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Vanessa Lopez-Littleton, Juliana Chiarelli, Amber Ward & William Shelby

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I Am Not Your Negro Movie Review: Critical Reflection and Discourse to Advance Social Equity

Vanessa Lopez-Littleton

California State University, Monterey Bay

Juliana Chiarelli

Washington University

Amber Ward and William Shelby

California State University, Monterey Bay

This article reviews *I Am Not Your Negro*, a documentary film based on *Remember this House*, an unfinished manuscript written by James Baldwin. *I Am Not Your Negro* is a critical film for any public service professional who impacts the lives and livelihoods of Black people in the United States. The critical nature of this film rests in the tragedy of lives lost in a quest for justice for Black people in the US. Baldwin's conceptualization of "the Negro problem" is an ethical concern that undergirds a strong rationale to advance social equity in American society. Using the tenets of critical race theory, we argue public service personnel have an ethical duty to actively oppose racism, reject color-blind ideology, engage in critical reflection and discourse about justice and the denial of the American dream, and pursue social equity as a means of achieving justice for all.

Keywords: American dream, critical discourse, critical reflection, racism, social equity

I Am Not Your Negro is a powerful documentary on the life and perspectives of James Baldwin, a Black novelist, playwright, and social activist. Baldwin's commentary on social and political issues provides a critical context for examining the plight of Black Americans in the implementation of public policy in the United States. Based on material written more than 30 years ago, Baldwin's work is still a relevant and eerie reminder of the seemingly entrenched struggle of Black people to find their place in America. Baldwin's commentary on racial apathy and the experiences of Black Americans provides a necessary context for critical reflection and discourse on the role of justice in the pursuit of the American dream. We began by critically analyzing the film and the efforts of the filmmaker to capture the racial commentary posit by Baldwin. Then, we examine the "negro problem," a phrase Baldwin uses to describe the circumstances of Black people who have been relegated to a

second-class citizenship by personally mediated and systemic racism. We then discuss the concept of justice through the lens of critical race theory (CRT) and the criminal justice system. Lastly, we argue for the ethical duty of public service personnel to become fierce advocates for social equity in fighting for the American dream for Black people.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

I Am Not Your Negro, a documentary film directed by Raoul Peck and narrated by Samuel L. Jackson, is based on Baldwin's unfinished manuscript, *Remember this House*, which Baldwin began in 1979. Peck provides a critical look at the experience of Black Americans during the Civil Rights era through the more recent Black Lives Matters movement, a resistance protest against the killing of Black people by law enforcement. Baldwin's highly racialized version of America is portrayed through skillful narration accompanied by rhythmic, soulful, and dramatic song lyrics that combine to create a powerful context for exploring the complex subject of race in the US. Baldwin's gift of oration is prominently displayed in a compilation of video clips, which include television appearances, classroom lectures, and speeches. Jackson's somber tone, accompanied by visual images of brutality against Black bodies, compels a self-examination of one's own thoughts about the pain and insult experienced by Black people for their mere existence in a country they dare to call their own.

Film was a major influence in Baldwin's life. At an early age, a White teacher took an interest in Baldwin and stirred in him a fascination with movies and music. His early exposure to plays and film allowed him to discover ideas and perspectives other Black boys rarely had a chance to experience. In his youth, Baldwin believed all heroes were White. Instead of admiring these White heroes, Baldwin "despised and feared those heroes," claiming "they sought vengeance against their very own countryman," a notion that would later disgust Baldwin (Peck, 2016, 16:00). From his way of thinking, Baldwin viewed film as a sort of vehicle of exploitation, something that created reality by distorting the truth. In this regard, filmmakers have the ability to shape reality by creating narratives that support their own perspectives and ideals about race and identity. These distortions are not limited to what is seen on the screen, but instead they have broader implications when understood through the lens of the subjugated, a critical context for understanding power and privilege. For instance, as a Black child watching depictions of cowboys and Indians, Baldwin realized that oftentimes he had been unwittingly rooting for the oppressor (White cowboys) in epic battles between White men and Indigenous people. He was also appalled watching Black characters such as Stepin Fetchit, Mantan Moreland, and Willie Best, all of whom he felt contributed to the negative stereotypes of Black people. For Baldwin, countless films, shows, commercials, and characters contributed to a growing narrative of White dominance and Black (and Indigenous people) ignorance and oppression.

A brilliance of the film is the careful intertwining of the Civil Rights Era with the more recent Black Lives Matter movement. Baldwin's reflection on the killings of Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. create a powerful juxtaposition of life and death. The three Civil Rights icons lost their lives fighting for justice for Black Americans. Each tragic death adding to the bloody catalog of oppression, a term Baldwin used to describe the

growing body count of Black citizens killed for speaking out against injustice. The more contemporary killings of Black youth are carefully integrated into the film to reflect the collision between their lives and the US criminal justice system. Baldwin prophetically states that “there is scarcely any hope for the American Dream because citizens who are denied participation in it, by their very presence, will wreck it” (Peck, 2016, 59:37). As a society, the US has yet to reckon with the long and persistent history of oppression and subjugation inflicted upon Black Americans. The US has failed to pay restitution for the social, economic, health-related, and physical harm done to Black people in the long fight for justice. The brutality shown in the images of Black Americans being beaten by White Americans and the vituperation and hatred spewed at them for simply seeking basic rights is evidence of deeply entrenched social norms in a highly racialized society. *I Am Not Your Negro* strikes at the heart of the “Self-perpetuating fantasy of American life” (Peck, 2016, 1:09:37) by offering a sobering reality for many Black America in that “the country which is your birthplace and to which you owe your identity has not in its whole system of reality evolved a place for you” (Peck, 2016, 17:39).

THE NEGRO PROBLEM

While race is a social construct, it is an enduring feature of American society and has a powerful influence in shaping social, economic, and political systems (Stevenson, 2017, p. 5). From chattel slavery to the prison industrial complex, there are American industries built on the enslavement of Black people. According to Baldwin, “White is a metaphor for power” (Peck, 2016, 1:27:07) and if you attempt to rebel against the system, “you have attacked a power structure of the Western World” (Peck, 2016, 43:14). Even today, there are few discussions of reparations and those that are mounted are often dismissed. Yet, without economic restitution for the dismal institution of slavery, the road to equity remains marred by systemic racism and social disadvantage.

In a debate with Baldwin, Yale Professor Paul Weiss argued that the concept of race is meaningless. For Weiss, racial group comparisons are pointless because each individual faces their own barriers. Weiss contends that as a White man he would have more in common with a Black intellectual than a White person who was not interested in intellectual discourse. Baldwin dismisses this assertion by noting that there is something unique about being Black in America that forges a bond and creates a reality distinct from that of any other types of groupings. Baldwin goes on to say that existing inside of a Black body in America is not safe; there is a real physical threat of bodily harm for being Black. Being afraid of the social dangers that exist in America is a reality for everyone who exists in a Black body. He bases his supposition on American institutions (e.g., education, religion, unions, and law enforcement), the very heart of public administration, and their historic (and contemporary) treatment of Black people.

To deny the existence of race-related issues in America is to posit the apathy and ignorance that perpetuates the problem (Baldwin, 1963). The dehumanization of Black people has remained a tool of oppression marked by exploitation and violence since the arrival of European settlers on the continent (Stevenson, 2017). From the experiences of the

Indigenous people with European settlers to the capture and enslavement of Africans, the history of America has been “defiled by the willingness to exploit citizens of color despite vaunted norms, values, and principles of equality” (Stevenson, 2017, p. 6). Africans were forced into the system of slavery as a cheap labor and became a valuable commodity in the economic power structure of the US. Slavery was more than a physical system of oppression, but carried with it an ideology that made their White captors believe they were superior to those they were enslaving and contributed to the dehumanization of their Black captives. The freeing of slaves in 1863 came without any effort to right the wrongs of the atrocities that befell them or moral concern for the socially ingrained norms that stigmatized their dark skin (Stevenson, 2017). The enduring legacy of slavery has resulted in a sort of second-class citizenship that has endured through slavery (1619–1865), Jim Crow segregation (1865–1965), the Civil Rights era (1954–1968), and continues today in the ongoing mass incarceration of Black people (Alexander, 2011; Stevenson, 2017).

The historic and contemporary experience of Black people in US is wrought with unfair treatment, punishment, and disparate outcomes. The animus towards Black people is evident in the way justice has been and is delivered. The racial terrorism that has befallen Black people has a long and dark history that includes slave patrols, vigilante lynching, unfair sentencing, racial profiling, police brutality, and resultantly, mass incarceration (Stevenson, 2017). Race and criminal justice are mutually constitutive in that each play “an integral role in the formation and reformation of the other” (Owusu-Bempah, 2017, para. 9). In reality, Black people are more likely to be stopped, searched, arrested, and even killed by members of law than any other group (Alexander, 2011; Owusu-Bempah, 2017). These experiences have consequences that go far beyond that of the individual and contributes to a culture of oppression where there is a genuine fear for one’s own ability to safely exist in America.

JUSTICE AND CRITICAL RACE THEORY

According to Baldwin, “Color is not a human or personal reality, it is political reality” (Baldwin, 1962, para. 57). For non-White groups in America, this means routinely experiencing bias and racism, which bring with them negative implications for health, wealth, housing, employment, education, personal safety, and well-being (Ward & Rivera, 2014). Racism, a social consequence of residing in a highly racialized society, is a system of structuring opportunity and assigning value based on the color of one’s skin that unfairly disadvantages some individuals and communities while unfairly advantaging others (Jones, 2018). To this end, America is characterized as a society where white-over-color has permeated myriad institutions and serves to benefit the dominant group. One such example is the ongoing racial financial exploitation (a process using indebtedness to extract money to support local jurisdictions) of Black people in the American criminal justice system where they experience a disproportionate burden of the fines and fees resulting from law enforcement interactions (Alexander, 2011; Blessett & Box, 2016). This and other social realities serve as the basis for CRT, a race-conscious approach to understanding social outcomes. Baldwin’s philosophical view on race directly aligns with CRT’s contention that racism is not aberrational, but a defining feature of American life (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). As such, the notion of

colorblindness or racial neutrality are preposterous and ill-conceived (Baldwin, 1962; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Race is created and manipulated to serve distinct societal purposes, which are neither “objective, inherent or fixed” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 9). To assume public policies are developed and implemented behind a veil of ignorance and those charged with these duties are unaware of how they will personally or politically benefit is to reject reality in favor of the absurd.

ETHICAL DUTY

In light of these truths, the public sector must work to ensure those who serve in the public’s interest have an awareness of the historic and ongoing oppression experienced by Black people and how the discriminatory policies enacted in various institutions contribute to an ongoing denial of the American dream for Black and other groups of people. To do anything to the contrary, is to deny justice for a large and growing segment of American society. America’s color-caste system with strong roots and ties to slavery, has established a stronghold on the social fabric of America. In this regard, race and racism (as an extension thereof) are moral concerns. Without intentional efforts to bring about social reform, America will continue down a path of apathy and ignorance allowing race and racism to become further ingrained in the American psyche. If Americans have the wherewithal to begin to unravel the complexities of racism, they must begin by understanding how personally-mediated and systemic racism continually feed into a vicious cycle of oppression. Public sector personnel are uniquely poised to ensure future generations understand the history and lasting legacy of racial oppression and mobilize and strategize to act on the “many generations of bad faith and cruelty” experienced by Black people in the US (Baldwin, 1963, para. 1). Creating a new normal for the lived experience of Black people will require careful reflection on historic and contemporary oppression, an active opposition to racism through dialogue and social action, and the concurrent pursuit of social equity as a means of achieving justice for all.

CONCLUSION

I Am Not Your Negro provides critical commentary for public sector personnel seeking to advance social equity. Baldwin’s perspective on race is catalytic in developing a public sector strategy to advance social equity for Black people in America. Engaging in self-reflection and discourse on the role of justice in the pursuit of the American dream is a good starting point for self-exploration to address apathy and ignorance. Moving towards social equity requires understanding of the lived experience of marginalized and vulnerable populations. *I Am Not Your Negro* provides a level of awareness and insight needed to begin the move towards a just and liberated society.

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