
James Baldwin on Langston Hughes

Interviewer: Clayton Riley, 14 February 1986

RILEY: James, I think many people have come to understand a certain period in Harlem's existence through your writing. Could we talk about the Harlem that you knew in the 1940s? Just kind of breeze through and tell us what that period was like and the place was like as you remember it.

BALDWIN: Harlem in the 1940s? I was born in 1924. So I was in my...

Taping Problem

RILEY: James, let's talk about Harlem. You not only grew up there but your writing about Harlem has introduced a lot of people to the tone and texture of the place. Tell us about it.

BALDWIN: It's a little difficult because I was born in Harlem in 1924. So the Harlem in grew up in was, you know the...

Taping Problem

RILEY: James, why don't we begin again (laughter) with the Harlem you remember in the thirties, forties and fifties.

BALDWIN: I began to be aware of Harlem... I was born during the Harlem Renaissance. But I was in a cradle. So I wasn't aware of Ethel Waters, Bill Robinson and Paul Robeson and all those people who make life very vivid in Harlem. And I became aware of Harlem in 1934-1936. There was still the Federal Works Program. There was the Lafayette Theater. There was the Apollo Theater, Harlem was a community when I was growing up—also a community which had just been uprooted from the South. So that, for example, every kid was the property of every grownup. So if you saw me doing something wrong, you would beat my behind and take me home and tell my mama and my daddy and they'd beat me again. That's how we grew up. It's a very different place.

It happened, I suppose during the second World War. The beginning of a certain devastation was Mayor Fiorello Henry LaGuardia (1882-1947) who after the Harlem riot in 1943—a riot brought about in part by letters written home by black soldiers in Mississippi or in Georgia and Alabama. Those letters had a lot to do with the eruption of Harlem in the summer of 1943. And Mayor LaGuardia declared Harlem off limits to white soldiers. And in effect the city began, as of that point, to create ghettos deliberately instead of more or less haphazardly. And this—which we're talking about '43, we're talking more than forty years ago—was the beginning of the devastation involving real estate, involving what we now call upward mobili-

ty. The people who could move moved, as far as Brooklyn, as far as Jamaica, Queens, maybe as far as Philadelphia. You know. They couldn't get much further than that. And now since the city and the state are recycling the land... I walked through Harlem about two weeks ago through the block I grew up in, 131st between Fifth and Lenox Avenue, and half the block is boarded up. The buildings are sealed. The people are God knows where. And this is not an act of God.

RILEY: You mentioned the Harlem Renaissance a few year ago. You were born in that period. What about the Harlem Renaissance in terms of the national literature? What in your view happened during that period? What figures emerged who we should pay particular attention to?

BALDWIN: Well—again. I repeat I was too young to realizewhat was going on around me. But when I became aware of it, became aware of Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Jessie R. Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, Wallace Thurman, it seemed to me that what happened in Harlem was a kind of—I repeat I grew up in a southern community displaced to the North, abruptly displaced! It seemed to me that what happened in Harlem was that a great many passionate people, carrying degrees of talent anyway, left the land, left the South anyway and came to what was sought as a kind of Mecca and they made it one. You know. Now how this happened is very...

RILEY: Do you think the effect of the arts produced during this period—is the effect on Black Art or is there an effect you feel on American art or perhaps world art?

BALDWIN: I think that's one of the aspects of what you would have to call the American dilemma is the effort to—if I may so put it—segregate art. Every artist has an effect on every other artist, you know. So on a certain level one can say that it's not so important to be a black artist. It's important to be an artist. But if you're an artist and happen to be an American black, then your experience comes from a depth and from places that the American republic does not wish to understand, does not wish to confront. These depths, these places exist in every human being. But a part of the American myth, devastating myth, is that it is a white country. And since it thinks of itself as a white country, it seals itself off from all those experiences which cannot be considered white. You see what I mean? It is not, in short, a black limitation. Or put it another way. This country does not have a black problem, it has a white problem.

RILEY: This calls to mind something in effect that by calling this the Harlem Renaissance it miniaturized the effect.

BALDWIN: There was an attempt to do that. But on the other hand the people who created it had already survived far worse labels. You see what I mean? It didn't matter what they called it. We knew what we were doing.

RILEY: You came from a family where I would have to guess writing was not considered a priory [laughter]—a future for a youngster and Langston Hughes from the same sort of family.

BALDWIN: We all did really.

RILEY: Your background has had an enormous impact on your life.

BALDWIN: Yeah that's true. I didn't... nobody... I was a kid you know. I used to write stories and rather awful pageants at Easter for the church. I wrote the school song which my brothers had to sing for years [laughter]. None of this was serious, and I never thought of becoming a writer. I didn't dare think about it. My father was very opposed to it, very frightened by it, and that frightened me. My mother was very frightened, too. But my mother was another kind of person. She didn't try to stop me. But, you know, the truth is you don't decide to be an artist. You discover that's what you are. And you don't do that, you don't do anything.

RILEY: Is there something you think in the relationship that both you and Langston had with a father not particularly disposed toward your choices personal and career choices? Is there something in that that perhaps impelled you to an art form? That pushes you even further towards being a writer? It might have been the case that your father was even more encouraging.

BALDWIN: Well, as a matter of fact as it turns out that's true. I didn't know it then. I had to fight my father very hard.

INTERVIEWER : We were talking about you and Langston sharing something. An uncomfortableness in your relationships with a father? But there could be a case made that the very nature of that relationship, perhaps created your art or your sense of it?

BALDWIN: I knew Langston much, much later. But I knew him well enough to know something about his relationship to his father—well, I understood it later. He opposed it. But he opposed the idea of my becoming a writer because he was afraid for me. And I could understand that then even. But I couldn't accept it. I fought my father so hard that in a sense I became a writer because of him. Because he was afraid I couldn't do it, because he said I couldn't do it, and because on a level I couldn't understand then—because I loved him. And I thought if I got through, that ultimately my old man would be proud of me. I am very much like him. We're both as stubborn as both very hard-headed cats, you know. And I'll tell you this, my father frightened me so badly. I had to fight him so hard that nobody every frightened me since. That is an inheritance.

RILEY: When we talk about the Harlem Renaissance, I think to be fair and particularly be fair to observers who hear us talk about it, it did not produce an enormous amount of great literature or great artists in other fields. It did produce a number of figures... we're especially concerned with Langston Hughes being one of them. If

you were to just take a hard-headed look at his work and assess it for that period particularly, what are the important things that you remember?

BALDWIN: I think for me—speaking of myself as an adolescent really. But even later really there was something in the voice which I recognized. Something in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” something in “For Me Life Aint’t Been No Crystal Stair” [“Mother to Son”], which corroborated, and in that sense, began to release me from the wretchedness and the horror I saw around me every day. And that he could or that a poet could do that, you know, to reconcile you to something, not passively, to reconcile you to what it is really. And once you’re reconciled to that you can begin to change it. It is not the act of poetry, if I may put it that way. It is really one of the most subversive acts possible. Because it can change you, you know. What Langston made me see helped me to grow up.

RILEY: You mentioned a voice. Is it that his work was conversational?

BALDWIN: Yeah. That’s right.

INTERVIEWER: Is that the voice you heard?

BALDWIN: That’s exactly what I really mean. It was as if you overheard someone talking. Like, as a kid you’d overhear the old folks talking to each other about things you only dimly know what they’re talking about. Aunt Lily in the South. What happened to Duke’s son in where? Virginia? And it’s always you know, half heard. You don’t quite know. It’s something very menacing about it. Something they don’t want you to really understand. You know. You begin to realize what it is. You begin to realize very quickly what it is, really.

RILEY: Did this seem in some instances set and apart from a lot of the other artists in the period who didn’t work in that particular style and perhaps did not have the sense of the style’s integrity that Hughes had? He was often criticized and I think properly criticized I think.

BALDWIN: Just for that kind of stylization. Looking back it must have been difficult for him because, I feel I was a kid, but he and Countee Cullen had very different exteriors in any case. He and Jessie R. Fauset, and I had not really known who Jessie R. Fauset really was. She was one of my teachers. And they all had a kind of polish, elegance, you see, at least from a kid’s point of view, which Langston didn’t have. Langston had, Langston was, I read Langston much later too. But Langston cultivated it. It seemed to me a kind of rough hue and, it was, it seemed to me, you know, at least as conscious and deliberate as it was real. He was a very sophisticated cat after all. But he affected the Jesse B. Simple manner for reasons of his own. I was a lot younger than Langston. So there was a lot I didn’t understand about him.

RILEY: What does that do for him in positioning him in the Renaissance particularly? Is he in your estimation as you look back at the period, do you say this is the

person who speaks most specifically for that time and that period? Or is he not representative of anything of that period?

BALDWIN: To me, the only two poets I read were Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes. And of the two when I was young, it was Countee Cullen I most wanted to emulate. Why? Because there was something in his voice, something in that voice I was talking about before which was also slightly menacing. Countee Cullen's account of a lynching in "The Black Christ" and Langston's various accounts of lynchings. I think something in Langston's account attracted me. But it scared me. In Countee Cullen's account I would have to outgrow this, but Countee Cullen's "That I may swing but not before, I sense some pale ambassador, hot footing it to hell to say the proud black man is on his way." I can deal with that for in some way the language kept the horror at a kind of arm's length. You see what I mean. In the case of Langston, you were dragged into it at once and, after all, I had never seen the South. And all I knew of the South really was my father's rages. And that frightened me.

RILEY: You raise a point that intrigues me here. Is there a power in literature? I mean when you talk about Langston Hughes, you talk about many [people from the Harlem] Renaissance. Can we say that the power of their work changed life? Would things have been different if the period had not developed with those people, had not been drawn to that particular place? Some people now are now saying that literature is just another form of entertainment.

BALDWIN: Ha. Ha. I've got news for them. No, no. Those people, this is true... any civilization is true of all. No. It's the role of what we call literature, for lack of a better word. But what is that role? The responsibility of the writer is to listen—right? To speech. To what people actually say, to what they actually mean as distinguished from what they think they're saying. What they are really saying, what they're really saying to each other. That's what. That's our life-blood. After all we only have each other. And the responsibility of the writer is to give it back to the people as language. To fix it in a sense.

RILEY: So the power of Langston's work is to give a voice to introduce people to the places, people and things and times and folks.

BALDWIN: To introduce them to their own possibilities. I think that's what it's all about. Certainly I would be very different if I were here at all without that testimony.

RILEY: Could you say that again. Could you back up again and say that again because you came on the middle? I'm sorry.

BALDWIN: Oh, I'm sorry.

RILEY: Let's take it back to the part of Hughes giving a voice to people who had no voices.

BALDWIN: In the case of Langston, in the case of Langston Hughes. For me, I recognized something, well I recognized the voice. It was something... it was like a translation if you like. It was my father's voice, my mother's voice. I suppose it's not too much to say that meeting Langston made me to understand something about my father's rages and my mother's seeming passivity and the people on the streets, the people in the church, the deacons, sisters and brothers and when I read Langston, it was like I was reading a book and looking up and what was on the page was in a sense right before my eyes. But he helped me to see it, you know. He helped me to locate myself in it. So that I wasn't entirely lost.

RILEY: How do you think he was affected by his work in the Renaissance? The Renaissance was a very unusual period for everybody who was participating in it.

BALDWIN: Very brief too.

RILEY: Right. Brief indeed. How do you think he was affected? I mean you look at his work post the Renaissance period. How do you think the Renaissance itself affected the kind of writer he would eventually become?

BALDWIN: I don't know how to answer that. How the Renaissance would, if he was part of the Harlem Renaissance. It ended roughly around 1929. It lasted not more than five or seven years and it did accommodate a great deal in those years in terms of in terms of articulating something which had not been articulated in that way or to that extent ever before...

A portion of the conversation may have been lost here, as cassettes were being switched and loaded.

RILEY: I think a case can be made of Langston perhaps surviving the Harlem Renaissance. An older writer may not have survived. Would you...?

BALDWIN: I would have to agree that he did survive the Renaissance in a way, for example, that Countee Cullen did not and in a way that Zora Neale Hurston did not either or Jessie R. Fauset. But it seemed to me too that Langston, well, the Harlem Renaissance ended with the crash and all our lives were altered with the second World War. So we're talking about a span of fifteen years really. From 1940 on Harlem and the country became very, very different. And I think that one of the things that may have happened to Langston is that one of the things that matters to every black artist in this country anyway is a certain... One runs the risk perpetually of being divided from one's sustenance. That is to say one's interaction with other black people. One's interaction with one's inheritance is the only way I can put it at the moment. It's a very peculiar society, this one and in which you can be a success or a failure, black or white, up or down. So that what matters on the one hand as obscurity even more matters by... In either case you risk losing your voice. Cause you risk losing the contact with whatever it is you come from. I think that is part of what happened to Langston really. In a sense, he no longer created the blues, he began to recite the blues. Do you see what I mean? And the blues is a form which is

quicksilver. It is not a quotation. If it becomes a quotation then it becomes irrelevant. And in a sense [that's what happened to Langston].

I once reviewed a book of his [*Selected Poems* (1959)]. And since I had grown up with Langston, his poetry, it didn't occur to me... I simply, you know, remembered what I had read. So it never occurred to me that I would have altered... but, of course, when I picked up the book and read it, that was so long ago being the boy I was, I was still moved by it. But I could see that, or perhaps I simply feared, perhaps I was thinking about myself, it seemed that Langston had not moved from who he had been that he was becoming an echo of himself. And that's not meant to be... that's not a judgment exactly. It's an observation. An observation grounded properly in terror. Cause it is probably of one of the, it is the great danger.

RILEY: Of course, he also had what I gather have been a traumatic experience in the breaking from his patron. I guess you'd call him.

BALDWIN: Oh yeah. I heard about that.

RILEY: I think that was probably a process that went on for a number of years. I mean freeing oneself from the dependency...

BALDWIN: Yes. That was another aspect of the Harlem Renaissance—the Harlem Renaissance was a kind of tourist trap. You know. What people were discovering that niggas could not only sing and dance, but they could sculpt. They could paint and, my God, they could write. So here the white world came bearing gifts. But you had to be very, very, very, very careful of people bearing gifts.

RILEY: I'm intrigued also by where he went from there. If he did in fact make the break with that particular kind of relationship. Where did he go beyond that? I mean what happened to Langston?

BALDWIN: That is a hard question. I hear you very well. What did happen to him? Well the first, the second World Wars, after all we're talking about a phenomenon between two World Wars, 1919 to 1940. 1940, everything changed. The menace of reality changed, Harlem changed. And a man like Langston would have found himself, I suspect, in a kind of limbo. No longer the atmosphere of the Renaissance being gone and the white folks being gone and no young poets coming up. You know. No one in the horizon. Not until Richard Wright. You know, 1938-1940. But there was a tremendous vacuum created by, created by poverty and created probably most importantly by a loss of compassion. You know, like what are we doing here in this strange land? How are you gonna sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

RILEY: Very disoriented.

BALDWIN: Yes, that what I'm trying to say.

RILEY: I wonder if you'd comment... I tend to believe, I hope, I believe you... I think perhaps it was out of that confusion, out of that disorientation that you mentioned before about that removal from one's roots and sources that might have driven Langston Hughes into testifying to the House Un-American Activities Committee. Not being certain where he was between the government and where he'd.

BALDWIN: Yeah.

RILEY: ... been as an artist.

BALDWIN: Yes, well I'd think that Langston's testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee was a part of the vacuum we're trying to discuss. Who was he gonna talk to? You know. Really? I would think it was that and I also think it was Langston's flirtation with the left was in the first place very brief. And to be fair, this country has such a short memory. But there was a moment when the Russian Revolution did look like the hope of the world. There's no point in pretending otherwise. And a great many very valuable people, very honest people tried to understand what was happening in Russia. You see what I mean? And Langston was one of them. Now what he made as unfair, unjust to penalize him for doing what a poet or what a person should be able to do. To look at something. The House Un-American Activities Committee which condemned so many people is really a terrible judgment on the morality of this country. [It] doesn't say anything about Communism or anything about that. It says something about an American paranoia that I don't want to get into that, you know [laughter]. But Langston's testimony before the House un-American Activities Committee... Frankly, I often wonder what I would have said. What I would have done? But I wasn't there.

RILEY: But you must remember that a lot of people testified. Jack Robinson testifies. Robert Rossen testifies [on 1 May 1953].

BALDWIN: Yes they did. Indeed they did.

RILEY: I say that to say that out of all this energy, I think there was a lot of confusion.

BALDWIN: Oh yes, there was. A vast amount of confusion. A vast amount of immoralization. At least Langston did not name names. I knew people later in my life who had gone through that crucible. And I repeat, I don't know what I would have done if I'd been there. But a great many people I'm thinking about did not really survive that moment in their lives.

RILEY: Elia Kazan; crushed by it.

BALDWIN: Elia Kazan is one of them, yes.

RILEY: You mentioned you had reviewed Langston's work. During a period of time, during the fifties roughly, you said quite honestly, quite sincerely, that you thought

Langston's work was still unfulfilled, that he was unfulfilled as yet as an artist. Would you talk about that?

BALDWIN: Yes, I came to that, I can't say conclusion really, that Langston's work had not grown the way perhaps I thought it would, could hoped. And, of course, when a black poet is talking about another poet he's in a way discussing, whether or not he knows it, it's better to know it, he's also discussing what may be happening to him. Because all black poets in this society operate under very particular stresses and strains and very particular habits. So it's by no means easy. It is not to be taken for granted that you will move from one place to another, especially if as in Langston's case and not only in his case, but in Langston's case, through what is in small way divorced from and it's not something you can really do anything about, it is not your will, divided, something divorced from the people who are your subjects is an awful way to put it. Langston lived in Harlem, up on the Hill. Countee Cullen lived on the hill. Sugarhill, we called it. Langston actually lived on 130th Street not far from where I was growing up. I didn't know that then. Later on I thought to myself that he should have moved. There may have been something a little too willed in remaining in the middle of the ghetto.

RILEY: Almost drown.

BALDWIN: Yes, because you are surrounded, you no longer see it. Do you know what I mean?

A portion of the conversation might have been lost here, as cassettes were being switched and loaded.

RILEY: We're talking about Langston's decision to live in Harlem when, of course, a number of artists including yourself chose to live elsewhere. What are the particulars of that? What are the pros and cons of that?

BALDWIN: Of living in Harlem, for example?

RILEY: Yes, saying you're a black artist and you're gonna live in the community with the people and...

BALDWIN: I think, you know. First of all, the last thing that any black artist has to prove is that he's a black artist. And living in the ghetto doesn't necessarily prove anything. It's very strenuous and there's also something strangely patronizing about it. It's a mistake to underestimate people. People are not so easily fooled and in my own experience, people—are not really the people you hoped to serve—are grateful in a sense for a certain distance between yourself and them. It does not help them to watch you share their misery. They don't want you there. They want you somewhere else.

RILEY: Similar to our people being very proud of the fact that Adam Powell ate at "21" [Manhattan's Club "21"] and not Singleton's [in Harlem].

BALDWIN: Something like that, yes. It may be ridiculous. But it's part of reality in any case. In order to get your work done, you know. No one asked me to become an artist. It's my responsibility. So I'm under the obligation to find and create the terms under which I can work. To find the tape, the room and the paper and sit down.

RILEY: James, can you remember the conscious decision to leave Harlem? Cause obviously, I shouldn't say obviously because you left very clearly in a very definitive way. You said, "I am going." Do you remember making that decision, consciously?

BALDWIN: Yes, I remember that decision. I remember the day that I decided to leave home. I was in a funny position because I was in the pulpit. I had been a boy preacher for three years and those three years in a sense, you know, those three years in the pulpit, I didn't know it then. That's what turned me into a writer really. Dealing with all that anguish and despair and that beauty for those three years. I left because I didn't want to cheat my congregation. I knew that I didn't know anything at all. And I had to leave... I knew I left the pulpit I had to leave home. So I left the pulpit and I left home the same day [laughter]. That was quite a day and it was a conscious decision and once I was out of Harlem, I began to see some things. Of course, they were not like coming into another situation in the army, in the white world really. Nearly got my brains beat out. And when I began to hate my people, which was another danger. That drove me finally out of the country. I left in 1948 when I was 24, with forty dollars, and a one way ticket. I was moving, you know. But at that time that is how, you know, what saved my life. I got out. I could look at it and I could forget it and I could begin to use it. I had only been out of the country four years, long enough to finish my first novel. Long enough in a sense, if you ever do, grow up and to understand my relationship to my country and to my past. And after that my life was not simple certainly, but it was never after that as horrible as it was before.

RILEY: I meant to ask you about that period. Had you come to the conclusion that you couldn't write where you were living?

BALDWIN: Oh yes, I came to that conclusion. I started writing when I was very, very young. I started being published when I was about 22. But in the two years between when I started being published and when I left in effect... well, I was a book reviewer and wrote some of the early, early essays in that time. But I had written myself into a wall. I was expected to write about one subject only. So for two years I reviewed all those post war "be kind to colored people, be kind to Jews" books. All 47,000 of them came across my desk! And I simply had to go and try and figure out what in the world was happening to me. It was very significant. The first thing I wrote in Paris once I caught my breath was "Everybody's Protest Novel" to get that behind me and to find out what I could really do, if I really was a writer and not a pamphleteer.

RILEY: Does the term expatriate have any meaning to you?

BALDWIN: Not to me. For me it's a very romantic term. Once I got to Paris, I was very lucky. Once I got to Paris, I realized that you don't ever leave home. You take your home with you. You better, you know. Otherwise you're homeless and the people who thought of themselves as expatriates were dreamers, you know. And when the reality closed in on them they either collapsed in Paris or took the first boat home.

RILEY: Someone once said to me that leaving your country is like trying to get out of [...] You can't do it.

BALDWIN: Once I left here I began to see it. I began to see how helplessly American I was myself.

RILEY: You have said recently in your writing that you do in fact see this in a very deep and personal way, your country.

BALDWIN: It is.

RILEY: And you're not gonna be driven out of it.

BALDWIN: Certainly not.

RILEY: Talk about that a little more.

BALDWIN: Well, from my point of view, not only from my point of view, my father's father's father, your father's father's father, they paid too much for it, you know. And romantic. It seems from my absolutely personal point of view, my media speaking for Jimmy only, Jimmy. Unless, I were driven, absolutely had no choice, I would never, no, I would never leave here. It's a great deal, there's too much happening here. There's a tremendous potential here. A potential I don't sense in the world happening in the same way. God knows the handicaps and hazards are very, very real and tremendous. But if we can get beyond the place where we are now, something very important might happen in the world. I believe that. And now I'm past sixty, so I guess I'll not change very much. I can't prove it, you know. But I've seen some remarkable things. I know some remarkable people who could only have been produced here. You know. And I can't bear witness to any other place, any other history. You know. I would become a part of it transcendentially. But I have to produce here. I'm the grandson of a slave and my responsibility, to use that grandiose term is my sustenance. In any case is, you know, lies from whence I came. And I can't pretend I came from anyplace else.

RILEY: James, considering all that and looking at the experiences you had here and other parts of the world, what does literature really mean? We talked about that. But what does writing and reading and being in touch with language and words and I mean particularly talk about that from your own perspective. But let's include Langston in that. Does his work now come to have a larger meaning? Or perhaps a lesser meaning? But what does literature really come down to mean given the pres-

sures put on all of us which may mean that we don't even feel safe reading books anymore? But you've lived personally as a witness to fifty-five to sixty years of American literature and you're the inheritor of hundreds of years of literature. What does it all come to mean?

BALDWIN: I don't know. It seems to me that what we call literature, what is it after all? It is one of the ways we have of confronting reality with the intention of changing it. Someone once told me years and years ago when I was in terrible trouble. He said, "describe it." It didn't make sense to me at first. He said, "describe it. If you can describe it, you can get past it." I think literature in short is that. If I can describe it and you recognize it, you can get past it. You can alter reality. It's one of the ways human beings have of confronting and altering reality.

RILEY: Let's apply that specifically to Langston. Are we saying perhaps, I'm searching here, are we saying perhaps that by Langston putting people in touch in some instances with their own voices, as you suggested, that he described a time and a place and helped people get beyond that?

Tape change here.

RILEY: We're talking about Langston and I'd like to relate here to the story you told about someone told you if you're in trouble, describe it. You're grieving, describe it, if you're hurt describe it. Do you think Langston was able to do it?

BALDWIN: In a sense, as less and less time went on, it says at least as much about one as it says about Langston. I think that in some of the Simple stories, he, from my own evidence watching the people I knew, people I know in barber shops, watching people I knew and knew very well with whom I'd grown up with, Jesse B. Simple meant something to those people. Meant something to me as well. His kinds of observations. Langston was really a very sophisticated person. So that, I was always a little uneasy about Jesse B. Simple, homespun, homespun from this really sophisticated cat, you know. But somehow it worked. I must admit that I had the feeling, too, that Langston had sort of settled for Jesse B. Simple, because he didn't, I had the feeling that he didn't have, didn't trust himself to go further than that—didn't trust his powers to take him further than that. I didn't know him very well but I liked him very much, cared a lot about him. He was always very nice to me and I thought, I always had an uneasy feeling that he should have tried, he should have trusted it more, his gift.

RILEY: Isn't it people [who] say that if things are as they are, Richard Wright will take us part of the way, Langston Hughes will take us part of the way, James Baldwin will take us further along? Maybe that's the real terror of being an artist. You have to confront the real fear of going that next half step and finding out that maybe you should've stood where you were.

BALDWIN: It's a risk that you have to take, you know. I know it. I think every artist knows it, especially as time goes on. But the whole thing is a leap in the dark, an act

of faith and it's better... I'd like to go... I want to die in the middle of a sentence. I don't want to... I'm scared. Of course, I'm scared that I don't want to be scared to death. I don't want to be paralyzed by fear. You see what I mean? You don't know what you're doing next. You don't... what is it? Actually it's a matter of life and death. You know people die. This endeavor is enough to kill a human being. You know. But it is also... there's something very beautiful about it. I will tell you this that... it does prevent you for having many delusions about yourself. It's one of the ways you may learn humility. That blank piece of paper and you.

RILEY: What would you say to somebody who had never met or heard of Hughes or read any of his work. How would you sum his life up?

BALDWIN: I always thought of him as a very gentle, very gallant, really gallant, a beautiful man. A weary, weary, weary, weary man too. He's seen a lot. It was in his eyes. And it was in his gentleness. To be that gentle and to be that strong, you had to suffer a lot. He knew a lot about suffering. And he knew a lot about people and I think in a sense the loneliness overtook him. And you know, it can overtake any one of us any minute, any hour and, I think, it overtook him. And that is what makes you weary and that's when you close your eyes. Marvelous I really enjoyed that.

New York Center for Visual History Interview
Lombardy Hotel, New York City
14 February 1986