

Looking the World in the Face: History and Raoul Peck's *I Am Not Your Negro*

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"History is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history."

James Baldwin

(*"Black English: A Dishonest Argument"*, 1980, as quoted in *I Am Not Your Negro*)

Raoul Peck's filmmaking approach in *I Am Not Your Negro*, affords us the opportunity to reacquaint ourselves with the dynamism of James Baldwin's thinking. Our times call on us to take up the critical task of ruthlessly analyzing our economic, social, and political conditions, not only as a way of understanding them, but as a way of changing them and ourselves. Baldwin and Peck each depict this process, in different ways, as messy confrontations and contestations of oppression and struggle that make up history itself. The ways they decipher and deconstruct the periods in which they live offer us a useful methodology. Baldwin and Peck's approaches and their critical elaborations, their contestation of social, political, and economic terrain, recall how Frantz Fanon uplifts the revolutionary potential of radical cultural engagement: "By imparting new meaning and dynamism to artisanship, dance, music, literature, and the oral epic, the colonized subject restructures his own perception. The world no longer seems doomed." (*The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961)

Peck's *I Am Not Your Negro*, takes up the dangling threads of an unfinished book by James Baldwin about the lives, politics, struggles, and deaths of Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King. Baldwin's previously unheard and unread words are brought to life through a vocal performance by Samuel L. Jackson and woven together with historical footage of Baldwin, Malcolm, King, and Evers, with moving and still images of US cultural life (commercials, TV shows, state and business propaganda films, etc.) and political struggles of the 20th century. The text of some of Baldwin's letters appear on screen for us to read, as does the text from FBI counterintelligence reports on Baldwin's movements, politics, and sexuality. *I Am Not Your Negro* also lingers on scenes from a dozen or so other films, as Baldwin's words in Jackson's voice offer scathing criticism and insight. Contemporary footage and images from our time are interspersed through the film and offset by some comment from Baldwin or a film or TV segment from the 1950s or 60s. This contemporary footage almost exclusively depicts the violence of policing and police repression of uprisings, from Los Angeles to Ferguson.

The film charts Baldwin's attempts to energize the lives and contradictions of Evers, Malcolm, and King:

I want these three lives to bang against and reveal each other, as, in truth, they did...and use their dreadful journey as a means of instructing the people whom they loved so much, who betrayed them, and for whom they gave their lives. (as quoted in *I Am Not Your Negro*)

Baldwin uses the tension created by complicating and undermining the simplistic narratives clouding our relationships with Evers, Malcolm, and King. For Baldwin, Evers is not a victim but a martyr; Malcolm and King are not fixed poles reducing social struggle to morality play. During one scene, Peck shows Baldwin noting that Martin and Malcolm seem to get closer and closer to each other even as—or maybe because—they are engaged in fierce debate and antagonism. Says Baldwin:

By the time each died, their positions had become virtually the same position. It can be said, indeed, that Martin picked up Malcolm's burden, articulated the vision which Malcolm had begun to see, and for which he paid with his life. And that Malcolm was one of the people Martin saw on the mountaintop. (as quoted in *I Am Not Your Negro*)

In many ways Peck creates similar tension by showing, telling, and asking through a depiction of Baldwin's words and by creating a nonlinear cultural, political, and economic landscape. The film asks: How do the things that are meant to degrade and dehumanize compel a spirit of steadfastness and resilience? How do our attempts to withdraw or reject draw us closer to what we are trying to flee? How does the dreadfulness of our reality cut through the mythologies papering over it? How does a commitment to domination and supremacy cause inner

decay? How does consumption and pursuit of the good life lead to grinding emptiness? How does history have everything to do with the present? And, how does the project of oppression and genocide fuel the unfinished business of freedom and liberation? For Peck, as for Baldwin, it seems radical questions don't have simple answers, and aren't meant to. They instead perhaps offer an opportunity to be parts and drivers of the tensions they create, and so, too, to be parts and drivers of history, rather than to be crushed by it.

In the late 1990s Peck made two films about Congolese national liberation leader and Pan-Africanist Patrice Lumumba; one a narrative film, the other a documentary. [Artist, curator, and activist Prerana Reddy commenting on Peck's documentary, *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet*](#), writes, "By inciting the viewer to explore the economic, political, and personal uses of the image, it presents the image as a contested terrain..." *I Am Not Your Negro* presents images in a similar fashion and in many ways is *about* contested terrain. As in Baldwin's work, the film is a radical invitation to engage that terrain, to understand it, to complicate it, to change it. Following a harrowing scene about Medgar Evers' assassination, Baldwin observes: "When you try to stand up and look the world in the face like you had a right to be here, you have attacked the entire power structure of the Western world."

Raoul Peck is also coming up against the West as a Third World filmmaker. *I Am Not Your Negro* is in large part about film itself; film as part of contested terrain. [Says Peck in a recent interview](#), "Film is much more dangerous than it looks –you know... film is not so innocent. Baldwin explained to me, you know, what was the content of films besides just the story and great actors—that film is also ideology."

Peck and Baldwin's engagements with film each offer a useful methodology for understanding and participating in political struggle. There are many scenes in *I Am Not Your Negro* in which Baldwin engages with the cinema of his time, as Peck overlays Baldwin's words with scenes from various Hollywood movies. Of the racist depiction of Black people, the genocide of Indigenous people, or the ambiguities and repression of sexuality, Baldwin describes being both "scared" and "strengthened" by their "icy brutality," but always having to engage these contradictions: "I was a child, you know, and when a child puts his eyes in the world he has to use what he sees. There's nothing else to use. And you are formed by what you see, the choices you have to make." (as quoted in *I Am Not Your Negro*)

[Peck reflects on a similar upbringing:](#)

...Like most children around the world, I also grew up with the mythology of American cinema and its images. At that time it was called cultural imperialism... Like many children in the third world, I learned very early on how to decipher and deconstruct these images.

[For both Peck](#) as a Haitian, and Baldwin as an African American, knowledge of self and history and terrain are indispensable parts of the struggle to own our histories:

I come from a country where we knew from day one who we were and where we came from—most importantly from a country which made history by freeing itself, on the battlefield, from its masters, and got its independence.

[Peck further notes](#), "it seems politically urgent to put Baldwin's word 'in the streets'..." In the streets we then have an opportunity to learn from Peck, learning from Baldwin, taking up the brave and creative, and potentially revolutionary, political work of deciphering and deconstructing the images, stories, conditions, and histories that are imposed on us, but that are also part of the contested terrain on which we struggle. [Raoul Peck hammers home](#) the blunt force of his film, saying: "You have to own your history, otherwise you will never be able to build anything in your future."

Peck's entreaty to own our histories echoes a similar commitment from Baldwin. Baldwin's insistence that we engage rigorously with history is not recuperative nor nostalgic. He reminds us that knowledge of our history is one of the best ways to critically engage with the contemporary world. As he notes in "Unnameable Objects, Unspeakable Crimes" (1966),

For history, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities and our aspirations.

And it is with great pain and terror that one begins to realize this. In great pain and terror, one begins to assess the history which has placed one where one is, and formed one's point of view. In great pain and terror, because, thereafter, one enters into battle with that historical creation, oneself, and attempts to recreate oneself according to a principle more humane and more liberating; one begins the attempt to achieve a level of personal maturity and freedom which robs history of its tyrannical power, and also changes history.

Today we need our history more than ever. It is a touchstone to which we must return to remind ourselves of lessons not to repeat. It imbues our analysis of our contemporary period with confidence in knowledge and experience that spans the years and may be applied to immediate struggles at hand. Perhaps even more importantly, history helps to imagine possible futures. If we are to respond effectively, for instance, to attacks against Black people today—through the violence of policing and vigilantism, or policy, or malign neglect—should we not examine and absorb the struggles to resist mob violence against runaway slaves, or anti-lynching campaigns, or the Black power movement, or the Movement for Black Lives? And would it not benefit us to consider what tactics and strategies have been most effective in each of these movements (and the many other organized efforts to resist anti-Black violence) while earnestly considering the specificities of the historical moments, actors, material conditions, and contradictions that may have been present when each was waged? Further, should we not engage vigorously with the circumstances under which our history is produced and interpreted?

As the stories of the events that constitute our histories are repeated, written down, or depicted through film, certain narratives emerge that cement specific analyses and interpretations as common sense. As Baldwin noted in a 1963 speech on American Identity, for instance, “I suppose that all those cowboy/Indian stories are designed to reassure us that no crime was committed. We have made a legend out of a massacre.” (as quoted in *I Am Not Your Negro*) Owning our history and being responsible to it means that we understand it as more than mere narrative, however, and rather a set of instances, situations, actions, and reactions with real material consequences for their participants, the outcomes of which may endure for generations.

Applying historical lessons to the present may require us to balance an urgency for action and transformation with a humility to learn from people who have engaged in struggle over time, or do to research, or to seek out archival materials without an assumption that history has nothing to teach us nor that lessons may be brought forward wholesale without adaptation to the contemporary context. The beatings of Black civil rights activists Baldwin describes witnessing at the hands of law enforcement are not equivalent to those suffered by Black activists associated with current day protest movements, for instance, but the through line of violence targeting Black protest must be examined thoroughly for information about the strains of thought and action that persist across these decades.

At the same time, however, engagement with and responsibility to our history provides a platform from which to analyze change over time and the role of people's struggle in forging social transformation. This type of historical engagement helps us disrupt the idea that “that's just the way things are” or that “since the beginning to time, humans have...” Thinking critically about change over time helps us see the force of our collective actions as well as their setbacks. It further encourages us to take up the challenge of *making* history as well as reflecting on it.

Baldwin's example encourages us to embrace challenge and confrontation as essential to making change. The incisiveness of his insights and clarity of his analysis stand as examples of the type of conviction necessary in long-term struggle. Despite being reviled by some of his contemporaries or pushed aside as old fashioned or outmoded in his writing, the fresh look at Baldwin's work offered through Peck's assemblage of his thought helps us re-examine him as an important political analyst. For instance, when set up to "debate" Yale Professor of Philosophy, Paul Weiss, who questioned why Baldwin focused on race, Baldwin replied,

I don't know what most white people in this country feel. But I can only conclude what they feel from the state of their institutions. I don't know if white Christians hate Negroes or not, but I know we have a Christian church which is white and a Christian church which is Black. I know, as Malcolm X once put it, the most segregated hour in American life is high noon on Sunday. That says a great deal for me about a Christian nation. It means I can't afford to trust most white Christians, and I certainly cannot trust the Christian church. I don't know whether labor unions and their bosses really hate me—that doesn't matter—but I know I'm not in their union. I don't know whether the real estate lobby has anything against Black people, but I know the real estate lobby is keeping me in the ghetto. I don't know if the board of education hates Black people, but I know the textbooks they give my children to read and the schools we have to go to. Now, this is the evidence. You want me to make an act of faith, risking myself, my wife, my woman, my sister, my children on some idealism which you assure me exists in America, which I have never seen. (as quoted in *I Am Not Your Negro*)

The clarity and directness of Baldwin's response above reminds us of the importance of articulating our experiences in our own terms. As reviewer [Ismail Muhammad notes](#) of *I Am Not Your Negro*, "The film asks us to ponder what we can know about our contemporary moment when we stop ventriloquizing our ancestors, and begin to speak in our own voices." While Baldwin chose the role of witness as his primary means of engaging with social change, his mode of analysis remains useful for social actors as well as witnesses. It compels us to look directly and critically at our contexts, at the forces at work in shaping those contexts, and at the cracks in the system that may be exposed or exploited to shift power. Far from merely an objective observer, Baldwin's witness acts as an amplifier for movements under repression. Even if his radical credentials have been in question, his ability to drill down to the heart of the matter—white supremacy, capitalism, colonization—and draw crucial connections between histories and geographies is instructive for radical movements today.

Peck's film, in turn, highlights the ways that Baldwin's engagement with history—putting historical moments at a variety of scales in conversation with each other, offers the possibility of creating entirely new ways of thinking and understanding. Additionally by offering examples of Baldwin's recuperation of pain, trauma, and anger as productive motors of resistance, Peck allows us to see Baldwin beyond his beautiful prose and captivating works of fiction. He shows us the self-proclaimed witness as actor. He offers us Baldwin's thought and method of analysis as tools of resistance for today.

I do not believe in the twentieth-century myth that we are all helpless, that it's out of our hands. It's only out of our hands if we don't want to pick it up. And the truth about us in this country is that we have evaded it for so long. The last cooling-off period relating to the Negro problem, as somebody put it, occurred during the Reconstruction, and we are paying for that now. It has escaped everybody's notice that it doesn't go back as far as the Civil War; it doesn't go back any further than 1900. Those laws that we are trying to overthrow in this country now are not much older than I am. Faulkner says they are folkways, and one would think they came from Rome. But they came out of Southern legislatures just before the First World War. And they are no older than that. Now, if they can be put there, they can be taken away. (from "Nationalism, Colonialism, and the United States: One Minute to Twelve—A Forum" 1961)

This weekend the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences will host its 89th Academy Awards ceremony. *I Am Not Your Negro* is nominated in the category of best documentary feature. This film and several others, including *Moonlight*, *Loving*, and *OJ: Made in America*, *The Fits*, and *Fences* have been bright spots in 2016 in terms of the nuance with which they illustrate the complexity of Black life under the unyielding violence of state and cultural forces. Rejecting simplistic or reductionistic explanations and formulas, these films go to the heart of state repression and cultural hegemony and emphasize the nature of Black resistance in all its complexity and contradiction. In the case of Baldwin, [Peck notes](#), “I think when you’re younger and you’re trying to find answers, I don’t think Baldwin is the person you go to. I think when you recognize and you become aware of the complexity of the problem, then you want to go to someone who articulates the complexity and is prepared to rest with ambiguity.”

At CPE we have been energized by the interest and enthusiasm around *I Am Not Your Negro*. The film is being shown in an increasing number of theaters and has inspired a wave of criticism and reflection that helps bring Baldwin's political thought back into sharper focus and has helped expose new audiences to his work. We hope that this enthusiasm will encourage viewers to take seriously Baldwin's example of historical engagement and apply those lessons to their campaigns and projects today.