



## “I Am Not Your Negro” (2016) Argument-Based Questions

These argument-based questions accompany the 2016 documentary [“I Am Not Your Negro,”](#) which was created from a set of unpublished writings by James Baldwin. Baldwin was working on a book, one that he did not complete but for which he prepared extensive notes, taking a very autobiographical look at the divergent and convergent lives and deaths of three towering civil rights leaders: Martin Luther King, Jr., Medgar Evers, and Malcolm X.

The documentary and these questions can be used as part of a unit on Civil Rights, African-American history, or simply American history. Students can be given these questions in advance of screening the film, for completion afterward. Or, the documentary can be paused at intervals so students can discuss or respond in writing to the questions. The timings attached to each question are approximately (not precisely) aligned with the film.

It would be sufficient to screen the first half of this documentary – through the first 45 minutes – for classes with younger students, students sensitive to images of violence (there are several of these in the film’s second half), or students very unfamiliar with the history of the Civil Rights movement.

There are various arguable angles into the civil rights era, and this documentary, as the questions below suggest. One overarching debatable issue is:

**James Baldwin establishes as one of his unifying arguments, in the writings on which “I Am Not Your Negro” is based and elsewhere, that America as a whole has been more damaged by racism than have African-Americans and other racial minorities, racism’s direct targets. Is he right about this? Do his arguments fully substantiate this thesis?**

- (1:30) In the short clip of his mid-1960s appearance on “The Dick Cavett Show,” James Baldwin is asked to respond to those who say that African-Americans should feel content with the progress that has been made on race relations. Aren’t you hopeful, Cavett asks? Summarize Baldwin’s response.

- (3:50) What years does the documentary span (as we are told by Baldwin’s introduction to his unfinished book, on which the film is based)?
- (5:05) What was the white response to racial integration of schools in the mid-1950s, as articulated by Leander Perez and some of the white protesters outside of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957?
- (7:00) How does Baldwin describe the images of Dorothy Counts, the 15 year old black girl who was the first to integrate schools in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1957? What do these images make Baldwin feel and do? Answer specifically.
- (8:30) Baldwin says that there was much about America he did not miss, did not care about, during his years in exile in Paris. What were those things and what do you think they symbolized? He also says that there were things that he did in fact miss, very deeply. What were those things and what do you think they symbolized?
- (12:30) What experiences did Baldwin have as a child that prevented him throughout his life from hating white people? How would you paraphrase this conclusion that he draws: “White people don’t act the way they do because they are white, but for some other reason”? What does he mean here?
- (15:00) Why do you think that Baldwin includes references to film images of African-Americans from the 1920s and 1930s, and why does the documentary include corresponding clips from these movies? What broader purposes do they serve for Baldwin and for director Raoul Peck?
- (17:00) Paraphrase Baldwin’s line, “I suspect that all these stories were designed to reassure us that no crime was committed. We made a legend out of a massacre.”
- (18:00) What argument is Baldwin making in the clip we see from a debate he took part in at Cambridge University in 1965? What is his claim? What support does he provide for it?
- (21:00) What were Baldwin’s reasons for not himself joining popular movements in the 1960s for African-Americans: Black Nationalist Islam, the Black Panthers, the Black (Christian) Church, and the NAACP? Were the reasons the same in each case, or did they vary?
- (22:30) What does Baldwin mean when he calls himself a “witness” to the civil rights struggle, rather than an “actor” in it?
- (23:30) What conclusion did the FBI file on James Baldwin reach on his posing a danger to the U.S.? What was the evidence and reasoning that supported that conclusion? How would you evaluate this support – strong, adequate, inadequate, completely empty? Explain your response.
- (24:30) What does Baldwin say about white people’s response to the Birmingham church bombing, an act of racial terrorism that killed four black children and injured 22 more? How does he critique this response?

- (27:00) Appearing on Dr. Kenneth Clark's television program, how does Martin Luther King respond to and attempt to refute Malcolm X's criticism of the non-violent civil rights strategy as too passive, meek, and ineffective?
- (28:00) What is Malcolm X's rebuttal to Martin Luther King's arguments? What does Baldwin say was the consequence of this debate on both men's thinking?
- (30:45) What is Malcolm X's "great authority over his audiences," according to James Baldwin? Does this authority qualify as pathos, ethos, or logos, in Aristotle's rhetorical triad?
- (32:00) Once again on Dr. Kenneth Clark's show, how does James Baldwin appraise the "vast majority of white people"? What consequence does this appraisal seem to have for Baldwin, as it affects his planning for his own life (for instance, where he is going to live)?
- (34:00) In 1963, at the Florida Forum, Baldwin sizes up the white population in American somewhat differently. What does he focus on in his statements about white people in this interview?
- (36:00) In what ways does Baldwin critique Robert Kennedy, through his description of the meeting that took place between him, black playwright Lorraine Hansberry, and himself, in the White House in 1963? Can this critique be interpreted more broadly as a critique of some white liberals, since Bobby Kennedy along with his brother John F. Kennedy were leading liberals of the time? Why or why not?
- (40:00) What does Baldwin say about the ability of African-Americans to rest, to be at leisure? What is the impact of this condition on African-Americans? What figurative meaning might "rest" have, in this context?
- (41:00) "A black man who sees the world as John Wayne sees it would not be a hero but rather a raving maniac." What does Baldwin mean by this statement? How would you paraphrase it?
- (42:45) How do black children understand race growing up, according to Baldwin? Then, when they get a little older, what does he say is the implication if they claim "a rightful place in this world"?
- (44:00) What do you think Baldwin is getting at when he says that the problems of racism in America is actually not a racial problem? What kind of problem is it, then? What is Baldwin's support for this claim?
- (47:00) Summarize Baldwin's complex argument premised on the distinction between white America's public face and its private self, as it pertains to their relationship to black people.
- (49:00) Baldwin explains that when white and black people hate each other, there is a different underlying, root emotion behind the hatred. What is the root of black people's hatred of whites? What is the root of white people's hatred of blacks? How does the imagery from the late-1950s film "The Defiant Ones" comment on these views?
- (51:00) According to Baldwin, how does American popular culture treat black male sexuality?

- (53:00) What was the “brutal and humiliating fact” of Baldwin’s love affair with a white woman?
- (56:00) What prediction did Attorney General Robert Kennedy make in 1963? Did it come to pass? How did James Baldwin respond to this prediction during his Cambridge University debate?
- (59:00) What points does the documentary make about the effect that African-Americans have had on the American economy?
- (1:04:00) What does the video montage of apologies, along with Baldwin’s words underneath them, say about apologies and American immaturity or childishness?
- (1:06:00) How does Baldwin explain the rise of the Black Panthers and militant Black Power movement more generally?
- (1:09:00) How do the images in “I Am Not Your Negro” comment on the rhetoric of the U.S. government film, “The Land We Love” (1960). What tone do these images establish?
- (1:11:00) What is Baldwin’s argument when the film shows images of happy and affluent white families?
- (1:13:00) Dick Cavett brings Yale University history professor Paul Weiss onto his show after he interviews James Baldwin. Summarize Weiss’s counter-argument against the arguments that Baldwin has been making about the pervasiveness of racism and segregation in America? What is Baldwin’s rebuttal, then, to Weiss’s counter-argument?
- (1:15:00) Baldwin then makes a strong argument about the evidence of racism. What is this argument, and what is the (unshown) argument that Weiss likely made to generate this argument?
- (1:20:00) How did James Baldwin react when he heard the news on April 4, 1968 that Martin Luther King, Jr., had been shot. How did America as a whole react?
- (1:22:00) Baldwin declares, “The story of the negro in America is the story of America. It is not a pretty story.” Is this the main argument of this documentary? Explain and substantiate your response.
- (1:25:00) Baldwin acknowledges that some of his detractors have charged him with being bitter. What does this charge mean? How does he answer it?
- (1:28:00) Baldwin states, “Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced.” What significance does this statement have in the context of race relations? Why does Baldwin say that this principle gives African-Americans a “terrifying advantage”?
- (1:29:00) What does Baldwin mean when he says, “We carry our history.” What relevance does this idea have to his arguments about race in America?
- (1:30:00) Baldwin concludes: “The future of the negro of this country is entirely the same as the future of this country.” What does the future of the country depend on, in the film’s closing words from Baldwin?