Not a Sociologist: James Baldwin's Evolving Role in the Early 1980s

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According to his biographer David Leeming, James Baldwin was initially "fascinated" by Dick Fontaine's plan to make "a film that would bring the Baldwin essays, novels, plays, and short stories together into a single work." After

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reading the script, Baldwin "reacted with anger" and viewed "the piece [as] a kind of collage that did not do justice to any of his works."[1] He allowed Fontaine and his co-creator Pat Hartley to film him touring the South in preparation for an article commissioned for *The New Yorker* that never materialized about the assassinated leaders of the civil rights movement. According to Leeming, Baldwin shouted at Fontaine, "I am *not* going to let you define me."[2] Defining is the issue I want to address in these brief thoughts. At the beginning of Fontaine's film, Harlem Renaissance poet Sterling Brown pointedly tells Baldwin, "You're not a sociologist." This is a warning, and it echoes through the film as we try to discern what exactly Baldwin's role is in 1980, nearly two decades after his heyday. Baldwin well understands the implications of Brown's admonishment—you're a *writer*, not a sociologist—and seems to silently agree, even as Brown offers substitute terms like "visionary" and "revolutionary".

And yet Baldwin rejected every imaginable identity label, including identity labels that might limit our understanding of what it means to be a writer. Critics have long debated whether Baldwin was primarily a novelist or an essayist, but readers who study him deeply realize that those generic distinctions are not helpful: he wrote plays, short stories, film criticism, a film script, a children's book, poetry, journalism, open letters, and many forms that cannot be classified, such as his photo-text collaboration with Richard Avedon, *Nothing Personal* (1964). To call him a writer does not eliminate any of these genres, but it also fails to appreciate his range, and is just slightly better than calling him *not a sociologist*. Plus, sociologists can also be writers.

Deepening the term "writer" and perhaps merging it with Baldwin's other prominent role as "spokesman," the other two words that have endured most in Baldwin criticism over the years are "prophet" and "witness." These terms are certainly fitting, but they are also oddly limiting in terms of understanding the complete arc of Baldwin's complex role. Both "prophet" and "witness" imply figures who see outside themselves as they peer into their society's future and present respectively, but Baldwin just as often took deep and uncomfortable journeys *inside* himself. "Prophet" and "witness" give us two important dimensions of Baldwin's legacy, but not all of it. Certain concerns will always be overlooked when we emphasize any one of Baldwin's roles. Those defining terms do not glimpse his nuanced understanding of sexuality, for instance, nor his humor, nor his distinctive rendering of beauty in language.

Baldwin not only defies definition, but he makes it seem futile. He's too rich and complex a figure to summarize in a word or two. When writers or filmmakers attempt to paint his portrait, they are making rhetorical choices that emphasize selection more than synthesis. In *I Heard It Through the Grapevine* (1982), Fontaine clearly foregrounds Baldwin's role as a witness. Bearing this in mind as we watch the film, it becomes clear that Baldwin is not really the subject of the film, but rather the thread that sews it together. In fact, fewer than half the camera shots in the film train their gaze on him. Other documentaries about Baldwin tend to focus squarely on his face, his words, his distinctive and riveting style

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of speaking. Until the very end of *Grapevine*, we much more often see Baldwin in profile, or hear from him off camera, or watch him silently observing a scene in which he is not the subject, such as a group of students listening attentively to their schoolteacher. Put succinctly, although this film emphasizes that Baldwin is a writer vis-à-vis Sterling Brown's early pronouncement, it is much more interested in what Amiri Baraka described as Baldwin's "big world-absorbing eyes"[3] than in the way he put words together.

This is not intended as a criticism of the film but rather an understanding of its effect, especially when viewed in the context of other films that feature Baldwin as the true subject, including Karen Thorsen's *The Price of the Ticket* (1989), the recently remastered trio of short films titled *James Baldwin Abroad* (2023), or Raoul Peck's *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016), to name a few. Until the end of Fontaine's film, we rarely see Baldwin's familiar firebrand persona, but rather we witness the witness in action as he revisits the South in preparation for the abandoned *New Yorker* project. Though he didn't know it at the time, Baldwin was actually preparing for his final major book, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1985), about the Atlanta child murders of the early 1980s.

I Heard It Through the Grapevine serves as a reminder that the battles of the 1960s were far from over in 1980, especially if one travels through the American South. Cutting back and forth between dramatic footage from the struggle in the 1960s and the present, the distance between the two eras is sometimes difficult to discern. Baldwin is positioned as a survivor of the struggle who is compelled to continue to fight and to pass along the will to fight to a new generation. Fontaine's piece is disorienting, perhaps deliberately so, as it moves through time and space according to its own logic. The scenes with Chinua Achebe and the memorable scene of Baldwin forcefully shouting down a heckler who hacks into the sound system and interrupts a speech he gave at the African Literature Conference, for instance, happened at the beginning of his trip to the South, but they show up at the end of the film. Fontaine disrupts chronological and geographical order, and the viewer might feel lost just as Baldwin sometimes looks lost, or is literally lost from the camera's view.

Ironically, despite Brown's pronouncement, Baldwin's role as a writer is diminished. We never see him at a typewriter, just once with a pen in his hand, writing out the film's title, and when he is introduced at a literary conference following the publication of his recent novel *Just Above My Head* (1979), his words are oddly drowned out by a jazz rendition of the title song. The same is true when he addresses a group of schoolchildren: he doesn't get through his first sentence before the camera cuts away to the next shot.

Despite this observation, the film may be more useful than Baldwin scholars have given it credit for as deep context for understanding one of his more challenging texts and his final book, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*. In terms of the way we describe the process of writing to college students, Fontaine's film shows Baldwin in the pre-writing phase, gathering information, silently observing, taking mental notes. Baldwin was always keen to use his experience rather than to

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leave it on the cutting room floor, and the aborted *New Yorker* piece may have seemed lost to history before it was revived as the script for Peck's *I Am Not Your Negro*, but *Grapevine* can also be seen as a framework for the project he took on beginning in 1981.[4] Baldwin's understanding of the South had been largely formed early in his career, explored in essays like "Journey to Atlanta" (1948), "A Fly in Buttermilk" (1958), and "Nobody Knows My Name" (1960). Trudier Harris argues that "Baldwin is fixated upon including the South in his writings" as a site of "mental terror," "bodily harm," "lynching and castration."[5] The South does indeed harbor a kind of terror for Baldwin in his early essays, and we see repeated incidents of racial violence and murder that take place in the South in his fictional works such as "Sonny's Blues" (1957), *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964), "Going to Meet the Man" (1965), *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968), and as Harris convincingly argues, *Just Above My Head*.

What we see forming in *I Heard It Through the Grapevine* is a refreshed, mature perspective that prepares Baldwin to return to the South for his final work of non-fiction. One way to reposition the film, then, might be to place it in conversation with *Evidence*, seeing it as context for what was to come rather than a coda to what happened two decades earlier. The "new South," according to Baldwin, is a dangerous myth, but the perspective he offers in *Evidence* does not isolate the South, instead putting it in conversation with the nation and the globe. The Baldwin we observe in *I Heard It Through the Grapevine* has traveled the world, and his conclusions in *Evidence* are what we see forming in Fontaine's film. He does not appear scared, but rather like "an interloper, a stranger" as he describes his later visit to Atlanta in preparing for his final book.[6] These are feelings rather than the observations of a witness or a sociologist, and they are worth noting as we attempt to view the film not in isolation, but as another piece of the Baldwin puzzle to be assembled and reassembled.

Notes

1 David Leeming, *James Baldwin* (New York, Knopf, 1994), p. 352.
2 *Ibid*., p. 353.
3 Amiri Baraka, "James Baldwin: His Voice Remembered," *The New York Times* (December 20, 1987), p. 27.
4 A short version of *Evidence* was published in *Playboy* with the same title in 1981, four years before the book came out.
5 Trudier Harris, *The Scary Mason–Dixon Line: African American Writers and the South* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2009), p. 20.
6 James Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (New York, Henry Holt, 1985), p. 55.

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