African Americans and Colonialism: James Baldwin’s Essays in the Era of the Civil Rights Movement

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The proliferation and growing influence of “post-colonial”\(^1\) theory and practice on the “Third World”\(^2\) literature in recent decades seems significant in that it has provided new and rewarding perspectives for the critics of American literature, enabling the latter to explore so far neglected and hidden aspects of literary texts. According to Ashcroft et al., the literature of the United States has been rarely studied in terms of its “post-colonial nature” because of its “neo-colonizing role” and its “current position of power”\(^2\). This diagnosis still seems pertinent and to discuss America’s colonial past or “postcoloniality” would not be meaningless, either. Yet, I am much more interested in understanding what it has really meant to live as African Americans in the United States. Focusing on how Baldwin’s essays reflect some crucial ideas about decolonization discussed by many “Third World” writers, I will explore James Baldwin’s essays mostly published during the turbulent years of the civil rights movement and during the following years of disillusion in the post-civil rights movement era.

Precisely speaking, Baldwin’s escape to France in 1948 was not a case of a colonial subject visiting the center of the empire. He had to escape his own country for other reasons. As a black homosexual, his identity was severely threatened by the social atmosphere of the post-

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\(^1\) A simplified distinction between “colonial” and “postcolonial” based on the moment of political independence would be blind to what can be called “neocolonial” domination by the former colonial powers. For more details on the meanings or ambiguities embedded in these terms, see Ashcroft et al. For a comment on the postcolonial cultural practices in Africa and their appropriation by the West, see Appiah. And for an interpretation of colonialism in general, particularly in the post–Cold war era, see Miyoshi.

\(^2\) I use the term “Third World” to refer, above all, to those African, Asian, Caribbean, and Latin American nations which had been under the European colonial rule, and which were mostly liberated after the end of the Second World War.
war period, especially by its political conservatism and conformism. Being an African American, he was not blind to the reality of the French colonialism and its particular impact on him. His experience as an exile in Paris was crucial to his development as a writer because, among other things, it made him see the general picture of colonial oppression. In Paris, this awakening arose out of his encounter with two groups of people who were dislocated from their homelands, namely Africans and Algerians.

In his short story “This Morning, This Evening, So Soon,” which was first published in 1960 and later collected in Going to Meet the Man (1965), Baldwin deals with the relations between the French and the Algerians. The protagonist of the story is an African American singer who established himself in Paris. Having stayed in Paris for twelve years, he and his family—his son and his Swedish wife—are ready to leave for America. At the final moment of preparation for the trip back to America, he comes to ruminate on the fate which his son, as a colored boy, will have to face in the States. Baldwin’s permanent concern for racial discrimination at home is revealed in this story, whose protagonist is politically awakened by the struggles of the Algerians against the French. Although Baldwin himself used to associate Paris with its free atmosphere, he could not avoid witnessing the hostility of the French toward the Algerians. The misery of the Algerians reminded him of his fellow African Americans, who were struggling against racism. The Algerians in Paris were considered inferior people by the French to such an extent that, in Baldwin’s own expression, “not even the dirty, rat-faced girls” were willing to go with an Arab. Baldwin portrays the Algerians he knew in Paris with great sympathy, but it would be problematic to expect him at this point to analyze their situation properly. Baldwin’s American citizenship appears to have protected him from the kind of discrimination that the Algerians in France had to face. For this reason, Baldwin found himself in a rather ambivalent position, which led to his alienation from both the Algerians and the French. In fact, Baldwin’s view of Paris, as both the center of French imperialism and the city of his personal salvation, is thinly disguised as that of the protagonist in the story. The presence of the Algerians in Paris eventually led Baldwin to move away from his initially disinterested position because the reality of oppression in this supposedly “free” city reminded him of the racial situation at home.

The essayist Baldwin approaches the same issue from a far more criti-