

Their Whole World in Our Hands: Baldwin's Responsibility to Children

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The image of the child in the James Baldwin imaginary is a bifurcated one: on the one hand, there is the tabula rasa, the child who sees and knows nothing of the world. While “innocence” is a loaded term for Baldwin, usually applied ironically to adults who deny their culpability for the nation’s political crimes, the tabula rasa version of childhood is one of authentic innocence, and much of the responsibility of being an adult involves shielding the innocence of that child. On the other hand, the second version of childhood is a variation of the

bildungsroman hero, the child who is being inaugurated into the adult world. And in the context of the civil rights movement, that inauguration was necessarily violent. Adolescents and young adults whom Baldwin still perceived as children were on the front lines of the movement, and much of the narrative of *I Heard It Through the Grapevine* (1982) constitutes an expedition to determine what happened to those symbolic children who survived—physically if not spiritually.

This notion of interior violence brings to mind Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973), which opens with a young man who goes into World War I totally unprepared for what he is about to face; and his name is Shadrack, an allusion to the book of Daniel and the brothers Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who bravely entered and survived the fiery furnace rather than cower before the King. Morrison's Shadrack is ironically named because the scars of war are invisible, and yet they control the rest of his "[b]lasted and permanently astonished" life.¹ The Baldwin documentary is a survey of these kinds of internal scars, the toll taken on the young people who survived the conflicts of the civil rights movement just narrowly.

Baldwin's essays frequently invoke the image of the child. *The Fire Next Time* (1963) has an epistolary structure, opening with a letter to his nephew who is also his namesake.² In effect, the essay reads as a conversation with his younger self. Another powerful image of Baldwin reflecting on his own childhood occurs in "Notes of a Native Son" (1955), which opens with the framing device of birth and death: "On the 29th of July, in 1943, my father died. On the same day, a few hours later, his last child was born."³ The father, child, and community form a trinity in the essay, three sites that had been or would be ravaged by internalized oppression as Baldwin's father had been. That essay ends with the writer haunted by the question of how to manage the parasitic rage that had overtaken his father and seemingly everyone around him.

The *Grapevine* documentary serves as the postscript to the warnings that Baldwin had issued in his writings throughout his life. It opens with Baldwin leafing through an unidentified coffee table book filled with images of civil rights conflict, the youth in the faces standing out as Baldwin's voiceover reflects on the images as a time capsule: "It was 1957 when I left Paris for Little Rock. 1957. This is 1980 and how many years is that? Nearly a quarter of a century. And what has happened to all those people—children—I knew then?"⁴ The voiceover serves as a framing device not only for the film but also for Baldwin's activist life. He describes in *No Name in the Street* (1972) that his departure from Paris was one partly of shame at the seemingly dilettante life he was living while a young girl absorbed the blows of racial hatred unchaperoned by her elders: "Some one of us should have been there with her!"⁵ Upon his return to the USA, he began the first iteration of his travelog through the frontlines of the struggle, the *Grapevine* documentary representing the return trip and denouement. The film crosscuts footage of the movement years earlier with the then-present day, under the mostly unacknowledged encroaching shadow of Ronald Reagan and the attendant conservatism that was already evident in the politics and culture of the new decade. Images of children, past and

present, scattered throughout the film constitute the same motifs of precarity and potential on display in the “Notes” essay.

One of the earliest instances of “children” (very broadly defined) in the film occurs with the juxtaposition of what appears to be a procession of Morehouse College graduates as a protesting speaker shouts through a megaphone that whether one graduates “from Morehouse or no house, you’re just another nigger.” Juxtaposed with this, Baldwin and Hoyt Fuller lament that children are in their view hampered by a lack of historical knowledge. To underscore the point, Fuller offers a memory of a student at Cornell who mistook the X in Malcolm X’s name for a Roman numeral.

Children of various ages appear in the background of several scenes in the film, such as when Baldwin is in Birmingham, Alabama, meeting in the film’s present with Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth. There is footage of Baldwin sitting in a sparsely populated park where a man is pushing a child in a swing and another child is nearby playing basketball. (More should be written about the role of such footage in Baldwin’s legacy. I would argue that the visual rhetoric of Baldwin as a spectator in film footage shot throughout his career is integral to how we remember him, not unlike the role of portrait photography in the public persona of Frederick Douglass.) Later, when Baldwin is in Newark, neighborhood children gather around him excitedly, though it is unclear if they recognize the man or only the cameras filming him. And when the film crew captures images of Jerome Smith, he is greeting young neighborhood children while the asynchronous audio of his interview emphasizes his optimism about the resilience of the movement. Smith is adamant that the movement has never died despite the overall pessimism of the documentary.

And while the film as a whole expresses anxiety about the ignorance or complacency of its present moment, its warmth comes from these scenes in contrast to the bleakness of the past. A would-be exception is the segment on Dave Dennis, which is marked by conspicuous omissions. The film includes historical footage of Dennis eulogizing slain civil rights worker James Chaney while his very young brother Ben’s face on the front pew is awash with tears. The modern interview with Dennis is somber as he recalls that as a recruiter for the movement, he felt partly responsible for James’s death; but it barely acknowledges how profoundly Ben’s life was affected by his brother’s murder. Ben joined the Black Panther Party and in 1970 was implicated in multiple murders committed by friends with whom he crossed state lines to buy guns. He served thirteen years in prison and was released on parole well after the documentary. In allowing his story to go untold, the film curiously leaves underexplored the starkest example of the collateral damage that it attempts to narrate. It summons the image of Ben’s crying face multiple times while falling silent on the full scope of his troubled biography.

The scene in which Baldwin visits Oretha Castle Haley is arguably the tenderest image of Black children in the film. Haley hosts a meeting of community leaders which Baldwin audits, and one of the subjects of the meeting is the threat of the mass incarceration of Black youth, a fear that would prove frighteningly well founded as

incarceration rates soared in response to all of the familiar ways that crime and punishment were politicized and weaponized in the 1980s and beyond. At one point, Haley holds up a newspaper with a sketch of a child, Black by all appearances, aiming a gun at the reader as a headline warns, “Youth Crime Breeds Web of Murders.” The pupils of the fictional child’s eyes are replaced with skulls. On the heels of this ominous spectacle, Haley’s own young children interrupt the discussion to ask when dinner will be ready. They grin mischievously at her as if they know that the question will try their mother’s patience, which it does to humorous effect.

The affection for this version of Black children is integral to Baldwin’s politics. Speaking to a group of elementary school children during the Jerome Smith visit, Baldwin begins, “You, young as you are, contain the hope of the future.” In “‘Why Talk About the Children?’: James Baldwin, Octavia Butler, and the Future of Care,” Habiba Ibrahim links images of children in Baldwin’s writing to the concept of futurity, but she focuses almost exclusively on the fiction, noting that Tish and Fonny’s unborn child in *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974) epitomizes the “impetus for moving past present-day moments of crisis that arise in Black life, for the sake of a better future.”⁶ Ibrahim also briefly notes that Baldwin conceived of himself as a paternal figure for Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and Medgar Evers, although I would add that they were all born within a few years of each other. In his nonfiction, Baldwin repeatedly blurs the line between sibling and father by drawing on memories of himself as his mother’s oldest child, helping to raise the younger kids until he emancipated himself from both his household and his father’s fundamentalist church. Especially in light of recent scholarly and popular attention to Bayard Rustin, an avenue for Baldwin scholars to explore further is the compulsory masculinity of the civil rights movement and the prescient if also marginalized role that Rustin and Baldwin attempted to play in critiquing the gender politics of Black political struggle. In a manner that sadly was replicated a generation later in the Gay Pride movement, Black activism tended to adopt the misogyny and homophobia of the culture that it sought to assimilate into. The limits of that conflicted vision of progress remain underexplored, but this lesson is one of the most important pillars of Baldwin’s legacy. The *Grapevine* documentary is thus a portrait of a queer man who even in the late stages of his radical career appears handcuffed to the regressive image of the symbolic patriarch, an image which helped him negotiate the politics of a civil rights movement that was forever lying in wait for him to commit some infraction to warrant his full exile.

Notes

- 1 Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York, Vintage, 1973), p. 7.
- 2 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1963), in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), p. 291.
- 3 Baldwin, “Notes of a Native Son” (1955) in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 63.
- 4 *I Heard It Through the Grapevine*, directed by Dick Fontaine and Pat Hartley (Grapevine Pictures, 1982), Vimeo via Harvard Film Archive.

- 5 Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (1972), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 383. In the *I Heard It Through the Grapevine* roundtable at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference in 2023, Robert Reid-Pharr noted the discrepancy between the year Baldwin recalls reading about Counts (1956) and the year that the direct action occurred (1957).
- 6 Habiba Ibrahim, “Why Talk About the Children?: James Baldwin, Octavia Butler, and the Future of Care,” *American Literary History*, 35:1 (2023), p. 174.

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- *No Name in the Street* (1972), in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), pp. 349–476.
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