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James Baldwin

### A Symposium

## THE NEGRO WRITER IN AMERICA

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*The four authors pictured above convened recently at Howard University to discuss "The Negro Writer in American Society" as one in a series of Project Awareness programs designed to air major current issues*

### INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

**BALDWIN:** It is awfully hard to talk about writing. I can only give some suggestions which I, myself, as a writer, as a *Negro* writer, try to do or would like to do in American society today.

One of the things about being an artist is that you are produced by a people because they need you. But the people who produce you do not want you. This is not a complaint, this is simply a statement of fact.

I suppose that the reason for this has to be something really bad and very mysterious; that is, that in the same way a human being . . . a single human being . . . wants to know who he is and wants to become himself or herself, wants to live, and read his or her proper name, one day as it is . . . and at the same time wishes to be safe and therefore accepts and adopts all kinds of disguises, and begins to believe all kinds of lies in order to be safe . . . in this safety, this mystical or unreal safety, he begins to perish. This war is in everybody.

Americans want to believe a great many things about themselves which are not true. Negroes want to believe a great many things about themselves which are not true, too. Part of the dilemma, I think, of being an American Negro is that the Negro has been forced for a long, long time in many, many ways—not only physically—to mantle himself on a society which always has been essentially incoherent. That is to say, one is mantling himself on someone who does not know who he is. This means, then, that the imitator—and for the sake of argument you may say that all Negroes in this country are imitators—finds himself in a very strange confusion. And if the writer, me, Jimmy Baldwin in this particular case, is trying to find out where the truth is—where I begin and where society stops—to try to tell the truth about my mother or my brother or the porter or the Negro bank president, and try to find out how this relates to the American myth, how it relates to the situation of young people in this country—black and white—who are lost in despair and bewildered, looking for standards which don't seem to be present in the Republic . . . then you have a fantastic kind of confusion, and the role of a writer in this country now, I think, is to begin to excavate, almost for the first time, the real history of this country . . . not the history that one would like to believe about the Founding Fathers or the nobility of an Abraham Lincoln, but to try to find out what really happened here . . . what really got us where we are.

**DAVIS:** I am, for better or worst, a writer. I became an actor not by accident, but because I was advised by my professor in philosophy, Dr. Alain Locke, to become a writer. When he found that I wanted to write plays and I had come from a little town in Georgia called Waycross and had never seen a theater, he was interested to know how I was going to do it.

I hadn't given any thought to that part of it, so his suggestion was to go, become a part of the theater, build sets, sell tickets, learn to act, learn everything you can about the theater, and eventually you will know what

it is you are writing about, and for whom you are writing in the terms of actors, etc.

And because of his advice I find myself today, from time to time, having my long stretches of unemployment interrupted by a job. My attitudes toward life, have been formed in many places and over long stretches of time, and I'm happy to say that some of the most constructive and generative of those formative people and ideas came from Howard University, from Sterling Brown, from Dr. (Eugene) Holmes, from many others. My attitude toward life, and toward art, and toward writing, and toward acting, and toward my three children and all the other children in the world is primarily the same. I can illustrate it briefly by quoting you a short poem of Langston Hughes, which goes as follows:

*"My Old Mule  
Got a grin on his face;  
He been a mule so long  
He forgot about his race.  
Now, I'm like that Old Mule  
Black, and don't give a damn;  
You got to take me like I am."*

You might think that this is a flippant approach to life, and yet it's not. I have occasion to visit many of the public schools in New York City and in my own community because they are bemused by the idea that I'm a personage of some importance because I work on the stage . . . and I'm too modest to disabuse them. So when they send for me, I go. And I regret to inform you at this late date that I have yet to go into a public school in New York City where there was a Negro principal.

I do not mean that the faculties of these schools are themselves vicious people. I do not mean that they are themselves anti-Negro. As a matter of fact, they send for me, and for my wife and for any other performer to prove to the Negro child that there is somebody who, in spite of his blackness, represents a plus factor on the world scene.

But I submit that the morale of a small child is too delicate and too important an instrument to have this treatment administered adventitiously. It has to be done deliberately. I think that all public schools should be staffed by teachers of all races, of all faiths, of all creeds, of all persuasions, all kind of people, so that a child not only sees himself reflected in the echelons of power, but he also sees the world as it really is.

I think that the time has come when we in this country, particularly the black man, must hang his harp on the willow and refuse to play it unless he can give the truth about himself, his people and the society in which we live.

KILLENS: I, as a Negro writer, Negro artist, Negro teacher, Negro worker, ask America to listen to me. I am your conscience. Get right with me and you will truly be beautiful before the world. You will be the land you should have been, but never have been yet.

A famous British writer once said many years ago that the important thing about a writer, about an artist, is out of how deep a life he speaks. Generally and specifically speaking, what is my frame of reference? Simply stated, I am a member of the human race, male sex, American. More specifically, I am John Killens; I'm a black man who was a black boy once, who grew up in a Georgia town, who lived and cried and hated and fought, and sang and laughed at being Negro . . . a boy who could not grow into manhood with the fullest implication of the word, manhood being a dangerous pursuit in Georgia, or in Mississippi, as every Freedom Rider knows and every sit-in student knows.

One of the problems I am faced with is that publishers want me to write about everything else but the Negro. Publishers and producers from Hollywood to Madison Avenue have said to me, "Why do you always want to write about Negroes? Why don't you just write about *people*?"

Negroes are the only people I know who are set apart because of who they are, and at the same time told to forget it.

No one has demanded that Tolstoy or certain other writers be so unspecific in their writings. Why this pressure on this writer to deny his roots, to write about anything else but? I think it is because the essence of the Negro writer's material is critical from the essence of his own being, which is a criticism of society. But I think that if America is going to get healthy, it must listen to this criticism. We may be the doctor America needs.

I write about the Negro because this is my frame of reference, my life's experience. But I also think that the most dynamic personality, the most dramatic image in America today, is the Negro. He is the protagonist personified by James Meredith, struggling with all his might, his brain, his great soul and his muscles to bring America out of the backwardness of white supremacy into the epoch of the colored people. We live in an epoch where the disinherited, for the first time in hundreds of years, are in the fore. England used to boast that the sun never set on the United Kingdom. Look at the map the way it was 20 years ago and you'll see where the sun is setting now.

This poem by Langston Hughes sums up why I must write what I write:

*"You've taken my blues and gone.  
You sing them on Broadway;  
You sing them in the Hollywood Bowl,*



*And you mix them up with symphonies,  
 And you make them so they don't sound like me.  
 Yep, you have taken my blues and gone.  
 You have also taken my spirituals and gone.  
 You put me in MacBeth and Carmen Jones, and all kind of  
 swing Mikados,  
 And in everything but what's about me.  
 But somebody will stand up and write about me, and talk  
 about me  
 Black and beautiful, and sing about me and put on plays about  
 me,  
 And I reckon it will be me myself.  
 Yep, it'll be me."*

#### PANEL DISCUSSION

DODSON: Is insecurity a condition of being a writer?

BALDWIN: I think insecurity is a condition of being an artist, but I also think it is a condition of being a man. One of the troubles about being an American right now, perhaps it always has been, is that white Americans seem to make the assumption that the world is beautiful, things are wonderful, and that all problems can be solved and that love lasts forever, and nothing really terrible can happen in marriage. It's a kind of Cary Grant-Doris Day world.

Of course, this is not true at all. It never has been true, and most white Americans don't know this until reality breaks in. Then what usually happens is that they never really know what experience is. In the case of being a Negro writer, the insecurity represents a level of experience out of which all art comes.

If you don't know that you're going to die, and I mean this very literally, in the most intensely spiritual way, then you never learn how to live. If you don't know that trouble is coming, then trouble will break you when it comes. This is the thing which Negroes in this country have and white people, in general, do not yet have. White people have invented themselves the kind of Negro they need, but what they need him for is precisely where the battle begins. If you're having cocktails with a liberal white man, one who presumably would not move out if you moved in next door, you might have trouble in trying to explain to him that the white man's view is not the only point of view in the world. When you try to suggest that you have another point of view, that you have not invented him, but that he has invented you and you see it, he can't take this because when you tell the truth about being a Negro, it says some-

thing about America which America is determined not to hear. The Negro is the only person who can begin to let this truth out in this country.

LOVELL: *Purlie Victorious* was certainly the first reasonably successful play to handle the question of civil rights and segregation from the standpoint of humor . . . very deep and biting and eloquent humor. What were some of the reactions of the people in the audience, southerners, northerners, white people and so forth?

DAVIS: I am happy to say that there was always a reaction, and very strong one, whether it was positive or negative. The reactions to *Purlie Victorious* ranged, if I can guess correctly, from shock, delight, indignation, anger, acceptance, identification and other emotional purgatives which mankind needs from time to time to clean his system out. For instance, and once again we come to the white liberal, some ladies and gentlemen who came backstage with tears in their eyes would say, "Can you do this . . . the Negro people, these wonderful people, can you laugh at the awful things that are happening to them?"

I tried to point out that the liberal, in this instance, had created a more vicious stereotype of the Negro than the southern white had because he was trying to identify me only with the fact that I represented an unfinished item of business on the civil rights agenda when I was trying to say that, in addition to being a good paid-up member of the NAACP, I lived a full, round life. Just staying out of the way of my friends gives me an interesting activity all day.

On the other hand, there were some negative reactions from the Negro community. This, I think, came about because we are, as an oppressed people, trying as best we can to fit into a rigorously exclusive society and we are automatically put on the defensive. We must prove that we can be, if not white men, honorary white men.

But to see these characters presented on stage in a ridiculous form was much more than some people were able to stand and accept. I understood this, and I accepted it from the people who had this reservation.

The most interesting reaction came from those members of the white race who came also from the South. After the show, they would come backstage and be very quiet and tentative, and sometimes with tears in their eyes would offer to shake hands and you would know that this is the first time they had ever offered their hands to a Negro. They would say, with deep sincerity, "You sure told the truth." This was as much as they could get out, and there was nothing I could say to them at that moment because it was one of the deepest moments I ever had in regard to the play. I knew that my own would accept it. Even if they did not laugh while they were looking and wearing their minks, they went home and

took off the mink and laughed like hell. But, for the white southerner, who had so much to learn, to have come and realized that under all the fooling and the slapstick and the nonsense, the essential truth of the experience embodied in *Purlie* was there and valid, this was the important thing, as far as I'm concerned.

But, all in all, from the letters and the response I got from the people, I think that *Purlie* made its point. I set out to prove in *Purlie Victorious* that segregation is ridiculous because it makes perfectly wonderful people—white and black—do ridiculous things. When you show forth this ridiculous attitude and activity on stage and the audience laughs, by its laughter it is voting in favor of your proposition.

THELWELL: Is American society really prepared to have writers tell the truth?

BALDWIN: No. There's a question as to whether any society is prepared to have the writer tell the truth. Life might be much simpler if people really were white or black, that is, if this really made a human difference. But, in fact, it doesn't make a human difference. It makes a psychological difference, a social difference, a political difference, but a human being is a human being and has to be respected as a human being. White Americans invented the Negro to invest him with all of the things which terrify them, by which I mean love, sex, death, hell . . . all these things are in the black face. White men and white women are pure, and what happens to Negroes cannot possibly happen to them, they feel. And, of course, since the Negro has been invested with all this, he is also envied for it, and communication becomes all but impossible. When I'm at the typewriter, I'm out to excavate through all this rubble that I have inherited. Now, does society accept? My problem is to try to tell the truth and survive with society while I'm doing it.

DAVIS: The last statement made by Jimmy summarizes my philosophy, about telling the truth in this country. You must do two things. You must tell the truth and you must survive. I consider a writer, and myself, like a guerrilla fighter who has to operate in the country of the enemy, and the enemy is not necessarily white and not necessarily black. It is the organized systems and attitudes and associations and ideas.

Any of us knows that there are certain truths about our society which must not be told because the punishment for telling them is swift, vindictive and irrevocable. Surely, we know that there are many things that I would like to say, that you would like to say, but at this stage of the game we can't say them. So what do we do? The writer must tell the truth, that's his commitment to himself and to his society, but he must also

survive. The writer owes it to himself and to his society to survive. He doesn't gain any credit with me or with you for going out and dying too early . . . the job is too tough.

LOVELL: Mr. Baldwin, do you plan to return to the same theme in your next book as you followed in *Go Tell It On The Mountain*?

BALDWIN: I want to return to it, but in a very different way. It's always dangerous to talk about things you have not written because they so seldom resemble what you have said when they are finished. I want to take the central figure of *Go Tell It On The Mountain* and two other figures who are yet very shadowy to me, and with that background, move it into politics and go by way of the Muslim movement to some comment on what has happened to us as Negroes in this 400 years and what has happened to the entire country. I want also to try to suggest what no one seems to know in this country . . . the real role of religion in American life.

For example, I think that the whole furor about the Muslim movement among white people, the panic among white people, depends upon the fact that they never knew what was going on in those store-front churches at all. They didn't know what the slave was saying when he was singing "Steal Away To Jesus." They thought, because they wanted to believe, that this was a primitive, simple, happy-go-lucky, childish religion. They had no idea what violent desperation it came out of, what needs it served, or what strength came out of it. There is a long tale to be told for our sake as Negroes, and for the country's sake as Americans, if the country is going to become a country instead of a collection of motels.

LOVELL: Would you say that there are any fundamental differences between the artistic problem of the Negro in America and the artistic problem of the Negro in Africa from the standpoint of writing?

KILLENS: Yes, there are some very practical problems. First of all, we, American Negroes, do not have a national theater to put on "*Purlie Victorious*," or to present many things we want to say to America. The artist in Africa now, more or less, finds himself at one with society. He does not have to criticize society because of his position. In many parts of Africa the people are encouraged, they almost demand that the writers write. This is a situation that we don't have in America.

But one of the things that the Negro writer has in America is the determination to change the world. This is what we want. We want the world to be different. This is what we do everytime we type one line on a page. We are out to change the world, to make people live better with

each other. I can state it almost that simply. Anyone (Negro writer) who says he isn't is really lying.

**DODSON:** In this struggle to present ourselves to society, do you think the other media, such as television, radio and movies, should have a wider use?

**KILLENS:** I've had some experience in the field of film writing, and I think it is potentially one of the greatest media to use. However, there are problems in film writing.

I have been in Hollywood many times, and have been frustrated out there many times. My novel, *Youngblood*, was purchased and I was assigned to write it. I spent five months writing it with my producer coming to see me everyday and crying on my shoulder because the other producer was telling him, "You are out of your mind to make this movie." Finally I had to tell him it was hard enough to write the screenplay, but if I had to convince him everyday that it can be produced, then we can't make it.

But the film was finished three years ago and it has not been produced. I went to Hollywood once with Harry Belafonte, and we sat down with one of the biggest houses out there. They wanted to sign a contract with him to do three films. Belafonte told them that he and his writer would have to have some kind of artistic control over the film. The problem was that they did not want us calling the tune on what we were going to write. The truth of it, especially in the movies, is that the producers think the American people are not ready to face up to this issue. It is almost impossible to get a movie that will allow us to say something in this medium. If we have to wait until Hollywood thinks the South is ready for *Youngblood*, we will be waiting a long time.

**THELWELL:** Is there a lack of awareness among American writers which causes them to deal sometimes in irrelevancies and untruths?

**BALDWIN:** The writers who do this are not, to my mind, really writers. This type of writer produces sort of a commodity which can be made into movies with no effort whatever. What they do really is soothe people into believing what people would rather believe. And in order to do this, the writer really has to believe it. Nobody writes down to anybody; you can only do the best you can.

These people are respected as articulate and responsible spokesmen for society, but what they are really doing is saying nothing dangerous, saying nothing which will disturb anybody, and therefore they are writers. That is part of the confusion of this society. The image of America they have

is nothing more than the popular image, and their role in society is simply to recreate and keep alive that image. There's nothing much you can do about that, except to know that this is perhaps one of the afflictions of having so much money. You begin to be respected as a writer or composer or painter or whatever the moment you begin to make a little money. It does not mean that you have become any better. Usually, it means that you have become a good deal worse. But because you have a bank account, you then exist on the American scene in a way that you never did before. And I don't know when this will change. But I agree with John (Killens) that every writer who ever put pen to paper is trying to change the world.

**DODSON:** There is a play that has been running on Broadway, written by a Frenchman, Jean Genét, called *The Blacks*. The play is what I call an absolute insult to the white audience. It is a horror, and yet the hordes keep coming on to be insulted. I would like for you to comment on that.

**DAVIS:** I saw the opening night performance of *The Blacks* in New York, and I found it a most exciting theatrical production, in which the aims of the author, director and actors were deliberate to be insulting. And yet, as you say, the hordes keep coming. Part of it is due to the fact that the insult does have, at its base, a certain amount of validity. Though it is not true that there is a great deal of overt hostility among the blacks for the whites, it is true that a great deal of the whites have a great deal of overt hostility. And they come, therefore, to be exposed to it in the safest possible fashion.

Genét's attitude toward the world, I think, is basically a cynical one. He possibly believes, if I can read *The Blacks* aright, that the oppression of the man on top is generic to his position, so that when the white man gets on top, he oppresses the man on the bottom, if that man is black; and when the black man gets on top, he will oppress the man on the bottom who happens to be white. This is sort of a closed circuit of oppression, and we struggle merely to get into position so that we can oppress somebody else.

I, personally, do not believe that. I believe that we have, as a group, a contribution to make which will be a little bit higher than the level of oppression which is aimed against us. I may be wrong, but I happen to believe that.

**KILLENS:** I would like to make a comment on that. Some of the people who come to see *The Blacks* come for the same reason many people went to see *The Wall*, another play that was on Broadway. It is a kind of morbid fascination with them. They seem to say, "Yes, this is what we did."

The other aspect of it, I think, is that Genét, somewhere along the line, is saying that when the blacks come to power they will be just as bad as you are. This let's the white people a little off the hook, giving them the idea that, "We shouldn't feel so bad about the way we are treating them; they are going to do the same thing with us."

I think these two aspects of *The Blacks* are somewhat responsible for the people who come to see it, and they are still coming.

#### FROM THE AUDIENCE

**QUESTION:** Isn't it also important for the Negro artist to get a more realistic picture of the white American?

**BALDWIN:** Now that I have decided to answer it, I hardly know how to begin. But, let us say that someone is inviting me to dinner who lives on Sutton Place in New York, and I live on 18th Street. It's evening, and I walk out of my house, always a little late, and I want to get a taxi. The sun has gone down; four cabs pass by, and they did not pass you because they were going to the garage. They come toward you, and they see you, and they veer off and go. This is a little upsetting. So maybe the sixth cab lets me in, or, which is more likely, the sixth cab stops for a light, and I get in. And I arrive at Sutton Place a little irritable.

Now, I know that my host and hostess and all the people at this party are not that taxi driver, and I am not unjust enough to take it out on them. Just the same, I arrive at their house in a state of rage, and I can only do one of two things. I can order a double scotch at once, and sort of smoulder . . . or I can let it out at once and say, "You know what happened to me?" If I smoulder, they say, "What's the matter with you, Jimmy? Are you upset about something?" If you're smart, you say, "No, I just had a bad day at the office." But, if you are in another kind of mood, you say, "Yes, I'm upset, I'm tired of having to deal with this dreadful city day in and day out." Then they will sympathize with you, and try to cheer you up, and eventually will say—if this goes on too long—"Jimmy, you're so sensitive."

At this point, no matter how civilized I may think I am, I begin to hit the ceiling. And then I try to explain in what I think are relatively calm and measured tones what it is like. I know that other people don't get taxis, and I know that other people have worst lives than I, that the world is full of lepers, syphilitics, people with cancer, and the maimed, the halt and the blind. I know that I am not the only person who suffers. I am not saying that. I am saying that this is what it is like, here and now, and that it takes a fearful toll of everybody.

Therefore, if the point of this question that the Negro artist get a more

realistic picture of the white American is important, then I must throw the question back and ask why, then, is it so difficult for this white American—who is full of goodwill—to understand what it must feel like to come from my house to Sutton Place by way of six taxis everyday. You are celebrating in January the fact that I've been free 100 years.

Now, this means that I cannot forgive you any longer no matter how well meaning you are. In short, the white American has no right not to know. He is living in a city, my city, New York, in which he is menaced by this everyday. I am tired of being told by the white American when I walk into his living room that I am making it up. It is much worse than anything I can say; it is much more dangerous than anything I can say. Americans have some peculiar notion that I, or any Negro, would take the word for the deed. When I tell you what it is like to be a Negro, I am not saying I hate you, and I am not accusing you of hating me. This thing that I am telling you about may kill me, but it is certainly going to kill you. The fact that you don't know what is happening is the worst possible comment on American life that you can make.

**DAVIS:** The question addressed to me relates in some degree to the same subject. The question is, "You seem to view the white liberal as a burden to the civil rights movement. Would you elaborate?"

I would say the white liberal is a burden, but he is not yet a drag. A great deal of what we have to do in this country as blacks and as whites can only be done if there is an alliance between the whites and the blacks. But the alliance must be based upon facts, upon truth and upon a realistic evaluation of the one by the other. And that realistic evaluation, I think, has begun to take place, and it is causing a great deal of pain in the country. But this is as it should be because there is no growth without pain.

