But this is not to overlook certain aporias and misprisions in the essay, some of them willful and others attributable to what Baldwin, after two years as an expatriate in Paris, considered in the 1950 essay “Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown” to be an historically engendered, existential tension: “They face each other, the Negro and the African, over a gulf of three hundred years—an alienation too vast to be conquered in an evening’s good-will, too heavy and too double-edged ever to be trapped in speech. This alienation causes the Negro to recognize that he is a hybrid” (39). And with characteristic courage and frankness, Baldwin undertakes in “Princes and Powers” to confront that alienation and verbalize it, thus potentially freeing it from the snares of mutual misunderstanding in the interests of a solidarity to come.

Faced in the Congress with representatives of a generation of black, largely Francophone intellectuals outside his expatriate habitus—he shows no awareness of Aimé Césaire’s by-then considerable poetic achievements and views him rather as possessing an intelligence “of a very penetrating and demagogic order” (52), and Senghor is referred to in the passive voice as someone who “is highly regarded as a poet” (46)—Baldwin cannot help expressing his own ambivalence in their presence. This manifests itself in his occasional recourse to reflexive “primitivist” constructions of Africa and a dichotomization of black U. S. experience and that of the rest of the black world. In the process, he elides the Caribbean as a distinctive sociocultural diasporic space:

what, at bottom, distinguished the Americans from the Negroes who surrounded us, men from Nigeria, Senegal, Barbados, Martinique—so many names for so many disciplines—was the banal and abruptly quite overwhelming fact that we had been born in a society, which, in a way quite inconceivable for Africans, and no longer real for Europeans, was open, and, in a sense which has nothing to do with justice or injustice, was free. . . . 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. (43)

As Manthia Diawara remarks: “It seems that Baldwin’s African has a fixed identity, whereas the African American is black not only because he or she is the object of American racism, but also by choice” (166).

Likewise, Baldwin’s proclamation of U. S. exceptionalism, however critical its intent, effaces the origins of the “machinery” he describes in the selfsame colonial enterprise around whose critique and transcendence the Congress was organized. This was a point about which Césaire himself felt it necessary to remind members of the U. S. delegation (which included Horace Mann Bond, Mercer Cook, and

William Fontaine as well as Richard Wright), in the course of a heated debate at which Baldwin was not present but whose aftershocks on the following day he describes in terms of “a rather tense atmosphere [which] continued throughout the day” (54).

Speaking, however, of an eventual, uneasy rapprochement between black Americans and their colonized African brothers, Baldwin briefly problematizes his previously constructed binary by admitting that “it was clear that our relation to the mysterious continent of Africa would not be clarified until we had found some means of saying, to ourselves and to the world, more about the mysterious American continent than had ever been said before” (46). This points towards, indeed portends, a clearing of the tangled thickets rooted in a long-shared history of oppression and a recognition that social and historical—and existential—mysteries are not confined exclusively to the erstwhile “Dark Continent,” that African American self-understanding will, if carried out with the profundity it demands, lead to a fraternal opening towards, and eventual active solidarity with, the colonized black world.

In short, although Baldwin quarrels with the tenets of *Négritude*, at least insofar as they are articulated in the major addresses of Senghor (“*L’esprit de la civilisation ou les lois de la culture négro-africaine*” [The Spirit of Civilization, or: the Laws of Negro-African Culture]) and Césaire (“*Culture et colonisation*” [Culture and Colonization]) on the occasion of the Congress, his fundamentally questing, and questioning, intent is echoed by Richard Wright’s poignant response to Senghor’s poetic description of African cultural totalities: “This is not hostility; this is not criticism. I am asking a question of *brothers* . . .—where do *I*, an American Negro . . . stand in relation to that culture?” (“Discussion” 67). The very title of “Princes and Powers”—with its Biblical allusions to Paul’s address to the Ephesians, “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” (Eph. 6:12); and the famous line from Psalms, so often quoted by African American would-be redeemers of Africa, “Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God” (Ps. 68:31)—bespeaks his awareness of what is ultimately at stake in the Congress’s debates: struggle and redemption. And as Baldwin makes clear, the proceedings were marked by the cut and thrust of often bitter debate precisely because they reflected the dramatic, perilous promise of revolutionary change that the colonized peoples of the world were beginning to fulfill. Questions of culture, as Baldwin observes with decidedly mixed feelings, rapidly metamorphosed into political questions in an impassioned dialectical movement.

The Baldwin of “Princes and Powers” is in many respects the Baldwin of the 1953 essay “Stranger in the Village” who in mingled anger and *ressentiment* characterized the Swiss villagers among whom he was sojourning as people who “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. . . . Go back a few centuries and they are in their full glory—but I am in Africa, watching the conquerors arrive” (83). And in this bleak declaration of marginality, he personifies Africa as passive and implicitly cultureless in comparison with the civilization that gave the world, *inter alia*, Chartres Cathedral and Shakespeare. Baldwin’s dismissive reaction to Cheikh Anta Diop’s presentation at the Congress, “*Apports et perspectives culturelles de l’Afrique*” (Africa’s Contributions and Cultural Perspectives), which he characterizes as exclusively (and, by implication, tediously) devoted to “claim[ing] the ancient Egyptian empire as part of the Negro past . . . [a] question [that] has not greatly exercised my mind” (57), may be considered as a further expression of his uncertainty about (paraphrasing Countée Cullen’s famous poem) what Africa is to him. Indeed, he himself had astutely characterized this hesitancy in “Encounter on the Seine” as the

product of “echoes of a past which [the American Negro] has not yet been able to utilize, intimations of a responsibility which he has not yet been able to face” (38).

It might also be that Baldwin’s impatience with Diop’s (at the time) revisionist stance stems from hearing cruder versions of Diop’s theories expounded by street-corner orators outside Lewis Michaux’s National Memorial African Bookstore in the Harlem of his boyhood and youth. Still, Baldwin’s haste to write off Diop overlooks the substance of Diop’s speech, which was as much about charting a course for the industrialization of black Africa and establishing cultural and linguistic bases for a continent-wide federation as it was a refutation of the racist mythologies of European Egyptologists. Indeed, towards the end of his talk, Diop emphasizes that the purpose of bringing forward the black African origins of Egyptian civilization is to orient the peoples of Africa towards a shared future: “As you recall, my purpose was to put forth perspectives for the future, so I had to recommend valuable and potentially acceptable solutions, on the level of history, on the level of language, on the level of culture in general, and on the level of technical organization. And the heterogeneous character of my presentation followed from this: an Industrial Perspective” (345; my translation). Surely there is more involved here than the kind of defensive vindicationism Baldwin purports to find.

When faced with Léopold Sédar Senghor’s affirmation of the far-from-rigid “laws of Negro-African culture” as predicated on communal, feelingful participation grounded in a cohesive social order, Baldwin “wistfully” admits the validity of Senghor’s aphorism “To feel is to perceive,” which he reproduces in the original French: “*Sentir c’est apercevoir*” (47), acknowledging not only its untranslatability into English, but more tellingly its perceived incompatibility with Baldwin’s own culturally conditioned world view. Baldwin (as did Richard Wright during the debates) acknowledges the attractions of the way of life implicit in this aesthetic, wherein the whole notion of art for art’s sake has no purchase, only to counterpose—again dichotomously—his own identification with “the lonely activity of the singular intelligence on which the cultural life—the moral life—of the West depends.” Baldwin wonders whether the kind of social art Senghor describes so eloquently and persuasively (and which Baldwin categorically states as having “no reality whatever in western life” [48]) might not in fact have “generally, and, I suspect, necessarily, a much lower level of tolerance for . . . the dissenter, the man who steals the fire, than have societies in which . . . each man, in awful and brutal isolation, is for himself, to flower or to perish” (48-49). The closest equivalent Baldwin can find in black American life to Senghor’s world is the jam session, but even here he overdetermines the “ghastly isolation of the jazz musician and the neurotic intensity of his listeners” (48) in making his case for the irreducibly and intrinsically tragic agon of the creative artist in the Christian West.

Ironically, given this avowed uncertainty about the relevance of an African aesthetic to the context of black America, Baldwin precedes his detailed summary of Senghor’s speech with an admiring account of a lecture/performance of Yoruba poetry by E. L. Lasebikan (“The Tonal Structure of Yoruba Poetry” [43-50]). While we might fault Baldwin for his reductive approach to Lasebikan’s presentation of the complex links between tone and theme, sound and sentiment in Yoruba poetics, he nonetheless apprehends its significance on an instinctual level. Beguiled by Lasebikan’s appearance and presentational style, intrigued by the sound of the “extremely strange language” (which he misspells as “Youriba”), and delighted by the music of the deconsecrated ceremonial drum, Baldwin not only perceives “something of the style of life out of which [the poetry] came,” but in his thematic summary of two poems, one prayerful and the second depicting the pounding of yams, realizes that “one somehow felt the loneliness and yearning of the first and the peaceful, rhythmic domesticity of the second” (46). It is precisely Senghor’s point that

the Negro is first and foremost sounds, smells, rhythms, shapes, and colors; I say *touch* before sight, like the European white. He *feels* more than he sees: he feels himself. It is in himself, in his flesh, that he receives and feels the radiance emitted by every existing-object. Shaken out of himself (*é-branlé*), he answers the call and abandons himself, going from subject to object, from I to Thou, on the waves of the Other. He dies in himself to be reborn in the Other. He assimilates; he is not assimilated. (52; my translation)

In short, power flows from energy, not discourse, and Baldwin's response to Yoruba poetry carries out an act of identification that, in Manthia Diawara's words, "takes place by empathy, in the sense that when you look at the object"—and in this case, hear it as sonic force—"you begin to see"—and hear—"part of yourself in it" (qtd. in Martínez and Tymkiw 115).

A similar process of unconscious identification occurs in Baldwin's attempt to come to grips with Aimé Césaire's uncompromising and—to him—discomfiting presentation. Faithful in his description of the contours of Césaire's argument—with specific attention to his dissection of the Western colonial enterprise—and generous in his direct quotations from the speech, Baldwin is nonetheless made ill at ease by the tumultuous applause accompanying Césaire's violent denunciation of the West (*prima facie* evidence for Baldwin of his "demagogic intelligence"). He criticizes the "unanswerable," "watertight" quality of Césaire's polemic, adding that it has the "advantage, also, of being very little concerned, at bottom, with culture" (53). Admittedly, as Baldwin himself notes, arriving at a definition of culture in the context of the Congress was a matter for constant debate throughout the proceedings.

Nevertheless, when read dispassionately, Césaire's actual speech, with its quotations from the Latin of Rutilius Namatianus and from Marx, Hegel, Goethe, Nietzsche, Spengler, and Malinowski,³ meticulously anatomizes the ways in which colonialism, in the name of modernization, not only deals mortal blows to the cultures it invades and dominates, but allows only such necessarily incomplete modernization as it is able to safely control. In the process, Césaire actually reveals that culture in every sense—as an agglomeration of artifacts, as an organized way of living, as first and foremost something one *does* and *shapes*—fuels his passionate denunciation of the *deculturated* condition to which colonialism seeks to reduce those who fall under its domination. As Césaire himself puts it, "I believe that our specific cultures possess in themselves sufficient strength, sufficient vitality, sufficient regenerative power to adapt themselves, when the objective conditions to which they are subjected have been modified, to the conditions of the modern world, and will be able to bring to all problems, whatever they may be—political, social, economic, cultural—valuable and original solutions, *valuable because original*" (204-05; my translation). Lamenting that Césaire's "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" (53), Baldwin overlooks the implications of the very "peroration" of Césaire that he had quoted in the preceding paragraph: "We are here to proclaim the right of our people to speak, to let our people, black people, make their entrance on the great stage of history." Césaire's speech is thus a clearing of the ground, a conceptual prelude to a historical praxis in which the awakening to a decolonized self becomes the creation not of a lone orator but of people in motion worldwide.

Baldwin regrets that Césaire, in his zeal to unmask and demolish the epistemological basis of colonialism, missed an opportunity for self-reflection on the processes that shaped him: "he had not raised the central, tremendous question, which was, simply: What *had* the colonial experience made of [the audience] and what were they now to do with it? . . . Césaire's speech left out of account one of the great effects of the colonial experience: its creation, precisely, of men like himself" (54). Here again, Baldwin appears to concede too much to some sort of residually redemptive or positively modernizing power of the West, which Césaire allegedly

must needs acknowledge, just as Senghor, even as he affirms the beauty of traditional African cultural totalities, must, for Baldwin at any rate, recognize that he is doing so in an adopted French. But Baldwin does not see—or does not wish to see—that for Césaire, such a question is self-evident and as such not worth posing. Indeed, the array of “Western” thinkers whom he enlists in his polemic should be sufficient to show that Césaire has appropriated—assimilated, to use Senghor’s term—a critical arsenal that in his *parole* becomes a cache of miraculous weapons, tools for writing on the wall of a doomed colonial order its “*Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin*—you have been weighed in the balance and found wanting.”

And in the end, Baldwin recognizes and admires this even while ostensibly pursuing his critique of Césaire’s seeming unconcern with self-positioning: “What made him so attractive now was the fact that he, without having ceased to be one of them, yet seemed to move with the European authority. He had penetrated into the heart of the great wilderness which was Europe and stolen the sacred fire. And this, which was the promise of their freedom, was also the assurance of his power” (54). Apparently without having encountered Césaire’s poetry—for Baldwin does not, as he does with Senghor, grant him his poetic vocation—Baldwin identifies one of the major recurring tropes of that poetry: the figure of the lonely rebel, at once solitary and solitary, who indeed steals the metaphorical fire and, like Prometheus, is ready to confront torment and martyrdom for that emancipating gesture. (Consider not only the totality of Césaire’s pathbreaking *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* [1939/1947] but these words from the dramatic poem “And the Dogs Were Silent” [1946/1958]: “My family name: offended; my given name: humiliated; my profession: rebel; my age: the stone age” [39].) That Baldwin should avail himself of the same Promethean allusion to describe what was lacking in Senghor’s portrait of traditional African culture complexes and what he sees as implicit in Césaire’s oratorical presence is an interesting aporia—as indeed is his quasi-Césairean image of Europe as a “great wilderness.”

Césaire’s continued haunting of Baldwin reappears in a kind of doubling that occurs when the latter describes, without characterizing it as demagogic, a galvanic, rage-filled oratorical intervention “by an enormous, handsome, extremely impressive black man whom I had not remarked before, who was also named Césaire” (62), and who sums up the trajectory of the Congress by denouncing colonialist depredation, calling on the assembled body to take their freedom rather than ask for it, and affirming that “No power will ever cause us to admit that we are lower than any other people” (62-63). In fact, however, this tribune, who stirred the audience to thunderous and prolonged applause, was a Haitian, Emile Saint-Lôt. By misnaming him “Césaire” in a context of praise and acknowledgment, Baldwin seems unconsciously to be moving closer to someone he had initially tried to keep at a rhetorical and theoretical distance. (Where missed connections and nonencounters are concerned, one might in retrospect lament Baldwin’s absence from the session at which his junior by one year, Frantz Fanon, gave a presentation on “Racism and Culture.”⁴)

“Princes and Powers” is framed by a description of the streets outside the Sorbonne where Parisians are lining up in front of the bakeries during a bread strike. Baldwin’s choosing to conclude the essay on the same note, the same scene with which he opened it, lends itself to two interpretations. If one accepts his biographer David Leeming’s account of Baldwin’s ultimate disappointment with the Congress (120), the image of a Paris going about its regular business after all the heated discussions, debates, and polemics would appear to convey that, in the end, all this talk might have had very little impact on the world beyond the Salle Descartes. But equally, it could be argued that the apparent tranquility of the surrounding scene is deceptive, that “princes” were indeed about to come “out of Egypt,” and beneath the breadlines and playing children, seismic tremors were about to shake

the apparent stability of that city Baldwin characterizes at the outset—with perhaps a hint of irony—as “the intellectual capital of the Western world” (41).

In his 1972 book-length essay *No Name in the Street*, Baldwin revisits the Congress: specifically, a moment in those sun-drenched Parisian streets with which he closes the earlier essay. Walking with Richard Wright and several Africans, he recalls seeing on every newspaper kiosk a photo of the young Dorothy Counts “being reviled and spat on by the mob as she was making her way to school in Charlotte, North Carolina.” In the context of his narrative, that moment marks an epiphany in which Baldwin, looking back, realizes “it was on that bright afternoon that I knew I was leaving France. I could, simply, no longer sit around in Paris discussing Algeria and the black American problem. Everybody else was paying their dues, and it was time I went home and paid mine” (475). In fact, Dorothy Counts’s ordeal occurred on September 4, 1957, nearly a full year after the Congress, and when Baldwin had been in the United States for less than two months.⁵ Baldwin’s alteration of the chronology of events should not, however, be attributed to a simple lapse of memory. His compression of historical time in order to present a sharp juxtaposition of an internationally disseminated image of domestic oppression in America, with an anticolonialist congress calling for self-determination of the black world, dramatizes, in the best novelistic style (if one accepts that the individual is the protagonist of his own personal drama), a fraught moment in which Baldwin chooses to situate himself as a witness—and hence a participant—in the dues-paying that comes from taking a stand at the crossroads of historical transformation. Seen from this angle, Leeming’s interpretation of Baldwin’s discontent with the Congress as stemming from “[his] own feelings of inadequacy and guilt in the face of the looming racial struggle” (120), tends to diminish the existential weight which Baldwin himself, admittedly at a certain temporal and spiritual remove, conferred on his decision to return to the United States.

The next essay Baldwin published after “Princes and Powers” was the 1958 “A Fly in Buttermilk,” which chronicles his journey to the U. S. South to monitor the struggle to integrate the schools (during which he actually visited Charlotte), and which begins with his admission that he had been “alchemized into an American the moment I touched French soil,” while yet recognizing that “if I had not lived in France for so long I would never have found it necessary—or possible—to visit the American South” (161). Somewhere in this declaration, there may lurk a subliminal influence of the Congress which he was prepared to recognize openly only after another fourteen years had elapsed. Clearly, his increasing political engagement reflected a desire to immerse himself in the specifically black American condition from which he had fled, and which, in reviewing the 1956 Congress, he continued to insist upon against the anticolonial intellectuals’ denunciations of the West: “the American Negro is possibly the only man of color who can speak of the West with real authority, whose experience, painful as it is, also proves the validity of the so-transgressed western ideals” (44). In many ways, Baldwin’s intellectual and political trajectory mirrored what Aimé Césaire said of his own: “The West told us that in order to be universal we had to start by denying that we were Black. I, on the contrary, said to myself that the more we were Black, the more universal we would be” (qtd. in Melsan 5). And the more Baldwin plumbed the deepest recesses of the collective Western malaise as embodied in the United States, the more he became disillusioned with that West for which he had in 1956 appeared to hold out some residual hope.

Significantly, in *No Name in the Street*, Baldwin returns to his earlier synecdoches for Western culture, Chartres Cathedral and Shakespeare, but this time in a far more disabused context than in “Stranger in the Village.” For now, having endured the growing inhumanity of white America, exemplified by (among other atrocities) the assassinations of his friends Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X as

well as the persecution of the Black Panthers, Baldwin had transmuted the “great pain and terror” he had once before connected with the confrontation with history—and with the self that had in part been forged by that history—into a refiners’ fire that purged him of whatever illusions he might still have maintained about any remaining residue of civilization in the West. The immense distance between that West’s cultural monuments and the victims of its depredations Baldwin here considered not in terms of a defensive, uncertain feeling of inadequacy, but as a reminder that the history that engendered these monuments and these depredations is, for the millions of the West’s “rest,” valueless. “[T]hey have never been free to reject it; they will never be able to assess it until they are free to take from it what they need, and to add to history the monumental fact of their presence. The South African coal miner, or the African digging for roots in the bush, or the Algerian mason working in Paris, not only have no reason to bow down before Shakespeare, or Descartes, or Westminster Abbey, or the cathedral at Chartres: they have, once these monuments intrude on their attention, no honorable access to them” (473). Might it be possible to discern, in Baldwin’s invocation of Descartes as a Western cultural icon, a veiled (even, perhaps, not wholly conscious) allusion to that Salle Descartes in which the 1956 Congress was held, and where the means and possibilities whereby the African and African diasporic worlds could “add to history the monumental fact of their presence” were discussed and debated?

Indeed, Baldwin’s subsequent insight in *No Name in the Street*—“Not until the many millions of people on the continent of Africa control their land and their resources will the African personality flower or genuinely African institutions flourish and reveal Africa as she is” (551)—could well serve as a watchword both for the 1956 Congress and the more explicitly political 1959 Rome Congress held under the same auspices. As well, in seeing a condemnable history as intimately linked with “oneself” (473), Baldwin grapples with that self and that history—and consequently the moments of false consciousness that marked and marred both—and moves further towards “recreat[ing] [him]self according to a principle more humane and more liberating” than the partial, reflex attachment to the West that occasionally emerges from “Princes and Powers.”

In an obituary tribute to Baldwin, the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe speaks of his astonishment upon first encountering *Go Tell It on the Mountain* in his homeland and of his subsequent desire to meet its author in person, which would not be fulfilled until a meeting of the African Literature Association in 1980 (eight years after the appearance of *No Name in the Street*): “When at last I met Jimmy in person in the jungles of Florida in 1980 I actually greeted him with *Mr. Baldwin, I presume*. You should have seen his eyes dancing, his remarkable face working in ripples of joyfulness” (Achebe 173). Achebe’s subversive repurposing of the by-now-clichéd (and some say invented) greeting extended by the rapacious explorer Henry Morton Stanley to the Scottish missionary David Livingstone, whose whereabouts in the Congo were the ostensible object of Stanley’s highly publicized quest, merits analysis as an example of the time-honored black tradition of changing the joke and slipping the yoke, which Baldwin’s delighted reaction confirms.

In “Princes and Powers,” Baldwin attempted to come to terms with Léopold Senghor’s proclamation of the intrinsically African qualities of Richard Wright’s autobiography *Black Boy* by asserting that the work’s “form, psychology, moral attitude, preoccupations, in short, its cultural validity, were all due to forces which had nothing to do with Africa.” At this point, he undercuts the apparent finality of this statement by turning a question back on himself, and, by extension, other black Americans: “Or was it simply that we had been rendered unable to recognize Africa in it?—for, it seemed that, in Senghor’s vast excavation of the world, the footfall of the African would prove to have covered more territory than the footfall of the Roman” (51). Now, nearly twenty-five years later, one of Africa’s finest novelists,

a former colonial subject whose rise to international literary prominence had begun two years after the 1956 Congress, greets him as a fellow sojourner—indeed, as a fellow African—in the “jungles of Florida.” And in so doing, he shows that indeed, the “footfall of the African” has covered more ground than that of the imperial Roman, or for that matter those of the self-styled representatives of what Baldwin would later indelibly brand “the very last white country the world will ever see” (675). Moreover, the “alienation” between black Americans and Africans of which Baldwin gloomily spoke in “Encounter on the Seine” has, at least in this particular encounter, been dissolved in a moment of affective solidarity that is no less real for being grounded in sly humor.

As if to confirm the ultimate seriousness of this jocular exchange, Achebe recounts Baldwin’s appearance on the podium in the Florida hotel where the conference was being held: “Within minutes a mystery voice came over the public address system and began to hurl racial insults at him and me. . . . The happiness brutally wiped off Baldwin’s face; the genial manner gone; the eyes flashing in defiant combativeness; the voice incredibly calm and measured. And the words of remorseless prophecy began once again to flow” (174). Explicitly invoking Baldwin’s analysis of the 1956 Congress, Achebe establishes a bond, forged under the sign of a shared prophetic vocation, between the black American writer and the idealistic, then-recently assassinated president of Burkina Faso, Thomas Sankara: “Principalities and powers do not tolerate those who interrupt the sleep of their consciences” (Achebe 175). The “princes” have come out of Africa, only to face the full hostility of the imperial principalities arrayed against them. And yet the only remedy for this is to continue to prophesy, as Baldwin did in the face of racist provocation at the Florida conference, and as he wrote in one of his final essays, “Notes on the House of Bondage,” from that same year of 1980: “I am speaking of the breakup—the end—of the so-overextended western empire. I am thinking of the black and nonwhite peoples who are shattering, redefining, and recreating history—making all things new—simply by declaring their presence, by delivering their testimony. The empire never intended that this testimony be heard, but, *if I hold my peace, the very stones will cry out*” (673).

For all that he quarreled—productively—with the ideas that were brought from Africa and its multiple diasporas to the welcome table set by the 1956 International Congress of Black Writers and Artists, James Baldwin was profoundly dedicated to bringing about what Léopold Senghor called “the civilization of giving and receiving.” Édouard Glissant aptly captured the lasting repercussions of the Congress in his speech to the fiftieth anniversary celebration, also held at the Sorbonne: “these texts [in the proceedings] tremble first of all with an impatience to reveal themselves mutually to each other: ‘here is how we are in our place, and here is how we are upright in the world, no longer on the hidden face of the earth’ ” (33). This trembling, this will toward mutual revelation, toward standing upright, in the whirlwind, against wind and tide, against the horrors of racism and colonialism in all their misshapen incarnations and, alas! reincarnations, and in the name of a philosophy first articulated by Senghor and memorably, aphoristically, summed up by Glissant as “*I can change by exchanging with the other, without, however, losing or deforming myself*” (55)—is this not embodied in Baldwin’s unremitting self-questioning as he worked through, revealed, made, shared, battled, witnessed, wrote, and, however painfully, changed a history that he saw as indissolubly personal and political? And if we ourselves accept Baldwin’s challenge to enter “the charged, the dangerous moment, when everything must be reexamined, must be made new, when nothing at all can be taken for granted” (674), we might yet overcome history’s tyrannical power and build sites of mutual encounter and transformation that are, in Baldwin’s words, “more humane and more liberating.”

- Notes**
1. My translation; all subsequent quotations from the Congress presenters are referenced parenthetically by page in the body of this essay.
 2. Owing to an editorial error, the essay as herein published is given a publication date of January 1951 instead of January 1957, and therefore appears out of the chronological sequence that governs the rest of the collection.
 3. It is worth noting that among the targets of Césaire's polemic is Margaret Mead, whose good intentions he acknowledges but whom he criticizes for attempting to find a positive aspect to colonialism. Less than fifteen years and many seismic social and cultural upheavals later, Baldwin would sit down with Mead for a dialogue (published in 1971 as *A Rap on Race*), in the course of which he proclaims his by-then total rejection of the pretensions and lies undergirding Western civilization in terms not far removed from Césaire's 1956 declarations. The ironies of history!
 4. This talk is reprinted in Frantz Fanon, *Towards the African Revolution*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove, 1965), 32-44.
 5. I am indebted to Douglas Field for pointing out to me this discrepancy between Baldwin's memory and the historical record.

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