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Review of Magdalena J. Zaborowska, James Baldwin's *Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile*.

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Magdalena J. Zaborowska, *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009. 416 pp. ISBN 9780822341670.

Reviewed by Keith B. Mitchell, University of Massachusetts at Lowell

Over the last few decades, a number of books have explored James Baldwin's expatriate life (some would say, self-imposed exile), particularly in post-World War Two Paris. Comparatively speaking, however, scant attention has been paid to an equally important expatriate period in Baldwin's life: the volatile decade between 1961 and 1971, during which he spent most of his time in Turkey. Baldwin scholars such as David Lemming, a close friend and author of the definitive biography, *James Baldwin: A Life* (1994); James Campbell, in *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin* (1991); William J. Weatherby in *James Baldwin: Artist on Fire: A Portrait* (1991); and Fern Maria Eckman in *The Furious Passage of James Baldwin* (1967): all emphasize the importance of Baldwin's years in Turkey but do not argue as cogently as Magdalena J. Zaborowska for their importance in understanding Baldwin and his work from the 1960s until his death in 1987. In contrast, Zaborowska's *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile* both argues for and contextualizes the profound influence that living in Turkey had on Baldwin and his work during and after this decade. Using never before seen photographs, letters, and original interviews with artists and intellectuals who, in many ways, became as close to Baldwin as his own family, *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade* provides a detailed examination of Baldwin and his development as an artist and social and political activist in other parts of the world where he spent a transformative period of time. Baldwin's Turkish decade, Zaborowska effectively argues, helped him in many ways to re-define himself in light of the political and social turmoil taking place both in the United States and abroad, over a ten-year period that encompassed one of the most sweeping social movements in the history of the West—the Civil Rights Movement—and its aftermath, the Black Power Movement, in the United States. These two movements would test black and white America's moral strength and would force white Americans, in particular, to reevaluate race relations in the United States. Baldwin understood this, even though he was living in Istanbul, Turkey, thousands of miles away from its epicenter.

One would think that because Baldwin chose exile in Turkey during this turbulent decade that his concerns about what was happening in America, especially to black Americans, would be as far removed as the distance of land and ocean between America and Turkey. Although, as Zaborowska brilliantly shows, exile for Baldwin was not completely utopic, it "gave Baldwin a unique outsider-participant perspective on his country and the world" (18). To be sure, Baldwin still had to deal with racial issues, even among those Turkish artists who became his dearest friends. Moreover, Zaborowska notes that while visiting the city of Erdek, Baldwin was severely beaten by a street performer: "a magician" and his assistant entrapped a naked Baldwin and called him a "nigger queer" during the attack" (13). The beating was so brutal that he had to be seen by doctors at the local hospital. She adds, though, that Baldwin's attackers were themselves "taken care of" by people in the village who loved and respected Baldwin. (What strikes one is not only the bizarreness of this story but also the fact that Zaborowska does not attend to salient details. What specific incident served as a catalyst for the attack? How did it come to be that he was found naked by his rescuers? What was the fate of his attackers? Much is implied in her unpacking of this incident, but nothing clearly elucidated.) In addition to the potential threat that Baldwin, as a black gay man, faced from strangers in Turkey, Zaborowska points out that even

his close Turkish friends "referred to [Baldwin] as 'Arap Jimmy' or 'Arab Jimmy'"; she goes on to explain, though, that unlike a racial slur the term "means that a difference in appearance has been noted but that this fact does not have further consequences for the person's everyday life as it does in the American context" (13). While she never divulges Baldwin's response to this nickname, she does show that even in a less orthodox race-conscious Turkish context, for black expatriates like Baldwin, the notion of race posed different but equally vexing questions.

One might surmise that this epithet, "Arap Jimmy," would have had *some* effect on Baldwin's sense of a renewed self during his exile in Turkey. However, in her discussion of Baldwin's encounters with racism and homophobia while in Turkey Zaborowska emphasizes that as a black homosexual man his situation was far more comfortable, far more tolerable, than what he would have routinely encountered in America. In Turkey, "He was noticed because he was black, but he was left alone because he was American" (87). With regard to Baldwin's sexuality, Zaborowska suggests that perhaps part of the reason why Baldwin felt so comfortable in Turkey was that homosociality among men was not frowned upon: "young men had no shame in touching one another" and that "homosexuality was quite common and, in its underground form, accepted without fuss" (14). Being away from home "made him one of the most powerful critics of twentieth-century American culture precisely because he embraced the mixed blessing of his condition" as a black American homosexual artist-intellectual "from another country" (18). Consequently, his exile in Turkey, similar to his exile in Paris and Switzerland in the mid-twentieth century, led to one of the most productive periods of his life as artist and activist. Although *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile* deals acutely with issues of (homo)sexuality, the book does not consider in great detail prescriptive gender roles for women and men. In terms of women's roles, Zaborowska focuses primarily on Baldwin's relationships with female Turkish artists (successful and generally of a higher class status—for example, the feminist journalist, Zeynep Oral) who have far fewer restrictions than those imposed on their village counterparts.

Baldwin's artistic growth could not have occurred if he had not been surrounded by his close friends who were also aspiring and well-established artists. Zaborowska writes in great detail about numerous Turkish artists with whom Baldwin collaborated during his Turkish decade. Friends such as Engin Cezzar, whom Baldwin actually met in New York in 1956 and who was cast as Giovanni in the New York stage production of *Giovanni's Room* (1956), and later in Turkey, Cezzar's wife, the actress Gülriz Sururi, who became one of Baldwin's closest friends and confidants, kept Baldwin not only entertained during his stay in Turkey but also intellectually stimulated. Zaborowska devotes more than an entire chapter to Baldwin's collaboration with Cezzar, Sururi, and dozens of other artists who were intimately involved in the wildly successful production of *Düşenin Dostu*, the Turkish translation of John Herbert's 1967 play *Fortune and Men's Eyes*. Despite the fairly progressive, artistically open-minded atmosphere that Turkey provided for Baldwin and company, the play's focus on male homosexuality in a prison setting prompted Baldwin to fear trouble from the authorities, "[and he was] worried that Gülriz and Engin would lose money or have their [or his own] reputations damaged" (180); not because the play, for him, revolved around homosexuality but because the play might well be panned by theater-goers and critics alike (180). Fortunately, "It was the hit of the year . . . a milestone in the history of Turkish theater" (180). The play went on to tour even in small outlying villages, and was wildly successful; villagers understood the message of the

play—exploitation, violence, and "the prison could be anywhere" (181). Zaborowska dazzles the reader with arresting photographs and film stills of Baldwin and some of the primary players during his life in exile. Few were more important to Baldwin during this period than his friend, often-mentor, actor, and artistic collaborator, Sadat Pakay. Pakay, Zaborowska maintains, was instrumental to her understanding Baldwin in Turkey, as Baldwin and Pakay were to each other.

Zaborowska makes her point clear in her introduction to the text, "From Harlem to Istanbul," by quoting from a rare moment captured on film at the beginning of Baldwin's sojourn in Turkey: "like no other existing documentary, the black-and-white film captures the profound paradox of Baldwin's transatlantic vantage point by showing how he both belongs and remains an outsider in the teeming half-European, half-Asian Turkish metropolis" (1). Zaborowska's description of Baldwin in this setting is an apt metaphor for the psychological double consciousness that W. E. B. Du Bois espouses in *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903). This foreign setting, which felt both familiar and alien to Baldwin, allowed him to process even more deeply the ambivalent feelings he had about being a black American; living in Istanbul gave him room to breathe. In many ways, as Zaborowska demonstrates in her provocative descriptions, Istanbul reminded him of Greenwich Village, New York—home—without, for the most part, the monumental pressures of race bearing down on his already burdened shoulders. Istanbul presented Baldwin a gift—a site in which he could write as an artist unencumbered (as he was in America) by the vicissitudes of race prejudice. For a reader who may be unfamiliar with Baldwin's earlier life in New York and Europe, Zaborowska provides a keen sense of the desperation that he felt as he attempted to become the artist he wanted to be. She shows us that his time in New York, Paris, and Switzerland proffered the landscapes "where he first learned 'how to see'" (5) not only himself as a human being but also how the white world viewed him and other people of color. Zaborowska claims that her text falls outside of Paul Gilroy's work on Black Atlantic transnationalism; however, I would answer that *Turkish Decade* actually expands upon Gilroy's work because it shows that the Black Atlantic extended far beyond what Gilroy covers in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1992); for, Baldwin in Turkey and elsewhere "desire[ed] to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity" (Gilroy 18).

The next three chapters focus on various aspects of Baldwin's life in Turkey. Chapter One presents Zaborowska's methodology in her search for the truth about how and why Baldwin came to live in Turkey from 1961-1971. In some ways, this chapter is as much about Zaborowska's search for Baldwin's Turkey as it is about Baldwin's presence there. Chapter Two tackles the questions of Baldwin's homosexuality and queer culture in Turkey in general and how Baldwin's artistic intentions, his gay identity, as important as his race and nationality, registered among his friends and lovers. It also touches on the Turkish location's influence on Baldwin's artistic output, most notably his novel *Another Country* (1962) and his plays *Blues for Mr. Charlie* (1964) and *The Amen Corner* (1968). Chapter Three focuses on Baldwin's desire to be taken seriously as an internationally renowned playwright and the trouble-ridden but ultimately successful staging of a Turkish adaptation of John Herbert's controversial prison play *Fortune and Men's Eyes* (1967), translated into Turkish as *Düşenin Dostu*. In Chapter Four, Zaborowska returns to Baldwin's responses to unsettling political happenings in the United States. She concludes with an assessment of "the Turkish decade's" influence on Baldwin's continuing interest in playwriting and the theater, recounting the production of Baldwin's *The Welcome*

Table (1987), a play "which was [actually] begun in Istanbul around 1967" (249), as well as the profound impact that Baldwin's Turkish exile had on another notable form of political expression, his essays.

Chapter One, "Between Friends: Looking for Baldwin in Constantinople," addresses the deep, life-long friendship between Baldwin and the Turkish artist and intellectual, Sedat Pakay, who was still a teenager and who found Baldwin "very different from what I had envisioned" (31). Instead of an "an angry man, difficult and imposing" (31), Pakat found "Jimmy" to be warm, kind, and very loving. Zaborowska goes on to explain how she first encountered Pakay and what that meeting meant to her in terms of her intense interest in Baldwin's Turkish decade. Zaborowska, who was born in Poland and who now lives and teaches in the United States, shows the reader how attuned she is to Baldwin's feelings of exile and how her life's story connects with his. She learns a great deal about Baldwin from Pakay's short film *Baldwin: From Another Place* (1973).

Indeed, in this chapter she offers a close reading of the film in order to explore the milieu in which Baldwin found himself in the early 1960s and to explain his need for exile, his relationship with Pakay, a straight man, as well as his relationship with other Turkish artists during this time. She concludes that "Baldwin's take on his Turkish exile as a badly needed space for work and reflection is clear in the [film's] monologue on the complexities of his entrapment as an American" (35). In other words, Baldwin, in order to see his artistic endeavors come to fruition, had to find an environment in which he felt human. That is, he needed to live and work in an environment in which his powers as artist and "prophet" could flourish, even if physically he was not rooted in his native soil. Rather than continue as a stranger in his homeland surrounded by those who would refuse his (and in general African Americans') humanity and his right to live freely, Baldwin, Zaborowska contends, needed to feel the "luxury" of living as a stranger in a strange land, surrounded by those who loved him for himself and who would judge him based on the content of his character rather than the color of his skin. Besides Pakay, Engin Cezzar "with whom Baldwin . . . shared accommodations when they first met and worked on staging *Giovanni's Room* in New York in 1956" (41), was instrumental in Baldwin's continued development as a writer, especially as a playwright, while in Turkey. Cezzar became one of Baldwin's primary caregivers and made sure that the time he spent there was artistically and intellectually rewarding, as well as relaxing.

In her quest for Baldwin in Turkey, Zaborowska ruefully notes that during her initial research, she discovered that almost all of the buildings that Baldwin resided in or frequented when he lived in New York had been torn down, but that "all the buildings in which Baldwin lived in Istanbul still stand," today (43). This, of course, says a great deal about America's throw-away culture, not only in terms of its architecture but also in terms of its disregard for artists and intellectuals, like Baldwin, who gave so much to America, even as it summarily rejected his efforts. Cezzar, the straight man married to Turkish actress and director Gürliz Sururi, did not reject Baldwin because of his sexuality but instead embraced him for being the person he was. Neither Cezzar nor Pakay was threatened by Baldwin's homosexuality; and in turn, through them, Baldwin cultivated deep and lasting friendships with men, straight and gay, which encouraged him throughout his life and allowed him to write and, just as importantly, to survive.

Chapter Two, "Queer Orientalisms in Another Country," largely documents Baldwin's time in Turkey finishing his novel *Another Country* (1962). Zaborowska deftly shows the influences that Turkey and Turkish culture had on the novel in terms of Baldwin's final conception of it and his thematic concerns: "The stories by those who witnessed his arrival in Turkey and lent editorial and moral support as he was finishing the manuscript," Zaborowska observes, "confirm the importance of Istanbul as a location and lens through which we should reassess this work today" (91). Given the opportunity to write *Another Country* in Turkey, a milieu that Zaborowska reveals as much more progressive in regard to homosexuality (more so than today), Baldwin discovered the freedom to become a "black queer writer" (93) and to fully articulate his "insistence on the indivisibility of race and sex and their dependence on location and migration" (93). In a close reading of the novel, Zaborowska not only demonstrates the subtle tropes and themes that parallel his time in Turkey but also squarely places Baldwin—with his insistence that racial and sexual oppression are generally two halves of the same coin—at the vanguard of the Gay Liberation Movement. In short, the rights and freedoms that African Americans were fighting for in the United States coincided with the rights and freedoms that many gay activists were struggling to obtain during this time. In addition, as a queer black writer, Baldwin challenged those African Americans aligned with the Black Power Movement whose rhetoric against him and other black queer activists, like Bayard Rustin, curtailed their full participation in the Civil Rights Movement. Many participants in the Black Power Movement did not see parallels between *their* oppression of queer African Americans and American society's general oppression of other black Americans.

Chapter Three, "Staging Masculinity in *Düşenin Dostu*," charts Baldwin's commitment to and the trajectory of the production of *Düşenin Dostu*, staged in 1969 and 1970 at the Sururi-Cezzar Theatre in Istanbul. It is a play, in part, about "prison homosexuality" (142), but on a transcendent level, Baldwin's philosophy "that all men are brothers, and that what happens to one of us happens to all of us" reverberates throughout the work (141). This is part and parcel of what critics have called Baldwin's philosophy of love—that despite his justified anger with American hypocrisy—Baldwin's oeuvre, no matter the genre, is about love. This chapter highlights Baldwin's thoughts on theater and the kind of "theatrical productions that he would prefer that Americans embraced" (143). Baldwin's work on *Düşenin Dostu* helped tremendously when it came to his own theatrical endeavors and his desire that theater should be "'truthful' and [politically] engaged" (143). One can see this in Zaborowska's sharp analysis of *The Amen Corner* and *Blues for Mr. Charlie*, plays that were not immediately embraced in America; nor were they particularly box-office successes. This chapter strikingly manages to convey the fever-pitch of activity that went into the production and eventual staging of *Düşenin Dostu*—which a number of times during its conception almost did not come to fruition; the meticulous details relayed through her scrupulous research are evident. She gives us a clear sense, too, of Baldwin's struggle: his desire to focus on his art and success in the theater weighed against his desire to be in America directly involved with the black struggle for civil rights. This conflict often hindered a more open reception to his work, especially in the United States. The accompanying photos that illustrate this chapter, many of which have never before appeared in print, work together to document the strange, wonderful, and frustrating *zeitgeist* of this period of Baldwin's artistic and political development.

Chapter Four, "East to South: Homosexual Panic, the Old Country, and *No Name in the Street*," addresses Baldwin's reception at home during his time in Turkey and his return in 1970. The treatment that Baldwin received from many so-called black leaders during the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement, Zaborowska shows, was absolutely shameful; she notes that "Baldwin was buried by many of his compatriots well before his death" (200). Yet, even as *persona non grata* in America, Baldwin did not abandon his country—he refused to abandon America—despite America's abandonment of him and African Americans in general. This chapter explores and assesses Baldwin's relationship to the struggle for civil rights in America, especially in the South. Zaborowska links the South's panic concerning race with a national and transnational panic preserved in America over homosexuality, and she asserts that the essays in *No Name in the Street* (1972) which, in large measure, deal with these issues, could not have been written if not for Baldwin's sojourn in Turkey. She observes: "Structurally, *No Name in the Street* works somewhat like the stage design that Baldwin insisted upon for *Düşenin Dostu* More than in any of his earlier essays, he was intent on showing how and where we live matters, that the planned organization of our communities goes hand in hand with the segregation of our bodies, minds and desires, and that this in turn enforces a national system of racist and heterosexist prohibitions" (218).

In "Welcome Tables East and West," Zaborowska concludes with a contextualization of Baldwin's transnational literary, political, and cultural legacy. Baldwin's Turkish decade was instrumental in how he saw himself and his home country once he returned to the United States. He recognized that, despite the "successes" (as well as the promises and disappointments) of the Civil Rights Movement, there remained much work to be done. The image of "the welcome table," the title of his last play, symbolizes a space where those outside of and within the margins can come together to share what is human in all of us—the good, the bad, and the ugly—without resorting to condemnation and violence against one another; to examine: "the power and the glory and the limitless potential of every human being in the world" (259), based on love and a profound respect for human differences.

Zaborowska's respect and love for Baldwin shines through this heartfelt and provocative book. Her sympathies and interest in Baldwin stem from feelings about her own self-imposed exile from her native Poland. As an intellectual exile, her "autobiographical intrusions" (xx) in the book allow the reader to experience two journeys—one in which Zaborowska searches for a better, more comprehensive understanding of Baldwin during his Turkish decade and, two, a better more comprehensive understanding of herself. Her personal introjections in the text give the reader a sense of immediacy that complements her close, critical analysis of Baldwin's Turkish decade. She permits the reader access to her conversations with many of the people whom Baldwin knew when he was in Turkey, very importantly, Engin Cezzar. She recounts Cezzar's generosity and affection upon meeting with her: "I was welcomed so warmly and generously that I felt as if I was a good friend, not an unknown Polish immigrant academic. Clearly, being serious about Baldwin opened doors and hearts in Istanbul" (45). By the end of the book, for Zaborowska and for the reader, Baldwin is not some enigmatic abstraction, but flesh and blood—our friend Jimmy.

James Baldwin's Turkish Decade: The Erotics of Exile is a model of interdisciplinary methodologies applied to biography. Zaborowska's employment of archival research, original

interviews, film and photography analysis, close readings of many of Baldwin's most important works, and her own sensitive affinity to and understanding of Baldwin and the problematics of exile set a high standard for future scholarship about him. Since his death, Baldwin's literary and cultural status, in the eyes of the American public, has waxed and waned, depending upon the political mood of the time. However, Zaborowska shows us that Baldwin will always be a man for all seasons; and his life and work not only testify to his artistic importance, but to his love for *his* people, no matter the country or cultural context.