Black digital humanities in interdisciplinary undergraduate teaching on diversity, gender, and sexuality

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Abstract

Two undergraduate courses (2020-23) introduce students interested in the humanities and computing to the life, works, and intellectual and material legacy of the world-famous African American writer and activist James Baldwin (1924-1987). Cross-listed with the Afroamerican and African Studies, American Culture, Digital Studies, and English Departments, these courses utilize an open-access digital collection documenting Baldwin's life and his selected works. Through innovative and experiential application of literary history in conversation with the emerging fields of Black Digital Studies and Black Digital Humanities, students develop projects that build (and build on) a growing, open-access archive. Published on the ArcGIS StoryMaps platform, these projects achieve two important higher-education goals: (1) They produce student-driven knowledge on an internationally renowned Black figure accessible to non-academic users; and (2) they confirm the importance of humanities and diversity literacy as invaluable skillsets in the modern workplace.

***Keywords:*** *James Baldwin; literature; black digital humanities; interdisciplinary; undergraduate.*

1. Introduction

This paper explores innovative teaching and learning in two undergraduate courses cross-listed between the Departments of Afroamerican and African Studies, American Culture, Digital Studies, and English at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor in the United States. The courses introduce undergraduate students interested in the humanities and computing to the life, works, and rich intellectual and material legacy of the African American writer and activist James Baldwin (1924-1987). Limited access to Baldwin's papers and no writer's museum in the United States make this key twentieth-century American author hard to teach outside of his published works. The courses intervene in this situation by combining innovative interdisciplinary learning and production of new knowledge on this writer in the form of an open-access digital archive.

Teaching methods harness students' considerable digital skills to make engagement with themes in the humanities, especially from antiracist and antiheteronormative perspectives, a creative and collective endeavor. The authors believe that college instructors can significantly advance inclusivity in the classroom, as well as foster humanities literacy and civic engagement, by taking full advantage of students' familiarity with a range of digital media and tools. In that sense, learning and teaching also become a cross-generational dialogue.

The courses are: "Preserving James Baldwin's Legacy through Black Digital Studies" (AAS 498-in action seminar) and "What's Love (Sex+Race) Got to Do with It: Reading James Baldwin's Fiction in the Twenty-First Century" (AAS 498-in action seminar). Designed by Prof. Zaborowska, a literary and cultural studies scholar with over three decades of scholarly and teaching experience in interdisciplinary humanities and cultural studies, these courses reflect an innovative and experiential focus on the ways in which African American literary history can and should be taught, i.e., in a rich conversation with the emerging fields of Black Digital Studies and Black Digital Humanities.

The courses utilize and expand through students' projects the rich archive amassed for over two decades by Prof. Zaborowska. Alongside more traditional materials like published texts, the courses draw on an open-access digital collection mounted on the website of U-M Library, as well as the resources of the National Museum of African American History and Culture/Smithsonian/NMAAHC in Washington D.C. They are supported by IT and instructional staff, thus making sure that students also acquire new computing skills as they develop their projects.
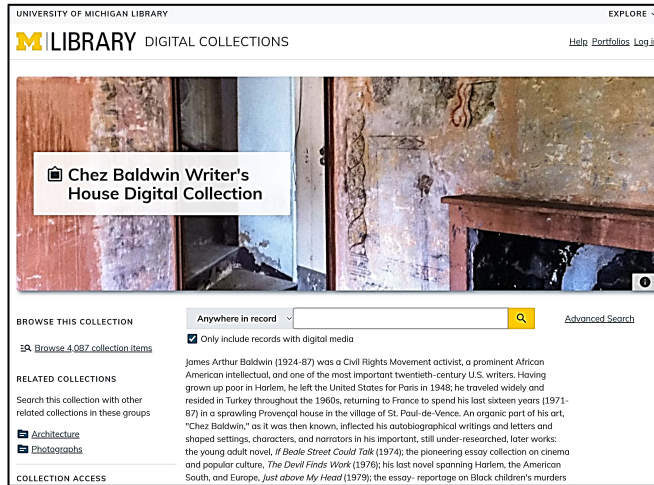
Pictured: Homepage of Chez Baldwin Writer's House Digital Collection on U-M Library's website.

The authors have collaborated on teaching techniques that combine interactive lectures, discussion, multimedia material and writing, and public-speaking assignments that will be described in this presentation. The courses also include guest speakers, and culminate in university-wide symposia open to the public in which students present their work. The long-term goal for the various iterations of these two courses is to create a virtual writer's house-museum for Baldwin that, instead of bricks and mortar, will be constructed from student projects showcased on an open-access website. The work of the course will be available to all, and especially to local K-12 communities in Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti, and Detroit. Our James Baldwin's Virtual Writer's House-Museum will in time become an anti-racist teaching tool and legacy all its own.

2. Teaching Archive

Inspired by Prof. Zaborowska's recent monograph, *Me and My House: James Baldwin's Last Decade in France* (Duke UP, 2018), the archive for both courses combines several types of resources for students' projects, with the goal of combining instructional goals with public humanities ones. The materials included in the digital collection, for example, consist of thousands of high-definition digital photographs taken between 2000 and 2014-18 on research trips to St. Paul-de-Vence, France, where Baldwin's house was located, and where he spent his last prolific sixteen years. As Prof. Zaborowska argues in the aforementioned book and in an essay in the American Quarterly, these images of Baldwin's house, known locally as "Chez Baldwin," and of its contents are key to the preservation efforts of this writer's material legacy in the United States and beyond. Taken weeks before that building was lost to developers and demolished in 2014, the images of the structure preserve its quality

and processes of deterioration over time. The objects from the house that were meant to be discarded, were instead salvaged by a friend of Baldwin's who allowed them to be documented via digital photography. PhD candidate Rodríguez Barrera was team leader in the processing of metadata for the collection and oversaw undergraduate research assistants as they went about caterorizing and ensuring the high quality of the various digital materials. The resulting archive includes documentation of the building, an extensive collection of vinyl records, jewelry, reference books, artwork, even furniture, as well as the contents of a private library, phone logs, bills, receipts, and other ephemera.

Documentation of research trips to the site of the house, interviews with subjects who knew the writer, and documents gathered at research trips to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in NYC, where the James Baldwin Papers are located, complement the resources for both courses, alongside the writer's published works and diverse artwork created to commemorate Baldwin by male and female artists.

The ever-expanding virtual Baldwin's "writer's house-museum" resulting from the student course work published via StoryMaps will become a hub for teaching this writer, offering a student-centered alternative to a brick-and-mortar structure. The students' creative productions—e.g., collaboratively produced podcasts and social media posts, written explorations, recorded interviews, video, or virtual-reality implementations of Baldwin's household archive, etc.—will make the surviving Baldwin's life matter a foundation for new knowledges and interpretations of his ideas on equality, inclusion, tolerance, and humanitarianism.

3. Course Descriptions

In addition to offering the public a glimpse into Baldwin's everyday writing life, student projects from both courses encode and interpret the objects with which the author surrounded himself, as well as the books that he read and collected in his library. Serving as one of the founding blocks in the learning process, the collection organizes the students' final projects into a website of resources that will grow with each iteration of the courses. This lasting archive of knowledge on Baldwin is rooted in the present historical, cultural, and political moment, reflecting both courses' different approaches to Baldwin.

In both courses, students work with the ArcGIS StoryMaps platform to create original, individually desgined final research projects. All students, all levels of experience, and all fields of study are included in the course, including architecture, literature, general humanities, social sciences, and STEM fields. Student final projects showcased at university-wide symposia (held on Zoom as of this writing) include guest speakers who comment on students' work.

3.1. AAS 498: "Reconstructing James Baldwin's Legacy in the Digital Now"

"Reconstructing" taps into the recent resurgence of this important national and international figure as the subject of new scholarship and as an African American popular culture icon (Black Twitter, Black Lives Matter). Students work with a Canvas course site that includes media and other learning tools and resources (e.g., the films *I Am Not Your Negro, If Beale Street Could Talk, James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket, I Heard It through the Grapevine, James Baldwin: From Another Place*, etc.), including online collections and other African American Studies-related digital projects. We also host 3-4 guest speakers via Zoom, and students have a chance to introduce the speakers.

The students work individually and in groups to explore some of the following larger themes in literary and cultural studies: (1) recasting national identity through intersectional approaches; (2) the centrality of domestic settings to African American authorial creativity; (3) the importance of Black women writers to Baldwin's later works; (4) Baldwin's relevance to the articulation of androgynous and trans identities today; (5) Baldwin's theorizations of popular media such as cinema, photography, and TV; and (6) Baldwin in fashion and style and as a creative inspiration.

3.2. AAS 498: "What's Love (Sex+Race) Got To Do with It: Reading James Baldwin's Fiction in the 21st Century"

"What's Love" explores Baldwin's philosophy of identity, love, and creativity that has inspired trans people and academics, musicians and painters, dancers and theater actors, and film directors and documentarians. This course approaches Baldwin's ideas through a Black queer lens—Black Queer Humanism (BQH)—while beholding the many musical, literary, and visual inspirations that came to Baldwin from such eminent artists as Bessie Smith, Aretha Franklin, Nina Simone, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Josephine Baker, Beauford Delaney, Vincent Van Gogh, Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor, Glenn Ligon, Janet Mock, Billy Porter, BLM, among others.

Students read Baldwin's novels written between 1953 and 1979, his selected short stories ("Sonny's Blues," "Going to Meet the Man"), and several key essays. Baldwin's fiction, which has been often misunderstood and dismissed by critics, in fact examines and anticipates the complex ways in which we approach racialized gender, sexuality, and erotic attraction in our own historical moment. Like "Reconstructing" (see section 3.1), "What's Love" invites students to develop final projects that engage broader themes in literary and cultural studies, such as the centrality of domesticity to African American artistic production and Baldwin's theorizations of popular culture.

4. Conclusion

These courses offer invaluable tools to today's young people to enter a diverse and complex world with strong humanities and digital-literacy skillsets. Students get to explore a major international Black queer activist, intellectual, and literary figure, all while honing their reading, writing, and public-speaking skills. Their final projects get published on StoryMaps, thereby offering them an accomplishment to include on their resumes. Students explore intersectional identity in ways that few other courses offer. For example, by exploring Baldwin's daring plots involving interracial couples and queer and other non-normative sexual attachments, students wrestle with his careful dissections of class, religiosity, colorism, and family violence—all of which a politics of respectability often kept hidden and unspoken as much within intimate and local communities as on the national scene at his time, and even in ours. With wars raging in Europe and Africa, and police brutality and gun violence escalating in the United States, our students need humanities skills and new and exciting learning tools more than ever.

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Digital Resources

_ Chez Baldwin: https://quod.lib.umich.edu/b/baldwin1ic?page=index

_ StoryMaps basics: https://doc.arcgis.com/en/arcgis-storymaps/gallery/?rsource=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.esri.com%2Fen-us%2Farcgis%2Fproducts%2Farcgis-storymaps%2Fstories

_ Selected student projects:

https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/43f933f23153477885ab114bf7ff7b08

https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/b47cba93c8444183997a915e3670b652

https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/09cf1dfb9e38447a9b3aaec89b3cc1a4