

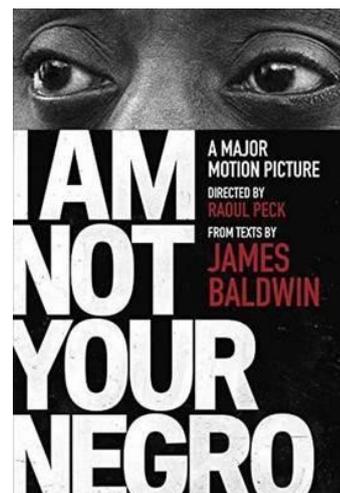
# *I Am Not Your Negro*

James Baldwin

«

You never had to look at me.  
I had to look at you. I know  
more about you than you  
know about me. Not  
everything that is faced can  
be changed; but nothing can  
be changed until it is faced.

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## Brief Author Biography



James Arthur Baldwin was born on August 2, 1924 in New York City's Harlem and was raised under very trying circumstances. As is the case with many writers, Baldwin's upbringing is reflected in his writings, especially in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.

Baldwin's stepfather, an evangelical preacher, struggled to support a large family and demanded the most rigorous religious behavior from his nine children. As a youth Baldwin read constantly and even tried writing. He was an excellent student who sought escape from his environment through literature, movies and theater. During the summer of his 14th birthday he underwent a dramatic religious conversion, partly in response to his nascent sexuality and partly as a further buffer against the ever-present temptations of drugs and crime. He served as a junior

minister for three years at the Fireside Pentecostal Assembly, but gradually lost his desire to preach as he began to question Christian tenets.

Shortly after he graduated from high school in 1942, Baldwin was compelled to find work in order to help support his brothers and sisters; mental instability had incapacitated his stepfather. Baldwin took a job in the defense industry in Belle Meade, N.J., and there, not for the first time, he was confronted with racism, discrimination and the debilitating regulations of segregation. The experiences in New Jersey were closely followed by his stepfather's death, after which Baldwin determined to make writing his sole profession.

Baldwin moved to Greenwich Village and began to write a novel, supporting himself by performing a variety of odd jobs.

In 1944 he met author Richard Wright, who helped him to land the 1945 Eugene F. Saxton fellowship. Despite the financial freedom the fellowship provided, Baldwin was unable to complete his novel that year. He found the social tenor of the United States increasingly stifling even though such prestigious periodicals as the *Nation*, *New Leader* and *Commentary* began to accept his essays and short stories for publication. In 1948 he moved to Paris, using funds from a Rosenwald Foundation fellowship to pay his passage. Most critics feel that this journey abroad was fundamental to Baldwin's development as an author.

"Once I found myself on the other side of the ocean," Baldwin told the *New York Times*, "I could see where I came from very clearly, and I could see that I carried myself, which is my home,

with me. You can never escape that. I am the grandson of a slave, and I am a writer. I must deal with both.” Through some difficult financial and emotional periods, Baldwin undertook a process of self-realization that included both an acceptance of his heritage and an admittance of his bisexuality.

Baldwin’s move led to a burst of creativity that included *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, *Giovanni’s Room* and other works. He also wrote a series of essays probing the psychic history of the United States along with his inner self. Many critics view Baldwin’s essays as his most significant contribution to American literature. They include “Notes of a Native Son,” “Nobody Knows My Name,” “The Fire Next Time,” “No Name in the Street” and “The Evidence of Things Not Seen.”

In addition to his books and essays, Baldwin wrote plays that were produced on Broadway. Both *The Amen Corner*, a treatment of storefront pentecostal religion, and *Blues for Mister Charlie*, a drama based on the racially motivated murder of Emmett Till in 1955, had successful Broadway runs and numerous revivals.

Baldwin’s oratorical prowess—honed in the pulpit as a youth—brought him into great demand as a speaker during the civil rights era. Baldwin embraced his role as racial spokesman reluctantly and grew increasingly

disillusioned as he felt his celebrity being exploited as entertainment. Baldwin did not feel that his speeches and essays were producing social change. The assassinations of three of his associates, Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, shattered his remaining hopes for racial reconciliation across the U.S.

At the time of his death from cancer late in 1987, Baldwin was still working on two projects—a play, *The Welcome Table*, and a biography of Martin Luther King, Jr. Although he lived primarily in France, he never relinquished his United States citizenship and preferred to think of himself as a “commuter” rather than as an expatriate.

The publication of his collected essays, *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948–1985*, and his subsequent death sparked reassessments of his career and legacy. “Mr. Baldwin has become a kind of prophet, a man who has been able to give a public issue all its deeper moral, historical and personal significance,” remarked Robert F. Sayre in *Contemporary American Novelists*. “Certainly one mark of his achievement... is that whatever deeper comprehension of the race issue Americans now possess has been in some way shaped by him. And this is to have shaped their comprehension of themselves as well.”

A novelist and essayist of

considerable renown, James Baldwin bore articulate witness to the unhappy consequences of American racial strife. Baldwin’s writing career began in the last years of legislated segregation; his fame as a social observer grew in tandem with the civil rights movement as he mirrored African American aspirations, disappointments and coping strategies in a hostile society.

Baldwin died on December 1, 1987 in France.

[<https://www.chipublib.org/james-baldwin-biography/>]

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## **From Remember This House to I Am Not Your Negro:**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In 1979, James Baldwin wrote a letter to his literary agent describing his next project, *Remember This House*. The book was to be a revolutionary, personal account of the lives and successive assassinations of three of his close friends—Medgar Evers, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.

At the time of Baldwin's death in 1987, he left behind only thirty completed pages of his manuscript.

In his incendiary documentary, master filmmaker Raoul Peck envisions the book James Baldwin never finished. The result is a radical, up-to-the-minute examination of race in America, using Baldwin's original words and flood of rich archival material. *I Am Not Your Negro* is a journey into black history that connects the past of the Civil Rights movement to the present of #BlackLivesMatter. It is a film that questions black representation in Hollywood and beyond. And, ultimately, by confronting the deeper connections between the lives and assassination of these three leaders, Baldwin and Peck have produced a work that challenges the very definition of what America stands for.

### **RAOUL PECK**

I started reading James Baldwin when I was a 15-year-old boy searching for rational explanations to the contradictions I was confronting in my already nomadic life, which took me from Haiti to Congo to France to Germany and to the United States of America. Together with Aimée Césaire, Jacques Stéphane Alexis, Richard Wright, Gabriel García Márquez and Alejo Carpentier, James Baldwin was one of the few authors that I could call “my own.” Authors who were speaking of a world I knew, in which I was not just a footnote. They were telling stories describing history and defining structure and human relationships which matched what I was seeing around me. I could relate to them. You always need a Baldwin book by your side.

I came from a country which had a strong idea of itself, which had fought and won against the most powerful army of the world (Napoleon's) and which had, in a unique historical manner, stopped slavery in its tracks, creating the first successful slave revolution in the history of the world, in 1804.

I am talking about Haiti, the first free country of the Americas. Haitians always knew the real story. And they also knew that

the dominant story was not the real story.

The successful Haitian Revolution was ignored by history (as Baldwin would put it: because of the bad niggers we were) because it was imposing a totally different narrative, which would have rendered the dominant slave narrative of the day untenable. The colonial conquests of the late nineteenth century would have been ideologically impossible if deprived of their civilizational justification. And this justification would have no longer been needed if the whole world knew that these “savage” Africans had already annihilated their powerful armies (especially French and British) less than a century ago.

So what the four superpowers of the time did in an unusually peaceful consensus, was to shut down Haiti, the very first black Republic, put it under strict economical embargo and strangle it to its knees into oblivion and poverty.

And then they rewrote the whole story.

Flash forward. I remember my years in New York as a child. A more civilized time, I thought. It was the sixties. In the kitchen of this huge middle-class apartment in the former Jewish neighborhoods of Brooklyn, where we lived with several

## ***An Unfinished Book Becomes A Successful Movie***

other families, there was a kind of large oriental rug with effigies of John Kennedy and Martin Luther King hanging on the wall, the two martyrs, both legends of the time.

Except the tapestry was not telling the whole truth. It naively ignored the hierarchy between the two figures, the imbalance of power that existed between them. And thereby it nullified any ability to understand these two parallel stories that had crossed path for a short time, and left in their wake the foggy miasma of misunderstanding.

I grew up in a myth in which I was both enforcer and actor. The myth of a single and unique America. The script was well written, the soundtrack allowed no ambiguity, the actors of this utopia, black or white, were convincing. The production means of this Blockbuster-Hollywood picture were phenomenal. With rare episodic setbacks, the myth was strong, better; the myth was life, was reality. I remember the Kennedys, Bobby and John, Elvis, Ed Sullivan, Jackie Gleason, Dr. Richard Kimble, and Mary Tyler Moore very well. On the other hand, Otis Redding, Paul Robeson, and Willie Mays are only vague reminiscences. Faint stories "tolerated" in my memorial hard disk. Of course there was "Soul Train" on television, but it was much later, and on Saturday morning, where it wouldn't offend any advertisers.

Medgar Evers died on June 12, 1963.

Malcolm X died on February 21, 1965.

And Martin Luther King Jr. died on April 4, 1968.

In the course of five years, these three men were assassinated.

These three men were black, but it is not the color of their skin that connected them. They fought on quite different battlefields. And quite differently. But in the end, all three were deemed dangerous. They were unveiling the haze of racial confusion.

James Baldwin also saw through the system. And he loved these men. These assassinations broke him down.

He was determined to expose the complex links and similarities among these three individuals. He was going to write about them. He was going to write his ultimate book, *Remember This House*, about them.

I came upon these three men and their assassination much later. These three facts, these elements of history, from the starting point, the "evidence" you might say, form a deep and intimate personal reflection on my own political and cultural mythology, my own experiences of racism and intellectual violence.

This is exactly the point where I really needed James Baldwin.

Baldwin knew how to deconstruct stories. He helped me in connecting the story of a liberated slave in its own nation, Haiti, and the story of modern United States of America and its own painful and bloody legacy of slavery. I could connect the dots.

I looked to the films of Haile Gerima. Of Charles Burnett. These were my elders when I was a youth.

Baldwin gave me a voice, gave me the words, gave me the rhetoric. All I knew through instinct or through experience, Baldwin gave it a name and a shape. I had all the intellectual weapons I needed.

For sure, we will have strong winds against us. The present time of discord and confusion is an unavoidable element. I am not naive to think that the road ahead will be easy or that the attacks will not be at times vicious. My commitment to make sure that this film will not be buried or sidelined is uncompromising.

We are in it for the long run. Whatever time and effort it takes.

[From the press release of the *I Am Not Your Negro* documentary, at <http://www.magpictures.com/iamnotyournegro/press-kit>]

## James Baldwin and Margaret Mead on Identity, Race, the Immigrant Experience, and Why the “Melting Pot” Is a Problematic Metaphor - by Maria Popova.

**“You’ve got to tell the world how to treat you. If the world tells you how you are going to be treated, you are in trouble.”**

The civil rights movement has been accused of excluding women from its campaign for “a brotherhood of man” and the feminist movement has been accused of excluding women of color. It is both fair and reasonable to suppose that in any movement of goodwill aimed at equality, such exclusions are not deliberate but circumstantial — the product of cultural biases so deep-seated that they require multiple directions of effort and commitment to overcome.

In the summer of 1970, a most emboldening integration of these efforts took place on a stage in New York City. On the evening of August 25, Margaret Mead and James Baldwin sat down for a remarkable public conversation, the transcript of which was eventually published as *A Rap on Race*. For seven and a half hours over the course of two days, they discussed everything from power and privilege to race and gender to capitalism and democracy. What emerged was a dialogue of total commitment, deep mutual respect, and profound prescience.

By that point, Baldwin, forty-six and living in Paris, was arguably

the most world-famous poet alive, and an enormously influential voice in the civil rights dialogue; Mead, who was about to turn seventy, had become the world’s first celebrity academic — a visionary anthropologist with groundbreaking field experience under her belt, who lectured at some of the most esteemed cultural institutions and had a popular advice column in *Redbook* magazine. As a black man and a white woman who had come of age in the first half of the twentieth century, before the civil rights and women’s liberation movements, and as queer people half a century before marriage equality, their formative experiences were at once worlds apart and strewn with significant similarity.

Since the depth and dimension of the conversation between these uncontainable minds cannot be reduced to a single thread of synthesis — this is, after all, the book I have annotated most heavily in a lifetime of reading — I have decided to examine its various facets in a multi-part series, [the first installment in which covered forgiveness and the crucial difference between guilt and responsibility](#). This

second installment focuses on identity, how we assemble it as individuals, and how we construct it as a culture.

Mead and Baldwin first consider how identity’s contour is often shaped by the negative space around it:

*BALDWIN: It takes a lot to wrest identity out of nothing...*

*MEAD: But nobody was talking about needing identity fifty years ago. We’ve started to worry about identity since people began losing it. And that gives us a new concept. And now you go back and work on it and figure out what your identity is. Fifty years ago you might have moved to Paris cause it was the thing to do. After all, lots of white writers went to Europe too, in order to understand America. But you wouldn’t have said the same thing about your identity fifty years ago.*

[...]

*The whole spirit of the North has been to keep other people out. It’s not only been about keeping out black people, it’s been about keeping out everybody... The North has always tried to establish its identity by cutting other people out and off.*

[...]

The Northern identity is dependent upon whom you can keep out.

Mead later revisits this notion of identity as a function of using what we are not to define what we are:

MEAD: *The white world ... [has] built its dignity and built its sense of identity on the fact it wasn't black, the way males in this country built their sense of superiority over the fact that they are not female.*

But there exists a certain hierarchy of desirable identities based on the social hierarchy of privilege. She offers a pause-giving empirical perspective on that totem pole of desirability regarding race and gender:

MEAD: *[Psychologists] asked the little white boys which they would rather be, little white girls or little Negro boys. What do you think they said? ... They said they would rather be little Negro boys.*

And yet identity, rather than a static fixture, is an assemblage of responsive parts that reorganize relative to cultural context. Baldwin offers an illustrative example:

BALDWIN: *When I first hit Paris, for example, I had dealt with cynical East and North Africans. They did not see me, and it may be argued that I did not see them either. But they did see that I smoked Lucky Strikes and Pall Malls and that I had American sports shirts. They did not see that I did not have a penny; that did not make any difference. I came,*

*I represented the richest nation in the world and there was no way whatever for them to suspect that I considered myself to be far worse off than they... The reason I was in Paris was that I considered my sports shirts, for example, and my cigarettes, had been a little too expensive and cost me a little more than I could afford. They did not know that.*

I had a parallel experience learning about race and identity as a child.

When I was growing up in communist Bulgaria, the Iron Curtain prevented practically all influx of foreigners and people of different ethnicities. The only major exception was the International Institute of Sofia University, located near my grandparents' small apartment, where my parents and I shared a pull-out sofa. Passing by the campus on the way to school, I would occasionally see one of several young black men — graduate students from a handful of communist and socialist countries in North and East Africa. But what registered immediately wasn't skin color, for the markers of privilege are different in a country whose entire identity was deeply rooted in a sense of poverty.

In encountering strangers, both native and foreign, Bulgarians always engaged in a mental math estimating who is "better off" on the poverty axis — a self-comparison from which

emerged a sense of superiority or inferiority, depending on the particular calculation. If those black graduate students were smoking Marlboros or wearing denim — the ultimate, most highly prized, usually contraband marker of Western privilege — the mental math automatically registered them as "better off" than us, people of greater privilege, and thus worthy of that peculiar blend of reverence and begrudging envy. (Never mind that they were poor grad students, likely of the same means as all grad students, anywhere in the world, ever.) If they wore no denim and smoked no American cigarettes, then they were dismissed as irrelevant — no better off or worse off than we were, just members of the same ill-fated human lot. Race was merely a marker of foreignness and a quicker cue for the mental math to be performed. Once again, it was a case of identity contoured by negative space.

Baldwin offers another example that illustrates how other such sociocultural variables can eclipse race in this calculus of privilege even within an ethnic group:

BALDWIN: *I remember once a few years ago, in the British Museum a black Jamaican was washing the floors or something and asked me where I was from, and I said I was born in New York. He said, "Yes, but where are you from?" I did not know what he meant. "Where did*

you come from before that?" he explained. I said, "My mother was born in Maryland." "Where was your father born?" he asked. "My father was born in New Orleans." He said, "Yes, but where are you from?" Then I began to get it; very dimly, because now I was lost. And he said, "Where are you from in Africa?" I said, "Well, I don't know," and he was furious with me. He said, and walked away, "You mean you did not care enough to find out?"

Now, how in the world am I going to explain to him that there is virtually no way for me to have found out where I came from in Africa? So it is a kind of tug of war. The black American is looked down on by other dark people as being an object abjectly used. They envy him on the one hand, but on the other hand they also would like to look down on him as having struck a despicable bargain.

But identity, Baldwin argues, isn't something we are born with — rather, it is something we claim for ourselves, then must assert willfully to the world:

**BALDWIN:** You've got to tell the world how to treat you. If the world tells you how you are going to be treated, you are in trouble.

Remarking on the emerging crop of elite-educated African American boys they had discussed earlier in the conversation, he adds:

*I'm tired of being told by people who*

*just got out of the various white colleges and got a dashiki and let their hair grow, I am terribly tired of these middle-class darkies telling me what it means to be black. But I understand why they have to do it!*

This assertion of identity transcends race and spills over into other demographic categories. As a first-generation immigrant in America three decades after this historic dialogue, I found Mead's remarks on national identity particularly pause-giving:

**MEAD:** It always takes two generations to really lose something, but in two generations you can lose it.

[...]

*The culture in this country that is ... most limited, is that of the second and third generations away from Europe. They have lost what they had and aren't ready to take on anything else. They are scared to death and so busy being American.*

[...]

*What we have in this country at present is a very large number of second- and third-generation Europeans who aren't really sure they're here.*

*Fifteen years ago, if I gave a test to people to fill in: "I am an American, not a \_\_\_\_\_," most people would say "foreigner," and a few said "Communist." Now, they say "not a Russian," "not an Italian," "not an*

*Irishman," "not a Pole": over twenty different things.*

Once again, the conversation circles back to this notion of constructing identity by the deliberate exclusion of what we are not in order to carve out what we are — a process that calls to mind Rodin's famous proclamation that the art of sculpting is about removing the stone not part of the sculpture. Baldwin captures this paradox succinctly:

**BALDWIN:** It is a curious way to find your identity, labeling yourself by labeling all the things that you're not.

They consider another aspect of identity — identity as an assemblage of ancestry:

**BALDWIN:** You are always the receptacle of what has gone before you, whether or not you know it and whether or not you can reach it.

[...]

**MEAD:** "We're sort of monglers," I was taught to say as a child. *Monglers is a Pennsylvania dialect word for a dog of mixed background.*

But ancestry isn't only a function of genealogy — while we can't choose our genetic ancestors, we can choose and construct our own intellectual, creative, and ideological lineage. I started Brain Pickings with the intention of assembling my own cultural lineage based on ideas

from minds belonging to brains I wasn't genetically related to, a kind of spiritual and intellectual re-parenting. Baldwin wasn't genetically related to Shakespeare — at least directly; all humans are, of course, genetically related further down the line — but the Bard was very much his cultural ancestor. All of us do that, in one form or another — we are cultural stardust.

Mead articulates this elegantly:

*MEAD: You see, I think we have to get rid of people being proud of their ancestors, because after all they didn't do a thing about it. What right have I to be proud of my grandfather? I can be proud of my child if I didn't ruin her, but nobody has any right to be proud of his ancestors.*

[...]

*The one thing you really ought to be allowed to do is to choose your ancestors.*

[...]

*We have a term for this in anthropology: mythical ancestors... They are spiritual and mental ancestors, they're not biological ancestors, but they are terribly important.*

*BALDWIN: We are talking about the models that the human race chooses to work from, in effect. It is difficult to imagine anyone choosing Hitler as an ancestor, for example... It runs very close to the terms in which one elects to live and*

*the reasons for that election. It reveals that depth of whatever dreams you have, and everyone lives by his dreams, really.*

Mead notes that there are very few black people in America who don't have some white ancestors, with which Baldwin agrees, and they go on to explore why the "melting pot" metaphor is deeply problematic in honoring the actual architecture of identity:

*MEAD: It isn't a melting pot, is it?*

*BALDWIN: No, it isn't. Nobody ever got melted. People aren't meant to be melted.*

*MEAD: That old image from World War I is a bad image: to melt everyone down.*

*BALDWIN: Because people don't want to be melted down. they resist it with all their strength.*

*MEAD: Of course! Who wants to be melted down?*

*BALDWIN: Melted down into what? It's a very unfortunate image.*

[...]

*But where this takes us, I do not know. I really do not know. I can't any longer find the point of departure. Part of it is, of course, the great dispersal of the Africans. But then everyone has been dispersed all over the world for one reason or another. And how out of this one arrives at any kind of sense of human unity, for lack of a better phrase, is a very grave question and obviously would take many, many*

*generations to answer.*

In one of his many brilliant asides, Baldwin makes a curious remark about how the eradication of neighborliness makes the "high-rise slums" of housing projects so ghastly and such a threat to the mutual honoring of identity:

*BALDWIN: The anonymity of it is a tremendous insult. People won't bear it. People will become monstrous before they can bear it.*

In a way, the internet is a high-rise slum — the very substance of neighborly friendliness, which is predicated on knowing one another's identity and thus honoring one another's personhood, vanishes behind the veneer of anonymity, shielded by which people perpetrate monstrous acts.

To illustrate the complex variables of identity beyond race, Mead shares a poignant autobiographical anecdote of her own formative experience with the duality of privilege and hardship, underpinned by the conscious choice not to partake in the era's limiting and bigoted treatment of difference:

*MEAD: I was born in a family where I was the child ... that both my parents wanted. I had the traits that they liked, that each one of them liked in the other. I was told from the time I was born that I was totally satisfactory. I had a chance to be what I wanted to be and I*

have always been able to be what I wanted to be... Because I was born where I was, I was fortunate. And it wasn't only because I was white, because there are an extraordinary number of white people in this country who are born very unfortunately. I might have been very fortunate had I been the third child of my parents instead of the first, with a baby who died in between somewhere so my father decided that he was never going to love the younger children too much.

But I have got to talk to you, you see, and I think that this is a problem. It isn't only race. It is weighted by race, oh, it's weighted by race. So you give yourself the same father and the same mother but you grow up in a small Iowa town. Fifty percent, seventy-five percent, God knows how much of suffering you would not have had, see? I mean, you just think of the things that you suffered by, and most of them were created by Harlem. Now, your father. If you

had had your father as a father but he had been white... He could have been, you know. There have been white preachers that were just as rigid as your father.

[...]

It wasn't because I was sitting, vis-à-vis black people, being privileged, as has happened in many parts of the world. I didn't belong to a separate class. I lived in a small Pennsylvania community and I was brought up with tremendous concern for every person who was poor or different in that community. In a sense my happiness was a function of the fact that my mother did insist that I call the black woman who worked for us Mrs. My felicity was a function of a denial, if you like, or a refusal of a caste position.

[<https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/03/26/margaret-mead-james-baldwin-a-rap-on-race-2/>]



JAMES BALDWIN



MARGARET MEAD

