

On the Road with Baldwin

Hayley O'Malley Rice University

Late in Dick Fontaine and Hartley's documentary film *I Heard It Through the Grapevine* (1982), James Baldwin visits St. Augustine, Florida. There, he meets Chinua Achebe for the first time and gives an address at an African literature conference. During the conference, Baldwin is dramatically—and traumatically—interrupted by threats projected anonymously over a loudspeaker. Stating that he understands that an assassination attempt could occur within “the next two minutes,” Baldwin nevertheless stands his ground, declaring, “the doctrine of white supremacy on which the Western world is based has had its hour—has had its day. It's over!” The encounter, which was one of the first scenes filmed for the documentary, made Pat Hartley think that making the movie might not be “quite as easy as we thought it would be.”¹

But the power of *Grapevine* stems not only from scenes of high drama, but also from more contemplative moments—what Kevin Quashie might call “quiet”—that gesture toward inner life.² One such moment comes when Baldwin, riding in a station wagon and framed in medium close-up, peers over the back seat and out the rear window (Figure 1). His brow furrowed, his body twisted, and one hand gripping the car's tan upholstery, Baldwin looks back. It is a gesture that, in many ways, defines the film. For 95 minutes, Baldwin revisits key sites from the civil rights movement, reconnects with his activist friends, and grapples with memories produced by the journey. He is always looking over his shoulder, drawn—sometimes violently—into the past.

Baldwin does not look back, however, just to languish in the past. He wants to mobilize that history for the future. “The film was made for the children,” Hartley recently explained when *Grapevine* was re-released: “It was made to be a film that gets seen over and over again.”³ To that end, Baldwin apparently never wanted the film to be about him. “He was very insistent about that,” Hartley emphasized, “the film is about the people and the children he's talking to.”⁴ Looking forward as well as back, working collaboratively while also turning inward, Baldwin saw an opportunity with *Grapevine* to build a historical archive. Indeed, what ultimately appears on screen is only part of Baldwin's historical recovery project. To fully



Figure 1 Screenshot from *I Heard It Through the Grapevine* (dir. Dick Fontaine and Pat Hartley, 1982)

appreciate Baldwin's ambitions for the film, it is thus necessary to consider not only the film itself, but also the much larger archive that was generated during the filmmaking process, including audio files, interview transcripts, production ephemera, and, more recently, the memories of those who were closely involved, as with Hartley's interviews on the occasion of the film's restoration.

Filming for *Grapevine* officially began in the spring of 1980 with a six-week road trip. "I've been sort of wandering through the deep South," Baldwin told reporters when he reached Newark, New Jersey.⁵ A small entourage accompanied him: Baldwin's then boyfriend; the husband-and-wife team of Fontaine, a white man, and Hartley, a Black woman, as well as their young, biracial son; and a few crew members. Together, they constituted a film family that flouted racist and heteronormative social conventions. Traversing the Southern states, Baldwin interviewed a series of artistic and activist luminaries, including Tom Dent, Jerome Smith, John Lewis, and Hoyt Fuller. Many of those conversations were recorded, but only a small fraction of that footage actually made it into the finished film.⁶ The film itself is therefore just one manifestation of a much larger oral history project, which includes many more hours of recorded conversations, currently being processed by the Harvard Film Archive. Those additional audio recordings help to underscore what an enormous, and often emotionally wrenching, project this was for Baldwin. According to Hartley, "The pain of listening to people's stories was awful. He absorbed it ... he made himself available to hold our story. That's a lot for a human being to hold on to."⁷

As much as Baldwin took on himself, the film was necessarily a collaborative endeavor. With an ensemble cast and a peripatetic shooting schedule, *Grapevine* is especially polyvocal, especially so because of the distinct agendas of its three main authors: Baldwin, Fontaine, and Hartley. “Baldwin’s agenda was historical,” Hartley recently contended. “Where are we now and what happened?”⁸ Those were not rhetorical questions. “He went South as a reporter,” Hartley explained. “We didn’t know what we were going to find.”⁹ Given Baldwin’s historical aim, Hartley amassed a tremendous amount of archival footage from the 1960s and 1970s, transforming memories voiced by Baldwin and his interlocutors in the film into historical photographs and moving images. Hartley’s activist ambition for the film aligned with that archival and curatorial work, too: “I’m going to show you the picture and I’m going to blame you for it. This is the photo, this is the person that did it, right here, so let’s do something about it.”¹⁰ Finally, there was Fontaine’s interest in what Hartley described as the “lyricism of history,” perhaps most evident in Baldwin’s meditative “wandering” through Southern landscapes, be it a Martin Luther King, Jr. memorial or a New Orleans city park.¹¹ The result is an elegiac rendering of America at the edge of the 1980s. Together, those three sometimes competing authorial visions give the film its distinctive aesthetic and ideological texture.

Those multiple visions also produced an editorial challenge. Especially given the length of Baldwin’s road trip, the filmmakers had to sift through a massive amount of footage, far more than could possibly fit into the tight 90-minute format demanded by one of the film’s financial backers, a British television station. After completing the film, Fontaine was proud of the result. But he also told David Leeming, one of Baldwin’s biographers, that *Grapevine* was “too compressed.” “We had a enough material to make a four-hour movie, and a good one,” Fontaine declared.¹² Fontaine told Leeming that Baldwin’s conversation with Medgar Evers’s brother Charles, for example, could have been its own film.

The same applies to Baldwin’s trip to Newark, which only comprises about nine minutes of *Grapevine*. Baldwin visited Newark to participate in the 1980 Conference on Literature and the Urban Experience, held at Rutgers University. It was also an occasion for Baldwin to reconnect with Amiri Baraka. The Newark segment in *Grapevine* includes excerpts from Baldwin’s conference speech at Rutgers, brief exchanges with reporters at the conference, and a tour of Newark led by Baraka, during which Baldwin meets residents of low-income housing “projects” as well as local youths who greet him as a celebrity. If Baldwin is often cast as a witness throughout the film, here he is joined by his brother David, who watches his famous sibling from the edge of the conference lecture hall and the back seat of Baraka’s sedan as Baraka drives them and the film crew through Newark. A jazz horn threads throughout the sequence, adding a quiet melancholy to this post-civil rights city symphony.

The Newark segment in *Grapevine*, like much of the rest of the film, is pointedly political. As Baraka drives Baldwin around the city, he calls attention to the architectural remnants of the 1967 rebellion in Newark—burn marks on buildings,

bullet holes, shattered windows—and the film supplements that narrative by cutting to archival footage. During the car ride, someone contends that war zones look better, and Baldwin adds that Newark’s housing projects are equivalent to a “reservation.” Yet those nine minutes in Newark are, of course, only a sliver of Baldwin’s time there—only a partial glimpse of the city. Archived transcripts and audio recordings of Baldwin’s conversation with Baraka provide a fuller, if hardly complete, picture.¹³

A 21-minute audio recording documents Baraka’s trenchant critique of Newark’s city planning and Baldwin’s eager corroboration of Baraka’s views. Although the two men clashed in the 1960s—Baldwin gets in a quick dig by introducing Baraka in the film as a “scared” poet during those days—their car ride shows how, in 1980, these two aging writers can together voice their shared frustration at the insidious racism of government policies, with an eye toward more livable cities for the future. In the audio recording, Baraka points out where his daughter goes to school and fondly remembers when Newark boasted two movie theaters. But his is not a nostalgic story; it is an infrastructural critique. He speaks of “abandoned hospitals, abandoned schools,” and he reveals that where there is new construction, it is connected to carceral and capitalist agendas—a new jail, for instance, and new apartment buildings that “don’t give you two inches.”¹⁴ Baraka’s most intense critique, though, is of the government’s creation of a food desert in Newark. “They won’t even build a damn McDonald’s,” he quips. He then points out “the only supermarket within miles,” but quickly warns Baldwin that “you wouldn’t want to eat the food that come out of there. You would not want to eat that. Them old vegetables. Second hand vegetables.”¹⁵

Ever the activist, Baraka recognizes an opportunity in the *Grapevine* production to publicize and critique government policies that harm Newark’s predominantly Black population. Importantly, throughout the car tour of Newark, Baraka is at the wheel. He is therefore literally directing the camera’s gaze by determining where in Newark it travels, and he implicitly prompts the editor’s hand through his conversational references to specific historical events. As I detailed in an earlier article, Baldwin did not just want to be a documentary subject: he also wanted to write and direct movies himself.¹⁶ And in the late 1960s, Baraka felt similarly. In 1968, Baraka made a 20-minute essay film entitled *The New-Ark*. Featuring scenes of anti-war street theater and children reciting “the Black alphabet” at Baraka’s Spirit House, Baraka’s directorial debut is perhaps best described as a propaganda film for Black Arts. And although Baraka ultimately gravitated toward the artistic mediums depicted in the film—poetry, theatre, radio—his directorial instincts manifested again when he took the wheel to shape the Newark segment of *Grapevine*.

If *Grapevine* was a collaborative, polyvocal project to build a historical archive, it seems only fitting on the occasion of the film’s re-release to also consider how it is curated for viewing today. Given Baldwin’s ambition to make a movie that was not about himself but about the people he met on the road, *Grapevine* deserves to be programmed not only alongside other films featuring Baldwin, but also in

other curatorial configurations that highlight the film's ensemble cast or complement its emphasis on local organizing and city planning. That might include, among many other possibilities, Baraka's *The New-Ark*; St. Claire Bourne's documentary about Baraka, *In Motion: Amiri Baraka* (1983); Haile Gerima's documentary about activism and the failures of the criminal justice system, *Wilmington 10—U.S.A.* (1979); Shirikiana Aina's documentary short about Washington, D.C. housing politics, *Brick by Brick* (1982); the documentary about the 1985 MOVE bombing, *The Bombing of Osage Ave*, directed by Louis Massiah, with a script and narration by Toni Cade Bambara (1986); and Michelle Parkerson's more recent documentary *Fierceness Served! The ENIKAlley Coffeehouse* (2021), about a key site for Black queer artmaking and activism in Washington, D.C. Hopefully the re-release of *Grapevine* is not the end of the journey—for scholars, curators, filmmakers, activists, and popular audiences alike—but merely the beginning.

Notes

- 1 Pat Hartley, interview with Gary Johnson, "Calculations Talk Show," February 7, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ehPcKYdGfck>. As the production continued, the threat of violence remained ever present: Hartley would, for example, recall Baldwin being spat on during one restaurant meal.
- 2 Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 2012).
- 3 "I Heard it Through the Grapevine" movie about James Baldwin's civil rights fight," interview with Pat Hartley, PIX 11, New York, January 26, 2024, <https://pix11.com/video/i-heard-it-through-the-grapevine-movie-about-james-baldwins-civil-rights-fight/9363745/>.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 "Editor's Transcript: Newark", Box 15, Folder 5, Dick Fontaine Collection, Harvard University.
- 6 Even with the cuts, including some of the more politically radical statements and interviewees, Baldwin was shocked that the film was shown on British television, as he was certain, in Fontaine's recollection, that "they would not let the film on the air." Dick Fontaine, interview with David Leeming, undated, David Leeming Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
- 7 Pat Hartley, interview with Gary Johnson.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Interview with Pat Hartley, PIX 11.
- 10 Pat Hartley, interview with Gary Johnson.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Baldwin seems to have also chafed at the compressed format, with Hartley sharing that it was difficult for him to have "his words edited. Remember, we were dealing with a writer." *Ibid.*
- 13 Archived transcripts indicate that sound and image problems marred footage of the Rutgers conference, which perhaps contributed to the filmmakers' choice to include only brief excerpts. "Editor's Transcript: Newark," Box 15, Folder 5, Dick Fontaine Collection, Harvard University.
- 14 "I Heard it Through the Grapevine," original audio recordings, tape 11, side 1, courtesy of Harvard Film Archive.

15 *Ibid.*

16 Hayley O'Malley, "Another Cinema: James Baldwin's Search for a New Film Form," *James Baldwin Review*, 7 (2021), pp. 90–114. An excerpt from this essay was reprinted and translated for the 2023 Forum Expanded at the Berlin International Film Festival (Berlinale). The excerpt was also published with the title "On the Road with James Baldwin": <https://www.arsenal-berlin.de/en/forum-forum-expanded/archive/program-archive/2023/program-forum/forum-special/i-heard-it-through-the-grapevine/essay-on-the-road-with-james-baldwin/>.

Works Cited

- Fontaine, Dick, and Pat Hartley (dirs.), *I Heard It Through the Grapevine* (1982).
- Hartley, Pat, interview with Gary Johnson, "Calculations Talk Show," February 7, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ehPcKYdGfck> (accessed June 14, 2024).
- "'I Heard it Through the Grapevine' movie about James Baldwin's civil rights fight," interview with Pat Hartley, PIX 11, New York, January 26, 2024, <https://pix11.com/video/i-heard-it-through-the-grapevine-movie-about-james-baldwins-civil-rights-fight/9363745/> (accessed June 14, 2024).
- O'Malley, Hayley, "Another Cinema: James Baldwin's Search for a New Film Form," *James Baldwin Review*, 7 (2021), pp. 90–114.
- Quashie, Kevin, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 2012).

Contributor's Biography

Hayley O'Malley is a film and literary historian, and her interdisciplinary research focuses broadly on African American literature, film, and visual culture, with a particular focus on Black feminist art and activism since the 1960s. Her writing has been published in *ASAP/J*, *Black Camera*, *Feminist Media Histories*, *Film Quarterly*, *James Baldwin Review*, and *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary African American Literature*, among other venues. She is currently an assistant professor in the Department of Art History at Rice University.