

“There Are No Signs”: *I Heard It Through the Grapevine* and Donald Glover’s *Atlanta*

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The 2023 reemergence of *I Heard It Through the Grapevine*—the 1982 documentary featuring James Baldwin, directed by Dick Fontaine and Pat Hartley—comes following a decade in which Baldwin and his work have been especially visible, recirculated and remixed in the twenty-first century by, for, and in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement. Beyond print, Baldwin’s recent recirculation has occurred, crucially, via social media, internet video clips, and new filmic works, Raoul Peck’s *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016) and Barry Jenkins’s adaptation of *If Beale Street Could Talk* (2018) the most notable.¹ Compared to Peck’s and Jenkins’s work, *Grapevine* is the most dated—presenting as it does a view from 1980—but it shows us Baldwin’s observations, reflections, and juxtapositions in ways that feel untouched, unfiltered, and uncut; his presence, consciousness, and intellect are the engines that drive the film. We accompany Baldwin as he grapples to make sense of his present. In this way it resonates with the contemporary television series *Atlanta*, created by Donald Glover (2016–22).² *Grapevine* and *Atlanta*, Season 3 in particular, can be viewed as strange inversions or continuations of each other, forty years apart. Both aim to assess the state of Black life and the shapes of racism in their respective moments, 1980 and the early decades of the twenty-first century. Together, their search for meaning in the long post-civil rights period is a search for understanding and for life in the shifting penumbras of white supremacy.

In *Grapevine* Baldwin, coming from his home in France, travels to meet old associates and revisit old sites of memory from the civil rights movement. Baldwin’s travels are punctuated, drenched in history. The film opens to show Baldwin flipping through black and white photographs. His various interlocutors, now aging, remember the past, assess the present. Archival black and white footage interrupts, fills in, and exists alongside the colorized present. Even the various settings of the film in Washington, D.C., Atlanta, Selma, Newark, St. Augustine, and elsewhere are physical links to the past: the same courthouse, city hall, bridge, church, highways, projects, and auction block.

In one early scene, even the new buildings in Atlanta appear as a link to the past: a new artifice built upon what has come before. Baldwin rides a glass elevator in the Peachtree Plaza hotel—when he narrates the scene to his brother David, he notes that it was the tallest hotel in America. He looks out over Atlanta. He is literally moving up, enjoying the so-called privileges of an integrated hotel and integrated America. Out the window Atlanta’s downtown is a construction site; new buildings, holes, and foundations everywhere. But the overlaid audio is Sterling Brown’s reading of “Old Lem,” describing the unyielding force of white supremacy. When Old Lem’s buddy “spoke out of turn”

They came and got him
 And they came by tens.
 He stayed in the county—
 He lays there dead.
 They don't come by ones
 They don't come by twos
 But they come by tens.

As Brown reads and Baldwin's elevator car moves up, the steel casing of the hotel appears not like the structure of progress, privilege, and liberation but like the bars of a cell.³ It is precisely this contrast that Baldwin seeks to understand throughout the film: how to make sense of the present, the enduring reality of entrenched racism and white supremacy in a country with civil rights laws on the books, Black politicians in office, Black writers celebrated at conferences and in the White House. In a key exchange between Baldwin and his brother David about Selma, they explain:

James Baldwin: I don't want to say that nothing has changed. Something is always changing... But [Selma] has not changed. The spirit has not changed. It is as it was when we were there almost twenty years ago.

David Baldwin: Lord, lord.

James Baldwin: The spirit of the south is the spirit of America...

David Baldwin: What you're saying, then, is there are no signs saying "you can't go here, you can't go there."

Together: You gotta figure that out all by your lonesome.⁴

The challenge, then, is that of a racist system that remains, but whose rules and structures are not simply invisible but camouflaged by hollow monuments to equality, such as the Martin Luther King, Jr. memorial Baldwin visits in Atlanta. For the children of the post-civil rights period, including those he meets on screen in Georgia, New Orleans, and Newark, it is a lonesome puzzle indeed.

Forty years later, Glover's *Atlanta* revolves around this same need to figure out contemporary American life all by your lonesome, without clear signs. Throughout the show, the main characters Al, Earn, Darius, and Van—those very same Black children of the post-civil rights period—confront perplexing situation after situation. In Season 3 they leave the US for Europe on a rap tour: their experiences throw into relief both the cosmopolitan cities of Europe that they visit and their native Atlanta. While Baldwin's travels in *Grapevine* link always to the past, what is and what has been, in *Atlanta* the narrative is punctuated by the speculative, the imagined, the may be or might be. In the early Season 3 episode "Sinterklass is Coming to Town," the crew is in Amsterdam in December; Al, who raps under the moniker Paper Boi, is set to perform. Al has enjoyed Amsterdam: a large cash advance, a comfortable stay in a top hotel, fans cheering for him on the street,

deferential respect from the police, and even a surprisingly pleasant stint in a very progressive Dutch jail. The concert venue is sold out, and his Paper Boi fans are lit, but when Al looks out from backstage he sees that all of the white fans in the audience—all, “they come by tens”—are wearing blackface, red lipstick, and Afro wigs in celebration of *Zwarte Piet*—the blackface character who accompanies Sinterklass (St. Nicholas) during traditional Dutch holiday celebrations. “I ain’t doing this shit,” Al tells Earn.⁵

For the characters of *Atlanta*, how to make sense of their experience? How to make sense of their fans? Of their success? Of the present moment? In *Grapevine*, Baldwin’s defiant response to an anonymous heckler at the African Literature Association Conference in Florida indicates how he might have dealt with Paper Boi’s white Dutch fans: with Baldwinian directness and eloquence. But in *Atlanta* Earn creates the obviously false excuse that Al is sick and can’t perform. There is no confrontation with fans, no protest; they simply take the money, skip out on the show, and go back to the hotel. These moments of cognitive dissonance and the refusal to conform to expected protest politics in the face of racism and injustice are two of *Atlanta*’s primary subjects.

Atlanta’s speculation goes further than the fictional situations in which the primary characters find themselves. Just as *Grapevine*’s filmed documentation of Baldwin’s travels is mixed with archival footage, in *Atlanta*’s Season 3 the story of the crew’s European tour is interspersed with standalone episodes that open mysteries and explore alternate realities. These include a retelling of the Hart family murder-suicides in which the Black children survive; the imagined implementation of reparations for slavery in which individual white Americans are fiscally responsible to those Black Americans their ancestors exploited; a scholarship program awarded by way of an interview panel judging authentic Blackness, not as genetic inheritance but as cultural knowledge and performance; and an examination of the familial and cultural bonds that are created and broken across lines of race and class when a Trinidadian woman and the white children she cares for spend more time with each other than their own families.⁶ *Atlanta*’s alternate retellings and realities challenge us to imagine a world just askew from our own, in which notions of justice, family bonds, identity, and the legacies of history are more complex at the same time that they are also more grounded in reality. It is not—as it may at first seem—that *Atlanta* escapes reality, but rather that its speculation works to reveal the reality beneath a surface that has no clear signs. It is for this reason that *Atlanta* is often termed an Afro-Surreal work.⁷ More than that, *Atlanta* compels us to envision the world and even empathize with individuals who must figure out the world and their place in it all by their lonesome, as Baldwin and his brother put it.

In their own ways *Grapevine* and *Atlanta* assess the long post-civil rights period. For Baldwin, his interlocutors, and Fontaine and Hartley, that moment is the more immediate aftermath of the civil rights movement. Glover and his *Atlanta* collaborators play in the longer shadows and partial shadows, a period that includes the Obama presidency and all it stands for, the recent movements for Black lives, and the visible preeminence of Black culture in and as popular culture. Both works search for a new language to confront a present absent the explicit signs of the

past—to understand Blackness, white supremacy, identity, and power, now. And, as Baldwin explains to Julius Lester in a 1984 interview, “a language is a frame of reference, isn’t it? ... I say a new language. I might say a new morality, which, in my terms, comes to the same thing ... Everything is in question, according to me. One has to forge a new language to deal with it.”⁸

Notes

- 1 *I Am Not Your Negro*, directed by Raoul Peck (2016; Magnolia and Amazon MGM Studios); *If Beale Street Could Talk*, directed by Barry Jenkins (2018; Annapurna Pictures).
- 2 *Atlanta*, created by Donald Glover (2016–22; FX).
- 3 *I Heard It Through the Grapevine*, directed by Dick Fontaine and Pat Hartley (1982).
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 *Atlanta*, season 3, episode 2, “Sinterklass Is Coming to Town,” directed by Hiro Murai, written by Janine Nabers, featuring Donald Glover, Brian Tyree Henry, Lakeith Stanfield, and Zazie Beetz, aired March 24, 2022, FX.
- 6 The Hart Family murder-suicides is the real case of a white lesbian couple who drove their car off a cliff in northern California in 2018, killing themselves as well as their six foster children, all Black. Though both women and all six children were declared dead, the body of one child, a boy, was never found—thus, the inspiration for the *Atlanta* episode “Three Slaps.”
- 7 D. Scott Miller theorized the Afro-Surreal in 2009, building upon Amiri Baraka, among others. D. Scott Miller, “Call It Afro-Surreal,” *48 Hills* (May 19, 2009), <http://sfbgarchive.48hills.org/sfbgarchive/2009/05/19/call-it-afro-surreal/>.
- 8 James Baldwin, “James Baldwin—Reflections of a Maverick” (1984), interview by Julius Lester, in *The Last Interview and Other Conversations* (Brooklyn, Melville House, 2014), p. 52.

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