

The Enduring Alienation of Black Bodies and Migrants: A Comparative Analysis of James Baldwin’s “Stranger in the Village” and Teju Cole’s “Black Body”

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the persistent sense of alienation experienced by Black individuals and migrants, comparing James Baldwin’s *Stranger in the Village* and Teju Cole’s *Black Body*. Both writers highlight how racial and cultural othering continue despite societal progress, showing how Black people and migrants are scrutinized, stereotyped, and pushed to the margins. Baldwin’s account of being treated as an exotic outsider in a Swiss village parallels Cole’s reflections on the racialized gaze in modern America, revealing how Blackness is still seen as foreign. The essay also examines how the media reinforces these reductive portrayals, the lasting psychological toll of historical trauma, and the pressures of forced assimilation. Additionally, it critiques cultural appropriation, where dominant groups profit from Black and immigrant cultures while disregarding the people behind them. Drawing from scholarly and literary sources, this analysis emphasizes the importance of awareness and solidarity in challenging systemic racism and fostering a more inclusive society. Ultimately, it calls for a shift in how we tell these stories—one that moves beyond stereotypes and truly acknowledges the humanity and belonging of Black individuals and migrants, both in America and abroad.

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Introduction: Literature as a Reflection of Racial and Migrant Alienation

In 1951, civil rights activist and American writer James Baldwin visited a remote village in Switzerland as the sole Black man. A few years later, in 1953, he published an essay titled “Stranger in the Village” where he reflected on those years he lived in Leukerbad. His essay established the effects of American racism on the Black body as it compares to outside countries. Decades later, Nigerian American writer Teju Cole visited the same village and later published his own 2014 essay, “Black Body.” By writing about the parallels between Baldwin’s experiences and his own in both Switzerland and America, Cole highlights the enduring legacy of racial othering, despite advances in societal progress. The conversation between both writers illustrates how literature has long served as a mirror reflecting the social realities of its time, offering powerful insights into issues of identity, belonging, and exclusion. Particularly, Teju Cole’s literary exploration reveals how societal perceptions of race render Black bodies as foreign—within and outside of their own countries—underscoring the challenges of identity and belonging faced by migrants, which will only continue without the proper implementation of change. However, it is important to note that the comparison between these two essays is not an attempt to conflate the experiences of Black individuals with those of other migrants, but rather to illustrate the resonance between their experiences.

The Alienation of Black Bodies and the Politics of Visibility

The alienation experienced by Black individuals, both as migrants and within their homelands, is intensified by societal perceptions and stereotypes. In “Black Body,” Teju Cole observes, “To be a stranger is to be looked at, but to be Black is to be looked at especially” (Cole, 13), illustrating how race magnifies the scrutiny and othering of Black Americans. This assertion emphasizes that while all migrants may experience the feeling of being viewed as outsiders, Black individuals face an additional layer of scrutiny tied

to their race. Their very existence and presence in a space are often politicized, viewed not as individuals but as symbols of difference. The constant gaze is dehumanizing, and the inability to escape the racialized identity imposed upon them fosters alienation. Similarly, Baldwin's "Stranger in the Village" recounts his dehumanizing experience in a Swiss village, where he was treated as a "living wonder" rather than a fully realized human being. This perception reduces Baldwin to an exotic spectacle, robbing him of his individuality and complexity. He is seen not as a person with his own experiences and history but rather as an object of fascination, a symbol of difference that reinforces societal boundaries.

This reducing of identity to racial difference does not only affect Black people but also extends to immigrants from many ethnic backgrounds. The process of othering frequently targets migrants, focusing intently on their cultural, linguistic, or religious distinctions; all become points of scrutiny in American society. Baldwin's own reflections on being perceived as an object of fascination in Leukerbad—an almost entirely White village—resonate with contemporary accounts of migrant experiences in America. He was othered because he was racially, culturally, and linguistically different.

The Role of Media and Stereotypes in Perpetuating Alienation

Media outlets, for example, perpetuate this sense of alienation for migrants through their frequent representation of refugees from the Middle East and Africa, labeling them as "waves" or "crises" due primarily to the colors of their skin, cultures, and religions. This reductive language indicates "that the media is still manufacturing consent with regards to immigration coverage" (Okoye) in a way that supports biased, racist perspectives and agendas. In doing so, the media itself removes migrants' individuality and diminishes them to a single, dehumanized group, and it is a phenomenon that points out many shared challenges of identity and belonging that affect a large number of Black

Americans and migrants. In an interview with Francois Bondy, Baldwin speaks on the harm of spreading similar reductive narratives about non-White Americans through media outlets and textbooks, commenting:

If we could tell the truth about what happened to Indians, what happened to the Black man in America, and get rid of all those terrifying myths which are all over TV, and books and textbooks, if we could tell the truth about what our real relationship was to the Mexicans, for example, then we would begin to use a tremendous potential, and it might begin to save the world. (Baldwin and Bondy, 18)

As Baldwin suggests, reductive narratives alienate and reinforce social hierarchies and “terrifying myths” that privilege the White Americans in power who cannot let go of their hatred for those who are not like them. It’s evident that these insights on the media’s role in shaping racialized perceptions of marginalized groups remain relevant today, as the same reductive narratives used to justify slavery and segregation in the past are now wielded against contemporary immigrant communities, such as the non-White immigrants who cannot escape their connection to labels like “waves” and “crises.”

The Psychological Toll and Historical Trauma of Alienation

A similar sense of reduction to one’s race or foreignness is echoed by Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her TED Talk, “The Danger of a Single Story,” where she recalls a personal encounter with microaggressions. Adichie describes how, after moving to the U.S. for college, her roommate was astonished that she spoke fluent English and didn’t listen to tribal music, reflecting how stereotypes based on incomplete knowledge lead to misperceptions. Adichie explains, “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue but that they are incomplete” (Adichie, 13:11). These stereotypes limit how people see others and prevent them from

understanding the complexity of their identities, reducing them to narrow, often harmful narratives.

This idea that stereotypes are incomplete captures how Black individuals as well as migrants are often judged based on the limited understanding others have of their backgrounds, cultures, and experiences. Together, these insights reveal how societal labeling and reductive narratives not only alienate Black individuals but also migrants from all backgrounds. These narratives reinforce the “otherness” of such groups, making it difficult for them to integrate fully into society. This alienation and the challenges that come with navigating a world shaped by stereotypes highlight the deep complexities of belonging and identity. American immigrants, just like Adichie, must constantly negotiate their sense of self within a society that frequently fails to see them for who they truly are.

Furthermore, such enduring racial stereotypes are linked to historical trauma, leading to the psychological toll of displacement for Black individuals. Baldwin reflects on this in “Stranger in the Village” when he writes that the children who shout slurs at him “have no way of knowing the echoes this sound raises in [him]” (Baldwin). These moments of casual racism carry a deep and cutting weight, tying Baldwin’s personal experience to the broader historical trauma experienced by Black Americans under systemic prejudice. Such instances aren’t just individual affronts—they are reminders of centuries of racial subjugation, with each insult or prejudice echoing the pain of history and time. The constant exposure to this dehumanization accumulates over time, leaving a profound psychological impact, particularly in terms of alienation. In “Black Body,” Teju Cole builds on this idea, observing that “the Black body comes pre-judged, and as a result, it is placed in needless jeopardy” (Cole, 13). This insight underscores how Black Americans face heightened vulnerability due to the stereotypes attached to their bodies. Because of this, Black individuals are often seen as threats or dangers, regardless

of their personal characters or intentions. This, in turn, can expose them to further discrimination and violence.

Similarly, migrants of all backgrounds—especially those who are non-White—face challenges rooted in racial and national stereotypes. These stereotypes, often leading to alienation and violence, shape the migrant experience in ways that parallel the racialization of Black bodies. A striking example of this is “the rapid escalation of racial violence that followed 9/11 [that] normalized an atmosphere of racial terror” (Rana), fueling a nation-wide growth of anti-Muslim racism and Islamophobia. Innocent immigrants who merely shared the faith of the terrorists were vilified, subjected to hate crimes, and labeled as threats to a country they had no role in attacking. Despite this being just one extreme instance in a long history of racial stereotyping, it does not stand alone as an isolated incident; in fact, it is simply one more tragedy added to the many others in American history which has led to the exclusion and persecution of migrants. It is clear that racial bias, historical trauma, and exclusionary practices create a shared vulnerability between Black Americans and immigrant communities. These experiences reveal the significant toll that systemic racism and prejudice exact on marginalized groups, preventing them from being seen as fully human. As a result, both Black Americans and migrants are frequently treated as outsiders where their sense of belonging is consistently questioned.

In Baldwin’s “Stranger in the Village,” he reflects on the loss of cultural and ancestral roots for Black Americans, stating, “I am told that there are Haitians able to trace their ancestry back to African kings ... the signature on the bill of sale” (Baldwin). Meanwhile, many Black Americans cannot say the same; that history was lost to time and stolen by terrors of the past, bleeding into the present. This difference highlights the disconnect that Black Americans feel from their heritage due to the traumatic history of slavery, which forcibly severed their ties to their African roots. Slavery erased much of

their history, rendering it difficult for them to trace their cultural lineage.

Likewise, immigrants from various ethnicities and nationalities experience a similar sense of dislocation when they migrate. Forced to leave behind their cultural traditions and identities in search of a new life, many immigrants face pressure to assimilate into the dominant culture of their new home. For example, many Mexican immigrants and their children face pressure to abandon Spanish in favor of English, often being discouraged from speaking their native language in schools, workplaces, and public spaces. This pressure stems from a broader societal expectation that assimilation into American culture requires the rejection of one's native language, as it creates discomfort for the mostly White, prejudiced Americans who dislike when someone of a different race and nationality engages in a language and culture that they do not. Non-conformity terrifies them. To those with this particularly poisonous ideology, what cannot be understood becomes *other*, and what becomes *other* soon becomes a threat. Thus, Mexican-Americans—like many other immigrants—are often given two choices: assimilate or face the consequences of their non-conformity.

Whether for Mexican Americans or for immigrants hailing from other countries, the process of forced assimilation often creates a feeling of displacement, as their roots are either erased or made invisible. As the scholar Nandini Sahu notes, “One of the most significant traits of the immigrant existence is the striking balance between the two worlds—the homeland and the adopted one” (Sahu, 145). This struggle is not simply a matter of learning a new language or adjusting to different customs; rather, it is a continuous negotiation of identity, where immigrants must navigate the tension between preserving their cultural heritage and integrating into a society that often demands conformity. For many, the homeland represents deep-rooted traditions, values, and a sense of belonging, while the adopted country offers new opportunities but often at the cost of cultural loss. This balancing act can lead to a fractured sense

of self, as immigrants attempt to retain their original identity while also trying to avoid marginalization in their new environment. The expectation to assimilate can be especially challenging when dominant cultural narratives portray foreign traditions as inferior or outdated, further alienating immigrant communities and reinforcing the erasure of their heritage. Or, sometimes, their roots and customs are stolen from them and appropriated to fit another's standards, and an entirely new loss of culture occurs.

Cultural Appropriation and the Erasure of Identity

Teju Cole's "Black Body" addresses this particular aspect of such alienation against Black communities when he writes, "Throughout the culture, there are imitations of the gait, bearing, and dress of the Black body, a vampiric 'everything but the burden' co-option of Black life" (Cole, 14). This highlights a frustrating truth: those who steal the culture of Black identity—in this instance, the majority points to White Americans—do so without bearing the burden of actually being a Black body. The appeal of it is embraced wholeheartedly, yet there remains a distance from the daily struggles of living in a society that marginalizes them. While Cole's statement directly critiques the exploitation of Black culture, the sentiment extends to the experiences of immigrants from all backgrounds.

Aspects of American immigrant culture—whether food, fashion, music, or art—are often celebrated or commodified, but the individuals behind these cultural elements remain marginalized and excluded. The culture is seen as desirable, something to be appropriated, yet the people who produce it are still treated as outsiders. This phenomenon is also reflected in Stuart Hall's "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" where he discusses the existence of ethnic hierarchies in America. Hall explains, "America has always had a series of ethnicities, and consequently, the construction of ethnic hierarchies has always defined its cultural politics" (105). This

statement highlights how both Black Americans and immigrants are positioned as outsiders in American society, even though their cultural contributions have shaped and enriched the nation.

One such instance of this presents itself in the rising popularity of East Asian American entertainment in Western culture. Despite things like K-pop and anime becoming more prevalent in American households, many Asian American artists still struggle to receive recognition or to break into the mainstream U.S. entertainment industry. This is due in part to Hollywood's decades-long streak of whitewashing Asian roles in movies and television, going so far as to cast White actors as Asian characters. Scarlett Johansson in the movie *Ghost in the Shell* is a prime example of this, as she was a White actress cast for the role of a Japanese woman. As it stands, this is not a singular occurrence; the upsetting truth is that it happens all the time with people of color in American media, and it remains yet another obstacle for non-White Americans and American immigrants alike.

Time and again we see that the contributions of immigrants are overlooked in American society. Even more so, those who are non-White are further dismissed in favor of a dominant narrative that consistently frames both Black and immigrant Americans as "other." This leads to American culture—and America itself—being enriched by that of migrants and Black individuals, yet that enrichment goes overshadowed and thankless. Unfortunately, sweeping it under the rug and claiming that it was always there is easier than admitting the truth of its origins.

These simplified, often inaccurate representations reinforce both communities' struggles with exclusion, marginalization, and misrepresentation. When their stories are told by others—when their food, art, music, style, and speech are stolen and appropriated—these individuals lose agency over how they are perceived and are left

with narratives that are incomplete at best and harmful at worst. Thus, their own narratives are now controlled by the dominant beliefs of American society. This process of reduction contributes to the erasure of both their personal identities and their cultural contributions. The result is a society that limits understanding and perpetuates harmful stereotypes, which further alienates marginalized groups. In this way, both Black Americans and migrants face similar challenges when it comes to maintaining their cultural identities while navigating systems that marginalize them. Their cultural richness is often commodified or misunderstood, leaving them in a constant state of tension between preserving their roots and assimilating into a dominant culture that does not fully accept them.

Unmasking Systemic Racism and the Power of Solidarity

It must be said, however, that in order to address systemic racism and the challenges faced by marginalized groups, it is also essential to understand the deeper, often hidden forces that perpetuate exclusion and discrimination. James Baldwin addresses this, arguing that Black Americans cannot be set free “unless one is prepared to set the White people in America free ... Free from their terrors, free from their ignorance, free from their prejudices and free, really, from the right to do wrong” (Baldwin and Bondy, 14). Baldwin’s assertion shows how systemic ignorance and prejudice don’t just hurt Black people—they hold back all of society. To really create change, these issues need to be addressed on a broader scale. Similarly, Teju Cole also discusses how racism has been able to cling onto life—or thrive, really—in America. He describes American racism as having “many moving parts, and has had enough centuries in which to evolve an impressive camouflage” (Cole, 15). This highlights the horrifying truth that racism isn’t always obvious; it can be hidden in everyday actions or policies, and that makes it even more difficult to fight.

Even still, in a later interview of his own, Cole claims that “the fact is that if you have a voice, you try to find ways to be responsible to your voice” (Hodapp, 249). This is a reminder that everyone has a role to play, especially migrants, allies, and activists who can challenge harmful narratives and speak out for change. Despite it being an uphill battle, it must still, in the end, be a battle we are all willing to fight. Given this, it is essential to recognize the importance of “the development of critical consciousness [and] the restoration of connective solidarities and healing relationships” (Lang, 182) in repairing the fractured American system. Building connections and understanding between different groups is an effective tool to fight against alienation and create a stronger sense of belonging for Black Americans and migrants alike.

Conclusion: The Path Forward in Addressing Systemic Racism

Ultimately, the purpose of this essay is to highlight the ongoing challenges faced by both Black Americans and American immigrants, exploring how their experiences mirror one another, the reasons these challenges persist, and the ways society can address and correct the negative perceptions and attitudes directed toward them. In this vein, Adichie’s declaration on and against stereotypes, once again, finds a place here. When she asserts that “the single story creates stereotypes [and] emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar” (Adichie, 13:11), she highlights how stereotypes reduce people to a single, oversimplified narrative that ignores their full humanity. Both the Black experience and the migrant experience are often shaped by these stereotypes, where people are seen as “others” rather than as individuals with rich histories and complexities. Baldwin himself addresses this dehumanization once more, arguing that “the Black man insists ... the White man cease to regard him as an exotic rarity and recognize him as a human being.” This need for recognition that Baldwin pleads for is something that applies to migrants just the same, especially those who are of a different

race. No matter where they come from, immigrants often face the challenge of being seen as outsiders or even threats—threats to American safety, the economy, and social status—with their identities shaped by the dominant culture’s view of them as different or lesser.

It is evident that “despite the passage of time, shades of political progress, and the greater spatial and cultural mobility that Cole enjoys, the underlying racial fear and hatred that Baldwin interrogated still persists” (Gehlawat et. al., 59). Just as it was before, Teju Cole’s claim that “if you have a voice, you try to find ways to be responsible to your voice,” becomes imperative to implement when considering the path to activism and speaking out against prejudice. It serves as a reminder for people to take action, challenge stereotypes, and speak up against the discrimination faced by Black Americans and migrants. It underscores the critical importance of continually revisiting the conversation about race relations, as these issues still persist today—decades after “Stranger in the Village” was written and centuries after the founding of America. Moreover, it illustrates the importance of using literature as a tool through which we can carry on this dialogue. This essay itself seeks to do the same, adding to the conversation between Baldwin and Cole and many other scholars within migration and race studies. By engaging in this ongoing dialogue, both verbally and through literature, we can use our voices—responsibly, as Cole encourages—to advocate for a more inclusive society so that we may finally foster the change that is long overdue.

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