

Native Sons in Paris

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The details of what happened when three of the twentieth centuries most significant writers--Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Chester Himes--gathered at a Parisian café on a spring night in 1953 are not fully known. The differing accounts that the men, all prominent members of Paris's Black expatriate and literary scenes at one time or another, provided in the aftermath of the event have raised questions about the evening's proceedings.

In a speech delivered at the American Church in Paris a few weeks before his death in November 1960, Wright, for example, described a serendipitous confrontation in which Baldwin purportedly declared to his one-time mentor, "I'm going to destroy you! I'm going to destroy your reputation! You'll see!" Baldwin recalled a much more congenial encounter between "[t]hree absolutely tense, unrelentingly egotistical, and driven people, free in Paris but far from home, with so much to be said and so little time in which to say it!" in his 1961 essay, "Alas, Poor Richard." Himes offered yet another perspective in his 1972 autobiography, *The Quality of Hurt: The Early Years*, recounting a spirited exchanged that lasted for several hours and that peaked with Baldwin saying to Wright, "The sons must slay their fathers." Each of these accounts is, no doubt, incomplete. Nevertheless, taken together, they provide a compelling portrait of what was surely one of the most riveting rows that *Les Deux Magots* had ever seen.

When Baldwin arrived at the cafe, a favored spot of Paris's literati, he was a year shy of thirty and mere weeks away from the release of his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953). Wright and Himes, on the other hand, were in their mid-forties and already the authors of several notable works. It was Baldwin's damning critiques of two of those works, Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and Himes's *Lonely Crusade* (1947), that generated much of the evening's heat. Baldwin famously dismissed Wright's bestseller in his essay, "Everybody's Protest Novel," drawing parallels between it and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). "Bigger is Uncle Tom's descendant, flesh of his flesh, so exactly opposite a portrait that, when the books are placed together, it seems that the contemporary Negro novelist and the dead New England woman are locked together in a deadly, timeless battle; the one uttering merciless exhortations, the other shouting curses," he wrote. He would excoriate the book further in his essay, "Many Thousands Gone." *Lonely Crusade* received similar treatment in a 1947 review, with Baldwin avowing, "Mr. Himes seems capable of some of the worst writing on this side of the Atlantic." Despite his sometimes-scathing commentary, Baldwin insisted that it was never his intent to betray his elder colleagues. Reflecting on his relationship with Wright in a 1984 *New York Times* interview, he stressed, "I knew Richard and I loved him...I was not attacking him; I was trying to clarify something for myself."

Of course, even as the trio maintained doubts about the sincerity of their peers, they were unwavering in their characterizations of the U.S. as a place fundamentally inhospitable to Black flourishing. All three men were subject to FBI harassment over the course of their careers; under the direction of J. Edgar Hoover, the agency regularly monitored the output of the Black literary community. Wright and Baldwin's FBI files are among the most extensive. Thus, when, in *Les Deux Noirs*, Wright suspects that Jean-Claude might be a government agent, he--much like the entire play--is recalling an all-too-real history.