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THE WITNESS AS ACTIVIST: JAMES BALDWIN AND THE CONGRESS OF RACIAL EQUALITY (CORE) IN 1963

# A Conversation with James Baldwin, May 7, 1963

*Elsa Knight Thompson and John Leonard*

## Abstract

This conversation was first broadcast on KPFA (Berkeley, CA) on June 6, 1963. Original transcription available online: https://americanarchive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip-28-8s4jm23q52. The transcription below has been lightly edited for clarity and prepared by Ed Pavlić and Justin A. Joyce. Vocal emphasis has been captured with italics. Significant pauses, interruptions, or non-word interjections have been captured in editorial brackets.

**Keywords:** writing, America, metaphor, oppression, guilt, nonviolence, revolution

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**EKT:** I'm going to begin by asking you if I have understood you correctly. When I read the thing in *The New Yorker*, which is the most recent thing of yours that I have read and therefore it's the most fresh in my mind, I had the feeling that you were speaking not really about the race issue but about the human issue and that you were speaking for people who are able to *be* aware of the agony and the beauty and the terror and the nobility of humankind. Because it doesn't seem to me that you're saying that this is a race problem, because the Germans did it to the Jews, Batista did it to the Cubans, there's three million people who are called outcasts in Japan—no racial differentiation at all. So it seemed to me that although a great deal of what you were saying pivoted around the race issue in this country that that is not the *essence* of the thing that you're conveying.

**JB:** Well, I don't, in the first place… I don't… I never have, really, I don't believe in race. What I was trying to do was precisely to use the greatest metaphor we have in this country. I mean, the central trouble in this country. I was trying to destroy… Let me put it this way: The vocabulary in which one talks about what we call the Negro problem or the race problem. It has been used *always* in my experience to obscure a fact so simple that it's banal: That you are here beneath that sky and this earth, like I am. And what your obligation is in the short time one is alive is my obligation too. And that *no one*, you can't and I can't, for whatever reason, make oneself *less* than a human being. And whoever thinks he really hates somebody else—on any level, from the most private to the most public—it's a confession you're making about yourself. When the whole population does it, it turns into a disaster like Germany. And this could happen to us.

**EKT:** And you are involved very deeply in trying to convey that message. I think that the next questions had best come from our director of literature and drama as to how you go about this.

**JL:** What I'd like most to find out is how you feel. I know your statement that's so widely quoted, "that you want to be a honest man and a good writer." Do you feel satisfied with the kind of reaction you're getting as a writer now, not as a moralist? When, for instance, you pick up the issue of *Commentary* and see that Norman Podhoretz has been moved to make this kind of confession.[1] Do you feel that, you know, that you've really made contact here? Do you feel satisfied with yourself as a writer, individually?

**JB:** No. That has nothing whatever to do with Norman's piece, by the way, which is a tremendous achievement, I think, not only for Norman but for all of us in a way. It would be nice to think that more people, more white people, were able to say what in fact all white people know, that they are … and what we all really know: that whatever you were once afraid of you always will be afraid of, and part of the terror of living and part of the triumph of it too is learning to live with what frightens you. The American trouble is that what frightens Americans they've never learned to live with. That's the real crisis which we now call racial, I think.

But speaking as a writer, it's impossible to … um … Norman, first of all, is a friend of mine; I've known Norman a long time. We've talked about this for years and I can't assume that because I *wrote* … Norman, in a way, would have come to it anyway. There's something terrible about being a writer because one would like to think that you're making an effect. But, in fact, in the generality one's got to be aware that the impact you're making if you're making an impact has probably very little to do with the fact that you are writing. The fact that I'm a writer, is, in this context, somewhat less relevant than the fact that Americans are now, for the first time, *really* scared about what they insist on calling their racial situation. I am not writing about the racial situation, really, but … and I'm not trying to cop out; I don't mean that, um, I don't mean that the way it may sound; I don't mean that I'm trying *not* to write about the racial situation. But I do mean what I said before, that I'm trying to destroy the rhetoric which, in effect, operates to obscure your humanity and mine.

**JL:** Then do you feel that the kind of popularity that has happened, the situation that you have now of these lecture tours, the tremendous audience up at the University of California, that the people have been moving toward this kind of consciousness and you've just come to symbolize it in your writing? You don't take any personal satisfaction from having expressed it as eloquently as you have?

**JB:** Oh, I take a great deal of personal satisfaction—"personal satisfaction" is not quite the word. Um… When I was writing *The Fire Next Time,* I was sure I'd never achieve it. When you're doing, when you're working, you're always scared. And when it's over, when you realized that you've not done quite what you wanted to do, but you've done the very best you could, well, you have that. If that's satisfaction, you have that: at least you didn't cheat. It may be, on the other hand, a failure. And it will surely be, in one way or another, entirely misjudged—for good reasons or for bad. And furthermore, you who wrote it will never be able to read it. When it's over all you can do is try to come closer to what you were after in some other piece of work. So, that, the satisfaction you get is when you're done, when it's over. And it takes about five minutes before *that* satisfaction ends…

**JL:** [interrupting] and you get on to the next piece.

**JB:** [laughing] yeah.

**EKT:** Did you have any other questions, John? I think you did?

**JL:** I have a couple. I noticed up at the university today, you pointed out that the tactic of nonviolence appeared to have failed in Birmingham.[2] Do you think therefore that these people should stop? I noticed, for instance, Jackie Robinson is now going down to Birmingham—this was on the news—and he is going to lead a demonstration. And Dick Gregory already has. And it appears not to have worked; I guess it only *can* work when the authorities are willing to…

**JB:** [interrupting] There is something very valuable about being a writer. In the sense that it teaches you … it's a discipline which teaches you patience.

I don't mean this, you know, in any corny way. I mean that, in order to do anything at all one's got to be aware that you cannot see the effects. It is not a two and two that make four. Or it may be a two and two that make four but you will not, perhaps, live to see the sum, and that is not important. I think that what is happening in Birmingham will either prove to be, when historians look back on it, the end of that endeavor called America or the beginning of it. It had to come to this.

The strategy of nonviolence was, and is, a strategy which is based, really, on the American Negro heritage. It is not a matter of Negroes having been or being capable of being passive. It's a matter, again, of knowing something about patience which most white Americans don't know. Now insofar as that strategy can be said to have "failed," one would have to revise the strategy. But from another point of view, I'm not at all certain that strategy has failed, because if it had failed I don't think the situation in Birmingham would now *be* at such a terrible point. It's been pushed to that point by the energy and the passion of a handful of people in Birmingham and all of whom knew that it had to get to this point before we can hope to get past it. So it's a question whether or not it's failed.

**EKT:** Well I would think it was a big question: is it not apt to occur in other places?

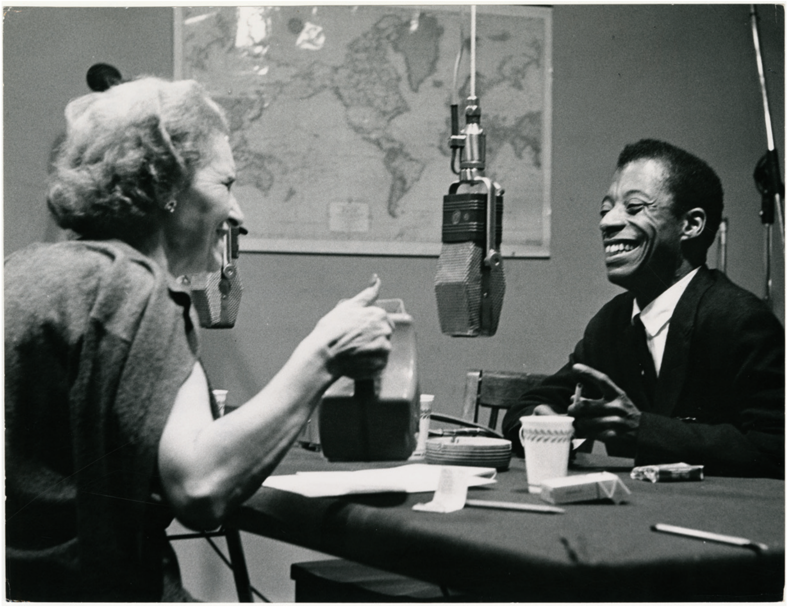

**Figure 1** Elsa Knight Thompson and James Baldwin, KPFA interview, May 7, 1963. Image courtesy of Phiz Mezey Photographs and Papers, San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library

**JB:** Ah [with tested patience in his voice]. The question there is not whether or not … it's not about nonviolence. The question *there* is about the rest of the Republic. After all, it is not *merely* the Negro problem and the country's not going, after all, to be saved by a handful of children the country has always been very proud of but has never taken any responsibility for. The crisis in Birmingham forces you, all of us, to be responsible for those children. That's what that comes to. It is really up to the Republic whether or not we fail. And this "we" is not a Black we or a white we; we will either learn to live together here, or we will not learn to live *at all*.

**EKT:** And do you think that this can be permanently based in any effective sense on the operation of fear? Because, certainly, fear and power are operating very heavily in the situation *now*. It is a question of power pitted against power; in a way even nonviolence itself as practiced in the South is a question of tactic. It can't become a healthy outcome as long as it's at that stage.

**JB:** Well, depends on which fear you mean. What we are really living through is nothing more or less than a revolution. The people who hold the power, *never give it away*. The power that one is trying—and I think, from a certain point of view, this may be happening for the first time in the history the world. One is trying to achieve a bloodless revolution, a *moral* revolution. And in our situation we have no choice. The fear that you're talking of is a white man's fear. Not only of losing his power and what he thinks of as his safety, but his very identity. And what is crucial here is that he doesn't realize, that in this terrible struggle that he has waged *himself* to keep the Negro, as we put it quaintly, "in his place." He's destroyed his own identity. Any Negro alive in this country, no matter who he is, I mean from a narcotics addict—from the lowest of the low—even to the most hypocritical of the most hypocritical, knows more about who he is than his white counterpart does. Because the conditions imposed by the American public on the Negro have made it necessary, imperative, that he not fool himself about *that*. He may be destroyed by it, but that's not the same thing. I was born knowing, having to know, by the time I was five, that life was going to be hard and that I was going to die. White Americans discover this when they're about 30 and then they go to a psychiatrist.

**JL:** Do you think that the feeling that this is so makes a man like, say, Norman Mailer jealous in some way and gives birth to this idea of the hipster who's going to live like the Negro and is going to find out the things that he senses the Negroes know and then, uh…

**JB:** [interrupting] Yes; leaving Norman for the moment out of it. It's like watching people who decided that they are going to … what? Learn how, as they put it, "to swing." And oh somebody who's going to learn what you know but he's not going to pay the dues…

**JL:** Yeah…

**JB:** He thinks it's on the surface. It comes from beneath. He thinks it's something he can pick up and learn and carry, and it is something *you* do because if you didn't you'd be dead.

**JL:** Yeah…

**JB:** I was beat long before the Beat generation ever was *heard* of or thought of. When I was 10 years old, we said in Harlem when one's father came down the street having just been fired again—when I was 10 it was 1934—"He was beat to his socks." That's what "beat" means. Now these cats who have discovered this vocabulary *twenty years* later don't know what they are talking about. I was "hep" long before people were "hip." And it only meant that you had to take on the world and *survive* it. If it doesn't mean that, it doesn't mean anything. And I resent… I resent the assumption that you can *achieve* an experience without undergoing it.

**JL:** Yeah, what do you think of their writing? Of guys like Kerouac? Does it miss the point entirely? Is it, is it…

**JB:** [interrupting] It's *not* writing. It is self-indulgence. It is masturbation. It is not writing. I hate to say that, but it is true. I mean he's talented. So is everybody at the age of five.

**JL:** What about Mailer?

**JB:** Norman is something else again. Norman is… Norman's more than talented. Norman could become, could have become anyway, a fantastic writer. I don't think he… I don't know. Norman… I hate to talk about Norman. Let me put it another way. There's a moment in any novelist's life, any artist's life, when you've done some things and you can't do any more. And every novelist knows—this is a very private thing and there's nothing, there's no way I can translate it to you—but there's a crucial moment when you can either keep on doing what you've done, *or*, you can make a leap which looks like death into things you have never done before and which you're not sure that you can do. It's an either or. If you don't try to do things that you have never done before you can survive on your reputation for the rest of your life. But you have effectively stopped writing. And no one in the world may know it but you. But you know it. And anyone who is trying to write also knows it. And this can destroy you.

**JL:** How do you feel about the critical reaction to you, for instance, your last novel, *Another Country*? It was a good deal more restrained than it's been to the books of essays, to *The Fire Next Time*, to…

**JB:** [interrupting] I like your use of the word "restrained."

**JL:** [nervous laughter] Does this really bother you? I mean, do you consider your fiction to be the real flesh of this, of your work?

**JB:** Yes, I'm a novelist. I think, essentially, it's probably much easier to read my essays. Essays are easy to read in any case; not necessarily easier to write. I think a novel… Yes, I will confess, it was my first novel in six years and I was very scared. And it's true the first week of reviews, the advance reviews, were ghastly and it was very demoralizing.

**JL:** Can you account for this kind of viciousness that came into these?

**JB:** Well, I think if the novel did anything, and not meaning at all to discuss, it's not a question of whether it was a good or a bad novel because, in any way, I would never know; it was the best novel I could do. But I think that it is one thing for most of my readers, let me say, you know to *deal* with… It would be very hard to, for example, to attack *Nobody Knows My Name*. Because if you did that then you would put yourself in the camp of the bigots and the enemy. You know, it is not fashionable to be *a racist*. But on the other hand, it is not *easy* to be a person, and if one … if I attack you as a liberal, let us say, on a private, personal, sexual, emotional level then I suppose you'll react the way reviewers did react: as though I had committed a personal affront, as though I wrote the book only to make you angry. But I concluded, finally, you know, to save my *life* that I put down … that there was nothing in it that I couldn't, that I can't, vouch for. And all those people in it are people we see around us every day—all of us—all of us. And if they got angry then I suppose that I drew blood. It is one thing to treat me, you know, to feel about me that I'm a Negro and to deal with me that way and quite another thing for me to become a personal threat to you. And, of course, *if* any liberal means what he says then he's got to move to a place where I am a personal threat to him before he can get past it. He's got to ask himself *why* I'm a personal threat.

**JL:** Is there a chance for a guy like Vivaldo? I mean you leave him hanging there at the end.

**JB:** That's where we are. Aren't we?

**JL:** Yeah…

**JB:** They did break through to each other at least one time.

**JL:** Yeah…

**JB:** If she told him the truth and he managed to hear it. And I think that was very optimistic of me. [You can palpably *hear* Baldwin smile at this point, and it's followed by nervous laughter on all sides.]

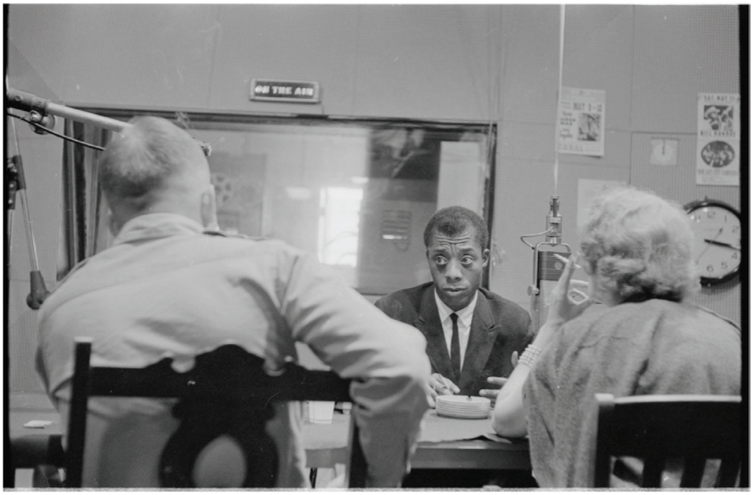

**Figure 2** John Leonard (left), James Baldwin, and Elsa Knight Thompson, KPFA interview, May 7, 1963. Image courtesy of Phiz Mezey Photographs and Papers, San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library

**JL:** [clears his throat, attempts to shift the conversation] Grim. [resigned laughter]

**EKT:** Very grim.

**JB:** It's not meant to be grim. My assumption is that if you can face it, then you can probably bear it. And if you can bear it, then you can change it. If you *lie* about it, that's the end.

**JL:** Yeah…

**EKT:** But even on the basis of, um, sensitivity you make a certain amount of racial differentiation. Now it's perfectly obvious that any minority which is subjected to intolerable pressure, you're going to get a high percentage of abnormal result because the pressure just simply does it. But surely, again, this also doesn't divide, necessarily, on racial grounds; not all Negroes are anything and not all white people are anything in particular, you see? If, in fact, the undue pressure and horror of what has happened to the Negro had made all of them as aware as you are, it would have indeed been a very strange result of oppression. In other words, beyond this suffering and this fear there is this level of awareness and of compassion, and so on, which it doesn't seem to me is arrived at, necessarily, on any *given* basis.

**JB:** No. I'll tell you something very strange about oppression. I have a very simple metaphor. If you put me in jail, you got to have somebody to watch me, to keep me in jail. That means there are two prisoners: you and me. Our situation is precisely that. Oppression is banal; people do this to each other all the time. What is crucial here is that we are confronted with the results of it—not *me* more than *you*. White people have oppressed me, yes indeed, but they destroyed themselves in the act. That's the crisis. I am not the victim here. I have the advantage, after all, of having nothing whatever to lose. But no white American has that advantage. There is nothing you can do to me any more except kill me. And for the moment you won't have the guts to do that. But there's nothing else you can do. Now it rests with you. What do *you* do out of *your* oppression of yourself? That's the crisis.

**EKT:** But I'm trying to get one step beyond this in some sense of the word. And that is that, supposing it's *not* true that I, or any given person, am one of the oppressors? Supposing I belong to a group of people who are capable of this quintessential type of suffering and awareness and mostly what I, or this hypothetical group, suffer from is an incredible sense of guilt, and guilt for something in which, in fact, we have not necessarily participated?

[Baldwin is heard sighing here as she speaks about guilt]

And I do believe that there is some level at which the people in the white group who feel that way and the people in the Negro group who understand as you understand, in whatever the groupings are, can make this cross-fertilization which may save the whole. In other words, what do I do with my guilt?

**JB:** You do with your guilt what anybody who hopes to grow up does with his guilt. You recognize you'll be guilty until you drop dead. So, that's classified; that's taken care of. Then, what you do is operate *despite* it. Maybe, maybe one is a worthless human being; maybe one has committed all the crimes in the world and at some point in anybody's life that is certainly the way you feel—there's always a reason to be guilty. Guilt is easy. Responsibility is hard. And action is even harder. Because it does mean, for you and for me, I'm now speaking to you as a white woman and me as a Black man, that in order for us to establish this cross-fertilization—or, rather, to redeem this cross-fertilization, because it's already happened—you will have to give up *many* things, and so will I. This is true of *any* real human connection. People modify each other; that's what's called love.

**JL:** When you speak of this revolution, how do you see it happening? I mean, do you see it happening through the confrontation when a guy like Podhoretz suddenly recognizes that he does, that he always has, hated Negroes? And when other people realize this then the possibility for the connection is made, is this how it comes about? That you have to first recognize, really in psychoanalytical terms, just the, you know, "there it is," and you as a writer help bring this out as the analyst helps bring it out? Then do we try to make the love connection?

**JB:** Before the psychoanalytical terms existed, the phenomenon existed. Very simple phenomenon: that whatever you were afraid of controlled you. And if you were going to conquer the fear, you had to go back to where the fear was. You couldn't deal with it in *any* other way. You could never get past it in any other way. If we're going to make a real connection, one's got to reduce it to one-to-one. Now I know this sounds… I know how this sounds in this most popular of ages, but life is not a popularity contest—or a football team. The first step is to be responsible for what you feel and what you do. And if you really are, then you can begin to realize what your responsibility is to other people. If you really are then you have no choice but to act on it; and you are divorced in some ways, indeed, from most people, from the great mass of people, but then you are also more connected with them than ever; because even though the mass of people may not know it, they depend for their lives on what the world calls poets. Which, I don't mean people who write poetry. The first responsibility is yours, and the revolution one's trying to accomplish is not… The history of revolutions is very depressing—if one looks at the history of ours, the history the French Revolution. And one's trying to accomplish another kind of revolution, and that revolution simply involves changing the moral climate within which it is impossible to live. It has to begin with a personal responsibility.

**JL:** Do you think many white Americans have come to this? I mean would Podhoretz have? Do you think Faulkner did?

**JB:** [lighting a cigarette] Faulkner discovered several discomforting things. He discovered that these slaves, those slaves he so adored, had, in effect, no descendants. Life is very rough. You can't always bear what you discover. One's got to take that into account too. Not many white Americans have come to any consciousness of themselves, no. But some have; some do.

**JL:** [interrupting] Do you count it in favor of the moral revolution that something like *The Fire Next Time* might appear in a magazine like *The New Yorker*?

**JB:** It's a symptom of something. One's forbidden to be too optimistic. I'm very glad that it appeared there. But it's one thing to be frightened by reading something, and quite another thing to be responsible for … to do something.

**JL:** [mm-hmm]

**JB:** The act of reading is comparatively easy, but to assess what you will have to give up, to assess what the journey will cost you, that is something else. One cannot… We've sat around in this country for a long time now and talked about how things are getting better and progress is the most… Well, progress is really an American word. It seems never to have occurred to Americans, for example, that progress can be up or down. And the question of what one's progressing *toward* never seems to have entered the American mind. And Americans have *bathed* in self-congratulation even over such a thing as troops carrying Meredith into Mississippi. And it doesn't occur to them what a terrible thing that says about the record, the hundred-year record before that, that troops now had to be used carry *one* man into a university which is presumably educating the young! No one has asked himself *yet* what they've been teaching at Ole Miss all these years. White people must find out *what* they hate when they say that they hate me, because it isn't me.

**EKT:** Do you feel that there is a possibility that what you would like to achieve, and what all people who understand this would like to achieve, do you feel that there's any chance that we can? For years I've been interviewing people out of the South and for years I have marveled at the apparently quite sincere graciousness and decency of people who have been hideously treated, and I have continued to marvel at the fact that people that I would have thought would have been militant and hostile and filled with hate did not appear to be. And yet I sense a change since the rise in popularity of the Black Muslim movement. Have, in fact, the white community waited too long? Is there any hope, in your view, that it can be done on the grounds of this super-structure that so few people participate in?

**JB:** A bill has come in; let me put it that way. Once I sat in the Birmingham airport waiting for my plane with a Negro porter who was saying "yas 'em" and "no ma'am" to everybody who happened to pass—I was the only Negro sitting there—with one side of his mouth, and on the other side of his mouth—I mean this literally almost—he was telling me about all these people who passed. And he was a man; this is very important. There have been two standards of masculinity in this country. This was a man, no longer young, who'd been all but destroyed because it is very expensive to be a man in Birmingham, Alabama, or in Brooklyn, or in Chicago, if you're Black. And he hated them and they didn't know it. Nothing has changed. All that has changed is that for the first time the white population is confronted with the fact that Negroes have been living in another country for 400 years. And it's *not* because they couldn't have known it before; it's because they didn't want to know it before. That's the bill that has come in. And what happens now depends on your stamina and on my stamina. It's a fearful bill; it's a long record. We will pay it. Or we won't.

**EKT:** I think we've been here for the time which was allotted us. We're very grateful to you for coming in.

**JB:** Thank you.

## Notes

1 Leonard is presumably referring to this piece by Norman Podhoretz, "My Negro Problem, and Ours," published in *Commentary* in February 1963 as a rebuttal of sorts to Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. It is available online at: https://www.commentary.org/articles/norman-podhoretz/my-negro-problem-and-ours/.

2 Leonard is presumably referring here to the talk Baldwin gave at the University of California at Berkeley on May 7, 1963. That same speech is reprinted elsewhere in this issue. An audio recording of the speech is available online at: https://americanarchive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip_28-vm42r3ph61.