

# *I Am Not Your Negro*

James Baldwin

## Suggested Discussion Questions

### **I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO**

1.- Who is James Baldwin referring to when he says 'Your' negro. And what do you think this means.

2.- Baldwin asks not what's going to happen to the Negro as much as what's going to happen to the country. He cites Martin Luther King:

*"Sitting down in a bus - not just having the right but having the duty to sit down."* - How do you interpret these comments?

### **PAYING MY DUES**

Expression meaning 'to earn the right to have something because you worked hard: *I've **paid my dues** for the last 25 years, and now I'm ready for a comfortable retirement.*

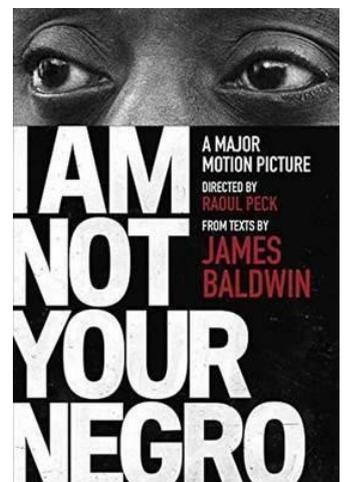
3.- What do you think Baldwin means by wanting to pay his dues in the context of his life story?

4.- What purpose do you think it serves to add the anecdote about Joan Crawford? (p15)

### **HEROES**

5.- The role of the black janitor had a strong impact on Baldwin, and as he was a scapegoat that even resembled his father somewhat, there's no doubt that it was scary for him. How do you think he means that it strengthened him as well? (p21)

6.- By the time of the Civil Rights Movement, Stepin Fetchit was a cultural anethma to African-Americans of the time, just as the "House Nigger" had been to their great grandparents. (Note: Samuel L. Jackson does a caricature of this character in Quentin Tarantino's *Django in Chains*) The chapter on heroes is largely a consideration of



the lack of viable role models or heroes for black people in Hollywood. Where did they indeed find them?

7.- Baldwin wrote: *"It comes as a great shock to discover the country which is your birthplace and to which you owe your life and your identity has not in its whole system of reality evolved any place for you."* p22 Has the situation changed in the 50-odd years since? Discuss.

### **WITNESS**

8.- On page 34 Baldwin writes, *"White people are astounded by Birmingham"* (referring to the 1963 bombing of a church there where four black girls died.) *"Black people aren't. White people are endlessly demanding to be reassured that Birmingham is really on Mars. They don't want to believe, still less to act on the belief, that what is happening in Birmingham is happening all over the country."* Over images of white men beating and kicking black protesters at lunch counters, he says, *"They don't want to realize that there is not one step, morally or actually, between Birmingham and Los Angeles."* Discuss how this remark, where Baldwin refers to Hollywood could be seen as prescient.

### **PURITY**

9.- On page 58, Baldwin talks about *"the role of a guilty and constricted white imagination as assigned to the blacks."* This seems like an accurate description of how the average white American was incapable of understanding the everyday experience of Afro-Americans, and in denial about how they were complicit in creating it. Discuss

10.- Page 84, How do you think Sidney Poitier could be seen as being used against his own people?

### **SELLING THE NEGRO**

11.- Page 77: *"Simplicity is taken to be a great American virtue along with sincerity."* And then page 79, *"One of the results of this is that immaturity is taken to be a virtue, too."* This immaturity can be seen in white culture in the naivete of cultural icons of the time such as Doris Day and the over-romanticize masculine ideal of box office idols such as Gary Cooper. Baldwin offers as a counterpoint, the example of Ray Charles. Discuss.

## I AM NOT A NIGGER

12.- Page 107:

*"I attest to this: the world is not white; it never was white, cannot be white. White is a metaphor for power, and that is simply a way of describing Chase Manhattan Bank."*

Some forty-odd years later, October 2019:

Donald Trump tweets:

*"So some day, if a Democrat becomes President and the Republicans win the House, even by a tiny margin, they can impeach the President, without due process or fairness or any legal rights. All Republicans must remember what they are witnessing here - a lynching. But we will WIN!"*

*"Trump has inspired multiple acts of racist violence and his referring to impeachment as a 'lynching' is risible,"* wrote The Atlantic's Adam Serwer. *"But worse will be his toadies adopting this inversion of past and present, with the nation's most powerful racist as a victim of racist violence, as a talking point."*

Rebuttal:

Rep. Bobby Rush, D-Ill., a civil rights activist who founded the Illinois chapter of the Black Panthers, demanded that Trump *"delete this tweet"*. Writing:

*"You think this impeachment is a LYNCHING? What the hell is wrong with you? Do you know how many people who look like me have been lynched, since the inception of this country, by people who look like you."*