



**“JAMES BALDWIN IN CRITICAL CONVERSATION
WITH KAMALA AND US:
STRIVING TO ACHIEVE OUR COUNTRY AND CHANGE THE WORLD”**

Los Angeles Sentinel, 08-01-24, p.B-1

DR. MAULANA KARENGA

ON THIS THE CENTENNIAL ANNIVERSARY and celebration of the coming into being of Nana James Baldwin (August 2, 1924), beloved writer and teacher of the beautiful, transformative and lie-resistant truth, we find ourselves still struggling and working our way through the awesome responsibilities of what he called the possibility of our being able “to achieve our country and change the history of the world”. This awesome task is brought into stark relief by the presidential campaign of Vice President Kamala Harris and the hard choices we must make and the difficult work we must do to self-consciously, rightfully and even radically reimagine and complete this task. And at the center of these hard choices must be our conscious and uncompromising commitment to make her campaign not only the support of a person, but also and most important, the support of *people-focused* and *earth-considered* policies which she commits to and pursues. Likewise, this election must move beyond the simple exchange of elites and become a clear and collectively determined and decided way for achieving the truly just and good society and world we all want, struggle for and deserve.

Nana Baldwin rightly senses and reasons that this is a problematic of both possibility and impossibility, and he calls on us, indeed urges and encourages us, especially us Black people, with others so inclined and committed, to dare and do the impossible. It is, he suggests, central and sustaining to who we are and how we understand and assert ourselves in the world. Thus, he says, “I know what I am asking is impossible”, this daring to achieve our country and change

the history and hope of the world, “But in our time as in every time, the impossible is the least we can demand – and one is after all emboldened by the spectacle of human history in general and (*African American*) *history in particular*, for it testifies to nothing else than the perpetual achievement of the impossible” (italics mine).

Here, he bears rightful witness to our history of continuously overcoming seemingly unsurmountable obstacles, finding ways out of no way, refusing to be brittle and broken, dispirited or defeated, and reaching inside ourselves and, as Nana Nannie Burroughs taught, demonstrating repeatedly that “we specialize in the wholly impossible”. Indeed, we constantly wonder and are humbly amazed, ourselves, about our resilience and resourcefulness, our adaptive vitality and human durability as Black persons and people. And we reaffirm and sing ourselves, declaring with Nana Clara Ward “My soul looks back and wonder how I got over”, indeed, how *we* got over. Yes, with bowed heads and uplifted hands, we still wonder how we have endured and prevailed during these long and casualty-laden centuries of brutish enslavement, savage segregation and continuing systemic racist oppression.

Now, when Baldwin calls the USA “our country”, he lays equal claim to a country that does not equally claim him and thus poses a problematic for Black people and other marginalized, excluded and oppressed people in terms of both consideration and claim. For he makes us ask ourselves what would make a person or people feel a country is theirs in the face and force of brutal realities of treatment and discourse that

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argue otherwise. Clearly, it cannot simply be birth or naturalization alone that gives us this sense of our belonging to the country and the country belonging to us. In such moral and political calculation, it is not only what we have given and continue to give the country, but also what the country must give us in reciprocal return, i.e., equal respect and treatment and just and equitable conditions that ensure and enhance our capacities for living good and meaning lives rooted in our shared status, wealth and power.

Baldwin defiantly declares possession of this land and equal rights to all its common goods, intangible and tangible, arguing in various writings his people’s investment in this land on virtually every level, i.e., their physical, intellectual and creative labor, their service, sacrifice and undeserved, unnecessary and systemically imposed suffering. There are, however, signs in his writings that he concedes prior and unceded claim to Native Americans, especially in his recognition of the European crime of genocide against Native Americans and his rejection of their thuggish, imperialist, and religiously sanctioned “doctrine of the right of discovery”, i.e., the false racial and religious right to pillage and plunder the lives and lands of peoples of color whom they claimed to have discovered. But he will not give an inch or iota of ground to White supremacy claims of Whites as the lords of the land, sole owners and rulers without any others equal in claim or merit.

Clearly, “to achieve our country”, we must assume and believe that the U.S. is our country in equal measure to others and that there is unfinished work to be done and struggles to be waged. And we must believe and do this in spite of our brutal, barbaric and involuntary insertion into this country, the Holocaust of enslavement, the savagery of segregation imposed on us, and the continued racist ideological, political and insti-

tutional denials of our equal rights, equal citizenship, and reciprocal related benefits. In fact, our Black Freedom Struggle, misnamed the Civil Rights Movement, has been and continues to be at its center, a righteous and relentless struggle to be our ourselves and to free ourselves, reaffirm our inalienable right to this country, and build with others so committed and so inclined the longed and strived for good society and world we all can claim as a truly cooperative and transformative achievement.

Indeed, one of the greatest tasks for VP Kamala Harris in her presidential campaign is to make more of us and others feel this is truly our country, not simply by birth, but also by benefit. That is to say, it is indispensable for each and every one to feel and know through equal rights, equal treatment, equitable participation and equitable benefits that this country is ours as an uncontested right with an enduring responsibility to not only save it from the monster side of itself, currently represented by the aggressive tragedy of Trump and kind, but also to eventually expand the arc of genuine inclusion, meaningful involvement and shared common good.

There are several interrelated issues that candidate and President Harris must begin to address immediately in platform and policy. They include: economic security and justice especially for the most vulnerable, i.e., secure income, economic initiative opportunities, taxation reform in favor of the people, eliminating student debt, restraining gentrification, and delivering reparations especially its economic dimension; political rights of voting and participation in governance without discrimination, restraint or repression; women’s reproductive rights and related issues of freedom; social care for the vulnerable and all others in terms of healthcare, childcare, elder care and family leave; housing availability and affordability;

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new immigration policy reflective of the world, especially with attention to Haiti and Continental Africans as well as others; new directions and approaches in international relations, especially toward Haiti and African countries and particularly urgent, stopping the Israeli genocide in Gaza, and supporting Palestinian self-determination and security; and environmental justice, acting on pressing climate change issues and the plunder, pollution and depletion of the earth.

FINALLY, NANA JAMES BALDWIN, NANA Dr. Anna Julia Cooper, Nana Haji Malcolm, Nana Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, and other clear-seers and deep thinkers among us urged us to understand and assert ourselves in world-encompassing ways and to link our struggle for freedom and justice and a new world to that of others

similarly situated in the world. And thus, he says, “any real commitment to Black freedom in this country would have the effect of reordering all our priorities, and altering all our commitments, so that, for horrendous example, we would be supporting Black freedom fighters in South Africa and Angola . . . ”, and other parts of Africa as well as freedom fighters in Latin America, Asia and the Middle East (especially Palestine) against racist, imperialist and colonialist interests. It is, he repeats, an awesome overwhelming task which he and history have assigned us, but this is a vital and actually indispensable way we must template, test and temper ourselves, repair, renew and remake ourselves in the process and practice required “to achieve our country and change the history of the world”.▲

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