

Revolutionary Hope

A Conversation Between James Baldwin and Audre Lorde

JB: One of the dangers of being a Black American is being schizophrenic, and I mean 'schizophrenic' in the most literal sense. To be a Black American is in some ways to be born with the desire to be white. It's a part of the price you pay for being born here, and it affects every Black person. We can go back to Vietnam, we can go back to Korea. We can go back for that matter to the First World War. We can go back to W.E.B. Du Bois – an honorable and beautiful man – who campaigned to persuade Black people to fight in the First World War, saying that if we fight in this war to save this country, our right to citizenship can never, never again be questioned – and who can blame him? He really meant it, and if I'd been there at that moment I would have said so too perhaps. Du Bois believed in the American dream. So did Martin. So did Malcolm. So do I. So do you. That's why we're sitting here.

AL: I don't, honey. I'm sorry, I just can't let that go past. Deep, deep, deep down I know that dream was never mine. And I wept and I cried and I fought and I stormed, but I just knew it. I was Black. I was female. And I was out – out – by any construct wherever the power lay. So if I had to claw myself insane, if I lived I was going to have to do it alone. Nobody was dreaming about me. Nobody was even studying me except as something to wipe out.

JB: You are saying you do not exist in the American dream except as a nightmare.

AL: That's right. And I knew it every time I opened Jet, too. I knew that every time I opened a Kotex box. I knew that every time I went to school. I knew that every time I opened a prayer book. I knew it, I just knew it.

JB: It is difficult to be born in a place where you are despised and also promised that with endeavor – with this, with that, you know – you can accomplish the impossible. You're trying to deal with the man, the woman, the child – the child of whichever sex – and he or she and your man or your woman has got to deal with the 24-hour-a-day facts of life in this country. We're not going to fly off someplace else, you know, we'd better get through whatever that day is and still have each other and still raise children – somehow manage all of that. And this is 24 hours of every day, and you're surrounded by all of the paraphernalia of safety: If you can strike this bargain here. If you can make sure your armpits are odorless. Curl your hair. Be impeccable. Be all the things that the American public says you should do, right? And you do all those things – and nothing happens really. And what is much worse than that, nothing happens to your child either.

AL: Even worse than the nightmare is the blank. And Black women are the blank. I don't want to break all this down, then have to stop at the wall of male/female division. When we admit and deal with difference; when we deal with the deep bitterness; when we deal with the horror of even our different nightmares; when we turn them and look at them, it's like looking at death: hard but possible. If you look at it directly without embracing it, then there is much less that you can ever be made to fear.

JB: I agree.

AL: Well, in the same way when we look at our differences and not allow ourselves to be divided, when we own them and are not divided by them, that is when we will be able to move on. But we haven't reached square one yet.

JB: I'm not sure of that. I think the Black sense of male and female is much more sophisticated than the western idea. I think that Black men and women are much less easily thrown by the question of gender or sexual preference – all that jazz. At least that is true of my experience.

AL: Yea, but let's remove ourselves from merely a reactive position – i.e., Black men and women reacting to what's out there. While we are reacting to what's out there, we're also dealing between ourselves – and between ourselves there are power differences that come down...

JB: Oh, yes...

AL: Truly dealing with how we live, recognizing each other's differences, is something that hasn't happened...

JB: Differences and samenesses.

AL: Differences and samenesses. But in a crunch, when all our asses are in the sling, it looks like it is easier to deal with the samenesses. When we deal with sameness only, we develop weapons that we use against each other when the differences become apparent. And we wipe each other out – Black men and women can wipe each other out – far more effectively than outsiders do.

JB: That's true enough.

AL: And our blood is high, our furies are up. I mean, it's what Black women do to each other, Black men do to each other, and Black people do to each other. We are in the business of wiping each other out in one way or the other – and essentially doing our enemy's work.

JB: That's quite true.

AL: We need to acknowledge those power differences between us and see where they lead us. An enormous amount of energy is being taken up with either denying the power differences between Black men and women or fighting over power differences between Black men and

women or killing each other off behind them. I'm talking about Black women's blood flowing in the streets – and how do we get a 14-year-old boy to know I am not the legitimate target of his fury? The boot is on both of our necks. Let's talk about getting it off. My blood will not wash out your horror. That's what I'm interested in getting across to adolescent Black boys.

There are little Black girl children having babies. But this is not an immaculate conception, so we've got little Black boys who are making babies, too. We have little Black children making little Black children. I want to deal with that so our kids will not have to repeat that waste of themselves.

JB: I hear you – but let me backtrack, for better or worse. You know, for whatever reason and whether it's wrong or right, for generations men have come into the world, either instinctively knowing or believing or being taught that since they were men they in one way or another had to be responsible for the women and children, which means the universe.

AL: Mm-hm.

JB: I don't think there's any way around that.

AL: Any way around that now?

JB: I don't think there's any way around that fact.

AL: If we can put people on the moon and we can blow this whole planet up, if we can consider digging 18 inches of radioactive dirt off of the Bikini atolls and somehow finding something to do with it – if we can do that, we as Black cultural workers can somehow begin to turn that stuff around – because there's nobody anymore buying 'cave politics' – 'Kill the mammoth or else the species is extinct.' We have moved beyond that. Those little scrubby-ass kids in the sixth grade – I want those Black kids to know that brute force is not a legitimate way of dealing across sex difference. I want to set up some different paradigms.

JB: Yea, but there's a real difference between the way a man looks at the world...

AL: Yes, yes...

JB: And the way a woman looks at the world. A woman does know much more than a man.

AL: And why? For the same reason Black people know what white people are thinking: because we had to do it for our survival...

JB: All right, all right...

AL: We're finished being bridges. Don't you see? It's not Black women who are shedding Black men's blood on the street – yet. We're not cleaving your head open with axes. We're not shooting you down. We're saying, "Listen, what's going on between us is related to what's going on between us and other people," but we have to solve our own shit at the same time as we're protecting our Black asses, because if we don't, we are wasting energy that we need for joint survival.

JB: I'm not even disagreeing – but if you put the argument in that way, you see, a man has a certain story to tell, too, just because he is a man...

AL: Yes, yes, and it's vital that I be alive and able to listen to it.

JB: Yes. Because we are the only hope we have. A family quarrel is one thing; a public quarrel is another. And you and I, you know – in the kitchen, with the kids, with each other or in bed – we have a lot to deal with, with each other, but we've got to know what we're dealing with. And there is no way around it. There is no way around it. I'm a man. I am not a woman.

AL: That's right, that's right.

JB: No one will turn me into a woman. You're a woman and you're not a man. No one will turn you into a man. And we are indispensable for each other, and the children depend on us both.

AL: It's vital for me to be able to listen to you, to hear what is it that defines you and for you to listen to me, to hear what is it that defines me –

because so long as we are operating in that old pattern, it doesn't serve anybody, and it certainly hasn't served us.

JB: I know that. What I really think is that neither of us has anything to prove, at least not in the same way, if we weren't in the North American wilderness. And the inevitable dissension between brother and sister, between man and woman – let's face it, all those relations which are rooted in love also are involved in this quarrel. Because our real responsibility is to endlessly redefine each other. I cannot live without you, and you cannot live without me – and the children can't live without us.

AL: But we have to define ourselves for each other. We have to redefine ourselves for each other because no matter what the underpinnings of the distortion are, the fact remains that we have absorbed it. We have all absorbed this sickness and ideas in the same way we absorbed racism. It's vital that we deal constantly with racism, and with white racism among Black people – that we recognize this as a legitimate area of inquiry. We must also examine the ways that we have absorbed sexism and heterosexism. These are the norms in this dragon we have been born into – and we need to examine these distortions with the same kind of openness and dedication that we examine racism...

JB: You use the word 'racism'...

AL: The hatred of Black, or color...

JB: – but beneath the word 'racism' sleeps the word 'safety.' Why is it important to be white or Black?

AL: Why is it important to be a man rather than a woman?

JB: In both cases, it is assumed that it is safer to be white than to be Black. And it's assumed that it is safer to be a man than to be a woman. These are both masculine assumptions. But those are the assumptions that we're trying to overcome or to confront...

AL: To confront, yeah. The vulnerability that lies behind those masculine assumptions is different for me and you, and we must begin to look at that...

JB: Yes, yes...

AL: And the fury that is engendered in the denial of that vulnerability – we have to break through it because there are children growing up believe that it is legitimate to shed female blood, right? I have to break through it because those boys really think that the sign of their masculinity is impregnating a sixth grader. I have to break through it because of that little sixth-grade girl who believes that the only thing in life she has is what lies between her legs...

JB: Yeah, but we're not talking now about men and women. We're talking about a particular society. We're talking about a particular time and place. You were talking about the shedding of Black blood in the streets, but I don't understand.

AL: Okay, the cops are killing the men and the men are killing the women. I'm talking about rape. I'm talking about murder.

JB: I'm not disagreeing with you, but I do think you're barking up the wrong tree. I'm not trying to get the Black man off the hook – or Black women, for that matter – but I am talking about the kingdom in which we live.

AL: Yes, I absolutely agree; the kingdom in which these distortions occur has to be changed.

JB: Something happens to the man who beats up a lady. Something happens to the man who beats up his grandmother. Something happens to the junkie. I know that very well. I walked the streets of Harlem; I grew up there, right? Now you know it is not the Black cat's fault who sees me and tries to mug me. I got to know that. It's his responsibility but it's not his fault. That's a nuance. UI got to know that it's not him who is my enemy even when he beats up his grandmother. His grandmother has got to know. I'm trying to say one's got to see what drove both of us into

those streets. We be both from the same track. Do you see what I mean? I've come home myself, you know, wanting to beat up anything in sight – but Audre, Audre...

AL: I'm here, I'm here...

JB: I agree with you. I see exactly what you mean and it hurts me at least as much as it hurts you. But how to maneuver oneself past this point – how not to lose him or her who may be in what is in effect occupied territory. That is really what the Black situation is in this country. For the ghetto, all that is lacking is barbed wire, and when you pen people up like animals, the intention is to debase them and you have debased them.

AL: Jimmy, we don't have an argument.

JB: I know we don't.

AL: But what we do have is a real disagreement about your responsibility not just to me but to my son and to our boys. Your responsibility to him is to get across to him in a way that I never will be able to because he did not come out of my body and has another relationship to me. Your relationship to him as his farther is to tell him I'm not a fit target for his fury.

JB: Okay, okay...

AL: It's so entrenched in him that it's part of him as much as his Blackness is.

JB: All right, all right...

AL: I can't do it. You have to.

JB: All right, I accept – the challenge is there in any case. It never occurred to me that it would be otherwise. That's absolutely true. I simply want to locate where the danger is...

AL: Yeah, we're at war...

JB: We are behind the gates of a kingdom which is determined to destroy us.

AL: Yes, exactly so. And I'm interested in seeing that we do not accept terms that will help us destroy each other. And I think one of the ways in which we destroy each other is by being programmed to knee-jerk on our differences. Knee-jerk on sex. Knee-jerk on sexuality...

JB: I don't quite know what to do about it, but I agree with you. And I understand exactly what you mean. You're quite right. We get confused with genders – you know, what the western notion of woman is, which is not necessarily what a woman is at all. It's certainly not the African notion of what a woman is. Or even the European notion of what a woman is. And there's certainly not standard of masculinity in this country which anybody can respect. Part of the horror of being a Black American is being trapped into being an imitation of an imitation.

AL: I can't tell you what I wished you would be doing. I can't redefine masculinity. I can't redefine Black masculinity certainly. I am in the business of redefining Black womanness. You are in the business of redefining Black masculinity. And I'm saying, 'Hey, please go on doing it,' because I don't know how much longer I can hold this fort, and I really feel that Black women are holding it and we're beginning to hold it in ways that are making this dialogue less possible.

JB: Really? Why do you say that? I don't feel that at all. It seems to me you're blaming the Black man for the trap he's in.

AL: I'm not blaming the Black man; I'm saying don't shed my blood. I'm not blaming the Black man. I'm saying if my blood is being shed, at some point I'm gonna have a legitimate reason to take up a knife and cut your damn head off, and I'm not trying to do it.

JB: If you drive a man mad, you'll turn him into a beast – it has nothing to do with his color.

AL: If you drive a woman insane, she will react like a beast too. There is a larger structure, a society with which we are in total and absolute war.

We live in the mouth of a dragon, and we must be able to use each other's forces to fight it together, because we need each other. I am saying that in our joint battle we have also developed some very real weapons, and when we turn them against each other they are even more bloody, because we know each other in a particular way. When we turn those weapons against each other, the bloodshed is terrible. Even worse, we are doing this in a structure where we are already embattled. I am not denying that. It is a family discussion I'm having now. I'm not laying blame. I do not blame Black men for what they are. I'm asking them to move beyond. I do not blame Black men; what I'm saying is, we have to take a new look at the ways in which we fight our joint oppression because if we don't, we're gonna be blowing each other up. We have to begin to redefine the terms of what woman is, what man is, how we relate to each other.

JB: But that demands redefining the terms of the western world...

AL: And both of us have to do it; both of us have to do it...

JB: But you don't realize that in this republic the only real crime is to be a Black man?

AL: No, I don't realize that. I realize the only crime is to be Black. I realize the only crime is to be Black, and that includes me too.

JB: A Black man has a prick, they hack it off. A Black man is a ***** when he tries to be a model for his children and he tries to protect his women. That is a principal crime in this republic. And every Black man knows it. And every Black woman pays for it. And every Black child. How can you be so sentimental as to blame the Black man for a situation which has nothing to do with him?

AL: You still haven't come past blame. I'm not interested in blame, I'm interested in changing...

JB: May I tell you something? May I tell you something? I might be wrong or right.

AL: I don't know – tell me.

JB: Do you know what happens to a man-?

AL: How can I know what happens to a man?

JB: Do you know what happens to a man when he's ashamed of himself when he can't find a job? When his socks stink? When he can't protect anybody? When he can't do anything? Do you know what happens to a man when he can't face his children because he's ashamed of himself? It's not like being a woman...

AL: No, that's right. Do you know what happens to a woman who gives birth, who puts that child out there and has to go out and hook to feed it? Do you know what happens to a woman who

goes crazy and beats her kids across the room because she's so full of frustration and anger? Do you know what that is? Do you know what happens to a lesbian who sees her woman and her child beaten on the street while six other guys are holding her? Do you know what that feels like?

JB: Mm-hm.

AL: Well then, in the same way you know how a woman feels, I know how a man feels, because it comes down to human beings being frustrated and distorted because we can't protect the people we love. So now let's start –

JB: All right, okay...

AL: – let's start with that and deal.

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