

ACKNOWLEDGING OTHERNESS

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The clickety-click of the departures sign cuts through the continuous murmur, as three trains switch to status “boarding.” I am overwhelmed by the sounds of the stampede of travelers rushing to get in line, a noise that begins to die down as the travelers feed into the descending escalators at the edges of the large room. Off the newly evacuated floors of Penn Station emerges a couple in their eighties, inching their way towards the tall information man standing to my right. The old man sports a freshly bought baseball cap with a crisp brim and an emblem that I do not recognize. It sits awkwardly on his head, too much space left at the top. I know that he has never worn a hat before.

Finally, the couple reaches the information man, and the husband takes a step forward, looking back at his wife a few times for reassurance. No words are spoken. All that I hear is the annoying static coming from the walkie-talkie attached to the information man’s waist. The old man continues to look back and forth from his wife to the intimidating stranger in front of him. I wait for a line of encouragement from the information man, a simple “Can I help you?” to relieve the obvious difficulty of this encounter. I grow angry at his unnecessary exertion of the little authority he has. The silence is eventually broken when the old man takes out his ticket, and pointing to it, says in broken English (it sounds like he is Hispanic), “I want to take this to Secaucus.” “Track 6,” says the information guard. This is his favorite terse reply.

The old man looks down at his ticket, “I also wanted . . .” but the information man has already turned his back, ignoring the request. We wait in vain for him to turn around. Defeated, the old man turns back to his wife. She motions a “Well? Go on . . .” gesture, the kind that mothers make when their sons are too scared to pay for candy at the register on their own. Gathering up what is left of his confidence, the old man speaks thickly to the information man’s back: “Where is track 6?” The information man turns around, and heaving a sigh of aggravation, points in the direction of the track. “Thank you,” the old man nods excessively and walks towards the gate with his wife.

I look back at the information man, who now shifts the weight back and forth from his heels to the balls of his feet. I try to detect any sign of remorse, but my attempts are futile, and soon I am wracked with a new preoccupation. I have always been aware of the diversity that makes up New York, and I had always believed that there was something about being a New Yorker that bridged the differences between diverse groups. But as I reflected on the way in which the information man purposely created distance between himself and the old Hispanic man, I began to see a different reality: perhaps New Yorkers create division between groups and establish an “other” (a person or group that opposes a certain ideal) as a tool of successful living. But what is

in the nature of “otherness” and in the nature of New York and its citizens that calls for this division? And what are the consequences, for both society and the individual, of acknowledging “otherness”?

My wishes for the interaction between these two men may very well seem overly romantic for what was just a momentary encounter in Penn Station. But I cannot help but think that my longing for contact is a natural feeling in this enormous and often cold city. In her essay “The Use of Sidewalks: Contact,” Jane Jacobs recognizes city dwellers’ “wishes for differing degrees of contact” as a catalyst for the social interactions among them (77-78). She asserts that the best kind of public contact arises in public settings, (sidewalks, for example), and emphasizes the futility and danger of attempting to achieve public contact through private interaction: “‘Togetherness’ is a fittingly nauseating name for an old ideal in planning theory. . . . The requirement that much shall be shared drives city people apart” (81). Jacobs’s disdain for private contact in the public sphere is highlighted through her example of a street in Baltimore that has no sidewalk public life and instead uses a sidewalk park as a primary location for private contact:

Still more distressing, when mothers of different income or color or educational background bring their children to the street park, they and their children are rudely and pointedly ostracized. They fit awkwardly into the suburbanlike sharing of private lives that has grown in default of city sidewalk life. The park lacks benches purposely; the “togetherness” people ruled them out because they might be interpreted as an invitation to people who cannot fit in. (83)

The words “rudely,” “pointedly,” and “ostracized” transform what might have been perceived as a mere distaste for “togetherness” into an unsettling representation of the discrimination that can arise out of this ideal. Jacobs’s representation of the benchless park emphasizes the thick irony of the exclusive “togetherness” of this Baltimore street. She senses the phoniness of this planned utopia, the manner in which by choosing to exclude members from its inclusive neighborhood, the inhabitants of these residences are in essence cheating, making the process of togetherness easier by avoiding the inherent difficulty of co-existence. By establishing the “other,” and making their inclusiveness exclusive, the residents achieve a powerful sense of belonging.

As I imagine this mother wheeling a stroller into the park, her clothes, her voice, her hair and her make-up a stark contrast to the park’s everyday visitors, I am reminded of the old Hispanic man with his broken English and too-new hat. I think of the “togetherness” people in the park, rudely complacent, and am reminded of the information man, who seemed to take advantage of the old man’s “otherness.” It is the old man and the visiting mother that give the information man and the Baltimore residents the identity they long for. As long as the former (out of place and visibly

awkward) is present, the latter can exert the little authority they have and celebrate their comfortable position of belonging. The suffering of the excluded “other” becomes a necessary component of the “togetherness” people’s contentment.

Like Jacobs, Joan Didion finds that the employment of the “other” masks unpleasant truths by establishing clear-cut, opposing forces. Didion argues, however, that the dangers of this concealment go beyond divisiveness and discrimination. In her essay “Sentimental Journeys,” she carefully examines the “sentimental narratives” (faulty and manipulative representations of public conflicts) that serve to “personalize and obscure” the real problems at the source of the city’s disorder (275). Presenting the case of Trisha Meili, the “Central Park Jogger” who was raped in 1989, Didion argues that the success of the case’s narratives arose out of the personalized and contrasting representations of the victim and her alleged attackers. She presents various headlines of newspapers following the case, “Teen Wolfpack Beats and Rapes Wall Street Exec on Jogging Path. Wolf Pack’s Prey. Female Jogger Near Death After Savage Attack by Roving Gang” (255), depicting the press’ insensitive portrayal of a helpless victim and the ravenous animals that allegedly attacked her.

In the simple narratives that evolved, the jogger became the image of everything that was right in the city (the “well-brought-up virgin,” the ivy graduate, the Wall-Street executive). The accused “by contrast, were seen as incapable of appreciating these marginal distinctions, ignorant of both the norms and accoutrements of middle-class life” (Didion 272). For the narrative to capture the peoples’ attention, it was not enough that the victim was the embodiment of success in the city. There had to be an opposing force, a person or group that challenged that ideal, so that the narrative could be distilled into a simple problem of good vs. evil, easily accessible to the citizens of New York.

Two “opposing visions” emerged. One “was of a city systematically ruined, violated, raped by its underclass. The [other] . . . was of a city in which the powerless had been systematically ruined, violated, raped by the powerful” (Didion 300). In using the exact same adjectives Didion illustrates that both opposing visions are as narrow as the narratives that sparked them. The personalization in the case of the Central Park Jogger allowed these groups to simplify the issues of race into problems of ravenous wolves and their prey. In doing so they were able to not only mask the complexities of the case, but also the economic crisis that was wrenching the city. The establishment of the “other” allowed New Yorkers to avoid confronting the real problems at the source of the city’s disorder, turning their attention instead to concerns that already had a set vocabulary and a familiar narrative and could thus be easily manipulated into the uncomplicated subjects that they were willing to address.

Didion’s concept of “sentimental narratives” is also reflected in James Baldwin’s “Notes of a Native Son,” a personal essay in which he paints with heart-wrenching detail his experience of growing up as an African American in the 1940s. In his retelling of the incident that sparked the Harlem riots (a black soldier’s fight with a white

policeman over a black woman that resulted in the shooting of the black soldier), Baldwin emphasizes that the story that spread throughout Harlem held little merit. He writes, “The facts were somewhat different—for example, the soldier had not been shot in the back, and was not dead, and the girl seems to have been as dubious a symbol of womanhood as her white counterpart in Georgia usually is” (110). This narrative, he suggests became a popular favorite among the inhabitants of Harlem because, “This invention expressed and corroborated their hates and fears so perfectly” (110). The similarity between the woman in Harlem and the Central Park Jogger moves beyond their common role of victim. Their glorified representations in their respective stories depict the “invention” that Baldwin offers as his own “sentimental narrative.” The personalization of the black woman as a chaste victim and the policeman as the “other”—and consequently the implicit distinction between black and white, good and evil—once again made the case into an accessible narrative for the silenced voice that had been waiting for a chance to speak. The story thus transformed into whatever the public wanted it to represent, the embodiment of the problems they were longing to address.

Baldwin also emphasizes that the popularity of these narratives is largely due to their ability to obscure personal strife. The establishment of the other created an environment where hate could be expressed freely, and sorrow driven into obscurity: “I imagine that one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, that they will be forced to deal with pain” (101). Like Didion, Baldwin illustrates how the narrative of the “other” allowed the people of Harlem to address their problems superficially, avoiding the internal pain that was at the root of their suffering. It was imagined, perhaps, that if the pain was simply ignored, or transferred into rage, it would begin to go away. Instead, the hate became a destructive force and served only to exacerbate the pain.

Despite these apparent similarities, however, Baldwin speaks of “otherness” in a way that sounds very little like Didion. He writes about acknowledging “otherness” from the perspective of an “other” and thus brings new dimensions to the meaning of the word. When he walks down the street after his confrontational interaction with a waitress, he becomes overwhelmed by his awareness of the differences that separate him from those around him: “People were moving in every direction but it seemed to me, in that instant, that all of the people I could see, and many more than that, were moving toward me, against me, and that everyone was white. I remember how their faces gleamed” (95). This is not the same “otherness” illustrated in Penn Station, a Baltimore sidewalk park, or the headlines of New York City newspapers. The “others” that Baldwin sees are not ostracized because they are different together; they are the majority. Baldwin, by contrast, represents the minority. Everyone walks together and “against” him, as he stands alone. He thus shares in the otherness of the old Hispanic man in Penn Station, the alleged rapists, and the awkward mother standing defenseless before the “togetherness” group.

Baldwin's perspective raises a consciousness that is not found in any of the other essays. The duality of his identity, expressed using a poignant first-person narrative, brings an added intimacy to his writing and allows him to articulate a vivid and convincing illustration of the dangers and pain that accompany "otherness." His writing exposes the conflict of a man deeply embedded in the subject he addresses, lacking the easy escape or comfortable distance that Jacobs, Didion, and I used to our advantage in our analysis of otherness. When I witnessed the episode in Penn Station, my pity emphasized the vast difference between the old-Hispanic man and myself. I could situate myself above him, looking down upon his personal struggle; take my acknowledgment of otherness and move on, perhaps forget about it in a couple hours and then revisit it later in writing. When Baldwin sees otherness in the white people that surround him, the results are far more consequential, for he sees the otherness that they see in him. The words "rage," "anger," "disease," "poison," and "hate" permeate his essay, rendering it with living emotion and urgency and conveying the almost incomprehensible burden of what it means to be the "other." Baldwin's writing thus exposes the true devastation that arises out of the creation of "otherness" in New York City.

It is thus the combinations of a large and indifferent city and its lonely inhabitants looking for belonging, overwhelmingly broad problems of race and economic crisis and fear of confrontation, and perhaps even a fear of the otherness that we see in ourselves that leads New Yorkers to establish a divide between themselves and the person or group that to them represents the "other." In this vast and complicated metropolis, it seems that the "other" has thrived in its ability to simultaneously include and exclude, reveal and obscure, for its multifaceted nature matches the multifaceted demands of the New York City citizens.

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