

# On Language, Race and the Black Writer

BY JAMES BALDWIN

Writers are obliged, at some point, to realize that they are involved in a language which they must change. And for a black writer in this country to be born into the English language is to realize that the assumptions on which the language operates are his enemy. For example, when Othello accuses Desdemona, he says that he "threw a pearl away richer than all his tribe." I was very young when I read that and I wondered "richer than his tribe?" I was forced to reconsider similes: as black as sin, as black as night, blackhearted.

In order to deal with that reality at a certain time in my life, I left the United States and went to France, where I was unable to speak to anybody because I spoke no French. I dropped into a silence in which I heard, for the first time, the beat of the language of the people who had produced me. For the first time, I was able to hear that music.

When I was in elementary school there were no black writers or white writers whom I could regard as models. I did not agree at all with the moral predicament of Huckleberry Finn concerning Nigger Jim. It was not, after all, a question about whether I should be sold back into slavery.

I am a witness to and a survivor of the latest slave rebellion, or what American newspapers erroneously term the civil-rights movement. I put it that way because Malcolm X and I met many years ago when Malcolm was debating a very young sit-in student on a radio station which had asked me to moderate the discussion. Malcolm asked the student a question which I now present to you: "If you are a citizen, why do you have to fight for your civil rights? If you are fighting for your civil rights, then that means you are not a citizen." Indeed, the "legalisms" of this country have never had anything to do with its former slaves. We are still governed by the slave codes.

When I say "a slave rebellion," I mean that what is called "the civil-rights movement" was really insurrection. It was co-opted. It is a fact that the latest slave rebellion was brutally put down. We all know what happened to Medgar Evers. We all know what happened to Malcolm X. We all know what happened to Martin Luther King. We know what happened to Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, and so many more. The list is long. That is the result of slave rebellion.

A very brutal thing must be said: The intentions of this melancholic country as concerns black people—and anyone who doubts me can ask any Indian—have always been genocidal. They needed us for labor and for sport. Now they can't get rid of us. We cannot be exiled and we cannot be accommodated. Something's got to give. The machinery of this country operates day in and day out, hour by hour, to keep the nigger in his place.

When I was young, I used to run an elevator—murderously, but I ran it. I am not needed to run that elevator anymore. Black people are no longer needed to do a whole lot of things we used to do. On the other hand, we are here. This coming summer is going to be a difficult one. In every city in this nation now black fathers are standing in the streets watching black sons; they're watching each other. Neither fathers nor sons have anyplace to go, and it is not their fault. It has nothing to do with their value, their merit, their capabilities.

There may be nothing worse under heaven, there may be no greater crime, than to attack a man's integrity, to attempt to destroy that man. For I know that in spite of the American Constitution, in spite of all the born-again Christians, my father was not a mule and not a thing.

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*James Baldwin is the author of numerous books, including "Go Tell It on the Mountain," "The Fire Next Time" and the forthcoming "Just Above My Head." This article is adapted from a speech delivered recently at UC Berkeley.*

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that my sister was not born to be the plaything of idle white sheriffs.

Black people find themselves between a rock and a hard place. Our presence in this country terrifies every white man walking. This nation is not now, never has been and now never will be a white country. There is not a white person in this country, including our President and all his friends, who can prove he's white.

The people who settled this country came from many places. It was not so elsewhere in the world. In France, they were French; in England, they were English; in Italy, they were Italian; in Greece, they were Greek; in Russia, they were Russian. From this I want to point out a paradox: Blacks, Indians, Chicanos, Asians and that beleaguered handful of white people who understand their history are the only people who know who they are.

When the Europeans arrived in America, there was a moment in their lives when they had to learn to speak English, when they became guys named Joe. Guys named Joe couldn't speak to their fathers because their fathers couldn't speak English. That meant a rupture, a profound rupture with their own history, so that they could become guys named Joe. And in doing so, Joe never found out anything else about himself.

Black people in this country come out of a history which was never written down. The links between father and son, between mother and daughter, until this hour and despite all the dangers and trials to which we have been subjected, remain strong and alive. And if we could do that—and we have done that—then we can deal with what now lies before us.

Every white person in this country—and I do not care

what he or she says—knows one thing. They may not know, as they put it, "what I want," but they know *they would not like to be black here*. If they know that, then they know everything they need to know, and whatever else they say is a lie.

The American idea of racial progress is measured by how fast I become white. It is a trick bag, because they know perfectly well that I can never become white. I've drunk my share of dry martinis. I have proved myself civilized in every way I can. But there is an irreducible difficulty. Something doesn't work. Well, I decided that I might as well act like a nigger.

The black people of this country stand in a very strange place, as do the white people of this country—and almost for the very same reason, though we approach it from different points of view. I suggest that what the rulers of this country don't know about the world which surrounds them is the price they pay for not knowing me. If they couldn't deal with my father, how are they going to deal with the people in the streets of Tehran? I could have told them, if they had asked.

There is a reason that no one wants our children educated. When we attempt to do it ourselves, we find ourselves up against a vast machinery of racism which infects the country's entire system of education. I know the machinery is vast, ruthless, cunning and thinks of nothing, in fact, but itself, which means us, because we are a threat to the machinery. We have already lived through a slave rebellion. We cannot pick up guns, because they've got the guns. We cannot hit those streets again, because they're waiting for us. We have to do something else.

Before each slave rebellion there occurred something which I now call "non-cooperation" by the slaves. How to execute this in detail today is something each one of us has to figure out. But we could begin with the schools—by taking our children out of those schools, taking them off those buses. Everybody knows, who thinks about it, that you can't change a school without changing a neighborhood, and you can't change a neighborhood without changing the city, and there ain't nobody prepared to change the city because they want the city to be white. America's cities are going to crumble when the white people move out to get away from the niggers. Every crisis in every city is caused by that. How can we expect people who cannot educate their *own* children to educate anybody else? This will be, well, contested.

But black people hold the trump. When you try to slaughter people, you create a people with nothing to lose. And if I have nothing to lose, what are you going to do to me? In truth, we have one thing to lose—our children. Yet we have never lost them, and there is no reason for us to do it now.

We hold the trump. I say it: Patience and shuffle the cards.