ESSAY

Another Cinema: James Baldwin's Search for a New Film Form

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Abstract

James Baldwin was a vocal critic of Hollywood, but he was also a cinephile, and his critique of film was not so much of the medium itself, but of the uses to which it was put. Baldwin saw in film the chance to transform both politics and art—if only film could be transformed itself. This essay blends readings of archival materials, literature, film, and print culture to examine three distinct modes in Baldwin's ongoing quest to revolutionize film. First, I argue, literature served as a key site to practice being a filmmaker, as Baldwin adapted cinematic grammars in his fiction and frequently penned scenes of filmgoing in which he could, in effect, direct his own movies. Secondly, I show that starting in the 1960s, Baldwin took a more direct route to making movies, as he composed screenplays, formed several production companies, and attempted to work in both Hollywood and the independent film scene in Europe. Finally, I explore how Baldwin sought to change cinema as a performer himself, in particular during his collaboration on Dick Fontaine and Pat Hartley's documentary *I Heard It Through the Grapevine* (1982). This little-known film follows Baldwin as he revisits key sites from the civil rights movement and reconnects with activist friends as he endeavors to construct a revisionist history of race in America and to develop a media practice capable of honoring Black communities.

Keywords: James Baldwin, film, visual culture, archives, *I Heard It Through the Grapevine*

Wednesday, May 17, 1972

VARIETY

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JAMES BALDWIN
will write and will direct
Miss DIANA SANDS
in "THE INHERITANCE"
for Kelly-Jordan Enterprises, Inc.
Fall 1972

Kelly-Jordan Enterprises, Inc., 342 Madison Avenue, New York, N.Y. (212) 682-1720

Figure 1 Baldwin in Paris. Kelly-Jordan advertisement, *Variety*, 1972

In May 1972, the production company Kelly-Jordan Enterprises placed a full-page ad in *Variety* announcing that James Baldwin would write and direct their next film, "The Inheritance."¹ It was to star Diana Sands, but the ad focused on Baldwin, featuring a photograph of him in Paris wearing trademark dark glasses

and a scarf beside a bookstall by the Seine. He gazes directly at the camera, a slight smile playing on his lips—pleased, it seems, to be making his directorial debut in France, an ocean away from Hollywood. Baldwin dove into the project, setting aside his in-progress novel, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), so he could concentrate on writing “The Inheritance.”² The film, unfortunately, was never made, but it is an exemplary moment in a larger story about Baldwin’s relentless efforts to be a film auteur.

Baldwin was, of course, a frequent and outspoken critic of Hollywood. From his early essays on Otto Preminger’s *Carmen Jones* (1954) and *Porgy and Bess* (1959) to his 1976 memoir of moviegoing, *The Devil Finds Work*, Baldwin showed how the American film industry, through a combination of racist hiring practices and aesthetic choices, consistently buttressed white supremacist mythologies.³ Baldwin didn’t just catalog Hollywood’s failings, though—he was a cinephile himself, and references to international cinema pepper his books and letters. His friend and biographer David Leeming reports that Baldwin “liked nothing better than talking and writing about the movies.”⁴ So it’s crucial to recognize that Baldwin’s searing critique of film was not of the medium itself, but of the uses to which it was put. Baldwin saw in film the chance to transform both politics and art—if only film itself could first be transformed.

Baldwin’s own work was an attempt to do just that. As I show in this essay, he actively sought to be a filmmaker throughout his career. This pursuit manifested itself in both his explicit attempts to write, direct, and produce films and also in his fictional, critical, and autobiographical writings, which became an alternative literary space for filmmaking when he could not literally bring his vision to the screen. Drawing on new archival research, this essay pieces together Baldwin’s many experiments with the moving image to analyze his deep and career-long belief in the aesthetic, moral, and political possibilities of film and to track his restless attempts, across a range of genres and artistic media, to reimagine what the movies could be.

I examine three distinct modes in Baldwin’s ongoing quest to revolutionize film. First, I argue, literature served as a key site to practice being a filmmaker, as Baldwin adapted cinematic grammars in his fiction and frequently penned scenes of filmgoing in which he could, in effect, direct his own movies, turning the novel and the short story into alternative genres of filmmaking. I then show how, starting in the 1960s, Baldwin took a more direct route to making movies, as he composed screenplays, formed several production companies, and attempted to work in both Hollywood and the independent film scene in Europe. Finally, I explore how Baldwin sought to change cinema not only by trying to work behind the camera, but also by performing in front of it, in particular during his collaboration on Dick Fontaine and Pat Hartley’s documentary *I Heard It Through the Grapevine* (1982). Baldwin described the film as “a personal endeavor on a public platform,” an effort to use the mass medium of film to circulate intimate conversations in which he and his longtime activist friends reflected on the civil rights movement,

constructed a revisionist history of race in America, and worked to develop a media practice capable of honoring Black communities.⁵

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Baldwin always wanted to make movies. His 1955 essay collection *Notes of a Native Son* includes his scathing review of *Carmen Jones*, but it also features a different vision for film. In the opening essay, “Autobiographical Notes,” Baldwin opines, “About my interests, I don’t know if I have any, unless the morbid desire to own a sixteen-millimeter camera and make experimental movies.”⁶ Critics have cited this line to suggest how deeply Baldwin was invested in film spectatorship and how intensely he took his work as a budding film theorist.⁷ But I want to take Baldwin more literally, as articulating a fundamental desire to *create films*, and I want to argue that this “interest” deeply structured his work as an author. Film-making may have been a “morbid desire”—a perhaps impossibly uphill battle—but seeing Baldwin as an aspiring filmmaker allows us to read his literary fiction as a form of “experimental movies.” In *The Devil Finds Work*, Baldwin mused that “It is said that the camera cannot lie, but rarely do we allow it to do anything else, since the camera sees what you point it at: the camera sees what you want it to see. The language of the camera is the language of our dreams.”⁸ In his fiction, Baldwin made the camera see what *he* wanted it to see, penning film sequences in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), *Another Country* (1962), and *Little Man, Little Man* (1976) that use cinema to tell a different kind of truth than Hollywood allowed.

The filmgoing scene in *Go Tell It*, Baldwin’s autobiographical first novel, has long attracted critical attention, in part because of its clear connection with *The Devil Finds Work*, but it also reveals Baldwin’s furtive hopes for film as a medium for interpersonal connection.⁹ Early in the novel, Baldwin’s avatar, John Grimes, spends an afternoon wandering New York City alone. He longs to go into a candy store and climb the steps of the New York Public Library, but he mainly keeps to the sidewalks, having internalized the fact that “this world was not for him.”¹⁰ The open expanse of Central Park is more welcoming, yet as John runs down a snow-covered hill, he almost knocks over an elderly passerby. To John’s surprise, rather than reacting in anger, “the old man smiled. John smiled back. It was as though he and the old man had between them a great secret.”¹¹ Encouraged by the encounter, John returns to the streetscape and continues his quest for human connection. Tellingly, he decides to go to the movies.

John chooses the film carefully, studying the movie posters and selecting the one that feels closest to his own experience: “he felt identified with the blond young man, the fool of his family, and he wished to know more about his so blatantly unkind fate.”¹² Baldwin never names the film, but the narrative he describes matches *Of Human Bondage* (1934), the film that made Bette Davis a star. In the theater, instead of identifying with the young man on the movie poster, John is pulled into rooting passionately for the doomed prostitute played by Davis. The

image of her dying face inspires soul-searching by John, with cinema facilitating the kind of interpersonal connection that otherwise remains ineffable. Yet when John returns home, “real life” reasserts itself: his younger brother has been stabbed. With such sequencing, Baldwin seemingly asks whether the interpersonal intimacies John feels in the movie theater are a necessary antidote to a violent world, or part of the problem, cheap imitations of the bonds that matter.

If Baldwin is ultimately ambivalent about the ethical possibilities of film spectatorship, though, he readily adapts cinematic vocabularies as a narrative tool and as a means to interrogate how we know others. In the first scene of *Go Tell It*, John, having slept in, stumbles into the kitchen. As he gazes at his mother and younger brother, he “saw them for a moment like figures on a screen, an effect that the yellow light intensified.”¹³ This gives him a new perspective on his daily life, as “the windows gleamed like beaten gold or silver, but now John saw, in the yellow light, how fine dust veiled their doubtful glory.”¹⁴ His mother’s face, too, takes on different dimensions on the “screen” of his mind’s eye: “the room shifted, the light of the sun darkened, and his mother’s face changed. Her face became the face that he gave her in his dreams.”¹⁵ If, as Baldwin later said in *The Devil Finds Work*, “the camera is the language of our dreams,” then John has internalized a cinematic logic for experiencing and inhabiting his world.¹⁶

Baldwin’s complex relationship with film is even more foundational for his 1962 novel *Another Country*. The book opens bleakly, casting cinema as complicit in the malaise of modernity: “He [Rufus Scott] was facing Seventh Avenue, at Times Square. It was past midnight and he had been sitting in the movies, in the top row of the balcony, since two o’clock in the afternoon.”¹⁷ Another character, Cass, later deems the cinema “a hideous place of worship”—as she watches the screen, “she thought, irrelevantly, *I never should come to movies, I can’t stand them*, and then she began to cry.”¹⁸ Movies are a powerful form of entrapment in these scenes, both the cause and effect of isolation.

Yet *Another Country* also, more hopefully, explores film’s capacity to change people’s perspectives and inspire sociality. In a scene late in the novel, Baldwin invents and narrates a film, allowing him to direct it like an auteur on the page. Vivaldo, Cass, Eric, and Ida decide to go to a French movie in which Eric has a bit part. Tensions between the characters are simmering: Ida and Vivaldo, an interracial couple, are bickering, and Vivaldo and Eric’s relationship has been strained, partly because they were both in love with Rufus. Going to the movies, though, temporarily unites the group. They “came, laughing, through the doors just as the French film began.”¹⁹ The darkened theater mends bonds and enables new intimacies:

Ida grabbed Vivaldo’s hand in the darkness, and clung to it as though she were a child, mutely begging for reassurance and forgiveness. He pressed his shoulder very close to hers, and they leaned against one another. The film unrolled. Cass whispered to Eric, Eric whispered to Cass. Cass turned towards them, whispering, “Here he comes!” and the camera trucked into a crowded café, resting finally on a group of students. “That’s

our boy!" cried Ida, disturbing the people around them—who sounded, for a second, like the weirdest cloud of insects.²⁰

The theater fosters a rare instance of un-anxious togetherness, even if it remains precarious and structured by gendered and raced hierarchies, such as Ida's child-like submission.

Baldwin lovingly details the scene in which Eric appears, attending to film framing and its possibilities. He focuses in particular on the effect of cinematic realism and the minimalism of Eric's performance: Eric "was compelled to be still during this entire brief scene," but his presence, as planned by the director, "held the scene together, and emphasized the futility of the passionate talkers."²¹ If *Go Tell It* raises a question about the power of faces on film, *Another Country* offers an answer: "the director had surely placed Eric where he had because this face operated, in effect, as a footnote to the twentieth-century torment ... It was a face which suggested, resonantly, in the depths, the truth about our natures."²² Baldwin here fantasizes about genuine collaboration between a director and a performer—something he argued Otto Preminger could never cultivate with Black actors.²³ The result deeply moves Vivaldo, who believes (somewhat naively) that he has finally glimpsed the real Eric on screen, catalyzing their subsequent affair. Baldwin thus suggests that film, at its best, could enable the kinds of intimate explorations of interiority that he aspired to in his novels.

Indeed, film played a pivotal role in the composition of *Another Country*. In 1959, on assignment for *Esquire*, Baldwin interviewed Ingmar Bergman in Stockholm. In the resulting essay, Baldwin recalls that after their first interview, he was so "struck by what seemed to be our similarities" that he "amused [himself], on the ride back into town, by projecting a movie."²⁴ He imagines a historical drama, then reflects on the burdens of personal history and the possibilities for representing it: "It did not seem likely, after all, that I would ever be able to make of my past, on film, what Bergman had been able to make of his."²⁵ "What was lacking in my movie," Baldwin writes, "was the American despair, the search, in our country for authority ... What would a Bergman make of the American confusion? How would he handle a love story occurring in New York?"²⁶ With these questions swirling, Baldwin returned to Paris and resumed work on *Another Country*, his New York love story. He found that the novel "was flowing again."²⁷

If film helped Baldwin finish *Another Country*, he also, appropriately, tried repeatedly to adapt it for the screen. Elia Kazan read *Another Country* in galleys, and by the spring of 1962, before it was published, he urged Baldwin to return to New York to discuss a screen adaptation.²⁸ Then, in 1964, the British director Tony Richardson acquired the film rights, with the understanding that Baldwin would write the screenplay.²⁹ Baldwin traveled to Los Angeles and began composing the script, confident that in the era of Sidney Poitier and interracial films, he and Richardson would find studio backing.³⁰ But that didn't happen, and Baldwin's collaboration with Richardson became one in a long line of failed film projects. Baldwin, though, never stopped pursuing his cinematic dreams, and as he worked back and

forth between his literary and filmic projects, the two media dialogically informed each other.

Baldwin's 1976 illustrated children's book *Little Man, Little Man*, an often overlooked entry in his canon, showcases that cross-media dialogue. The book's young narrator, TJ, envisions his block in Harlem as a film.³¹ "This street long," he says, "It real long. It a little like the street in the movies or the TV."³² TJ then riffs on the genre of the police procedural, conjuring a chase scene and zooming in and out on the action, cutting between characters' perspectives. The illustrations, by Yoran Cazac, keep pace, portraying the events as a sequence of shots on a film reel. But unlike most cop dramas, TJ refuses to reify the surveilling gaze of the police and instead privileges the felt experiences of the man being pursued and the local residents, who can only watch and "get real uptight" as "the cops keep coming real slow and careful down this long street."³³ The result is an imagined film in TJ's mind that does much more than simply reproduce what he has watched on popular screens.

In control of the camera, as it were, TJ makes a home movie of his local community, tracking the impact of state violence even as he lovingly films his block from his own child's-eye perspective, defined by his favorite places—the church, the ice-cream parlor, his friend Blinky's house. And as TJ explores the imaginative possibilities of film for understanding his home, the literary space of *Little Man, Little Man* allows Baldwin to experiment with the affordances of film, speculating about what an alternative cinematic depiction of Harlem—his Harlem—might look like. Blending literary fiction with hand-drawn illustrations to create a cinematic scene, Baldwin mobilizes a range of different arts to push the boundaries of what film can do and the stories it can tell. As TJ describes his block in Harlem, recreating it, to borrow a phrase from *The Devil Finds Work*, in a "cinema of [the] mind," Baldwin repurposes a filmic medium that had long been used to malign Blackness, creating a new cinematic space for Black aesthetic innovation and communal empowerment.³⁴

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None of Baldwin's works actually reached the silver screen during his lifetime. But not for lack of trying. Besides *Another Country*, he wrote adaptations of *Giovanni's Room* (1956) and *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964), at least three original screenplays, and countless film treatments. Why? "Cinema is an art in the hands of an artist," he said in 1968, "and I am an artist."³⁵ His best-known film project is his screenplay about Malcolm X, later published as *One Day When I Was Lost* (1972), but following Baldwin's own lead, critics typically frame that as a singular dalliance with film—and one that Baldwin was keen to leave behind.³⁶ In truth, Baldwin's cinematic dreams were far more expansive: As I trace in this section, he turned intensely to film in the 1960s and 1970s, seeking to script, produce, and direct films from *One Day When I Was Lost* to "The Inheritance." What this shows is that Baldwin wasn't just committed to critiquing Hollywood, he was

determined to develop an alternative to it, in the form of transnational Black independent film.

In late 1967, Columbia Pictures asked Baldwin to write a screenplay about Malcolm X. It was the offer he had been waiting for. But he was also skeptical that any Hollywood production would be equal to the subject. Deeply conflicted, Baldwin bought a plane ticket to Geneva—his only luggage was a copy of Alex Haley's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*—and spent a weekend in a hotel room “reading and re-reading—or, rather, endlessly traversing—the great jungle of Malcolm's book.”³⁷ It wasn't the first time Baldwin had thought about a Malcolm script: he had been planning a stage production with Haley and Kazan. And with that work as a foundation, he ultimately resolved to bring Malcolm's life to the screen.³⁸

What followed has been much rehearsed, by both Baldwin and his critics. His Hollywood sojourn “was, by all accounts, a disaster.”³⁹ Columbia paired him with a white screenwriter, Arnold Perl, who rewrote many of his scenes, and the studio instructed him to depoliticize Malcolm, a task he found unconscionable—not to mention impossible.⁴⁰ In 1969, Baldwin fled Hollywood, telling Louise Meriwether,

I don't think Mrs. Baldwin's little boy should fall so far beneath himself as to be found dead or mad in Hollywood and so I shook the dust of that city—my God—from off my feet. There was absolutely nothing left to discuss: I was not going to make their movie ... It was hastily.⁴¹

And, indeed, Baldwin's Malcolm film was never made. In *The Devil Finds Work*, he proclaims, “I would rather be horsewhipped, or incarcerated in the forthright bedlam of Bellevue, than repeat the adventure.”⁴²

Such harsh rhetoric, however, obscures Baldwin's deep investment in the film. At least initially, he had seen it as a means to reimagine American cinema. No naïf, Baldwin had “been to Hollywood before,” he told reporter C. Robert Jennings in 1968, and he only agreed to the project on the “very abnormal terms” that he “approve director, cast, and final cut.”⁴³ The FBI, for one, was nervous about what Baldwin might accomplish: William J. Maxwell says that “FBI newspaper clippers got busy documenting Baldwin's work on [the] movie,” and FBI agents tried to discover his address in California so they could keep tabs on the film.⁴⁴ Baldwin, in turn, reported to Eugene Lerner, a film agent and friend, that he was hard at work on the script, a project which was doing “strange things to [his] nights and days.”⁴⁵

Baldwin's writing process was always torturous, but his ambitions for this project were particularly high: he was trying to invent something new. As he explained to Lerner, “I don't see many movies that I like; even those I like don't seem, rally [*sic*], to address themselves to anything I really want to do.”⁴⁶ He was especially “avoiding foreign films” because, he said,

my subject being so atrociously American—to say nothing of myself—I can't really, at the moment, learn anything from them, except the very last thing I need to learn, that

is effects. But the effect, or effects, made by a European movie come out of the European mind. No, I must find my own vocabulary.⁴⁷

Baldwin was no newcomer to cinema, and for that very reason, he was well positioned to recognize the necessity of creating a new American film language for Malcolm X. He ended his letter, though, with a wink: “Enough. I will probably have a Malcolm X beard by the time you see me again. Grey. I never believed that shit before about living your role. Home soon.”⁴⁸

More than the “effects,” though, it was the people that made a movie for Baldwin, and as the filmmaker Sedat Pakay would recall, “Everybody wanted to play Malcolm X and everybody wanted to do the film.”⁴⁹ Gordon Parks launched a campaign to direct, showing Baldwin a rough cut of *The Learning Tree* (1969), while the studio proposed everyone from Charlton Heston to Jim Brown as Malcolm; Baldwin wanted Billy Dee Williams.⁵⁰ Columbia also pushed Poitier—clearly hoping for a repeat of *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1967)—but Baldwin refused: “I said Sidney could *never* do it and they could either have him or me. It’s *got* to be right. Otherwise it’s the end of *me*. Sidney would sink the movie and he knows it.”⁵¹ Baldwin was similarly decisive in his approach to the narrative: “The whole effort is to do it from the inside; otherwise, you only have a propaganda poster.”⁵²

Perhaps to avoid the flattening of propaganda, the beginning of Baldwin’s script embraces a filmic grammar designed to narrate complicated histories. The sideview mirror of a car becomes a portal to Malcolm’s past, and Baldwin calls for “Inexplicable images, swift, overlapping, blurred.”⁵³ Those images soon become legible as both Malcolm’s memories and icons of a longer history of racial violence: hooded men destroying his house, with his pregnant mother standing outside; his father laid across train tracks seen from an oncoming streetcar.⁵⁴ While the montaged memories are to be “swift,” Baldwin also insists on visual pauses and aural silences, creating a melancholy ambience.⁵⁵ His script reads as both an adaptation of Haley’s *Autobiography* and an extension of Gordon Parks’s iconic photographs of Malcolm in *LIFE* magazine. Film thus serves as an omnivorous medium where Baldwin can bring together the multilayered narrative of a biography with the arresting indexicality of a photograph and the soulfulness of sound, all in a manner that’s accessible for a mass audience. But that was not the kind of film Columbia wanted, and when the studio refused to hire Parks, citing his supposed “inexperience,” Baldwin had had enough.⁵⁶ He packed his bags and left, taking his copyrighted script, too.

As he had before, Baldwin turned to Europe, specifically Turkey, to regroup. In Istanbul, he made his directorial debut on the stage with *Fortune and Men’s Eyes*.⁵⁷ Its success, and his intimate rapport with the actors, whom he deemed his “Turkish children,” gave him confidence in his directorial abilities.⁵⁸ He also starred in his friend Sedat Pakay’s black-and-white film *From Another Place* (1970), an intimate, *cinéma vérité* production. In one of the first scenes, Baldwin lies sprawled in bed. Willing himself to rise, he opens the curtain, letting in the light, and walks

toward the camera, unabashedly wearing only briefs. As Magdalena Zaborowska notes, "This is not how we are used to seeing famous writers."⁵⁹ In other sequences, Pakay's camera accompanies Baldwin as he wanders the city. That a film could be such an intimate affair—both in its production and its aesthetics—may well have restored Baldwin's faith in the artform.

In the fall of 1970, Baldwin also launched his own production company, Berdis Films, presumably named for his mother. Newspapers in the United States took note. Ollie Stewart, a columnist for the *Afro-American*, devoted his weekly "Report from Europe" to Baldwin's new venture, under the headline "James Baldwin Turns to Movies," and *Variety* ran a front-page story, explaining that Baldwin "wants to be able to have the say in the adaptation of any of his works ... However major distrib [*sic*] would not be eschewed once the film was finished or even before, provided there was no interference."⁶⁰ The initial projects were to include a film version of *Another Country* directed by Joseph Losey, which had been in the works since the mid-1960s, and an adaptation of "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon," a short story about film culture and artistic collaboration. Baldwin would write the scripts for both. And his film company would be thoroughly transnational: *Variety* said that French-language films "would also be considered" and that Baldwin wanted to work with Constantin Costa-Gavras and Alan Resnais, while Stewart remarked on Baldwin's choice of Paris as his base of operations and speculated that "Hollywood is becoming an also-ran."⁶¹ Having found Hollywood wanting, Baldwin turned to foreign film and the independent scene.

Baldwin had long valued independent film. In 1962, he sold "This Morning" to an independent producer, who planned to have Edward Albee or Ossie Davis write the screenplay, and Baldwin had been cautiously optimistic: "It might turn out quite well—no stars, low budget, foreign market, prizes at Cannes, all that jazz."⁶² Aside from the prizes at Cannes, by the 1970s, Baldwin also saw independent film as a way to unite art and politics. In 1971, he and Costa-Gavras planned a film entitled "Soledad Brother," but even more pressing political demands interrupted their plans: soon after Baldwin finished the film treatment, George Jackson was murdered and Baldwin "had to go on the road, for Angela Davis."⁶³ That same year, Baldwin also wanted to resurrect his Malcolm film, as he had initially intended it.⁶⁴ Failing that, he published his script as *One Day When I Was Lost*, and he wrote about his Hollywood experience in *No Name in the Street*. The two texts, both published in 1972, marked Baldwin's break from Hollywood, but they also added to his growing film portfolio—his concerted attempt to declare his place in the world of film.

Berdis Films never produced any pictures, but by the spring of 1972, Baldwin had agreed to do a film called "The Inheritance" with Kelly-Jordan Enterprises.⁶⁵ Kelly-Jordan's roster of writer-directors also included Maya Angelou and Bill Gunn, and Baldwin himself had previously partnered with Jack Jordan, one of the few Black producers in the business, though with no results. That spring, however, Kelly-Jordan had released *Georgia, Georgia*, starring Diana Sands and scripted by Angelou, and in Leeming's words, Baldwin felt that "If Jordan could do it for Maya,

why not for him?”⁶⁶ So Baldwin signed on to write “The Inheritance”—and to direct. That summer, as he wrestled with his screenplay, he told his friend the actor David Moses that it was “far more complex than I’d expected it to be, I don’t yet know enough about the people, and, in short, I’m sweating my balls off.”⁶⁷ The plot of “The Inheritance” follows Brigid Bryant, a bi-racial dancer to be played by Sands, who travels from Birmingham to Berlin to confront her white German father, whom she has never met, and to claim her “inheritance.” In the script, Brigid’s German family assumes her quest is materialistic, but Baldwin was after much larger questions of identity, complicity, and memory, charting a multi-generational family saga that weaves together scenes from America and Germany to interrogate forty years of history—and white supremacy—on two continents.

There are clear stylistic connections between “The Inheritance” and *One Day When I Was Lost*, but “The Inheritance” comes closer to a shooting script. The opening, like *One Day*, is emotionally saturated with the past: “In silence: a black woman’s hand, regal, heavily-burdened with pride, ornate with spangles at the wrist, splendid with rings, moves across and within a kind of private space: a dance elaborately private, the key-note of which is, nevertheless, farewell.”⁶⁸ As the narrative progresses, Baldwin remains dedicated to his characters’ emotional terrain, but he is also more attentive to cinematography than in his other scripts, consciously orchestrating close-ups and point-of-view shots. He does, though, leave some direction for the set. In a montage introducing 1929 Berlin, for example, a staccato list suffices: “Bread-lines; Soup kitchens; Riots; Whores, female; Whores, males.”⁶⁹ As the film’s planned director, Baldwin would be able to film that montage exactly as he wanted.

“The Inheritance” also treats film as a technology of memory. In an early scene in Istanbul, Brigid visits a fortune teller, a “medium,” who functions as an obvious stand-in for the medium of film. Rather than illuminate the future, the fortune teller focuses on the past. A series of flashbacks show her visions, and throughout the screenplay Baldwin embraces the opportunity to leap between time periods and across oceans with a simple cut. So, when Brigid responds to a query about why she came to Germany, “Well, time and space have altered. Both are smaller than they were before, and so one can do more with them,” the line immediately signifies as a meta-cinematic comment on what a camera can do.⁷⁰

Baldwin uses this filmic ability to compress time and space to explore the resonances between America and Germany, but without asserting any easy moral equivalency. Brigid’s father Wilfred, for instance, wants to aid Germany’s drive toward industrial autonomy as an engineer but then becomes complicit in Hitler’s rise. Baldwin likewise analyzes contemporary Germany, describing the Berlin Wall as an “excessive border,” before calling for an overhead shot that shows “Cars crawling East: cars crawling West.”⁷¹ By interweaving these German vignettes with scenes from Birmingham, Baldwin makes the political connections clear, not least with a scene in which Brigid’s husband is murdered by an Alabama police officer.⁷² Baldwin never shies away from depicting the national nightmares of both countries, but he also, not unlike *Go Tell It*, retains some hope that interpersonal

connections, particularly a friendship between Brigid and her blond-haired German nephew, can bridge differences.

"The Inheritance," however, was never made: Kelly-Jordan Enterprises went bankrupt, and in 1973 Baldwin had to sue to retain the rights to the film.⁷³ Even amid that legal battle, Baldwin didn't give up on cinema. He attended the Cannes Film Festival, where Bill Gunn's avant-garde vampire film *Ganja & Hess* (1973) was the only American movie to screen at Critics' Week, and later that summer he finished writing "The Inheritance." With the screenplay complete, Baldwin tried to start another new film company. He wrote to Moses and detailed his casting plans, which were to include Simone Signoret. He also shared his ambition "to create a nucleus of people who will continue working together" and rattled off ideas for location shooting.⁷⁴ "I'm very excited and very frightened," he concluded, "but the reaction to the script has been extraordinary."⁷⁵

By 1974, popular films like Parks's *Shaft* (1971) and Melvin Van Peebles's *Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) had ushered in a boom in Black cinema, and *Esquire* commissioned Baldwin to write about the phenomenon. Two years earlier, when George Goodman, Jr. of the *New York Times* had asked Baldwin about mainstream Black films, Baldwin responded, "Are they in fact black?"⁷⁶ And his tune had not changed in 1974: he told Moses that he was "doing research for a long essay *Esquire* asked me to do on Black films (Lord) and was therefore trapped in projection rooms in Paris."⁷⁷ Baldwin saw his own filmmaking endeavors as fundamentally different—an artistic rather than a commercial project—and it's an unfortunate irony that he seems to have disregarded many of the Black independent films of the period.⁷⁸

Baldwin, though, was still forging ahead with "The Inheritance." His intended lead, Diana Sands, had died of cancer the year before, but Baldwin told Moses that he had recently pitched the script to Ingo Preminger, whom Baldwin deemed a friend and "a very different cat" from his brother Otto.⁷⁹ Baldwin also had new casting plans, including Diana Ross for the lead (or if not her then Rosalind Cash), Thommy Berggren, and Sylvia Sidney. There were also parts for David Baldwin and Abbey Lincoln, as well as Moses, newcomer Ivan Nikolov, and Richard Attenborough, whom Baldwin had recently met. "Not a bad package," he concluded, "and I think we'll get most of it: we might get it all."⁸⁰ Baldwin had carefully plotted camera angles in his script, but his conception of filmmaking was ultimately less about cinematography and more about bringing different artists—and the different arts—together. "To guide my poor self through" as director, he wrote to Moses, "I have the nucleus of the technical crew. Have the set designer. Will get Quincy Jones to do the music. I don't have a cameraman, but I expect him to present himself shortly."⁸¹

Baldwin's last long discussion of "The Inheritance" with Moses comes in a 1976 letter. He begins by apologizing for being "distant," explaining that he was afraid he had become a "jinx on actors," particularly ones he was close to: "I wrote The Inheritance for you, and my beloved Diana [Sands]. You saw how the producer (Jack Jordan) fucked that up."⁸² Then, seeming to forget his 1974 letter about new

casting possibilities, he asserted that “when Diana died, I had no heart to go any further.”⁸³ But Baldwin was newly resolved to see the project through, and he eagerly outlined other film ventures, too, noting that Third World Cinema might do *If Beale Street Could Talk* with Michael Schultz directing and Baldwin writing the screenplay. He was in high spirits about the work. He had realized that he would have to “do it myself” if he wanted any project to reach the screen, and he felt that he could, finally, focus entirely on film.⁸⁴ “Actually,” he mused, “with two books coming out in a single year, and with *Beale Street* still working, I don’t want to bring out another book for awhile. Which means that I may, at last, have bought the time I needed to work in films.”⁸⁵

Baldwin likely wrote *Beale Street* itself with the intention of bringing it to the screen, but at the very least, he saw the novel as an enabler: “It’s funny, but it would appear that *Beale Street* will make it possible for us to do a lot of the things we wished to do long before I wrote that least ‘controversial’ of my novels.”⁸⁶ In 2018, Barry Jenkins belatedly proved this true when his adaptation of *Beale Street* became the first of Baldwin’s novels to reach the big screen.⁸⁷

* * * * *

Perhaps Baldwin’s most explicit connection to visual mass media was as a subject. From his 1965 Cambridge University debate with William F. Buckley, Jr. to his regular appearances on television talk-shows, Baldwin became a media icon. So although he struggled to get behind the camera, he could at least share his perspective from in front of it. In documentary films from Pierre Koralnik’s *Un étranger dans le village* (1962) to Richard O. Moore’s *Take This Hammer* (1963) and Horace Ové’s debut *Baldwin’s Nigger* (1968), Baldwin collaborated with directors and appeared onscreen himself to explain, examine, and critique his world.

Of all the documentaries Baldwin collaborated on, *I Heard It Through the Grapevine* (1982) is both the most ambitious and the closest to Baldwin’s own vision for film: using the medium to tell intimate stories with serious political stakes, in ways not typically seen in mainstream media. I therefore close this essay by narrating the making of *Grapevine* and reading both the film and additional interviews Baldwin conducted for it in order to show how Baldwin crafted a counter-media project and a revisionist history of civil rights through independent film.

In 1980, as Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter hit the campaign trail, Baldwin began his own road trip. Ostensibly on assignment for *The New Yorker*, and planning to write a book, too, Baldwin traversed the South to reflect on the gains and the stagnation of the civil rights movement.⁸⁸ He revisited key sites from Atlanta to Selma and reconnected with friends and activists, including Jerome Smith, Sterling Brown, and John Lewis. The husband-and-wife team of Dick Fontaine and Pat Hartley accompanied him with a small film crew, recording Baldwin’s six-week journey and the hours of conversations he had along the way. *Grapevine* was the result.

Inspired by *No Name in the Street*, Fontaine envisioned *Grapevine* as a “Baldwin essay on film.”⁸⁹ The film’s thesis is, essentially, that only superficial changes have occurred. Baldwin calls Atlanta the world’s best “make-up job,” for example, and in New Orleans, he says that “Everything has changed on the surface, but nothing else has been touched. In a way, the state is more powerful than ever because it has given us so many tokens.” Time and again, Baldwin expresses the feeling that he’s only been gone from the South for a few minutes and has reentered the same conversations he was having in the 1960s. At one point, he reflects that “It is very bitter to have fought so hard for the vote only to enter the system and realize there is nothing to vote for,” a stinging critique given the television footage of Carter’s and Reagan’s campaigns that we see Baldwin watching periodically throughout the film. In Eddie Glaude’s words, Baldwin is preoccupied with “the complex relationship between history and memory ... as he witnessed the country’s zealous embrace of Reaganism. So much was being willfully forgotten at a breathtaking pace, and just as much was being relived.”⁹⁰ Fontaine initially pitched the film to Baldwin as a funded research trip, but it soon became much more, as Baldwin realized the power of telling this story in moving images.⁹¹

The film’s historical consciousness develops through a series of visual juxtapositions, tacking between 1960s documentary footage, contemporary 1980s scenes, and intimate conversations between Baldwin and his longtime friends. Sometimes, the historical footage is intentionally jarring, as when a white sheriff calmly describes to television audiences the use of electric cattle prods on protestors. At other times, *Grapevine*’s editing emphasizes the seamless transitions between time periods, for example cutting, mid-sentence, from the activist Oretha Castle Haley speaking in 1980 to finish her thought with a speech she delivered in the 1960s as president of the New Orleans chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Similarly, when Baldwin crosses the Edmund Pettus Bridge into Selma, the site of Bloody Sunday, the film cuts between contemporary and historical footage of the city to suggest how the past still haunts the present. These visual effects and the film’s elegiac lyricism are tightly tied to Baldwin’s own running commentary and his bodily performance: it is very much his film. As Baldwin emphasized in a conversation with James Meredith, contrasting *Grapevine* with his Malcolm film, this time “the whole thing has been done from my point of view.”⁹²

Indeed, *Grapevine* is an intensely personal film, and it experiments with how to use such personal experiences to interpret history. It opens with Baldwin at his desk, paging through a book of documentary photographs, and as Glaude writes, “One can see the slight smile on Baldwin’s face or the furrow of his brow as he pauses to look at a photo. He *feels* the images.”⁹³ Then Baldwin reflects, in voiceover:

It was 1957 when I left Paris for Little Rock. 1957. This is 1980, and how many years is that? Nearly a quarter of a century. And what has happened to all those people, children I knew then, and what has happened to this country, and what does this mean for the world? What does this mean for me?

Baldwin's reflection on his photo album is metonymic of *Grapevine* as a whole: the film effectively sets those photographs in motion, treating them as a bridge between times rather than as remnants of a fundamentally different past.

Grapevine was also a family affair. Fontaine's close friendship with Baldwin's brother David "made a difference" for the author, who was initially "a bit reluctant" to trust a white British filmmaker, and once on the road, Baldwin found a kindred spirit in Fontaine's wife Hartley, a Black New Yorker. "He cared about us," Fontaine recalled. "Whether or not we were going to survive [as an interracial couple]."⁹⁴ And in the film itself, Baldwin visits Bunkie, Louisiana, his stepfather's birthplace, where he encounters, apparently for the first time, a photograph of his stepfather's half-brother, whose father was the white master of the house. "It was strange to see, in effect, your father in whiteface," Baldwin tells David. The camera slowly zooms in on the photograph, then cuts to a picture of Baldwin's stepfather, letting the first image linger. The slow dissolve produces a ghostly double-image, like a daguerreotype, creating a striking visual of the fundamental entanglement of white and Black America.

The heart of the film, though, is the bond between James and David Baldwin. David appears in most of the film's non-Southern scenes, which must have pleased his older brother, who always wanted to cast him in his movies, and over drinks at Mikell's in Harlem they reflect on Baldwin's trip South. Portions of their conversation at Mikell's appear throughout, forming the film's "spine," in Fontaine's words, and providing a narrative and expository framework.⁹⁵ Their easy rapport and

Figure 2 Screenshot from *I Heard It Through the Grapevine* (dir. Dick Fontaine, 1982) (Courtesy of the Dick Fontaine Paper and Film Outtakes Collection, 1960–1990, Harvard Film Archive, Harvard College Library)

sometimes elliptical discussions evoke the ambience of a home movie, and indeed, the intimate, semi-narrative style of *Grapevine* is itself a politics: a commitment to contesting the stereotypical images of Black life circulated by mainstream media and using the camera to record both the explicit and the subtle ways that America's history of racist violence continues to shape everyday life.

Weaving together personal and national memory, *Grapevine* seeks to inspire historical literacy in a period at risk of political quiescence. Hoyt Fuller, for example, tells an incredulous Baldwin about a recent exchange with one of his students at Cornell who had left a question on a quiz blank: when Fuller asked her to read it aloud, she admitted she had never heard of "Malcolm ten." But rather than offer a parade of facts, *Grapevine* advocates a more fundamental shift in perspective. In one scene on the road to Selma, for example, shot from inside a car, as the camera captures the rural highway scenery, Baldwin says, in voiceover, "When I first went South, I felt, I felt I had come home," and then, pausing, he continues, "You are aware of the trees. You are aware of how many of your brothers hung from those trees. In that landscape. Under that sky. And the people in that landscape have been doing that for generations. And may now do it to you." Sun streams through the window as he speaks, a juxtaposition that demands that viewers recognize the saturation of the landscape with racist violence. The film's interviewees share Baldwin's sense of urgency for circulating alternative perspectives on American history. Oretha Castle Haley, for example, says Baldwin's project has the potential to "teach and enable people to understand why things have happened" and to provide "a sense of renewal, a sense of re-dedication to the struggle that we are engaged in."⁹⁶ With its limited release, *Grapevine* probably wasn't quite so transformative, but the film, and Baldwin's oral histories for it, still represent an invaluable archive of political history and Black radical thought.

It's important to recognize, though, that only a fraction of Baldwin's recorded interviews made it into the film.⁹⁷ Some of the most searing political critiques were left on the cutting-room floor, including Baldwin's conversation with Ben Chavis, who had just been released from prison, the last of the Wilmington Ten. Archived transcripts reveal that Baldwin often spoke in terms of state-sanctioned "genocide" against Black Americans, rather than "racism," and that he argued that the civil rights movement was best categorized as the "latest slave rebellion," for "as Malcolm pointed out a long time ago, if you're a citizen you have your civil rights. If you don't have your civil rights, what are you ... a slave."⁹⁸ Baldwin's criticism of politicians is similarly sharper in the archived transcripts: during his conversation with Chavis, for example, Baldwin repeatedly notes that Nixon was president during Chavis's unjust trial, and at one point he interjects, "I want to say one thing, about Mr. Nixon, I want to say, do not cut this out, Nixon was a kind of amateur Hitler."⁹⁹ The line, however, was cut. Fontaine later told Leeming that he had enough material for a four-hour film and that the final cut for British television was "too compressed,"¹⁰⁰ but even in its edited version, Baldwin was shocked that they let it air.¹⁰¹

The threat of racist violence wasn't only in the past, however. During Baldwin's opening remarks at a conference on African literature in St. Augustine, Florida, at the start of his trip for *Grapevine*, a man's voice interrupts over a loudspeaker, demanding, "You're going to have to cut it out Mr. Baldwin, we can't stand for this kind of going on."¹⁰² Some of the audience members giggle in disbelief, while others look aghast, seemingly more from the impropriety of it than any real sense of danger. But Baldwin quickly grasps the lethal possibilities of the threat. Standing at the front of the conference room, utterly exposed, he refuses to step down, and with extemporaneous force, he declares,

Mr. Baldwin is nevertheless going to finish his statement. And I will tell you now, whoever you are, that if you assassinate me in the next two minutes, I'm telling you this: it no longer matters *what* you think! The doctrine of white supremacy on which the Western world is based has had its hour—has had its day. It's over!

The audience then breaks into thunderous applause and leaps to its feet, at least sonically and symbolically sheltering Baldwin in an act of solidarity against a very present white supremacist menace.

In fact, a crucial feature of film, for Baldwin, was its capacity to carry political critiques to a global audience and thereby build solidarity. When Chavis details his unjust incarceration, for instance, Baldwin interjects: "I want you to explain on what legal pretext this could happen. We are talking to Tehran, we are talking to another country."¹⁰³ Similarly, in his conversation with Oretha Castle Haley, Baldwin emphasizes that "Malcolm and Martin were murdered at the point where they connected the black situation in this country with the non-white situation around the world. That was a terrible menace to the entire Western world."¹⁰⁴ And at the conference in St. Augustine, Baldwin meets the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe for the first time, leading to a moving picture of diasporic solidarity. Baldwin and Achebe visit a former slave market that later served as a Ku Klux Klan meeting place, and as they enter the open-air structure, Baldwin grasps Achebe's hand and proclaims that this was where they met four hundred years ago: "You were chained to me," Baldwin says, "And I was chained to you." Reflecting on the experience later with David, Baldwin explains, "There we were—together. It defeated a conspiracy that meant we should never be able to speak." For the writer and filmmaker Toni Cade Bambara, film was perfectly suited to forging such connections. "How shall a diasporized people communicate?" Bambara asked rhetorically. "Answer: independent films."¹⁰⁵ *Grapevine* suggests that Baldwin would have agreed.

Indeed, the finished film and Baldwin's archived interviews emphasize his commitment to making *Grapevine* a counter-media project, designed to circulate alternative images and narratives about Blackness in America and to equip audiences with a critical media literacy. In a scene in Oretha Castle Haley's living room, for example, Haley shows Baldwin the front page of the local newspaper, which features a sketch of a young Black man pointing a gun directly out at the

Figure 3 Screenshot from *I Heard It Through the Grapevine* (dir. Dick Fontaine, 1982) (Courtesy of the Dick Fontaine Paper and Film Outtakes Collection, 1960–1990, Harvard Film Archive, Harvard College Library)

reader. In his pupils, the artist has drawn skulls. The film then cuts from a close-up on the newspaper to a shot of Haley's young son, who is Black, and his white friend. The two boys peer around the doorway as Haley's son, with a mischievous grin, asks when dinner will be ready. Haley's expression in response is a complex mixture of amusement, weariness, and love that raises the question: what kind of world will her son be able to grow up in? And how can a media landscape that demonizes and endangers Black life be challenged and remade?

We get a sense of Baldwin's own answer to that latter question in his conversation with James Meredith, another interview that was cut from the film. The last time Baldwin had seen Meredith was when Baldwin was planning a film collaboration with Warren Beatty, and reflecting back on that project, Baldwin tells Meredith that "Warren is all right but Hollywood is a strait jacket. There's very little I can do in that framework."¹⁰⁶ Their conversation then turns to the popular television miniseries *Roots* (1977), based on Alex Haley's novel. They agree that the series has been oriented toward white audiences, and they are both "frightened" by its particular framing of Blackness and Black history. In a statement about TV that echoes his early film reviews, Baldwin then proclaims, "the phenomenon of television can distort everything, and it is really, I've begun to think more and more and more, one of the most effective ways ever devised to destroy history, to make everything unreal."¹⁰⁷ *Grapevine*, which was made for TV and centers on the recovery of familial and national history, aimed to accomplish just the opposite.

Throughout his career, Baldwin saw film as a powerful tool for forging connections and collectivity. In one scene in *Grapevine*, Oretha Castle Haley says, of her New Orleans community, “Many of us have lost contact with each other and within the past year, we were forced to recognize that we have got to come together to recognize what’s going on.” *Grapevine* implicitly argues that her sentiment applies to the Black community in the 1980s nationwide. So it’s important that the very process of making the film became a way to build community: as Baldwin crisscrossed the country, reconnecting with activist friends, he recreated the grapevine, reestablishing many of their ties with each other. The film’s initial screening was a similarly communal affair, held at Mikell’s, where some of the film was shot, and attended by Baldwin’s family and close friends, including Toni Morrison, Ossie Davis, and Max Roach.¹⁰⁸ *Grapevine* was then shown at the Film Forum Festival in New York and appeared on television in Britain and the United States. Today, though, it is extraordinarily difficult to see the film—it has become an archival object. But Harvard Film Archive is working to restore and re-release it.¹⁰⁹ If *Grapevine* was, in some ways, a realization of many of Baldwin’s dreams for film, hopefully its re-release will build new communities. Such a project remains necessary today.

Acknowledgment

My thanks to Robert Jackson, Justin A. Joyce, Ed Pavlić, and Andrew Lanham for their very helpful comments on earlier drafts.

Notes

- 1 “James Baldwin will write and direct Miss Diana Sands in ‘The Inheritance,’” advertisement, *Variety*, 17 May 1972, p. 23.
- 2 David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 2015), p. 316. Leeming is, to my knowledge, the only critic who has discussed “The Inheritance.” His treatment is brief; he is primarily interested in possible connections between Baldwin’s life and the screenplay’s plot. For contemporaneous reporting, see Richard Lingeman, “American Notebook: Baldwin,” *The New York Times*, 11 October 1970.
- 3 James Baldwin, “On the Horizon: On Catfish Row,” *Commentary*, September 1959; James Baldwin, “Carmen Jones: The Dark is Light Enough” (1955), in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston, Beacon Press, 2012), pp. 47–55.
- 4 Leeming, *James Baldwin*, p. 165.
- 5 James Baldwin and Hoyt Fuller, interview transcript, Box 15, Dick Fontaine Collection, Harvard Film Archive, Fine Arts Library, Harvard University.
- 6 Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, p. 9.
- 7 Cassandra M. Ellis, “The Black Boy Looks at the Silver Screen: Baldwin as Moviegoer,” in D. Quentin Miller (ed.), *Re-viewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen* (Philadelphia, PA, Temple University Press, 2000), p. 190.
- 8 James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work* (1976) (New York, Vintage, 2011), p. 35.
- 9 For example, see Ellis, “The Black Boy Looks at the Silver Screen”; Ian Balfour, “The Force of Black and White: James Baldwin’s Reflections in/on his Early Experience of

- Film," *Critical Philosophy of Race*, 3:2 (2015), pp. 180–202; Ryan Jay Friedman, "Enough Force to Shatter the Tale to Fragments': Ethics and Textual Analysis in James Baldwin's Film Theory," *ELH*, 77:2 (2010), pp. 385–411; Baldwin's hopes for film are also mentioned explicitly in Leeming, *James Baldwin*, p. 17.
- 10 James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) (New York, Vintage, 2013), p. 35.
 - 11 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
 - 12 *Ibid.*, p. 36.
 - 13 *Ibid.*, p. 18.
 - 14 *Ibid.*, p. 19.
 - 15 *Ibid.*
 - 16 There is an affinity between Baldwin's relationship to cinema and that of Virginia Woolf, who railed against the imitative dullness of the medium while also speculating about its yet-to-be-realized possibilities. Virginia Woolf, "The Cinema," *The Nation and Athenaeum*, 3 July 1926.
 - 17 James Baldwin, *Another Country* (1962) (New York, Vintage, 1993), p. 3.
 - 18 *Ibid.*, p. 283.
 - 19 *Ibid.*, p. 328.
 - 20 *Ibid.*, p. 329.
 - 21 *Ibid.*
 - 22 *Ibid.*, p. 330.
 - 23 Baldwin was also writing "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon," a short story published in 1960, which details the collaboration between a film actor and his director. James Baldwin, "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon," in *Going to Meet the Man* (New York, Vintage, 1995).
 - 24 James Baldwin, "The Northern Protestant," in *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (1961) (New York, Vintage, 1993), p. 178.
 - 25 *Ibid.*, p. 180.
 - 26 *Ibid.* As novelist Randall Kenan notes, the film that Baldwin conjures at the end of his Bergman essay borrows from the plot of a novel he was working on. Kenan, "The Good Ship 'Jesus': Baldwin, Bergman, and the Protestant Imagination; or, Baldwin's Bitter Taste," *African American Review*, 46:4 (2013), pp. 701–14.
 - 27 Leeming, *James Baldwin*, p. 167.
 - 28 Letter from James Baldwin to Mary Painter, 10 May 1962, Box 2, Folder 7, Walter O. Evans Collection of James Baldwin. James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
 - 29 Peter Bart, "Baldwin Making Novel into Film; Author of 'Another Country' Signs to do Screenplay," *The New York Times*, 10 October 1964.
 - 30 *Ibid.*
 - 31 James Baldwin, *Little Man, Little Man: A Story of Childhood*, illustrations by Yoran Cuzac, ed. Nicholas Boggs and Jennifer Devere Brody (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2018), p. 40.
 - 32 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
 - 33 *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 13.
 - 34 Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, p. 9.
 - 35 C. Robert Jennings, "Warning for Mr. Charlie," *Los Angeles Times*, 7 July 1968.
 - 36 See, for example, D. Quentin Miller, "Lost and ... Found? James Baldwin's Script and Spike Lee's Malcolm X," *African American Review*, 46:4 (2013), pp. 671–85.
 - 37 James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (1972) (New York, Vintage, 2007), p. 99.
 - 38 Leeming, *James Baldwin*, pp. 284, 288.

- 39 Miller, "Lost and ... Found?," p. 671.
- 40 *Ibid.*; Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, pp. 99–103.
- 41 Letter from James Baldwin to Louise Meriwether, 22 September 1969, Box 1, Louise Meriwether papers, Emory University.
- 42 Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, p. 99.
- 43 Jennings, "Warning for Mr. Charlie."
- 44 William J. Maxwell (ed.), *James Baldwin: The FBI File* (New York, Arcade, 2017), p. 311.
- 45 Letter from James Baldwin to Eugene Lerner, 13 January 1968, Box 2, Folder 9, Walter O. Evans Collection of James Baldwin, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
- 46 *Ibid.*
- 47 *Ibid.*
- 48 *Ibid.*
- 49 Interview with David Leeming and Sedat Pakay, May 1992, David Leeming Collection of James Baldwin Research. James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
- 50 *Ibid.* Interview with David Leeming and David and Sharon Moses, 21 February 1989, David Leeming Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
- 51 Jennings, "Warning for Mr. Charlie." A month previously, Baldwin published a profile on Sidney Poitier for *Look* magazine. Newly enmeshed in the Hollywood system, Baldwin uses his discussion of Poitier to work through his complex attitude toward his own similar position. He comments, for instance: "It takes a long time in this business, if you survive it at all, to reach the eminence that will give you the power to change things. Sidney has that power now, to the limited extent that *anyone* in this business has. It will be very interesting to see what he does with it." James Baldwin, "Sidney Poitier," *Look*, 32:15, 23 July 1968, p. 58.
- 52 Jennings, "Warning for Mr. Charlie."
- 53 James Baldwin, *One Day When I Was Lost* (1972) (New York, Knopf Doubleday, 2013), p. 5.
- 54 *Ibid.*
- 55 *Ibid.*
- 56 "God knows what they consider experience to be," Baldwin complained to Meriwether. Letter from James Baldwin to Louise Meriwether, 22 September 1969, Box 1, Louise Meriwether papers, Emory University.
- 57 Leeming, *James Baldwin*, p. 306.
- 58 Letter from James Baldwin to David Moses, 20 February [likely 1971], Box 1, Folder 2, James Baldwin, Letters to David Moses, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University. Access to much of Baldwin's correspondence is restricted, so his letters to Moses are especially important for piecing together this film history.
- 59 Magdalena J. Zaborowska, *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2009), p. 33.
- 60 "James Baldwin's Own Paris Pix Co," *Variety*, 260:9, 14 October 1970, p. 1.
- 61 "James Baldwin's Own Paris Pix Co," p. 68; Ollie Stewart, "Report from Europe: James Baldwin turns to Movies," *Afro-American*, 24 October 1970.
- 62 Letter from James Baldwin to Mary Painter, 10 May 1962. Walker O. Evans Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
- 63 Letter from James Baldwin to David Moses, 27 September 1981, Box 1, Folder 22, Emory University.

- 64 Letter from James Baldwin to David Moses, 20 February [likely 1971], Box 1, Folder 2, Emory University.
- 65 George Goodman, Jr., "For James Baldwin, a Rap on Baldwin," *The New York Times*, 26 June 1972.
- 66 Leeming, *James Baldwin*, p. 316.
- 67 Letter from James Baldwin to David Moses, [summer 1972], Box 1, Folder 4, Emory University.
- 68 James Baldwin, "In the Cross, A Trembling Soul: The Inheritance," screenplay, Box 14, Dick Fontaine Collection, Harvard University, p. 1.
- 69 *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- 70 *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- 71 *Ibid.*, p. 74.
- 72 Brigid is an international performer who uses that position as a platform for activism, representing a clear departure from the apolitical character Sands played in *Georgia, Georgia* (1972).
- 73 Letter from James Baldwin to David Moses, 27 September [1974], Box 1, Folder 16, Emory University.
- 74 *Ibid.*
- 75 *Ibid.*
- 76 Goodman, Jr., "A Rap on Baldwin."
- 77 Letter from James Baldwin to David Moses, 27 September [1974], Emory University.
- 78 *Ibid.* Baldwin did not, for example, appear familiar with *The Spook who Sat by the Door* (1973). In both his published work and correspondence, Baldwin's references are generally to Hollywood movies.
- 79 Letter from James Baldwin to David Moses, 27 September [1974], Emory University.
- 80 *Ibid.*
- 81 *Ibid.*
- 82 Letter from James Baldwin to David Moses, 4 January 1976, Box 1, Folder 19, Emory University.
- 83 *Ibid.*
- 84 *Ibid.*
- 85 *Ibid.*
- 86 *Ibid.*
- 87 In 1984, Stan Lathan directed a made-for-television film adaptation of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.
- 88 The book was to be called *Remember This House*. The fact that Baldwin never finished it forms the premise for Raoul Peck's film *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016). Fontaine initially proposed a different kind of collaboration: he wanted to write a play that would "consist of images, scenes and narrative from all parts of [Baldwin's] work" and then film the production process. Dick Fontaine, "Tomorrow Brought Us Rain (treatment)," Box 28, Folder 1, Dick Fontaine Collection, Harvard University. Baldwin was initially intrigued by the idea, but when he saw the script in 1979, he took offense, apparently shouting at Fontaine, "I am *not* going to let you define me." Leeming, *James Baldwin*, p. 353. Baldwin did, however, trust Fontaine to make *Grapevine*.
- 89 Dick Fontaine, interview with David Leeming, undated, David Leeming Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
- 90 Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own* (New York, Crown, 2020), p. 152.

- 91 Dick Fontaine, interview with author, 12 February 2021; Fontaine interview with Leeming.
- 92 James Baldwin and James Meredith, interview transcript, Box 15, Folder 21, Dick Fontaine Collection, Harvard University. Fontaine told me that he generally avoided discussing Baldwin's previous film endeavors, since he "didn't want [them] to sour our experience" and instead wanted *Grapevine* "to have its own integrity." Fontaine interview with author, 12 February 2021.
- 93 Glaude, *Begin Again*, pp. 154–5.
- 94 Fontaine interview with author, 12 February 2021; Fontaine interview with Leeming.
- 95 *Ibid.*; Fontaine interview with author, 12 February 2021.
- 96 Oretha Castle Haley and filmmakers (Baldwin is not present), interview transcript, Box 15, Dick Fontaine Collection, Harvard University.
- 97 Fontaine had wanted Baldwin to talk with Rap Brown—to have a conversation with someone who wasn't necessarily his friend—but Baldwin was reticent, likely remembering earlier hostility toward him by Black radicals. Fontaine interview with Leeming.
- 98 New Orleans, Oretha meeting, interview transcript, Box 15, Folder 14, Dick Fontaine Collection, Harvard University.
- 99 James Baldwin and Ben Chavis, interview transcript, Box 15, Folder 4, Dick Fontaine Collection, Harvard University.
- 100 Fontaine interview with Leeming.
- 101 *Ibid.*
- 102 For more on this scene, see Ed Pavlić, *Who Can Afford to Improvise? James Baldwin and Black Music, the Lyric and the Listeners* (New York, Fordham University Press, 2016). Pavlić is one of the few scholars to have written on *Grapevine*; I am grateful for his encouragement to view the Dick Fontaine Collection.
- 103 James Baldwin and Ben Chavis, interview transcript, Box 15, Folder 4, Dick Fontaine Collection, Harvard University.
- 104 Baldwin in conversation with Oretha Castle Haley and Richard Haley, interview transcript, Box 15, Folder 16, Dick Fontaine Collection, Harvard University.
- 105 Toni Cade Bambara, "Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye: *Daughters of the Dust* and the Black Independent Cinema Movement," in *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays, and Conversations*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Pantheon, 1996), p. 118.
- 106 James Baldwin and James Meredith interview, Box 15, Folder 21, Dick Fontaine Collection, Harvard University.
- 107 *Ibid.*
- 108 Leeming, *James Baldwin*, p. 353. D. A. Pennebaker ran the projector. Fontaine interview with Leeming.
- 109 "When James Baldwin Went South," *The New Yorker*, 17 September 2020, www.newyorker.com/culture/video-dept/when-james-baldwin-went-south.

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