

***James Baldwin's Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile*, Magdalena Zaborowska. Durham: Duke UP, 2008. (416 pages)**

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When, in 1961, a dispirited James Baldwin arrived on the doorstep of Engin Cezzar's Istanbul home, he inaugurated what would become a decade-long liaison with the Turkish metropolis. Misunderstood by both his supporters and detractors in the States, Baldwin's "Turkish decade," as Magdalena Zaborowska terms it, has often been dismissed as either a confounding inconsistency or a homoerotic romp, particularly by those who view Baldwin's later years as the dissolution of a once-great career (21). In arguing against these interpretations, Zaborowska makes the case for a closer examination of Baldwin's time in Istanbul, as well as a reevaluation of his later works.

In *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile*, Zaborowska uses a combination of biography and close readings to trace the influential role that Istanbul played in Baldwin's writing from the early sixties until his death over twenty-five years later. Specifically, Zaborowska claims, Istanbul provided Baldwin with a free space in which to work and a vantage point from which he could reevaluate life in America. Working against what she sees as the critics' tendency to divide Baldwin up, to "segregate the black writer from the gay writer and the novelist from the essayist," Zaborowska sets out to create a more holistic portrait of Baldwin by "placing Turkey at the center of his career" (27). Of primary concern is Baldwin's "embrace of . . . a 'queer' identity," something that Zaborowska writes "was sharpened and enabled by his Turkish exile," during which he was "free . . . from the American notions of race and sex" (6). It was in Istanbul, she argues, that Baldwin was able to fully develop his thoughts on "the intertwining of the erotic and race" (6), which, while met with skepticism by scholars at the time, has since become a mainstay of black queer studies (21-22).

Zaborowska's thesis is twofold: that Istanbul functioned as both "location and lens—a place to write from and one through which to see and reassess American culture" (93). Baldwin's visits to Turkey, she argues, had a significant impact on his work in both senses of that word: the act of working and the body of work his efforts produced. Istanbul, in other words, both enabled James Baldwin to write and left an indelible mark, "a distinct Turkish stamp," on what he was writing (xxiii). To support these claims, Zaborowska employs an array of local sources—interviews with Baldwin's friends and associates, unpublished letters, Turkish periodicals—as well as her own visits to the region and her exhaustive close readings of several key texts. Dividing her book into four principal chapters, Zaborowska begins by examining Baldwin's relationships, both professional and personal, with key members of Istanbul's artistic and intellectual elite; in each of the remaining three chapters, she

focuses on a major work produced by Baldwin in Turkey: his novel *Another Country*, his direction of John Herbert's play *Fortune and Men's Eyes*, and his book of essays *No Name in the Street*. By exploring the ways in which Istanbul functioned as a "freospace" for Baldwin, a "nurturing authorial lair" in which he was free (if only relatively) from the "public scrutiny and condemnation" his race and sexual orientation brought him in America (218), Zaborowska makes a compelling case for the first of her claims: that Turkey offered Baldwin a "haven" in which to write (7), "a safe space" from which he could "take on . . . contentious issues" and "confront his most disturbing memories" (195), including his 1957 visit to the American South and the 1946 suicide of his close friend Eugene Worth.

Zaborowska's second claim, however, that Baldwin's time in Istanbul not only facilitated the production of these works, but also "shaped [their] form and content" (xxii) is less well founded. While she does manage to show Orientalist fantasies at work in the minds of several characters in *Another Country*, it is not clear that these were influenced by Baldwin's firsthand knowledge of Istanbul. As stock "Orientalist clichés," they reflect the same stereotypes of the East as "exotic, erotic, and oversexed" (19) that Baldwin's own critics expressed and that he would certainly have been aware of before ever setting foot in the region. Ultimately, there is scant evidence of a "Turkish imprint" (xxii) on the texts themselves, and Zaborowska occasionally overreaches in her attempts to prove otherwise, at one point citing "the racially motivated beating" of two characters in *Another Country*—a scene which takes place in New York and includes no mention of Turkey—as "Baldwin's most immediate autobiographical link to Istanbul in the novel" (118-119). The text errs by omission as well: by neglecting to contrast Baldwin's time in Turkey with his more prolonged stays and eventual residency in France, for instance, Zaborowska leaves us wondering if Istanbul's most important quality for Baldwin wasn't simply that it was outside the U.S. What, in other words, did Istanbul have to offer that Paris, Saint-Paul-de-Vence, or even the Swiss town of Loeche-les-Bains, where Baldwin completed *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, did not? Similarly, by omitting any substantive discussion of his early work, Zaborowska fails to convey the exact nature of the transformation she claims was taking place in Baldwin's writing at this time.

Putting these criticisms aside, however, it must be noted that, while Zaborowska falls short of some goals, the significance of those she does reach is considerable. By calling attention to this vibrant yet understudied period in Baldwin's life, she demonstrates the need for a reevaluation of his later works, and particularly their contribution to black queer studies. Perhaps most importantly, this book prompts us to consider the "inextricable link between writing and location" (44) and to think seriously about the vital role safe spaces play in the work of writers on the margin—those, like Baldwin, whose challenge of authority places them at risk, and who must struggle, as he did, to find a haven in which to write.

Works Cited

Zaborowska, Magdalena J. *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile*. Durham: Duke UP, 2008. Print.