

INTERVIEW

# They Came to See if I'm for Real: James Baldwin Interviewed by Hakim Jamal for *LA Free Press* (1968)

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## Abstract

Having returned to the United States to work on his screenplay about Malcolm X, James Baldwin was interviewed for the *Los Angeles Free Press* in 1968. The interview offers a rare and valuable glimpse of Baldwin's style of engagement with a new generation of radical Black activists whose current vogue Baldwin understood as valuable, whose new appraisal of history Baldwin had both helped to create and needed to learn from, and whose dangerous predicament Baldwin recognized and felt partly responsible for. Ed Pavlić provides a contextual and historical introduction to that interview, which is reproduced here with permission from the *Free Press*.

**Keywords:** Hakim Jamal, *Los Angeles Free Press*, Hollywood, Malcolm X, 1968, Black Power

On February 27, 1968, two weeks after he'd arrived in California to write the screenplay for a film treatment of *The Autobiography of Malcom X*, James Baldwin wrote his brother David a letter. He described the strange scene of Black radicals coming to see him at the Beverly Hills Hotel, where Columbia Pictures had initially put him up. Baldwin welcomed the curiosity, savored the strangeness, and appreciated the spectacle. He told David that they'd come to see if he was for real because he was in Los Angeles to make a film about Malcolm, whom he considered their brother. Among those who came to Beverly Hills was Hakim Jamal, soon-to-be founder of the Malcolm X Foundation.

Along with his wife Dorothy, Hakim Jamal was a founder of the cultural nationalist Us Organization in Los Angeles that grew out of a study group at the Aquarian Bookstore in the weeks following the August 1965 uprising in Watts.<sup>1</sup> Initially Jamal took credit as the group's founder, which repurposed the name and credo of a magazine he'd published: "US ... Anywhere we are, Us is."<sup>2</sup> Also engaged from the beginning, Maulana Karenga, initially listed as "chairman" of Us, eventually became "commonly perceived as the organization's founder."<sup>3</sup> After a term in prison in the mid-1970s, Karenga also became well known as an Afrocentric theorist and inventor of the African American holiday Kwanzaa.



**Figure 1** Still from an interview with Hakim Jamal broadcast on a public affairs program, *Say Brother*, July 11, 1968, WGBH Boston

By the time Jamal came to interview Baldwin in Beverly Hills he had severed ties with Us and aligned himself more closely with the Black Panthers, and above all with the legacy of Malcolm X. So, at least according to himself, Jamal represented a militant vanguard of Black cultural consciousness in Los Angeles. Born Allen Donaldson and raised in Boston, he also took great pride in having met Malcolm X when the latter was still known as Detroit Red in the streets of Roxbury and understood himself to be Malcolm's cousin by marriage. This family affiliation bolstered his radical credibility generally and connected him directly to Baldwin's reason for coming to California.

A collaboration with photographer Allen Zak and staffer Ted Zatlyn, the *LA Free Press* published Jamal's interview with Baldwin on February 23, 1968. Bolstering Baldwin's case for solidarity with radicals who viewed themselves as furthering Malcolm's legacy, and countering impressions he feared from a damaging front page story published earlier that week—on the third anniversary of Malcolm's assassination—in *Variety*, Baldwin's defense of Stokely Carmichael appeared in the same *LA Free Press* issue with the interview. As Baldwin had written his brother, Jamal was clearly there to assess his Black Power credentials, to see if he was for real.<sup>4</sup> The interview offers a rare and valuable glimpse of Baldwin's style of engagement with a new generation of radical Black activists whose current vogue Baldwin understood as valuable, whose new appraisal of history Baldwin had both helped to create and needed to learn from, and whose dangerous predicament Baldwin recognized and felt partly responsible for. These irreconcilable and imperfectly mutual needs made Baldwin's position far from stable, which was really nothing new for him. So in his answers and statements Baldwin attempted to make the most of whatever mutual advantages could be created.

Jamal's first question focused on Baldwin's residence in France: "To begin with, you know that our primary problem in this country is one of white against black ... You probably left the continental United States to escape this. Why on earth would you go to a country that is predominantly white?"<sup>5</sup> Answering at an angle, Baldwin: "That's a good question. I never thought of it quite in that way before ... I would have been afraid to go to Africa in 1948 ... The people I saw in Paris, I saw from a great distance for a very long time." Next, FP: "Have you escaped from the ghetto in the United States?" JB: "In a sense, as long as people are in the ghetto, I don't want to escape from it. Where would I go?" The assessment of Baldwin's revolutionary credentials continued as Baldwin attempted to signify that he wasn't as out of touch as many may have then assumed him to be. But at the same time Baldwin avoided being put on the defensive:

FP: I asked that because we're in the Beverly Hills Hotel, where if there's five Black people in the whole hotel, it's a miracle—the janitors are all white, the chambermaids are even all white. And you're in what would be considered a bourgeois state right now.

JB: I'm a very bourgeois type.

FP: I can dig it. Do you write out of anger or is that merely a style that happens to be popular?

The beat went on, and *on*. Baldwin fielded accusatory questions on his toes, repositioning Jamal's intended stresses as if shifting chords under the melody. He understood that real mutuality was contested, contests always partial. Years before, in the "Autobiographical Notes" section of his first collection of essays, he'd written: "I love to argue with people who do not disagree with me too profoundly."<sup>6</sup> In choosing the angles of his answers, Baldwin seems to be trying to measure just how profound the disagreements were.

On the other hand, Baldwin also made it clear that he wasn't easy to intimidate:

FP: Are you a homosexual?

JB: No, I'm bisexual. Whatever that means.

FP: Good. No, I know, because that's what they say anyway.

JB: I don't give a shit what people say.

In his letter, Baldwin told his brother that, despite the "bourgeois state" of his suite, he sensed that the radicals, Jamal and others, were surprised to find that he knew the score. As the interview went on, Jamal and Baldwin struck up a kind of halting rapport. Jamal let on that he knew about Malcolm X's respect for Baldwin. He asked "Did you know him well?"

JB: It's difficult, because now he's dead. If you had asked me when he was alive if I knew him well, I would have said yes. When a man is dead, you wonder how well you knew him, no matter how well you loved him. There was so much more in Malcolm than Malcolm knew how to tell. There was so much more in him than he ever lived to express.

In a way most radical leaders in the younger generation didn't expect, Baldwin respected *them*. He feared for their dangerous predicament that was, in his mind, in a way, made all the more dangerous by what he regarded as *his* generation's failures. Baldwin's sense of connection and responsibility had immediately to do with his eight younger brothers and sisters whom he loved, often in a loosely paternal way. Born in 1931, Hakim Jamal was the same age as Baldwin's brother David. But, in a way he considered very *un-American*, Baldwin understood that generations depended upon each other. And in a way Baldwin thought of as *dangerously American*, many Black radical activists and artists at the time didn't sense the importance and complexity of intergenerational needs. In an interview at the end of his life in his house in France, Baldwin told Quincy Troupe about meeting LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka in the mid-1960s. Trying to diffuse a rivalry instigated by the culture industry at the time, Baldwin told Jones: "You're LeRoi Jones, I'm James Baldwin. And we're going to need each other."<sup>7</sup> Then Baldwin told Troupe: "He didn't believe it then but time took care of that."<sup>8</sup>

Aiming at the generational divide, Jamal pointed out a disagreement he perceived between Baldwin and H. Rap Brown. At the time Brown was embroiled in court proceedings related to charges of arson and inciting to riot in Maryland the previous summer. Baldwin answered: "Well, Rap and I are very different people. I'm much older than Rap." Reading now, we think we can see what's coming: the elder deploys his wisdom. Instead, JB: "And Rap may know a lot that I don't know." The question of anti-Jewish currents in the Black radical movement came up, Jamal said it "was a European hangover." JB: "The whole country is a European hangover." Writing from his apartment in Bebek, in Istanbul, in 1967 Baldwin had addressed Black anti-Semitism, calling it "the most ancient and barbaric of the European myths"; he would do so again and again in the coming years.<sup>9</sup>

Jamal asked if Baldwin thought that Malcolm X hated white people. Baldwin said no, he didn't think so; Malcolm "understood something about this country and our dilemma here that carried him far past that." Then Baldwin swerved. In letters to his brother, he'd been rehearsing a response to being challenged, as he knew he would be, over all kinds of things including his choosing Elia Kazan, an ostensibly white man, as the director of a film about Malcolm X. Baldwin told his brother that he intended to deal with the controversy over Kazan's color by saying that proving such things about human beings is impossible, a point of view he found in the final chapter of Malcolm's autobiography.<sup>10</sup> Kazan's family was Greek. His parents had fled persecution in Turkey in 1913 when Kazan was four years old. In response to the idea of Malcolm hating white people, Baldwin veered into his thoughts about Kazan, who he'd known for at least a decade and whose novel, *The Arrangement* (1967), he'd reviewed the previous spring in the *New York Review of Books*. Baldwin told Jamal:

You said in the beginning that our problem is white against black—but I think in fact our problem is much deeper than that. In the first place, I'm not sure any white man in this country is able to prove he's white. That's a myth. And Negro is a legal term. That's another myth really.

Baldwin went on. He told Jamal that the whole mythic racial nightmare was based upon "economic arrangements of the Western world [which] are obsolete." People's identities as Americans are built on fraudulent terms, terms founded upon criminal economic arrangements. Of the latter, Baldwin told Jamal that "either the West will revise them or the West will perish." The logic for identities, especially for so-called white folks gripped in "European hangovers" who, in places like Georgia, fantasized that they had more in common with villagers in Scotland or Ireland than they with Black folks who had been their neighbors (and closer than that!) for generations, was similar.

Beckoning Jamal and readers of the *LA Free Press* into territory where stabilities weren't to be found in expected places, Baldwin signified how economics and race were mutually reinforcing false witnesses. Meantime, white Americans (and now, in radical response, some Black militants too) seemed determined to pretend that "race" was a naturally occurring phenomenon and American's disfigured sense of

economics indicated that “mink coats grow and automobiles are an act of God.” No matter the myths, as for the cars at least, Baldwin reminded: “They’re all built out of stolen tin.” People around the world in places like Johannesburg are not going to go down into mines, “dig up all that wealth, and give it away. That is simply not going to go on forever.”

In economics, and likewise with the identities of human beings, pretending that such things were matters of nature and would, therefore, “go on forever” required performances worthy of Academy awards. This kind of simplicity was another American narcotic. Switching the frame to Hollywood but also adopting Jamal’s style of issuing direct and bold statements, Baldwin said that postures of American self-certainty require that “John Wayne [be] the ideal. He’s a straight-shooter. A simple, straightforward guy. You can trust him. Only trouble is, he’s brainless.” Meanwhile, riffing on Du Bois’s idea of double-consciousness, Baldwin stressed that an “American male who is capable of having two warring thoughts at the same time is suspect.” This delusional mash-up of economics, identity, and simplicity was a recipe for exactly the national electoral politics of the era as well as certain dangers in radical responses that mirrored those politics. Jamal—who was known to slip into delusions that he himself was God—followed along, kind of. Mistaking Baldwin’s sense of instability for weakness and contrasting it with his own masculine sense of strength, Jamal attempts—but fails—to agree with Baldwin: “Yes, it’s true that most Americans live with contradictions.” No doubt sensing the gap between what he was saying and what Jamal was hearing, JB went in anyway:

Yes, but they lie about them. It’s the loneliest country in the world because everybody is saying to his neighbor what he thinks his neighbor wants him to say. Then they have violent nervous breakdowns all of a sudden, and they murder their children or their wives and everyone wonders why. They’ve been carrying this thing around in them all along and suddenly it blows up. People are not what we say they are. People are much more complex than that.

Meanwhile, the two agreed that, somehow, with every protest against the war in Vietnam, Washington’s insane response was escalation.

Apart from the complex significance of the tension between Jamal and Baldwin in their meeting, a few historical details benefit from a little clarification. After discussing the controversy over William Styron’s 1967 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Jamal leaps to a moment from Malcolm X’s speech from November 1963, “Message to the Grassroots.” Concluding the speech with masterful rhetorical fury in his indictment of the March on Washington, Malcolm had added that Baldwin was prevented from speaking:

It was a sellout. It was a takeover. When James Baldwin came in from Paris they wouldn’t let him talk, because they couldn’t make him go by the script. Burt Lancaster read the speech that Baldwin was supposed to make; they wouldn’t let Baldwin get up there because they know Baldwin’s liable to say anything.

In light of Malcolm's respect for Baldwin's integrity, Jamal asks him about his decision to step back and allow Lancaster, who was in Paris that August filming *The Train*, to read his brief speech on behalf of Americans in Paris who'd marched to the American Embassy the previous week. Introduced by Ossie Davis in Washington, DC, Lancaster did his actor's best at the podium. But his voice—and if we watch, his face—can't quite carry even Baldwin's most carefully guarded sentences about how hard it is “to make coherent to those who are not Americans the nature and the meaning of our struggle” and “the struggle toward freedom on the part of the previously subjugated [that] is occurring in capitals and villages all over the world.”<sup>11</sup> Baldwin recalled that he stepped aside out of reluctance, at the March, so as not to take attention away from John Lewis, whose speech was under scrutiny instigated by the Archbishop of Washington, Patrick O'Boyle. Speaking with Jamal, Baldwin wonders whether he stands by his decision four years later.

Referring to more contemporary events, Jamal and Baldwin discuss the difficulty of judging celebrity militancy. Jamal mentions Eartha Kitt's provocative statements from January 1968 to President Johnson's wife, Claudia Alta “Lady Bird” Johnson, during a “Woman Doers Luncheon” focused on the problem of juvenile delinquency. Kitt told the attendees and Mrs. Johnson that many young men committed crimes and used drugs in hopes they would be disqualified from military service in Vietnam. Baldwin compares Mrs. Johnson's shock to Robert Kennedy's surprise at Lena Horne's frank comments during their meeting on May 24, 1963. Baldwin remembers that Kennedy, who would announce his candidacy for the US presidency on March 16, 1968, thought Horne “was the black Joan Crawford.” Turned out not so much. Meantime Baldwin implies that he's not a celebrity in the same sense that Kitt, Horne, Muhammad Ali, and others are celebrities.

Reading this interview in 2022, one would love to stop time and conjure a space between Baldwin and Jamal that could contain possibilities not then available. What if we could walk back into that faux-elegant suite in the Beverly Hills Hotel that Hakim Jamal—acting—took as an affront and James Baldwin—also acting—enjoyed with what complex twists of real pleasure and ironic regard one can only guess? What if we could have stopped the conversation there? And turned it back. Slowed it down. What if Baldwin could have indicated to Jamal that maybe people didn't really need new beards and new names and new holidays. In one sense Baldwin knew his own name wasn't his when he was born. He had *made* it his, which really meant that he had made it *ours*. Couldn't the same be done with history? Appearing on the radio on April 25, 1961, with Malcolm X himself, who was then operating as Elijah Muhammad's mouthpiece, Baldwin had argued exactly that:

What I would like to see, and maybe we will never live to see it, is a world in which these things are not necessary, in which I will not need to invent, in effect, a heritage and a history but can deal with the one I have. And will not need in order to deal with the rest of the world will not need to feel superior to them but simply be a part of them.<sup>12</sup>

Could Baldwin and Jamal have homed in on historical horrors alive behind the lines, at work in intimate proximities and, yes, in contradictions, the existence of which Americans—radicals, liberals, conservatives—are warned away from admitting? Maybe. That didn't happen. But Baldwin and Jamal both acknowledged, for instance, that the looting in Detroit during the uprising the previous summer had been integrated. JB: "It's one thing for the looting to be integrated. It's another for the neighborhood to be integrated." Disorder and chaos, it seemed, were already free; the prison was made of prevailing systems of order. That explained much in the counterculture's revolt against order, including the violent and volatile music and the ectoplasmic phantasms that Baldwin's autobiographical protagonist, Leo Proudhammer, encountered during his visit to the fictionalized Carousel Ballroom near the end of his novel from 1968, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*. What did that radical need to reorder mean for our most immediate and intimate relationships, what kinds of madness and danger and contradiction did the terrible simplicity of American order leave unaddressed? Did prevailing radicalisms in vogue at the time address them?

Baldwin and Jamal never went there. They would meet again in a panel discussion about Malcolm X's legacy moderated by Jamal and broadcast by KPFK in Los Angeles on May 19, 1968. Evincing Baldwin's regard for Jamal and, probably more importantly, for continuing work in the name of Malcolm X, Baldwin included Jamal's organization among those to receive funds from the publication of *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* in June 1968. On April 12, he wrote to Engin Cezzar: "I'm making my publishers, in England and America, use my publication party as a benefit for the South African (black) Freedom Fighters, and The Malcolm X Foundation."<sup>13</sup> But Baldwin and Jamal's trajectories through history would diverge as radically as they had come—however briefly—together.

Within sixteen months, in July 1969, and in ways that maybe began with the shattering evening of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in Memphis on April 4, 1968, Baldwin bounced back to Istanbul. He gathered up his North African lover, Alain, who he had met in Paris in August 1967, and Beauford Delaney, his oldest mentor, who he had known since he was a teenager in the Village. Baldwin spent the rest of 1969 reordering *his* sense of a private life. Contrary to biographical accounts, Baldwin did not do this alone, in solitude. And he did not *find* a community abroad. He had built part of that community with friends like Engin Cezzar and his wife Gülriz Sururi already, and he brought the queer domestic core of it along with him in Alain and Beauford. Pulling himself back together during these months, Baldwin searched for glimpses of the world and himself through Alain and Beauford's eyes. Rather than self-examination, which he'd never trusted very far, Baldwin caught glimpses of himself in the eyes of people who watched him. Rather than directly, Baldwin sought clarity in revealing flashes between people who knew him in different ways. As he described it to his brother David in letters, Baldwin watched the people watching him indirectly, by concentrating on the eyes of his lover and his oldest mentor as they watched the people concentrating on him. Too often mistaken for introspective solitude,

Baldwin's version of self-examination was often more like a sense of complexly mutual refraction. Such mutual dynamics would be—likewise often misunderstood—keys to his later fiction.

Baldwin spent the rest of 1969 (when he directed a play, *Fortune and Men's Eyes*) and the first part of 1970 (when he made a short film, *James Baldwin from Another Place*) in Istanbul while searching for a less politically immediate and hyper-visible point of view on the world, himself, and his work. In the summer of 1970, he went back to France, pushed by pressures of fame in Istanbul and plagued by a persistent health crisis. Worried friends in France sent him south to heal. He was sent to Saint-Paul de Vence, where his friend Mary Painter and her husband had enjoyed a vacation. He arrived at a hotel called Le Hameau, a few kilometers up the mountain from Nice. The whitewashed hotel sprawls along thickly vegetated paths up the mountainside from the road, the Mediterranean visible in the distance below. From there, describing himself in a letter to David as an unwilling and ill-equipped recluse in yet another hideout, yet one visited nonetheless by curious wannabe artists from the village up the hill, Baldwin began to retrace the steps of his radicalization on paper.<sup>14</sup> After six weeks friends came to visit and, alarmed by the hotel bills, looked for an alternate residence. There was a studio for rent across the street. They helped install Baldwin there, at 6 route de la Colle. Baldwin told his brother that the apartment was cheaper than the hotel, which was good, but it also left him more exposed than before to the artistic—and clearly sexual—longings of the fledgling artists in the area. He would live in that same house—that he would eventually buy—until his death on December 1, 1987. Because of the time difference, when he died it was still November 30 for family and friends in New York.

Hakim Jamal rode other currents away from his afternoon speaking with Baldwin. He founded the Malcolm X Foundation and an affiliated Montessori school at 430 E. Compton Boulevard. Married and with children, Jamal's charisma and the radical fashion of the era endeared him to Hollywood celebrities, most notably Jean Seberg. Jamal and Seberg met on a flight in October 1968. An affair ensued, while Seberg donated money to the foundation and to the school. Owing to her support of Jamal's endeavors, Seberg was targeted by US government surveillance and hounded by public scrutiny in France in ways that contributed to her personal and professional demise and eventual death (ruled suicide) in Paris in 1979 at the age of forty.

Around the same time Baldwin left the US for Istanbul in July 1969, Jamal left his wife Dorothy and family in California and, supported initially by Vanessa Redgrave, traveled in Black Power-oriented circles in London. There he met Michael Abdul Malik, a.k.a. Michael X, founder of "the Black House and the Racial Adjustment Action Society."<sup>15</sup> Soon Jamal became romantically involved with Gale Benson, daughter of a British Conservative MP. In a relationship that at times became a stage for public dramas of reverse racial submission, Jamal and Benson made their way about London, then lived hand-to-mouth on the edges of Agadir, Morocco. They returned to London, where Jamal finished his memoir,

*From the Dead Level: Malcolm X and Me* (1971), which he dedicated to his estranged wife, thanking her “for making Malcolm X my cousin.”<sup>16</sup> After securing funding from a wealthy German benefactor, Herbert Girardet, Jamal attempted and failed to establish a commune in Guyana. Late in 1971, they joined up with a similar project in Trinidad led by Michael X, who had fled—supported by John Lennon, Yoko Ono, and others—back to his birthplace to escape kidnapping charges in London.

On January 2, 1972, Gale Benson—who had been renamed Halé Kimga, an anagram made from scrambled letters of Gale and Hakim—was ritualistically murdered by members of Christina Gardens, the commune led by Michael X located in a suburb of Port of Spain, Trinidad. Also killed on that day was Michael X’s cousin, a barber named Joseph Skerritt. A few weeks later, before the police discovered the crime in February, and allegedly—however implausibly—not knowing about Benson and Skerritt’s murders, Jamal returned to Boston. He was questioned in Boston but law enforcement in Trinidad didn’t pursue his involvement in the murders. He was killed in Boston on May 1, 1973, in a shooting at his apartment at 113 Townsend Street. The killing owed either to personal vendettas or political rivalries, or both.<sup>17</sup> By then, in many cases, as Baldwin had told *Cinema* about the life of “any black cat in this curious place and time,” it was hard to tell them apart.<sup>18</sup> At the close of her memoir, Diana Athill said that “Hakim’s death was as empty of meaning as his life had become.”<sup>19</sup> She thought his death followed directly from his having been “starved into a process of desperate self-invention.”<sup>20</sup>

Michael X and two other commune members were charged with the murders of Benson and Skerritt. After being found hiding in a mineshaft in Guyana and extradited to Trinidad, Michael X was convicted of Skerritt’s murder and eventually executed by hanging in the Royal Gaol in Port of Spain on May 17, 1975. No one was ever punished for the murder of Gale Benson.

For decades most of Baldwin’s writings involving activists from the Black Power era were not collected in editions of his work. Several of these pieces were first collected in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings* (2010). Absent from both *The Price of the Ticket* and the Library of America edition of *Collected Essays*, pieces such as “Black Power” (1968), “The Price May Be Too High” (1969), “Open Letter to My Sister” (1970), and “Speech for the Soledad Rally” (1971) make it clear that Baldwin was listening closely to, learning a great deal from, and also trying to guide, support, and to some extent protect activists such as Stokely Carmichael, Angela Davis, George Jackson, Huey P. Newton, and others. In *No Name in the Street* (1972), Baldwin returned to contextualize those connections. The absence of those pieces from the first major collections of Baldwin’s nonfiction suggest the extent to which such radical political affiliations were seen as ancillary—even anathema—to his literary legacy. Likewise, heretofore uncollected, Baldwin’s conversation with Hakim Jamal offers a real-time, blow-by-blow account of the complex give and take entailed in Baldwin’s engagement with Black radical figures and ideals of the era.

Los Angeles Free Press

February 23, 1968

## “A Free Press Interview with James Baldwin”

James Baldwin arrived in L.A. last week to work on the screenplay based on the autobiography of Malcolm X. The F.P. took the opportunity to interview him at his hotel. Mr. Baldwin was interviewed by Hakim Jamal, Ted Zatllyn, and Allen Zak.

*FP:* To begin with, you know that our primary problem in this country is one of white against black. I know that in Harlem you have experienced these same problems. You probably left the continental United States to escape this. Why on earth would you go to a country that is predominantly white?

*JB:* That’s a good question. I never thought of it quite that way before. I went to France in ’48. Well, it’s not so illogical when you think back, you know—I wouldn’t have gone to Africa at that time of my life because I wouldn’t have known anybody there—I would have been afraid to go to Africa in 1948, I had no connections with it. Whereas from another point of view—no matter what one thinks of this point of view, without judging it—I was trying to become a writer. And I’m a Western writer, whether or not I like that. And France is one of the literary capitals, you know. I went there mainly to get out of the United States. I had friends there. As it turned out it was very good for me, because I had to learn to think in another language. It gave me the courage to imagine that I had the right to speak. It’s difficult to explain that, but you know, being born in America—in Harlem, where I was—and trying to become a writer in those years—I was a freak. I developed a complex about it—an inferiority complex, if you will, much deeper than I knew.

*FP:* I can’t imagine you with an inferiority complex. Tell me this—did you find more sincere white folks outside the United States, or are they all the same no matter where you go?

*JB:* I tell you the truth—when I split the scene 20 years ago I didn’t care if I ever saw another white face or, for that matter, another black face. I just wanted to be left alone. I had been beaten over the head too long. I wanted to get out, and I didn’t want to talk to anybody. The people I saw in Paris, I saw from a great distance for a very long time. They left me alone and I left them alone, which was exactly how I wanted it.

Now later on, I got to know some Frenchmen, some Algerians, some Africans—a spectrum. And some of them were marvelous, and some of them were not. The most revelatory time of my life when I was living in Paris was the beginning and the duration of the French-Algerian war.

*FP:* Have you escaped from the ghetto in the United States?

*JB:* No black man ever has, no black man ever will. In a sense, as long as people are in the ghetto I don’t want to escape from it. Where would I go? The price of escaping from the ghetto and remaining in America is prohibitive—you’ve

got to become what? Some artificial creation who can speak neither to white or black.

*FP:* I asked that because we're in the Beverly Hills Hotel, where if there's five black people in the whole hotel, it's a miracle—the janitors are all white, the chambermaids are even all white, and you're in what would be considered a bourgeoisie state right now.

*JB:* I'm a very bourgeoisie type.

*FP:* I can dig it.—Do you write out of anger, or is that merely a style that happens to be popular?

*JB:* Well, I'm very angry, surely—and I don't know—other people can talk about my style, I can't. I don't know what my style is, if you see what I mean.

*FP:* Are you an iconoclast? In "The Amen Corner," you ripped at Christianity;—in "Blues for Mr. Charlie," you ripped at white folks in general, and the acceptance by black people even of death by white people. Do you like to tear down establishments, or do you like to build new ones that are more palatable by people?

*JB:* I think probably I like to do the two things at once. I would think that nowhere in the world is it more difficult than here—where the establishment is so totally oppressive. It's also that it's so amorphous. If I were an Algerian writer, say, and I lived in Algeria, my relations with the French would be very, very clear, and my relations with the Algerians would be even clearer than my relationship to anybody here. And that's because the way the thing works in this country is that it's not a question of driving out an invader. We have not been colonized in the way that the West Indians or the Africans have been colonized. It has happened here on the mainland to all of us and it's mainly happened not only in the visible things like the way we live, the jobs we get and what happens to us and their brothers; also, it happens in the mind. And that's a harder thing to lick. It's a white country, or we think it's a white country—which is built, really, on slavery and genocide—those are the principles on which this country is built—and we, the victims, are also schizophrenic. It can scarcely be blamed on a Negro child, you know—you're born into a context which is all white—in which the values are all white—by the time you're fifteen you're at war with them, and you don't know how to fight it because those values are also in you. And you have to divest yourself of those and find another standard. But that is very hard to do.

*FP:* You're in Hollywood now to do a picture on Malcolm X, or do you want to talk about that?

*JB:* I knew Malcolm.

*FP:* Did you know him well?

*JB:* I don't know if I knew him well; we loved each other. We were very good friends.

*FP:* I know that.

*JB:* It's difficult, because now he's dead. If you had asked me when he was alive if I knew him well, I probably would have said yes. When a man is dead, you

wonder how well you knew him, no matter how well you loved him. There was so much more in Malcolm than Malcolm knew to tell. There was so much more in him than he lived ever to express.

*FP:* Did he hate white people?

*JB:* No. Malcolm was, first of all, far too proud to hate anybody—and he understood something about this country and our dilemma here which carried him past that. You said in the beginning that our problem is white against black—but I think in fact that our problem is much deeper than that. In the first place, I'm not sure that any white man in this country is really able to prove that he's white. That's a myth. And Negro is a legal term. That's another myth, really. The trouble in this country is that brothers are tearing each other to pieces, and have been doing so for generations. The problem in this country is that they have never decided what they are; in a sense it can be said that no white man in this country ever left Europe—that's why you still have St. Patrick's Day. It's a country which is frequented by racism, which is built on guilt and panic. Everybody knows, really, what happened to the Indians. Everybody lies about it, but everybody knows. And everybody knows what happens to black men in this country. Everybody lies about it, but everybody knows. And what the American effort is, and has always been, is to hide this away; they don't want to see it. That's why Negroes can't live in your neighborhood; that's why Negroes can't do this and do that; that's why Negroes are all rapists. That's why Negroes all want to marry white women. All you have to do is examine the myths white people have created about Negroes and you'll understand what happened. Every single taboo, every single prohibition is a confession. It's a confession of guilt. And until the people of this country are able to get over that, there's very little hope for any of us. In a sense, they are liars, and the truth is not in them.

*FP:* Malcolm said that, and he was said to be teaching hate. Now you say it and it becomes literary. What's the difference?

*JB:* You can put any kind of label on it, it doesn't matter.

*FP:* I remember when Malcolm referred to you as a great freedom fighter. Do you see yourself as a great freedom fighter?

*JB:* No—I'm one of the people in the trap. And I know it. I'm determined to live, if I can, but I can't live without the rest of you. And I won't.

*FP:* Eartha Kitt made a statement to Lady Bird Johnson. Now Eartha and you are friends and what I want to know is—Eartha making this statement is big news because it's not her type [of] statement; but people would expect you to make it.

*JB:* I wasn't invited to the White House in the first place.

*FP:* Based on the fact that you're always honest, is this an indication that Eartha and Eartha's type—non-militant or whatever the case may be—are they becoming honest because of the truth catching up with them, are they changing—or are the militants dropping back?

*JB:* I think it's very hard to know what's going on in someone else's mind or heart. Eartha's a kid who paid some heavy dues—she plays her thing and is

good at it—she's also a mother, though, she's a woman. She's by no means stupid and far from blind. And she's not a liar. So in a sense what she said was inevitable. If the moment ever came, she would have to react that way. It's true of millions of us. That's why Bobby Kennedy is still shattered by Lena Horne's performance in front of him. He thought she was the black Joan Crawford. She knew who she was.

*FP:* Do you think that this stand, taken by people of this kind is an improvement of them or do you think that it's just a statement based on a particular subject?

*JB:* I think it's what any Negro in this country really feels. Most people don't say it, and most people don't have an opportunity to say it. But we know what it's like to get through a single day here. Whether you're a janitor, or me.

*FP:* It's been rumored that the Organization of Afro-American Unity in California—I'm sure you're familiar with it, Malcolm X started it—is going to establish a Malcolm X Foundation. It'll be attacked as a hate thing, but your name was mentioned in respect to it. Would you participate in it, along with Malcolm's widow, or would you tend to disclaim it as others have done?

*JB:* You're joking. You're joking. Of course—he was my friend. Why would I disclaim it?

*FP:* Because of the fact that the leader of it, who happens to be Hakim Jamal, is admittedly a dope addict.

*JB:* Some of my best friends are dope addicts.

*FP:* This doesn't cause you any consternation?

*JB:* Why should it?

*FP:* Well, a junkie isn't referred to by most cloistered artists as a friend.

*JB:* Have you heard some of the things people have called me?

*FP:* Other than homosexual? Are you a homosexual?

*JB:* No, I'm bisexual. Whatever that means.

*FP:* Good, no, I know, because that's what they say, anyway.

*JB:* I don't give a shit what people say.

*FP:* You made a remark about the Beat Generation. I can't remember the exact quote, I think it was something to effect that when you were six years old you were beat, and any black person living in the ghetto knew he was beat—he didn't have to go to school and get out of college and run away to become beat. I was wondering if you had that same view now?

*JB:* I'm afraid that I must say that I never paid much attention to the Beat Generation. It never struck me as very interesting or very relevant to me—I'd seen those kids before and it didn't matter what they were doing, because presently they would go home and take over the family business. And that's what they really do, unless they're hung up on junk, or something, or unless they do grow up, which is extremely difficult to do in this country. This is another symptom of Western despair. It shows me how little people care about their children.

*FP:* Then aside from the fact that when you were writing in Paris, you were writing at the same period as the Beats, you don't consider yourself to be a Beat writer?

*JB:* Oh, Lord, no. Why would I? A Negro who manages to grow up at all is much older than his age.

*FP:* How do you view the hippie scene?

*JB:* Again, it shows me how unable people are to love their children. That's what's wrong with those kids. They just want someone to pay attention to them, and I can't blame them. Their mothers and fathers thought it was more important to become something else rather than to raise their children.

*FP:* Rap Brown made the statement that he thought the hippie movement—the hippie scene— was politically irrelevant.

*JB:* Well, it is politically irrelevant—but so, in this country, is politics.

*FP:* Evidently not so to Rap Brown.

*JB:* Politics? What do you mean by that?

*FP:* If he finds the hippies politically irrelevant, then he must find other forces that are relevant in this country.

*JB:* Well, Rap and I are very different people. I'm much older than Rap, and Rap may know a lot that I don't know—but the political institutions of this country, as we see them now, are visibly unresponsive, let's just say that, to the real needs of what we have to call the American community. It does strike me as occurring mainly in a vacuum. And it'll be a long time before that changes. You know, the most stunning collection of mediocrities is in Washington. God knows how they got there. And I don't know what they're doing there. They could not be more dangerous, but they're also ignorant. And they think they're voting for the housewife in Des Moines or—I don't know what the fuck they think they're doing.

In the meantime, the whole country's gone to pieces and the whole world's in flames. We've gotten, at last, the politicians we deserve. We can't face that, you know, and we're going to change it. But what right Governor Reagan has to be Governor of a state, or what right Sen. Eastland has to be in any position of power at all, or Gov. Wallace, or any of those people ... it's hard to take people seriously.

*FP:* And Johnson?

*JB:* He's just folks. That's the way we like our politicians to be.

*FP:* I have another question, about LeRoi Jones. We ran an article last week. The tenor of the article had a lot to do with the anti-Semitic hysteria that took place at the meeting.

*JB:* You mean the ...

*FP:* The one that took place in L.A. last week.

*JB:* Which I've hardly heard about. I can't make any comments about it, since I wasn't there and I've just come back into the country.

*FP:* Could you comment generally on ghetto anti-Semitism?

*JB:* It strikes me as a kind of flourish on the part of responsible people, indefensible—because I don't see what's to be gained at this late hour by teaching people to hate Jews, who have absolutely nothing to do with it. They're in a trap, too, if you got all the Jewish merchants out of the ghetto tomorrow, you

would still have General Motors, which is not a Jewish organization. It just seems to me to muddy the waters—to confuse the issue. Why attack Shylock? It's the Christians' fault. It's not a Jewish country, it's a Christian country. The crimes here are not committed in the name of Jehovah; they're committed in the name of Jesus Christ. It's a waste of time going round shooting Jews or hating Jews.

*FP:* I can understand the origin of the feeling, but ...

*JB:* I can understand the origin of the feeling too but what I'm saying is that I, if I'm in a responsible position, have no right to use the Jew that way.

*FP:* It seems like a European hangover.

*JB:* The whole country is a European hangover.

*FP:* The anti-Semitism is a European thing, though.

*JB:* It's a reflection of the role the Jew has always played in the Christian culture. He's always been the middleman—he's always been the usurer. He's done the Christians' dirty work. That's what he's doing in the ghetto.

*FP:* How long do you think there'll be an open revolt in this country?

*JB:* Well, from a certain point of view you're asking me to look in a crystal ball, and I don't have one. From one point of view, there is an open revolt in this country now. It's a very curious country, and it's long going to learn how to contain revolts. What is dangerous—what complicates the situation terribly—is that the only allies in the event of what you call an open revolt—the only allies the American Negro would have, are very far away and powerless. If there were a revolt for example, among the Irish, well, there is a nation called Ireland. It's not entirely powerless even though it's tied to England. But no one's going to my aid, because nobody can.

*FP:* Do you see the possibility of a revolt being primarily of race against race, or class against class?

*JB:* This country doesn't yet believe in class. Poor white labor still thinks he's white.

*FP:* During the Detroit riots, the looting was integrated.

*JB:* Oh, we've always known the white people are poor too. It's one thing for the looting to be integrated, it's another thing for the neighborhood to be integrated.

*FP:* Is there any hope?

*JB:* There has to be, as long as we've got breath.

*FP:* What do you think will happen if the war is escalated, as far as our domestic situation is concerned?

*JB:* Frankly, you know, I cop out. I don't want to think about it. I don't know what will happen. I can't imagine the domestic situation could get any worse, but it will.

*FP:* Mr. Baldwin, I have yet to see a Hollywood movie that was not a cop-out when it dealt with the black situation, or for that matter, in almost any situation. Now, what weapons are you carrying with you when you meet these people and when you sit down to write this script? Do you have guarantees that what you say is going to be filmed as you say it?

*JB:* I'm armed with one thing only—I don't care. We'll do my movie or we'll do no movie. I do lots of other things.

*FP:* I understand that there are two companies bidding. Do you have a contract that guarantees no re-writes without your permission?

*JB:* Yes, and I do the editing.

*FP:* When "The Confessions of Nat Turner" by William Styron was published, you were quoted as having a favorable opinion of it. Since then there have been many criticisms—one carried in the FP, claiming the book was historically inaccurate. Have you had any occasion to review your opinion of the book?

*JB:* What you're really asking is, did Styron do this in bad faith?

*FP:* Yes.

*JB:* That's what you're asking. And it's a very different question to answer, though I know the man ... I can say that ... No, I don't think he was doing it in bad faith. But that doesn't answer your question. You take a historical event ... any historical event. The novelist takes it and does what he likes with it. He's not writing history, he's trying to interpret it. You may disagree with his interpretation. But if I say he has no right to take this subject or take this event and do what he likes with it, I'm saying that about a whole lot of novelists—from Charles Dickens down to myself. That's a prohibition that no novelist can work under. Now, the most subtle question is—you're asking what is the effect of this, and what is it really saying. I think what it is really saying—this is its importance for me—is how frightened white Americans have always been of black people. And to what extent the whole race situation in this country is tied up with sex and the whole Old Testament syndrome, Puritan syndrome, which afflicts every single one of us until today. In that sense you could hardly expect William Styron to produce anything but what he did produce. He's not, after all, a black militant, the reality of Nat Turner would exist in his consciousness in a very different way than it would in mine, and I might do an interpretation of Nat Turner which you would find equally reprehensible for very different reasons. You see what I mean? I think the value of the book lies precisely with the poetry of a certain kind of panic. It's a panic the white people had about Negroes and still do have. And I'm saying that it doesn't really matter whether or not this Nat Turner in Bill's book was the real Nat Turner, because no one knows who the real Nat Turner was. Whoever's going to write about it will have to create it, have to invent it. He's contributed to an anatomization, almost, of a certain American myth. You see what I mean?

*FP:* I understand your point, but I'll still argue with it.

*JB:* I'm not asking you to accept it.

*FP:* Were you surprised ... on Malcolm X's record "The Message to the Grass Roots," when Malcolm was delivering a lecture, and when your name came up right in the middle of the record, in very favorable composition ...

*JB:* Yes, I was very surprised [he ever] said that ... I was very happy, and I was very surprised.

- FP:* Did you—were you fully aware that they wouldn't let you read your own speech and they got Burt Lancaster to read your speech?
- JB:* Yes, I was aware of this, and I was up tight, because when I got there John Lewis was on the griddle and John was fighting for his speech. I thought that what John had to do was much more important than what I had to do, so I cooled it ... so at least John could talk. If I'd started fighting, it would have been a mess too. So that's what happened.
- FP:* This is 1968, four years subsequent to the march on Washington, do you think marches on Washington are of any value?
- JB:* Four years ago. It seems like a thousand years ago. And all of us four years ago hoped—that we could prevent what has come. But we couldn't. We tried, we failed.
- FP:* If you were given an opportunity to deliver the same speech today—
- JB:* None of us could deliver the same speech today.
- FP:* Very true, Malcolm seemed to think that if you had read it, it would have been a beautiful presentation to a people who needed it at the time, white and black.
- JB:* Looking back on it now, maybe I made a mistake and I should have fought to speak. I never thought of myself as a speaker, particularly.
- FP:* Well, Malcolm X certainly did. If he were alive right now—and all of his predictions are certainly coming true—Where exactly do you think he would be right now? Everybody says he was going socialist, he was turning away from hatred, he was becoming pro-white—now, you knew him, Malcolm certainly respected you, because he told me he did.
- JB:* I think our situation would be incomparably better than it is if Malcolm were alive, because what the people need—Malcolm was the only person who had that. He understood the people in the streets. They trusted him. And he had something very rare—he had a tremendous clarity of the way society works, and what pressures can be brought to bear on it, and what, when, where, and how. What has happened now is that the ferment is there, but no one has appeared yet to tell us what is happening.

This is what is indispensable. That absence is what makes our situation so dangerous. What directions would Malcolm have taken? I've only got to watch the way I myself have been driven by the pressure of events. You're forced to examine your own indignation, you're forced to find out exactly what it means and to what use can it be put. Frailty, when it's forced to consider this situation whether or not one likes it—one has finally got to see that part of the trouble involves the economic arrangements of the world, by which I mean of course the Western world, and when you say that you're speaking about the capitalist system—the sacred cow.

And the moment that you mention the capitalist system you're immediately called a Communist, and God knows what that is. What it comes to is that the economic arrangements of the Western world are obsolete. They have to be revised. Either the West will revise them, or the West will perish.

I mean that, and I know that as well as I'm sitting in this chair. The vital interests of the West have to involve the slavery of millions of people. The vital interests of the West depend on materials taken from other countries, by other people, for the West to exist.

Now, the people in Johannesburg, South Africa are not forever going to go down into those mines, dig up all that wealth, and give it away. That is simply not going to go on forever. No one knows, because we've become so slothful, how to begin these rearrangements, because they're all tied up with Christianity and with race. This is what has to be done. And the sooner one faces it, the better. But in this country, I suppose people think that mink coats grow. And automobiles are an act of God. But they're all built out of stolen tin.

The American myth ... you have ... an American male who is capable of having two warring thoughts at the same time is suspect. John Wayne is the ideal. He's a straight shooter. A simple straightforward guy; you can trust him. Only trouble is, he's brainless.

*FP:* Yet it's true that most Americans live with contradictions.

*JB:* Yes, but they lie about them. It's the loneliest country in the world because everyone is saying to his neighbor exactly what he thinks his neighbor wants him to say. Then they have violent breakdowns all of a sudden, and they murder their children or their wives and everybody wonders why. They've been carrying this thing around with them all the time and suddenly it blows up. People are not what they say they are. People are much more complex than that. They're much better than that. If you think that's what people are, then you get Washington. Then you get that cretin in the White House. What is his virtue if it's not that he's straightforward, hard-hitting, simple-minded, patriotic, our American boys, and all that bullshit? And the world is big; there are millions of people in the world. They haven't got to live like us. We will have to learn from them. But we put him there. That's the national ideal; we've got no one to blame but ourselves.

*FP:* Speaking of Johnson and his rise to power, there's been a lot of speculation that in 1963 a coup took place—that the government was replaced forcibly with the assassination of Kennedy. Do you have any comments about that?

*JB:* Something happened ... you know ... and not being qualified to go into all that, one gets back to what must have happened and who benefitted. Certainly the Cubans didn't. Certainly the American people didn't. It's a great question of who is ruling this country, now, no matter what happened in 1963, I wonder—I know—I'm not very old, but I've spent most of my life in this country and I've never seen a government—an administration—so totally unresponsive to the will of the people it is supposed to serve. All it needs to make sure the war is escalated is to protest against it.

*FP:* That's absolutely true. With every protest, the escalation has gotten worse.

*JB:* It's precisely as though—I don't know what we're paying our taxes for ... I don't know who those people are in Washington ... and they don't know

who we are out here. It's a very frightening spectacle. And now you can no longer in any way influence your government. We all know, after all, that not only the people in the streets protesting the war are against it; it is certainly the most unpopular war this country has ever had; everyone knows that it's indefensible; and everyone knows that it cannot be won. Now what are we doing?

*FP:* Yet as incredible as that is, yesterday the paper printed a poll—if you can trust a poll—that stated that 61 percent of the American people have taken a hawkish position on the war and want it escalated.

*JB:* That's obviously an American panic, and anyway, I don't trust polls. A lot of people who are against the war would be afraid to say so, especially to a poll-taker.

## Notes

- 1 Judson Jeffries (ed.), *Black Power in the Belly of the Beast* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2006), p. 74.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- 4 James Baldwin, letter to David Baldwin, February 27, 1968.
- 5 Hakim Jamal, Allen Zak, and Ted Zatlun, "Free Press Interviews James Baldwin," *Los Angeles Free Press* (February 23–29, 1968), p. 3; the rest of the citations in running text are from this same source, and to ease readability have either been indicated as such explicitly or have been marked in the text with questions as "FP," and Baldwin's answers as "JB."
- 6 James Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes" (1955), in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), p. 9.
- 7 James Baldwin, *The Last Interview and Other Conversations* (New York, Melville House, 2014), p. 104.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 James Baldwin, "Anti-Semitism and Black Power," *Freedomways* (first quarter, 1967), 77.
- 10 James Baldwin, letter to David Baldwin, October 2, 1967.
- 11 A clip of Lancaster delivering this speech is available online at [www.criticalpast.com/video/65675029518\\_Burt-Lancaster\\_Lincoln-Memorial\\_Black-Americans\\_Statue-of-Abraham-Lincoln](http://www.criticalpast.com/video/65675029518_Burt-Lancaster_Lincoln-Memorial_Black-Americans_Statue-of-Abraham-Lincoln) (accessed June 1, 2022).
- 12 James Baldwin, "Black Muslims vs. the Sit-ins," with Laverne McCummings and Malcolm X, WBAI Radio, New York, April 25, 1961, BB5322, Pacifica Radio Archives (author's transcription).
- 13 James Baldwin, qtd. in Engin Cezzar, *Dost Mektupları* (Istanbul, Yapi Kredi, 2007), p. 133.
- 14 James Baldwin, letter to David Baldwin, December 7, 1970.
- 15 Patrick French, "Introduction," in Diana Athill, *Make Believe: A True Story* (London, Granta, 1993), p. xii.
- 16 Hakim Jamal, *From the Dead Level: Malcolm X and Me* (London, André Deutsch, 1971), dedication page.
- 17 Information about Hakim Jamal's early life can be found in his 1971 memoir, *From the Dead Level*.

- 18 James Baldwin, "I Can't Blow This Gig: Interview by G. Nagata," *Cinema* (summer, 1968), 3.  
 19 Athill, *Make Believe*, pp. 134–5.  
 20 *Ibid.*

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