

DISCUSSION GUIDE



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NOT  
YOUR  
NEGRO



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## ***I Am Not Your Negro* Discussion Guide**

### **About the Film**

In 1979, James Baldwin wrote a letter to his literary agent describing his new endeavor: the writing of his final book, Remember This House, recounting the lives and successive assassinations of his friends Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Baldwin was not able to complete the book before his death, and the unfinished manuscript was entrusted to director Raoul Peck (*Lumumba*, *Sometimes in April*, *Moloch Tropical*, *Murder in Pacot*) by the writer's estate.

Built exclusively around Baldwin's words, Peck's *I Am Not Your Negro* delves into the complex legacy of three lives (and deaths) that permanently marked the American social and political landscape. Framing the unfinished work as a radical narration about race in America, Peck matches Baldwin's lyrical rhetoric with rich archival footage of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, and connects these historical struggles for justice and equality to the present-day movements that have taken shape in response to the killings of young African-American men including Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Mike Brown, and Amir Brooks.

Exploring what it means to be Black in America today, Peck reflects on the legacy of racial violence that still permeates the country. In Baldwin's words, "You cannot lynch me and keep me in ghettos without becoming something monstrous yourselves. And furthermore, you give me a terrifying advantage: you never had to look at me; I had to look at you. I know more about you than you know about me. Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." By revealing the deep connections between past and present injustice, *I Am Not Your Negro* weaves an epic narrative about America's irrational relationship with skin color - a relationship that would be absurd were it not so tragic.

### **About the History**

James Baldwin — the grandson of a slave — was born in Harlem in 1924 and became an American novelist, essayist, playwright, poet, and leader in the civil rights movement. The oldest of nine children, he grew up in poverty. After working for the railroad starting at age 18, Baldwin moved to Greenwich Village, where he worked as a freelance writer. He caught the attention of the well-known novelist,

Richard Wright who helped him secure a grant so he could support himself as a writer. In 1948, at age 24, Baldwin moved to Paris. In the early 1960s, Baldwin returned to the US to take part in the civil rights movement. During this time he traveled throughout the south, writing about all that he witnessed. For many, Baldwin became one of the first – and most important – voices for civil rights. After the assassinations of too many of his close friends in the movement, Baldwin moved back to France, where he died of stomach cancer in 1987 at the age of 63.

James Baldwin had many famous friends in political, entertainment, and intellectual circles, including Miles Davis, Sidney Poitier, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Bob Dylan and Lorraine Hansberry. *I Am Not Your Negro* begins in June, 1979, when James Baldwin wrote a letter to his literary agent explaining his intention to write a new book that “tells his story of America through the lives of three of his murdered friends: Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr.” In this book, Baldwin wanted, in his own words, “these three 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.” He never got past an original truncated manuscript of 30 pages, but in that short document, Baldwin was able to explore, with cutting clarity, their complex and painful journey, and the many intertwining, ambiguous, toxic, and sometimes conflicting themes that affected – and still affect – the development of both the individual and society at large in the United States of America.

### **Guidelines for Viewing in the Theatre**

“To look around the United States today is enough to make prophets and angels weep. This is not the land of the free. This is only, very unwillingly and sporadically, the home of the brave.” James Baldwin spoke these words over 50 years ago as he watched the “corpses of [his] brothers and sisters piling up around [him]” in their fight for equal rights. And yet his words are as relevant today as ever. *I Am Not Your Negro* is not only a documentation of the American civil rights movement of the mid to late 1960s, it is a critique of American society today. By viewing contemporary footage paired with words penned over 50 years ago, we can only admit to how much remains to be done in the struggle for equality and freedom - independent of race – in the United States of America.

“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” This film provides an eloquent opportunity to face the truths from our nation’s history and our present, in order

to facilitate real and sustainable change. You can be a part of the change you wish to see by organizing a group to go to the theater to see *I Am Not Your Negro*. Go as a family, or bring your colleagues, classmates, students and friends together to view the film, talk about the issues and feelings it raises, and develop an action plan to turn those responses into qualitative change. Below is a step-by-step guide to help you plan a thoughtful and productive trip to the theater with your family and friends to see *I Am Not Your Negro*.

### **Before You Arrive at the Theater**

Every moment of *I Am Not Your Negro* is packed with information, references, and conversation prompts – both aural and visual. To truly appreciate all the insights the film communicates, it is best to come to the film in a thoughtful manner, and allow yourself time to process what you’ve seen. Make sure you have time before and after the film starts to talk with your companions about your experience.

### **Create a Safe Viewing Space**

*I Am Not Your Negro* is a film that deals with a very dense, nuanced, and difficult subject, and in order to create the most productive outcome, viewers need to feel safe expressing their feelings and responses. The most important thing is to ensure that everyone in your party feels welcome and safe, so that they are open to viewing – and discussing – this crucial content. Refer to the **Things to Consider Before Watching I Am Not Your Negro** section of this guide for topics and questions to help frame the viewing experience and to help navigate both the film, and responses to it.

### **Check in with Yourself – and Your Companions – Before the Film Rolls**

This film’s subject matter is an important and contentious aspect of our country’s history. Seeing it on the big screen with family and friends is a great way to start a dialogue about this emotionally charged, and extremely topical chapter. When viewing in a theater, try to pay attention to the details that add relevance to the story: the relationship between the voiceover and the footage that is used, the editorial choices, the film references, the music, the lighting, and the visual point of view. Also pay attention to your own physiological responses. Oftentimes our deepest insights come when we can focus on our own, personal, holistic and emotional experiences of the film. What aspects of the film make you most uncomfortable? Don’t turn away from these moments; rather, observe how the images, ideas, conversations and characters affect your own sense of anger, fear, well-being, anxiety, and calm.

As much as you can, while still being present, make note of these details, so you can discuss them with your companions after the film ends.

### **Consider Timing**

The film itself is just about an hour and a half, and in order to really unpack all the issues the film raises, you should allow for a minimum of an hour after the film to debrief with your friends and family. Consider inviting everyone back to your home for snacks, and to talk. Or walk to a nearby café where you can sit with a cup of coffee or tea and chat. Prior to your evening, you might refer to the **Things to Consider After Watching *I Am Not Your Negro*** and the **Questions for Further Discussion** sections of this guide for questions and topics that can help start a fruitful dialogue.

### **Follow-up**

This film will likely bring up a lot of questions and reactions, many of which will not get resolved the night of your outing. Make time in the coming weeks to revisit the conversation. Maintain that safe space and encourage your friends and family to continue the discussion, dialogue and thinking. Think about the ways that you will continue to work towards the ideals and goals the film brought up – even after the movie ends. Refer to the **Extension Activities** section of this guide for ways to get involved.

### **Choose a Date**

*I Am Not Your Negro* will be in theatres everywhere beginning February 3, 2017. As you have heard time and again, opening weekend is the most important time for a film, and especially a film with a topic as sensitive as this one. If you are able, plan your date and location well in advance. When picking the date and time for your viewing, consider holidays and local events, as well as the general preferences of your invitees. A weeknight evening is often a good time to host an adults-only event, as it allows professionals to come straight from work and does not conflict with major weekend plans. If you are choosing between days, do not hesitate to ask an expert, such as an administrator at your church or synagogue, about when they've had the most success with attendance.

...and now that the basics are decided, you can get to planning your event!

### **2-4 Weeks Prior**

- Put together your invitation list.

- Select a convenient location and time for your in-theatre viewing. Depending on the size of your group, many theatres may offer a group discount rate for your tickets as well as a private auditorium for larger groups. Contact your local theatre in advance for more information.
- Design and email or text your invitation. Make sure your invitation outlines all the details of your event: including the name of the film, and a description of the activities you have planned (panel discussion, moderated Q&A, open group dialogue, small group activities, dinner, etc.). If you are planning to gather at a restaurant following your in-theatre viewing, select a convenient location and make a reservation and include this information in your invitation. If you are planning a potluck or bring-your-own event, at a private location following the in-theatre viewing, make sure you detail this expectation in your invitation as well.

### **2 Weeks Prior**

- Plan the food and drinks you will serve. Will you serve drinks and light snacks? A full buffet meal? Do you need to rent tables, chairs, plates, glasses, and utensils, or purchase disposable ones?
- Prepare an agenda for your event. This can be as formal or as informal as you wish, but you should decide on the timing for arrivals, introductions, film start, and starting the post-film discussion or supplemental activities. This guide provides questions and discussion prompts for creating a unique, dynamic dialogue.

### **1 Week Prior**

- Send out a reminder to those guests who have RSVP'd "yes," or have not RSVP'd at all.
- Consider providing RSVP'd guests with links to the film's website, the film's official Facebook, or Twitter to garner involvement in the issues, and get your guests excited about your event.

### **3 Days Prior**

- Purchase the necessary food, drinks, and other event supplies if you are hosting a discussion at a private location following the in-theatre viewing. If you are going to a local restaurant after, confirm your restaurant reservation and the final number of attendees.
- Confirm with your invited guests one more time, and consider resending links to any late RSVPs.
- Prepare and practice an introduction to the film and a welcome to your event.

### **The Day of the Event**

- Don't forget your agenda. Make the most out of your time by following the agenda you created. If your group is attending a showing with a general audience, and not your own private auditorium at the theatre, gather your guests in the lobby of the theatre for a brief introduction. Introduce the film and explain why you are bringing it to the group. Before the film starts, remind your guests that there will be a short discussion, panel discussion, or activities afterwards.

### **The Day After**

- Send a thank-you to all your guests and encourage them to continue the discussion and/or the action plan that was started at your event.
- Think about the ways that you will continue to work towards the ideals and goals the film brought up for you – even after the movie ends. Refer to the **Extension Activities** section of this guide for ways to get involved.

## **Things to Consider Before Watching *I Am Not Your Negro***

This film explores historical, contemporary, and artistic themes relating to race and culture in the United States. While much of the film deals with events that took place half a century ago, all of it is still very relevant to this day. It is this relevance – this lack of societal evolution – that audiences should examine closely, in order to fight against our cultural inertia. Take a moment to think about one or all of the following themes. Consider your relationship to these themes. What opinions or thoughts do you have on these subjects already? Considering these topics, and your personal relationship to them before you view the film, will allow for higher level thinking during the viewing as well as more productive dialogue afterwards.

- What is the legacy of slavery, segregation, and Jim Crow in our culture? How do these historical institutions affect contemporary society?
- What do you know about the original American Civil Rights movement? What do you know about that movement's leaders, in particular, Martin Luther King, Jr., Medgar Evers, and Malcom X?
- How is your perception of the world influenced by what you see represented on television, in music, or in movies? How are these representations different, or similar, to your own life?
- In your opinion, why do you think some people hate other people? Where does this feeling of hatred originate?
- Can you think of a character in a movie or a popular film that looks like, lives like, and/ or acts like you and your family? If so, who are these characters, and how do they make you feel? If not, how does this lack of representation make you feel?
- What is a hero? Who are your heroes?
- What defines a "journey?" What's the difference between a journey and a trip? Have you ever been on a journey?
- Are you affiliated with a political, social, or religious group? If so, describe it. If not, is there a reason why?
- What is the American Dream?
- What is a song or a musical artist that speaks for your generation, or for the times?
- What is race?
- All of the leaders associated with the civil rights movement – from Martin Luther King, Jr. to Robert Kennedy – were murdered. Consider the impact that this had on the movement – and



on society at large. What message did this send to the American people about civil rights in this country?

- What role does violence play in American history? In world history? When is violence perceived as acceptable? When is it not?

### **Things to Consider After Watching *I Am Not Your Negro***

This film can be appreciated on many levels: as a work of art, as an interpretation of a complex and under-documented history, or as a call to action, a story whose message is almost as painfully relevant today as it was in its own time. Use the following discussion starters to broaden your thinking about the film and the issues it depicts.

#### Media Literacy/ Film Studies

- What did you notice about the title treatments throughout? How does the art direction in the titles mirror the message of the film?
- Throughout the film, there are moments where seemingly random visuals appear on screen. For instance, young co-eds running in the sun, beautiful pastorals and sunsets – at one point there is footage of a rocket going into outer space. Why do you think the filmmaker made this artistic choice? What might these different images represent in the context of this film?
- There are title cards that come up periodically throughout the film. They read: “Paying My Dues”; “Heroes”; “Witness”; “Purity”; “Selling the Negro”; and “I am not a Nigger.” Consider how these titles relate to the sections of the film. Is there a direct correlation, or a symbolic one, between the content explored in these sections and the title cards?

#### The Civil Rights Movement and Race Relations in America

- How do the lives of Malcolm, Medgar, and Martin “bang against and reveal each other” in this film? What do the portrayals of these men reveal about the people who ‘loved and betrayed’ them?
- How did the film portray the struggle for school integration – the importance of school and access to books and learning – as well as the vitriol surrounding the effort to integrate?
- What impact did the early representation of blacks in film have on Baldwin, specifically, Stepin Fetchit, Willie Best, Uncle Tom, and Clinton Rosemund?

- The film touches multiple times on the idea that African-Americans are not entitled to claim part of the society that they helped build. At one point Baldwin is quoted “I am not a ward of America. I am not an object of missionary charity. I’m one of the people who built this country.” Consider this statement and evaluate it within the context of the civil rights movement – then and now.
- There were many references to contemporary society throughout the film: a montage of young African Americans who have been killed in the past 10 years (Tamir Rice, Darius Simmons, Trayvon Martin, and others), as well as footage of riots in Los Angeles, Ferguson, and other cities. Why did the filmmakers choose to include these references, and how did they impact you as a viewer?
- Do you think the following statement is accurate? Explain your reasoning. “You cannot lynch me and keep me in ghettos without becoming something monstrous yourselves.”

#### Literature, Art and Culture

- What are the differences between one’s public persona and their private self? Why is this so?
- How does contemporary Hollywood culture affect the attitudes and behaviors of society at large?
- Explore the significance of Lorraine Hansberry and her play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, within the narrative arc of this film, in American history and culture, and in Baldwin’s life.
- What significance does Baldwin give to the historical image of black slaves “singing songs on the levee?” What does he mean when he says “They require a song to justify my captivity and to justify their own.”
- Analyze the melody and lyrics to Bob Dylan’s song “Pawn in their Game.” Explore the lyrics as a poem – what do his words say about the society they came from? What is Dylan trying to impart with this song?

### **Questions for Further Discussion**

Use the following questions to reflect on, and tease apart some of your responses to the film. These prompts could be used to start a family conversation, a community dialogue, or for journaling, to process the emotions and implications that this film brings.

- The film begins with Baldwin saying “a journey is called that because you cannot know what you will discover on the journey, what you will do with what you find, or what you find will do to you.” Explore the literary meaning of “journey” within the context of this film. What are some of the various literal and figurative journeys that are depicted in the film?
- In the film, Baldwin argues that any conversation about the ‘Negro in America’ is really simply a conversation about America, and that attempting to silo race not only hinders us from improving race relations, but also undermines growth for our society as a whole. How does this theory relate to the contemporary conversation about race in America?
- What does it mean to be a witness? How is the role of witness in history different from the roles of others – such as perpetrators, victims, bystanders or allies? What are the responsibilities of a witness, and why is it important that there be witnesses?
- What was the significance of including Baldwin’s FBI file?
- At one point in the film, there was an audio montage of voices (some very recognizable) saying “I’m sorry.” What was the purpose – and the impact – of this moment in the film, on both the narrative arc, and on you as a viewer?
- Baldwin notes that MLK and Malcolm X were “two men... poles apart, driven closer together. By the time each died, their positions had become virtually the same position. It can be said indeed, that Martin picked up Malcolm’s burden, articulated the vision which Malcolm had begun to see and for which he paid with his life, and that Malcolm was one of the people that Martin saw on the mountaintop.” These two men are often represented as opposites, or even enemies, in popular culture. How does Baldwin’s depiction differ? Why is this difference significant?
- Baldwin loosely defines segregation as apathy plus ignorance. Explain what this means using real-life examples as well as paraphrases from Baldwin’s words.
- At one point Baldwin notes the difference between a white man with a gun (a romantic revolutionary, or an eccentric patriot) and a black man with a gun (a raving maniac). What examples of this was Baldwin referring to? What examples of this can you find in contemporary society?
- What does Baldwin mean when he uses the phrase “emotional poverty?”
- Analyze the following quote: “I can't be pessimistic because I am alive. To be a pessimist means that you treat human life as an academic matter. So I am forced to be an optimist.”

- Discuss, explore, and analyze the following quote from James Baldwin: “It is entirely up to the American people whether or not they are going to face and deal with and embrace this stranger on whom they’ve relied for so long. What white people have to do is to try to find out – find out in their own hearts – why it was necessary to have a nigger in the first place. ‘Cause I’m not a nigger, I’m a man. But if you think I’m a nigger then you need it – so the question the white population has to ask themselves is -- if I’m not the nigger here and you, the white people, invented it, then you have to figure out why. The future of this country relies on that. On whether or not I was able to ask that question.”

### **Extension Activities**

Continue the journey from audience to agent of change by engaging with a nonprofit or social movement that works to eradicate bigotry, hate crimes, and institutionalized bias.

- Learn more about the legacy of bias in this country through the important work of the Southern Poverty Law Center, whose mission is to “fight hate and bigotry and to seek justice for the most vulnerable members of our society.” Go to [www.splc.org](http://www.splc.org) to find out more.
- Black Lives Matter has become one of the most respected voices in what is now known as the “new civil rights movement.” Go to [www.blacklivesmatter.com/find-chapters/](http://www.blacklivesmatter.com/find-chapters/), find a local Black Lives Matter chapter, and get involved in the movement.
- The NAACP, the world’s largest grassroots-based civil rights organization, was founded in 1909 with the mission to ensure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights of all persons and to eliminate race-based discrimination. Support their work in civic engagement, environmental justice, criminal justice, health and more by becoming involved in your local chapter. Learn more here: <http://www.naacp.org/find-local-unit/>
- The National Urban League has many programs to protect civil rights and fight racism in America’s cities. Check out their national and local initiatives and learn how to get involved here: <http://iamempowered.com/programs-and-initiatives>

### **Additional Resources**

The Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture

<http://nmaahc.si.edu>

Teaching Tolerance

[www.teachingtolerance.org](http://www.teachingtolerance.org)

Facing History and Ourselves

[www.facinghistory.org](http://www.facinghistory.org)

Color of Change

[www.colorofchange.org](http://www.colorofchange.org)

The King Center

<http://www.thekingcenter.org>

National Visionary Leadership Project

<http://visionaryproject.org>

NAACP

<http://www.naacp.org>

National Urban League

<http://nul.iamempowered.com>