

# Being White in America

*Part Three of a discussion of red, white, blue and beyond*

By GABE HUCK

Whose words are these?

For a very long time, America prospered: this prosperity cost millions of people their lives. Now, not even the people who are the most spectacular recipients of the benefits of this prosperity are able to endure these benefits: they can neither understand them nor do without them. Above all, they cannot imagine the price paid by their victims, or subjects, for this way of life, and so they cannot afford to know why the victims are revolting.

I assume most readers of *Celebration* are white and at least middle-aged. Many of you could likely name the African American who said: “I have a dream.” And the African American credited with these words, “No Vietcong ever called me nigger.” And the African American who said: “If violence is wrong in America, violence is wrong abroad.” And another who said, “I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired.”

But the text quoted in the opening paragraph, “For a very long time,” asks more of us. These are words of James Baldwin (1924–1987), as heard in the 2016 film “I Am Not Your Negro.” Nearly all the words heard in the film, whether recorded during Baldwin’s life or read off-camera by Samuel L. Jackson, are from Baldwin’s writing. Though there is almost too much to praise, I want to focus on what seems to me director Raoul Peck’s great gift in this film: a confrontation for us white Americans with someone who spoke urgently and deeply and eloquently about the tragedy of our society.

My first encounter with the writing of James Baldwin happened 55 years ago, November 1962, in a seminary library in northwest Missouri. Late at night I sat down with the most recent *New Yorker*. In it was the Baldwin essay that would become a book called *The Fire Next Time* (as in the spiritual:

“God gave Noah the rainbow sign: / No more water but the fire next time”). I read Baldwin’s piece through to the end and probably came as close in that text as I ever would to being Paul-like knocked to the ground and nothing after would be the same.

Baldwin grew up poor in the Harlem of the 1920s and 1930s, oldest of several children and often responsible for his younger brothers and sisters. He was a brilliant child who would later give great thanks that he had a few outstanding teachers in the public schools (he never went to college). Of his fifth-grade teacher, he would write:

By this time, I had been taken in hand by a young white school-teacher named Bill Miller, a beautiful woman, very important to me. She gave me books to read and talked to me about the books, and about the world: about Ethiopia, and Italy, and the German Third Reich; and took me to see plays and films, to which no one else would have dreamed of taking a ten-year-old boy. It is certainly because of Bill Miller, who arrived in my terrifying life so soon, that I never really managed to hate white people.... I was a child, of course, and, therefore, unsophisticated. I took Bill Miller as she was, or as she appeared to be to me. She too, anyway, was treated like a nigger, especially by the cops. And she had no love for landlords. (*I Am Not Your Negro*)

Baldwin had a love of good writing and a sense for the authors whose work would educate him, but he would find no way in the U.S. to grow in depth or hope. So at age 24 he went, without a plan or money, to Paris. There, three years after the end of World War II, he found a society where he could think and write. But he did not turn his back on his home. He later wrote of what sent him back to America in 1957:

That’s when I saw the photograph. Facing us, on every newspaper kiosk on that wide, tree-shaded boulevard in Paris were photographs of fifteen-year-old Dorothy Counts being reviled and spat upon by the mob as she was making her way to school in Charlotte, North Carolina. There was unutterable pride, tension, and anguish in that girl’s face as she approached the halls of learning, with history, jeering, at her back. It made me furious, it filled me with both hatred and pity. And it made me ashamed. Some one of us should have been there with her! But it was on that bright afternoon that I knew I was leaving France. (*Ibid*)

He was back and forth between these two homes, Europe and America, until he died. Baldwin knew that he could not do what King did, or what Fannie Lou Hamer did, or what Malcolm X did, or what his New York City contemporary Shirley Chisholm did. Or what so many others did in those decades of protest. But Baldwin knew that he could be a witness, could “write the story. Get it out.”

The story as he wrote and spoke it over those decades is, I think, the most important telling we have. The hardest to face. The deepest and heaviest for us white people to take to heart.

Too often we white people, myself included, thought and perhaps still think that the racism in this nation could be resolved with better rules and laws, jobs, voting rights, integration of many kinds, scholarships, African Americans in Congress and on corporate boards and — this would be the proof, wouldn’t it? — in the White House.

However much Baldwin supported all these and more in his lifetime, he never ceased believing that all this could be done without white Americans ever confronting the deeper flaw/sin. And what was that sin? Americans of European origin came and took an already inhabited land, the

founding genocide. For hundreds of years then human slavery was legal, and when that ceased they dominated African Americans in a century of Jim Crow. The civil rights movement opened many eyes and made legal and economic progress, but decades later we need to confirm that Black Lives Matter. This extends far beyond the deeds of local police. It is, as Michelle Alexander argues in her book of that name, the new Jim Crow.

From one white generation to another, who can deny how tenacious is our white American racism? And how deep in each of us? And now we live where fear has become a political tool and where we face an administration and a Congress beating the drums for more prisons, more poverty, and we see less and less shame in open racism. Baldwin once wrote an essay whose title says it all, "The White Problem." So it is.

In the spring of 1963 Baldwin, and other African Americans he had gathered, met with Attorney General Robert Kennedy. Baldwin had only one day to assemble participants for a conversation that Kennedy asked for. In Kennedy's mind this discussion at his NYC apartment was to make allies and to challenge what seemed to Kennedy the impatience of African Americans with his brother's administration. Kennedy began by summarizing what had been accomplished in civil rights in just two years of John Kennedy's presidency.

This did not go over well with Kennedy's guests. It was not Baldwin nor Lena Horne nor Kenneth Clark nor Harry Belafonte who then challenged Kennedy and demanded this discussion be honest. As Larry Tye wrote in *Tough Talk*, it was a 24-year-old African American from New Orleans, Jerome Smith, who "shattered the calm, his stammer underlining his anger." Tye continued:

Mr. Kennedy, I want you to understand I don't care anything about you and your brother," Smith began. "I don't know what I'm doing here, listening to all this cocktail party patter." The real threat to white America wasn't the Black Muslims, Smith insisted — it was when he and other advocates of

nonviolence lost hope. Smith's record made his words resonate. As a Freedom Rider and CORE organizer, he had suffered as many savage beatings as any civil rights protester had, including one for which he was now getting medical care in New York. But his patience and his pacifism were wearing thin, he warned. If the police came at him with more guns, dogs, and hoses, he would answer with a weapon of his own. ... Others chimed in, demanding to know why the government couldn't get tougher in taking on racist laws and ghetto blight. Lorraine Hansberry, author of the play "A Raisin in the Sun," stood to say she was sickened as well. "You've got a great many very, very accomplished people in this room, Mr. Attorney General, but the only man who should be listened to is that man over there," Hansberry said, pointing to Smith. ... "He didn't sing or dance or act. Yet he became the focal point," said Baldwin. "That boy, after all, in some sense, represented to everybody in that room our hope. Our honor. Our dignity. But, above all, our hope.

I am not trying to write a movie review here, thought it may seem so. Rather I see in this documentary, "I Am Not Your Negro," an opportunity for homilists and parish staff members and various groups of parishioners to use this film to create a discussion we badly need. "I Am Not Your Negro" confronts us with Baldwin's understanding of our story, the story we refuse to attend to at great risk.

What then to do with James Baldwin and this film? I am encouraged by what a reviewer, A.O. Scott, wrote in *The New York Times* in February 2017. I quote at length with the suggestion that you see what role this film, all at once and then a bit at a time, might mean in any setting your church community offers. It is readily available for viewing. And it isn't only for the parish peace and justice committee. It's for us all. We have to grapple with this in order to glimpse another way to be. It should primarily be a vehicle for

white Americans who take the Gospel seriously, to wrestle with our thought and behavior. And figure out what we might do. This is from Scott's review:

Though its principal figure, the novelist, playwright and essayist James Baldwin, is a man who has been dead for nearly 30 years, you would be hard-pressed to find a movie that speaks to the present moment with greater clarity and force, insisting on uncomfortable truths and drawing stark lessons from the shadows of history. ...

It doesn't just make you aware of Baldwin, or hold him up as a figure to be admired from a distance. You feel entirely in his presence, hanging on his every word, following the implications of his ideas as they travel from his experience to yours. At the end of the movie, you are convinced that you know him. And, more important, that he knows you. To read Baldwin is to be read by him, to feel the glow of his affection, the sting of his scorn, the weight of his disappointment, the gift of his trust. ...

But he was also a prophet, able to see the truths revealed by the contingent, complicated actions of ordinary people on both sides of the conflict. This is not to say that he transcended the struggle or detached himself from it. On the contrary, he demonstrated that writing well and thinking clearly are manifestations of commitment, and that irony, skepticism and a ruthless critical spirit are necessary tools for effective moral and political action.

The final paragraph could have been written especially for those who preach.

For further exploration of James Baldwin: *I Am Not Your Negro*. NY: Vintage International [www.historynet.com/tough-talk-robert-kennedy-civil-rights-movement](http://www.historynet.com/tough-talk-robert-kennedy-civil-rights-movement). [www.nola.com/opinions/index.ssf/2017/02/baldwin\\_documentary\\_negro](http://www.nola.com/opinions/index.ssf/2017/02/baldwin_documentary_negro).

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