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## *Black Girl in Paris: Shay Youngblood's Escape from 'the last plantation'*

In making a pilgrimage to Paris and then setting her second novel there, Shay Youngblood joins a distinguished line of African American writers and artists who have left the U. S. for an extended stay in France.<sup>1</sup> For black male writers, like Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin, the choice was made not so much out of an admiration for the beauty of French culture or the depth of its history, all motivations of their white counterparts, but as an escape from racial discrimination in the United States. Because freedom from discrimination was their goal, black expatriate American writers have been more sensitive to European prejudices against people of color than their white expatriate counterparts. Earlier American white writers sometimes employed these very stereotypes, using their travel writing to differentiate the world's people into distinctive racial and ethnic groups, or national groups as Edith Wharton did in *French Ways and their Meaning* (1919). Some African American expatriates like Langston Hughes negotiated these stereotypes and lived out "the myth of being poor, American, and happy in Paris" by joining a pan-African expatriate community. Others, like James Baldwin, were "skeptical of the pan-African bond assumed by Du Bois, Hughes, and Wright." Baldwin pointed to the difference between African colonials and African Americans 300 years removed from their African homeland, with the result that he felt more isolated in Paris than earlier African Americans did. Baldwin firmly believed that black Americans might find in Europe liberation from the oppression of American color codes but with that liberation came "an introspective and aggravated solitude" both because European countries had initiated the slave trade to the Americas and because Europeans still treated black Americans as "an exotic presence, an embodiment of binary difference."<sup>2</sup> Baldwin meditates on this phenomenon in the essay "Stranger in the

Village,” and Nella Larsen poignantly fictionalizes the experience in *Quicksand* (1928), a novel about Helga Crane and her peripatetic journey from the American South to Harlem to Denmark and back as she struggles to find her home in the world.

And yet twentieth-century African American writers have shared with their white American counterparts the expectation that in Paris they would find a community of writers and artists. And to varying degrees each did. Much like Edith Wharton, African American writers viewed the French as a people who value art and creativity, the aesthetic and the intellectual.<sup>3</sup> And much like American writers from Hawthorne to Henry Miller, African American expatriates viewed Paris as an “outlet for repressed sexuality,” an unpuritanical place, which would allow, even encourage, people to live and love and create as they pleased.<sup>4</sup> In *Black Girl in Paris* (2000) these are certainly the hopes of Youngblood’s protagonist, Eden, a twenty-six year old black woman from Georgia. As a child Eden’s Aunt Vic broadens the provincial limits of her rural and strict religious upbringing by introducing her to the joys of reading, especially the stories of Langston Hughes. Unbeknownst to Eden’s parents, Vic teaches her to sing and dance, regaling her with tales of Josephine Baker and the “freedom” Paris would provide: “Free to live where you wanted, work where you were qualified, and love whom you pleased” (17). Thus Eden grows up thinking of living in Paris as a way to leave behind an old identity shaped in a place where her working class parents, who have not had the benefits of higher education, expect her college education to lead to a practical professional career, like nursing.

As Thadious Davis has pointed out, Eden does not travel to Paris primarily “to escape racial discrimination and racial oppression” as Baldwin, Du Bois, Hughes, and Wright did.<sup>5</sup> Instead, Eden sees such a move as a step away from the safe, respectable work in a museum that she takes after disappointing her parents by majoring in English, rather than nursing. She believes that a sojourn in Paris will provide a necessary first step toward a career in writing. Her view not surprisingly is a romantic one:

James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Gabriel García Márquez and Milan Kundera all lived in Paris as if it had been part of their training for greatness. When artists and writers spoke of Paris in their memoirs and letters home, it was with reverence. Those who have been and those who still dream mention the quality of the light, the taste of the wine, the *joie de vivre*, the pleasures of the senses, a kind of freedom to be anonymous and also new. I wanted that kind

of life even though I was a woman and did not yet think of myself as a writer.  
*I was a mapmaker.* (1-2)

One of Youngblood's starving artists sums up the feeling of the expatriate artists this way, "As bad as it is, some of us don't want to go back home. Here I am an artist; in Mexico, I am nothing. . . . When I was home I felt like I was already in exile. Like nobody understood the language I was speaking."<sup>6</sup> This feeling of being in exile in America and finding a 'spiritual home' in Paris echoes the sentiments of Gertrude Stein.<sup>7</sup> But Youngblood does not invoke Stein (or Wharton, both American women writers who went to Paris before her).<sup>8</sup> Eden is a "black girl in Paris," where race signifies more dramatically than gender although she comes to see they cannot be separated. While black female artists, such as Josephine Baker and Billie Holiday, have come to Paris before her, Eden thinks of herself as somewhat without a model because she is the first black woman writer there. When Youngblood puts Eden in the position of singing the blues in a Parisian club, Billie Holiday does not function as a creative foremother for Eden as she did for Alice Walker.<sup>9</sup> Instead Eden feels "defeated" on the very night that she becomes Billie Holiday "with every haunting look, roll of her hip, tap of her foot" (224) because she views herself through white European eyes: as the exotic other, the ubiquitous black entertainer of whites.

So it is not surprising that James Baldwin functions as Eden's model and inspiration, "her godfather," and that his Parisian novel, *Giovanni's Room* (1956), which she reads before she departs, serves as a warning not to live a life full of "regrets" and "fears" (34). Like Baldwin, Eden finds a sexual and creative freedom she did not experience in America; also like Baldwin, she discovers that her color prevents her from ever feeling fully at home in France. However, in an interesting regional rewriting of Baldwin's realignment of identification – he feels more American after his years in France, which is not to say he feels any less black – Youngblood significantly has Eden think more complexly about her identity as a southern black girl in Paris. It is this focus, not the novel's rather predictable theme that a writer needs to find and follow her own path, which I find most interesting about *Black Girl in Paris*. Youngblood structures the novel so that Eden has an episodic series of encounters with a variety of Parisians and expatriates, many of them from the U.S. South, and all of whom have had an encounter with James Baldwin or his work. Youngblood's purpose is dual – to explode Eden's romantic myth of Paris

as a city exemplary for its *liberté, égalité, et fraternité*, and to move Eden beyond narrow notions about black-white relationships and appropriate sexual partners that she has internalized because of her southern upbringing.

Thus when Youngblood playfully invokes the most famous southern writer who preceded her protagonist in Paris, William Faulkner, he appears as an aging gray wolfhound who belongs to a southern woman editor and her professor husband for whom Eden is an *au pair*. This Faulkner is symbolically “blind in one eye and nearly crippled with arthritis” (93), no longer the Dixie Limited roaring down literary history’s tracks, although clearly a literary predecessor of whom Eden and Youngblood, also from Georgia, are keenly conscious. On her evening walks with Faulkner, Eden thinks about writing, sometimes penning sentences in a notebook, as “Faulkner tries to keep up” with her (94).

From the first chapter of *Black Girl in Paris* Youngblood calls attention to similarities between postcolonial tensions in France and violence during the civil rights era in the U.S. South. This comparison works to name southern white violence ‘terrorism’ and to point up the similarities in racial and ethnic tensions that Youngblood herself experienced in France in the mid-1980s. Baldwin writes about tensions between the French and immigrants from Algeria; Youngblood about tensions between the French and the Lebanese and the Haitians as well as the North Africans. Her novel is set in 1986 when Lebanese terrorists were retaliating against the French for their involvement in the Middle East and when anti-apartheid activists protested French military support of South Africa. Drawing attention to daily life punctuated by violence, Eden writes in her journal, “I was no stranger to terrorism. . . . I was born in Birmingham, Alabama, where my parents witnessed the terror of eighteen bombs in six years” (5). Within days of Eden’s arrival in Paris, “four separate explosions” kill three people and wound 170 (7); the detonation of bombs punctuates the novel. When Parisian police beat a non-violent student protestor to death, a BBC newscaster compares the situation to student protests of 1968, but readers might easily draw an analogy to police turning dogs and fire hoses on peaceful demonstrators in Birmingham in 1963. While terrorist activity has made Eden’s plane ticket to Paris affordable, it has increased suspicion among the French people and the French authorities about people of color. As a result Eden, far from being objectified as an exotic like Josephine Baker, is discriminated against by French shopkeepers and viewed as suspect by the police.

Paradoxically it is Eden's American citizenship that protects her in France, even as it literally divides her from her friends of color who do not carry American passports. One night she is walking with two men, a white American jazz musician and a black Haitian who has no passport. After the police detain all three, the two Americans never see the Haitian man again; he becomes another of the seventeen hundred foreigners expelled from France as a threat to public order during the time period the novel covers (176). Simultaneously such experiences afford Eden the opportunity to 'witness' and to record the plight of people of color in Paris, as her predecessor James Baldwin had done in the U.S. South during the sixties. For Eden will go on to write the novel we are reading. Youngblood's examination of Islamic terrorism, of immigrant life (both legal and illegal), and of white suspicion bordering on hysteria at times places *Black Girl in Paris* in the most recent incarnation of American travel narratives about Europe. William Decker defines these works as a "complex, evolving adjustment of U. S. expectation to European realities," in which "the real France offers something quite different" not only from legend but from the experience of older generations of African American writers. Contemporary European countries face "consolidating economies, resurgent and militant ethnicities, a burgeoning Islamic community, a neo-fascist fringe, and strange appropriations of American pop culture,"<sup>10</sup> thus some Europeans have grown more nationalistic, less willing to absorb immigrants.

Youngblood's approach doubly defamiliarizes contemporary Paris, making it not only less French, but more like an earlier American South in its racial and ethnic tensions and its labor relations. As in the South, the division of labor in Paris is by race with black people doing the dirty work. When Eden is horrified by all the dog feces left in the street, rather than cleaned up by dog owners, her new French friend Delphine explains that there are 'people' whose job it is to clean the streets. Of course, they are black; it is immigrants from North Africa who pick up behind the pets of white natives. The pay scale is by race as well, with a French woman, Madame Fabre, offering Eden a wage that is just a bit more than half what she paid her previous au pair who was white. This situation reminds Eden of her mother's stories of being turned down for jobs or offered lower wages than advertised when a potential employer found out she was black. Madame Fabre's detailed description of round-the-clock duties and her husband's predilections for the female hired help remind Eden of slavery and the

South: "I was sad to have found that I wasn't so far from home after all" (118).

In Paris discrimination against people of color limits Eden's ability to find a spiritual home there and involves her in an old southern battle for her identity as an individual. Much like her idol James Baldwin, Eden discovers that living in Paris is neither romantic nor easy, not only because of overt discrimination against people of color but because stricter laws make getting a work permit difficult: "*Officially* the new laws were designed to contain the new wave of terrorism, *unofficially* they were created to keep out new immigrants" (60). As a result Eden is relegated to the type of work for which a work permit is not always needed: such as being an au pair and an artist's model and a tutor of English. While such work recalls the kind of work black workers have done for centuries in the U.S. using their bodies, not their minds,<sup>11</sup> Youngblood gives the same work to the young white women traveling abroad. Interestingly these young white women make distinctions between their French employers and the American employers, whom they say really do try to treat their au pair "like one of the family," riffing on the old saying that southern white employers used and, in the process, revealing their naiveté about black-white relationships. Significantly in *Black Girl in Paris*, it is the French employers, not the expatriates from the American South, who indulge themselves in such fantasies, proclaiming as Madame Fabre does to Eden that she treats her employees "like one of the family" (118).

Through Eden's encounters with white southerners in Paris, Youngblood illustrates a phenomenon that Baldwin articulated in *The Fire Next Time*, when he wrote that "the social forces which menaced me had become interior."<sup>12</sup> Black journalist and critical race theorist Njeri Itabari has recently named this interior space, "the last plantation," arguing that "even as we are victimized by the ethos of slave masters and their descendants, we often define ourselves and operate in terms that speak to the psychological slavery that leaves the mind the last plantation."<sup>13</sup> The mere fact that Eden is in France, however, literally takes her out of her usual place in southern society, but also out of her black community as well, thereby putting her in a physical position to break the ideological bonds of both. In France far from the burden of the South's racist history, Eden can choose a career, writing, which she had only dreamed of in Georgia, and engage in a sexual relationship with a white man and an infatuation with a black woman, neither of which she would have contemplated at home. As a result, she re-

thinks region and race and the very meaning of home. The Americans that Eden meets in Paris are almost all southerners, character choices that enable Youngblood to illustrate the tenaciousness of an internalized regional psychological slavery, even as she never loses sight of its contemporary social manifestations, both interpersonal and institutionalized.

The first white southerner Youngblood has Eden meet is a rather stereotypical one – provincial certainly, although not apparently racist. He is clearly a tourist, “in yellow plastic poncho and Western boots” (75), and Youngblood mocks him much as Henry James and Edith Wharton would have done. Eden hears his distinctive drawl before she sees him. He attempts to connect with her because he believes her to be like him, an American tourist, which indeed she is at that moment, making her first foray into the Louvre, and feeling “overwhelmed by its scale.” The man’s self-evident question – “That’s where they keep the Mona Lisa, huh?” – is blatantly a way of making contact with a fellow American in a country far from home, but Eden, who identifies herself as a “writer,” even though she has yet to put pen to paper in Paris, has no interest in being linked with a provincial “ugly American.” In no way is she cowed by him; in fact their encounter allows her a moment of superiority, “There’s a lot more than the Mona Lisa in there,” she retorts (75). There’s no sign of “the last plantation” mentality in such casual encounters with white people, whether they are gauche southerners as in this incident, presumptuous Americans, or prejudiced French people. Even though Eden is desperate, she has no trouble refusing to take the job as an au pair for the French woman who will treat her like a “slave” (116). Nor does she have any difficulty extricating herself from the materialistic American painter Charlotte Rockefeller, for whom she works briefly as an artist’s model, when Charlotte offers to “teach” her “how to act as if you own plantations” (81). Charlotte has seen Josephine Baker in the film *Princess Tam Tam* (1935) and decides to similarly transform Eden into a “black Rockefeller.” To be dressed in style, taught how to select fine wines and choose a china pattern is “not the kind of freedom” Eden came to Paris for (82). “Greedy for experience” and eager for mutuality in her relationships, Eden quickly moves on.

However, it is in more intimate relationships with white southerners that psychological slavery manifests itself. Eden’s first real job is as an au pair for twin girls of an American couple, he a philosophy professor and she the editor of a gourmet cooking magazine. While



the husband treats Eden like “the little sister of a friend from college,” Eden feels that the wife, who is from “an old-money Virginia family,” lavishes her “with attention as if trying to make up for her ancestors’ treachery.” It is not that this job as an au pair makes Eden think less of herself, but rather that she has difficulty judging her relationship with the southern wife: “In the beginning, I looked at her – thin, blonde, rich, the opposite of me – but hard as I tried I couldn’t see nothing but Miss Ann” (88). This woman is not identified by name, which suggests the stereotypical way Eden sees her at first. Youngblood allows readers to see the relationship somewhat differently; Eden’s “Miss Ann” is sometimes mother, sometimes friend. Eden is not particularly responsible as an au pair, losing the children twice, once when she is caught up in conversation with the previous au pair and a second time when her desire to participate in a student demonstration trumps her job to meet the children after school. The reader is never sure whether this American family keeps Eden on out of liberal white guilt or due to the difficulty of finding an English-speaking au pair in Paris or simply because the children adore her. Whatever the case, by the time the family returns to the U.S., Youngblood places Eden in a position not only of teaching the children black history and literature, but also of mellowing toward “Miss Ann”: “I have grown to like the girls and their parents, who are relatively liberal and have the best intentions” (106).

Compared to her relationship with an aging British poet, Elizabeth, for whom Eden had assumed she would be working as an amanuensis but ends up serving as a practical nurse – waiting on her “hand and foot, like a slave” (123) – Eden’s relationship with the woman from Virginia is not really one of mistress and servant. Significantly although the South’s history of race relations at first interferes with Eden’s ability to see “Miss Ann” clearly, this regional memory does not have the same effect on Eden’s contact with the British poet, who ironically calls to mind this very history: “She said to me once that in glory days I would have been presented to her as a gift, like a toy at Christmas or on her birthday, for her amusement, and she wouldn’t have had to pay so dear a price” (123). Working for Elizabeth reminds Eden that she has not lived up to her mother’s expectations: “My mother worked for white people all her life so I wouldn’t have to, she constantly reminds me” (124). While she does not want “to disappoint” her mother, Eden is willing to support herself so that she can achieve her three goals: meeting James Baldwin, writing a novel, and



falling in love. Working as a poet's helper she imagines will put her closer to the first two of these goals, than will working as an au pair.

Interestingly it is with this aging British poet, whose "accent is grand and elegant" (123) and whose apartment is in an "ornate building" (125), that Eden first self-consciously thinks of herself as southern, especially as regards her accent and manners. For Eden, her own accent connotes provinciality and lack of education when juxtaposed with the impeccable King's English of a British poet. As a result, Eden suppresses her southern accent in order to land the job. But she uses southern manners to her advantage in retaining her patience with the haughty Elizabeth, referring first to southern manners in general, but then specifically to how blacks employed them: "Southerners are known for having the most beautiful manners. My parents taught me that patience and good manners were tools for survival in the segregated South they grew up in, and I am learning that they are useful abroad as well" (124). Eden survives in this relationship because she feels in control; Elizabeth is in a wheelchair and needs her. Working for Elizabeth, Eden performs the unsavory chores that a slave might have so that she can gain information about Baldwin's whereabouts, all the time aware that, unlike a slave, she can walk away from the work on this particular Parisian plantation whenever she finds a better position.

Meeting a southern white blues trumpeter tests Eden's psychological slavery more severely than working for "Miss Ann" or Elizabeth. Hearing the "dark, blue, familiar notes" of "Do you know what it means to miss New Orleans...?," Eden falls in love with the sound of Ving's horn before she discovers that he is white. His music pulls her "home" to Georgia and makes her "miss home" (141-42). Ving is the only white person Eden encounters who produces this positive effect. White people, whether southern or not, negatively remind her of home, most especially of the South's racial history but also in the case of the British poet Elizabeth of its regional position as provincial Other to the nation. Only one other person makes Eden miss home, and he is Indego, a black poet from Texas, who comes to her aid shortly after her arrival: "His stories made me think about things I thought I'd forgotten. My father's apple-scented pipe, my mother's quilts, Aunt Victorine's copper-colored lipstick" (46). With Indego, home comes into view as a safe place, the security of family and the domestic comforts of daily life, not surprisingly since Indego serves as both a black anchor in a sea of white faces and a reassuring guide and traveling companion when she first arrives in Paris.

In contrast, with Ving the sense of home Eden experiences goes to her emotional core, site of her deepest passions and creative longings. Once she realizes that he is white, his warm southern accent, far from repelling her like the southern tourist's drawl, succeeds in keeping Eden interested long enough for her to find out that he not only has "soul" but, unlike anyone else, white or black, male or female, fully understands her creative desires (146). Indego has called her "soul sister" on first meeting Eden, appealing to their mutual blackness to begin their friendship. Her connection with Ving is on another plane, but he too must first pass the racial soul test, proving that he can feel the music as she does. While many people, including Eden, who hear Ving play his "soulful and sad" trumpet and watch the fluidity of his hips as he dances to the music of James Brown, wonder if he has "any African blood in him" (222), Youngblood, unlike such bestselling African American authors like Eric Jerome Dickey,<sup>14</sup> does not find any African American ancestors in his family tree. Her focus in this encounter is on the hybridity and mutuality of culture, rather than its racial exclusiveness. Eden has sung the blues as a young girl, but she does not know jazz. It is significant that Youngblood gives Ving, a white man but a true cultural son of New Orleans, the task of introducing Eden to an African American art form.

When Eden first contemplates going out with Ving, the burden of southern history overwhelms the regional cultural ties that draw her to him. She must overcome the "fear" of white men engendered in her by her father, who called them "white devils," and her mother, who warned her to trust no whites "but Jesus" (149). Eden must also overcome her own stereotypes, which make her wonder if Ving can dance. But because she is away from the South, away from the demands of family and friends, she feels "free" to act as she desires, rather than as her southern black community dictates: "I remembered that I was in Paris and there was no one to judge my actions, no one to remind me of my disloyalty to the race, to accuse me of losing my blackness, no one to remind me of the master-slave relationship. I was a free woman and could choose whom and what I wanted" (150). This is an example of the "unhomely moment" that Homi Bhabha defines in *The Location of Culture*: "The intervention of the 'beyond' that establishes a boundary; a bridge" that can make one aware of "the dangers of the fixity and fetishism of identities within the calcification of colonial cultures."<sup>15</sup> At first disoriented by the loss of racial absolutes, Eden finds that her world expands and she is enriched: "I felt that

another useless belief had died and that the road ahead of me was paved with new riches" (150).

But as soon as Eden attempts to free her imagination from the last plantation's slavery, Youngblood signals that the emancipation will not be an easy one. The African American poet Indego, who observes the progress of her encounter with Ving during the party where they meet, motions for Eden to come over to him, a sign Eden pointedly ignores, only later to be physically restrained by Indego, as if he thinks he were pulling her "away from the devil," as if she "belonged to him" (150). Although she leaves the party with Indego because she has come with him, Eden rapidly becomes romantically involved with Ving, and Youngblood makes their relationship seem like a perfect match – artistically, culturally, personally, even as regards both his and her androgynous appearance and possible bisexual orientation. Only Ving perceives James Baldwin's creative significance in the same way Eden does ("I think he is a king"); only Ving shares with Eden Baldwin's life-changing artistic advice to him: "'You got talent,' he said, 'but you sound like too many other people. You've got to make the music yours. Tell your own story with the horn'" (160). But Youngblood very quickly emphasizes that this interracial match is perfect only in the privacy of Eden's bedroom or Ving's apartment. On the same night that Eden feels for the first time in Paris as if "the world was all right" because she feels both "safe and new" with Ving (163), Youngblood tests their relationship. Sexually aroused by dancing together in a jazz club, Ving and Eden are on the way back to his apartment to make love when French youths throw bottles and yell offensive remarks – "*T'as vu, le pédé qui promène son chien noir. Look at the queer walking his black dog. Salope. Putain. Bitch. Whore*" (164). This encounter frightens Eden out of her sexual desire and sends her back to "the last plantation" out of a need for self-protection: "Those men hadn't cared that I was American, college-educated, and Christian; all they saw was the color of my skin. Back home, I still wouldn't be able to hold Ving's hand without inviting comment or threat. What made me think I could be free? He was a white man, yet he couldn't protect me here in Paris or any part of the world. What kind of future could we have together? What about our children, if we had any? . . . My sweet high was gone" (165). With this novel, Youngblood suggests the global reach of Itabari's "last plantation," and she figures blackness in France as a sign of the African and Islamic Other.

Although Ving and Eden's relationship does not end with this discouraging encounter, it seriously questions any possibility of a happily-ever-after trajectory. Significantly the next chapter introduces a new character, Professor May Day, a black novelist from Mississippi, whose famous Sunday sit-downs are racially segregated. With his overly suggestive name, Youngblood offers the distressed Eden a pan-African alternative to the stresses of interracial relationships. The southern food, such as cheese grits, is comforting; the jazz music by Miles Davis is familiar; sharing work in an African-American call and response pattern is reassuring; and the talk, Afro-centric, is nurturing. But Eden also finds Professor May Day's remarks "contradictory, sometimes illogical" (173), and his unwelcome pat on her thigh suggestive of a route home that she does not care to take. Eden's passionate reunion with Ving right after this segregated party recalls James Baldwin's 1960s refusal to join the pan-African community in France or to take a black nationalistic stance back home in the U.S. At the same time that Eden ignores Ving's marriage proposals in part because she has two more goals yet to fulfill in addition to falling in love, Youngblood simultaneously reminds readers that today when black people attempt to flee that "last plantation," the likelihood is high that not just a white person, but a person of their own race may try to bring them back. Even the young Haitian Olu-Christophe, allegedly Ving's best friend in Paris, objects to their interracial liaison (179).

But in this novel Ving, although not a soul brother, becomes Eden's soul mate, at least for a while. By arranging for Eden to sing with him and then by suggesting that she stay with his friends in St. Paul de Vence, Ving helps Eden earn much needed money and fulfill her remaining goals, of writing a novel and meeting James Baldwin. Significantly Ving is the only character, black or white, who actually tries to assist her in meeting Baldwin. Ironically when Eden discovers that Baldwin has left his home in St. Paul de Vence to return to Paris for a theater opening of *The Amen Corner*, she drowns her sorrows in her writing and produces the novel we are reading. At the end of *Black Girl in Paris*, Youngblood rewards Eden's creative efforts with a surprise visit from her "beloved" Ving, "as handsome as his music" (232), and a subsequent brief meeting with Baldwin on her last day in Paris. While readers do not know if Eden will ever see Ving again once she returns to Georgia, we do know that two southerners have had to go to Paris to discover that beneath their racial differences there are

regional similarities and creative connections. But in Paris, Eden also discovers what Baldwin did before her, that although one can relatively easily cross the cultural color line, skin color cannot be erased, and at the turn of the twenty-first century, it still conditions human interaction, not just in the U.S. South but in Europe as well, even in Paris.

At the same time that Youngblood points out the internal hurdles that Eden must overcome in order to escape "the last plantation" and the external barriers that she will encounter even if she does, Youngblood ends her novel on an optimistic note. Youngblood, not surprisingly, views writing as a route to discovery and understanding. Her novel is a *Künstlerroman* after all, a portrait of the artist as a black girl in Paris, who begins her quest dependent upon others (first a young French woman, then a black American expatriate, a white American couple, an aging British poet, a southern white man, and a black Barbadian woman) and concludes it with solitary self-examination. Eden's personal fears, which she must face before she can create, are "the maps of desire. Ving. The taste of need. Lucienne" (232). In experiencing forbidden desires, she resembles both the American protagonist in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* and the artist-protagonist Elmer that William Faulkner created while he was a young man in Paris.<sup>16</sup> But Faulkner's Elmer fails because he sacrifices art to life, and Baldwin's protagonist goes unfulfilled because he turns his back on homosexual love. In contrast, Youngblood's Eden succeeds at her art because she gives in to her desires, which lead to the very adventures that become the basis for her novel.

More like Henry Miller than James Baldwin, Youngblood gives readers a Parisian story of egoistic self affirmation,<sup>17</sup> but she accomplishes this by riffing on Baldwin. By focusing Eden's romantic attentions on a white man, even if only for a while, Youngblood gives her protagonist the interracial love affair that Baldwin had in Paris with a young Swiss man, Lucien Happersberger, but that he did not fictionalize cross-racially in *Giovanni's Room* (1956).<sup>18</sup> By making her novel's same-sex attraction one between Eden and Lucienne, a Barbadian woman to whom Eden is drawn after Ving leaves Paris to visit his mother, Youngblood does not shy away from giving homosexuality a black face, a move Baldwin did not make in *Giovanni's Room*.<sup>19</sup> When Eden and Lucienne separate, Eden thinks of Giovanni and David, Baldwin's white star-crossed lovers in *Giovanni's Room*. She wonders if she is "missing an opportunity or letting go too soon" (213), just as

David does because he cannot face up to his sexual orientation, but Youngblood rather too easily takes the decision away from Eden by sending an ailing and financially-strapped Lucienne back home to Barbados so that Youngblood can get on with her *Künstlerroman*.

Interestingly Eden's interracial affair with Ving and her same-sex attraction to Lucienne together hold the place in Youngblood's Parisian novel that the white homosexual relationship held in Baldwin's, suggesting that for Youngblood's readers an interracial heterosexual affair between a southern white man and a southern black woman and a same-sex attraction between black women is as transgressive at the end of the twentieth century as a homosexual love affair between white men was in the 1950s. Significantly in *Black Girl in Paris* Youngblood revises Baldwin's *Another Country* (1962), the Baldwin novel that most moved Ving, by refusing to end her interracial love affair tragically. Youngblood, however, does not give the couple a happily-ever-after ending or further test their relationship; she simply shifts the focus. Ving is not in evidence in the last scene of the novel when Eden has her long-awaited but fleeting encounter with James Baldwin, thereby reminding readers that the most prominent "love" interest in this novel is with a literary precursor.

Explorations of the many social and historical issues dealing with race relations and racial identity are truncated by the episodic plot of *Black Girl in Paris*, which moves from one concern to another: the difficulty of expatriates finding work, the plight of immigrants of color in Paris, race relations in France, interracial love, black nationalism, Afrocentrism, same-sex attraction among people of color. Although the form allows Youngblood to spotlight the many vicissitudes of a black female writer as she struggles to find her own voice apart from the constructions of race and gender and region, the episodic form combined with the *Künstlerroman*'s necessary focus on the artist figure subverts Youngblood's dramatization of race relations in France. Racial incidents that are the byproducts of French Islamophobia and xenophobia briefly touch Eden's life and she recycles them in her fiction. But Youngblood does not dwell on the social unrest in impoverished Parisian neighborhoods, scenes of the many clashes between French police and African immigrants and their French-born children. Nor does Youngblood explore the schisms in French society between the social and political elites and the underclasses.<sup>20</sup> The result is a novel that ironically seems removed from the very postcolonial tensions it seeks to represent, such as the terrorists' bombings and the

unjustified arrests and subsequent disappearances of people of color. Not surprisingly *Black Girl in Paris* better represents concerns that Eden wrestles with as an individual: racial loyalty, black authenticity, regional identity, interracial love, and same sex desire. But Youngblood's obvious interest in airing such controversial topics at times reads like a checklist, where highlighting all issues is more important than fully representing the social and psychological ramifications of a few. The thinness of Eden's psychological probings, so unlike Baldwin's narratives of excruciating introspection, is somewhat compensated for by Youngblood's examination of the paradoxical circumstances that make a foreign place feel like home and home feel like an alien place. Youngblood's Eden does succeed in becoming the "map-maker" she sets out to be, creating a map that future black girls in Paris (and in the U.S. South) can follow, one that charts the beginnings of an escape route from "the last plantation," but one that also marks, even if it does not dwell on, the barriers that still remain, and not only in the United States.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See James Baldwin's "A Question of Identity," *Notes of a Native Son*.
- <sup>2</sup> See William Merrill Decker, "Americans in Europe: Henry James to the Present," forthcoming *The Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing*. See especially manuscript 16-20. Above quotations are from Decker 17, 19.
- <sup>3</sup> On pages 171-72 Youngblood sets up a contrast between French and the U.S. attitudes that is similar to Wharton's but attributes the difference to governmental policies rather than inherent ethnic differences which Wharton ascribed to Anglo-Puritan characteristics permeating the American character.
- <sup>4</sup> Decker, manuscript 12. This is a legend Baldwin delineates in "A Question of Identity" 127.
- <sup>5</sup> Thadious M. Davis, "Sashaying through the South," *South to the Future: An American Region in the Twenty-First Century* 69.
- <sup>6</sup> Shay Youngblood, *Black Girl in Paris* 176. Subsequent quotations will be identified parenthetically in the text. My analysis of interracial intimacy in *Black Girl in Paris* in this essay draws in part on my book *Race Mixing: Southern Fiction since the Sixties*.
- <sup>7</sup> Decker, manuscript 5.
- <sup>8</sup> When Eden has spent round-the-clock days with an older black American poet, she does allude to Virginia Woolf in her need for "a room of my own" so that she can examine her own thoughts apart from his and discover her own "hidden mysteries" (60).
- <sup>9</sup> Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983) 234.



- <sup>10</sup> Decker, manuscript 12.
- <sup>11</sup> Anita Miller Garner, "The Southern Model of Labor Travels Abroad," unpublished paper presented in Birmingham, Alabama, at the Society for the Study of Southern Literature Conference, 1 April 2006.
- <sup>12</sup> James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* 11.
- <sup>13</sup> Itabari Njeri, *The Last Plantation: Color, Conflict, and Identity: Reflections of a New World Black* 8.
- <sup>14</sup> See the analysis of Eric Jerome Dickey's *Milk in My Coffee* in my book, *Race Mixing: Southern Fiction since the Sixties* 149-51.
- <sup>15</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 9.
- <sup>16</sup> Faulkner's Elmer also had to face his forbidden loves – his mother's body, his sister, a childhood male friend. David Minter, *William Faulkner: His Life and Work* 56.
- <sup>17</sup> See Decker on Henry Miller, manuscript 12.
- <sup>18</sup> Baldwin does dedicate *Giovanni's Room* to his lover, "For Lucien."
- <sup>19</sup> Baldwin does make this move six years later in *Another Country*.
- <sup>20</sup> Andrew Hussey has taken up these topics and the time period Youngblood's novel covers in great detail in *Paris: The Secret History*.

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