

I Heard It Through the Grapevine: The Language of the Streets, Blues Literature, and the Church: Commentary on James Baldwin's 1982 Film

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In 1987, legendary poet and author Amiri Baraka (a.k.a. LeRoi Jones) aptly named James Baldwin, “God’s Black revolutionary mouth.” Replete with the sounds of blues, soul, and freedom songs tinged with gospel chordal seasoning, the 1982 film, *I Heard It Through the Grapevine*, recounts James Baldwin’s

articulation of race in America, coupled with pivotal scenes of civil rights activism during the 1960s. In the beginning of the film, Baldwin asks, "What has happened to this country?" Having left Paris in 1957 and returning to the South to reconnect with the people of the South with his brother, David, the visionary and reforming nature of Baldwin as a person and his literary writings display the relevance of his continuous prophetic voice, even in 2024. From documenting the incessant murders of Black people, police brutality, and marginalization, this film marks the quest for freedom and justice.

March 7 marks the fifty-eighth anniversary of the civil rights march on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. While *I Heard It Through the Grapevine* illustrates extensively the path to securing voting rights for Black people in this country as a prevalent theme, this film also examines the Conference on Literature and the Urban Experience held at Rutgers University, Newark, April 17–19, 1980. James Baldwin delivered a keynote address entitled "The Language of the Streets," at which writers such as Amiri Baraka, Ntozake Shange, and Toni Morrison were present. The way in which Baldwin has connected the language of Black people with the culture and the cities in which they reside remains of utmost significance. Questions that resonate regarding this film, the music, and the person behind the prophetic philosophy of equality and justice for all are: What are the ways in which Baldwin tied the streets and his literature to the lives of the characters he created in his novels? How does Baldwin articulate the civil rights movement and the activism he experienced personally in his last novel, *Just Above My Head* (1979)? How can we juxtapose what Baldwin wrote in the late 1970s to 2024? These questions and more continue to arise from Baldwin's film.

In *I Heard It Through the Grapevine*, Baldwin asks, "What has happened to this country?" We, as scholars, theologians, and artists, must ask this question. Let us not forget, the morning that we gather here to commemorate James Baldwin and his 1982 film *I Heard it Through the Grapevine* is the same day three years ago, January 6, 2021, when an angry mob of 45's supporters stormed the United States Capitol, breaking through barriers, barricading themselves in the hallways and offices of the country's most elite democratic representatives, even turning on their own party members, calling for the capture of then Vice President Mike Pence. What has happened to this country? Cacophonous chants calling for the capture of Pence, Pelosi, fire extinguishers being thrown at the heads of police officers who are called to serve and protect marked the uneasy and violent sounds of insurrection. According to Vice President Kamala Harris, these protesters "were assaulting the institution, values, and ideals that generations of Americans established and shed blood to defend." This was a modern-day preparation for a lynching by antisemitic and white supremacists of anyone who stood in the way of 45's *imagined* election win.

The song "I Heard It Through the Grapevine" was written by Barrett Strong and Norman Whitfield in 1966 and first recorded by Gladys Knight and the Pips

in 1967. This composition was further recorded by the Miracles and then Marvin Gaye. The artist singing realizes their significant other has found someone else to love and the narrator hears this through the grapevine. This phrase is used to refer to the circulation of both official and unofficial information. If something was heard on the grapevine, it was heard or learned by word of mouth. This term also dates to the Civil War when individuals had “grapevine telegraphs” that were used for communicating or disseminating information.

In *My Brother Slaves: Friendship, Masculinity, and Resistance in the Antebellum South*, Sergio Lussana’s chapter entitled “Enslaved Men, the Grapevine Telegraph, and the Underground Railroad” details how “slaveholders tightly regulated enslaved people’s access to the outside world” but failed because of enslaved men’s “grapevine telegraph” operation, which was “a network spreading news and correspondence between enslaved communities maintained by mobile bondpeople.”¹ Lussana fleshes out the ways in which enslaved men exchanged information with each other through the grapevine telegraph. According to Lussana, the “grapevine telegraph” was used to form an “inter-plantation network with other men and hold conspiratorial meetings.”²

If we continue to think about this term in the way Baldwin would have wanted us to intellectually process the “grapevine,” we could think about the ways in which his prophecies, his assertions, and beliefs about this country traveled through the grapevine. Baldwin was the philosophical and theological mouthpiece for his generation, my generation, and future generations to come. God’s Black revolutionary mouth was and is the source of information on which this country depended and still depends. The theme of *I Heard It Through the Grapevine* encompasses Black writers, artists, scholars, and thinkers who prophetically caution their communities to be on guard and be vigilant. This film calls for us to hear closely both the harmonious and dissonant sounds of the freedom struggle. Baldwin invites us to hear the blues, to hear the gospel, to hear the soul, to hear the palpitations in our hearts of freedom’s call. This film invites us to hear the cacophony, and sometimes mellifluousness, of the streets ... the music in the streets ... the language of the streets, and how this language has fashioned, molds, and *will* shape Black literature for centuries to come.

Notes

- 1 Sergio Lussana, *My Brother Slaves: Friendship, Masculinity, and Resistance* (Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 2016), p. 18.
- 2 *Ibid.*

Work Cited

Lussana, Sergio, *My Brother Slaves: Friendship, Masculinity, and Resistance* (Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 2016).

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