

The Next Exit

by [Ayslin Exum](#)

I think about my father every time I drive down the highway and pass the sign that says, “STATE PRISON NEXT EXIT. DO NOT PICK UP HITCHHIKERS.” My father frequented this particular penitentiary, though I’ve never been inside.

I haven’t seen my father for seven years, but I’ve passed that exit, that bright green sign in the dry Arizona desert, countless times. At this point, I remember the look of the sign more clearly than my father’s face. He probably looks much sicker than I remember. He was addicted to cocaine for most of my childhood and, like his father before him, his life has been reduced to the inside of a dime bag. I won’t lie and say I’ve forgiven my father for the man he was. Unfortunately, the world hasn’t forgiven him, either. We don’t tend to forgive Black convicts in America.

This is something I’ve known since, as an eight-year-old, I decided to write my dad a letter. Like many little girls, I wanted to make the card special. Since it was around Halloween, I filled the letter with gold and orange glitter and covered it in little black cat and pumpkin stickers. “I love you daddy!” I wrote in purple crayon, using the cursive I’d just learned in grade school. I begged my mom to send it and she obliged. But it was sent back. Glitter, crayon, and stickers, it turns out, are considered contraband in prisons, and my card was rejected immediately. As a kid, I didn’t understand why – I couldn’t grasp why my father didn’t deserve beautiful things, why his life began and ended with gray walls and iron. So I sat at our dining room table and tried to scrub away all the glitter, the gold flakes dancing down to the floor before settling, defeated, on the tile. I peeled the stickers off, tearing the little cats into pieces and leaving blank spaces on the lined paper, but I still couldn’t send it. I couldn’t erase

the crayon, so I had to throw it away. It made me sick, really. I sat and thought about a police officer opening my letter and deciding my father didn't deserve to see it. Even then, I somehow knew that he wouldn't get better – like his father, he was to be sidelined and degraded as another ghost in a Black body. There was no next exit. This was it.

I've witnessed firsthand the way the American justice system kills the Black spirit – traps it in a plastic bag and suffocates it. The great American novelist and activist James Baldwin witnessed similar attacks on the soul of the Black American, a journey documented in Raoul Peck's 2016 film *I Am Not Your Negro*. Peck finishes telling a story that Baldwin – who died in 1987 – never could. Baldwin's unfinished manuscript, *Remember This House*, is a revolutionary lamentation over three murdered friends, each giants of the civil rights movement: Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Baldwin tells their stories in a way American history often fails to, portraying them as complicated men who often changed their minds, and with whom Baldwin frequently disagreed. The film thus takes back a narrative of the Black experience that America has long derailed and sanitized.

The first words we see after *I Am Not Your Negro's* opening credits are simple, yet deeply moving: "In June 1979, acclaimed author James Baldwin commits to a complex endeavor: tell his story of America through the lives of three of his murdered friends" (00:40-01:01). Their names then appear on screen in bold lettering against a black and white background. "Medgar Evers. Martin Luther King Jr. Malcolm X." Already, this story is one framed by the denigration and death of Black Americans; for Baldwin, this is more than just any story – it is America, in its entirety. His goals become clearer when we hear Samuel L. Jackson's voice vibrate with Baldwin's words: "I want these lives to bang against and reveal each other, as in truth, they did, and use their dreadful journey as a means of instructing the people whom they loved so much, who betrayed them, and for whom they gave their lives" (05:05-05:22). The lives and deaths of Baldwin's

friends frame the rest of this story, making a profound statement about America and the racism at its core. In order to understand what exactly that statement is, it's vital to understand the way that Baldwin characterizes his friends.

Baldwin's description of Malcolm X when they first met at an event in New York is chilling. "I saw Malcolm before I met him," he says, while Peck's film displays images of Malcolm looking on with his characteristic intensity. "I stumbled through my lecture, with Malcolm never taking his eyes from my face" (19:06-19:10; 19:59-20:07). Here, Baldwin succinctly and beautifully articulates Malcolm's complexity: his mystery, skepticism, and fiery disposition. He goes on to juxtapose his experience of Malcolm X with popular perceptions of him, claiming that "Malcolm might be the torch that white people claim he was, though, in general, white America's evaluations of these matters would be laughable and even pathetic did not these evaluations have such wicked results" (19:38-19:55). In this, Baldwin describes two other things about Malcolm. First, white America was wrong about him. They couldn't see Malcolm's face as Baldwin could – couldn't meet that passionate, untrusting gaze – and so any attempt they made to understand him was futile. He was a different sort of 'torch' than the people who reviled him could ever imagine because he was *alive* – until he wasn't. This brings us to Baldwin's second point: white America's tragic (mis)perceptions of Malcolm held great and ultimately fatal power. They called Malcolm a torch and so he had to be put out. America demanded from Malcolm what it demands from everyone: superficiality. They demanded that he reduce himself to a caricature for white America to consume and hate. Malcolm's life and death reveals that America's perception of reality is deadly; this goes for Martin Luther King Jr. and Medgar Evers, too. Power in America robs its subjects of their humanity. By creating a piece of media that refuses to flatten Blackness and instead celebrates its complexity, Baldwin and Peck give life to men that the US tried desperately to stamp out.

Baldwin's friends, not unlike my father, exemplify how American culture denies Black men the grace to exist outside of its flat, sellable expectations. At the root of these expectations is what Baldwin calls the "American sense of reality" (01:09:47). Early in the film, Baldwin's intelligent, thoughtful words are contrasted with humiliating depictions of Black Americans in advertisements (07:49-08:24). With this, a conflict emerges between white, consumerist society and the Black men we follow in this film. Baldwin concretizes this tension when he discusses the shallow portrayals of Black men he saw in films as he grew up: "It seemed to me that they lied about the world I knew, and debased it" (13:49-13:53). In addition to these lies, he also saw disgust and felt fear: "Their comic, bug-eyed terror," he reflects, "contained the truth concerning a terror by which I hoped never to be engulfed" (13:58-14:08). American media failed to speak to Baldwin and his experience, failing to present Black men in roles that weren't defined by cowardice, laziness, or fear.

These characterizations bring to light a certain impoverishment of the Black spirit that I know all too well. In the films of Baldwin's time, the Black man was nothing but a cartoon to be humiliated and brutalized. Meanwhile, the heroes – the John Waynes – were always white, and thus, always the enemy of black, indigenous, and other people of color. "What this does to the subjugated is to destroy his sense of reality," observes Baldwin, who found himself in a society that spat on his reality every day (16:40-16:46). Ads packaged and sold his people as flat and worthless; films sold them as comedic relief, if not as blatantly evil. "It comes as a great shock," he concludes, "to discover the country, which is your birthplace . . . has not, in its whole system of reality, evolved any place for you" (17:18-17:47). Baldwin's word choice – he says *evolved* – is important. This country has no place for Black folks, especially poor Black folks, only the promise that they will always be products. The plantation has "evolved" into a prison instead, and there's no new place for us – at least not without money. Where do you get off the highway when that green state prison sign is the only exit? When a speeding ticket's price is your life?

Many don't keep driving. Many, like Malcolm, MLK, and Medgar Evers, are stopped. Many more take the only exit there seems to be. Those of us left behind, like Baldwin, are the witnesses. White Americans will never quite understand this conundrum, and, according to Baldwin, they don't want to – they would prefer things remain simple. The story of America is one in which the powerful fight desperately to maintain a superficial sense of 'reality' – using any excuse they can that makes things easier to buy and sell. Although the institution of slavery is gone in name, its shadow looms over a country that commodifies its own people and refuses to make space for them. If you are Black and demand that your spirit be acknowledged, you're pumped full of bullets until your body is torn into too many pieces to hold a spirit anymore. If your knees aren't on the ground, you're taking up too much space. Today, John Wayne doesn't just carry a gun – he carries a badge. And the next exit is hundreds of miles away.

But that doesn't mean there isn't one. Maybe my father won't ever get better, or won't ever escape that dime bag, but I am still alive. Like Baldwin, I am a witness to the dark, rotted, core of our culture, this consumerism, and the degradation that comes with it. We cannot make a badge safe in the hands of any man and we cannot make glitter belong in a prison until we root out that core. It's poisoning us: We are choking on our own superficiality, bathing ourselves in idealism and suffocating anyone who doesn't measure up. But none of us will ever measure up so long as our hearts are so deadened. "We cannot possibly become what we would like to be until we are willing to ask ourselves just why the lives we lead on this continent are mainly so empty, so tame, and so ugly," Baldwin tells us (01:09:55-1:10:10). The flat expanse from the desert to the horizon seems endless and immutable. But we built this road. The only way off is to believe in that next exit and to ask ourselves why we didn't think it would come and didn't build a sign for it. Only then can we pay our dues.

Works Cited

I Am Not Your Negro. Directed by Raoul Peck, Magnolia Pictures, 2016.