

INTERVIEW

# “He Gave Me the Words”: An Interview with Raoul Peck

Leah Mirakhor Yale University

## Abstract

*I Am Not Your Negro* (2016) takes its direction from the notes for a book entitled “Remember this House” that James Baldwin left unfinished, a book about his three friends—Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr.— their murders, and their intertwining legacies. The film examines the prophetic shadow Baldwin’s work casts on twentieth- and twenty-first-century American politics and culture. Peck compiles archival material from Baldwin’s interviews on *The Dick Cavett Show*, his 1965 Cambridge lecture, and a series of banal images indexing the American dream. Juxtaposed against this mythology is footage of Dorothy Counts walking to school, the assassination of black leaders and activists, KKK rallies, and the different formations of the contemporary carceral state. Our conversation examines Peck’s role as a filmmaker and his relationship with the Baldwin estate. Additionally, we discussed a series of aesthetic choices he fought to include in the film’s final cut, directing Samuel L. Jackson as the voice for the film, the similarities and shifts he wanted to document in American culture since the 1960s, and some of the criticism he has received for not emphasizing more Baldwin’s sexuality.

**Keywords:** James Baldwin, Gloria Baldwin Karefa-Smart, race, film, America, *The Devil Finds Work*, “Remember this House,” violence, sexuality, Patrice Lumumba, film

*I Am Not Your Negro* (2016) is a work that has been a lifetime in the making for Raoul Peck. Before he met James Baldwin’s younger sister, Gloria Baldwin Karefa-Smart, a decade ago at her home in Washington D.C. and expressed his desire to make a film about him, Peck had what he describes as an intimate relationship with Baldwin. As a teenager transplanted to Brooklyn during the 1960s, Peck began reading Baldwin as a way to understand the world he occupied—his peripatetic life between Haiti, Congo, France, and Germany, growing up during

the Civil Rights movement, and as a Haitian immigrant well-versed in the history of slavery, colonialism, and occupation. Baldwin provided Peck with a theoretical, moral, and aesthetic underpinning to the world around him. He “gave me,” Peck has said “a voice, gave me the words, gave me the rhetoric ... all I knew or had learned through instinct or through experience, Baldwin gave a name to and a shape.”<sup>1</sup>

Subsequently, his work as a filmmaker has been shaped by a responsibility to tell stories that intervene into dominant narratives that elide the histories of Third World resistances. His previous films, such as *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet* (1990), *Lumumba* (2000), *Sometimes in April* (2005), and *Fatal Assistance* (2013), engage directly with political conflicts, economic strife, racial terror, and postcolonial shifts in contexts such as the Rwandan genocide, the 1960s Congo crisis, and the devastation wrought by the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. In addition to his work as a filmmaker, Peck served as Minister of Culture from 1996 to 1997 in the Haitian government during the one-year term of Prime Minister Rosny Smarth.

In addition to his personal and political journey as a filmmaker, and his debt to Baldwin’s work in his thinking, *I Am Not Your Negro* is also a testament to Peck’s close relationship with Gloria Baldwin Karefa-Smart. Peck credits Karefa-Smart’s generosity and support as the most significant part of the decade-long process of turning the words of James Baldwin into an Oscar-nominated film. After their initial encounter, Peck received unprecedented access to the estate and has developed a deep bond with and loyalty to Karefa-Smart, whom he identifies as “a soul mate, a friend, and above all an ally with whom the conversation quickly became real, direct, sincere.”<sup>2</sup>

About halfway through the process, Karefa-Smart gave Peck a packet containing Baldwin’s unfinished book project titled “Remember this House,” centering on the intertwined lives of his three friends, murdered within a five-year span of one another: Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr. This unfinished book provided the narrative direction for the film which spans the work and life of James Baldwin, drawing most notably from *The Fire Next Time* (1963), *No Name in the Street* (1972), and *The Devil Finds Work* (1976). Although Peck had access to all of Baldwin’s archives, he eschewed drawing heavily from Baldwin’s private letters, respecting the family’s wish to keep Baldwin’s private life private. Although Peck did not draw much from personal correspondence, he noted in our conversation that the letters were important in shaping what he understood about Baldwin’s writing process, his life, and how he negotiated his status as a writer and man.

Peck compiles archival material from Baldwin’s interviews on *The Dick Cavett Show*, his 1965 Cambridge lecture, as well as a series of banal happy images indexing the American dream. Juxtaposed against this mythology is footage of Dorothy Counts walking to school, the assassination of black leaders and activists, KKK rallies, and the different formations of the contemporary carceral state. Alongside Baldwin’s own voice from recorded interviews and lectures, Samuel L. Jackson narrates Baldwin’s letters and excerpts from his work, creating a subdued

but emotive and unsettling tone throughout the film. Baldwin’s words reverberate prophetically against the present moment of militarized state violence, racial capital, and the limits of the American dream.

Our two-hour-long conversation took place in Los Angeles on 10 December 2016 while Peck was there to promote a series of advance screenings of *I Am Not Your Negro*. I had the opportunity to see the film on two occasions with enraptured audiences: once at the International Documentary Screening Series, and again at the Film Independent Screening at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, where he appeared with Samuel L. Jackson. We continued our conversation via email over the following months. Peck has appeared internationally for screenings, and as a recent recipient of a Ford Foundation grant is garnering support to build curricula and outreach programs around Baldwin’s work in under-served communities.

Peck’s confidence about the film’s uncompromising look at Baldwin’s words against the backdrop of America in the last fifty years is built around a journey he has defined as “respecting at all times and preserving scrupulously the spirit, the philosophy, the pugnacity, the insight, the humor, the poetry, and the soul of the long-gone author.”<sup>3</sup> It is undeniable that a lifetime with Baldwin’s work has guided Peck’s own experience and created a lasting intimacy to which he has wanted to remain true. “I hope,” Peck recounts movingly, “I have not betrayed a man who has accompanied me from very early on, every day of my life, as a brother, father, mentor, accomplice, consoler, comrade-in-arms—an eternal witness of my own wanderings.”<sup>4</sup>

### Interview with Raoul Peck, 10 December 2016

**LM:** How did your previous films prepare you for making *I Am Not Your Negro*?

**RP:** My films are mainly based on complex political/historical material, not often covered by others. Because they are complex and rare, I make sure that they will survive the test of time. For example, *Lumumba: La mort du prophète* (1990), which I made nearly three decades ago, is still distributed, viewed and used by a general public, and scholars use it as well for their teaching, because there aren’t many films that take on these issues, and with that kind of approach. The film industry is permanently asking “simplicity” from us filmmakers. I try to deliver on my terms, without compromising substance and form. I never enhance a subject for dramatic purpose or convenience. I always choose not to invent any fictional plot or any fictional character to make the story conform to Hollywood dramatic standards.

I will always prefer to find *real* historical characters or *real* events to build my story with, because I want them to be historically and politically accurate. I basically have to wear three hats simultaneously: one as a “normal” filmmaker and artist confronted with the world at large, another as a “politically engaged” filmmaker, with a specific combative agenda, and the third as a researcher of my own

national narrative and creator of an appropriate form for that narrative, for we were not part of the previous 100 years of world cinema. In the case of a film like *Lumumba*, for example, while having to make a film “sellable” to my Western financiers, I had to make sure that Congolese, Africans, and the diaspora at large would feel that this film is totally theirs, and make it unique, “immortal,” and real. And I wanted to “record for posterity” as much reality as possible on the screen. That’s why I always prefer to shoot where the actual story happened. I shot part of *Lumumba* in Belgium, but also in Bera, an old colonial city in Mozambique which looks like the old Leopoldville that I knew as a child, and I shot *Sometimes in April* (2005) in Kigali, Rwanda, a city that today has totally changed and expanded.

Ultimately, I think that all my previous work did play a major role in the Baldwin estate’s decision to allow me such an unlimited access to his archive.

**LM:** The film quotes quite a bit from *The Devil Finds Work* (1976), where Baldwin eloquently examined the power of images. In previous interviews, you’ve said that regarding depictions of Haiti, writers and journalists don’t often want to show the dignity of people, but tilt toward sensationalism. Your films on Haiti have instead been an attempt to depict the dignity of those that we often don’t get to see. How did you want to capture the dignity of what and whom Baldwin talked about?

**RP:** This requires compassion. Compassion in the way Baldwin sees it. Baldwin emphasized this. My most telling Baldwin quote about this is the following: “Every human being is an unprecedented miracle. One tries to treat them as the miracles they are, while trying to protect oneself against the disasters they’ve become.” And there is no algorithm to solve that dilemma. It’s a permanent search and every time a new decision about how to approach people and situations. It’s always about finding the right distance, both ethically and cinematographically.

**LM:** You do a lot of archival work in your films. What were the most significant archival materials as you worked on *I ANYN*? I know the estate gave you their full support for a long period of time.

**RP:** Yes, the estate was of course the main source. The access they gave me is simply unprecedented by any standard. Some of the material to which I had access is of a private nature. I didn’t want to use it, but it did help me “understand” Baldwin’s working process, environment, and life. Regarding Baldwin’s legacy, I think that Gloria has paid her dues, although she has always been discreet and modest about it. Because James Baldwin is *foremost* her brother, whose life she witnessed, with all its high and lows, she cannot exclusively be concerned about scholarship and research. I have seen letters or heard comments criticizing the estate. But one should understand that for her, it’s her life as well as her family. And this comes with a heavy responsibility. Furthermore, Baldwin has already exposed most of his life on paper, in his plays, screenplays, novels, essays, and interviews. Everything he deemed necessary and important for others, and for his

message, he has already written about. I don't think one can use him freely and without limit for his own agenda. I believe this to be true regarding the legacy of Fanon, Césaire, Lumumba, and others.

**LM:** You stated that Gloria Baldwin gave you the “decisive key to the film,” when she handed you the thirty pages of writing called, “Notes Toward Remember this House” a book project Baldwin never finished.

**RP:** I had the rights to Baldwin's work and because of the relationship and the trust established between Gloria and me, she basically allowed me access to everything, published or unpublished, private or public. When she invited me to meet her, I was very frank, modest, and open about my endeavor. I just knew that James Baldwin's *oeuvre* was the central subject—and less his biography, and that it had to be “major.” Other than that, I didn't have a clue about form, scope, or even genre. Gloria, and the estate, had seen my work, and had of course enquired about who I was. So, I was able to start this project under the best conditions possible. From very early on, it was a sort of familial and committed relationship that I wanted to honor, respect, and protect. I kept Gloria informed regularly about my progresses, or failures, probably more than she would have wished [smiling] and always made sure that we were “in sync.” This is key in the work of a filmmaker: to establish trust and common ground with next of kin and not only show, but *prove* respect to the life you will talk about, and in that process, there are a lot of emotions and feelings that aren't solely intellectual.

Furthermore, I knew that any attempt to try to develop a personal portrait of Baldwin was neither what I wanted nor what his family was primarily interested in. For the life of an artist is not always the “key” to profoundly understanding the work of that artist. Of course, it gives clues, but some of the indulgent and almost promiscuous dealing with Baldwin's private life seems to me at time deliberately humiliating. If you are an artist—and I count myself among that particular species—your private life is usually a big mess, a lot of the time. It's the price you pay. I reject this kind of self-claimed authority where some judge the lives of others without ever having to justify the source of their authority, neither by their work, nor by their experience. It is a very common attitude nowadays. It reminds me of Khizr Khan, the father of this U.S. soldier who died in Iraq, who addressed Trump and said “you have sacrificed nothing and no one.” Today, anyone can go on a rant on Twitter without any legitimate sacrifices as they critique or berate or judge someone else's life.

**LM:** What do you think drives others to own or possess another artist? Do you think this is driven by publishing something different?

**RP:** I have a feeling that sometimes it is only— and almost solely—about “coining” one or two terminologies. A few years ago, I spoke about Lumumba at a gathering of scholars. I told them about the fact that I remember that when I was studying,

most of my teachers were not only in the classrooms but also on the street with us, as well. They were interpreters and researchers of the system, but they were also activists. It seems to me, in the past thirty years, academia has become a citadel and has less to do with what's going on in the streets. As Minister of Culture in Haiti 1996–97, I've been involved in government. I remember asking myself where are the papers, the policy research, the logical framework that I needed to properly do my job? My cabinet and I had to construct our own needed set of research in order to analyze, plan, and propose policies. I dreamt of having papers coming from Haitian scholars from institutions such as MIT or Columbia, that were more grounded in the reality we were confronted with. Again, I am generalizing a bit, but this was my reality. Academia may have worked itself into a protective bubble that literally floats so far above reality, that I wonder about the connection between research and praxis.

**LM:** Does this analysis reflect your decision to not interview scholars or consult scholars? Can you talk about your choice to forgo these voices?

**RP:** From the start, the film was not about “giving” anybody the word: Not scholars, not experts, not activists, not family, not fellow writers. From the start, it was about putting James Baldwin's own words up on the frontline: strong, raw, and without interpreters. Making films is about exercising a kind of power. To include anybody in the film is allowing him/her the power to be a kind of “translator,” and I wanted to avoid that. I didn't want anyone or their words to be above Baldwin's. I didn't feel, and I still don't feel, that anyone should be allowed to “explain” Baldwin more than Baldwin did himself. Furthermore, I wanted his words of combat, rather than the lethargy of cold analysis by others. I had to protect myself from all the self-proclaimed “insiders,” not from their wise advice, but to allow myself the freedom to go “all the way,” wherever that would be, both politically and artistically.

**LM:** Tell me about encountering Baldwin's letters and how this aided you in picking out material from his published work such as *Fire Next Time* and *The Devil Finds Work*?

**RP:** Accessing these materials is one thing. To find out how to use them would have been impossible without the knowledge I already had of Baldwin's “voice.” In fact, saying that the project took me ten years is not quite true. To be honest, I should also count all the years prior, dating back to the first time I discovered Baldwin as a young man. The film is also the result of my long gestation of Baldwin throughout my whole life. You can't really “give birth” to such an intense work, without the time that provides layers, experience, intimacy, and the life that make it possible. I had to go back to all these totally underlined Baldwin books I own, in different languages or editions, in order to make sure that I didn't omit anything that was important to me. The film takes my own experiences and my own inti-

mate relationships with all of Baldwin's subjects from *Birth of A Nation* to Doris Day to Kennedy, from Tarzan to Fred Astaire, from Ray Charles to Gary Cooper (part of my mythology growing up), from dealing with the Civil Rights movement and its leaders, to Baldwin's struggle with being a witness, to his increasing international "celebrity." The letters gave me insight into how he was doing all these extraordinary tasks, all the while seeking safety, love, and peace of mind, which seemed to elude him. He sacrificed gravely. All of this together helped me frame the film; the film then is the convergence of my own experiences, structured through and by Baldwin, which allowed me to remain close to Baldwin's work and not venture too far away. I wanted to be the messenger, but I needed to be the best messenger possible, and that intimate link between my experience and his was fundamental.

**LM:** By the time you got to the letters you essentially spent forty years with Baldwin. You were already so familiar with his work and you had your own point of entry, of what to look for, what you needed. You were also working on another film. How much of your work and journey with Baldwin figured into your soon to be released film *Le Jeune Karl Marx* (2017)? Is it your other biography?

**RP:** Baldwin shaped my mind. I can vividly remember one time, in my twenties, how I suddenly became aware that I was basically rephrasing Baldwin's positions, thinking they were, in fact, mine. I inherited a lot from this man. I guess, like millions of other people too. The two fundamental pillars to my thinking are James Baldwin and (the young) Karl Marx. Marx is one of the most brilliant and most determinant thinkers of the nineteenth century, indispensable to this day. Whatever other people have done with him is a different story. Marx, together with Friedrich Engels, delivered the most precise, argumentative, prescient analysis of what capitalism has become today, with all its crises, profound inequalities, and accumulation of profit on one side and of massive poverty on the other side. In addition, they have provided us with the most efficient instrument to analyze that precisely historical capitalist society. My other film *Le Jeune Karl Marx* is not a Hollywood-type biopic. The idea was to show the evolution of the thinking of three young people: Karl Marx, Jenny Marx, and Friedrich Engels, all from rather wealthy families, who decide to change their unjust and repressive world in order to create more equality among human beings and a more just society. Nothing else. Baldwin probably drew his own analysis of the relationship between individual and society from them. His analysis and the dialectic of his thinking is a Marxist one. Dialectic in the sense that two opposing points of view can simultaneously be true and that it is the contradiction between views that raises a question seeking an answer. But in our world of simplistic answers, this reality is hard to grasp. A lot of the white working class voted for Donald Trump because they sought a simple answer or simple recipe to solve very complex problems in their lives. This, as Baldwin says rightfully, is "a formula for a nation or a kingdom in decline."

**LM:** What sorts of roadblocks did you encounter as you made the film? And what about your choice to include no personal narratives from people who knew Baldwin?

**RP:** The estate always wanted to promote Baldwin's legacy and less his private life. When word got out that I was making a film "on" Baldwin, many people came out of the woods wanting to share their own Baldwin "story." These ranged from petty anecdotes to intimate details—that I really didn't need to know—to very authoritative stands on his legacy, because that particular person shared a moment of his life with him. I found that to be a bit vulgar, especially when I felt that these particular sources would offer opinions they would have never voiced in front of Baldwin himself, and I think it's because he would have destroyed their arguments. I have encountered this before. When I made *Lumumba*, most of the foreign journalists I met in 1989 started their careers during the 1960s crisis in the Congo—some of them close to the CIA, some to the French or Belgian secret service—and had now become heads of big media outlets in the U.S. and Europe. I would always smile when they would tell me how they used to correct the young Lumumba's articles before they could be printed. All this of course was a way to underscore on one side how important they were in the life of these future leaders, and on the other side their own superiority. A long-time BBC producer, after seeing a cut of my film, admonished me not to make *I Am Not Your Negro*, but to instead do a biography of James Baldwin. His justification came from the usual anecdotes that attempted to show that he knew Baldwin better than anybody else.

**LM:** You have said that you wanted to move yourself "to the back," while making the film, further emphasizing that "it isn't about me." How did you get Samuel L. Jackson involved in the film, and not make it about Samuel L. Jackson?

**RP:** Well, this was probably one of the biggest artistic hurdles in making this film. The question was: How to make sure that the audience would not be disturbed after seeing and hearing the voice and face of the real Baldwin and then encounter *another* voice "playing" his role. Since *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet*, I have worked with voices. It's a device that gives me an incredible freedom and enriches the limited cinematic instruments. And what I mean with voice is, of course, totally different than what is commonly known as voice-over, and so abusively used in journalistic contexts, and in bad documentaries. In cinema, voice-overs are considered a no-no and a lazy solution. It took me a long time to learn how to use and direct voices, reflecting exactly what I needed. In *Lumumba*—the narrative—you hear Lumumba's voice reading his last letter to his wife, in *Sometimes in April*, you hear Idris Elba's voice as a schoolteacher telling the story of the survivors; in *Fatal Assistance*, there are two voices, a female international worker and a male counterpart engaging in an epistolary dialogue. Finding the right voice

is also a way for me to challenge the oft-stated fact that film can only enlighten you through emotion and not intellect, without becoming didactic. I refuse this dichotomy. All my work has always been to try to do both. The deeper emotions that create empathy coupled with the more complex intellectual insight create profound understanding and critical reflection, which adheres to the “Brechtian” approach of creating distance.

Of course, sometimes I would have loved to get away without a voice, and use something equivalent as a two-page digression like you have in literature, where you can explain and develop a longer chapter if need be. This is possible and accepted in a novel, not in film. You can reread a page, but on the screen it has to be clear by the first showing. The instruments of filmmaking are not so subtle and have their limits. The rules are precise. One being that you should avoid boring your audience, even when tackling very complex issues, the other is to avoid any didacticism and confusion. So, my artistic solution is to create a character you can identify in the context of the story. In *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet*, the voice is the little boy telling the story of his mother (modeled after me as a child); I had to use my own voice in order to find the right approach, the right distance from the words. In *I Am Not Your Negro*, it is Baldwin telling his story. In this case, I asked Samuel Jackson *to be* Baldwin, not to mimic him. I asked him always to be “in character.” And by being Baldwin, he could let all the emotions, the poetry, the anger, the sorrow, even the silence, go through his own soul. We can emotionally follow it anywhere. This gave us incredible creative freedom. During the editing process, I used the voice of John Beltsh—an African-American jazz musician living in Paris. I liked his grainy, deep voice. As we did the edits, he needed to be close and reachable so that we could re-record him at will. My only real direction to him was: “Just be yourself, don’t say anything you don’t feel. Read it once or twice and then tell it. Don’t read it, tell it.” And he did, in a very powerful and magical way. So, when it came to choosing the final voice, as you may know for a film like this, you need a celebrity that will help sell it. This is a commercial aspect that one cannot avoid. I had a list of names of actors on my wish list and Samuel Jackson was my first choice. I was able to send the current edit to him and he responded immediately and positively.

**LM:** How did you find working with Samuel L. Jackson and what sort of instructions, if any, did you discuss with him regarding the character you wanted to develop?

**RP:** Normally, this kind of recording can take several days because of the precision of the needed delivery, the undeniable strength and emotion that it requires. In our case, the recording session itself took one day, and we still had time to try several different versions. This was thanks to Sam’s incredible talent and understanding of the process. He is incredibly precise and disciplined in his work and his diction is probably one of the best, if not the best in Hollywood, despite his well-documented propensity for exquisite insults in Tarantino’s films. The only

direction I gave him was the same I gave to John: be yourself, be the character, feel it, be it. In these instances, despite the precise delivery, you cannot direct every word. Sam Jackson did a *performance*.

**LM:** There were a lot of emotional responses and reactions to the choices of images you employed in the film. I was particularly struck by the images of whiteness and those women in white leotards dancing against the blue sky.

**RP:** It is particularly funny that *exactly* these images were the subject of a lot of discussions with some of our American partners. These images are from French director François Reichenbach's 1960 film *L'Amérique Insolite*, a documentary of his travels in the U.S. in the 1950s where he shot these rather surrealist images. I called it "the angels sequence." This footage, the blue sky, the happiness and the innocence, I thought this as the perfect metaphor for paradise in all its purity. We struggled with that particular edit and its context. It's absurd where it is now, but I like this absurdity.

**LM:** It was a haunting image that remained with me. Was it in part a way to explain the obsession of the Cult of True Womanhood and this putative innocence that Baldwin talks so much about?

**RP:** Yes, maybe. In any case, I felt very strongly about it. When we were almost ready to validate the last edit, I asked my good friend Sam Pollard—Spike Lee's editor for films such as *Jungle Fever* (1991), *Clockers* (1994), and *Four Little Girls* (1997)—to be a sort of American eye for the film. I tested these particular images with him, and his reaction was that if I felt strongly about them, I should keep them. Period. It was clear that these images created some sort of unease, which was appropriate toward the inherent absurdity. It's carnal; it's bizarre.

**LM:** The Ferguson moments seem to be a way to show Baldwin's theories confirmed in our current moment. What made you decide to employ the images from Ferguson?

**RP:** I had to find a way to introduce what was happening now, in this instance Ferguson, but without just the meaning of Ferguson. It needed to be artistically, philosophically, and historically accurate and symbolic. Thus, the usage of black and white to parallel and signal the 1950s and 1960s civil rights imagery, that we already know so well. But these images had to also be distinctive from news footage. Although we had our own crew filming there during the protests, we finally decided to buy images from some of the hundreds of other people filming the events. The differences between then and now is that now there was intensified military-like gear and equipment. History repeating itself with a twist, similar but just technically improved.

**LM:** This technical difference—did you want us to see the way in which instruments of empire are employed, advanced, and developed?

**RP:** The setups are the same—police and protesters. The police reminded me of perverted Barbie or Ken dolls who were in cloaked in these costumes of armor. I wanted to show the faces of both protesters and police. Behind the angry face of violence and bullying of the police, there is also fear and insecurity. I wanted to show their eyes and their confusion and avoid clichés. I wanted to show that individuals on both sides were caught in a situation that they don’t totally control. This is the Baldwinian and Marxian attitude of observing the human costs of societal repression.

**LM:** You take this approach of showing fear and insecurity when zooming in on 15-year-old Dorothy Counts’s face, walking to school in 1967, as well as zooming in on the faces of those who terrorize her.

**RP:** Yes, because if the view is wide and blurred you don’t get the reality of it, and you render it anonymous. I like to basically explore a photo, learn from it, study it, and examine it from all its different angles. When you zoom inside the photos of the faces of young boys harassing this young girl, you are looking at human behavior in all its ugliness. Seeing a particular little boy doing what he’s doing, you’re thinking about his parents, about who he will become as an adult. It’s not about your race, it’s about you being a human being. How can a child be in that situation? You are somehow obliged to see yourself, whoever you are. So, the selection of the images and their iconographic structure is key.

**LM:** Tell us a bit about how you captured Baldwin recounting Lorraine Hansberry’s meeting with Bobby Kennedy, where she sought to convince him to have his brother, the President, personally escort to school a young black girl, so that “whoever spits on the child will be spitting on the nation.”

**RP:** Indeed, I didn’t have many photos or film to edit this sequence. There is not much material on Lorraine Hansberry, who died at a very young age, only 34. But at the same time, we needed to make this sequence work, for it was one of my most preferred scenes. So, we had to be very creative and find ways—for there are no photos of that famous meeting—with just Lorraine Hansberry’s and Bobby Kennedy’s images, who Baldwin zeroed in on, to create the sensation that we were in that room with them.

**LM:** The game show clips like *The Gong Show*, or *The Jerry Springer Show* also reveal so much about American popular culture and politics.

**RP:** Yes, such performative innocence. I would have loved to have had more of today’s pop cultural shows, like *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* or MTV’s *Cribs*

or one of these ninja warrior game shows. But these rights are hard to get today. People today are suspicious of any derogatory use of their image, and with so many rights holders to ask permission of it's an impossible task. With the kind of awkward activities some people can get themselves involved in, I can understand that they might rightfully hesitate.

**LM:** How did you go about the musical selections in the film?

**RP:** The first big research endeavor I took on was to find all the music Baldwin listened to and referred to, including the music he included in footnotes, and all the existing versions of that particular music, via distinctive recordings and covers by other musicians. Sometimes we would lose the rights to a song I liked, but then we would find an even better replacement. We lost a beautiful Nina Simone song "Why (The King of Love is Dead)" for the MLK funeral sequence, because it was just impossible to clear, but instead we found an extraordinary beautiful musical version of the poem "The Ballad of Birmingham," performed by the Tennessee State University students in 2006. The more material I gathered, the more flexibility and creativity I would allow myself. I wanted to present the black music spectrum, ranging from early blues, country, jazz, modern jazz, soul and funk, particularly James Brown. Of course, we had to stay as much as possible in the timeline of the story, and used artists from that period. It was about constructing a total "Baldwin" atmosphere, because he loved music above all else. As for Kendrick Lamar's "The Blacker the Berry," which rolls in credits, it was a way to link the film to today's generation and a way to close a generational circle.

**LM:** What was your approach to examining Baldwin's sexuality in the film? I know that you have been critiqued by some for not discussing his sexuality and his treatment of sexuality in his work.

**RP:** I got fewer questions than I thought regarding sexuality. The film ultimately intimidated people who could have been more vocal about this. It's hard to attack me on this film, for it is merely Baldwin's words. There has been an underlying attempt by a few gay commentators—who have self-identified as such—to critique the film's lack of a more programmatic gay agenda. I am always taken aback by this question, and sometimes undisguised accusation. The film is Baldwin's film, by which I mean they are his words from start to end. I didn't write any of the text. So, I don't see why I would manipulate them in one direction or another to satisfy some specific agenda. I can only say to critics: do your own film. A film is ninety minutes. And one has to make choices. My choice was to follow Baldwin as close as possible, retaining all along my own clarity over the subject, submit myself totally to *his* agenda, while trying to be the best and most modest messenger that I can be. Furthermore, I am not sure Baldwin was so vocal about his sexuality, nor that he would put this aspect center stage in *Remember this House*. The few instances I used were organic in the text and in the moment, like when

he talked about being in Puerto Rico with Lucien, the FBI files branding him as a homosexual, or when he plays with the illusion of Sidney Poitier and Rod Steiger sharing a final kiss at the end of *In the Heat of the Night*. What else could I have included? I am not sure that there was a need for more personal and private flags. It's a trap when you reduce someone to being a flag bearer, because you are reducing the person and their work. Baldwin changed my life, and I'm not gay, and by the way that's nobody's business anyway. Why would I reduce him to one aspect of who he is, or emphasize more the gay agenda, when the central motivation of him writing *Remember this House* is the history of America? Baldwin refused to be defined by anybody, so why and how would I try to define him? I'm old enough to have seen over the years how some prominent intellectuals like Aimé Césaire, and later more aggressively like Fanon, were used for so many different agendas which were not their primary destination. I try to respect these people's work, to be inspired by them, and eventually to try to develop my own work, learning from them. But I don't "own" them. Especially when they can't defend the integrity of their work and the interpretations anymore. Self-proclaimed gatekeepers, beware: we cannot reduce the work of someone so universal as Baldwin to just one particular issue. Baldwin's skill is that he makes sure you get involved, that you realize it's about you, whoever you are. It's your story, and he doesn't let you push this discovery away; you have no right to be blind, you need to face it, your history, your role in it and more than anything else to face yourself. Unapologetically.

**LM:** Your film was nominated for an Oscar and has already been sold in fifty countries. What sort of future do you envision for the film as it relates to the legacy of James Baldwin?

**RP:** Well, both the critical success and the commercial success of the film were a great surprise. After ten years of work, I was focused on making sure that the film would be finished properly and that it would at least premiere in a prestigious festival. After its world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival, it won the Audience Prize for best documentary, a very coveted prize that we didn't expect. I realized then that the film—and Baldwin—was much more accessible than I imagined. After this, the film has been nominated and won many awards and been invited to screen internationally. The Oscar nomination will always remain the climax. You can't get better than this. Etching Baldwin's name in that "noble" chapel, especially because he always wanted to get even with Hollywood, is indeed a sweet irony. Furthermore, the theatrical releases in the U.S. so far have broken all box office records for an independent documentary film and it is the highest grossing documentary this year. I can proudly say today that Mr. James Baldwin's legacy is now assured. No one will dare forget him ever again. I am working on an outreach project to bring Baldwin's work to a variety of school curricula. We received a grant from the Ford Foundation that we are matching with other global partners in order to develop and sustain a community outreach, which includes building libraries for underprivileged school in the U.S. After the

theatrical release, the film will also be distributed by Amazon Studios this summer and by 2018, it will air on PBS through Independent Lens. There is also a companion book to the film, edited by Vintage International, which includes excerpts from Baldwin's work.

**LM:** You've traveled extensively across the USA, Canada, and Europe with this film. What has been some of the most surprising feedback you have received from audiences across LA, Paris, Birmingham, Mexico City, and Berlin.

**RP:** Yes, for the last three months I had to follow the film everywhere where it opened (the U.S., U.K., Sweden, Germany, France, Italy, Mexico, Switzerland to name a few). I must say, through my numerous discussions with audiences, that a new generation is discovering Baldwin, as well as a previous generation who are incredulous that they did not know his work. I am also noticing how Baldwin is perceived as incredibly prescient on every topic, and is motivating a new cohort of young activists, who are energized by his words, his strength, his eloquence, his credibility. Baldwin is changing lives—again. Every sentence is perceived as an explosion of wisdom, of accurate analysis, of making sense of the world, of pure poetry. He reminds people of the connections between their own identity, the world around them, their intimate lives and the link between one's individual quest and a shared collective history. And he emphasized that compassion, empathy, and social justice are shared common ground.

## Notes

- 1 Raoul Peck, "Introduction," in *I Am Not Your Negro* (New York: Vintage International, 2017), p. xii.
- 2 Peck, "There Are New Metaphors," in *I Am Not Your Negro*, p. xiv.
- 3 Peck, "Notes on the Writing Process," in *I Am Not Your Negro*, p. xviii.
- 4 Peck, "Notes on the Writing Process," in *I Am Not Your Negro*, p. xix.

## Works Cited

Peck, Raoul, *I Am Not Your Negro* (New York, Vintage International, 2017).

## Contributor's Biography

**Leah Mirakhor's** work has appeared in *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, *African American Review*, *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, and *Paste*. She is currently a lecturer at Yale University.