LINGERING EYES

Madison Marsh

There is something familiar in how uncomfortable I feel here—a black face in a largely white space. I don’t even recognize it anymore, how there are so few people of color around at any given time. But in this very moment, I feel at peace. Maybe it’s because I start to tune out everyone around me and begin to focus on our small group. Our laughter swells and becomes so loud that the other patrons, scattered at other tables on the patio, turn to look at us. We try to quiet ourselves, but with one shared look, we’re all laughing again. I sit back with a lazy, satisfied smile, basking in the feeling of the slight breeze that typically settles here at this time of the evening, a reminder of the Mediterranean Sea only 45 minutes away. The air is gentle, soft and simple, typical of Aix-en-Provence. I glance at some of my fellow diners, only a few throwing us quick, annoyed glances, but I have grown somewhat accustomed to them.

The time we spent at a cafe after work or school typically signaled a transition from the end of the working day to a generally late dinner. We usually consumed a couple of rounds of fries (frites, as they’re called here), crepes, and sodas, as we waited to escape the last of the day’s heat. After telling a hilarious story, I relax into my chair, making myself comfortable despite the heavy presence of cigarette smoke that I inadvertently inhale. Everyone smokes here, as if cigarettes were as French as the flag or national anthem. But I don’t let that hinder me from enjoying the moment, one of the few times I let myself be carefree on this trip.

Usually, in France, I felt uncomfortable. Everywhere we went, people would stare at me and my friend, Kat, because we were some of the few black people around. We would often scan our surroundings during our daily excursions in the city and keep count of the number of black people that we saw. During our week in the southern French town, we only noticed a handful of people of color, let alone black people, most of whom we believed to be tourists. It quickly became a joke between us: the looks that lingered on us and not the other members of our travel group. Kat once said that she imagined that we might have been the only black people that they had ever seen in person, even though we were less than an hour away from Marseilles, one of the most diverse cities in France. When I made
eye contact with some of these people, got caught in their stare, I didn’t know how to respond other than to smile and nod at them and continue as if I hadn’t noticed them staring at all.

In his essay, “Stranger in the Village,” James Baldwin details his experience of being the only black man in a small Swiss town by comparing the black experience in Europe to that of black people in the United States. He declares that many Europeans got to claim ignorance of the black existence; to them, black people were just abstract concepts rather than actual people. Baldwin makes a point to talk about the suppression of the black identity, the chief method used by white supremacists to oppress the black community: “I am told that there are Haitians able to trace their ancestry back to African kings, but any American Negro wishing to go back so far will find his journey through time abruptly arrested by the signature on the bill of sale which served as the entrance paper for his ancestor” (46). When Africans were snatched from their homes and brought to the Americas to labor as slaves, the slave traders did not bother to record where they took each person from. Instead, they herded their captives into large ships and forced them to voyage to unknown lands. If African Americans are lucky, some of us can trace back to when our ancestors were sold into slavery, but not back to when they still lived on the African continent.

My identity, my blackness, has always both empowered and alienated me. To me, being black represents strength and community, but not knowing the full extent of my heritage, exactly which country or countries make up my ancestry, has left me and many others in a state of confusion. We are often in limbo between the parts of ourselves that feel familiar and the parts that we may never know. Two years ago, on Christmas Day, I was elated to open the present that I had begged everyone in my family for all year: a DNA testing kit. That night, I eagerly spit into the tube, much to my mother’s disgust. My family was just confused about why I even asked for the gift. As a teenager, I was expected to ask for clothes and shoes, which I still received. But this gift, this test, seemed to promise me a sense of belonging, true peace of mind.

I eagerly waited for a few months to receive my results. I had tried to prepare for what I would see, the excitement overwhelming. But I was not prepared for the disappointment I felt, once I looked at my results. They only confirmed what I already knew: my ancestry was mainly West African, with a small part Irish as well. I was naive and had put all my faith into this tube to tell me exactly who I
was and where I came from. It is often said that knowledge is power, and without
the knowledge of my heritage, I feel powerless. It was as if I couldn’t take true
ownership of my identity; even my last name was bestowed upon my family by a
slave master who relied upon the forced labor of my ancestors. Not even science
could bring that lost history back.

While describing his experience in Switzerland, Baldwin details the
European mindset toward those of African descent as one of ignorance. Today,
the black population of Europe is growing, with more refugees and immigrants
often coming from places that were previously a colony. In the United States, as
Baldwin points out, there was never a true way to ignore the presence of black
people, despite some people’s efforts: “At the root of the American Negro prob-
lem is the necessity of the American white man to find a way of living with the
Negro in order to be able to live himself . . . No road whatever will lead
Americans back to the simplicity of this European village where white men still
have the luxury of looking on me as a stranger” (47-48). Many were brought here
against their will and forced to labor through all the transgressions done against
them. White people were unable to deny their existence, so, instead, they denied
them quality of life and the full recognition of citizenship. Baldwin argues that
some Americans desire to return to that former European mindset, but they are
unable to do so. The final line of his essay declares that racial diversity is
inevitable: “This world is white no longer and it will never be white again” (48).
He decides that black people should be proud, that we have managed to survive,
even though some have tried to silence and oppress us. They attempted to make
our identities obsolete.

Every day, in this country, we see black people shipped off to jail in large
numbers, living in food deserts, stuck in systemic poverty, and killed in the
streets. Still, America will never be a simple European village, and I will never
know my family’s true, unique history.

Sometimes, I believe that the reason I was bothered so much by the staring
in Aix is because I feel insecure about my identity. In some ways, I feel like a
fraud, even though I’m not doing anything wrong. I don’t know if I’ll ever find
out exactly what country I’m from. Maybe I’ll spend my whole life searching,
ever content with vague answers. I know now that these things are out of my
control: the staring, the racists who hide behind computer screens. I will likely
always get stared at wherever I travel, and I’ll probably always feel uncomfortable about it. But I won’t stop voyaging and smiling at those I meet.

Maybe the stares weren’t as bad as I thought. I probably got just as many stares for being American as I did for being black. But for me, being black is more significant in my life. Some days, I don’t even feel American, because sometimes in America, when I see the news on TV and the racists rants online, I feel unwanted by this country. How can I claim to belong in a place that doesn’t want me?

WORKS CITED