

Entretien de | interview with Mavis Nicholson et | and James Baldwin pour | for *Mavis on Four*

1987

Sélectionné par | selected by cheyanne turions

19:49 min | mins

Vidéo | video *YouTube*, 1 novembre | november 2014

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James Baldwin was 63 years old when he died in 1987, his life bearing witness to significant social upheavals including the African-American civil rights movement of the 1960s; the Second World War, the Vietnam War and the Cold War; and the gay liberation movement and the emergence of AIDS. Just eight months before his death, British television host Mavis Nicholson interviewed Baldwin as part of her afternoon show *Mavis on Four*. In London for a remounting of his play *The Amen Corner* (1954), Baldwin joined Nicholson amongst a set of empty theatre seats. The footage is raw: a time code ticks the seconds away, noting that the edit begins eight minutes into recording¹. The conversation shows Baldwin ruminating on shifting distributions of social power and those that remain entrenched. He is irreverent, refusing to be sated by the revolutions he has witnessed for the deliverance he imagines. I cannot be sure why this interview, nearly 20 years old, re-entered circulation in November 2014², but with the title “Civil Rights” it is easy to register its resonance with contemporary events in the United States such as waves of protest against a racist, and specifically anti-Black, police state or the then-anticipated release of Ava Duvernay’s *Selma* (2014). It seems that Baldwin’s ideas again aggravate, push and prod: this is not yet the world we dream of.

1 I am unable to find a more complete version of the interview.

2 From what I can tell, the footage was not available online until 01 November 2014, published on Youtube by ThamesTv and then circulated amongst aggregation sites. However, the footage remains relatively unseen, registering just over 4500 views as of 24 February 2015.

Nicholson is a provocative if somewhat naïve interlocutor, asking frank questions about racialization, religion and sexuality, and Baldwin is an affable subject. And yet, the interview comes to be characterized by his consistent reframing of the assumptions embedded in her prompts. For instance, when Nicholson suggests that the terror Baldwin felt as a young man was because he is Black, he resists: it was because he was despised. The fear he felt was not properly related to the colour of his skin, but to the base reactions it elicited from peers who did not look like him. Baldwin's point is that the pathology of racism belongs to the inner life of each of us, not to the observable facts of the world. And, while he never says this explicitly, it's not a generalized racism but white supremacy in particular that allows for the social legibility of such hate, then and now.

This point is taken further when Nicholson tells a story about watching Baldwin's play the week before the interview was taped and witnessing an interaction between two families. The patriarch of one family she describes as looking "intelligent...well-off...liberal" and the other family she describes as having a crying child and being Black. Nicholson suggests that the inherited history of "racial prejudice" prohibits the man whom she implies is white from telling off the Black family for bringing their child to the theatre. But again Baldwin stops her: "Why don't you examine what does the word 'racial' mean. After all, everybody is a race of one kind or another. We're not talking about racial prejudice; we talking about the structure of power. The structure of power that has the right and the duty to tell other people who they are for very dubious reasons. After all, one of the reasons I am Black is because I had to be Black in order to justify my slavery. That's a part of my heritage and a part of yours too. It has nothing to do with race; it's a way of avoiding history." Against Nicholson's proposal that this nearly missed confrontation between families is a moment of post-racial neutering, Baldwin insists that the white man will simply find another way to punish the Black family, a worse way. Perhaps Baldwin meant to imply a direct reaction—an admonishment of parenting capability or a slashed tire—though more likely he was invoking systemic distributions of power—higher rates of incarceration, widespread poverty, obstructed access to education. Seeming to function without leadership, these ongoing phenomena are actually the perfect manifestation of a white supremacist fear of difference. Baldwin knows he is being

provocative when he says that “the hardest thing for any human being to do is to forgive someone they know they’ve wronged... [and so] white people live with the nightmare of the nigger they’ve invented.” Patterns of racial discrimination are not ever the proper consequences of whiteness or blackness, but rather a product of social conditioning, where white people are unjustifiably understood as superior to others, and where this unfounded belief then maintains systems of inequality that effect the social, economic and political lives of all other people.

Baldwin refuses what Nicholson calls “racial prejudice.” On his terms, racial prejudice is nothing more than “the most abject cowardice” of those who occupy positions of power—politicians, citizens, the bourgeoisie—to self-reflexively understand their standing as historically informed and arising through subjugation. To the extent that material and political equality is possible, it will involve a recognition of how fear shapes every member of a society, and to address shifting political subjectivities through some kind of embodied relationship to this complex truth. Race is absolutely a lived reality despite the fact that it is not real, at least not biologically as is now generally accepted in scientific fields³. And yet, there are countless social consequences tied to our differing historical, linguistic, ethnic and religious backgrounds. Racism has become shorthand for acts of fear or hate that unfairly cast their provocation upon the body of the person who must bear their cruelty. Baldwin’s tactics refocus agency upon the perpetrator. He doesn’t say it, but in his persistent refusal of Nicholson’s terms I read a refusal of racism. Racism is a way of describing structures of power, but it is not a thing unto itself, not the way the word is commonly used. More precisely, it is a system predicated upon an insidious kind of make-believe.

³ For discussions on the persistent myth of biological race see Merlin Chowkwanyun’s 2013 article “Race Is Not Biology,” published by The Atlantic; Agustín Fuentes’s 2012 article “Race Is Real, but not the way Many People Think,” published by Psychology Today; or UNESCO’s 1950 document “Statement by Experts on Race Problems”.

In this precision, the complexities between the “you” of Mavis Nicholson and the “I” of James Baldwin (and vice versa) are drawn out, placing the capacity for great social change upon them both as social actors capable of responses based in sentiments other than abject cowardice. However, that this nearly 30-year-old interview still so urgently resonates points to the fact that any real confrontation of racism will require systemic dismantling of white supremacist power structures. We can begin (one place amongst so many) by following Baldwin’s lead and engaging with the repercussions of language. We can consider, at the urging of poet and scholar Jackie Wang in her text *Against Innocence*, that “social, political, cultural and legal recognition [of Black people in North America] only happens when a person is thoroughly whitewashed, neutralized and made unthreatening...[and that] using ‘innocence’ as the foundation to address anti-Black violence is an appeal to the white imaginary.”⁴ We can refuse a rhetoric of innocence that serves to distance the murders of Michael Brown and Eric Garner and Pearlie Golden and Kathryn Johnston and Aiyanna Jones and Trayvon Martin and Nizah Morris from the murders of hundreds and hundreds of Black people each year by police officers in the USA. We can map how language works to obscure and deflect systemic exercises of power. We can use language more precisely, in order to reveal. And dismantle.

Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are from the video *Civil Rights—James Baldwin—Interview—Mavis on Four (1987)*, found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Wht4NSf7E4>.

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4 Jackie Wang, *Against Innocence* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2014), 7-8. The text is also available online here: <http://liesjournal.net/media/LIES-Against-Innocence>.