Many critics have pointed out the importance of location in the study of James Baldwin. Herb Boyd’s recent *Baldwin’s Harlem* claims to be a Baldwin biography, but is more accurately a study of the intersection of person and place—as is Magdalena Zaborowska’s book on Baldwin’s little-studied time in Turkey. James Darsey states that, “If ever a writer required, perhaps demanded, such attention to place, it is Baldwin. Throughout Baldwin’s writing is an awareness of the relationship between place and self” (192). Whether as a black man in white America, a lost soul in the predatory avenues of Harlem, a homosexual in a puritanical society, an unbelieving preacher standing at the pulpit, or a lonely expatriate wandering the streets of Paris, James Baldwin in life and in writing seemed always to be on the outside looking in. Literal or metaphorical, location is crucial in Baldwin’s work: as he wrote in one of the last essays of his life, “Go back to where you started, or as far back as you can, examine all of it, travel your road again and tell the truth about it. Sing or shout or testify or keep it to yourself: but know whence you came” (“Price” 841).

Knowing where Baldwin comes from (literally) is crucial to knowing where he is coming from metaphorically. The combination of his nationality, race, sexual orientation, and religious and political attitudes, together with his refusal to compromise or to close his eyes, doomed him to being a perpetual outsider. But it is from the outside that one can see things that one never noticed while inside. As any expatriate must learn, one can never begin truly to understand one’s own culture until one steps outside it.

Edward Said stresses the importance to the intellectual of rejecting “the rewards of accommodation, yea-saying, settling in” by moving “toward the margins, where you see things that are usually lost on minds that have never traveled beyond the conventional and comfortable” (380). As an African-American, Baldwin was born in the margins, though he still could have found a reasonably comfortable place within African-American culture if he had been willing to accept his place—but that would have required him to play a role and deny who he was. And so instead he chose to move further toward the margins, even leaving his culture physically, leaving Harlem for Greenwich Village, and later leaving New York for Paris and beyond, exiling himself in order to see more objectively and become a fully realized individual, discovering who he was by learning ever more clearly from whence he had come. We read about this in his deeply personal essays, and we also see it played out over and over in his fiction, as main characters are confronted by the “ethical imperative” to “figuratively commit suicide” (Martinez 783) in one of two ways: to sacrifice their individuality, giving up the struggle to be who they are and accepting the place their society demands they occupy, or to sacrifice comforting illusions, embrace their exile to outsider status, and become themselves. The former choice, like that taken by the closeted homosexual David of *Giovanni’s Room* or the sexually dysfunctional racist Jesse of “Going to Meet the Man,” traps characters in delusion and self-loathing; while the latter choice, taken by the recovering-addict musician of “Sonny’s Blues” or the unnamed narrator of “This Morning, This Evening, So Soon,” forces characters to take a harder road that leads to a life that, if not unambiguously happy, is at least clear-sighted and self-aware.

This last story is of particular interest because, while it is certainly fiction, it is one of the most clearly autobiographical stories of an author who so often used writing as a vehicle for intimate self-exploration. Darsey refers to the narrator of “This Morning, This Evening, So Soon” as Baldwin’s “surrogate” (193), and although unlike Baldwin he is a singer and a heterosexual married father, his narrative voice is so similar to Baldwin’s...
in his essays, and so much of what he says about the experiences of being an African-American expatriate in Paris closely parallels what Baldwin writes in his essays, that this surrogate status rings true. Partly for this reason, this story richly rewards the examination of certain passages when exploring the themes of location and dislocation, and of how they can give rise to both alienation and freedom.

At the beginning of the story, as the narrator and his family prepare to relocate from Paris to the United States in two days so that the narrator can pursue his rising career as an entertainer in New York and Hollywood, we see how not only the narrator but his entire family are dislocated. The narrator and his wife Harriet are both expatriates, he from America, she from Sweden, while their seven-year-old son Paul, though he has not yet encountered the overt racism that the narrator fears awaits him in America, has recently begun to become aware that his parentage sets him apart from his schoolmates.

Over and over, the story demonstrates the importance of the characters’ location and their dislocation. Early in the story, as the narrator and Harriet discuss his nervousness about his impending return to America, he reflects on how unlikely their relationship would have been if they had not met in Europe:

[...] and I think how, if I had never left America, I would never have met her and would never have established a life of my own, would never have entered my own life. For everyone’s life begins on a level where races, armies, and churches stop. And yet everyone’s life is always shaped by races, churches, and armies; races, churches, armies menace, and have taken, many lives. If Harriet had been born in America, it would have taken her a long time, perhaps forever, to look upon me as a man like other men; if I had met her in America, I would never have been able to look on her as a woman like all other women. The habits of public rage and power would also have been our private compulsions, and would have blinded our eyes. We would never have been able to love each other. And Paul would never have been born. (869)

The narrator, like Baldwin, needed to leave America in order to “enter [his] own life.” He could not become himself in a place where he was limited by the “races, armies, and churches” of America—in other words, three ideologies: the social construction of race which attempts to define who he is and what he can become in order to preserve a permanent underclass, of Cold War patriotism which imposes a Manichean with-us-or-against-us mindset that threatens reprisal against anyone who criticizes American values, and churches which likewise demand acceptance of dogma over skeptical inquiry. At their worst, these ideologies become weapons of terror to keep the populace in line, indoctrinating American society with “the habits of public rage and power” so that even those who realize the wrongness of it cannot resist being “blinded” and taking on those same habits as “private compulsions.”

As Baldwin writes in his essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” “It must be remembered that the oppressed and 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” (17). In an American setting, this white woman and black man would have found their love twisted into something perverse, something less than love, by class differences and the internalized expectations of society.

Becoming an individual rather than playing a role thus became impossible for the narrator without removing himself from a society that insisted on defining him rather than allowing him to define himself. By exiling himself to Paris, he entered another society which had far less need to define him. Baldwin’s narrator does not blind himself to the reality of this foreign city—he recognizes that France has its own ideologies, its own racism (largely against North Africans) and armies (the War of Algeria) and churches, but he lies largely outside of these. He is still defined, yes, but as something else: an American expatriate. As a member of a far tinier minority than he was in America, a minority that is no threat to France’s social order, he is largely and blessedly ignored. The North African immigrants in Paris might be “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” (875).

He reiterates this idea of positive loneliness when he remembers falling in love with Harriet. In spite of—or as it turns out, because of—having just had an argument, he is struck with a revelation:

There were millions of people all around us, but I was alone with Harriet. She was alone with me. Never, in all my life, until that moment, had I been
alone with anyone. The world had always been with us, between us [...], making love impossible. During all the years of my life, until that moment, I had carried the menacing, the hostile, killing world with me everywhere. No matter what I was doing or saying or feeling, one eye had always been on the world—that world which I had learned to distrust almost as soon as I learned my name, that world on which I knew one could never turn one’s back, the white man’s world. And for the first time in my life I was free of it; it had not existed for me; I had been quarreling with my girl. It was our quarrel, it was entirely between us, it had nothing to do with anyone else in the world. For the first time in my life I had not been afraid of the patriotism of the mindless, in uniform or out, who would beat me up and treat the woman who was with me as though she were the lowest of untouchables. For the first time in my life I felt that no force jeopardized my right, my power, to possess and to protect a woman; for the first time, the first time, felt that the woman was not, in her own eyes or in the eyes of the world, degraded by my presence. (876)

Those definitions that had been imposed and internalized in America could be discarded in France, and these two expatriates, free of their cultures, could simply be themselves.

Ironically, the narrator must return to America soon after this revelation, to attend his mother’s funeral. During his ship journey, he is among large numbers of white Americans for the first time in four years, and he is both fascinated and repelled by them. They are friendly toward him, but “It was a friendliness which did not suggest, and was not intended to suggest, any possibility of friendship” (877). As by this time he has become a minor celebrity, at least among “penniless French students,” he is asked to sing for his fellow passengers and, he finds them “ready to be pleased:

I found in their faces, as they watched me, smiling, waiting, an artless relief, a profound reassurance. Nothing was more familiar to them than the sight of a dark boy, singing, and there were few things on earth more necessary. It was under cover of the midnight fiction that I was unlike them because I was black, they could stealthily gaze at those treasures which they had been so mysteriously forbidden to possess and were never permitted to declare. (878-9)

This is in line with Baldwin’s statement that “oppressed and oppressor are bound together” (“Everybody’s” 17), mutually dependent. White Americans, Baldwin claims, have suppressed and made shameful many of their most important desires, and projected them onto black Americans—thus the need for black Americans to be defined as “other,” so that they can bear these “treasures.” And yet these dangerous desires persist, making black people both valued (at least when they can be safely sentimentalized as entertainers) and feared. We see this in a very negative “return of the repressed” in “Going to Meet the Man,” the title short story of the collection which includes “This Morning, This Evening, So Soon,” in which the viciously racist deputy sheriff Jesse cannot achieve an erection without imagining a lynching he witnessed as a child, when his father forced him to watch the hanging, castration, and burning alive of the black victim, an action which resembles a ritualistic scape-goating. To have the abandoned, wild, satisfying sex that he desires, he must force himself on black women, or imagine himself to be black, whispering to his wife, “‘Come on, sugar, I’m going to do you like a nigger, just like a nigger, come on, sugar, love me just like you’d love a nigger’” (950).

For the narrator of “This Morning, This Evening, So Soon,” even the shallow friendliness of his fellow passengers is confined to its own location, and lasts only for the duration of the journey. He may be able to dance with white women on board the ship, in the transition between Europe and America, but once America is within sight, things change. “Was it my imagination or was it true that they seemed to avoid my eyes? A few people waved and smiled, but let me pass; perhaps it would have made them uncomfortable, this morning, to try to share their excitement with me; perhaps they did not want to know whether or not it was possible for me to share it” (879). And as he finishes his breakfast,

I tipped my waiter, who bowed and smiled and called me “sir” and said that he hoped to see me on the boat again. “I hope so, too,” I said.

And was it true, or was it my imagination, that a flash of wondering comprehension, a flicker of wry sympathy, then appeared in the waiter’s eyes? (879-80)

The ship’s waiter is a sort of expatriate as well, a dweller in the transition state between places, and as such may consider himself closer to his fellow expatriate than to most of his other customers, regardless of skin color.

As they move into the harbor, the other
passengers excitedly looking at New York, the narrator feels his alienation keenly. “I watched their shining faces, and wondered if I were mad. For a moment I longed, with all my heart, to be able to feel whatever they were feeling, if only to know what such a feeling was like. As the boat moved slowly into the harbor, they were being moved into safety. It was only I who was being floated into danger” (880). The Statue of Liberty which enthralls the other passengers is to him “an ugly joke.” When he faces customs agents, they practically interrogate him, subtly threatening. Another uniformed man, red-faced and sweating, calls him “boy.”

He is home, dislocated and shaken, already desperate to earn enough money to return to Harriet. To do so, he must spend a summer working in his Alabama hometown, avoiding or trying to placate the police who will “take you in and beat you, just for fun” and the white people who “kept saying, I hope you didn’t bring no foreign notions back here with you, boy. And I’d say, ‘No sir,’ or ‘No ma’am,’ but I never said it right. And there was a time, all of them remembered it, when I had said it right. But now they could tell that I despised them [...]” (889). As in the Southern idiom, he has grown “too big for his britches”—to the white people, it means that he doesn’t know his place anymore, and has become a disruptive element, threatening the stability of a society that depends on an oppressed underclass to perform hard, low-paid, unskilled labor. For the narrator, having grown too big means only that he has become a man who can see clearly what his society really is, and cannot stand any longer to live in a place where he is treated like a child.

But even after returning to Paris, he cannot leave America behind. Back in the present, eight years after his summer in Alabama, the narrator meets his French friend, the film director Vidal who made him famous. When the narrator claims to have escaped America, older Vidal laughs and asks, “Do you really think you have escaped anything? Come. I know you for a better man than that” (884). They discuss how, in playing the role of Chico in Vidal’s film, the narrator was able to turn out an acclaimed performance only after Vidal almost cruelly forced him to draw upon his suppressed rage at his time in America. It is possible to leave one’s home, to gain perspective with distance, even to become unfit ever to be more than a visitor there again, but it is never left behind. Dislocation, positive or negative, does not mean escape.

Going out together for a last night on the town before the narrator and his family leave Paris, Vidal takes him to a jazz club, where they meet four African-American students, newly arrived and charmingly excited at the beginning of their own exile. Ironically, the French no longer leave the narrator alone—he is now a celebrity, and when the club starts to play his songs, the group retreats to a sidewalk café, where they meet Boona, a Tunisian former prize fighter and acquaintance of the narrator. Another expatriate, Boona’s dislocation is the only one that is truly tragic in this story. As a colonial, he suffers from the racism that the narrator has escaped, and he is unable to find work. Unlike the narrator’s positive, healing loneliness, his is painful—nearly all the North Africans in Paris are men, and no other women will have him. He is the negative reflection of the narrator, a reminder that the narrator is fortunate in being able to experience dislocation in a positive way. Robert Tomlinson describes European expatriation for African-Americans as ironic, “taking refuge in the maw of the lion, for through its history of slave trading and colonization, Europe is the very source of that subject’s original alienation” (142). The narrator is fortunate that the lion doesn’t recognize him as prey. For Boona, the lion bites.

Boona steals some money from one of the students and refuses to admit it. Because of his own background, the narrator feels that he can understand Boona, but this makes communication all the more difficult:

I want to say, I know you steal, I know you have to steal. Perhaps you took the money out of this girl’s purse in order to eat tomorrow, in order not to be thrown into the streets tonight, in order to stay out of jail. This girl means nothing to you, after all, she is only an American, an American like me. Perhaps, I suddenly think, no girl means anything to you, or ever will again, they have beaten you too hard and kept you out in the gutter too long. (905)

It is impossible to say these things without robbing Boona of the last vestiges of his pride, all he has. All the narrator can do is tell Boona that he believes him, and allow the party to break up.

The story ends with the narrator returning home to his family. His concierge, who has been babysitting his son, remarks on their upcoming journey “all the way to the new world” (907). He muses on this phrase as he ascends in the elevator, but without any commentary, leaving the reader wondering whether he thinks of it as positive or negative. America is his old world, but
perhaps this triumphant return to singing engagements and Hollywood films, and perhaps with his wife and son to help him see it with new eyes, he will be able to make it his new world, too.

Works Cited


