



I Am Not Your Negro Discussion Guide

Director: Raoul Peck

Year: 2016

Time: 95 min

You might know this director from:

The Young Karl Marx (2017)

Murder in Pacot (2014)

Assistance mortelle (2013)

Moloch Tropical (2009)

Sometimes in April (2005)

Lumumba (2000)

It's Not About Love (1998)

Chère Catherine (1997)

Haiti - Silence of the Dogs (1994)

The Man on the Shore (1993)

Lumumba, The Death of a Prophet (1990)

FILM SUMMARY

At the time of his passing in 1987, James Baldwin left behind just 30 pages of an unfinished book project titled "Remember This House." It was to be a personal account of the rise and fall of fellow civil rights icons Martin Luther King Jr., Medgar Evers, and Malcolm X, each of whom he had come to know personally before their assassinations. Picking up where Baldwin left off, director Raoul Peck attempts to weave together these remaining loose narrative threads using only Baldwin's words, via startlingly clairvoyant video clips of Baldwin in interviews or lectures, and earthily interpreted readings of Baldwin's texts by Samuel L. Jackson. The result is an interpretive essayistic documentary that surveys how the civil rights movement and America's failures to wholly embrace it are still frighteningly relevant and continue to shape our current times.

James Baldwin has long been an eloquent voice on race relations and the African-American experience, appearing in panel discussions alongside his more well-known contemporaries throughout the 1960s while publishing novels, essays, and scripts for the stage until his death in the 1980s. He also wrote a considerable amount of film criticism, culling from his memories of watching Doris Day and Gary Cooper or the films of Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier to analyze the inequalities depicted and perpetuated in racial representations on screen. Pulling from Baldwin's writings, as well as the clips from the movies he wrote about, Peck gives Baldwin his big-screen due with crystalline lucidity and a deeply emotional sense of cultural purpose.

FILM THEMES

James Baldwin once stated on national television that he was not a “nigger,” but in fact, he was a man, and if you thought that he was indeed a “nigger,” that meant that you needed this hateful term and you needed to figure out why, as the future of the United States was depending on this very fact. This core idea of racial inequality haunts the entirety of *I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO*.

SOCIAL JUSTICE REMAINS TO BE SEEN

Above all else, *I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO* is a searing indictment of America’s failure to rectify its shameful history of racial inequality. Baldwin’s personal account of the civil rights movement and its trio of outspoken icons on the vulnerable vanguard reminds us that there is still much work to be done. As if to hammer home just how little we’ve moved forward since the violence committed against civil rights activists throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Peck cuts away from the disturbing black and white archival footage to recent images of the streets of Ferguson, Missouri, where riots broke out after the fatal 2014 shooting of Michael Brown, an African-American man, by a white police officer.

RACIAL REPRESENTATION IN THE MEDIA

Over the course of his lengthy and productive career, Baldwin wrote a considerable amount of cultural criticism, including many essays on racial representation in cinema. Peck uses this fact to his advantage throughout *I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO*, using film clips and Baldwin’s impassioned writings, the film manages to show just how subtly racial inequality was ingrained in films from the birth of the movies onwards, and how they were perceived differently by black and white audiences all along the way.

PEOPLE ARE NOT SO DIFFERENT

Midway through *I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO*, Baldwin is quoted expressing just how different Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr. were, but in writing about their differences he was really attempting to express just how similar their beliefs and personal struggles actually were. These three men gave their very lives fighting for the same exact thing—the basic civil rights of their fellow man, no matter that they each went about it in their own, if politically contradicting, way.

THE POWER OF WORDS

Author Ta-Nehisi Coates recently posed the question as to whether or not James Baldwin was the greatest essayist of all time. Some of his written work undisputedly stands among the great American publications, and *I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO* takes pains to lend Baldwin’s voice enormous gravity, having his written word read aloud by none-other-than Samuel L. Jackson, while Baldwin himself comes across as exceptionally eloquent when speaking publicly and on camera. The film wholly rests upon the power of his words, as the entirety of its construction is formed from his writings and his on camera appearances. This is by no means a fault in the film, but its strength.

“People cling to their hates so stubbornly because they sense once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.”

- James Baldwin

“A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is a approaching spiritual death.”

Martin Luther King, Jr.

FILM FACTS:

- I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO had its world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival on September 10, 2016, winning the People's Choice Award. It went on to screen as part of the New York Film Festival, AFI Fest, the Berlin International Film Festival, CPH:DOX, and many other prestigious festivals the world over.
- The film was nominated for an Oscar for Best Documentary Feature, but lost to Ezra Edelman's 8-hour epic "O.J.: Made In America." However, I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO was awarded the Creative Recognition Award by the International Documentary Association, as well as the Amnesty International Award from the Thessaloniki Documentary Film Festival, the Gilda Vieira de Mello Award from the Human Rights Watch Film Festival, and the Panorama Audience Award from the Berlin International Film Festival.
- The three subjects of Baldwin's unfinished work "Remember This House" were civil rights activists Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr., each of whom was assassinated. Evers was killed on June 12, 1963 at his home in Jackson, Mississippi, at age 37. Malcolm was killed on February 21, 1965 in Manhattan, New York, at age 39. King was killed on April 4, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee, at age 39.
- James Baldwin's first novel, "Go Tell It on the Mountain," was published by Knopf in 1953. In 1998, the Modern Library ranked it 39th on its list of the 100 best English-language novels of the 20th century.
- Director Raoul Peck was born in Haiti in 1953. He eventually moved to the Congo and went to school in the United States, France, and finally, Germany, where he earned a degree in film in 1988. From March 1996 to September 1997, he was Haiti's Minister of Culture.
- Following Baldwin's death in 1987, the publishing company McGraw-Hill sued his estate to recover the \$200,000 advance they had paid him for the unfinished book "Remember This House," which I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO is based upon. The lawsuit was eventually dropped in 1990.
- By the end of its theatrical run, I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO had become the greatest documentary box office hit of 2017, netting over \$7 million in ticket sales. Surpassing "Food Inc.," the film became the highest-grossing non-fiction release to date for its distributor Magnolia Pictures.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Read** James Baldwin's written works, from his monumental essays like "The Fire Next Time," to his novels "Go Tell It on the Mountain."
2. **Join** a local social justice organization to help build strong, diverse, sustainable communities.
3. **Know** your civil rights movement history. There are countless fiction films, documentaries, and books on the subject that are deserving of your attention.
4. **Spread** the word on Twitter and Facebook. #BeTheChange you want to see in the world. #IAmNotYourNegro is now available on VOD and Blu-ray/DVD!

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.