Still not your negro: Recovering James Baldwin’s Challenges to Big White Het Lies

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*I am not your Negro* by Raoul Peck is a formidable compilation of James Baldwin’s potent essays, books, letters and notes about race relations in America. It employs “Remember this House”, Baldwin’s unfinished biography about the lives and deaths of Civil Rights activists Malcolm X, Medgar Evers and Martin Luther King Jr., to provide a colorful illustration of the intensity of living and dying as a Black person in America during the Jim Crow era. Through the superimposition of imagery from Civil rights activism, and Black protest in Ferguson, Missouri, *I am not your Negro* demonstrates the parallels between the Civil Rights movement and the Black Lives Matter movement. This highlights the perpetuity of Black American struggle and verifies the ongoing relevance of Baldwin’s ideas about race and power.

Baldwin’s assertion: “I am not your Negro” implores white people to acknowledge race as a category invented to subordinate non-European peoples while marking individuals of European descent as “superior.” Race consequently works as a power dynamic with a long, brutal history of violence employed against non-Europeans to secure the racial category of “white”. This same violence was (and still is) systematically used to build and maintain whiteness, the American Dream and America itself. Unless the American public and American institutions can engage and reconcile with America’s barbaric and bloody foundations, the same violence that was central to America’s birth as a nation will continue to resurface and reassert itself. Ultimately, the legacy of white supremacy will relentlessly wreak havoc and suffering for all Americans.

Unfortunately, the truly radical potential of this documentary's transformative depictions is muted by its critical reception which fails to acknowledge its call for action and self-reflection. This negligence is typical of contemporary liberal white media; its discourse about race tends to limit its own capacity to ignite broad social change. If white liberals would truly like to enhance racial equity in America, they must extend their discourse about race past the ills of history and into the morality and ethics of the meaning of whiteness as a constructed category. If not, Baldwin warned, “there is scarcely any hope for the American Dream… the people who are denied participation in it, by their very presence will wreck it1.” Through an analysis of 5 popular media outlet reviews of this documentary, I reveal modern, white liberal tendencies to engage in reductive and incomplete discourses about race. This insufficient interpretative approach to Baldwin’s message prevents meaningful discourse about racial justice and reconciliation from occurring and thus hinders their fruition.

Film reviews by The New York Times, The Guardian, The Washington Post, CNN and The Rolling Stone glorify the documentary as “brilliant”, “thought-provoking”, “honest”, “emotionally devastating” and “unforgettable”3,4,5,6,7. All of these film reviews acknowledge, to a slight extent, the similarities between the Civil Rights movement and Black Lives Matter and all of these film reviews recognize the relevance of Baldwin’s words today. However, every single one of these reviews ignores Baldwin’s remarks about America’s fabrication of the Negro for the justification of the violence enacted in the name of whiteness- in fact, CNN’s review entirely omits Baldwin’s commentary about America’s white supremacist history. *The Rolling Stone*’s review also eschews this account of American history and instead, focuses more on Baldwin’s influence as an African-American writer.

While *The Washington Post* recognizes the documentary’s emphasis on revealing the “history and collective denial and shame [that] have conspired to forge a dramatically bifurcated American culture5”, it doesn’t specifically mention whose “collective denial and shame5” should be reconciled. *The Post* also admits, that “racial supremacy” has had adverse effects on American society, but by failing to properly name and address white supremacy, whiteness, in this context, remains invisible and again, white Americans are exonerated from their brutal history and their legacy of white supremacy. This prevents white people from claiming responsibility for the creation and maintenance of American white supremacy and as a result, this current system of oppression prevails. *The Guardian* states the documentary is one of the first to explain “the root causes of a complacent white American mindset 4” but fails to actually mention what the causes of this mindset are.

*The New York Times* does actually mention white supremacy and the myth of white innocence within its review. It also acknowledges that white people will go to great lengths to “wash themselves clean of their complicity in racial oppression3,” however, their analysis entirely ignores Baldwin’s challenges to the legitimacy of whiteness. This is problematic because this sustains the widely-held assumption that race is natural or inherent to human populations. As Ta-Nehisi Coates once said “Race is the child of racism, not the father 2”; At its dawn, race was employed to promote European colonial and imperial desire; race inserts people with particular phenotypic traits and ancestries into specific groups and into a racial hierarchy. This hierarchy, which was designed by people descended from Europe, places European peoples at the highest position of power while non-Europeans are assigned to lower positions of power with Black people at the very bottom. This hierarchy is supported by an ideology that holds that Black people are inferior, less intelligent, less beautiful and overall less human than white people, thus justifying destructive European domination. Coates argues that:

“The elevation of the belief in being white was not achieved through wine tasting and ice cream socials, but rather through the pillaging of life, liberty, labor and land; through the flaying of backs, the chaining of limbs, the strangling of dissidents, the destruction of families, the rape of mothers; the sale of children; and various other acts designed, first and foremost, to deny [Black people] the right to secure and govern our own bodies…2”

Whiteness is then, as Baldwin contended, really just “a metaphor for power1.”

“The Negro problem1”, according to James Baldwin, was invented” to safeguard the purity of white people1”, but it has made white people into “criminals and monsters…, ultimately destroying them1.” Baldwin vehemently rejected the label “negro”, proclaiming “I am a man. But if you think I’m a nigger, it means you needed him.” This claim reveals the ways in which racist white people have depended on race to construct and preserve their identity and the power of this identity; “the longevity of racism1”, Baldwin states, “has more to do with white people’s refusal to relinquish power than in their inherent desire to genuinely hate somebody else1.”

Ultimately, it is not enough for white people to confess to the wicked nature of racial violence and white supremacy; they must aggressively interrogate the categories that produced this agony and torment for non-white groups in the first place. If white America fails to do this, it passively participates in the in preservation of these dehumanizing categories and in this way becomes complicit in white supremacy. The victims of white supremacy have, do and will continue to revolt and this, according to James Baldwin, “is the formula for a nation or a kingdom decline1.”

While *I am not your Negro* explores, in great depth, Baldwin’s ideas and insights about Blackness, it almost completely erases Baldwin’s queerness. The documentary hardly touches on Baldwin’s sexuality save for a fleeting moment at the start of a new scene. This scene briefly displays a 1966 FBI memorandum offering details about Baldwin’s involvement in the civil rights movement and stating that Baldwin is rumored to be “a homosexual1”, but the documentary does not return to the question of Baldwin’s sexuality again. Consequently, his sexuality remains just that: a rumor or a myth. We never learn how the intersection of Blackness and queerness informed Baldwin’s life experience and politics. We never learn how much more distanced from the American Dream he became or how much less human his sexuality made him in the eyes of America.

In their essay about James Baldwin and the silencing of queer men, Melton McKinley argues that Baldwin’s expression or representation of queer Black male experience gives voice to and “affirms [8]” the “lives and identities [8]” of other queer Black individuals. In doing so, Baldwin has created “a legacy [8]” allowing for those who would follow in his footsteps to do the same [8].Black queer visibility is therefore useful in the facilitation of queer Black liberation and it also contributes to Baldwin’s vision and hope for a better America.

Although it would be difficult for any individual documentary or film to explore every aspect of an individual’s life, this documentary’s avoidance of Baldwin’s sexuality is detrimental to the film’s accurate portrayal of Baldwin’s life and his radical politics; Baldwin’s queerness was not distinct from his Blackness. This lack of focus on Baldwin’s sexuality is deeply significant; I assume Baldwin’s Blackness and queerness both worked together to exclude him from American society. If this is true, I’m sure Baldwin’s queerness also contributed to and informed his politics. Therefore, although the documentary made it clear that Baldwin wanted a more racially just America, its lack of engagement with Baldwin’s sexuality diminished its own capacity to prompt change across the borders of both race and sexuality. In addition to this, Black liberation is only meaningful and complete if it involves the liberation of marginal Black bodies including queer Black bodies. A vital first step of this liberation process is the recognition and visibility of these subjugated identities.

In conclusion I end this paper with Baldwin’s final quote in this memorable documentary:

“..the future of the Negro of this country is precisely as bright or as dark as the future of the country. It is entirely up to the American people… whether or not they are going to face and deal with and embrace the stranger who they’ve maligned so long... The question you’ve got to ask yourself, the white population of this country has got to ask itself… If I’m not the nigger here and you invented him, you the white people invented him, then you’ve got to find out why. And the future of the country depends on that whether or not it’s able to ask that question1”

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