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Blaze Campbell
Bowling Green State University

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A Passage to Bowling Green: A Chronological Exploration of James Baldwin's Connection to

BGSU's Ethnic Studies Department

Blaze Campbell

Bowling Green State University

Abstract

James Baldwin became connected to Bowling Green State University's (BGSU) Ethnic Studies Department starting in the late 1970s, making four visits to campus, once as a guest speaker, once as a Write-in-Residence, and twice as a Distinguished Visiting Professor. The purpose of this paper is to understand how the relationship between BGSU and Baldwin developed. I constructed a historical, chronological narrative utilizing primary sources including various documents from BGSU's archival collection to understand Baldwin's affiliation with the university.

Baldwin's 1977 visit to BGSU was his first public lecture in the United States since his departure to France years prior. Additionally, it was at BGSU that Baldwin first experienced teaching in a college classroom. Thus, given Baldwin's legacy and the peculiarity that of all post-secondary institutions, he found his way to BGSU, the way in which Baldwin and BGSU overlap deserves analysis. Furthermore, I examined how Baldwin's visits to BGSU impacted the campus and local community, as well as challenged the erasure of Black people's perspectives and lived experiences within the post-secondary curriculum.

Keywords: James Baldwin, Ethnic Studies, African American, Black, Race, Bowling Green State University, History, Archives, Curriculum, Bowling Green State University

A Passage to Bowling Green: A Chronological Exploration of James Baldwin's Connection to
BGSU's Ethnic Studies Department

Notably one of the most prolific writers within the literary canon, James Baldwin's work has proven to be timeless. His novels, essays, plays, and critical public commentary are unequivocally classic works of art, and 31 years after his death, we are still learning from him. Distinct in his style and tone, Baldwin's critical analysis of race got to the essence of many African Americans' experience in the United States. In *Remembering James Baldwin*, Dr. Ernest Champion (1987) wrote:

His books are a testimony for his great love for America even though he has bitterly criticized the American experience. As a Black American, he has been the voice for millions of Black people who found in him a spokesperson for their unspoken thoughts and emotions and their own frustrations at what America appears to offer them. (pp.1-2)

Baldwin entangled vulnerability, authenticity, and boldness in his writing and public speaking. For example, in a 1978 newspaper interview, Baldwin stated "If you have a secret, a hate, a worry, and walk into a room trying to hide it, that secret is all people see.... Face it and you find a miracle, you find yourself" (Leise, 1978). This level of authenticity is one of the reasons captivates people with his work. This was certainly the case at Bowling Green State University (BGSU). From 1977 to 1981, Baldwin visited BGSU four times. His first visit in 1977 marked his first public appearance in the United States since his departure to Europe many years prior (Champion, 1987). Thanks to a 1976 letter that Dr. Ernest Champion, professor and Assistant Chair of Ethnic Studies at the time, Baldwin first came to campus for a guest lecture. He then returned a year later for a month holding the position, Writer-in-Residence. On Baldwin's last two visits, he held the title of Distinguished Visiting Professor.

Research Scope

In a 1979 BGSU press release, the chief academic officer at the time, Michael Ferrari, said, “For the university, I think it is a mark of distinction to have a person of his caliber here” (p. 1). Considering the magnitude of Baldwin’s legacy, his time at BGSU deserves attention and analysis. It is a history that is a noteworthy part of BGSU’s story that should be sketched into the university’s collective memory. As such, through analyzing primary sources, I sought to examine the way in which Baldwin’s visits to BGSU impacted the campus and the local community.

Methodology

I constructed a chronological narrative of Baldwin’s affiliation with BGSU from the five-year period of 1976 to 1981 using the BGSU archival collection. I used various types of archival documents consisting of essays, annual reports, memos, press releases, guest lists, letters, newspaper articles, and Dr. Champion’s book, *Mr. Baldwin, I Presume* to compose this narrative. The scope of this paper is limited to what I uncovered in the archival documents and in Dr. Champion’s book.

Brief Overview of BGSU’s Historical Development: Placing Baldwin’s Visits in Context

Bowling Green State College was established as a part of the fulfillment of the 1910 Lowry Normal School Bill. This bill required that two state normal schools be established, one in northeastern Ohio and one in northwestern Ohio (Overman, 1967; Hildebrand, 1998).

According to Hildebrand (1998):

The Lowry bill was the last of numerous measures that had been proposed and defeated over several years to meet the urgent need for professionally trained elementary teachers

in the northern half of the state. Ohio was one of the last states to provide professional training for its elementary teachers.” (p. 2)

Kent was chosen for the northeastern location and Bowling Green was chosen for the northwestern location (Overman, 1967; Hilderbrand, 1998). The primary educational mission was to train teachers. As cited by Overman (1967) a provision within the Lowry Bill stated, “the board of trustees in connection with the presidents of the normal schools shall . . . provide a suitable course of study for the theoretical and practical training of students who desire to prepare themselves for the work of teaching” (p. 25). Additionally, In the *First Annual Catalogue* (Bowling Green State Normal College, 1915), written under the section *Function and Scope of the Normal College* it was stated, “In order to furnish adequate training for all classes of teachers, the State Normal College maintains the following courses...” (p. 18). The course list went on to detail various requirements for “supervisors, superintendents, principals, and teachers in secondary schools.” There were also educational options for teaching in both “city and village” schools as well as schools in rural areas. Through the examination of the year book photos, the institution was, and has remained, predominately White over the years.

The primary mission of teacher education began to shift in 1929 when the school began providing degree offerings in the College of Liberal Arts (Bowling Green State University website, n.d.). This shift continued into the 1930s and in 1935 the College of Business was added along with graduate programs (Bowling Green State University website, n.d.). This was also the year that the institution became a university (Bowling Green State University website, n.d.). Fast-forward to the 1970s. The university history, as presented on the university website, highlighted that new colleges were added to the university, that the College of Health and Human Services was introduced and that in 1975 the School of Music was expanded to the

College of Musical Arts. However, it was also during the 1970's that Ethnic Studies emerged at BGSU. In 1970 the Ethnic Studies Center was established (Perry, 1971). It later became a program and eventually was granted departmental status in 1979.

Substantive Issue

According to Dr. Robert L. Perry, (1971) Ethnic Studies Center Director at the time, the start of Ethnic Studies at BGSU was born out of primarily Black students' desire "to alter the trend of higher education as it neglected the experience of American Ethnic groups of color, as well as the experiences of African and other third world peoples" (p. 3). Baldwin's visit is one of numerous events coordinated by Ethnic Studies that sought to provide opportunities for people of color to engage the campus community. Due to the nature of the curriculum and the predominantly White environment, Eurocentrism ran rampant, something not beneficial to students of color nor White students. In the letter that invited Baldwin to campus, Dr. Champion (1976) wrote:

Bowling Green State University has a student population of 16,000 of which approximately 1,000 are black or other minorities. We feel our students should be given the opportunity to meet and to hear from persons of such high distinction as yourself. Your presence here will undoubtedly help the minority cause while it will also help enlighten all persons regardless of race, color, or creed. (p. 1)

This excerpt illuminates the importance of Baldwin's visit and one of the actions that Ethnic Studies professors took to address the Eurocentric dominance on campus during that time period. Therefore, my reason for choosing to analyze Baldwin's visits is to highlight one of the ways this issue was addressed.

The Beginning: 1976 and 1977

In 1976, Dr. Champion wrote a letter to Baldwin inviting him to take part in a seminar and public lecture (Champion, 1976). He wrote "...we would like you to know that you will be well received because there is a very large audience awaiting to hear from you"(p. 1). Baldwin nor his agent responded to Dr. Champion's letter for over a year. Dr. Champion (1987) had forgotten he had even sent the letter until the day came that Baldwin finally wrote back, indicating that he had interest in visiting BGSU. Years after this visit, Dr. Champion wrote about a conversation with Baldwin in which Baldwin stated "...of the thousands of pieces of mail that I receive, for some reason this one caught my attention.... That is how I find myself in Bowling Green, Ohio of all places" (1995, p. 8). This correspondence was the starting point for the ongoing relationship between Baldwin and Ethnic Studies.

Even though Baldwin had agreed to come to campus, securing the funds for this monumental event meant that Ethnic Studies needed to produce a plan to pay the fees associated with Baldwin's visit. Dr. Champion (1977a) diligently got to work reaching out to campus organizations and departments to help with the finances needed to bring Baldwin to campus. For example, he sent a letter (1977b) to the Black Student Union requesting a donation, writing "We believe that a writer of such eminence as Mr. Baldwin ought not to be measured in terms of dollars and cents, but in terms of his scholarship and his contributions to his people and his art" (p. 1). Letters like that one secured donations from the College of Arts and Sciences, the Popular Culture Department, Third World Theater and Cultural Activities, the Commuter Center, the Student Development Department, Student Activities, the English Department, Academic Services, the President's Office, the Black Student Union Executive Committee, the American

Studies Department, Graduate Student Senate, International Education, and Minority Affairs (Champion, 1977b). Through these donations, Baldwin's contract was secured.

In May 1977, the year after Dr. Champion's written request for Baldwin to come to BGSU, Baldwin gave a public lecture to 700 people in the Main Auditorium (Perry, 1977). Leading up to the 1977 visit, Dr. Champion wrote a letter to Baldwin confirming his visit for the public lecture and seminar on the dates for May 12 and May 13, 1977. This letter put into perspective the significance of Baldwin's visit for not only BGSU but the entire community. Dr. Champion wrote (1977c):

I am expecting a very large audience composed not only of Bowling Green State University students, but also students and faculty from neighboring universities such as Toledo University, Ohio University, Kent State University, and Ohio State University. It is my presumption that most of them would be interested in your views about the role of the Black writer from the 50s through the present and where you think he is headed. (p. 1)

Additionally, per a thank you letter (1977) from Dr. Perry and Dr. Champion, the president of the university held a reception in honor of Baldwin. The guest list (1977) for this reception included representatives from the following organizations: Black Student Union, Latino Student Union, Asian Roots, Third World Graduate Students, Graduate Student Senate, and the Black Cultural Board among other guests.

A Longer Stay: Writer-In-Residence, 1978

During his 1977 visit, Dr. Champion raised the idea of Baldwin coming back to BGSU on an extended visit (Bowling Green State University Ethnic Studies Website, n.d.; Champion, 1995). This first visit also began a friendship between Baldwin and the Ethnic Studies professors.

In a letter to Baldwin from Dr. Champion (1977d), he wrote “When I first wrote to you, I did not realize that I would end up knowing, not only one of the greatest writers of our time, but also enjoying the unique privilege of now calling him a friend” (p. 1). This letter goes on to state, “...we will now begin working on having you with us in May 1978....We, for our part, will endeavor to make such arrangements that are mutually beneficial and also of lasting value to our students” (p.1). Indeed, arrangements were made to make this a valuable experience for BGSU students. Ethnic Studies worked with the English Department’s Creative Writing Program to offer graduate students a course entitled *Baldwin and Contemporary Fiction* (Champion, 1978). Additionally, at the undergraduate level Baldwin was set up to lecture on contemporary fiction (Champion, 1978). Community members also inquired about spending time with Baldwin on this visit. A woman by the name of Lee Reho wrote a letter (1978) after seeing a newspaper article that Baldwin was coming to BGSU writing, “I am writing to inquire if there is any way that one who is not a student could attend any of those classes. Having long been an admirer of Mr. Baldwin, I would appreciate the opportunity to attend any of his lectures, and/or classes” (p. 1). Another person by the name of Suzanne Kreinberg (1978) wrote “Would he be giving any talks during May’s weekends? As I am Cleveland-based, commuting would be rather difficult on days other than Friday or Saturday. As an alumnus (English major, 1970 graduate) and admirer of Mr. Baldwin’s work, I ask that you please send me any additional information about the May writer-in residence program” (p. 1). Additionally, a thank you letter sent on May 17, 1978 from the WGTE television station thanked Ethnic Studies for their help securing an interview with Baldwin. Jim Hill (1978) wrote:

You and your staff are to be thanked many times over for the help the Ethnic Studies Department gave to Gary Bond and my-self in regard to the interview with James

Baldwin.... I hope you keep in mind this struggling black producer who is trying to pull together some quality minority programming.... Please don't forget us."

This visit marked the first time Baldwin had ever taught in higher education. In *Mr. Baldwin, I Presume* (1995), Dr. Champion recounted Baldwin's first day teaching a college class. Before Baldwin could even introduce himself, the class greeted him with applause (Champion, 1995). Dr. Champion and Baldwin were co-teaching this course, so he was there to hear what the first question posed to Baldwin was. A White man raised his hand and asked, "Mr. Baldwin, why does the white man hate the nigger?" (p.2). After recovering from the initial shock of that question worded in that way, Baldwin was able to respond, "...why do *you* think the white man hates the nigger?" (p.3). At this point the class began to engage the topic, both Black and White students raised their hands. Dr. Champion noted that Baldwin had a clear answer to this question, however he did not wish to impose his views on the students. He instead sought to lead the student to the self-reflection needed to answer that question for himself. Champion wrote (1995), "Baldwin was going to draw the students, especially the white students, into this very painful act of self-discovery while, at the same time, he was going to challenge black students not to become victims of self-fulfilling prophecy" (p. 5).

Extended Stay: Distinguished Visiting Professor, 1979

A letter from Dr. Perry sent May 5, 1979 to Baldwin outlined clarifications about the Distinguished Visiting Professor position. Dr. Perry stated, "The visiting Distinguished Professor with Ethnic Studies is a position that is being offered to you on a continuing basis. Money has been allocated for this purpose indefinitely as long as you wish to continue." A student, Yolanda Johnson also wrote Baldwin to request interviews for two campus publications, one for the *Black Newsvoice* a publication for "minority" students and one for a publication that was a part

of the university yearbook (Johnson, 1979). The undergraduate class he co-taught with Dr. Champion was entitled *Arts and Sciences 300: Minority Writers and the Western Tradition*. The graduate course was limited to ten students called *English 664: Contemporary Fiction* (Bowling Green State University, 1979). It was also during this visit that Baldwin delivered his public lecture *Passage to America* (Baldwin, 1979). In this lecture Baldwin discussed the “nightmare for Black people” living in what he called the “White imagination” (Baldwin, 1979).

Final Visit: Honorary Degree and Distinguished Visiting Professor, 1980 and 1981

In 1979, Dr. Perry, Dr. Champion, and Dr. Bashore wrote a letter recommending Baldwin receive an honorary degree from BGSU. They wrote “... in view of his contributions to American Literature and to creative writing he has been and is an inspiration to the youth of this country, and his commitment to learning is exemplified by his willingness to enter the world of the classroom” (p. 1). The president must have agreed because in March 1980, President Moore sent Baldwin a letter informing him of an invitation to accept an honorary degree during summer commencement of 1980. However, the records that I examined do not indicate whether or not Baldwin actually attended the commencement.

In 1981, a journalist announced that Baldwin would return to BGSU in the spring to continue as a Distinguished Visiting Professor (Swaigood, 1980). Swaigood wrote “Baldwin, who said he came to Bowling Green because he was invited and because he was experimenting to determine if he could use a university setting as a forum for his ideas, noted that he enjoys teaching.” In this same article Baldwin is quoted stating, “I wouldn’t be doing it if I didn’t care about the students. We learned something from each other.” The 1981 visit marked the last visit from Baldwin to BGSU. Nevertheless, on this last visit, Baldwin was able to engage his students in a meaningful way. The same graduate students that were at BGSU during the 1979

visit were still on campus. During 1979 Baldwin was writing his book *Just Above My Head*. The book was then complete, and Baldwin opened up to these same students about how he felt to be done with the book. Champion (1995) stated, "...it is very rare for a writer to bare his soul before the public. Baldwin did just that" (p.41).

The 1981 visit marked the last visit from Baldwin to BGSU. This is the one year that there are not many records documenting this specific visit. It is unclear why that was his last visit, although it may have been because of financial issues that the university was facing. In a letter written by a graduate student, Paul Marginley (1983) to President Olscamp it was inferred that the reason Baldwin was not returning was due to financial constraints. Marginley wrote "I have enquired about the possibility of his return and have been told that the University is unwilling to pay his fee as a writer-in-residence.... I find it amazing that a university with a growing reputation refuses to fund one of America's foremost writers of the twentieth century" (p. 1).

Conclusion

In 1976, Dr. Champion sent a letter that would result in an ongoing relationship between BGSU and one of the most important writers, historically and contemporarily. Based on the documents I reviewed, Baldwin's presence at BGSU had an impact on the campus and local community as, with each visit, Baldwin stayed a little longer illustrating the mutual benefit between what Baldwin brought to the community and what the community brought to Baldwin. Baldwin allowed BGSU to be the place he had his first experience teaching in the university setting. This time period reflects a significant part of Baldwin's life as well as a significant part of BGSU history. This paper is best summed up by a quote from Dr. Champion. He wrote (1995):

It was fascinating to see how the black students on campus were using Baldwin as their own weapon of anti-racist racism. No writer of such standing had ever taken up residence in the university and therefore his very presence was sending out a message that this predominately white university in a predominately conservative and Republican city was taking pride, and rightly so, in such a celebrity roaming its corridors. His presence was a source of envy to others in the region. Whether they liked it or not, there had to be an acknowledgment of his excellence and thereby even the racists on campus could not but acknowledge that stature of such a writer. (pp.65-66)

Hence, Baldwin's legacy at BGSU should be remembered and recounted, but not simply as a part of history to be idolized. Instead, this history should live on to let us know where we have been, so we know the possibilities of where we can go. Baldwin's affiliation with BGSU is not only an accomplishment of Ethnic Studies, it is an accomplishment that reflects BGSU as an institution because it is an example of an action taken to challenge Eurocentrism and universalism on BGSU's campus at that time.

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