I Am Not Your Negro’s Queer Poetics of Identity and Omission


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I Am Not Your Negro is a cinematic journey, prompted by its subject’s quest to make sense of his life in the wake of three earth-shattering deaths. As James Baldwin narrates his friendship with and admiration of the civil rights leaders Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr., the film explores Baldwin’s relationship to the current conditions of blackness in the United States which have been informed by the legacies left by all four of those men. Authorized by Baldwin’s unfinished manuscript, the film plays with time and the utterance to supply a complex but necessary study of the relationship between identity and history.

While the film does not announce itself to be particularly invested in Baldwin’s queerness or even in the more expansive albeit academic discursivity of “queer Baldwin,”1 it nevertheless adopts what might be termed a queer cinema poetics to reflect the fluidity of Baldwin’s thoughts and writings. These poetics, rooted in the cinematic vocabulary of the shot and the cut, supply a dynamic, radically unbounded vision of US race relations as they play out on screen. Attending to but not determined by historical events, I Am Not Your Negro cruises the dystopia of American antiblackness in order to reflect upon Baldwin’s insights on race, selfhood,

1 Matt Brim explains that “[t]he queer Baldwin is not simply the liberatory or the visionary or the multiple Baldwin but rather the paradoxical Baldwin.” Matt Brim, James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2017) 2. Similarly, Cora Kaplan and Bill Schwarz critique the reductiveness of the formulation, stating that “[f]or too long one Baldwin has been pitted against another Baldwin, producing a series of polarities that has skewed our understanding: his art against his politics; his fiction against his nonfiction; his early writings against his late writings; American Baldwin against European Baldwin; black Baldwin against queer Baldwin.” Cora Kaplan and Bill Schwarz, “Introduction: America and Beyond,” in James Baldwin: America and Beyond, eds. Kaplan and Schwarz (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2011) 3.
and cinema.\(^2\) Through a resistance to stasis and a commitment to movements both political and temporal, the film structurally embodies principles of radical progressiveness.

Whereas the film foregrounds director Raoul Peck’s processing of Baldwin, resulting in the cinematic text known as *I Am Not Your Negro*, a critique of the film may itself be regarded as yet another layer of processing—this time by the spectator—which in turn produces yet another text, this time comprised of the spectator’s encounter with the film text—itself comprised of a unique encounter between the filmmaker and the subject, James Baldwin. Though claims that a documentary reveals more about the filmmaker than the ostensible subject are not-uncommon assertions, *I Am Not Your Negro* provides an especially compelling object of examination precisely because it foregrounds its constructedness and the labor entailed in the production of meaning. It is a film that allows its seams to show.

As a film project sourced from Baldwin’s literary archives, the film necessarily employs a retrospective gaze but also makes an effort to trouble the presumed certitude of such a gesture. Indeed, it adopts a perspective akin to that presented in Peck’s earlier film, *Lumumba: Death of Prophet* (1990), in which absences and aporias are permitted to resonate and in turn offer the viewer moments in which to reflect and to mourn. These moments of absence mark the places where the past touches the present but is not fully brought into it. These scenes, themselves characterized by expressionist depictions of modern urban movement (literally planes, trains, and automobiles), bridge temporal moments but resist filling them. Instead, they return the viewer to watching time unfold and in so doing invite the viewer to interrogate the certainties of the past, of the present, and even of identity itself.

\(^2\) My reference to cruising dystopia is a reference to José Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009) in which Muñoz, by way of Samuel Delany, identifies the utopian possibilities in forms of queer (male) sociality that overcome and undermine the cordoned-off and closeted individuality of heteronormative societies.
In the introduction to the book accompaniment to *I Am Not Your Negro*, Peck describes the importance of Baldwin’s prose to his own self-knowledge as a Black man in the West. Baldwin was one of a handful of authors who “were telling stories describing history and defining structures and human relationships that matched what I was seeing around me.” This emphasis upon the interconnection of “history” and “structure” made sensible through “stories” invites a post-structuralist interpretation of Peck’s meaning-making project, then and now, in which the power of discourse and language are foregrounded in a relation of non-dominance to either history or the present. Considering how C. L. R. James and Michel Foucault theorize the ordering of historical events for uses in the present illuminates the ways that Peck’s films convey meaning. Specifically, Foucault’s rejection of histories “of tradition and invention” in favor of a “history of ideas” that denotes a “history of perpetual difference” clarifies how an historiographic work, including a film, might emphasize invention rather than fixed knowledge of the past and future. Similarly, James’s figuration of the strategically suppressed accounting of the Haitian Revolution as a recoverable lever in the war against global fascism casts the history and the archive as undetermined but powerful sources of and for the present.

Peck presents *I Am Not Your Negro* as a deeply personal film—not quite a hagiography, but a sort of open letter in which the maker acknowledges his and our indebtedness to an author who is out of reach. While the author’s individual biography is no determinant of meaning, one may consider how the film circulates alongside French and Francophone Caribbean philosophies of language and the self. Indeed, Peck, who is Haitian by birth, describes his childhood self as

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“inhabiting a myth in which I was both enforcer and actor”—a description that resonates with both French theorist Roland Barthes’s notion of the cultural myth—the enabling but also restrictive system through which meanings are circulated—and Martiniquan psychoanalyst Franz Fanon’s crushing self-awareness as the mythological Negro of cosmopolitan French fantasies.

Following another post-structuralist thread laid down by Barthes’s philosophies of language and literature, one perceives *I Am Not Your Negro*—as well as *Lumumba*—to be “writerly texts” that reject as false the notion that a complete(d) film is a closed text. To the contrary, “[t]he writerly text is a perpetual present, upon which no consequent language (which would inevitably make it past) can be superimposed; the writerly text is *ourselves writing*, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages.” The stoppages of ideology et alia are resisted in the film conceptually by responding to Baldwin’s own writerly prose as such, “disseminating it, … dispersing it within the field of infinite difference.”

Denying fixity in favor of dissemination and difference, *I Am Not Your Negro* embraces what Fred Moten describes as the poetics of the break and the atemporal “wherein black radicalism is set to work … as part of a critique immanent to the black radical tradition that constitutes its radicalism as a cutting and abundant refusal of closure.” The film formally establishes its commitment to this tradition through both the cut and scenes of movement. These cinematic poetics work through and on the historical events referenced in Baldwin’s writings (the murders of Evers, X, and King) and in our

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8 Ibid.
more recently-passed moments of antiblack conflagrations (the Ferguson uprising and the murders of Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, and too many others). As in *Lumumba*, the film strives to re-construct sense for our current moment out of the archive’s abundances as well as from its prior, insufficient stories and the non-sense of history’s aporias.

Following the opening sequence—a riot of stillness and motion and words comprised of Baldwin’s calm but pessimistic appearance on *The Dick Cavett Show* in 1968 and a montage of photographs of the Ferguson uprising of 2015 accompanied by Buddy Guy’s rollicking blues number, “Damn Right, I’ve Got the Blues”—the film returns to stark white text on a black background. Modernist, almost futurist animation announces the film as “Written by James Baldwin” and “Directed by Raoul Peck.” With these words, *I Am Not Your Negro* announces itself as a collaboration afforded by a medium that can transgress the boundaries of death itself. The film, through its recruitment of visual, aural, and written records, operates as a spiritualist medium, echoing the wisdom of the past in the scenes of today.

The sequence that follows the titles reinforces the movement and shuttling between the past and present that characterize this project. The narrator’s voice, supplied by actor Samuel L. Jackson, breaks into the silence, announcing, “To Jay Acton.” These words reflect the text of a source letter of Baldwin’s written to his literary agent. Within moments, white letters mimicking typewriter script appear on a black screen, punctuated by the sound of tapping typewriter keys. The voice and the images on screen reinforce the moment of our viewing time and of Peck’s directorial time; yet the words themselves reference the time of Baldwin’s composition: June 30th, 1979, to be exact. A past moment is reenacted in the moment of its passing in this scene.

In the letter and in the larger project of “Remember This House,” Baldwin expresses the uncertainty about identity and direction that the film mirrors in its imagery and sounds.
Baldwin’s letter to Acton references the author’s “divided mind” and the woeful sense that “[t]he summer has scarcely begun, and I feel, already, that it’s almost over.” Baldwin’s letter goes on to announce his impending birthday and the commencement of a journey, one that Baldwin explains “I always knew that I would have to make, but had hoped … not to have to make it so soon.” Despite the felt inevitability of the journey, Baldwin remarks that the character of such a journey is itself, by nature, unknowable: “I am saying that a journey is called that because you cannot know what you will discover on the journey, what you will do with what you find, or what you find will do to you.”

In the context of the film, with the words spoken by Jackson and visualized by Peck, the “I”—as well as the “you”—for whom these logics cohere is multiplied, generating multiple journeys for multiple addressors and addressees.

In this early scene the film plays with the grammatical logic of its title, resisting not only the possessiveness of the words “your Negro,” but also the inevitable belatedness and accuracy of the words “I am not.” Certainly and sadly, James Baldwin is no longer, yet the film and the title articulate, seemingly despite themselves, a desire to return to the moment when the “I” could be located, assuredly, in the body of Baldwin himself. As in Lumumba, following shots of train tracks, cars viewed hazily through a rain-soaked window, and tracking shots of landscapes as though viewed through a car or train window signal the absence of the films’ protagonist – as well as the three activist-friends he mourns. These scenes reinforce the sense of the film’s inexorable movement forward into a future already decided but as yet unknown. The film has begun; there is no going back.

Consequently, a desire for Baldwin is highlighted even as it is shown to be impossible and misplaced. This is the very character of mourning, which is also the character of identity

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itself. But there is no going back to the source of the words heard in voiceover. Baldwin has died even before the film gets underway. His death is a condition of the film’s existence.

Nevertheless, through the technologies and poetics of literature and film, Baldwin’s words linger and are carried along into the future, perhaps to re-view the sites of American antiblackness and white supremacy that persist in the director’s and viewers’ presents.

Considering theories of language, history, and meaning is productive as it helps explain I Am Not Your Negro’s production of an historically contingent (but not determinant) story about Baldwin and antiblackness through literary and cinematic archives. The story’s coordinates—Baldwin’s letter, his notes for “Remember This House,” passages from The Devil Finds Work, as well as an FBI memorandum on Baldwin, print and film advertisements, archival photographs and film, and news footage—enable the film to navigate the echoes of Baldwin’s wisdom in our present without insisting upon a final and foreseen destination. The film treats these coordinates as artifacts of an unfinished past-in-process, what Fred Moten names a “durational field rather than [an] event.”11 The project thereby participates in what Kara Keeling identifies, referencing historian Robin D.G. Kelley’s book Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination, as “freedom dreams”—a liberationist poetics in which her own book, Queer Times, Black Futures, participates even as it “does not pretend to know where the insights it generates might lead.”12 Her endeavor seeks neither to make definitive sense out of non-sense nor to provide a closed reading of the archive, but “to remain aware of” possibilities for a future through a poetic commingling of extant materials that may be “felt and perceived even though—or especially if—

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11 Fred Moten, Black and Blur (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2017), xii. Moten makes this distinction in order to recognize, following Saidiya Hartman, that slavery is not an object of discrete historical investigation, but an ongoing concept that inevitably also defines the terms of freedom as we know them “throughout the history of man.” See Saidiya Hartman, Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

it remains unrecognizable or unintelligible to current common sense.”\(^\text{13}\) Writing in terms that I maintain mirror those of *I Am Not Your Negro*, Keeling adds that “[w]e can think of what escapes these operations [of narrative and/or other formal devices of texts] as the content that exceeds its expression, though which poetry from the future might be perceived, yet not recognized.”\(^\text{14}\)

The poetics of Keeling’s project describe the rich liberationist potentials of *I Am Not Your Negro*’s play with the archive, memory, and identification. It is significant that the film includes within it not only materials for “Remember This House,” but also excerpts of Baldwin’s published writings on film, which appear in Baldwin’s book-length essay *The Devil Finds Work*. This inclusion stages a partnership of sorts between Peck and Baldwin in deconstructing the medium of film in order to identify and mobilize a cinematic vocabulary that can tell stories beyond the self-satisfying and implicitly (and explicitly) racist and homophobic nationalist stories (what Barthes calls “singular systems”) of the Hollywood Golden Age.

Baldwin’s essay is a curious text that shifts tenses unexpectedly and, even more oddly, tells the reader of things the author himself will never know or see. As a retrospective memoir, the essay explores both the limits of knowing and the limits of narration. Unlike the attempts at comprehensiveness explored by many conventional autobiographies, Baldwin’s attempt fails—gloriously—to pierce the surface of the image. Instead, the essay takes seriously the misreadings and misunderstandings that would eventually come to constitute what Baldwin calls “all those

\(^{13}\) Keeling, 83.

\(^{14}\) Ibid.
hang-ups I didn’t yet know I had.”\textsuperscript{15} It is these errors of memory and identification that \textit{I Am Not Your Negro} takes up again to replay in the present.

There are canny slippages of characterization in Baldwin’s writing, such as where he writes that he “knew about Booker T. Washington less than I knew about my father’s mother, who had been born a slave, and who died in our house when I was a little.”\textsuperscript{16} Only the rules of English grammar maintain order in this passage, designating the fraternal grandmother (not Washington) as the formerly enslaved person who died in the Baldwins’ house. Such confusions about origins suffuse Baldwin’s essay, most especially where he writes of the important but somehow insignificant fact that the father to whom he refers in the first chapter is not his biological father—a fact he acknowledges in retrospect but with a commitment to narrating the truth of his childhood as he knew it, a childhood in which he believed his step-father was indeed his biological father. Baldwin, writing about his childhood assessment of Dostoyevsky’s \textit{Crime and Punishment}, puts into language what can be understood as the phenomenological wonderment of learning through one’s encounter with a work of representation: “I did not believe in any of these people so much as I believed in their situation, which I suspected, dreadfully, to have something to do with my own.”\textsuperscript{17} If there is a more succinct description of how the humanities work upon us, I would be eager to read it.

Baldwin, in other words, tells the truth as it is experienced and lived rather than as an historical event that must be corroborated and confirmed. His writing makes for generative material for the \textit{I Am Not Your Negro} film project because it “exceeds its expression … [and]

\textsuperscript{16} Baldwin, 485.
\textsuperscript{17} Baldwin, 485.
also produces a surplus, one that cannot be seen or understood, but is nevertheless present as affect.” 18 Baldwin does not give up on the mistakes and lies precisely because they are constitutive of his self. These very mistakes and lies, never fully processed or consumed by Baldwin’s text, become in turn the material that the film will work over to work upon us in our own time. Never depleted nor consigned to an irretrievable past, the deceitful images of the Black subject and of the wider American romance with and against racism reemerge in Peck’s film as clips and stills of classical and old Hollywood, carrying along with them the sentiments they have accrued from Baldwin’s prior re-viewings.

Within a poetics that appreciates the unforeseen and unpredictable sense, meanings, and affects to come, re-viewings do not signal a loss or failing. In this instance, the principle that an historical document must be updated to respond seamlessly to a present (a kind of attempt at retroactive continuity in the documentary medium) is to be rejected in favor of the illuminating fissures of temporal displacement. To appreciate the re-viewing as art, one must therefore dispense with this investment in the “update” in order to acknowledge that something new is being brought into the world by drawing upon the past. Tellingly, Peck resists the appellation of adaptation—a term that suggests an updating that fully consumes its source material in order to produce something new and more applicable to the current moment. In describing his process, Peck writes of knowing at the early stages of the project that “[i]t could not be an adaptation, or a simple compilation, let alone a chronological narration.” 19 Even in this rejection of overworking (adaptation) or underworking (compilation) or organizing (narrating) as a desirable process, Peck’s aversion to “adaptation” might be understood best as a resistance to fixity and the illusion of unmediated representation that would presume to close the text, rendering the film, in

18 Keeling, Queer Times, Black Futures, 82.
Barthes’s logic, “readerly” rather than “writerly,” and one for whom the viewer “is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text.”

The film that results is not, it is true, a straightforward adaptation, one that conceals the influence and labor of the director in favor of an illusion of unmediated presentation. Instead, it is a worked-upon text that documents how Baldwin has worked upon Peck and how Peck attempts to convert that work into a sensible and communicable but ultimately unfinished object. It is evidence of a process of making-sense that is singular and unavoidably subjective. The challenge of this film is to render the project of a process of comprehending itself comprehensible in cinematic terms.

The intermittent returns to the black screen, accruing white text, and soundtrack of keys clacking as the words are read anchor the film in the utterance of Baldwin’s present even as the variety of footage—rolling landscapes of sky, of traffic, snips of film and still advertisements, movie excerpts, news footage, and, of course, interviews with the man himself—usefully trouble the temporal referents of Baldwin’s words. An instance of such an interplay of meaning and time follows the montage of white male politicians apologizing for their various unnamed trespasses superimposed over a purple California sunset. The litany of apologies resolves with Baldwin’s discussion of the misguided American virtue of immaturity, heard as a voiceover read by Jackson. The declaration retroactively classifies the preceding apologies as a symptom of this false virtue. However, Baldwin’s words go on to link this condition to the figure of John Wayne—a shift that the film uses as an occasion to cut to stills of some of Wayne’s cinematic appearances. The effect of this cut is to interrogate the prescience which we might attribute to Baldwin. But the film resists framing Baldwin as a fortune-teller, preferring instead to show him

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Barthes, S/Z, 4.
as a man commenting upon his own era. That the era and consequently Baldwin’s words resound so pitch-perfectly in our present is instead made the point of the sequence.

Baldwin himself remarks upon the difficulty in creating a cinematic project that resists the discursive systems inclined toward closure. To be sure, Baldwin has nothing good to say about his own experience with Hollywood’s attempts to translate his writing into a screenplay of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. But the indictment is not of translation, per se—after all, Baldwin admits he has hopes for the translation process—but of the master discourse to which his language is being submitted. The language is that of the Hollywood movie that can abide no ambiguity, no humanity to its Black characters, privileging what Baldwin calls “the ‘action’ line [which works primarily] in the interest of ‘entertainment’ values.”

Parsing his critique, one detects a justified aversion to Hollywood’s profit-driven view of entertainment—an understandable aversion for an author so fully committed to the representation of humanity’s complexities. *I Am Not Your Negro* is not a Hollywood film, either by the standards of the industry (it was produced [which is to say funded] and distributed by non-US corporations and US independent houses, not Hollywood studios) nor by the aesthetic precepts of plot (as Baldwin defines it) and entertainment in their privileging of action and resolution over art and poetry.

Indeed, the film *I Am Not Your Negro*, to the extent that it emerges from the specific unfinished project of Baldwin’s own notes and letters toward “Remember This House,” chronicles Baldwin’s own strivings toward an identity and a vocabulary that could ethically and more-or-less accurately accommodate the positionality of a gay, middle-aged, African-American,

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22 The production companies are Arte France, Independent Lens, Barthes, 4., Radio Télévision Suisse (RTS), Shelter Prod, and Velvet Film. The US distribution company is Magnolia Pictures.
former-expatriate, male-identified writer amidst the crisis of America’s lethal struggles of the Civil Rights movement. The trinity of deaths—Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr.—seem to throw Baldwin into no mere emotional turmoil but into a true existential crisis about his being and his purpose in the world. One of the film’s intertitles, displaying the word “Witness,” underscores how Baldwin understood his journey during the civil rights era to be one of overcoming the role of mere spectator and “to accept … that part of my responsibility—as a witness—was to move as largely and as freely as possible, to write the story and to get it out.”

The gravity of Baldwin’s notion of the witness can be located in one of the texts that informed his faith and vision of the world: the Christian bible and in particular the role of the two witnesses in the book of Revelations. On the cusp of a new era, the witnesses stand as “prophets who will eventually bring ‘every people, tribe, language and nation’ to the millennial age,” even if the cost of this divine task is their own deaths.

Baldwin’s statement about witnessing is preceded in both the manuscript and in the film (heard in voiceover) with a litany of identities that Baldwin claims he is not. Not “a Black Muslim” or “a Black Panther” or “a member of the NAACP” or even one who had “to deal with the criminal state of Mississippi” or “to sweat cold sweat after decisions involving hundreds of thousands of lives,” Baldwin navigates these coordinates, marked by his friends and fellow African Americans, to arrive at his own identity—that of witness. The identity he claims is, much like the identities he rejects, produced in relation to a context. He resolves to take up the

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23 James Baldwin, Remember This House (incomplete ms.); reprinted in Baldwin and Peck, I Am Not Your Negro, 31.
24 Lynne Joyrich, “American Dreams and Demons,” Black Scholar 48, no. 1 (2018): 31 The witness at the end of days is mentioned in Revelation 11:3 - 12.
25 James Baldwin, Remember This House (incomplete ms.); reprinted in Baldwin and Peck, 30–31.
task of viewing the movement “in passing,” “to move as largely and freely as possible,” and to write.26

This freedom of movement that rejects even as it acknowledges identity formations has the possibility of engendering liberation through bearing witness and taking note. Adapting Elizabeth Freeman’s formulation of queer temporality to foreground the implications of queer spatiality as well, Keeling indicates “how queer spaces and indeed ‘queerness’ as a material practice call attention to the instability of existing relations, the (im)possibility of a rupture in any moment whatever,” that might “proliferate unpredictable connections and encounters between seemingly random, exhausted, or useless things.”27 Her highlighting of the radical potential of queer temporalities resonates with Moten’s characterization of black radical work in the break. Refusing identitarian closure in this passage, Baldwin sets himself up for a dynamic reconstruction of the self, one whose motive Moten describes as “the sexual differentiation of sexual difference.”28 With this appreciation of black radical queer potentiality in mind, we might well see in Baldwin’s self-identification as a roaming, reporting witness to be a modality of queerness, one that bears in its resistance to fixity the potential to break open existing texts into new paradigms of liberation.

This interpretation of queerness might also have the effect of satisfying the film viewers’ desire to see the queer Baldwin. While I Am Not Your Negro is not a biography and should not, therefore, be expected to account for Baldwin’s (self-)identification as queer, his queerness may well usefully supply a fleeting logic to the film’s structure of sense-making. Baldwin appears to preview the film’s fugitive engagement with its subject’s sexuality where he declares, amidst a

26 Keeling, Queer Times, Black Futures, 87.
27 Ibid.
28 Moten, In the Break, 85.
discussion of the film *The Defiant Ones* (which *I Am Not Your Negro* also screens), “I doubt that Americans will ever be able to face the fact the word, homosexual, is not a noun.”  

29 Baldwin goes on to add that “[t]he root of this word, as Americans use it … simply involves a terror of any human touch, since any human touch can change you.”  

30 In other words, according to Baldwin, in an apparent prediction of Freeman’s, Keeling’s, and Moten’s theories, queerness is change, the possibility of which subtends the conservative American terror of change that includes not only sexuality but also race.

A queered identity is presented as a resistance to stasis through the film’s depictions of movement and contemplation. Halfway through the reading of the letter to Acton, the image cuts to a tracking shot of the elevated tracks in Baldwin’s birthplace of Harlem, New York, as seen from below. Muted police sirens and a piano melody join the soundtrack as Jackson continues Baldwin’s letter. A nearly unnoticeable dissolve halfway through the letter creates the illusion of continuous space and of moving forward toward a never-reached vanishing point before another dissolve focuses on the shadows cast on the ground by the tracks and proceeds, still, to follow them into an unknown distance, highlighting Baldwin’s pronouncement of his “journey.”

It does seem fair to interrogate whether the film’s silence regarding Baldwin’s sexuality renders the film project an exploitative one—a documentary that recruits Baldwin’s image to tell its own story at the expense of the subject’s actual views. This issue, however, is not one of authenticity. The writerly text, the text that only comes into being at the conjunction of the reader and the work (here, the work that constellates in the literary figure and biographical subject known as James Baldwin), can never be exactly inauthentic, though it can prove unproductive as an exercise and not useful for any but the reader-made-filmmaker.

30 Ibid.
Keeling’s recent work on the queer Black subject in cinematic time helpfully addresses the consternation of Baldwin’s largely absent sexuality in *I Am Not Your Negro*. Discussing the character M—— of the film *The Aggressive*, Keeling validates this queer woman’s escape from her military post and also of the film’s narrative as a condition of Black queer life. “[B]y ‘abruptly disappearing’ and thereby refusing to become a conscript of war, M—— might live … [albeit living] unprotected and vulnerable.”31 Recognizing her own spectatorial and intellectual desires to know as structurally analogous to the designs of capture mobilized by the state, Keeling explodes the binary of out versus closeted into a far more meaningful and nuanced appreciation of narrative frustration and elusiveness: “If disappearing enables M—— to live, dragging M—— into my sight here implicates my own work in the very processes and situations I seek to illuminate and challenge. … The fact that M—— must disappear from the film’s narrative highlights the ways that a critical apparatus predicated upon making visible hidden images, sociocultural formations, ideas, concepts, and other things, always drags what interests it onto the terrain of power and the struggles through which that power is contested and/or (re)produced. On this terrain, the benefits of visibility are unevenly distributed.”32

Keeling’s caution against privileging the visible as the site of liberation returns us to the radical work of the break which can be usefully understood in cinematic terms as analogous to the cut. Indeed, Baldwin’s discussion of the miscegenated queer potentiality of the farewell scene in the film *In the Heat of the Night* (a scene staged provocatively at a train station—unconsciously, it would seem, linking movement to queerness) is re-viewed in *I Am Not Your

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31 Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*, 100.
32 Ibid.
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Negro. The cross-cuts that undergird the reaction shots between the Black and white man become, formally, the place where “the kissing will have to start.”

[insert figures 1 and 2 near here:]

Figure 1 caption: “Sidney Poitier as Virgil Tibbs in In the Heat of the Night (1967)”
Figure 2 caption: “Rod Steiger as Sheriff Gillespie in In the Heat of the Night (1967)”

Baldwin’s contemplation of the forestalled queer interracial kiss between the characters portrayed by Sidney Poitier and Rod Steiger appears in his essay The Devil Finds Work. There, Baldwin expresses his “aware[ness] that men do not kiss each other in American films, nor, for the most part, in America, nor do the black detective and the white Sheriff kiss here.” The film I Am Not Your Negro elects to feature this scene and declaration just after another of Baldwin’s cinematic considerations: the interracial heterosexual kiss between Poitier and Katherine Houghton in Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner. Of this latter film, Baldwin writes, “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner may prove, in some bizarre way, to be a milestone, because it is really quite impossible to go any further in that particular direction. The next time, the kissing will have to start.”

It is an odd declaration since the kissing has already started rather early in the film. When I Am Not Your Negro abuts this declaration and scenes of the film against Baldwin’s comments on the absence (or, better, invisibility) of the queer kiss in In the Heat of the Night and its farewell scene, it invites a reassessment of the screen kiss as in line with the radical queer touch that Baldwin notes can produce change. The longing gazes and secretive smiles of Poitier and Steiger touch in the cut, which is both a cinematic poetic strategy and “the space between

expression and meaning or between meaning and reference [that] remains an experience of meaning.”

Comprised of cuts and movements, *I Am Not Your Negro* offers a Black radical queer re-vision of Baldwin for the current moment. Rather than impose coherence in a style more familiar to historical documentaries relying heavily upon voiceover, the film lets the omissions and obfuscations of the archive retain their silence, compelling the film to contemplate its own desires and limitations. While there is certainly much to learn about the Baldwin presented in *I Am Not Your Negro*, the film, through its self-reflexive gestures, resists the certainty of knowing, preferring instead the contemplation that comes from encountering what cannot be known, what is left out, what is artfully omitted. The cinematic gestures the film utilizes are disruptive and haunting as they return the viewer to the vocabulary, and in particular the movement, of the film. In so doing, they fulfill Baldwin’s assertion that “[t]he language of the camera is the language of our dreams.”

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36 Moten, *In the Break*, 92. One is also brought to think of Nathaniel Mackey’s formulation of the “sexual cut,” a principle of envisioning that also informs Moten’s theory of the break. See Nathaniel Mackey, *Bedouin Hornbook* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1986).