



JAMES BALDWIN

THE LAST INTERVIEW

and OTHER CONVERSATIONS

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JAMES BALDWIN: THE LAST INTERVIEW
AND OTHER CONVERSATIONS

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AN INTERVIEW WITH JAMES BALDWIN

**INTERVIEW BY STUDS TERKEL
ALMANAC, WFMT, CHICAGO
DECEMBER 29, 1961**

*When it thunders and lightning and the wind begins to blow,
When it thunders and lightning and the wind begins to blow,
There's thousands of people
They ain't got no place to go.
My house fell down,
And I can't live there no more.*

Bessie Smith, *Back Water Blues* (1927)

TERKEL: Sitting with me hearing Bessie Smith singing of disaster, a flood, is James Baldwin, the young American novelist. But perhaps a more specific description of Mr. Baldwin, since he is one of the rare men in the world who seems to know who he is today, would be: James Baldwin, brilliant young Negro American writer. As you listen to this record of Bessie Smith, Jim, what is your feeling?

BALDWIN: It is very hard to describe that feeling. The first time I heard this record was in Europe, and under very different circumstances than I had ever listened to Bessie in New York. What struck me was the fact that she was singing, as you say, about a disaster, which had almost killed her, and she accepted it and was going beyond it. The *fantasy* understatement in it. It is the way I want to write, you know. When she says, "My house fell down, and I can't live there no more"—it is a great ... a great sentence. A great achievement.

TERKEL: I'm looking at a passage in your new book, a remarkable one, *Nobody Knows My Name*, a series of essays, articles, opinions. You say here that when you went to live in the mountains of Switzerland you arrived armed with two Bessie Smith records and a typewriter. "I began to try to re-create the life I had first known as a child and from which I had spent so many years in flight," you wrote. "It was Bessie Smith, through her tone and her cadence who helped me to dig back to the way I myself must have spoken when I was a pickaninny and to remember the things I had heard and seen and felt. I had buried them very deep. Now, here's the part, Jim: "I had never listened to Bessie Smith in America (in the same way that, for years, I never touched watermelon), but in Europe she helped me to reconcile myself to being a 'nigger.' "

BALDWIN: Well, that winter in Switzerland, I was working on my first novel—I thought I would never be able to finish it—and I finally realized that one of the reasons that I couldn't finish this novel was that I was ashamed of where I came from and where I had been. I was ashamed of the life in the Negro church, ashamed of my father, ashamed of the Blue

ashamed of Jazz, and, of course, ashamed of watermelon: all of these stereotypes that the country inflicts on Negroes, that we all eat watermelon or we all do nothing but sing the Blues. Well, I was afraid of all that; and I ran from it.

When I say I was trying to *dig back* to the way I myself must have spoken when I was little I realized that I had acquired so many affectations, had told myself so many lies, that I really had buried myself beneath a whole fantastic image of myself which wasn't mine, but which was people's image of me.

I realized that I had not always talked—obviously I hadn't always talked—the way I had forced myself to learn how to talk. I had to find out what I had been like in the beginning, in order, just technically as a writer, to re-create Negro speech. I realized it was a cadence; it was not a question of dropping *s*'s or *n*'s or *g*'s, but a question of the *beat*. Bessie had the beat. In that icy wilderness, as far removed from Harlem as anything you can imagine, with Bessie Smith and me ... I began ...

TERKEL: And white snow ...

BALDWIN: And *white* snow, white mountains, and white faces. Those Swiss people really thought I had been sent by the devil; it was a very strange ... They had never seen a Negro before. In this isolation I managed to finish the book. And I played Bessie every day. A lot of the book is in dialogue, you know, and I corrected things according to what I was able to hear when Bessie sang, and when James P. Johnson plays. It's that *tone*, that sound, which is in me.

TERKEL: This "tone" is in your forthcoming novel?

BALDWIN: Yes, yes, in a forthcoming novel.

TERKEL: Did you feel a sense of shame about a heritage that is really so *rich*, when you accepted the white man's stereotype of yourself?

BALDWIN: I'm afraid that is one of the great dilemmas, one of the *great* psychological hazards of being an American Negro. In fact, much more than that. I've seen a great many people go under because of this dilemma. Every Negro in America is in one way or another menaced by it. One is born in a white country, a white Protestant Puritan country, where one was once a slave, where all standards and all the images ... when you open your eyes on the world, everything you see: none of it applies to you.

You go to white movies and, like everybody else, you fall in love with Joan Crawford, and you root for the Good Guys who are killing off the Indians. It comes as a great psychological collision when you realize all of these things are really metaphors for your oppression, and they will lead into a kind of psychological warfare in which you may perish. I was born in the church, for example, and my father was a very rigid, righteous man. But we were in Harlem—you lived, you know, in a terrible house. Downstairs from us there were what my father

called “good-time” people: a prostitute and all of her paramours, and all that jazz. I remember I loved this woman; she was very nice to us; but we were not allowed to go to her house, and if we went there, we were beaten for it.

When I was older, that whole odor of home-made gin, pigs’ feet, chitlin’, and poverty, and the basement: all this got terribly mixed together in my mind with the Holy Roller, White God business. I really began to go a little out of my mind. Obviously I wasn’t white—wasn’t so much a question of wanting to be white—but I didn’t quite know anymore what being *black* meant. I couldn’t accept what I had been told.

All you are ever told in this country about being black is that it is a terrible, terrible thing to be. Now, in order to survive this, you have to really dig down into yourself and re-create yourself, really, according to no image which yet exists in America. You have to impose, in fact—this may sound very strange—you have to *decide* who you are, and force the world to deal with you, not with its *idea* of you.

TERKEL: You have to decide who you are—whether you are black or white—who you are ...

BALDWIN: Yes, who you are. Then the pressure of being black or white is robbed of its power. You can, of course, still be beaten up on the South Side by anybody; I mean, the social menace does not lessen. The world perhaps can destroy you physically. The danger of your destroying yourself does not vanish, but it is minimized.

TERKEL: The name of your book—this is directly connected—*Nobody Knows My Name*. For years you have been known as James but never as James Baldwin—“Home, James, sometimes called George; in the old days, Sam; sometimes, Boy.

BALDWIN: Sometimes ...

TERKEL: *Nobody Knows My Name*. Why did you choose that title?

BALDWIN: Well, at the risk of sounding pontifical—I suppose it is a fairly bitter title—it was meant as a kind of warning to my country. In the days when people ... well, in the days when people called me Boy ... Those days haven’t passed except that I didn’t answer then and don’t answer now. To be a Negro in this country is really—Ralph Ellison has said it very well—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.

As a Negro, you represent a level of experience which Americans deny. This may sound mystical, but I think it is proven in great relief in the South. Consider the extraordinary price—the absolutely prohibitive price, the South has paid to keep the Negro in his place; and it has not succeeded in doing that, but has succeeded in having what is almost certainly the most bewildered, demoralized white population in the Western world.

On another level, you can see in the life of the country, not only in the South, what a terrible price the country has paid for this effort to keep a distance between themselves and black people. In the same way, for example, it is very difficult—it is hazardous psychologically, personally hazardous—for a Negro in the country really to hate white people. He is too involved with them: not only socially but historically.

No matter who says what, in fact, Negroes and whites in this country are related to each other. Half of the black families in the South are related, you know, to the judges and the lawyers and the white families of the South. They are cousins, and kissing cousins at that—least kissing cousins. Now, this is a terrible depth of involvement.

It is easy for an African to hate the invader and drive him out of Africa, but it is very difficult for an American Negro to do this. He obviously can't do this to white people; there is no place to drive them. This is a country that belongs equally to us both. One has got to live together here or else there won't be any country.

TERKEL: This matter of living together, this ambivalent attitude that the South has towards the Negro perhaps is most eloquently, perhaps tragically, expressed in the life, the sayings, of William Faulkner. His remarkable story "Dry September" seems to analyze the malaise, but at the same time, he himself makes comments that are shocking. You have a chapter in your book dealing with Faulkner and desegregation. Is it this ambivalence, too?

BALDWIN: It's his Love-Hatred ... Love-Hatred. I hate to think of what the spiritual state of the South would be if all the Negroes moved out of it. The white people there don't want them ... they want them in their place. But they would be terrified if the Negroes left. I really think the bottom of their world would have fallen out.

Faulkner in "Dry September"—or *Light in August*, or even in *The Sound and the Fury*—can really get at (as you put it, "to the bone") the truth of what the black-white relationship is in the South, and how what a dark force it is in the Southern personality. At the same time Faulkner, as a man, as a citizen of Mississippi, is committed to what in Mississippi seems to be their past. It is one thing for Faulkner to deal with the Negro in his imagination, where he can control him; and quite another thing to deal with him in life, where he can't control him. In life, obviously the Negro, the uncontrollable Negro, simply is determined to overthrow everything in which Faulkner imagines himself to believe. It is one thing to demand justice in literature, and another thing to face the price that one has got to pay for it in life.

No matter how Southerners, and whites in the rest of the nation, too, deny it, or what kind of rationalizations they cover it up with, they know the crimes they have committed against black people. And they are terrified that these crimes will be committed against them.

TERKEL: The amount of guilt here is a point you make very beautifully somewhere in *Nobody Knows My Name*. In the South, the white man is continuously bringing up the matter of the Negro; in the North, *never*. So obsessed in one case, so ignored in the other.

BALDWIN: It's very funny. It is very funny especially because the results have gotten to be, in the case of the Negro's lot in the world, so very much the same in both South and North.

must be absolute torment to be a Southerner, when you imagine that these people ... even Faulkner himself was raised by a black woman (probably a model for Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury*)... and one fine day, the child of three or four or five, who has been involved with black people on the most intense level, and at the most important time in anybody's life suddenly it breaks on him like a thundercloud that it is all taboo.

And since we know that nobody ever recovers, really, from his earliest impressions, the torment that goes on in a Southerner, who is absolutely forbidden, you know, to excavate his beginnings: it seems to me this is a key to those terrifying mobs. It isn't hatred that drives those people in the streets. It is pure terror.

TERKEL: And perhaps a bit of schizophrenia here, too?

BALDWIN: Yes, of course, schizophrenia. And not only in the South. But the South is a very useful example, on a personal and social level, of what is occurring really in the country. And the sexual paranoia. It is very important to remember what it means to be born in Protestant Puritan country, with all the taboos placed on the flesh, and have at the same time in this country such a vivid example of a decent pagan imagination and the sexual liberation with which white people invest Negroes—and then penalize them for.

TERKEL: The very nature of the American heritage: the combination of Puritanism and Paganism. The conflict.

BALDWIN: The terrible tension.

TERKEL: The terrible tension that comes as a result.

BALDWIN: It's a guilt about flesh. In this country the Negro pays for that guilt which white people have about the flesh.

TERKEL: Since you bring up this point, I think, too, of the position of Negro women and the Negro man. In the beautiful article you wrote for *Tone* magazine, you were saying something about the white mistress of the house, who admires her maid very much, but speaks of the no-account husband. What does it mean to be a Negro male?

BALDWIN: The old, old phrase: "Negroes are the last to be hired and the first to be fired." That doesn't apply to the Negro maid particularly, though it can. It actually applies, without exception, and with great rigor, to Negro men. One has got to consider, especially when you talk about this whole tension between violence and nonviolence, the dilemma and the rage and the anguish of a Negro man who, in the first place, is forced to accept all kinds of humiliation in his working day, whose power in the world is so slight he cannot really protect his home, his wife, his children, when he finds himself out of work. And then he watches his

children growing up, menaced in exactly the same way he has been menaced.

When a Negro child is fourteen, he knows the score already. There is nothing you can do. And all you can do about it is try ... is pray really that this will not destroy him. But the tension this creates within the best of the Negro men is absolutely unimaginable, and something this country refuses to imagine, and very, very dangerous.

It complicates the sexuality of the country, and of the Negro, in a hideous way, because Negroes are raised in a kind of matriarchy, since, after all, the wife can go out and wash the white ladies' clothes and steal from the kitchen. And this is the way we have all grown up. This creates another social and psychological problem, in what we like to refer to as a subculture, which is part of a bill the country is going to have to pay. Bills always do come in.

TERKEL: A phrase Sandburg used: "Slums always seek their revenge."

BALDWIN: Yes, they do, indeed.

TERKEL: Thinking about the matriarchal set-up of the Negro family and Negro life—even back in slave days, the underground railway leaders were women, like Harriet Tubman.

BALDWIN: Yeah. It is a terrible thing: Negro women for generations have raised white children who sometimes lynched *their* children, and they have tried to raise their own child, like a man; and yet in the full knowledge that if he really walks around like a man he is going to be cut down. A terrible kind of dilemma. A terrible price to ask anybody to pay. In this country Negro women have been paying it for three hundred years; and for one hundred of those years when they were legally and technically free. When people talk about *time*, therefore, I can't help but be absolutely not only impatient but bewildered. *Why* should I wait any longer? In any case, even if I were willing to—which I am not—how?

TERKEL: You mean the point about "Go slow."

BALDWIN: "Go slow," yes.

TERKEL: The final sentences in your essay on Faulkner: "There is never time in the future in which we will work out our salvation. The challenge is in the moment, the time is always now."

BALDWIN: Now.

TERKEL: The world we are living in ... we have to make it over. We made the world we live in. You speak of now. It is always now.

BALDWIN: Time is always now. Everybody who has ever thought about his own life knows this. You don't make resolutions about something you are going to do next year. No! You decide to write a book: the book may be finished twenty years from now, but you've got to start now.

TERKEL: I'm thinking of the subtitle of your book—and of the position of the Negro woman and Negro man—*More Notes of a Native Son*. Naturally, I immediately think of Richard Wright, who has meant so much to you as an artist and a man—

BALDWIN: Yes.

TERKEL: —his short story, which you refer to beautifully here in the chapter "Alas, Poor Richard," the story "Man of All Work," in which the husband, in order to get a job, dresses himself up in his wife's clothes and hires out as a cook.

BALDWIN: A beautiful, terrifying story. It really gets something which has been hidden for a long time in these generations, which is the ways in which ... It really suggests, more forcefully than anything I've ever read, the humiliation the Negro male endures. And it is this that our country doesn't want to know. And, therefore, when people talk about the Noble Savage, and the greater sexuality of Negroes, and that *jazz* ... I could name six men with whom I grew up who are on the needle just because there is really no ... The demoralization is so complete. In order to make the act of love, there has got to be a certain confidence, a certain trust. Otherwise it degenerates into nothing but desperate and futureless brutality.

TERKEL: You've mentioned the needle; and we think of course of junkies and narcotics. For some, perhaps, it is the only means of escape from the brutal reality.

BALDWIN: Yes, that's right. I knew a boy very well once who told me, in almost just that manner of words, that he wasn't trying to get "high," he was just trying to hold himself together. He talked about himself walking through one of our cities one morning, and the way people looked at him, and he said to himself, he told me, "You ought to be able to bear me if I can't bear you." What is most important about it is that all these things might not be so terrible if only when facing well-meaning white people, one didn't realize that they don't know anything about this at all. They don't want to know.

Somehow this is really the last drop in a very bitter cup. If they don't know and don't want to know, then, what hope is there? People talk to me about the strides that have been made—and all these dreary movies Hollywood keeps showing about "Be kind to Negroes today" and "Isn't this a good sign?" Well, of course, they've never seen these movies with a Negro audience watching them.

TERKEL: What is the reaction?

BALDWIN: Well, for example, in *The Defiant Ones*, a movie which I ... I really cannot say.

TERKEL: That's okay. Go ahead. Please do.

BALDWIN: At the end of that movie, when Sidney [Poitier]... and he was very brilliant in the movie; he does his best with a rather dreary role; he does something with it which I wouldn't believe could have been done. Anyway, at the end of that movie when Sidney jumps off the train to rescue Tony Curtis ... I saw it twice, deliberately, in New York. I saw it Downtown with a white liberal audience. There was a great sigh of relief and clapping; they felt that that was a very noble gesture on the part of a very noble black man. And I suppose, in a way, that was.

Then I saw it Uptown. When Sidney jumped off the train, there was a tremendous roar of *fury* from the audience, with which, I must say, I agreed. They told Sidney, "Get back on the train, you fool." In any case, why in the world should he go back to the chain gang, where they were obviously going to be separated again: it's still a Jim Crow chain gang.

What's the movie supposed to prove? What the movie is designed to prove, really, to white people, is that Negroes are going to forgive them for their crimes, and that somehow they are going to escape scot-free. Now, I am not being vengeful at all when I say this ... because I hate to see the nightmare begin all over again, with shoes on the other foot. But I'm talking about a human fact. The human fact is this: that one cannot escape anything one has done. One has got to pay for it. You either pay for it willingly or pay for it unwillingly.

TERKEL: That Negro audience shouting, "Get back on the train, you fool"... we think of two movements happening simultaneously with the Negro in America today: the Black Muslim movement and Martin Luther King. Isn't there a direct connection here, Jim?

BALDWIN: Yes, yes, precisely. And I must admit that there is a great ambivalence in myself. For example, I'm devoted to King and I worked with CORE and tried to raise money for the Freedom Riders. I adore those children. I have a tremendous respect for them. Yet, at the same time, in talking to very different people, somewhat older, and also talking to ex-sit-in students who said, "No, I simply can't take it anymore ...": I don't know.

Let me put it in another way: King's influence in the South is tremendous, but his influence in the North is slight, and the North doesn't talk about the South. Chicagoans talk about Mississippi as though they had no South Side. White people in New York talk about Alabama as though they had no Harlem. To ignore what is happening in their own backyard is a great device on the part of the white people. Whether I were for or against violence is absolutely irrelevant. The question that really obsesses me today is not whether or not I like violence or whether or not you like it—unless the situation is ameliorated, and very, very quickly there *will* be violence. There will be violence (and of this I am as convinced as I am that I am sitting in this chair) one day in Birmingham. And it won't be the fault of the Negroes in Birmingham. It is the fault of the administration of Birmingham, and the apathy of Washington. An intolerable situation. It has been intolerable for one hundred years.

I can't ... I really cannot tell my nephew or my brother—my nephew is fourteen, m

brother is a grown man—I can't tell my nephew that if someone hits him he shouldn't hit back. I really cannot tell him that. And I can still less tell my brother that, if someone comes to his house with a gun, he should let him in, and allow him to do what he wants with his children and his wife. But the point is: even if I were able to tell my brother he should, there is absolutely no guarantee that my brother will, and I can't blame him.

It is too easy, in another way, for the country to sit in admiration before the sit-in students because it doesn't cost them anything. They have no idea what it costs those kids to go through that picketed building, for example, where people upstairs are spitting down on your head or trying to vomit down on you. This is a tremendous amount to demand of people who are technically free, in a free country, which is supposed to be the leader of the West.

It seems to me a great cowardice on the part of the public to expect that it is going to be saved by a handful of children, for whom they refuse to be responsible.

TERKEL: It's so much more easy, say, for a Black Muslim speaker to win followers than Martin Luther King ...

BALDWIN: It is always much easier, obviously, to—how can I put this?—to ... Well, in Harlem those Black Muslim meetings every Saturday night, and people there listening to those speeches, and all kinds of other speeches, because they *are* in despair. They don't believe—and this is the most dangerous thing that has happened—they don't believe ... They've been betrayed so often and by so many people, not all of them white, that they don't believe the country really means what it says, and there is nothing in the record to indicate that the country means what it says.

Now, when they are told that they are better than white people, it is a perfectly inevitable development. Through all of these hundreds of years, white people going around saying they are better than anybody else, sooner or later they were bound to create a counterweight (especially with Africa on the stage of the world now): which is simply to take the whole legend of Western history—and its entire theology, changing one or two pronouns, and transferring it from Jerusalem to Islam, just this small change—and turn it all against the white world. The white world can't do anything about this, can't call down the Muslim leaders, or anybody else on this, until they are willing to face their own history.

TERKEL: How does all this, then, connect with being a Negro artist? Coming back to a man who meant so much to you, Richard Wright: he escaped. He spoke of Paris as a refuge. You looked upon it as a sort of way-station.

BALDWIN: In the beginning, I must admit, I looked on Paris as a refuge, too. I never intended to come back to this country. I lived there so long, I got to know a great deal about Paris.

Several things happened to me: one of them was watching American Negroes there, who, so to speak, dragged Mississippi across the ocean with them and were operating now in a vacuum. I myself carried all my social habits to Paris with me, where they were not needed. It took me a long time to learn how to do without them. And this complex frightened me very much.

But more important than that, perhaps, was the relationship between American Negroes and Africans and Algerians in Paris, who belonged to France. It didn't demand any spectacular degree of perception to realize that I was treated, insofar as I was noticed at all, differently from them because I had an American passport. I may not have liked this fact: but it was a fact. And I could see very well that if I were an Algerian, I would not have been living in the same city in which I imagined myself to be living as Jimmy Baldwin; or if I were an African, it would have been a very different city to me.

And also I began to see that the West—the entire West—is changing, is breaking up; and that its power over *me*, and over Africans, was gone. And would never come again. So then it seemed that exile was another way of being in Limbo.

I suppose finally the most important thing was that I am a writer. That sounds grandiloquent, but the truth is that I don't think that, seriously speaking, anybody in his right mind would want to be a writer. But you do discover that you are a writer and then you haven't got any choice. You live that life or you won't live any. And I am an American writer. This country is my subject. And in working out my forthcoming novel, I began to realize that the New York I was trying to describe was the New York which, by this time, was nearly twenty years old. I had to come back to check my impressions, and, as it turned out, to be stung again, to look at it again, bear it again, and to be reconciled to it again.

Now, I imagine, I will have to spend the rest of my life as a kind of transatlantic commuter. At some point when I'm in this country, I always get to the place where I realize that I don't see it very clearly, because it is very exhausting—after all, you do spend twenty-four hours a day resisting and resenting it, trying to keep a kind of equilibrium in it—so that I suppose I'll keep going away and coming back.

TERKEL: You feel your years in Europe afforded you more of a perspective?

BALDWIN: I began to see this country for the first time. If I hadn't gone away, I would never have been able to see it; and if I was unable to see it, I would never have been able to forgive it.

I'm not mad at this country anymore: I am very worried about it. I'm not worried about the Negroes in the country even, so much as I am about the country. The country doesn't know what it has done to Negroes. And the country has no notion whatever—and this is disastrous—of what it has done to itself. North and South have yet to assess the price they pay for keeping the Negro in his place; and, to my point of view, it shows in every single level of our lives, from the most public to the most private.

TERKEL: Can we expand a bit on this, Jim—what the country has done to itself?

BALDWIN: One of the reasons, for example, I think that our youth is so badly educated—and is inconceivably badly educated—is because education demands a certain daring, a certain independence of mind. You have to teach some people to think; and in order to teach some people to think, you have to teach them to think about everything. There mustn't be something they cannot think about. If there is one thing they cannot think about, very short-

they can't think about anything.

Now, there is always something in this country, of course, one cannot think about—the Negro. This may seem like a very subtle argument, but I don't think so. Time will prove the connection between the level of the lives we lead and the extraordinary endeavor to avoid black men. It shows in our public life.

When I was living in Europe, it occurred to me that what Americans in Europe did not know about Europeans is precisely what they did not know about me; and what Americans today don't know about the rest of the world, like Cuba or Africa, is what they don't know about me. The incoherent, totally incoherent, foreign policy of this country is a reflection of the incoherence of the private lives here.

TERKEL: So we don't even know our own names?

BALDWIN: No, we don't. This is the whole point. And I suggest this: that in order to learn your name, you are going to have to learn mine. In a way, the American Negro is *the* key figure of this country; and if you don't face him, you will never face anything.

TERKEL: If I don't know your name, I, a white man, will never know mine. I'm thinking of Africa, and of how you have come home again by returning to your work here. Even though you have said that *Nobody Knows My Name* is a collection of essays, it isn't that; it is a novel; it is an autobiography, in a way. In it you wrote a journalistic report, very accurate and astute—"Princes and Powers." You were covering a meeting of Negro writers of the world. African writers, too, were speaking ...

BALDWIN: It was really an African conference. Predominantly African. The Negroes were there as Africans, or, well, as the black people of the world, let's put it that way.

TERKEL: What of the African writer? Isn't there a problem here: the uncovering of this rich heritage, so long buried by kidnappers and colonial people, while at the same time technological advances are taking place, slums are being cleared.

BALDWIN: The twentieth century, in fact.

TERKEL: Yes. Isn't there loss as well as gain here? It is a question of things happening at the same time.

BALDWIN: It is a very great question. It is almost impossible to assess what was lost, which makes it impossible to assess what is gained. How can I put this? In a way, I almost envy African writers because there is so much to excavate, and because their relationship to the world—at least from my vantage point, I may be wrong—seems much more *direct* than mine can ever be. But, God knows, the colonial experience destroyed so much, blasted so much

and, of course, changed forever the African personality. One doesn't know what there really was on the other side of the Flood. It will take generations before that past can be reestablished and, in fact, used.

At the same time, of course, all of the African nations are under the obligation, the necessity, of moving into the twentieth century, and really, sometimes, at a fantastic rate of speed. This is the only way they can survive. And, of course, all Africans, whether they know it or not, have endured the European experience, and have been stained and changed by the European standards; and in a curious way the unification of Africans, as far as it can be said to exist, is a white invention.

The only thing that really unites all black men everywhere is, as far as I can tell, the fact that white men are on their necks. What I'm curious about is what will happen when this is no longer true. For the first time in the memory of anybody living, black men have the destinies in their own hands. What will come out then, what the problems and tensions and terrors will be then, is a very great, a very loaded question.

I think that if we were more honest here, we could do a great deal to aid in this transition because we have an advantage, which we seem to consider to be a disadvantage, over all the other Western nations. We have created—no other nation has—a black man who belongs who is a part of the West. In distinction to Belgium or any other European power, we had our slaves on the mainland. No matter how we deny it, we couldn't avoid a human involvement with them, which we have almost perished in denying, but which is nevertheless there.

Now, if we could turn about and face this, we would have a tremendous advantage in the world today. As long as we don't, there isn't much hope for the West. How can I put this? If one could accept the fact that it is no longer important to be white, it would begin to cease to be important to be black. If we could accept the fact that no nation with twenty million black people in it for so long and with such a depth of involvement, that no nation under these circumstances can be called a white nation, this would be a great achievement, and it would change a great many things.

TERKEL: Assuming that sanity ... assuming that humanity itself, the humanity in all of us, will triumph, there will be, as you say, no white nation and no black nation but nations of people. Now we come to the question of this long-buried Negro heritage. At the beginning of the interview, a Bessie Smith record was played. Once upon a time, you were ashamed of it. Now you realize that there is a great pride here—and artistry. Thinking now of the young African, if a certain identity, imposed from the outside, is lost, will he reject that which was unique to his in the beginning for a grayness, even though it be more materially advanced?

BALDWIN: I have a tendency to doubt it; but, of course, there is no way of knowing. Judging only from my very limited experience in Paris with a few Africans, my tendency is to doubt it. I think the real impulse is to excavate that heritage at no matter what cost, and bring it into the present. This is a very sound idea. It is needed. In all the things that were destroyed by Europe, which will never really be put in place again, still, in that rubble, there is something of very, very great value, not only for Africans, but for all of us.

We are living at a moment like that moment when Constantine became a Christian. All the standards for which the Western world has lived so long are in the process of breakdown.

and revision; and a kind of passion, and beauty, and joy, which was in the world before and has been buried so long, has got to come back.

TERKEL: Now we come to the matter of dehumanization, don't we: the impersonality of our time?

BALDWIN: Yes, yes. Obviously this cannot—I would hate to see it—continue. I don't even intend to make my peace with such a world; there is so much that's more important than Cadillacs, Frigidaires, and IBM machines. No. And precisely one of the things wrong with the country is this notion that IBM machines and Cadillacs *prove* something.

People always tell me how many Negroes bought Cadillacs last year. This *terrifies* me. I always wonder: Do you think this is what the country is for? Do you really think this is why I came here, this is why I suffered, this is what I would die for? A lousy Cadillac?

TERKEL: That holds for white or black, doesn't it?

BALDWIN: For white or black, yes, exactly. I think the country has to find out what it means by freedom. Freedom is a very dangerous thing. Anything else is disastrous. But freedom is also very dangerous. You've got to make choices. You've got to make very dangerous choices. You've got to be taught that your life is in your hands.

TERKEL: The matter of freedom leads to another chapter in your book, in which you discuss your meeting with Ingmar Bergman, whom you described as a free, a relatively free, artist. Would you mind telling us about that?

BALDWIN: Well, part of Bergman's freedom, of course, is purely economical. It is based on the social and economic structure of Sweden. He hasn't got to worry about money for his films, which is a very healthy thing for him. But on another level, he impressed me as being free because—and this is a great paradox about freedom—he'd accepted his limitations, his limitations within himself, limitations within his society. I don't mean that he necessarily accepted *all* these limitations, or that he was passive in the face of them. But he recognized that he was Ingmar Bergman, could do some things and could not do some others, and was not going to live forever; he recognized something that people in this country have a great deal of trouble recognizing: that life is very difficult, very difficult for anybody, anybody born.

People cannot be free until they recognize this. Bessie Smith was much freer—onerous and terrible as this may sound—much freer than the people who murdered her or let her die. Bill Broonzy, too—a much freer man than the success-ridden people running around on Madison Avenue today. If you can accept the worst, as someone once said to me, then you can see the best; but if you think life is a great, big, glorious plum pudding, you know, you end up in the madhouse.

TERKEL: To perhaps even extend the example you just offered: the little girl who walked into the Little Rock School House and was spat on was much freer than the white child who stood there with a misconceived notion.

BALDWIN: Well, I think the proof that Negroes are much stronger in the South today simply ... you know ...

TERKEL: She knew who she was ...

BALDWIN: She knew who she was. She *knew* who she was. After all, that child has been coming for a very long time. She didn't come out of nothing. Negro families are able to produce such children; whereas the fact that the good white people of the South have yet to make an appearance proves something awful about the moral state of the South. Those people in Tallahassee who are never in the streets when the mobs are there—why aren't they? It's the town, too!

TERKEL: What about someone like Lillian Smith [writer, magazine editor, and social critic]?

BALDWIN: Lillian Smith is a very great, and heroic, and very lonely figure. Obviously. She has very few friends in that little hamlet in Georgia where she carries on so gallantly. She has paid a tremendous price for trying to do what she thinks is right. And the price is terribly, terribly high. The only way the price can become a little bit less is for more people to do it.

TERKEL: This leads to what you wrote in your chapter, "In Search of a Majority," about the question of majority and minority.

BALDWIN: The majority is usually—I hate to say this—wrong. There is a great confusion in the country about that.

TERKEL: Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* ...?

BALDWIN: Yes. I really think, seriously, that there is a division of labor in the world. Let me put it this way: there are so many things I am not good at—I can't drive a truck; I can't run a bank. Well, all right—other people have to do that. In a way, they are responsible for me, and I am responsible to them.

My responsibility to them is to try to tell the truth as I see it—not so much about my private life, as about *their* private lives. So that there is in the world a standard, you know, for *all* of us, which will get you through your troubles. Your troubles are always coming. And Cadillacs don't get you through. And neither do psychiatrists, incidentally. All that gets you through it, really, is some faith in life, which is not so easy to achieve.

Now, when we talk about majorities and minorities, I always have the feeling that the

country is talking about a popularity contest in which everybody works together, you know towards some absolutely hideously material end. But in truth, I think that all the Southern politicians have failed their responsibility to the white people of the South. *Somebody* in the South must know that obviously the status quo cannot exist another hundred years. The politicians' real responsibility is to prepare the people who are now forming those mobs to prepare those people for their day: to minimize the damage to *them*.

The majority rule in the South is not a majority rule at all. It's a mob rule. And what the mobs fill is a moral vacuum, which is created by the lack of a leader. This is the way the world is, and I am not talking about dictatorships.

TERKEL: Statesmen?

BALDWIN: Statesmen, exactly. People who are sitting in government are supposed to know more about government than people who are driving trucks, and digging potatoes, and trying to raise their children. That's what you are in office for.

TERKEL: Someone, then, with a sense of history?

BALDWIN: That is precisely what we don't have here. If you don't know what happened behind you, you've no idea of what is happening around you.

TERKEL: Earlier, Jim, you mentioned that for a national policy to be straightened out, the private policies, these private, individual lives must be, too. You spoke of your job as a writer, and of how you've got to write. In that chapter on Bergman, "The Northern Protestant," is a beautiful comment:

"All art is a kind of confession, more or less oblique. All artists, if they are to survive, are forced, at last, to tell the whole story, to vomit the anguish up."

BALDWIN: Art has to be a kind of confession. I don't mean a true confession in the sense of the dreary magazine. The effort, it seems to me, is: if you can examine and face your life, you can discover the terms with which you are connected to other lives, and they can discover too, the terms with which they are connected to other people.

This has happened to every one of us, I'm sure. You read something which you thought only happened to you, and you discovered it happened one hundred years ago in Dostoyevsky. This is a very great liberation for the suffering, struggling person, who always thinks that he is alone. This is why art is important. Art would not be important if life were not important, and life *is* important.

Most of us, no matter what we say, are walking in the dark, whistling in the dark. Nobody knows what is going to happen to him from one moment to the next, or how one will bear it. This is irreducible. And it's true for everybody. Now, it is true that the nature of society is to create, among its citizens, an illusion of safety; but it is also absolutely true that the safety is always necessarily an illusion. Artists are here to disturb the peace.

TERKEL: Artists are here to disturb the peace?

BALDWIN: Yes, they have to disturb the peace. Otherwise, chaos.

TERKEL: Life is risk.

BALDWIN: It is, indeed. It always is. People have to know this. In some way they will have to know it in order to get through their risks.

TERKEL: So the safety itself is wholly illusory?

BALDWIN: There's no such thing as safety on this planet. No one *knows* that much. No one even knows what he or she will. Not only about the world but about himself. That's why it's unsafe.

This is what the whole sense of tragedy is really about. People think that a sense of tragedy is a kind of ... embroidery, something irrelevant, that you can take or leave. But, in fact, it is a necessity. That's what the Blues and Spirituals are all about. It is the ability to look at things as they are and survive your losses, or even not survive them—to know that your losses are coming. To know they are coming is the only possible insurance you have, a faith in insurance, that you will survive them.

TERKEL: Again, in your book, you mention that Americans, although we have tremendous potentialities, are lacking in that which non-Americans may have: a sense of tragedy.

BALDWIN: It's incredible to me that—and I'm not trying to oversimplify anything—in this country where, after all, one is for the most part better off materially than anywhere else in the world: it is incredible that one should know so many people who are in a state of the most absolute insecurity about themselves. They literally can't get through a morning without going to see the psychiatrist. I find it very difficult to take this really seriously.

Other people who have really terrifying and unimaginable troubles, from the American point of view, don't dream of going anywhere near a psychiatrist, and wouldn't do it even if they were mad enough to dream of it. This seems a very great, well, not illness, exactly, but a fear. Frenchmen and Frenchwomen whom I knew spent much less time in this dreadful and internal warfare, tearing themselves and each other to pieces, than Americans do.

Why this is so is probably a question for someone else; but it *is* so, and I think it says something serious about the real aim and the real standards of our society. People don't live by the standards they say they live by, and the gap between their profession and the actuality is what creates this despair, and this uncertainty, which is very, very dangerous.

TERKEL: In your essay "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," you explore your relationship with Norman Mailer. You infer that the White Boy, if he can deal as truthfully as he knows how with our present fortunes, these present days, these "sad and stormy events," and if he

has understood them, “then he is richer and we are richer, too; if he has not understood them, we are all much poorer. For, though it clearly needs to be brought into focus, he has a real vision of ourselves as we are, and it cannot be too often repeated in this country now that, where there is no vision, the people perish.”

BALDWIN: I mean that.

TERKEL: During this hour, which has passed so ludicrously fast, we have only scratched the surface in getting to know James Baldwin, who has confessed in a very beautiful way. Besides *Nobody Knows My Name*, he has written two earlier novels, *Giovanni's Room* and *Tell It on the Mountain*, and now, the forthcoming novel ...

BALDWIN: *Another Country*. It is about this country.

TERKEL: One last question. James Baldwin: who are you, now?

BALDWIN: [*Long pause*] Who, indeed. Well, I may be able to tell you who I am, but I am also discovering who I am not. I want to be an honest man. And I want to be a good writer. I don't know if one ever gets to be what one wants to be. You just have to play it by ear and ... pray for rain.

JAMES BALDWIN—REFLECTIONS OF A MAVERICK

INTERVIEW BY JULIUS LESTER
THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW
MAY 27, 1984

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