

Youth, Violence, and Queer Futurity in *I Heard It Through the Grapevine*

Jared O'Connor University of Illinois at Chicago

The documentary *I Heard It Through the Grapevine* follows writer and activist James Baldwin as he revisits significant sites and locations that defined the Black liberation movement of the 1960s.¹ Filmed in the early 1980s, the documentary is partly a retrospective. Baldwin seeks out and reconnects with prominent leaders who helped define the movement, social activists who led their communities to pursue justice against the social and political institutions that perpetuated extreme violence against Black people throughout the American South. But the documentary is also concerned with the very problem of its form: while Baldwin looks back at the historical importance of the movement and the key sites of action where justice was sought, as viewers we find ourselves often looking at Baldwin's expressions of discomfort, unease, and melancholy. This retrospective isn't a victory lap about the progress made by and for Black people in the US South. Instead, we watch and listen to the people integral to the movement and their families express endless dissatisfaction and abject sadness about the fiction of progress the revolution promised. What the documentary showcases is instead a story about the past's unresolved and violent persistence in defining and shaping the present. As Baldwin laments toward the end of the film, "twenty years later it's the same ol' piano playing the blues."²

The problems of the past and their violent persistence in the present is not a new idea. Indeed, this could frame the ways we understand and historicize most narratives of revolutions of the oppressed. But what makes *I Heard It Through the Grapevine* both a timely reentry into the canon of social activist documentaries and an important historical document of the Black liberation movement is its

insistence on trying to find a version of futurity when progress has all but become a fiction perpetrated by the oppressor. There are numerous ways in which what we might call the specter of the past haunting the film's present—and our present—is represented: in Baldwin's journey through the South and its storied landscapes of stolen land that remain inaccessible to their rightful owners; through the structures and settings that are renamed to erase their past while remaining symbolically charged; through the remnants of destruction that refuse to forget the unrest and violence in pursuit of justice. But the specter of the past speaks perhaps most poignantly and inescapably in the lives of those in the present, namely the children of the revolution.

I want to draw on Lee Edelman's polemic *No Future* and on José Esteban Muñoz to explore the representation of children throughout *I Heard It Through the Grapevine*. While the film sidesteps conversations about sexuality—notably Baldwin's own—queer theory can help articulate those identities of the impossible, the subjects that are always-already outside visions of the normative future.³ Questions about the future beyond the haunted present elide and confound the figures of the movement and their children. It is the children of the revolution who feel the results of the violent processes of social, cultural, and political assimilation despite their lack of agency. The children in the documentary are the subjects conscripted by the false promise of progress that haunts Baldwin, his compatriots, and the American present.

Comparing the realities of 1960s America to the film's present moment, the documentary begins by critiquing the pursuit of integration, as educator Hoyt Fuller articulates, a “collaboration against ourselves.”⁴ Back in the film's present, we cut between scenes of protest and audio of former First Lady Rosalynn Carter's 1980s commencement address at Morehouse College—an all-Black college—where while speaking to a room of young Black adults, she corroborates the fictive narrative of progress akin to that of integration, citing the increase of Black people holding political, entrepreneurial, “respectable” positions in society. Carter's speech quickly becomes didactic and almost threatening, telling her audience, “it would be a tragedy if you—all of us—did not continue this progress.” While Carter speaks, a protest presses on outside the building, leading to the arrest of several Black protesters, one of whom, amplified, yells: “Jimmy Carter don't give a damn about that silken pie.”⁵

Edelman argues that politics is the ultimate fantasy of progress, leading not to futurity but to the perpetuation of a social order always-already established and antithetical to opposition. To be political, or to assimilate into a politically legible subjecthood, is merely a “social enactment of the subject's attempt to establish the conditions for th[e] impossible consolidation by identifying with something *outside* itself in order to enter the presence, deferred perpetually, *of itself*.”⁶ By beginning with the shattering of integration's illusion of progress—especially by way of a commencement address to young adults—the film posits politics as entirely fictive. For politics is, if nothing else, a means to an end. Baldwin argues this in a public speaking engagement later on, where he names this end as “the doctrine of

white supremacy in which the Western world is based.”⁷ The film is telling us: it’s impossible to live in it while trying to tear it down.

The pursuit by those representing the fictive project of progress to assimilate young Black people is the subtle keystone of the film. Starting with college graduates isn’t an accident; the film compels us to see the capaciousness of the oppressor’s powers. Naturally, we find the most vulnerable are at risk. It isn’t just the activists in the streets. Rather, it is those without any power in a system that is designed to fail them. For Edelman, in this paradigm the symbolic function of the child or those most without agency is as the “the emblem of futurity’s unquestioned value,” forcing us to ignore any attempt to “propose against it the impossible project of queer oppositionality.”⁸ The children in the film, like the graduates of Morehouse, are subjects forced to follow the social scripts designed by their oppressors.

During a trip in the film to Philadelphia, Mississippi, we are reminded of the murder of three civil rights activists, Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Earl Chaney, in 1964, whose bodies weren’t discovered for forty-four days. Three years later, seven men were convicted of the crimes. Importantly, we are shown footage of Chaney’s younger brother, 12-year-old Ben, sobbing into his mother’s shoulder as they sing hymns in bereavement. We then see young Ben interviewed by a reporter about how he feels. Ben stoically claims, “I feel like everybody else. But I’m ready to take my brother’s place.”⁹ Ben would go on to join radical Black organizations and would later be arrested for murder in 1970. What makes Ben’s representation in the film so compelling is at once his resistance to assimilation; he instead promises a kind of vengeance, to continue his brother’s legacy as a civil rights activist, and in many ways creates a vision of futurity for a brother who no longer can.

Ben’s resilience in the face of tragedy is quite astounding, using the past to fight for something better not in the present but for the future. Muñoz claims that those without access to the dominant positions of power must imagine themselves as subjects existing within “temporal arrangements,” wherein “the past is a field of possibility in which subjects can act in the present in the service of a new futurity.”¹⁰ Ben would serve thirteen years in prison for a crime he did not commit. Following his release, he returned to advocacy, founding the James Earl Chaney Foundation, a civil rights advocacy organization.

Midway through the film, we meet activist Oretha Castle in New Orleans, who shows Baldwin and viewers a newspaper article with the headline “Youth Crimes Breeds Web of Murders” accompanied by a crude drawing of a Black youth with skulls in his eyes, pointing a gun at the readers. Amid her chastising of the newspaper for its perpetuation of a racist vision of Black youth—inherently violent with their finger on the trigger—Castle is interrupted by two of her young children. Poking their heads through the door, they sheepishly ask their mother, “How soon is the dinner going to be ready?” Castle, telling them to wait until they are finished, returns to the newspaper, exclaiming, “This says ‘this is what black youth is.’”¹¹ The moment, capturing the everyday domestic world of Black families and their children, couldn’t contradict the newspaper depiction

any more severely. As the kids show us, Black youth are home, coy, and ready for their future dinner.

Notes

- 1 Dick Fontaine and Pat Hartley (dirs.), *I Heard It Through the Grapevine* (Living Archives, 1982).
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 Important to note is Baldwin's own queer sexuality, which he did not necessarily deny, though he refused to associate with labels such as "gay" or "homosexual." In a famous and candid 1984 interview with then-editor-in-chief of *Village Voice* Richard Goldstein, Baldwin responds to Goldstein's question, "You never thought of yourself as being gay" with "No. I didn't have a word for it. The only one I had was *homosexual* and that didn't quite cover whatever it was I was beginning to feel. Even when I began to realize things about myself, began to suspect who I was and what I was likely to become, it was still very personal, absolutely personal." Later in the same interview, Goldstein asks Baldwin his thoughts on the future, asking "What do you think gay people will be like then?," at which Baldwin again asserts his impatience with labels: "No one will have to call themselves gay. Maybe that's at the bottom of my impatience with the term. It answers a false argument, a false accusation." James Baldwin, "James Baldwin on Being Gay in America," interview by Richard Goldstein, *The Village Voice* (June 26, 1984), pp 59, 73, <https://www.villagevoice.com/james-baldwin-on-being-gay-in-america>.
- 4 *I Heard It Through the Grapevine*.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2004), p. 8.
- 7 *I Heard It Through the Grapevine*.
- 8 Edelman, *No Future*, p. 4.
- 9 *I Heard It Through the Grapevine*.
- 10 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York, New York University Press, 2009), p. 15.
- 11 *I Heard It Through the Grapevine*.

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Contributor's Biography

Jared O'Connor is an advanced PhD candidate in English at the University of Illinois at Chicago. O'Connor focuses his teaching and research on twentieth- and

twenty-first-century American literature, poetics, queer and feminist theory, the American Cold War, and affect theory. His dissertation, "Forming Queerness: Gender, Sexuality, and the Literature of Post-Stonewall America," focuses on the rapid and drastic changes to literary output in America following the Stonewall Riots of 1969 and argues that this new investment in the articulation of queer narratives produced formally innovative texts that offer complex interrelations between contemporary and historical queer subjectivities.