Leslie-Ann Murray | The enigma of my departure

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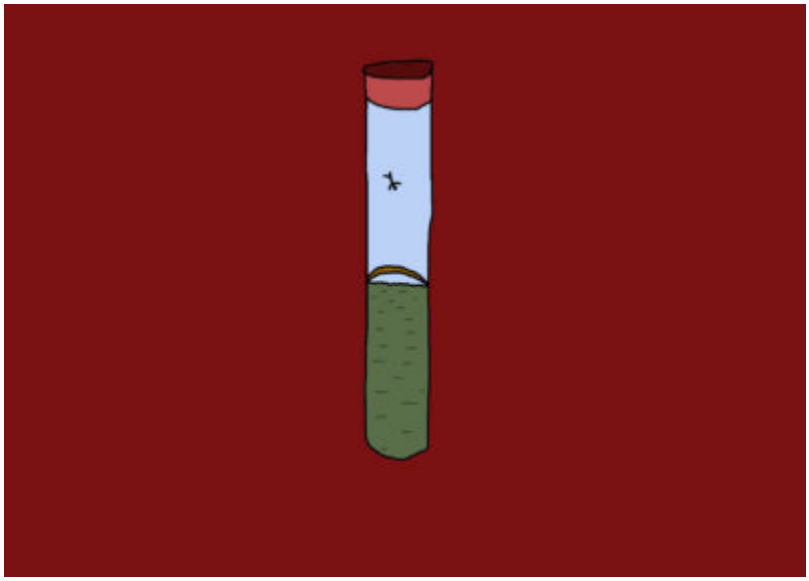

I would like to be romantic and call my eight-month stay in Paris a personal exile from Trump, but I moved because I'm a coward. A week after Trump was elected, I purchased a one-way ticket to Paris. I thought of staying in America, fighting for justice, equality, education, and democracy like the millions of people who're resisting. But I chose personal sanity and it was only afforded through escape.

This is my fourth attempt at escaping America. Back in 2003, I escaped to Durban, South Africa for one year. I told my friends and family that I was studying Visual Anthropology, which I was, but psychologically I was on sabbatical from American-style racism. Being an immigrant to America, I only felt the clenches of racism in my twenties. I heard about racism from my African American classmates and my parents who worked low-skilled jobs as a security guard and a domestic worker, but the inanimate social construction became alive later in my life. In my twenties, I became a "black woman" in the eyes of America, and my identity and autonomy was simultaneously stripped away. I hated the limits and caricature that was assigned to my blackness, and not wanting to let anger swallow me alive, I escaped. It had already eaten my mother and step-father alive. They were married to the American dream and suffered racism in silence for that dream. On the weekends, their loveless ramshackle marriage tattered because they had time on their hands. On the weekdays, they reunited for the good of their children and that American dream.

I tried to stay in South Africa after I flunked out of my graduate program: applying for jobs, applying to other graduate schools, pleading with my male friends to marry me. Nothing worked. In South Africa, I learned to love blackness without fear, and this self-love taught me about the power of reconciliation, and forgiveness. In 2012, when I returned to the States, my experiences helped me cope with American-style racism for awhile. Eventually, the blunt overwhelming force of racism started riding my back again. I was back in Brooklyn where it was common for white women to grab their purses and smile as I approached a bus or train stop.

On job interviews, managers were surprised that I was black and always doubtful that I could perform the job tasks. Once, the manager of a hardware store where I interviewed for an Administrative Assistant position was uncertain that I had obtained a bachelor's degree. I did not get the job although I showed him proof of my degree. Getting a job that matched my professional abilities was not just about my pride or ego, it was a lifeline to avoid sinking further into debt. I depended on my credit cards to live. My rent was five months overdue, and I owed money to all of my friends who could afford to lend it. But I stayed in America, trying to carve out my position in the world and dealing with American racism the old fashion way: lots of alcohol, church, and embedding the pain within my body.

When I graduated with my Master in Creative Writing and I was still poor, and on the brink of homelessness, I quit the American dream. My second attempt at escaping America was a move to Beijing, China to teach English at an international school. I planned to stay in Beijing for one year to save money, and work on a short-story collection. Within a few weeks of living in the city, I decided to stay longer. It all happened when I stopped emotionally preparing for racism as soon as I stepped outside my house. My mind was not over-worked and I felt as if I was regaining some part of my humanity. One of the many consequences of racism is violence: fighting yourself about reality, fighting others about their racist reality, and trying to recover in enough time to block the next punch. The irony is not lost on me that in a country well-known for its human rights violations, my humanity was restored. But the massive city weight on me: the constant shoving, the spitting, and the othering. My blackness was not criminalized, but it was treated as a spectacle – on several occasions someone tried to touch my hair and touch my skin to see if the blackness would rub-off.

I lived in China for three years, I was fed-up but I wanted to continue living outside of America, so I accepted a Composition and Rhetoric Instructor position at the Asian University for Women in Chittagong, Bangladesh. It's the country we all exploit without even knowing it. Most of my clothes are made in Bangladesh by young women who earn less than one-hundred dollars a month. I could go on a rift about the stench of raw garbage on the streets of Chittagong, the debilitating poverty, the rickshaw driver who slept outside my apartment building waiting for a fare from the rich American teachers, the dissolution of many, but the majority of perspective about Bangladesh is steeped in a racist Western rhetoric. What I know for sure is that in Bangladesh, people don't move from rags to riches. They move from rags to rags. They move from shanty town to shack. Witnessing this, paralyzed me, and I prayed daily for my work contract to end. In July of 2016, when a group of young militants took hostages in Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka and killed 29 people (foreigners and locals), I ended my work contract. Religious fundamentalists were always threatening to attack the university because we had the audacity to educate women. Working in Bangladesh reignited my activism for civil rights, and I decided to move back to New York City with hopes of helping marginalized communities move to the center.

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I was not as enthusiastic for the 2016 presidential election as I was eight years prior when I cast my first vote as an American citizen for Barack Obama. Back then, I believed in change, hope, and all of the uplifting values of his political agenda. I did not believe Obama would reverse racism, but I hoped that his presence in Washington would change our conversations about race. In this election, I knew it was my duty to vote for Hillary Clinton, although I was still

disheartened that Bernie Sanders wasn't the democratic candidate. I just remember thinking I could not allow a megalomaniac, pussy grabbing racist, and islamophobic candidate to be elected.

The night of the election, I went to my favorite bar in Brooklyn with friends to watch the results and celebrate democracy. Suddenly, Clinton started losing bigly. "White people are racist," a random white guy at the bar said to me. "Those backwards country people are cowards," he said. I nodded and continued drinking my wine. He wanted me to affirm his denial that white folks living in New York City were less racist and more open-minded. For him, New York City is probably an American utopia because of its cultural diversity and solid democratic voting history. For me, New York City is just as racist as a countrified American town. I finished my drink, and left the bar with one of my friends. The others stayed to watch the opening credits of fascism.

I arrived in Paris one week before Trump's inauguration. The city was rainy and grey, and the people moved about as if the dark clouds were personally following them. I quickly learned that Paris in the summer – sidewalk cafes, Saturday evening dance parties at the seine, and people watching in Republique Square was unlike Paris in the winter. The mornings start off dark, sometimes the sun peeks out in the afternoons, and before you know it, the cold, harking darkness returns. I spent the first week experiencing seasonal depression and rethinking my abrupt decision to flee America. Then, I remembered Baldwin's words in 1961, "To be a Negro in this country is really…never to be looked at. What white people see when they look at you is not visible. What they do see when they do look at you is what they have invested you with. What they have invested you with is all the agony, and pain, and the danger, and the passion, and the torment — you know, sin, death, and hell — of which everyone in this country is terrified." His words and the knowledge of his life in Paris inspired me to go out. I went to art galleries, concerts, museums, events hosted by expats for expats, trendy cafes, and poetry readings. I planted myself deeply into the artist's community in Paris and within two months, the city became my new home. As long as Trump was the American President, I would remain an exile in France.

Oh mon Dieu, I even found a boyfriend in Paris. His life mirrored mine: immigrant, backpacker, artist, part-time Buddhist with working class roots. On our third date, we were hanging out at a trendy café in Le Marais. The café attracted hipster, artists of all races and interracial couples like us. I was relaying the news from the old country. "You know they have issued a Muslim ban," I said, biting my bottom lip. "The pretense of not being racist is over; they have taken off their white hoods, showing us their faces." Ahmed laughed. He told me I was too consumed with matters of race on our first date after I went off on a diatribe about France's Arab xenophobia. So, he didn't bother talking. He grabbed my head and planted his moist lips on my forehead. "French people are pretty hip", he paused. I could tell that he was translating his thoughts, looking for the right words. Then he said, "You will not have to worry about American-style racism and discrimination over here." I was fresh off the boat, and I did not have a solid personal history with the country. Ahmed was as "woke" as they came, and I trusted his opinions on racism. After all, I was living in the city for several weeks, and I hadn't encountered any harsh or subtle racism.

As winter wore on, and the browbeating loneliness of being a stranger in yet another country started to seep into the marrow of my bones, I embraced Ahmed's statement about race in France. It kept me warm and justifying my absence from the rising American resistance against President Trump. With this in mind, I moved through the city with confidence. I often went on long strolls by myself, without mentally preparing for the "stop and frisk" method of racism. I often imagined James Baldwin sitting in a deserted cafe with a cigarette limp at his lips, and his pen dancing about something deep: "The artist is distinguished from all other responsible actors in society—the politicians, legislators, educators, and scientists—by the fact that he is his own test tube, his own laboratory, working according to very rigorous rules, however unstated these may be, and cannot allow any consideration to supersede his responsibility to reveal all that he can possibly discover concerning the mystery of the human being." I felt I had an opportunity to write creatively

and breathe deeply. My writing had started to become reactionary, and angry. I wasn't out ahead like Baldwin described the artist; I was stuck in the mud with the politicians and gatekeepers.

I would like to say that I resisted Trump from afar. I would like to say that I attended anti-Trump demonstrations in Paris, and called my elected officials to protest the Muslim ban, Betsy Devos, and all of the other maniacal things Trump did in the early months, but I didn't. I only resisted by re-posting articles that denounced Trump on social media. When my apartment was empty from the outside noises and NPR hosts, and I allowed myself to feel authentic emotions, the words traitor echoed throughout. It was a pulsating sound that paralyzed me– I was enraged, yet I could not purchase a return ticket to New York City.

In April, my depression expanded and took over every corner of my life. The threat of immigration raids in urban American cities kept me up, and I worried about my undocumented family members. I could not find a job willing to sponsor my employment visa. Even with Ahmed at my side, I was down to my last skin. One evening, as I curled-up next to him crying about another employment rejection, Ahmed decided that we should take a walk. We walked from his apartment in Saint Ouen, a nearby suburb to Paris, into the 17th, and then we curled our way into the village of Montmartre. Ahmed, usually the introspective partner and listener, led the conversation. He told stories of his first years in Paris. He arrived to the city from Morocco when he was thirteen-years old, and his French teacher, Gerald, took a liking to him. They built a friendship that remains to this day. Gerald introduced him to art, international music, and travel. (My Social Studies teacher in High School, Mr. Wharton did the same for me. Through him, I learned about post-colonialism, Karl Marx, and I started hanging out in the West Village when it still viewed as a dodgy neighborhood.) We walked until our feet were sore. We found the nearest metro station. Soon as we entered, police officers asked for our identification cards. One cop asked me a question, and I responded in English. He asked another question. I responded in English again. "American," he finally said. I have been an American immigrant for twenty-five years, and an American passport holder for five-years. I often called myself – Caribbean American or Afro-Caribbean America, but not exclusively "American" — because I am fearful of a singular identity. Still without hesitation, I blurted out, "yes, I am." The police officer allowed me to leave without checking my documents. They checked and re-checked Ahmed's identification, and searched him. He did not protest. He allowed them to raid his brown body until they were satisfied that it was not a threat. Afterwards, he grabbed my hands and we ran to board the train.

"Where are they taking the other people?" I asked. "The ones without identification."

"Probably to jail," he said, not looking up from his phone.

"Did you see that they were only stopping brown and black people?" Ahmed shrugged. "Did you see that?" I pressed. He did not want to engage, and continued playing a game on his phone.

I took out a book to read, but the previous incident with the police officers kept me from following the story's plot. When I looked up from my book, most of the black people were no longer on the train. There were white people on both ends and the middle. I stared at him, and he finally looked up at me. I knew in my gut that nothing was going to make him feel safe with me again. At the transfer station, Saint Lazare, he jumped off the train without a departing kiss and went home without me.

Without Ahmed's rose-colored glasses, the floodgates opened; I started to see French-style racism. I realized that my strolls through Paris had two layers. The same street I walked on one day, enjoying the beauty of cross-cultural Paris, was the same street where a young black male, Theo, was raped by two police back in February. It was the same street where other victims of police brutality walked. The street where I bought trinkets was also where a white, French women grabbed her purse as I walked by. My eyes were open, wide. It took me a while to see and feel racism in France because

the country had rescued my favorite artists, their music, stories, paintings, and their writings from America's tedious racism.

When I started to move beyond my black-American circle of friends to a circle of Francophone friends from West Africa, the Caribbean and North Africa, a different understanding of blackness in France emerged. While I professed my love for France, and I never wanted to leave. My new friend Valerie from Cameroon laughed at my crush on Paris. She hated the country and dreamt of moving to America for equality. She had just finished her doctoral degree, and could not find a job after applying to several cities in France. "Even with a high education, I will not be able to get a good job here because I am black." She worked as an Administrative Assistant for a fancy skincare line.

As my friendship with Valerie grew, she brought me into her network of friends. One night, she invited me to attend a dinner party with her classmates from Science Pro. They were immigrants or first-generation French citizens. At one point, one of the newly graduated doctoral recipients, a cute Cameroon guy asked my opinion about differences between racism in France and America. As I began to share my thoughts, one of the partygoers from Gabon interrupted me, "You are American and you are close to whiteness, so you will not feel French racism like me." I defended myself by listing the racist incidents I encountered while in France, but she stopped me. "As long as you can list and remember the racism you've encountered, then you've not truly lived as a black person in France." A deep shame settled within. I wanted to deny my privilege and tell her about all the agony of American racism, but I knew that would not erase my current entitlement. Valerie entered the kitchen during the discussion and when she noticed my shame, she pulled me out into the living room to dance.

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During the first election run-off in France, Ahmed and I took our bikes and escaped the city for a long bike ride. When we were tired, we found a park and pulled out our picnic. Ahmed sketched and I worked on my short story collection.

In the middle of writing, I blurted out, "I hate this feeling."

"What?"

"The feeling of politics controlling my life and I am powerless to change it."

"It's the consequences of being brown in a very white world," Ahmed said and continued sketching the scene ahead.

At the end of the day, the outside world came to us. Both of our phones started buzzing from friends and news sites, Marie Le Pen was in the second round of the elections.

"huh, I am not that surprised," I said as I laid in the grass and allowed the earth to sallow me.

Ahmed shrugged and he continued to pack-up our picnic.

"You should be more upset," I shouted as I continued to dig my heels into the fresh earth. "Feel something…"

"And what will that do?" He asked. "You want me to become angry like my father? Do you want me to become cut-off from this society like my mother?"

He retreated to his silent place and this tone accompanied us back to the city. Paris was failing him at every turn – he was facing a bitter divorce, he was a single father, he worked non-stop because of his climbing debt, and now active xenophobia was encroaching his politically apathetic world.

In the evening, we did the typical couple thing: cooked dinner together, watched a movie, and made love in the darkness with all of our defenses up. In the morning, he left for work and that week, he suddenly became too busy to spend time with me. After ten-years of therapy and introspection, I knew that Ahmed's behavior was not a reflection of me. I was fully aware that "love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within." I was fully aware that the colonial ghost lurks in our memories, and takes charge of our lives without us knowing. But all this awareness did not keep the tears away. How could a man be more committed to wearing a mask than to our relationship?

To escape our failing love story, I continued my longs walks throughout Paris. Sometimes I brought along my friend Valerie for the stroll. We walked through the streets watching the sun worshipers and couples performing love. We'd walked through the tourist neighborhoods and just like the tourists I would stand still in reverence to the beauty. Then we weaved through the fourth and fifth arrondissements to get to the other side of paradise. The sidewalks were crowded with people selling everything illegal – skin lightening cream, counterfeit items, and food from the homeland that they cooked in their unregulated kitchens. The men and women have different roles. The men hang out in cafes repeatedly drinking and smoking while the women hang out in front of their apartment buildings watching their children play. In familiarity, we nodded and whispered a faint, bonjour. "For you this is still glamorous even with all this poverty," Valerie once said. "But for us this beauty was built on the backs of our indignities." I wanted to comment and tell her that as a poor working class immigrant woman with an emotionally volatile mother, my life has never been easy. But as I opened my mouth to speak, a police van arrived. Four bulky officers jumped out, and they started searching the young Arab men who were sitting on their motorbikes. I did not want to witness the scene, and we walked ahead to a less hectic arrondissement.

I was beyond happy that Le Pen had lost and I thought this would mend my relationship with Ahmed. A few days after Emmanuel Macron was elected, Ahmed and I met for coffee at la Cafeotheque, my favorite café in Le Marais. He spent the first hour gloating about Macron's win. "You see we are not like the Americans," Ahmed said. "We are smarter and we put our country first." I knew it was not the overall intelligence of the French people that defeated Le Pen. She captured the failure of the white imagination, like Donald Trump, and if white privilege continues to reign, Le pen or someone like her will eventually become president in France. Ahmed did not want to talk about the millions of French citizens who voted for Le Pen, and the prevailing fear amongst many that if another terrorist event occurred – Le Pen might have won.

When the political conversation ran dry, we eventually talked about the end our relationship. He could not continue our relationship because he was still depressed about his divorce. He was was moving to his hometown, Agadir, Morocco to recover. "Maybe I will find myself there," he said. I could not argue with a person who is on a journey of self-discovery. I have been on that quest for ten years. The first five-years, I spent crying on my therapist's couch in New York City, and the second half, I traveled throughout Asia. When we left the café, he reached for my forehead and kissed me.

"You aren't lost," I whispered.

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I did not want to leave Paris and James Baldwin. I wanted to stay in the city of lights and carve out my destiny like Josephine Baker, Nina Simone, and Richard Wright. But I was running low on funds and the job offers were not coming. I quit my job teaching Business English, I packed-up my life in Paris, and I decided to move to Kuwait. An international school offered me a job teaching literature, and I accepted. My last day in Paris, I walked through my favorite neighborhood, Le Marais. I walked near the bridge and looked down at the oncoming traffic. I wanted to jump inside the blur. All my problems would end – racism, dislocation, sexism, classism, single-life, and the fact that I could not finish my short story collection. I pulled away from that fantasy, and I walked to the art gallery where I first met Ahmed. I pictured us in the gallery, talking, laughing, unable to contain our flirtation. In those moments, we found beauty and peace within the story of us. I cried. I cried some more, and then I went to fetch a taxi to the airport.

As I waited for my flight to Kuwait, a lot of the passengers gathered at the television station to watch the news. I joined them, and I saw the clashes in Charlottesville, North Carolina. A few days before my departure to Kuwait, I spoke with my mother and she begged me to return to New York City. “Trump can’t do anything to you,” she said. “You are an American citizen and you did not kill Jesus Christ, of course you can make a living here.” I told her I would think about it. I also told her that I would keep Jesus in my life, although I’m not religious. I walked away from the television and the chants from the young white men shouting, “you will not replace us,” rattled my spine. I sat down, closed my eyes, and I prayed to the Gods of small things for deliverance.

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