James Baldwin

as interviewed by Francois Bondy

BONDY: When I had the privilege of knowing you here in Paris, Jimmy, eight or nine years ago, you were an American writer, novelist, essayist — we published then, among others, your essay on your impressions of a stranger in a Swiss village, "Stranger in the Village" — and now by reading the papers, looking at the covers of all the big magazines, I discover that you have emerged as a great Negro leader. How do you feel about this: is this a new vocation, an interlude in your writing career, or a kind of 'calling' which was inescapable?

BALDWIN: That is very hard to answer. I am certainly not a Negro leader. I don't know what you would call it; I suppose you could say it is a kind of calling, but I have never thought of myself as a Negro leader. I think what really happened was an unforeseeable kind of combination of circumstances; what people mean when they say the "Negro problem" : I have never quite known what they meant, but whatever they had in mind overtook them and I became thrown up as a kind of public figure by the internal pressures of life in the United States these days. That is most distressing for me, to tell you the truth, and has nothing to do with me as a writer. I am a little upset about it, and there is nothing I can do except survive it. I have a lot of other things to write about, I mean, and it is impossible to be a writer and be a public spokesman, too, because the line which you have to use, really, in polemics, is to my point of view, just a little bit much too simple. And I might do something else, which you can do on a page, which you can do as a writer, but you cannot talk in terms of black and white as a writer, and one must particularly avoid believing that things *are* black or white. Do you know what I mean?

BONDY: What precisely has happened to put such a pressure on you to go into this full line?

BALDWIN: I should think that one of the reasons, probably the biggest reason, has to do with relation with my brothers and sisters, my nieces and nephews. My brothers and sisters and I came up out of the streets, and somehow we all survived it. My nieces and nephews are growing up now.

BONDY: In Harlem?

BALDWIN: In Harlem, and the Bronx, they are sort of scattered. And I deal with them all the time, day in and day out, — I don't mean necessarily each week, but I know what is happening to my brothers in their various jobs and misadventures; they talk to me. And I know what is happening to my sisters; I know what is happening to their children, and this controls me. I might have had a very different life, may be, or done very different things if we had grown up differently, if we had not been so poor, and if we had been fragmented as so many families have been. But since we were not, I turned into, without quite knowing it, the eccentric uncle who was called on, let's say, when someone had an operation, — and I wasn't making a lot of money, but what I made I made in chunks, so I'd be likely to have the cash. And I knew when I went to various cocktail parties that what all these liberal, idealistic, wet-eyed people were talking about did not resemble my brothers and sisters at all. And since I could speak, and they mainly could not, I was forced to speak for them, if only for their morale, in order that they would know that what was happening to them, was really happening and not totally in silence. I had to do my best to help them and help myself stay alive, you know; the terms in which people speak about the Negro problem seems not to include anybody that I know.

BONDY: But you have begun to speak not at a time when the Negro question was in any danger of falling into oblivion or neglect, but at a time when through all kinds of pressures and circumstances on the material fabric of American society through the emergence of the new African States and so many other factors, it has become, in forefront anyhow, it has found, so to say, professional spokesmen, preachers, political leaders, and so on. So, it is not only because of you that the problem has been prevented from being forgotten. This is a time when everybody is most concerned about it, I think, in America. But if you have spoken, obviously it is a fact that there was something, some point which was in danger of being forgotten or neglected, or misunderstood. Now, what could that have been?

BALDWIN: What I try to suggest when I say that the terms in which people speak about the Negro problem has nothing to do with — putting it as simply as I can put it — has nothing to do with human beings. There seems to be some extraordinary assumption on the part of a great many people in the American Republic that Negroes are — again putting it maybe too simply — Negroes are either saints or devils, so they think that the word 'Negro' describes something, and it doesn't. There isn't such a thing as a Negro, but there is such a thing as a boy, or a man, or a woman who may be brown, or white, or green, or whatever; but when you say the "Negro problem", you create a great big monolith, and beneath this wall are thousands of millions of human beings' lives which are being destroyed because you want to deal with an abstraction. And what I know is that these are people, and also something else, which is worse: they are just like everybody else. Negroes are just as capable of all the crime you have ever heard of, and all the prejudices and all the violence, everything that any human being has ever done in the world, and people have done some monstrous things. Black people are capable of doing these things, too. White people in America have

some kind of sentimental illusion that perhaps this isn't true, and they cling to it. And the longer they cling to it, the more dangerous the future becomes. It is a fact, no matter how long it takes, that the whole structure of the world, in terms of power, even in terms of economics, is shifting — God knows where it is going! The world in which we were born, all of us in this room, no longer exists, it has vanished. It seems to me — maybe this sounds grandiose — but it seems to me that part of the trouble is that at the time Britain achieved her peculiar revolution, and the time France achieved hers, and the time that America wrote the Declaration of Independence, or the Constitution, the people who are now filling the world, coming into the world's capitals, no one thought of those people. When England talked about 'Britons never will be slaves', they weren't thinking about the people in Jamaica, who are now suddenly very vivid and alive, and who do not intend to be slaves; and if the West is going to survive, in my view, or what one calls the West, or what one would like to think of as the Western system of values, to which in any case I have subscribed — which I value — if it is going to survive the only way it is going to be able to do it is to include these people, now, in what they meant when they said freedom, when the word freedom was first spoken. But if they don't, or rather if we don't, we in the West don't do that, then we don't have any future; because those people, the people who are coming out of centuries of darkness and oppression, are not going to go away, and their presence, their energy, can make us stronger than we are, potentially, actually — so it seems to me it is a question of whether we'll be able to revise ourselves, and our institutions, enlarge ourselves and our institutions in such a way as they can be made to have or to receive this new life; either we will do that or else I don't quite know what will happen. It would seem to me that there are some things Americans, Englishmen, Frenchmen could do, in all these places, which we seem quite incapable of doing now. For example, I think that the American adventure in Cuba, and the American policy towards Cuba, is a very significant disaster. I don't think that any Cuban, no matter what his persuasion or even his economic level, and quite apart from what one thinks of Castro, can take seriously the Western professions concerning Cuban liberty. America was never concerned by Cuban liberty when Batista was there, and our objection to Cuba can't really be a matter of opposing dictators, since we support so many all over the world. Now, if you live in Washington, or anywhere in America, then the logic that we use in America, and in the American press might sound convincing; but if you're living anywhere else in the world then it doesn't sound convincing at all. And what it sounds like in fact, is that the only thing the Americans are upset about in Cuba, is that the wrong man got in. That's all, and I am sure that that is the way most of the Cubans feel. When I say it is a significant disaster, I mean this, that it seems to me that we could have done a great deal to alter the course of that revolution itself, and made it much less of a menace than it is at present if we had, in fact, backed it. You see what I am trying to say?

BONDY: Inside the United States, do you feel that we are at the beginning of some kind of profound revolution changing completely the situation of the Negro community?

BALDWIN: I think we are at the beginning of a profound revolution which will not change only the Negro community, it is going to change the country. You see, there is no prospect of setting Negroes free, unless one is prepared to set the white people in America free.

BONDY: Free from what?

BALDWIN: Free from their terrors, free from their ignorance, free from their prejudices and free, really, from the right to do wrong, knowing that it is wrong. White Southerners, I think, are the most victimized, saddest people in the Western world. They know it is wrong, you can't turn a dog on a child, or a hose on a child and not know that you are doing something wrong. You have to know it, and nobody can deny it. And this is an extreme example of what I mean when I say that this revolution is not designed so much to change the Negro community as to change the American community and the American relationship to itself, Americans relations to themselves. We can't afford a population walking around in various degrees of uneasiness and terror, wondering what the Negro is going to do next; especially since they invented him. You know what I mean?

BONDY: Yes, I understand. But in the piece of yours which we published in *Preuves* seven years ago on your experience of a Swiss village,* you seemed to say that the Americans were not behind Europeans but rather in advance because they had to meet much more broadly the real problem; while here we often had the feeling that we had solutions just because we don't have that problem. Would you still say that there could be a significant advance of the American community as a whole because they have the challenge?

BALDWIN: I think that it is a great opportunity that America has right now, the trouble is our opportunity. What I was trying to suggest in that piece several years ago was that Americans, because they have lived with it so long, knew more about the colour problem than any European nation because Europe never had its slaves on the mainland; but, on the other hand the price for what one might hope to call the American advantage, the price for this would be a matter of investigating its own history, which America has never been willing to do. If we could tell the truth about what happened to Indians, what happened to the Black man in America, and get rid of all those terrifying myths which are all over TV, and books and textbooks, if we could tell the truth about what our real relationship was to the Mexicans, for example, then we would begin to use a tremendous potential, and it might begin to save the world. After all, the American experiment, as far as I know, is without precedent in the world's history: it is the only place in the world, as far as I know, where so many various people came together and created out of a wilderness a nation, and where, in principle, all of the constructions, let us say, of the European social order were not present, and it is an experiment which is still, after all, in great jeopardy and in great doubt, because it seems to be very hard for a people to overcome or to

* Published in a collection of essays under the title *Notes of a Native Son* by Beacon Press, 1955 and Michael Joseph, 1963—ED.

face their real past. It is very confusing to be an American in some ways, because if your father, for example, was born in Italy and you want to become an American, you don't speak Italian, which means you don't speak to your father; which means that when you are 30 you hardly know who you are. And that is a very sinister matter. Now, it is an awful thing to demand of a civilisation that it begin to examine itself in these terms; but if we could *begin* to examine ourselves in these terms, we would all come much closer to what we suppose to be some real sense of identity and be a good deal less menaced by the black Americans there who have a much stronger sense of identity since they have *had* to talk to their fathers. Upward mobility for an American Negro is a very peculiar thing. You did what you did, and then — maybe — you got a better job than your father, you know, — my father was a handyman and I'm a writer, — but the terms in which one achieved this as a Negro are very different from the American terms; they are almost antithetical to the American terms. And no American Negro ever seriously believed for a moment in any of those books written by Horatio Alger, Jr., but Americans still do. It is in that area that I see the real trouble, the real crisis, the question of whether one is going to keep on living in a country which one has essentially invented out of nostalgia and panic, or deal with what really happened in the country and what is really happening there now. Does it make sense to you?

BONDY: It raises at the same time many problems: for instance, there are countries which have the tradition that most significant social changes come through the will of the new legislation of a strong government. Now, the Democratic tradition in the United States doesn't seem to work quite that way, and you always hear people speak about the Rights of State, the Rights of Property and so on, which go in the opposite direction. Now, do you think that to obtain what you are now thinking of, you would be ready to accept this sense of a much greater possibility of a central government to impose the Rule of Law, as it sees it, even if it creates thereby all the dangers which we know are connected with a much stronger centralized government?

BALDWIN: No, but it's a terrible question, it's a terribly loaded question. I don't quite know how to answer it, but we can speculate. In the first place, I think that no matter how we play it, what one's attitude is, we in America are under the necessity of re-defining a great many things, among them the real role of the Government: for example, the Democratic Party we were talking about before, the Democratic Party is a divided party, which has always seemed like a real entity for quite some time. Under pressure of last year's events, it seems less real and unquestionable than it did before. For example, all Negroes have always known that there are two democratic parties, one in the North, one in the South; and we have always known that whatever the Democratic Party did in the North, let us say in terms of civil rights, it had to compensate for in the South. And the effort of every Administration has been to hold this peculiar structure together. Now, again under the pressure coming from the streets of places like Birmingham, this is no longer possible: Kennedy certainly lost the South, and lost it probably for the next 100 years; the Democratic Party lost the South probably in the same way that Abraham Lincoln lost it, one hundred years ago, and for the same reason. Now this means, I think, that one has to be very bold and look at it as it is, and try to make political alignments in terms of what the political alignments really are. That doesn't answer your question about the role of the Government, but it does suggest, to my mind, anyway, some of the complexities facing the Government. But I don't want a strong central government, it involves more dangers and risks than even our present situation does. And yet, it is clear that Federation has to have some central authorities; when people talk about States Rights, for example, when the Governor of Alabama talks about States he is not talking about States rights, which are a reality and something to be defined; what he is talking about is something else, he is talking about the Southern oligarchy's right to use me as a source of cheap labour. Now no State ought to have that right, under any conditions, and one has got to be very precise about that; and the Government here has to be very precise about that: what rights the State has and what rights it does not have. And of course, I think it is out of the question that an American State has the right to oppress by reason of race or colour or religion, any group of people within its borders for any reason.

There isn't such a thing as a Negro, but there is such a thing as a boy or a man, or a woman who may be brown, or white or green, or whatever; but when you say the 'Negro problem', you create a great big monolith . . . and thousands of millions of lives are destroyed because you want to deal with an abstraction

BONDY: We have been talking about the South: Europeans, when they think of the Negro question remember a bus strike in Montgomery, events in the University of Mississippi, and you have the feeling that everything centres about the solid, deep, prejudiced, backward South. But I heard you speak in that little group at the 'Living-Room' place two days ago, about the fact that Negroes in the North are not as dramatized, not as projected in the national consciousness in the American scene, but that the problems in a way are just as bad, and in a way even worse because they cannot be dramatized the same way. Is that correct?

BALDWIN: I think that is correct. I think that is true; I know that it is true. Birmingham is a terrible place, but it is absolutely naked. They had signs up until a few months ago saying "White" and "Colored"; now, by the way, there is only one drinking fountain and no sign above it, and they have done an insane thing — they have taken away all the cups, I think, — anyway, some such manoeuver so that nobody can drink any water at all. But anyway, in Birmingham, it's obvious, it's clear, you cannot be fooled in Birmingham, you know very well you can't go here and you can't go there and if you go, you know what you are going to get into. So it's clear. And there is one other thing in the South, which is not true in the North, which is that there is still Martin Luther King who can get people in the Church and use the Church in the South, the way he does use it, because there is still the Negro family in the South, and there is no Negro family, effectively speaking, in the North. We all know this: you know, when a peasant leaves the land and he comes to the city, his

family breaks up at once, it's the first thing that goes.

This is what happened to Negroes, too, when they came off the land — they have been off the land for a long time, after all, they have been up North about almost as long as I've been on earth, it is not quite forty years. And therefore, the Northern Negro is much more demoralized than the Southern Negro is, because there being no signs, you have to play it by ear entirely, and you can be put behind the stove in a restaurant, or get thrown out of the restaurant, or get killed; or if you look for an apartment, they won't say 'Get away from here, Nigger', they'll say that the apartment is taken; and if you look for a job, it's the same thing, and you can go mad. And Negroes do, in the North, go mad for just that reason. And what one really hopes for out of this present situation is that if the South gets past this nightmare, this point of crisis, it will be the South which will lead the country in this area. One thing one has always known about the South, speaking as a Negro, is that if you have a Southern friend, you have a friend, and this is not true of a Northerner, who takes refuge in all his attitudes and fails you when the chips are down. But it costs the Southerner something to repudiate, in effect, his heritage and his family in order to do what he knows to be right. If we succeed here — people think it sounds very mystical — but I think it may be a concrete reality — if we succeed here now, we can create, then, in America a moral climate which will make it less dangerous for White people to do the right thing.

BONDY: Not only in the United States, but also in Africa there are also two lines; the one is leading to what some French Negroes call 'Negritude', which is not an aggressive political notion, but still a notion, that the Negro is not just a man but a very special kind of man with special traditions linked with special means of expression, and so on; and the other one wanting purely equality so that people can be judged as individuals with their gifts as they are. Now we see from here in the United States also the two movements; the one leading just to emancipation and the other which we identify as the Black Muslims leading to an assertion of something very specific of the Negro, which nobody else could share. Now, at what point does one have to dissociate from one or the other, or is this too premature because the main point is to bring the question into focus? I don't know if it is clearly put . . .

BALDWIN: I think I know what you mean. Again, all these questions are loaded, obviously. I myself, speaking only for myself, I know of the concept of Negritude, but I know I profoundly distrust it; and I am opposed to the Black Muslim movement, — but this is really kind of irrelevant. But let's kick it around for a minute.

You know, when I first heard of the concept of Negritude, six or seven years ago, the question which came into my mind was "Well, how in the world is this going to connect so many different experiences?" To be born in Jamaica, or Barbados, or Portugal, or New York, or to be black, wouldn't seem to me to be enough until one has evolved oneself in opposition to whatever one's circumstances are; and the situation of a man in Jamaica is not the situation of a man in Harlem at all; I don't even know that a man in Jamaica and a man in Harlem would have very much to talk about, at least it seems to me far from certain that they would — except, of course, they could talk about white people. So the concept of Negritude would seem to me to be a kind of extrapolation of a series of circumstances which spell out in each case that if you are Black, you are oppressed, but it overlooks the fact that oppression doesn't last forever, and that oppressions do not necessarily unify so many millions of people all over the world. But even if that could be spelled out to my satisfaction, which I doubt, I would soon distrust it because you say it is not a very aggressive political notion, but I think it seizes a very great political notion, which is nothing more, nothing less, than Black supremacy. And we have suffered enough, God knows already, all over the world, White and Black, from the notion of White supremacy; so that I would tend to reject it out of hand. Now, the Black Muslim movement is allied with this, whether it knows it or not, it is part of the same error, I think.

And it is impressive to listen to the Black Muslims speak, especially in Harlem on Saturday night, telling those unhappy people, trapped people, in something very much resembling a concentration camp, articulating to them what is happening: it is a terrible thing to keep on paying rent, and keeping on throwing good money after bad, and good energy after bad, and be, just the same, not only defeating yourself in that situation, but watching your child being defeated by it. And then, to live in a country which pretends it isn't happening, creates almost total silence, almost total despair. So when the Muslim speaker speaks, he is the only person in America speaking about what those cats in Harlem really, really feel. And with that, of course, it is very easy to conclude, as so many have concluded, that the American white man is simply not worth listening to, he is in fact, let us say, a devil, and the entire structure represented by white people is entirely evil, and that black people are better than white people because of the attitude of the white people, and the way the black people have been treated by whites. It is very seductive: the trouble here is that the only way this can be answered is not by the black people, but only by white people. The only way the American Government, for example, the American Republic can undermine, can destroy the Black Muslim movement, is in fact to eliminate the conditions which breed the Black Muslim movement. Nothing else will do it. The only way to stop Malcolm X. from speaking in Harlem on Saturday night, is to get rid of Harlem. Let all the Negroes out of there and let them go wherever they want to go and do like anybody else, without being penalized on account of their colour. Until the American Government can do that, the Muslim movement will be a great threat; and not simply the Muslim movement, but all that energy trapped down in all those ghettoes can blow up the whole country. It can blow up the whole world, really because what Europe has to do in answering the concept of Negritude, is re-examine its own history, because, after all, the French said for years that they were better than anybody else because they were French; and the English said they were better than anybody else because they were English. All of Europe has said this for generations.

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power that it has until today, we run a very great risk of reversing the nightmare for an unforeseeable number of years, with the shoe on the other foot and heels on other necks. It seems to me that it is scarcely worth doing. One nightmare was enough for me.

BONDY: When I come back from this very enlarged worldwide perspective to the American scene, there is always this question in peoples' minds: does the present great urgency of the whole Negro protest movement come from the simple fact that it is more recognized, that it has made more progress, that it has been more supported by the Government, by the Administration, than before or, on the contrary, does it come from the fact that the Negro community has been hit harder by the economic crisis, that there is just a heavier percentage of people out of jobs, and that thereby, this is just a moment of greater distress. I mean, is it just impatience in the wake of the great progress, or is it a distress because of the limits of this progress, if I can put it that way?

BALDWIN: I think the second part, the distress you mentioned, is much more relevant than the triumph, yes, much more. Whatever triumph there has been apart from the major triumph of having survived so long, the triumph has been very minor, very limited and has as yet to affect in any way whatever, the bulk of the Negro people in America. I mean Marian Anderson and myself, and even Martin Luther King, are irrelevant in the Negro's 24-hour day, the man has got to deal with his job, his wife and his children, and all that. Because in fact, nothing that Marian Anderson has been able to do, nothing that Martin Luther King has been able to do, has managed to get us out of prison. And this is very important. The unemployment rate in America, the last time I heard about it a few months ago, the Negro unemployment rate was twice that of the nation, something like 12½%. The Negroes have always been the last to be hired and the first to be fired. And the jobs they are about to lose, because of automation, is going to create, and is creating now, a great social disaster. Now, what Martin Luther King, for example, is trying to do, and what anyone who is dealing in these streets down there, is trying to do, is to alert the Government and the officials of Labour Unions and banks and real estate interests and factories to what is coming, because no one, no Negro alive today, can guarantee anything about what Negroes will do in the streets, because the pressure is too great; the pressure is too great, and one is trying to do two things at once; to get them out of the streets as quickly as possible to minimise the damage to them and to the country; and to make the country aware of the damage, to make the country aware of the danger. It is going to be a very great social problem: what is one going to do with all these Negroes out of work, and furthermore, the pressure works in such a way that such jobs as are now going to be open to Negroes, most Negroes cannot apply because they have never been trained for them. The whole level of expectation has been kept down so low by the American Republic for so long: if I could work as an air pilot, let us say at TWA, I would have trained myself for it. And in some way the Government has to take very active steps, I think, because one has got to, somehow, set right the balance; and it cannot be done simply by the goodwill of private people it has got to be a Government policy, I think, to begin, to really implement the Civil Rights problem, to get Negroes into places where Negroes have never been before: into schools where they have never been before. To begin really to deal with the American Negro for the first time as a first class citizen; having kept him for so long as a second-class one, and having, in his own mind, turned him into one, in many cases.

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BONDY: If I understood rightly, to get to equality, there should be now a kind of reversed inequality, just like in Italy there are special credits to develop the South because it is underdeveloped and backward, you would think that there should be special efforts, special money, a special education programme, special training, to bring the whole Negro community, which is a kind of underdeveloped country inside a developed country, to a higher level. Is that correct?

BALDWIN: Something like that, yes. I would like to see, for example, and one will in any case, one way or the other, see in Harlem, a real massive effort to counteract the demoralization of the young there. Now, you can go about it two ways; but the way I would like to see it come about in fact, is for the people of Harlem themselves, to begin to do such radical things as, for example, organizing rent strikes, until something is done about the apartments in which they live — and I know that they can do nothing about those apartments, so it will in effect, dramatize the fact that to live in Harlem is to live in a concentration camp. And the Government, I think, has got to come in at this point, or before that point, and really begin to set up schools, to send in teams like a Peace Corps even, to bring those people out of that incredible darkness which is mainly economic, but which is also psychological and moral. After all, we have been functioning in that country for 400 years, as a source of cheap labour; we built it. It would be a very different country if I hadn't, if one of my ancestors hadn't laid all that track. That is how the country created its capital; and I wouldn't think that it is too much to ask now that they re-invest a little bit of it in the most oppressed portion of its population. I'd be prepared to say that they owe it to us, and it must be done, it must be done. Three years ago, for example, my sister was told by her school teacher, — my sister was studying fashion — and the teacher told her as a favour to her that she shouldn't study fashion because there were no Negroes in that field, there was no future in it. It has taken a lot of effort on the part of my family and myself to conquer the inevitable demoralization that overtook her when she was told such a thing. And that is a very small anecdote: and for a boy, for a Negro male, it is infinitely worse. It is a terrible thing to live in a civilization which shows you every day, every hour of your life that you are not a man. And one of the ways in which the Government has to be responsible for this, to check what I call the demoralization, is precisely to let the Negro male free to be a man — to allow his level to

expectation to be as high as anybody else; but that has never been so in America, in spite of all the famous American Negroes one has heard of; they are all terribly scarred, first of all, including myself, and marked by a certain ruthlessness because one knew that in order to get anything done at all one had to be at least thirty-eight times better than any white cat around. That is a terrible penalty.

BONDY: Now, to move back from the American to the world scene, you have often said, at least I believe so, that here in Europe, in some way we would have to cope later with this problem of a massive presence of people who are not white, and that may be what is being done in America may even in a way teach us things here in Europe. We somehow have all a certain feeling of superiority to this American drama just because we don't have it. You seem to feel that this is not a thing which is outside of our history, but that it will become inevitably the history of every white community.

BALDWIN: I think so, because, after all, the doctrine of white supremacy did not begin in America, it began here in Europe, and doctrines have a terrible way of coming home to roost. It was a great shock in some ways to see signs in London saying "Keep Britain White"; all the terrible things they did in Paris during the Algerian war including graffiti saying "Pas de bicots à Paris". And it would seem in my experience everywhere, in a community when the black man makes himself felt, as a human being, as an entity, he always makes himself felt as a threat to the social structure; and each community acts exactly the same way, they try to thrust them out. And this is what Europe has already begun to do; and I should suppose that in the future when more and more black Frenchmen and black Englishmen come increasingly into London and Paris and into the countries which in fact helped to create them, helped to create their present dilemma and their present psychology, then Paris itself under such a pressure will discover very unhappy things about itself. If Americans could manage to make this experiment work — the American experiment — it might prove of great value to all the rest of the world.

BONDY: One element which in your own books you have very much stressed as important to this conscience of the Negro question, is the erotic. I don't think we should ignore it when talking now. Now it is a fact that at least in France there is not this kind of morbid conscience made of, at once, I don't know, attraction, repulsion, wish to castrate or whatever else you have analysed in the White Anglo-Saxon protestant community. In any case, this whole problem of a feeling of a difference which creates sexually a fear and an attraction in some way in your work as writer, it has a great place, so I wonder whether we can ignore it altogether?

BALDWIN: Well, we can't ignore it but we can't do much about clarifying it either. But, it is very strange; I can only speak with authority of America; I have also watched it in England. It seems to me that the French, for example, — and I am guessing, but it is hunch based on the years I lived in Paris; the French are not really any less racist than any other European power; the only distinction I have found in France — and I may be wrong about this — is that somehow the whole concept of puritanism, the whole necessity to mortify the flesh seems never really to have taken root in France, perhaps because it is a Catholic country; so that a black man doesn't represent a personal, emotional sexual, psychological threat to a Frenchman, in the way he seems to represent this for an Englishman, and as I know he represents it for an American. I think it is one of the penalties for the power that the American white man has had over black flesh for so long. And no matter what Southern Senators say, that kind of licence is always brutal; it does terrible things to the object, and it does ghastly things to the perpetrator. But it is clear that even I who am very dark, am not as dark as an African, and it is not because my grandmother went around raping people. It was she who was raped. What is crucial here is that this is an unadmitted fact in American life; Americans are not prepared to accept what they have done, and do, to accept the fact that the people they call Negroes are also their brothers, and their cousins, and their uncles, and their sisters . . . In the Deep South I know of one man who is much fairer than I whose father is a very important man in the town, and he goes to his father's office, his father's office is never open to him, but he goes to his father's office once or twice a week and sits in the anteroom just so his father will see him, out of pure desperation and pure spite. But this is very important, I think, because it means that white men, who have been able to do what they wish with Negro women for so long, have invented this whole concept of keeping me out of the white women's bedroom, because they are afraid of my retaliation; and also there is something else which is very odd about it, and even suicidal I should think, if I were a white man. If you go around telling your women to stay away from me because I am sexually more potent, and you in the meantime are on the other side of town with all the black girls you can find, or if you were simply dreaming of them, then you are not taking care of your wife: you yourself are involved in black flesh up to your ears, and obviously sooner or later what has happened in the South would have to happen: some hysterical white woman, hysterical from neglect or longing cries 'Rape!' when she sees me. All her unfulfilment is projected on to me, because the white man has assured her that I am better in bed than he is. It seems a curious thing to do to oneself, especially since it isn't true; it involves some peculiar, infantile notion of sex.

We say, to put it rudely: "*It ain't the meat, it's the motion*". It is a very rude expression, but not inaccurate. If you don't know how to make love, and making love is much more than a physical act — the size of your member doesn't matter; if you do know how to make love, or if you are in love with somebody, the size of your member doesn't matter. What has happened here is that the American white man has trapped himself in a weird kind of adolescent competition: "*I bet mine's is bigger than your's is*", and it is the Negro pays for this fantasy. There has got to be something weird going on in the mind of anybody who has to castrate another man. And it is of a complexity and horror that one can't hope even to begin to clarify in a discussion; in fact, it would take years to figure out how you are going to write it, if you dare to think you can. But it really is I think, the most horrifying aspect of what we will here call the white man's problem. It must be ghastly to walk around the world supposing that all the black men you see are able to take your woman away from you . . .

BONDY: I still would like to see whether there is any link or may be no link at all except the situation between your personal problem as a writer and individual who has to create individual situations, and your involvement in this collective situation because as you said before, as a writer you have to say something new, which has never been said before, while as a spokesman, as a man who brings into focus these problems, you cannot avoid saying things which have been said before, which will even be said after you, and will have to be repeated again, for this is the way political and social progress works. What problem does this create for you personally?

BALDWIN: It creates a great problem because my interest in people doesn't really exist on this public level; the importance of the Negro to me, for example, is involved with aspects and levels of experience which will certainly be expressed in politics, but which I would like to live long enough to begin to explore in what I do, in fiction, in plays, in novels. I feel terribly menaced by this present notoriety, because it is antithetical to that kind of endeavour which has to occur in silence and over a great period of time, and which by definition is extremely dangerous, presently because one has to smash all the existing definitions. I would like to write very different things than the things I have written and go much further than I have so far gone. And I am sure that if I live, I will. But it really is a very curious kind of dichotomy, or to speak in simpler terms, it is difficult to keep your mind and your eye on what you know to be complex, which everyone else wishes to make simple, to remain fixed on what you know to be the truth beneath it, and try to arrive at a newer and truer simplicity. It is a matter of stamina, and one's got to pray that I have enough stamina.