



**RE-READING AND REFLECTING ON JAMES BALDWIN:  
RETHINKING RACE AND AMERICA**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

The last time I saw James Baldwin was at a memorial colloquium on Hoyt Fuller at Cornell University in 1984 at which we were both presenting. He was talking, as always, about the problematic reality and responsibility of race and writing, about his continuing amazement at White folk's cultivated self-delusions concerning what they do for and to other people, and the harried and hassled hope he still held for America in spite of its chronic and seemingly incurable race-induced sickness. This re-reading of Baldwin in this his month of birth, August 2 (1924-1987), is done in respectful remembrance of one of our greatest writers. But I also re-read him to gain added insight into rethinking race and America, recognizing Baldwin's deep attachment and constant challenge to the country and idea of America, his insight on race and racism and his dignity-affirming defiance of the established order.

I had met Baldwin in the late 60's at a small gathering at Sammy Davis, Jr.'s house and we talked about race, revolt and revolution, about his writings, and his ideas and aspirations concerning this country. He was, of course, engaging and insightful, and as everyone knows intensely expressive in word and gesture. His book, *The Fire Next Time* (1963), was among the essential readings of the 60's and its title's focus on "fire" provided a metaphor of repeated use as cities went up in flames and smoke across the country. He had, I told him, predicted the fire next time, and the time had arrived.

Actually, Messenger Muhammad and Min. Malcolm had already prophesized the coming of fire in both religious and political terms, but Baldwin had presented it as both an aesthetic and social assertion. Of all his essays, I liked most *The Fire Next Time* which reflected the roots and range of his impressive creativity. It included his ever-present blues notes and religious references, his righteous anger at racism, his painful personal journey as poetry and a source of depthful insight, his critique of White Christian hypocrisy, and the gentle beauty of his

description of Messenger Muhammad as an embraceable father figure.

In this essay, Baldwin was, as ever, mindful and openly appreciative of the adaptive vitality and human durability of Black people, their "indescribable struggle to defeat the stratagems that White Americans have used, and use, to deny (them their) humanity". Indeed, he says, it requires great internal strength and cleverness "to assault the mighty and indifferent fortress of White supremacy, as (Blacks) in this country have done so long". Moreover, he says, "It demands great spiritual resilience, not to hate the hater whose foot is on your neck, and an even greater miracle of perception and charity not to teach your children to hate".

He realized the role that African Americans played and play in redefining the course and character of this country in moral and human terms. Thus, he asserts, that the Black young people, and by extension others, of the Movement who faced the mobs and madness of racism, "Came out of a long line of improbable aristocrats—the only genuine aristocrats this country has produced". Here Baldwin, as I read him, reflects the *Kawaida*—Maatian ethical contention that real royalty is rooted in righteousness, and nobility in its highest sense, is a moral status, not a social one. This is the ancient ethical lesson in the *Husia* in which the sage Djedi teaches Pharaoh Khufu in his defense of the dignity, inherent worthiness, and infinite value of the life of every human being, including a nameless prisoner. Baldwin's statement also reaffirms Marcus Garvey's contention that a real African aristocracy must be based and built on service and loyalty to the people.

Part of African Americans' strength and resilience, Baldwin tells us, lies in the fact that we, at least most of us, have "the great advantage of having never believed that collection of myths to which White America clings", which are both dishonestly self-congratulatory and ultimately self-destructive. These White myths are about being freedom-loving, the world's

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greatest, invincibility in war, and honorable dealing with others darker and less powerful. But the Holocaust of enslavement, continuing White supremacy, the Vietnam War, and other imperial and unjust wars, as well as a history of brutal dispossession, colonialism and genocide should make us, as Baldwin says, dismiss those who hold these myths “as the slightly mad victims of their own brainwashing”.

But make no mistake, Baldwin loved this country and had close relationships with no small number of Whites. His anger was directed against the savage cruelty and horrific costs of White racism, and wasted possibilities of truly human collaboration and exchange in mutual benefit. He wanted Whites to divest themselves of illusions of innocence and superiority and of “the notion that they are in possession of some intrinsic value that Black people need or want”. For it is an irrational and arrogant “assumption which, . . . makes the solution to the (Black) problem depend on the speed with which (Blacks) accept and adopt White standards”.

Baldwin observed that “a bill is coming in that I fear America is not prepared to pay”, i.e., one of radical transformation. Here he quotes W. E. B. DuBois’ classic assertion that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line”, i.e., race and racism. It is, he laments, “a fearful and delicate problem which compromises, when it does not corrupt, all the American efforts to build a better world—here, there and everywhere”. To get beyond this sickness which has produced a past “of rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape, death and humiliation” and continued oppression, we must free this country of cherished myths and

self-deception even in the 21st century.

He had written in an earlier essay, “The time has come, God knows, for us to examine ourselves...” as both persons and a society. But he warned, “We can only do this if we are willing to free ourselves of the myth of America and try to find out what is really happening here”. Certainly, what passes as the health care, voting, police violence and gun debate, with all its racial subtext, and the attempt to block and brand criticism of America as “bitter” and “unpatriotic”, reflect this need of serious social and self-examination and escape from self-delusion.

Baldwin concludes the essay with a call for shared responsibility of progressives. He states that: “Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise”. We, “the relatively conscious” must, he urges, “insist on or create the consciousness of others”, and imagine a new way of relating in and to the world. And “if we . . . do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare and achieve our country and change the history of the world”.

Being Baldwin, he concedes the extreme difficulty of the struggle before us saying, “I know that what I’m asking is impossible. But in our time, as in every time, the impossible is the least that one 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 less than the perpetual achievement of the impossible.” And after all, as our foremother Nannie Burroughs and all our ancestors reaffirm, “we specialize in the wholly impossible.”

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