17, or, Tough, Dark, Vulnerable, Moody

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By the time I was 17, you'd done everything that you could do to me. The problem now is, how are you going to save yourselves?
—James Baldwin, May 1963

In the wake of his death, which had come a few weeks earlier in December 1987, the editor-become-writer Toni Morrison eulogized James Baldwin. Published just before Christmas in the book section of the New York Times, Morrison’s essay is a work of introspection and humility. Rather than offer an encapsulation of Baldwin’s life, as a writer or as otherwise, Morrison opens in abnegation to her task. “Jimmy,” she writes, “there is too much to think about you, and too much to feel” (2008, 90). The sheer improbability of his emergence into the life that became his, what Morrison calls “the difficulty” of such a life, is nothing short of a miracle itself and thus “refuses
summation . . . and invites contemplation instead." To think about Baldwin in his eclipse is to think about him in his totality, and out of that contemplation Morrison generates her essay’s structuring epiphany: “Like many of us left here I thought I knew you. Now I discover that in your company it is myself I know.” From this fundamental insight Morrison’s essay blossoms into an exploration of how she understands Baldwin’s life and work as a gift to hers. Hers is a story of being brought into being through what she characterizes as the three gifts given by Baldwin: language, courage, and vulnerability—his decolonizing language by replacing “lumbering platitudes with an upright elegance”; his “courage that came from a ruthless intelligence married to a pity so profound,” and his “vulnerability, that asked everything, expected everything and, like the world’s own Merlin, provided us with the ways and means to deliver” (Morrison 2008, 93).

It is this last gift, the ways and means to deliver, that I would like to take some time to explore, for what is most striking in Morrison’s essay is the vividness of her willingness to address Baldwin as a parent. Not parent like “forefather,” nor in the ways literary critics talk about inheritance, but just very literally as a caregiver, thus highlighting the motivational and expressive power of care in Baldwin’s oeuvre, the revolutionary possibilities of black American life embedded in loving children who are already in the world, no matter how they have arrived, where they have been, and who they might choose to become. From her early confession that “I never heard a single command from you, yet the demands you made on me, the challenges you issued to me, were nevertheless unmistakable, even if unenforced,” to her essay’s closing insistence that “I suppose that is why I was always a bit better behaved around you, smarter, more capable, wanting to be worth the love you lavished,” Morrison’s orientation to Baldwin shifts comfortably across a spectrum of caregiving relationships (Morrison 2008, 90; 93). Baldwin is parent and uncle, admired older sibling and doting grandparent and, ultimately, midwife to the black world’s many survivals. In Baldwin’s conceptualization, futures are not born; they are built in contrapuntal movements between the demands of filiation and the possibilities of affiliation, in the care of children who are not one’s own. As Morrison identifies in her goodbye, Baldwin, tender, is a midwife to revolution.
Across his oeuvre Baldwin is careful to articulate that his focus on children and childrearing has simply been another part of his own becoming, even as, without nostalgia, he observes that his “childhood is the usual bleak fantasy,” and goes on to note that “we can dismiss it with the restrained observation that I certainly would not consider living it again” (Baldwin 1998, 5). Indeed, once understood as central to Baldwin’s moral, ethical, and political cosmology, it is almost shocking how many children emerge in Baldwin’s writing. In one essay children are off in the distance, patrolling the same Harlem dump where Baldwin grew up playing. In the story “Sonny’s Blues,” they curl up on the floor as their elders talk, hoping the soft night will never end. In “Fifth Avenue, Uptown,” they are simply just everywhere, “sometimes in my arms, sometimes underfoot, sometimes at my shoulder—or on it—their children, a riot, a forest of children, who include my nieces and nephews” (Baldwin 1985, 206). In almost every essay and interview, Baldwin repeatedly signals how children are never foreign to him and, like anyone whose identity is constructed around childcaring, he sees their meaningfulness in all things, describing the worlds they inhabit as contiguous with his own body. The children are in his arms, on his shoulders, within his sight, his.

There is nothing dramatic in this daily and consuming work, and Baldwin makes clear that his becoming a writer is something that happened alongside other necessary tasks, for instance in “Autobiographical Notes” describing how “in those days my mother was given to the exasperating and mysterious habit of having babies. As they were born, I took them over with one hand and held a book with the other” (Baldwin 1998, 5). His tone should be familiar to anyone who grew up in a family or neighborhood where older girl children were expected to do all the work of caregiving, as assistants or to replace mothers spending long days or nights working elsewhere. Child in one hand, book in the other: in his repeated mentioning of himself as a caregiver, it becomes increasingly apparent that Baldwin is trying, repeatedly and in different contexts, to make us see something fundamentally important about his self-identity, something that he very reasonably assumes would otherwise slip by. In so doing, he queers readers’ gendered assumptions regarding who is rightfully responsible for childcare, while also reminding readers that black children require and are worthy of care.
Tough, Dark, Vulnerable, Moody

Collected in 1963 in *The Fire Next Time*, “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of Emancipation” is both a treatise on the state of race relations in the United States and also a meditation on what it means to perceive the world across generations, to see parents in children, and to watch a child become an ancestor: “if you’ve loved anybody that long, first as an infant, then as a child, then as a man,” Baldwin writes, “you gain a strange perspective on time and human pain and effort.” Himself now an elder, Baldwin in some ways knows more about his younger brother than he knows about himself,

behind your father’s face as it is today are all those other faces which were his.
Let him laugh and I see a cellar your father does not remember and a house he
does not remember and I hear in his present laughter his laughter as a child.
Let him curse and I remember him falling down the cellar steps, and howling,
and I remember, with pain, his tears, which my hand or your grandmother’s so
easily wiped away. (1985, 334)

This is a complicated image, for even as Baldwin’s memory operates in excess
of his brother’s, he also sees a distance that cannot be broached, as “no one’s
hand can wipe away those tears he sheds invisibly today, which one hears in
his laughter and in his speech and in his songs. I know what the world has
done to my brother and how narrowly he has survived it.” Baldwin’s knowing
can bring no remedy as his brother, now a man, suffers outside the domain
of Baldwin’s easy care. But that earlier care was also shadowed. Even as Baldwin
replays the fall into the cellar in the sound of his brother’s curses, the cellar is
also superimposed over the sound of his laughter, still equally unremembered.
In this web of affective synesthesia, this slipperiness that moves across regis-
ters, Baldwin offers a striking image for how structural oppression has per-
verted the temporality of care. Racism ruins the future: his brother’s laughter
is still the laughter of his childhood, but that laughter has always already been
tainted with that which is unremembered, yet persistent, the cellar. Baldwin
himself is stricken, as he cannot look at a sign of the future, his nephew, in a
space not under the shadow of that past: his nephew is haunted, and it is his job to tell him, to make him see the shadow under which his own life will play.

Seeing such a shadow depends on his nephew comprehending the basic structuring unreason of anti-black oppression. Baldwin’s struggle to articulate this is intimated at the beginning of his essay, both in his own struggle to write (“I have begun this letter five times”) and also in the flat dissimulating observation with which it begins: “I keep seeing your face, which is also the face of your father and my brother. Like him, you are tough, dark, vulnerable, moody—” and then culminating in anger, suddenly describing his nephew’s grandfather, his own father, with brutal and strangely timed honesty: “he is dead, he never saw you, and he had a terrible life; he was defeated long before he died because, at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said about him” (Baldwin 1985, 333).

The strange appearance and seemingly inappropriate insertion of this outburst—why say this now?—intimates the extent to which the letter is itself performing for multiple audiences. Baldwin cannot speak directly to his nephew because he understands that the very structural possibility of safety and happiness that he desires for his nephew is contingent upon white America’s capacity to change. By default and by necessity, Baldwin’s letter is in address to white America, and the fact of that split address is itself an instantiation of the wound, the shadow. He has nothing to offer his nephew but loss, and the hope that others will work to change the world in which he must, regardless, live. Baldwin needs his white audience to be moved by his performance of addressing a child. But despite so carefully avoiding directly addressing his white audience, this point about his own father slips out, resisting the performance.

One might be reminded here of “Sonny’s Blues,” a story that should read as an encapsulation of Baldwin’s broader political theory. Much like “Letter to My Nephew,” “Sonny’s Blues,” is about filiation, terror, and the limits and possibilities for black care, and it too is heavily populated by parents, children, siblings, and caregivers. Its title connotes both the play of light and darkness that also permeates “Letter to My Nephew,” and it is similarly focused on the question of how to assure survival across generations, even as the knowledge required for survival is itself crippling in its totality. Here, the narrator,
Sonny's older brother, is thinking back on how it felt as a young child to be surrounded by adults responsible for the children's care and protection even as their own dark embodiment itself foretells the childrens' future destruction:

For a moment nobody's talking, but every face looks darkening, like the sky outside. And my mother rocks a little from the waist, and my father's eyes are closed. Everyone is looking at something a child can't see. For a minute they've forgotten the children. Maybe a kid is lying on the rug, half asleep. Maybe somebody's got a kid in his lap and is absent-mindedly stroking the kid's head. Maybe there's a kid, quiet and big-eyed, curled up in a big chair in the corner. The silence, the darkness coming, and the darkness in the faces frightens the child obscurely. He hopes that the hand which strokes his forehead will never stop—will never die. He hopes that there will never come a time when the old folks won't be sitting around the living room, talking about where they've come from, and what they've seen, and what's happened to them and their kinfolk. (Baldwin 1993, 115)

The riot of children has become quiet, "obscurely" frightened in the face of their elders' silent remembering. Twilight falls both slowly and quickly, and the split time pulls the adults back in traumatic reflection while leaving the children suspended, their time only marked by the stroke of loving but distracted hands. "But something deep and watchful in the child knows that this is bound to end, is already ending": The suspension is temporary, and even though the children cannot see what their elders see, they can apprehend the arrival of darkness and its meaning. It is not told; it is felt, experienced:

And when light fills the room, the child is filled with darkness. He knows that every time this happens he's moved just a little closer to that darkness outside. The darkness outside is what the old folks have been talking about. It's what they've come from. It's what they endure. The child knows that they won't talk any more because if he knows too much about what's happened to them, he'll know too much too soon, about what's going to happen to him. (115)
Day's dawning does not bring hope; it instead brings children closer to the inevitability of their own demise. In the "already ending," the taking away of the arrival of daylight and of the children's diminishing futures, the reader might again sense time as out of joint and thus discern the haunting slippage powered by the transmission of pain across generations. There is no reason in the oppression, and thus no reasonable response. Later, in "Letter to My Nephew," this fact constitutes the only birthright Baldwin can offer this child: "You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and for no other reason" (Baldwin 1985, 333). In an unreasonable regime, the only one way to survive is to know what can happen before it happens, to learn associatively through the deaths of others, rather than through one's personal experience of living. Twilight is the space of the transgenerational.

In thinking about the overlapping public and private signals being transmitted in Baldwin's "Letter to My Nephew," I am reminded of the newly public nature, especially since 2014, of black American families offering commentaries on how to talk to their black sons about how to deal with the police, a trend that came to a head when the then newly-elected Mayor of New York City, Bill de Blasio, pointed out in a public speech that he too had given his son, whose mother is black, "the talk." His declaration came the evening of the Staten Island attorney general office's December 3, 2014, decision not to indict the NYPD officers responsible for the death of Eric Garner, a black father of six who died as a result of being put in a chokehold, in the course of being "questioned" on the street. By focusing on individual caregivers' responsibility to prepare their black children to deal with the irrationality of police violence against nonwhite people, talking about "the talk" soon became a way of telegraphing the illogic of police brutality to a wider American public. In a December 3, 2014, New York Times article about de Blasio's navigation of his "dual role" as "the keeper of law and order in the nation's largest city, and a parent to children of color who had experienced firsthand the perception of police officers as both violators and protectors," reporters Michael Grynbaum and Nikita Stewart offer this vignette:

... the mayor, who shied away from describing family conversations after the grand jury decision in Ferguson, Mo., volunteered on Wednesday that he and
his wife, Chirlane McCray, had instructed Dante “on how to take special care” in encounters with police officers, and described a private worry of whether his son was safe at night. (Grynbaum and Stewart 2014, A29)

In choosing to disclose what is characterized as an otherwise private family moment, de Blasio generates an opportunity for connection made possible by how this sharing can be experienced as at a distance from politics. Situated in the context of its utterance—the Eric Garner verdict following numerous other similar moments, most recently the St. Louis County grand jury’s decision not to indict Officer Darren Wilson in the shooting of 17-year-old Michael Brown the previous week—the meaningfulness of de Blasio’s description of “instructing” his son “on how to take special care,” would easily resonate with others whose own sensibilities had been hewn in witness to the vagaries of black life. “On how to take special care”—a euphemism: on how not to end up dead. “This is profoundly personal for me,” Mr. de Blasio said, in the halting cadence of a pained father” (Grynbaum and Stewart 2014, A29).

It is dangerous to assume that the “private worry” that comes with raising black children is anything but a political reality, what Baldwin 50 years prior had identified as America’s moral failing. Indeed, while many white readers at the time of its publication focused on how “Letter to My Nephew” encourages black youth not to succumb to bitterness, it is important not to read Baldwin’s essay as an intervention addressed to any black community, family or otherwise. Everything Baldwin wants to say to his nephew gets said in the essay’s first paragraph: “You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a nigger. I tell you this because I love you, and please don’t you ever forget it” (Baldwin 1985, 333). What follows is a performance that is trying to demonstrate how the past haunts his nephew’s future. As de Blasio put it in his December 2014 speech, in regards to the “Black Lives Matter” mandate qua invocation at the center of that year’s nationwide protests against police brutality in black communities, “They said it because it has to be said. . . . It’s a phrase that should never have to be said. It should be self-evident, but our history sadly requires us to say it” (Grynbaum and Stewart 2014, A29).
SAY IT

In May 1963 the U.S. attorney general, Robert Kennedy, asked James Baldwin to a “secret meeting” on civil rights and racism in the United States, in response to Baldwin’s November 1962 New Yorker piece, “Letter from a Region in My Mind,” which later became one of the two essays making up The Fire Next Time. The conversation also included Lorraine Hansberry, Harry Belafonte, Lena Horne, Clarence Jones (a lawyer representing Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.), and the prominent African American psychologist Kenneth Clark, among others. All parties experienced the meeting as a complete failure, with Kennedy tragically unable to read the room and Baldwin’s compatriots emotionally rocked by their glimpse into the depth of Kennedy’s naivété regarding American race relations, and what they subsequently perceived as his incapacity for empathy. By virtue of arranging the meeting, and by virtue of his track record with civil rights, they had come with hope that Kennedy would be able to hear them. But, as Lorraine Hansberry would report to Diane Fisher, writing for the Village Voice on June 6, 1963, “When we left the Kennedys’ apartment I had a feeling of complete futility, and as we got on the elevator I wondered if there is any way to make the white people in this country understand” (Fisher 1963). If a Kennedy could not hear them, what other white person in power possibly could?

Kennedy apparently had arrived with the assumption that the purpose of the meeting was to discuss solutions to the civil rights problem, but to do so from an unassailable position. But as King’s lawyer Clarence Jones would later recall in his own 2008 narrative What Would Martin Say? the meeting derailed when Jerome Smith, a Freedom Rider from New Orleans who had been repeatedly beaten and jailed in Mississippi,

started weeping, the tears appearing to come out of nowhere, as if he’d just suffered some traumatic flashback. As he rocked in grief and pain, he blurted out that being there in the room with Robert Kennedy made him “want to vomit.” He said, “You guys are full of shit,” referring to the Justice Department. “I’ve seen you guys stand around and do nothing more than take notes while
we’re being beaten.” As you might imagine, Kennedy recoiled, looked at the rest of us for some help, and started to defend himself. (Jones 2008, 193)

Kennedy’s shock at Jerome’s flashback thematizes the inappropriate—the temporally and spatially inassimilable—nature of trauma, insofar as Smith’s tears disrupt the orderly flow of time and disregard the assumed nature of any given space. In the midst of what is essentially a state visit, in the white and wealthy and powerful Kennedys’ South Madison Avenue compound, the rules for proper behavior suffuse the space so completely that the fact of the space’s existence is itself an expression of its own restrictions. A Freedom Rider to the end, however, Smith resists, and his tears break the space, allowing the emergence of truth: “You guys are full of shit.”

Smith has been made vulnerable by his own memory of being beaten while the people charged with protecting him watch, taking notes. Time is split by his realization that those people are these people, now claiming otherwise. The differential between word and action, between his known world and the implicit reframing the RFK meeting attempts makes him want to vomit, as the competing realities cannot be reconciled, cannot occupy the same space at the same time. The conversation’s two parties were unable to communicate because the terms of their engagement with the world itself were incommensurable to each other. The philosopher Jean-François Lyotard calls this kind of difference a différence, “a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments” (Lyotard 1988, 11). Without translation, without rules that can bring these differences into alignment, such conflicts deny resolution. For when rules are applied, those rules very likely emerge from only one side, thus subjugating one party’s discourse to one understood at the moment of that rule’s application as empowered by mainstream convention invoked as rule of law. Be it as a matter of time, place, race, age, or gender, Smith is not supposed to cry, and the inappropriateness of the act is supposed to negate its power, even as the terms of appropriateness are themselves an expression of the subjugation itself.

But when Kennedy tries to pull the situation back into alignment with his expectations, by turning to black people whom he imagines wouldn’t let this
sort of thing happen, he is further rebuked as, according to Jones, “Lorraine and Lena jumped in”:

Lena said to him, “You have to hear what’s being said to you. We’re trying to interpret the pain and fear and apprehension about what’s going on.” Lorraine drove in the last nail. “You’ve got a great many very, very accomplished people in this room, but the only man who should be listened to is that man over there,” she said, meaning Jerome. Kennedy was visibly shaken. It was clear to me that he’d never had any group of people, let alone Negroes, talk to him like that (2008, 103).

It doesn’t take much to imagine how far this meeting fell from Kennedy’s imagination of what it meant to talk to this group of famous and “respectable” black people, many of whom reputationally circulated in the same social world as himself. Arthur M. Schlesinger, who would go on to use interviews with the participants to draw a picture of the ill-fated meeting in Robert Kennedy and His Times, frames it thus:

Baldwin: “Bobby didn’t understand what we were trying to tell him . . . didn’t understand our urgency.” Kennedy: “They seemed possessed. They reacted as a unit. It was impossible to make contact with any of them.” (Schlesinger 1978, 333)

Without meriting his power of discernment, we can see how Kennedy may have been right to characterize Baldwin and his compatriots as possessed, in the sense that they are speaking of matters that remain invisible to him. He cannot “make contact” because he lacks the ability to see or hear what they have seen and heard and known; they are not inhabiting the same world. Rather than contact, Kennedy was seeking affirmation, which was denied him. “When Kennedy explained how closely he had worked with Dr. King, they jeered and cried, ‘That’s not true.’”

Speaking of the truth that Jerome Smith was trying to make plain, Horne would later point out in an interview with Schlesinger that “This boy”
just put it like it was. He communicated the plain, basic suffering of being a Negro. The primeval memory of everyone in that room went to work after that. ... He took us back to the common dirt of our existence and rubbed our noses in it. ... You could not encompass his anger, his fury, in a set of statistics . . .

(332)

Rather than dissimulate to speak a difficult truth, to make an accusation aloud—again we might think here of how Baldwin and so many other caregivers to black children “share” stories that help keep their children alive—Smith and the others instead address Kennedy as one of their own, communicating “the plain, basic suffering of being a Negro.” In his response, however, Kennedy immediately demonstrates his distance from them. Not only is he incapable of hearing what they are trying to tell him, he is lost in the gap, unable to comprehend the very structure of their speaking, to even understand that other worlds exist and that they do not include him. In his own language, Schlesinger identifies this differend, noting that “In subsequent months [Kennedy] tried to explain to himself why there had been this outburst against him. Of course the meeting was misconceived. He was interested in policy, the blacks . . . in witness. What Clark called the ‘excruciating sense of impasse’ seemed inevitable” (Schlesinger 1978, 334).

In being made to witness their suffering and dismay, Kennedy was forced to very suddenly acquire the knowledge Baldwin describes in “Sonny’s Blues” as being imputed to black children in the twilight hours of adult conversation, in grown folks’ talk. According to Schlesinger, who would over the years ask Kennedy to return to his memory of that day, not even the careful assessment of distance between what he had sought to give and the witnessing that had been instead required of him, “could quite explain away the violent jolt he received that spring afternoon. He began, I believe, to grasp as from the inside the nature of black anguish.” Whereas the group’s words could not make Kennedy connect, the traumatic shock of the experience itself did, as through this wild spiral of testimony, feeling, and experience, Kennedy could begin to comprehend what it meant to try to survive a world without reason, the very experience Baldwin had in so many ways tried to describe in The Fire Next Time. As Schlesinger describes it, Kennedy “resented the experience, but it pierced him all the same. His tormentors
made no sense; but in a way they made all sense” (Schlesinger 1978, 335). Where Robert Kennedy had expected a decorous and empty ritual, instead he was made to participate in some messy and uncomfortable learning.

**SEVENTEEN**

The prominent African American psychologist Kenneth Clark was also present at that fateful meeting between Baldwin and RFK. Clark, famous for his work with Mamie Clark on the black dolls experiment and by then a well-known civil rights figure in New York, that same evening would interview James Baldwin for a series to be aired on PBS. Baldwin, clearly still in the throes of the day’s turmoil, is tough, dark, vulnerable, and moody, unwilling to let Clark control the interview. He insists that America’s future is tied to finding a way to make the federal government make a moral commitment to the Civil Rights struggle, which is precisely the commitment he saw as lacking during his earlier meeting with RFK. Now, having dropped all pretense of being a spokesperson, Baldwin instead simply speaks his sense of the truth of black life in 1963, of “the common dirt of existence” as Horne called it:

> It doesn’t matter any longer, and I’m speaking for myself, for Jimmy Baldwin, and I think I’m speaking for a great many Negroes too. It doesn’t matter any longer what you do to me; you can put me in jail, you can kill me. By the time I was 17, you’d done everything that you could do to me. (Clark 2016)

Set on the cusp between the short past and long present, 17 is childhood’s twilight, materializing the sense of split time that Baldwin so eloquently described years ago in “Sonny’s Blues,” in his image of the children silently witnessing the white world’s demolition of their caregivers, which, by virtue of their own dark resonance, their status as black, is also understood as their own future destruction. The fact of childhood might stave off this process, but the in-between nature of being 17 reveals the precariousness of this hopeful delay. One’s recognizability as a child can be revoked at any moment.

A half-century after *The Fire Next Time*, the poet Claudia Rankine, in an interview with Meara Sharma in a November 2014 issue of *Guernica*, would
share her experience of spending time in Ferguson, Missouri, following the police murder of 17-year-old Michael Brown that same year. For many Americans, Brown’s death was understood as one in a series of murders of unarmed black children over the previous few years—Trayvon Martin, Renisha McBride, Tamir Rice—to name only a few. Rankine recalls an experience at a makeshift memorial:

A man stood next to me, and saw a picture of Michael Brown at the memorial, and said, “He looks like me.” I didn’t want to say yes, because I didn’t want to align him with a person who had passed away. So I said nothing. And then he said it again, he said, “He looks like me.” (Rankine 2014)

Rankine tries to resist the stranger’s own identification with Michael Brown, to resist shading one who is living with the shadow of the dead. But he pushes against her reticence, perhaps needing her to witness this thing he now sees:

So at that point I looked at him and looked at the photo, and he did look like Michael Brown. And I began to think, I wish there was a way to stop him from identifying with somebody who is dead. But the real understanding was that he too could be dead, at any point. He just stood there. He was a teenager. He was still in his pajamas.

When she allows herself to look more fully at the speaker, she also immediately sees that he is himself also only a teenager. She wants to keep him from his knowledge, because in it is potentially written his own fate. And he is a child, “still in his pajamas.”

According to Rankine, this and other such interactions were existentially “exhausting,” which echoes Baldwin’s declaration to Kenneth Clark back in 1963, “It doesn’t matter any longer what you do to me; you can put me in jail, you can kill me. By the time I was 17, you’d done everything that you could do to me” (Clark 2014). You’d done. Everything has already been done. It is over. Rankine pins her exhaustion in Ferguson on the “sense of inevitability”—“It almost felt Greek. Predetermined, and hopeless” (Rankine 2014). Clark would draw a similar determination from the Baldwin-Kennedy confabulation, this sense that nothing can
be done because the wheels were set in motion so long ago that the future has always already been subjugated to the past, is haunted. "There were no villains in that room," Clark would tell Schlesinger, "only the past of our society. That is what made it all seem so hopeless" (Schlesinger 1978, 33). The circumstances of their encounter are experienced as beyond the possibility of their control.

Locked together in Kennedy's apartment, each speaker was traumatized by having been made both subject of and witness to the workings of a history that long precedes their arrival in the world. They are haunted because they cannot own these moments and are instead owned by them. (Kennedy: "They seemed possessed. They reacted as a unit. It was impossible to make contact with any of them.") Thus the haunted nature of Baldwin's claim, which is formalized in the discomfiting structure of its second person address: "By the time I was 17, you'd done everything that you could do to me." His statement is not addressed to Clark. Baldwin's indictment of white America flies out through the studio's camera, as if Baldwin hopes that in landing, making contact, his claim's otherwise ghostly target will come into being as the site of his address. By giving name to the dreams and nightmares that come to us through each other's stories, haunting concretizes what it means for a person to have his or her own experience of another person's experience in the world. Desperate, or perhaps just exhausted, Baldwin tethers the strength of his claim against black children's stolen futures to an act of transference, an exorcism, a birthing opportunity—the haunted himself turns to haunting, to transmission: "By the time I was 17, you'd done everything that you could do to me. The problem now is, how are you going to save yourselves?"

REFERENCES