

Commentary

James Baldwin Speaks to the Nation on the Occasion of Donald Trump's Inauguration

By Christopher Z. Hobson

(Author's note: I've been working for several years on a book about James

Baldwin's use of religious language to describe social and sexual transformation. Baldwin (1924-1987), once seen as belonging to a past era, has grown in relevance as his uncanny ability to speak to America's sins of exclusion and blindness have seemed more and more timely. So it felt appropriate to ask what he would say today. I asked him to choose five quotations from his works that he thought most applicable to the present occasion. He cheated a little, insisting on two for his third selection. The quotations are followed by our back-and-forth comments, which, obviously, are imagined.)

The world is white no longer, and it will never be white again.
(*"Stranger in the Village,"* 1953)

CH: Why did you choose these words to start with? Surely not just because they were the earliest published?

JB: They are prior in my life and thought. I wrote this at the end of an essay about being the first Black resident in a small Swiss village, where I had gone with my then-lover, Lucien Happesberger, to finish my first novel. The comment, I hoped, pointed to an emerging, not yet clearly visible truth: the world, never "white" in reality, was becoming "white no longer" in thought, ideas, activity, and people's impact on social life—if not, yet, in most white



people's perception. Really, this belief, and the contradiction it involved between present and future reality, formed the whole basis of my subsequent writing.

CH: And they are relevant today because—?

JB: I'm speaking from a distance (but I have excellent connectivity, as one says now) and I'm aware that many issues besides race and bigotry were important in the recent election. But it's my impression that the new president has not absorbed the idea I was trying to convey at all. When he speaks about Representative Lewis of Georgia—whom I knew back when—or talks about Black communities as if all Black people live in utter poverty and despair, or says we must support the police against the threat of anarchy, or rails against immigrants and Muslims—whom I would include if I were writing my essay today—my impression is that this is someone who does not know these people at all, and for whom the world remains white.

CH: If that is true about Trump, what about the people who voted for him?

JB: The obvious point, I think, is that not all of those voters are the same. Some may have been primarily motivated by bigotry and some by that as well as other issues—the economy, the very real arrogance and dishonesty of the other candidate—and some may have been motivated mainly by those issues despite distaste for their candidate's statements, but without that being a deal breaker. But the world doesn't wait for anyone, and these voters will be tested, quite soon. When police next shoot Black youth (unfortunately we can be sure of this) and there is protest in the streets, when the government targets immigrants for deportation and churches try to protect them, when a new Supreme Court reconsiders abortion and people organize mass demonstrations, where will these voters be then? It's not guaranteed that they will all stay with the new president.

CH: There have been many signs in the last weeks and months of the beginning of a new movement of protest and resistance—not just against Trump, but distinct struggles such as at Standing Rock. Perhaps overoptimistically, I hope these threads of a new movement will grow, spread, come together, and become more far-reaching. This movement is still taking form—and I think it very

much needs to include a struggle for jobs and economic rebuilding—but on the issue we're focusing on, it is already, to some extent, an embodiment of the idea that the world is "white no longer," and of the hope for a genuinely post-racial future.

JB: It's very early to say what this movement you're speaking of may become. Two things seem important. One is that people like yourself have to speak about the post-racial future you're presenting as a hope. The other is that the movement itself has to embrace that hope, and not just as an ideal, but has to genuinely work to solve the nightmare that was not solved in my time.

CH: I have a Dominican friend who said, about Trump, "He thinks the country is white; and maybe it is, for the next four years."

JB: People in the United States, themselves, will have to determine whether that is true. What they do, in response to whatever the new administration's actions are, will determine whether your friend was too pessimistic, or not.

It was necessary to hold on to the things that mattered. The dead man mattered, the new life mattered; blackness and whiteness did not matter; to believe that they did was to acquiesce in one's own destruction. ("Notes of a Native Son," 1955)

JB: This was in the concluding pages of my essay. I was speaking about the Harlem riot of August 1943, which broke out on the night of my father's funeral and my own nineteenth birthday, and a few days after the birth of my father's last child, my youngest sister. Of course, I was speaking too about the overall life of the United States. This idea, of course, is also a challenge to the new president and his administration. So far he has not shown an awareness that "blackness and whiteness do not matter," or, shall we say, that blackness and whiteness, immigration status, and religious identification do not matter. But this is also a question for the country, and it can be a tricky one because "blackness and whiteness do not matter" can be an evasion, if, let's say, people bring up something of particular concern to African Americans such as police murders and others say, you are being divisive by bringing up race. In that essay, I also said—and this was a lifelong pattern of

thought—that it was necessary “to hold in the mind forever two ideas which seemed to be in opposition,” and this is an example. Blackness and whiteness do not matter, yet they must be allowed to matter, because they are there.

CH: Your novels, particularly the later ones that you include in some of your selections, are centered in African American communities (Harlem and elsewhere). They celebrate African American culture, particularly blues and Gospel music, and they value African American survival modes and struggle over historical time. You saw your own community as transmitting a culture that was precious for the world at large.

JB: Those things are who I am. I would not be a full human being without them, just as I would not be without the Jewish students I knew at DeWitt Clinton High School, some of whom became friends for life. So yes, race, national background, religion all matter, not just as social factors, things that other people assign to us that we must pay attention to—at the risk of our lives!—but as parts of who we are. And yet, not just in a political sense but in the most basic human sense, what matters in life (or should) is its beginning, its accomplishments and failures, its end (and for many, the hope of a life beyond), but certainly not race. And that idea, of course, is also a challenge to the new president and for the country.

He is placed in solitary for refusing to be raped. He loses a tooth, again, and almost loses an eye. Something hardens in him, something changes forever, his tears harden in his belly. But he has leaped from the promontory of despair. He is fighting for his life. He sees his baby's face before him, he has an appointment he must keep, and he will be here, he swears, sitting in the shit, sweating and stinking, when the baby gets here. (If Beale Street Could Talk, 1974)

"A lot of us came back from over there [the Korean War] bitter," I said.... "It was bitter to see that you were part of



a country that didn't give a fuck about you, or anybody else." (Just Above My Head, 1979)

JB: I made these selections, from my last two novels, because, if there are reasons for hope, we also have to have our eyes open to American brutality and exclusion, to police, government, and vigilante violence, legal frameups, buying and selling of witnesses, and prisons—the America that the new president's intended unleashing of police and war on immigrants are meant to revive—and he has to be aware of opposition and resistance to that America. *If Beale Street Could Talk* is about a man framed for rape and his family's and a white lawyer's effort to defend him, which is still unsuccessful at the book's end; *Just Above My Head* covers the pre-civil rights years, the civil rights movement, and the loss of radical hope in the 1970s. In both I tried to show the will to fight back against oppression, as well as the hope not just for a new country, but a new world, that was so palpable then.

CH: Almost at the end of *Beale Street*, the imprisoned man's fiancée, who is the narrator and is about to give birth, feels her baby kick, and imagines the kick as a question, "*Is there not one righteous among them?*"—a reference, in your biblically-influenced vocabulary, to Abraham's plea to God to spare Sodom, in Genesis 18. How does that fit?

JB: It's a question that someone in her circumstances must ask: she is about to go into labor, and her lover and fiancé is in pre-trial detention with no prospect of bail, or confidence in not being convicted unjustly. Yet the implied answer, maybe surprisingly, is that there are—the lawyer who defends him, the Jewish landlord who rented to the two lovers, and more. Abraham bargained God down to ten. I think there were more than ten, in New York, even in those years. There was a tenuous network of the righteous. So, I hope, there is a network of "the righteous" forming today.

If Guy is saying he does not like being a Frenchman, what would he think of Arthur if Arthur proclaimed that he did not like being a black American? And indeed, for the very first time, and almost certainly because he is sitting on this unknown avenue [in Paris], he puts the two words together black American and hears, at once, the

very crescendo of contradiction and the unanswering and unanswerable thunder and truth of history—which is nothing more and nothing less than the beating of his own heart, his song. (Just Above My Head)

JB: Through the thoughts of Arthur Montana, my protagonist, I was getting at the conflicted and paradoxical experience of African American identity—that calling oneself American in a country that reviles and disregards African Americans is a contradiction, and yet African Americans have consciously chosen to do just that, and to claim full rights in a land they have built, for two hundred years.

CH: It is worth noting that this month, January 2017, marks the 200th anniversary of one of the first African American mass meetings on the topic of voluntary repatriation of free Africans to Liberia, in which 3,000 persons at AME Bishop Richard Allen’s Bethel Church in Philadelphia rejected this idea and asserted, among other points, “Whereas our ancestors (not of choice) were the first successful cultivators of the wilds of America, we their descendants feel ourselves entitled to participate in the blessings of her luxuriant soil, which their blood and sweat manured.”

JB: Today, of course, I would add the same point about Dominicans, Mexicans, Vietnamese, Muslim immigrants, and so on. Those words you cite can stand as another warning to the new administration: people will not give up their dreams, particularly when they have contributed so much to the wealth of the nation.

But I want to approach this idea more broadly. From what I can tell, one quality of the new movement that might be developing is its sense of upholding American ideals. People say, and believe, about the new president and his program, “This is not America,” referring to ideals such as fairness, equal justice, openness to other cultures and peoples, and unity. The dangers of idealizing “America” are obvious. I believe freedom and justice are international values, not national. And the president’s values are just as American, in reality. But I think this sense of “America” as an ideal, although risky, is not so bad, if—as I sense—people are not conceiving it as enjoyed at the expense of peoples elsewhere (just the opposite) and if it is counterposed to the other, regressive Americanism we know so well. It can be a way of fighting over the direction of the country.

CH: Would you say this contradiction, this honoring of “American” values while being aware that they’re not really more “American” than their contraries, is also an example of holding in mind “two ideas which seemed to be in opposition”?

JB: And of my character Arthur’s awareness both of the America that hated and feared him and of the “black American,” equal in a country that does not yet exist, which he felt himself to be.

Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise. If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—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. (The Fire Next Time, 1963)

CH: This passage, almost at the end of your most famed book, expresses a lifelong belief that it is possible to build a just society—not one *more* just than now, but one whose defining characteristic is justice.

JB: There are various ways to approach those sentences. One can put them back into historical context; that is, point out how they mirror the hopeful mood of the early civil rights movement. Or one can note that later I used more revolutionary language, at least in a certain period. At the end of *No Name in the Street*, in 1972, I spoke of a global crisis in which “An old world is dying, and a new one, kicking in the belly of its mother, time, announces that it is ready to be born.”

CH: So you were attracted to the idea of historical inevitability, as in Marxism?

JB: I was never a Marxist. But yes, many of the radicals thought that way then. Clearly, the outcome was different, at least for that time.

CH: Is that why, in *Just Above My Head*, you balance your protagonist’s belief against your narrator’s skepticism?

JB: I thought it was important for readers to answer for themselves. It is the most basic question—is the world destined to go on in the future as in the past, unequal and unjust, or can we change it? So, if you'll permit me, I want to bring this statement in my 1963 book into the present. I have the impression, today, that out of everything I might have said, this idea, that working together we can change the world, is now the least accepted. I sense that most young people today (particularly but not only African Americans) believe, as my narrator did, in a world that will not change in any basic way, and so in a future in which they will seek to live with dignity, and to gain social traction, while always on guard against, and prepared to fight back against, oppression and discrimination—as we have always lived—but will never truly be equal or free.

CH: Something like that is true of my students (African American students included). They “get” your works as indictments of injustice. They “get” you as a critic of sexism and a prophet of LGBTQ freedom, and respect you as a front-liner in the civil rights struggle. But, intellectually and experientially, it is very difficult for them to grasp that you (and others) could actually have thought it possible for African Americans and others, and indeed working class people overall, to gain full freedom and equality in America. And, as regards African Americans, this is also the viewpoint of some recent, prominent works such as Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* (which I hope to write more about subsequently).

JB: Truly, it is much more plausible to imagine the future this way. There is half a century's history to back up this expectation—since the enormous compromise that ended the civil rights struggle, of enacting formal rights without actual equality. And it's the lesson of the horrible chain of police murders we have lived with so intimately in the last few years, thanks to social media. So I admit that my words from 1963 can look naïve or overblown.

But I think we need to take those words seriously. I think we must, once again, have a conception of fundamental justice as our goal. One reason is that without some such belief the movement of resistance you refer to will remain trapped in choosing between the two major parties, or trying to push one of them in a better direction, which means becoming satellites to them, instead of

building a long-term movement for justice and betterment. Another reason is that no one joins or stays for years and decades in such a movement without believing in the possibility of fundamental change. But really, the most basic reason for believing what I said—the reason I wrote it—is that it is true, or can become true. When people stop thinking in terms of what can be gained within and by the rules of the existing politics, and instead start believing in their own ability to construct the future, then the future opens up and expands beyond what previously seemed possible.

CH: Is that what you meant by the title of the novel you wrote then, *Another Country*?

JB: I meant much more. I was thinking of verses in the Letter to the Hebrews: “And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.” I really believed then, I believe now, that it is possible for us, together, to build that city, here, on this earth. But I don’t necessarily ask activists today to share that belief. If people dare to believe they can reshape their country, that is a start.