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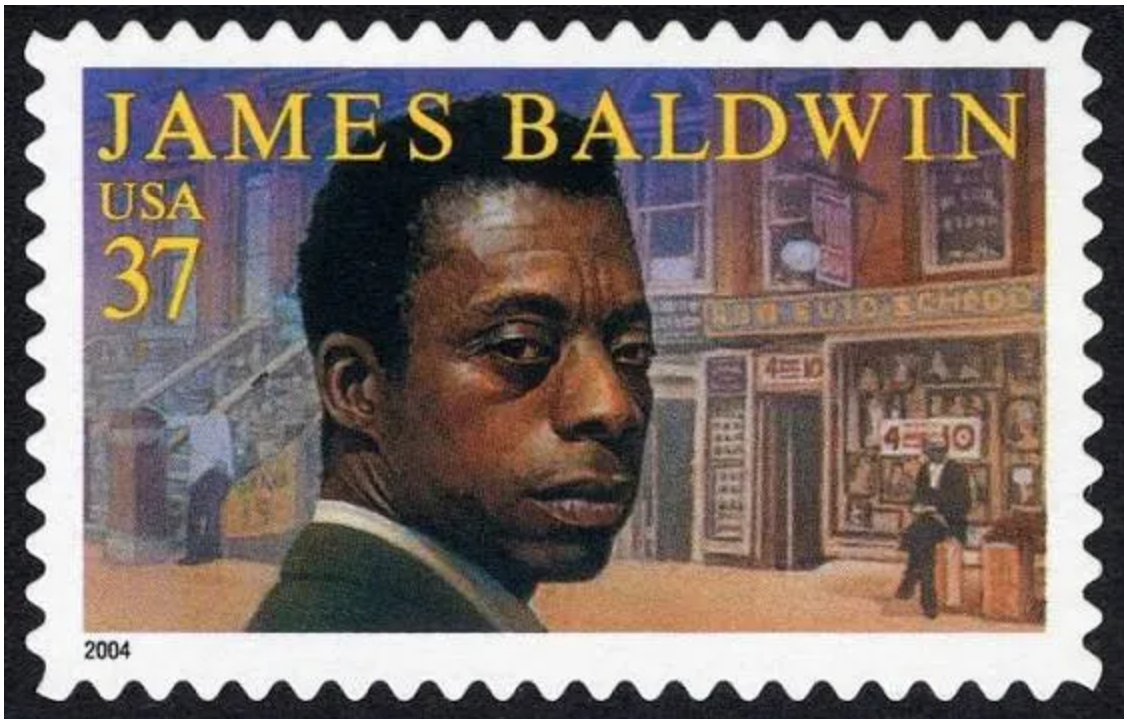
# America Did Not Misunderstand James Baldwin

It understood him perfectly, then buried the evidence beneath praise.

The Color of My Politics Follow 10 min read · Aug 2, 2026

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**By Malik Shakur®**



For today's Sunday sermon, on this warm August morning, I would like to consider America's remarkably sophisticated relationship with James Baldwin.

Baldwin would have turned 102 today. The occasion will bring the customary tributes from universities, corporations, politicians, publishers, and cultural institutions that have spent the rest of the year carefully avoiding the conclusions he reached. His face will circulate. His sentences will be posted. His courage will be praised by people whose communications departments would have asked him to soften the language.

Baldwin will once again be called timeless, which is the respectful way of admitting that the conditions he described remain fully operational.

His work survives because America continues to provide supporting documentation.

### The Education I Was Assigned

I began reading Baldwin in the fifth grade, not because I was an unusually self directed child wandering the library in search of moral clarity, but because my father assigned him to me.

Other children had chores. I had American racial pathology.

My father wanted me to understand racism before racism had the opportunity to introduce itself. He wanted me to recognize not only the insult, but the structure beneath it. The polite exclusion. The lowered expectation. The institutional smile that assures you nothing personal has occurred while something remarkably personal is happening.

He also wanted me to remember what my two great grandmothers had instilled in our family. One had been born enslaved. The other was a Jamaican immigrant. Neither possessed the luxury of confusing social rank with human worth. They taught us that we were as capable as our white counterparts, and sometimes better, particularly when the counterparts had mistaken inheritance for achievement.

Baldwin gave those lessons architecture.

Through his novels, essays, speeches, and the unmistakable timbre of his voice, he required readers to inspect the scaffolding upon which their lives had been built. He did not treat racism as a collection of unfortunate opinions held by unusually vulgar people. He examined the emotional beams, political wiring, religious wallpaper, and national habit of calling structural damage a difference of opinion.

More offensively, he explained that racism deforms the people who benefit from it.

That remains the part America finds impolite. We prefer moral problems that can be solved by identifying one spectacularly offensive person, removing him from a television program, and returning to brunch with our institutions intact.

### Racism, Now Available in Denial Flavor

Nearly everyone in American public life claims to oppose racism. The disagreement begins when racism is discovered anywhere other than the distant past, an obscure internet forum, or the heart of someone without institutional counsel.

We oppose racism in theory. In practice, we oppose the documentation.

Mention disparities in policing, incarceration, housing, education, health care, voting access, or wealth, and a surprising number of people suddenly become amateur statisticians. They demand variables, controls, footnotes, atmospheric readings, and perhaps a notarized confession from the entire banking industry.

The evidentiary standard is curious. Racism must be systemic enough to explain nothing and individual enough to implicate no one.

Baldwin understood that racial innocence is not simply the absence of guilt. It is the refusal to know. America has perfected this refusal by reducing every structural question to a debate about personal manners.

Was the officer polite?

Did the employer use a slur?

Did lawmakers intend to suppress the vote, or did access merely become inconvenient in a sequence of remarkably predictable neighborhoods?

Was the district map discriminatory, or did it simply emerge from the earth in the precise shape of partisan advantage?

This is how a nation avoids confronting racism while congratulating itself for finding the word distasteful. We have not removed the machinery. We have improved the user interface.

*America has not defeated racism. It has taught racism to speak in the passive voice.*

Nobody segregated the neighborhood. Market forces developed preferences.

Nobody excluded the applicant. The organization pursued cultural fit, one of the most elegant phrases ever devised for hiring people who already know where the golf tournament is held.

Nobody suppressed the ballot. Certain voters encountered procedural friction.

The language has become gentler. The machinery has not missed a shift.

**Identity, Subject to Availability**

Baldwin also understood something our political culture still approaches with the caution of a committee handling an unattended suitcase: human identity is complicated.

In *Giovanni's Room*, *Another Country*, and throughout his essays, Baldwin wrote about race, sexuality, masculinity, religion, desire, shame, and belonging without reducing anyone to a public relations category. He was Black, gay, American, expatriate, religiously formed, spiritually estranged, furious, loving, and unwilling to amputate one truth to make another audience comfortable.

That complexity is now praised in principle and punished in practice.

Society celebrates authenticity until an authentic person becomes inconvenient. Then everyone begins asking for restraint, gratitude, civility,

and a more constructive tone. Apparently, the purpose of identity is to make institutions appear inclusive without requiring them to reconsider anything.

The modern compromise is simple. You may be different, provided the difference is photogenic, economically useful, and finished speaking before the commercial break.

Tolerance often means that the majority has agreed not to object publicly, at least while the cameras are present.

Baldwin refused that bargain. He did not ask marginalized people to become harmless enough to deserve recognition. He asked the majority to examine why another person's existence felt like an accusation.

That remains the more dangerous inquiry.

It is easier to debate pronouns, bathrooms, books, wedding cakes, and the alleged fragility of civilization than to admit that many political disputes are not really about policy. They are about hierarchy. They concern who is allowed to define reality and who must submit supporting documentation before describing his own life.

The people most offended by identity politics are often remarkably committed to the politics of their own identity. They simply regard theirs as the default setting.

When your identity controls the room, it is called tradition. When someone else names theirs, it is called an agenda.

**Love, After Legal Review**

Baldwin wrote often about love, which has allowed many readers to mistake him for comforting.

He was not.

His conception of love was not sentimental approval. It was moral confrontation without dehumanization. It required seeing people clearly, including their fear, cruelty, cowardice, and capacity for change.

That is considerably harder than posting a quotation about unity beneath a photograph of two hands with different skin tones.

Public figures routinely invoke love when they want the injured party to lower its voice. They call for healing before diagnosis, reconciliation before accountability, and forgiveness before anyone has admitted doing anything.

This is not love. It is conflict management for people with reputational exposure.

*Reconciliation without accountability is surrender dressed for church.*

Baldwin's love made demands. It asked the oppressed to resist hatred, not because the oppressor deserved emotional protection, but because hatred can become another form of captivity. At the same time, he never suggested that love required pretending the injury had not occurred.

That distinction has been lost in our national enthusiasm for therapeutic language. America now discusses injustice as though the central problem is that everyone has become upset about it.

The wound is unfortunate. The anger, however, is considered divisive.

This is how power behaves after attending a seminar on emotional intelligence. It does not deny your suffering. It asks whether you might express it in a way that is more useful to the people causing it.

Love may prevent you from becoming what you despise. It does not require you to become what power finds manageable.

### The Artist, Once Safely Dead

Baldwin believed the artist had a responsibility to bear witness. The artist was not merely an entertainer, content provider, or lifestyle accessory. The artist was expected to notice what society had trained itself not to see and then make ignorance more difficult to maintain.

Naturally, we celebrate this principle while maintaining an economy designed to punish it.

Artists are encouraged to be courageous, but not alienating. Political, but not partisan. Honest, but not unpleasant. Challenging, but still suitable for a brand partnership.

The artist may question power, provided power receives final approval over the campaign.

In *Notes of a Native Son* and elsewhere, Baldwin had little interest in that arrangement. His work did not reassure readers of their virtue. It implicated them. He asked not only what they believed, but what their comfort required other people to endure.

That is the sort of question institutions prefer from dead writers.

Dead writers are unusually cooperative. They attend no meetings, reject no sponsorships, object to no commemorative merchandise, and cannot complain when their most dangerous ideas are reduced to decorative quotations in a lobby.

This is why Baldwin is now safe enough to celebrate. He has become canonical, which is what America calls a radical after removing his capacity to interrupt dinner.

His words appear in classrooms that censor the history necessary to understand them. His image appears in institutions whose hiring practices might have interested him enormously. His courage is praised by executives who believe dissent should be courageous elsewhere.

Institutions do not object to courageous art. They object to recognizing themselves in it.

### The American Dream Has a Guest List

Baldwin's critique of the American Dream was not that ambition is foolish. It was that America distributes opportunity unequally, then treats the result as a character assessment.

The winners are disciplined. The losers lacked initiative. The inheritors are entrepreneurial. The excluded should improve their networking skills.

This mythology remains useful because it converts policy into personality. Wealth becomes proof of virtue. Poverty becomes evidence of poor choices.

History disappears, leaving only a collection of individuals who apparently arrived at the starting line through unrelated personal decisions.

*The American Dream survives because it is rarely audited.*

We discuss mobility while preserving dynasties. We praise competition while subsidizing incumbency. We tell children they may become anything, then finance their schools according to the property values of nearby adults.

It is a charming arrangement, provided nobody examines the invoices.

Baldwin understood that the dream was not simply inaccessible to many Black Americans. Their exclusion helped define the dream itself. Prosperity required someone else's labor, dispossession, confinement, silence, or removal from the photograph.

The country has never enjoyed that observation. It prefers stories about exceptional individuals who overcome injustice because their success can then be offered as evidence that the injustice was never structural.

One person escapes the burning building, and the fire code is declared adequate.

This is why America celebrates Black excellence while remaining suspicious of Black grievance. Achievement flatters the system. Grievance examines it.

*The exception becomes the alibi.*

America does not merely reward the exceptional person. It conscripts that person into defending the rule that made exception necessary.

## The Urgency of Later

Baldwin understood that injustice benefits enormously from administrative delay. Power rarely says no when it can say not yet, establish a commission, request additional study, and return after everyone most affected has either exhausted themselves or died.

The demand for patience is almost always issued by people whose lives are not being postponed.

Baldwin's warning was plain: "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

The sentence endures because America has spent generations proving its second half.

We face injustice ceremonially, preferably on anniversaries, during heritage months, or after the documentary has won an award. Then we return to the more comfortable work of explaining why meaningful action would be premature, divisive, expensive, politically difficult, or insufficiently bipartisan.

Apparently, oppression must first satisfy a procedural calendar.

Climate collapse is studied while the temperature rises. Racial injustice is acknowledged while its mechanisms are defended. Political corruption is denounced by officials whose campaign committees remain available for dinner.

Every emergency receives the same institutional treatment: grave language, tasteful concern, and a timetable designed to outlive public attention.

Delay is not an accidental feature of the process. Delay is often the result.

Baldwin did not ask us to become more eloquent about crisis. He asked whether we intended to survive our refusal to confront it.

America has spent decades answering him with a panel discussion.

### What the Celebration Is For

On Baldwin's 102nd birthday, America will again praise his courage, intelligence, compassion, and prophetic clarity. This is generous of us, considering how determined we remain not to follow his instructions.

We have made Baldwin safe by making him inspirational.

His indictments appear on posters. His warnings circulate online. His sentences are removed from the arguments that gave them teeth and returned to the public as evidence that reading has occurred.

The tribute has become a substitute for the reckoning.

Baldwin did not leave behind a comforting collection of lessons about racism, identity, love, art, and democracy. He left a sustained argument about the cost of living inside a lie.

He understood that racism injures both its victims and its beneficiaries, though not equally. He understood that identity becomes threatening to people who have mistaken their own identity for neutrality. He understood that love without truth is sentiment, empathy without consequence is theater, and art without risk is frequently advertising with better lighting.

Most importantly, he understood that no nation can heal from a history it continues to edit while the patient is still bleeding.

***America does not lack Baldwin's wisdom. It lacks the appetite for Baldwin's consequences.***

To honor him requires more than admiring the language. It requires surrendering the innocence his language made impossible.

It means confronting the systems that convert cruelty into procedure, privilege into merit, and cowardice into moderation. It means accepting that justice will not emerge from improved intentions while those intentions remain carefully separated from budgets, laws, schools, prisons, ballots, and power.

We have had decades to read Baldwin, teach Baldwin, quote Baldwin, sell Baldwin, and place Baldwin beneath flattering photographs of ourselves. We know what he said. We know what he meant. We know what following him would require.

The difficulty was never comprehension.

Baldwin was easy to understand. Obedience was the part America found radical

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Tom Mitchell

What are your thoughts?

Indigo Colossus
Aug 3

Excellent reflections, and all very true. I felt like highlighting every sentence.

34 Reply

Dr. Janine Bouey
Aug 2

Malik —

This is a fine piece of writing, and "the tribute has become a substitute for the reckoning" is the line the whole thing earns.

Your point about the exception becoming the alibi is the one I keep returning to. One person escapes the burning... more

33 1 reply Reply

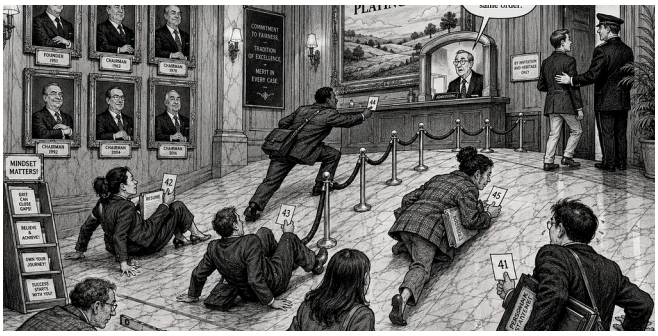
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Excellent column as it relates to one of my personal heroes!

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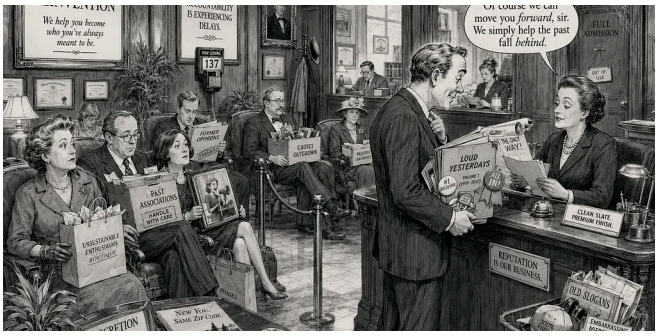



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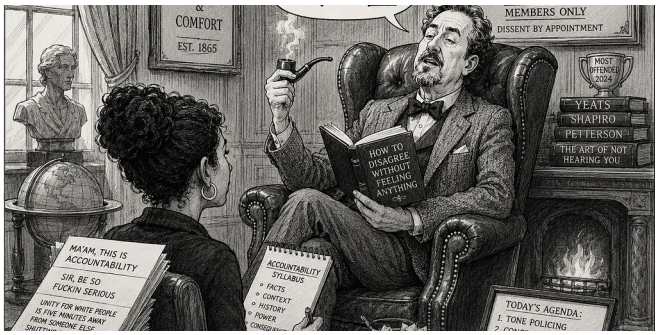

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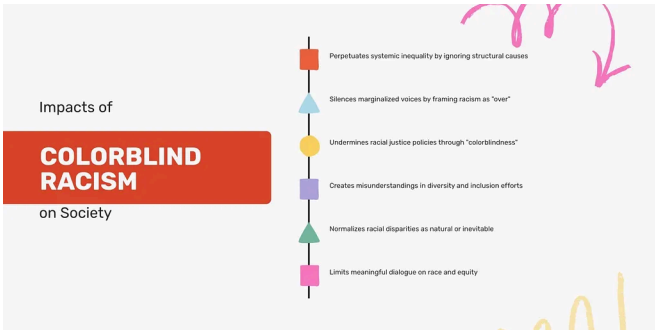
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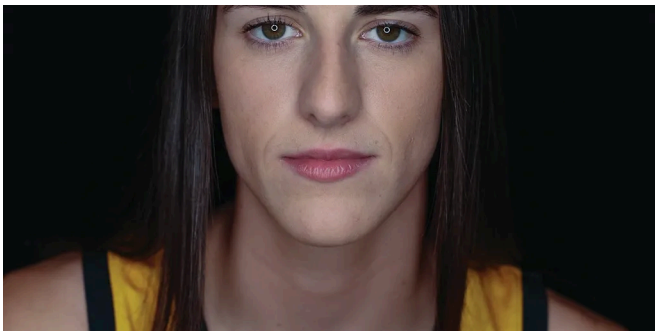
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