

## Style in the Face of Sorrow

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In aphorism 290 of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche writes, “One thing is needful . . . to give style to one’s character.”<sup>1</sup> Far from superficial, he clarifies that the practice of developing one’s style requires continual and honest self-reflection. Across James Baldwin’s writing, we see a similar commitment to knowing oneself and facing who we are at a personal and collective level. In the 1982 documentary *I Heard It Through the Grapevine*, Baldwin’s readers are given a rare audio-visual portrait of the author. The power of his presence is immediately striking, and even more so is the *style* of his character. I argue that Baldwin’s style exceeds mere appearance and approximates a kind of spirit enacted through sartorial flair, facial expressivity, and vocal cadence. These elements form an organic unity that marks his distinction as an artist and public figure. Still further, I propose that Baldwin’s stylishness rebukes the historical conditions of oppression documented in the film. In her essay “Subversive Beauty: New Modes of Contestation,” bell hooks quotes Keats’s lines, “a thing of beauty is a joy forever, its loveliness increases, it will never pass into nothingness,” after which she argues, “he attributed to beauty the subversive function of sustaining life in the face of deprivation, unrelenting pain, and suffering.”<sup>2</sup> In this documentary, Baldwin’s cool armor of stylish singularity embodies the writer’s resistance to a sociopolitical system intent on the dehumanization of Black people.

*I Heard It Through the Grapevine* follows Baldwin as he travels across the United States meeting with other artists, public figures, civil rights activists, and Black citizens. It juxtaposes documentary images and footage from the 1960s civil rights movement with late 1970s conditions of Black life in America. In so doing, it shows the ongoing suffering of Black people across the decades, yet with a notable difference. In the sixties, activists believed that the organized opposition, initiating energy, and passionate leadership of the movement could create real progress and lasting social change. However, in the narrative present of the documentary, we see a disillusioned landscape where growing poverty and urban decay reveal a lack of meaningful structural support for Black Americans. Baldwin witnesses these deteriorating conditions with an unflinching gaze and exudes a piercing charisma that the camera loves. This magnetism, I argue, has a restorative spiritual effect on the people and places he visits because it emits a compassionate vitality that is lacking in the blight of poverty and hopelessness. My focus on Baldwin’s style is unsentimental; the documentary in no way implies that he can repair what is broken in America. Indeed, it presents a wrenching portrait of the challenges faced by those who work on behalf of racial and economic justice. Throughout, Baldwin stands as a witness to this suffering and simultaneously furnishes an image of the Black American as heroic, deeply human, and *handsome*, in that word’s sense of substantiality.

In Alexander Nehamas's book on beauty, he elaborates on the concept of style and explains, "A style is *another* way of doing something," and that "[s]tyle requires originality and originality demands distinctiveness."<sup>3</sup> In other words, mere difference alone does not yield style. In *I Heard It Through the Grapevine*, Baldwin's stylishness is at once appropriate to the context and somehow special and distinct from it. In elegant beige shirt and slacks, Baldwin blends with the muted earth tones of the hotel room where he watches the news, and somehow transforms that dull space into a rich and melancholy setting for rumination. Walking out of a courthouse with camel blazer draped over his shoulders, hands in pockets, he affects a weary, aristocratic nonchalance in the face of belated, and thus, partial justice. On the sidewalks of New York, wearing a black ushanka fur hat with coat collar popped up, Baldwin strolls with one arm waving jauntily. And at his talk at Rutgers University, he distinguishes himself from the generic academics in the audience with his polished dark suit and black-and-white scarf knotted at the neck.

Inseparable from these deliberate fashion choices is Baldwin's facial and verbal expressivity which further contributes to his singular style. His animated face in conversation changes like quicksilver; one minute grave, listening, the next, broken out into a wide toothy grin, and a moment later, eyes blazing with intensity, as his body leans forward in polemic. Acute in his attention to others, Baldwin's body language is dynamic and authentic; no one else seems to have his verve, a kind of physical intelligence that telegraphs responsivity and reflection through its every gesture. Much has been said about Baldwin's oratorical skills, but in the documentary we are also treated to his vocal range in conversation: mirthful, gravelly laughter, a lilting, melodious rhythm to his storytelling, and at times an almost mandarin intonation that grants him a classical stature. But perhaps most striking is his insubordination to the interrupting voice that crackles criticism at him over the loudspeaker late in the film. Baldwin pivots from gentle joking with his audience to a sharp, staccato confrontation with his invisible challenger: "It no longer matters what you *think*," he declares in a magisterial dismissal that ends with a double-syllable at the end of the hard "k." And with that, the intimidation ceases. With his precise diction and his modulation of dynamics, Baldwin achieves what his predecessor Henry James called a "tone-standard" that elevates his style above the disruptive chaos and violence he witnesses in America.<sup>4</sup> Together with his cultivated style of dress and gestural grace, Baldwin evinces what bell hooks describes as, "the appropriateness of being myself."<sup>5</sup>

Baldwin's exemplary bearing, still further, heightens our attention to broader features of Black life that remain staunchly stylish in the face of despair. The blues music performed and played as the film's soundtrack summons a kind of coolness that is marked by yearning. In one shot, the image of a trombone being played in the foreground juxtaposes with the background of shattered windows in a Newark housing project and perfectly encapsulates this sorrowful dignity of style. And we see it as well in various others on screen: Chinua Achebe's sunglasses and boldly patterned shirt on the beach, the Baldwin family photos, and women in charming

straw hats at a protest for fair wages. Most impressive is the line of people waiting to register to vote in Selma wearing white gloves, dapper hats, scarves and furs, a leopard print coat. Dressed up to demand the civic rights they deserve, their collective display produces a tableau vivant of civility.

We can contrast this singular stylishness, this well-turned-out urbanity, with the homogeneous uniformity of white power as seen in the presence of law enforcement and the KKK. At once banal and bizarre, these figures are utterly bereft of style; they have *no style at all*, precisely because it would not befit their function of enacting domination and terror. Expressive humanity—the ethos behind Baldwin’s style—has no place in the world of white power. Nietzsche concludes his aphorism on style thus: “Whoever is dissatisfied with himself is continually prepared to avenge himself for this, and we others will be his victims, if only by having to endure his ugly sight.”<sup>6</sup> It is this “ugly sight” of white racist violence that is contested by the subversive stylishness of those who refuse to submit to its evil.

Alexander Nehamas writes: “Taste, sensibility, character, style: they can’t exist without a background of principles, systems, and rules, but they are exactly what principles, systems, and rules have no room for. Style can’t be fully articulated—a sensibility, as Susan Sontag wrote, ‘is almost, but not quite, ineffable.’”<sup>7</sup> We might describe Baldwin’s style as a vibe that emerges intuitively through the symphony of his clothing, gestures, and diction. Style in Baldwin is neither escape nor superficial fantasy, but the elaboration or extension of moral character. The creative resilience that informs Baldwin’s prose emerges here vis-à-vis his personhood. His style mocks efforts at dehumanization, even as it stands in alert proximity to the effects of that violence.

At the Watergate Hearings in July 1974, civil rights activist and statesperson Barbara Jordan delivered her impeachment speech wearing a bright pink dress suit with a black and white polka-dotted scarf, distinctive in every way from the tedious uniform of her male colleagues in Congress. Making no effort to camouflage herself, Jordan announced her singularity in a groundbreaking performance of civic accountability. Speaking about his 2002 exhibition *What Barbara Jordan Wore* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, artist Donald Moffett explained: “What she wore was significant. It was the fashion of forthrightness and courage. She wore the burden of our hope and pride.”<sup>8</sup> The image of these Black stylists—at once fierce and fashionable—offers aesthetic choice as a political stance, no less intentional than their powerful prose and political actions.

## Notes

- 1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 163.
- 2 bell hooks, *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics* (New York, New Press, 1995), p. 49.
- 3 Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 86, 89.

- 4 Henry James, *The Question of Our Speech; The Lesson of Balzac: Two Lectures* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1905), pp. 12–13.
- 5 hooks, *Art on my Mind*, p. 120.
- 6 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 164.
- 7 Nehamas, *Only a Promise*, p. 85.
- 8 Donald Moffett, *Donald Moffett: What Barbara Jordan Wore* (Chicago, Museum of Contemporary Art, 2002), p. 32.

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## Contributor's Biography

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