

James Baldwin: A 1970 Interview

conducted in Paris by **Nabile Farès** for *Jeune Afrique*, translated from French and introduced by **Peter Thompson**¹

THIS INTERVIEW WAS not included in Nabile Farès's 1971 novel *A Passenger from the West*—yet it is the event which not only brings Baldwin and Farès together but also serves as a springboard for the novel. Farès, then thirty, was working for the magazine *Jeune Afrique*. Baldwin, sixteen years his senior and experimenting for the second time with living in France, was delighted to learn that Farès had just published a novel (his first, *Yahia, pas-de-chance*). The interview was conducted in French and took place at the home of actress Simone Signoret.

A Passenger from the West gives insight into the days before the interview. Baldwin insisted on getting to know the young Algerian writer before they sat down to work. I recently visited several of the novel's settings with Farès, including cafés where the prefatory chats with Baldwin—sometimes tense, sometimes melancholy—had taken place. I learned that those spring days in Paris saw the beginning of a deep friendship between the two writers. More importantly, whatever narrative was shaping itself in Farès's plans (many critics hesitate to call *A Passenger from the West* a novel), this encounter became the dominant chord in his harrowing story of exile and the search for identity.

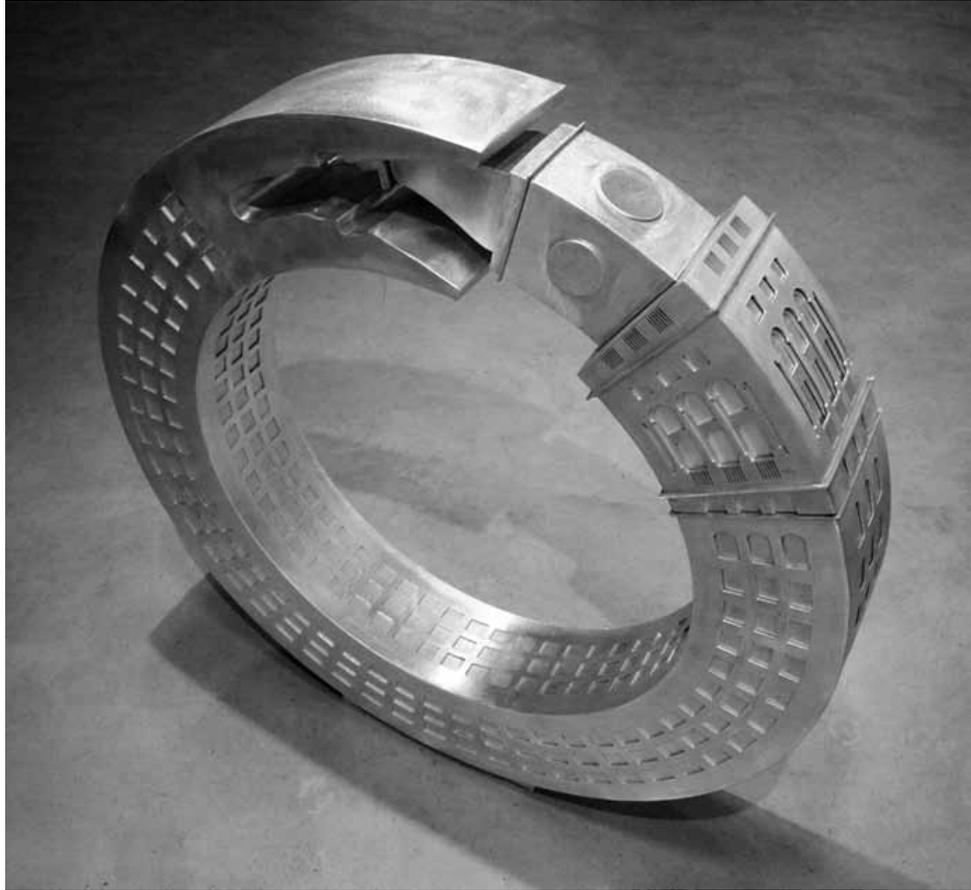
Baldwin has been back in the news lately, and it is good to hear his voice. Had we forgotten that *Another Country* was “panned,” as he says, when it came out? This great novel, with its ironic title, is one focus of the interview. The title is suggestive of Farès's situation as an Algerian in Paris, just as it evokes W. E. B. Du Bois's sense of the “double consciousness” in black American life. Broadly speaking, Baldwin's novel reflects many of the issues of alienation and identity which Farès—and many others in the Maghreb, sub-Saharan, and the United States—will write about in the years between 1970 and now.

1. Reprinted from Peter Thompson's English translation of Nabile Farès's *A Passenger from the West* (UNO Press, 2011) with the permission of UNO Press and of *Jeune Afrique*.



Portrait of James Baldwin, 1955. Gelatin silver print. Photo by Carl Van Vechten courtesy of the Library of Congress via pingnews.

The interview contains rare comment by Baldwin on American letters: J. D. Salinger, Richard Wright, James Fenimore Cooper. Is the American South “another country” for Baldwin? Was it, even, for Faulkner? It evolves that Farès (like many Parisian literati) has always been very sensitive to Faulkner. Baldwin and Farès even have the same favorite: *Light in August*...



Bracelet.
Aluminum, 47.2
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Nabile Farès: How long have you been in Paris?

James Baldwin: Since mid-July. But I'd already come once, in 1948. Now, I'm here to "get something started" and to finish a book.

Farès: You left the United States in kind of a rush.

Baldwin: Yes and no. I was in Istanbul and I came back to the United States in the month of December, 1969, to go see one of the leaders of the Black Panthers, Huey Newton, who is in "the slammer," near San Francisco.

At that time the American government was hurling threats at anyone who spoke, however much or little, about the Black Panthers. I stayed in New York five days, and nothing happened. I left again for Istanbul, where I got sick. So I came to Paris via Istanbul, London, and the prisons of San Francisco.

Farès: Who is James Baldwin?

James Baldwin: I figure I am what I am through a sum of very considerable sacrifices made by my folks. In my effort to become myself, I have kept an inner accounting of this cost. I was in Atlanta, the day of Martin Luther King's burial. I was walking behind the "chariot." Martin Luther King had wanted to be buried in the poorest and most traditional way of the South. The road was fairly long and narrow, and, as far as the eye could see, on the roofs and in the windows and on the asphalt, it was only blacks. A memorable parade. The silence was total. Well, I felt a responsibility to all those people that were there! A completely personal responsibility, because, if I can't live with myself I won't be able to do anything for others.

Farès: Where are you with that?

Baldwin: First of all I am, not through my own choice, in the Western world, and also in a world which in a certain way is not yet born, created, or else it's so ancient that it exists only in the passions and underground memory of certain folks. I'm in mid-voyage. It's not at all an escape. I see something, and I have confidence in this something that we are: human beings.

Farès: Along this route, what is the definition of a black man, and his power?

Baldwin: I think you really have to get in behind that phrase. Because I think "The Black Man" doesn't exist, any more than the white man. We shouldn't confuse the fact of living with the demands of living. We speak of the white man because white men have always held the power in all the history of the world, and we speak of the black man because, in theory, black men don't have power.

Therein is the root of these terms: if you are white you have power; if you are black, you don't have power. As a writer, I am profoundly convinced that you can't write about a black man, a Jewish man, a white man, or a Russian lady. That doesn't exist: there are women, men, people. I am a black man, if you will—I was darkened long ago by the sun; but that's not what makes me "black." It's the role I play in the world. It's the world's perspective, which says to me not "black" but "nigger"; and the whole question, in the end, if you are black, can be summed up this way: getting to the point where you're not called "nigger." Even after the liberation of under-developed nations we notice—and it's very dramatic—that Africa is far from liberated. Why? Because Europe has created in certain African countries an elite class which is valuable to Europe but not to Africans.

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And, at the same time, Christianity, that long and bloody story, has distorted everyone's spirit, and we won't come up with the means, any time soon, not only of repossessing the land but also of rebuilding our spirit. For as long as the spirit is focused toward London, for example, as long as blacks think that whites own something valuable that blacks don't have, the nightmare goes on... It will take another generation for the establishment of a sort of contact with the real past, the non-invented past, and the creation of a new people who see the world in a way that no one has seen it up till now.

Farès: From one of your books we get the impression that the evolution of American society is completely conditioned by this negation of the black man.

Baldwin: That is, in fact, the subject of *Another Country*. It's the reason Rufus kills himself so early in the book. I wanted to find a way to make the reader reflect. Rufus's cadaver, that's the black cadaver in the American

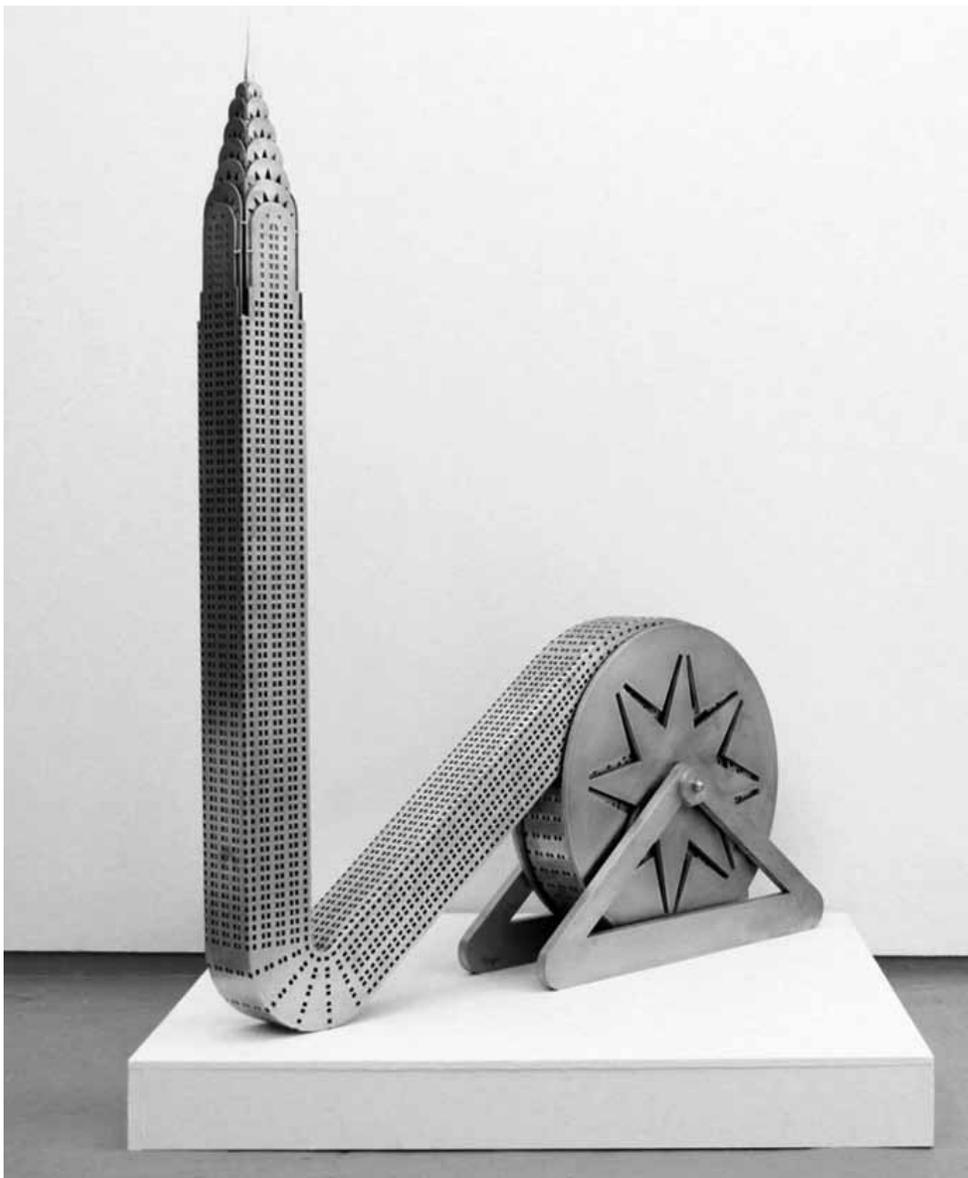
I speak for my father, for my great-grandfather, and I speak about something that, personally, I understand. I'm a witness—too bad for those who don't understand me! The truth of the life of a black man—white men have never been able to come face to face with it.

conscience. All of American society has been built in order to kill—not to deny the black man, or humiliate him, but kill him. That's the key to the American drama: and as long as the intellectuals, writers, and moral authorities of the United States can't face up to that, the United States will never be a great country. It will remain a great big store selling every-one lots of things at high prices, and currently run by Mr. Nixon. This is

the result of the criminal history of the United States. Let me insist: it's a criminal history, and not just in terms of the crimes committed, but perhaps even more in terms of the crimes denied. When a criminal knows that's what he is, he can change, make amends. But if he refuses to see himself for what he is, his situation is hopeless. That's the case with my country.

Farès: How was your book, *Another Country*, received in the United States?

Baldwin: Very badly. The book was panned. They said, "Mr. Baldwin has become bitter, he has lost his craft, and he's a racist." So then I understood that, although American whites like to hear Ray Charles, Bessie Smith and their maids sing, they've never heard a word! They have a certain image of blacks and they cling to that. It's their idea that a black man who protests is going to protest by following their laws and their complexes. But me, I'd rather not speak for them. I speak for my father, for my great-grandfather, and I speak about something that, personally, I understand. I'm a witness—too bad



***Elastic Chrysler
(After the
Monument
Series).***

Aluminum, 59 x
50 x 52 inches.
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for those who don't understand me! The truth of the life of a black man—white men have never been able to come face to face with it.

Farès: What is this function, the white representation of blacks? Is it having a good conscience, or making the crime acceptable?

Baldwin: Both. What whites want is for blacks to agree with their fantasy. If you don't play that game, you're immediately portrayed as communist, anti-American, unpatriotic. As for me, I know my mother and my brothers and my sisters very well. I know that I owe them a lot. Whereas the American republic—I don't owe it a thing.

Farès: Is there a difference between reality the way you conceive it as a writer, and political reality?

Baldwin: No, there's really no difference. I was forced to understand that a man's life, any man's, takes place in society, that society acts on him, the way he acts on it. But I have to add that I'm not a politician. I don't see

people en masse, as a lump. I see them individually. But it's clear that if you took away the social context from Anna Karenina, for example, there's no more Anna Karenina. This vision of the whole thing has kept me from becoming one of those "precious" poets who lose themselves in contemplating their beautiful souls.

Farès: What career is there for a black American writer?

Baldwin: As far as that goes, the truth is almost impossible to get at, because everyone thinks I have this huge success, that I earn lots of money. But that's far from the case. Being a black American and trying to become a writer? From the simple point of view of the profession, that means finding yourself faced with the fact of having no models nor any past. I was thirty before I understood that Pushkin wasn't white, that Dumas wasn't fully white either. But they don't teach us that in American schools.

In school I learned that I was the illegitimate son of Tarzan, and that I have contributed nothing to mankind's well-being. I was a savage who had been saved in the nick of time by the English, the Spanish, the Dutch, who handed me Jesus's cross. That gives you a complex. They handed us the most frightful lies. Not just about our history (that's bad enough), but even about our mothers and fathers: we began to look at them as savages. That's an unpardonable crime. Later, we learn that all his life our father worked "like a black man" to feed nine kids. Finally, he gave in like an old mule, crushed by the load. And all that to fill the coffers of the banks. He was treated like a savage by people who, themselves, were the real savages.

Farès: Why did you get started on the career of writing?

Baldwin: It's very hard to explain. I didn't choose to be a writer, oh no! I had understood something: I had a family to save, and I didn't have a single weapon to do this. When I was young the idea—for a black—of becoming a writer was somewhat utopian. People looked at you as if you were not so much crazy, as sick. The first time my father saw me with a typewriter he wanted to take me to the hospital. But I had no other option. And I was stimulated precisely by the fact that they kept telling me I was getting into something impossible. That's why I stuck with it.

Farès: What is "Jim Crow" in the United States?

Baldwin: Yet another American "fantasy," that! It takes the place of sexuality. Everyone has his own erotic dream. What it means is that white women, currently, in the United States, can kill black children while holding their own children in their arms. It is one of the great sicknesses of the twentieth century, one whose cure is not coming tomorrow or the day after.



Elastic Metropolitan (After the Monument Series). Aluminum, 87 x 36 x 12 inches. ©2010 Alexandre Arrechea. Courtesy of Magnan Metz Gallery, New York.

Farès: Do you consider yourself a lost soul?

Baldwin: Oh no no no! I'm not a lost person, because in a strange way I'm a patriot. I would be lost if I hadn't *understood*. Luckily I had no model. When I looked around me, in America, I saw the misery of my family, on the one hand, and the white cops on the other: I understood, definitively. So, after an education received mainly in the street, I was smart or lucky enough to never again believe the whites' bunk. I knew I was black. I knew I was ugly. I knew I was little. And I knew the whites didn't

like me. All that—that was enough for starters. If they had succeeded in fooling me, if I had spent my life scrubbing myself in the hope of becoming white, then, yes, I would be lost. But since I understood! No no no, I wash every once in a while, that's all! Nothing in the world could convince me to be a representative of the “master race,” like Mr. Nixon or Mr. Agnew. If *that's* what it is, the “master race,” I prefer being underdeveloped.

Farès: In your view, does American literature have any “gaps”?

Baldwin: Yes, there's a great void in American literature. But something is starting to move, because true power never lies where people think it does. True power is underground, and things change before people have time to become aware of it. And, from the moment that the Pope is forced to go to Jerusalem, after two thousand years, to make an apology to the Jews that Christian theology has always despised, or from the moment the Pope takes himself to Africa, the whole moral base of the Western world began to tremble. And the peoples who have been prisoners of that theology take notice. The moral authority of the Catholic Church, the moral authority of the Western world—now it's clear—is farcical, because the history of the Church is a criminal history. All the voyages to “civilize” the “savages” are a laugh. And once you're aware of that, a process is unleashed which can't be stopped.

Farès: How do you explain American novels being so well received in Europe?

Baldwin: It's very simple—it's Europe that created America. Lots of people have wanted to become American. America has been the great hope of the Western world. The proof is that all the western European nations are linked, willingly or not, to American politics. Europe wants to brag, about the flowering of the American novel. But nobody, neither in Europe nor in the United States, has measured the cost of this success! They haven't pointed out that Europeans killed off the indigenous populations and that America was created on this basis! The whole world, from Amsterdam to Louisiana, made its fortune on our backs, on mine, on ours, the blacks. That's why they adore the American novel.

Farès: Is there, in the United States, a difference between the new generation of white writers and the previous one?

Baldwin: As far as I'm concerned, I don't see a major difference between the two. Between James Fenimore Cooper and J. D. Salinger, there appears to me a very logical link. If you are capable of *The Last of the Mohicans* you're certainly capable of writing *Franny and Zooey*. Both works are situated equally far from reality. The story of *The Last of the Mohicans* has

never existed in any tribe. It only existed in the heads of people who were not yet Americans, but who were busy slaughtering in order “to civilize.” Mr. Cooper and Mr. Salinger don’t interest me in the slightest. The latter gets off by bearing a sort of witness to American innocence. But this witness is out of whack with the facts.

Farès: What do you think of someone like Faulkner?

Baldwin: I can tell you that I liked two of his books, *As I Lay Dying*, and *Light in August*. But Faulkner was both witness and defender of the system of slavery.

Farès: *The Wild Palms*, isn’t it an allegorical presentation of American society, whose author suggests it’s a sort of prison?

Baldwin: Yes but for me American society is worse than that. There is a great distance between the language of an American black and an American white—a tragic distance, and it won’t be blurred over any time soon. I’ve spent my life talking to American whites. When they finally understand something it’s always just a little off! Because if they begin to really understand you, either they end up hating you or they become furious: they don’t want to know. Everyone was astounded, so it seems, to find out that there’d been massacres in Viet Nam! But not blacks, because our whole history is a long succession of massacres.

Farès: I believe your meeting Richard Wright was a turning point for you.

Baldwin: Yes, that was my most important encounter. Richard Wright was my hope, he proved that becoming a writer was possible. The book I loved wasn’t *Native Son* but *Black Boy*—for its nakedness. For the first time in American literature a black narrated, in a style stripped of any pretension, what it meant to be black in America. *Black Boy* is, in American literature, an isolated testimony. You can’t turn it into anything. It simply exists.

The tragedy that happened between Richard Wright and me was my fault alone. I never had a chance to tell him that. The title “Alas, Poor Richard” was badly misinterpreted. What I meant to say was, “Richard, look what you’ve done to Richard.” We had been friends and, well, that’s who you end up fighting with.

Farès: In your books there are many invocations of the blues.

Baldwin: Certainly, because I was created by the blues! I was born in Harlem and when I grew up, and sought out my past, my language, I had to go back to the source. It was then that I understood “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” and when I understood, I was liberated. I had found my models. I knew that there was, between Miles Davis and me, between Ray Charles



Elastic Empire State (After the Monument Series). Aluminum, 72 x 25.5 x 8 inches. ©2010 Alexandre Arrechea. **Wall Street.** Watercolor on arches paper, 44 x 66 inches. ©2010 Alexandre Arrechea. Courtesy of Magnan Metz Gallery, New York.

and me, between Bessie Smith and me, a connection much greater than between Saul Bellow and me.

Farès: Is the blues only the expression of a condition and a rage?

Baldwin: There are three elements in the blues: the reflection of a condition, the expression of a rage, and an avowal of love. It's love that gives the blues their ironic and tragic tone. The blues are tragic, but in the manner of the corpses in Harlem. They are tragic because love lets us bear our condition and our rage. Certain songs—"I Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray," "I Cried So Long To Get The Blues To My Neighbor Next Door"—are, properly speaking, fantastic if you really listen to them! Such a thing has never existed in Europe.

Farès: Could the blues be dying off?

Baldwin: Oh no no no! That's impossible, because the blues are like bread, they're always valuable.

Farès: Where are you in relation to "Black Power"?

Baldwin: Ask me, more precisely, where I am in relation to certain adventurers of Black Power. With respect to Black Power as such, I've never had any problems. My father was a disciple of Black Power, and I've never known a single black who was not a disciple of Black Power. But now the term can mean all kinds of things. Me, I'm going to keep on playing the role I've always played. I've never been, even in my youth, a member of an organization. What I've always wanted was to speak for myself. For everyone else too, of course, but I don't want to cause anyone problems. If Mr. Baldwin says such and such, well, may that fall only on Mr. Baldwin's head! You understand? Some militants in Black Power are my friends, others aren't. That's normal. As far as the goal goes—liberating blacks—there's no controversy. There are even some who lump me in with the architects of Black Power. As for me, I'd never thought of that.

Farès: What are you hoping to do, now, in Paris?

Baldwin: I'm not sentimental. I love Paris, I like the French, but that doesn't change the fact that the Western world finds itself at a crisis point. I'm going to work here. Ever since Martin Luther King was killed in the United States I've understood that he was killed because he had realized, like Malcolm X for that matter, that the problem wasn't "domestic" but global. The entire economic system of the United States is in the hands of whites. When Martin Luther King started speaking about Viet Nam, and the world, he became something different. When he died I knew it wasn't possible to take up his marches once again. There wasn't anyone at the White House to present our petitions to. It was the end of a hope. It was necessary to start some other way. I decided to leave in order to develop, perhaps, that possibility. I'm the only survivor of my generation. Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Dick Gregory, the two Kennedys, me, we worked together, for better or for worse; you had to! But now? In any case, things are clearer. I definitely won't live long enough to see certain results. Martin Luther King's work was very well carried out. He left behind something very helpful for everybody. As for me, I would want him to be proud of me.

Farès: Thank you Mr. Baldwin. 🌐