

Building on Baldwin: Teaching Narratives, Spaces, and Synchronicities of Architecture and Literature

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FIG 1. Student exhibit flier 2003

This crucial day may be the day on which an Algerian taxi-driver tells him how it feels to be an Algerian in Paris.... It is the day he realizes that there are no untroubled countries in this fearfully troubled world; that if he has been preparing himself for anything in Europe, he has been preparing himself -for America.... Nothing will efface his origins, the mark he carries with him everywhere.
James Baldwin, "The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American"

James Baldwin's vision of the Algerian in 1948 as an oppressed people, speaks volumes to the ways he perceived himself in the world while living in the United States, prior to his first trip to Europe and many transatlantic crossings that followed. Regardless of his cosmopolitan career, however, Baldwin (1924-1987) firmly believed in the im-

portance of one's national and cultural origins, and spent much of his life writing about his roots in Harlem, Greenwich Village, and the Bronx. His focus on American identity in the world, or how he saw himself, his people, and country between mid- and late-twentieth century, inspired many scholars in literary and cultural studies. But Baldwin's essays and fiction have rarely been subject of courses that link textual with visual and architectural components, despite the fact that, as the above quotations demonstrate, his work resonates with complex issues of social space, and especially so given our current focus on transnationalism and globalized contexts of university education.

This essay uses as a springboard a collaborative, interdisciplinary teaching project designed by faculty members representing three interdisciplinary academic units at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor: The Program in American Culture, the Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, and the Center for Afroamerican and African Studies.¹ Two award-winning and collaboratively taught seminars for graduate and upper-level undergraduate students that arose from this project bring together race, urban space, narrative, and architecture with the works of Baldwin, who is among the most famous black queer American writers. The courses - Spaces of African American Identity Across the Atlantic: Exploring Architecture, Gender, and Race through James Baldwin's Works - resulted in diverse students' interpretations of Baldwin's writings and of the sites where

he lived, worked, and traveled as a Civil Rights activist and international intellectual. These interpretations involved manipulation of both literary and architectural tools and skills – reading and writing but also design and building – and explored the ways in which social space and built forms pertain to the notions of belonging and exclusion, the notions that in turn influence local and global, often violent, representations of (African) American identity.

As an expatriate, who made his home on three continents, James Baldwin was an internationally recognized spokesperson for both African American civil rights and what it meant to be American, Black, male, gay (or queer) and in European exile in the second half of the twentieth century. Hence, the courses locate their geographic and cultural frameworks as much in the United States as across the African Diaspora and the vestiges of what Paul Gilroy famously termed the “Black Atlantic” (Gilroy, 1993). The students followed Baldwin’s expatriate trajectories from Harlem/New York to Paris, then to Istanbul, and later back to France, and traced his preoccupations with the legacies of slavery, contemporaneous events, and predictions for America’s multiracial future, what in *The Fire Next Time* (1963) he termed the end of the last “white empire.”

The juxtaposition of the metaphorical representations of space – or literature/story – with the material representations of space – or architecture/design – serves to illustrate how urban imaginaries and national identity have been historically racialized (and gendered and sexualized) and eventually made “American” in this culture.² More specifically, the books, buildings, and cities studied in the courses that I discuss here help the students to understand the paradoxes underlying African American identity. The two issues that were central to both courses were identified by W.E.B. Du Bois at the cusp of the 20th century as “double consciousness” and the “color line” (Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903). More than half a century later, echoing Du Bois, James Baldwin described living in the United States as akin to living in the “house of bondage.” Both Du Bois and Baldwin saw African Americans as burdened with double consciousness – or the necessity of always seeing themselves through the racial gaze

of the white majority – and as victimized by color lines that were cutting across urban landscapes. African Americans were occupying both a distinct space of their own as blacks, or a group that was seen predominantly through their “race,” and as having no place at all in their own country, or as being constructed as the necessary Other to the model white “American.” Baldwin’s works were our guide in both courses as they offer interesting ways out of this dualism by opening up spaces for multiracial integration that challenge traditional architectural/architectonic and narrative/literary models of American identity.

Baldwin’s ideas also inspired specific assignments throughout the semester that culminated in an installation for public exhibit. The students worked through readings and theoretical issues by means of spatial interpretations and creative group projects. They achieved specific built exhibit formats and arrived at their underlying narrative explanations. In the pages that follow, I first discuss the rationale for the course and several assignments that led to the final exhibits. I then present the rich visual material from the exhibit/s, while touching upon some of the theoretical and disciplinary issues that we have grappled with in the process. Most important, I argue that interdisciplinary perspective, method, and assignments that myself and my co-teacher colleague employed in these courses helped the students to see themselves as readers and builders, that is, as agents shaping social space of their cities and countries, and, in short, as citizens in the “globalized” world.

1. FOUNDATIONS

When I and Magdalena Zaborowska, my co-teacher and literary and cultural studies scholar, first discussed a possibility of teaching a course that combined literature and hands-on architecture, we envisaged it as a capstone offering for all the three units we served: Architecture, American Culture, and Afroamerican Studies.³ We spoke of the rise of multiculturalism in the humanities and urban design for the 21st Century.

First we connected start-up ideas, and student ideals, to the course material and the works of James Baldwin. Having read Leslie Kanés Weisman’s (1994) and Liam Kennedy’s (2001) books, as well as healthy chunks of Henri Lefebvre’s *The*



FIG. 2 Assignment two: group project on social stereotypes using baby food jars as containers

Production of Space (1974) it was soon clear to our students that space and language were related, that all structures could be seen as telling stories because of their historic and social contexts and due to the cultural identities of those who design, build, and dwell in them. It was harder, however, to make them see how race operated in the midst of all this, no less because of the absence of race in Lefebvre's Marxist argument. An added challenge was the courses' specific emphasis on the spaces of the African Diaspora, which had often painful and traumatizing, or as Toni Morrison calls them "unspeakable," stories inscribed in them. We dealt with that by providing historic background information: e.g., the students learnt about slaveholding forts and castles in West Africa. We also read and had Magdalena lecture on slave narratives by Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass; we reviewed economic debates on chattel slavery. We specifically looked at race as a design process.

Our mini lectures on historic background from architectural and literary points of view helped the students to learn to identify, define, interrogate, and find ways to obscure and subvert the socially constructed boundaries set up to define African American identity as essentialized and biological. But we approached that particular identity as both metaphorical and material, that is, as both a theoretical or abstractly defined social construct and a tangible reality shaping and having consequences for people's lives. On a more general level, the students learned to understand the ways in which the invention of "race" had impact on how our communities had been designed and built and how we ourselves were products, victims, and perpetrators—often unwittingly--of racialized spatial politics in this country. This was important, as

white middle class students – usually the majority in our classrooms – are often sheltered from the realities of "minority" life.

At the same time as we wanted the students to become more knowledgeable about the ways in which American literature and culture segregated, stereotyped, and victimized Blacks, how they "spaced out" and made them invisible, we also wanted them to realize the resilience and power that minority populations demonstrated in this culture. Hence we studied "spaces of martyrology," such as lynching sites, for example, but we also emphasized the "spaces of reconciliation and dialogue." We presented these issues in international contexts, when it was relevant, for example, by looking at how countries like Germany and Poland dealt with the burdens of genocide, memory, and interracial healing, or how the heritage of the Holocaust influenced museum displays there (Auschwitz/Birkenau) and in the United States (Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C.). Thus, although acknowledging tremendous importance of this construct, the course encouraged the students to get away from the often reductive white-vs.-black racial dichotomy and interrogate the workings of race on social space as a wider, multicultural, and transnational issue.

Finally, and perhaps most basically, we wanted the students to acquire a certain level of sophistication about what it was that architects and "lit-and-cult" critics did and how we could use what these disciplines teach us in everyday life. Readings from Baldwin were very helpful, as we went around the room and employed everybody's skills to closely read and discuss his texts, select essays and novels, Giovanni's Room (1956) and If Beale Street Could Talk (1974), from various disciplin-

ary angles. Such a focus on one writer positioned at the center of a complex crossroads of interdisciplinary issues was deliberate. The students had to work with his texts intensely as they developed their understanding of the key theoretical concepts in the course – social space, race, gender, nation, texture, narrative, etc. – and this helped them to see the world and their own work from multiple and interdisciplinary points of view.

In terms of the instructors' division of labor, Magdalena was responsible for the narrative-based part of the course and I for the spatial. I presented my architectural work, "Spaces of the Black Atlantic," to show the students that my very site-based project was also about telling a story, the story of the African slave trade that many of them knew about only from history or literature. Within that story, I presented the spaces, castles, forts and dungeons, where many of the events they read about took place. The hope I had in offering such a format was that the spaces would come alive and the object/building, Cape Coast Castle in Ghana in this case, would become more than just indifferent objects and illustrations. Other presentations highlighted film, which I see as a perfect medium illustrating how space and narrative come together. I also explored the work of artists such as Mark Robins, who examines the space of gender and sexuality to problematize the exclusionary components of the spaces we occupy daily.

To a large degree, this class was therefore about training good readers of people, structures, and texts. The group-centered assignments and cross-group participation in the design and building of the final exhibit also led to their increased awareness of the presence and feelings of others, and to a greater ability to negotiate space and engage in spatial practice around others. Feminist critic and poet Adrienne Rich asks young people to "claim their own education"; we asked our students to "claim your place and space and learn to share and enjoy it with others." This led to their being active participants in and vigilant readers of social space, which in turn, we argued would lead them to question the notions of proverbial American individualism and unity, that is, as Baldwin says, to realize that "we are all in this together" as Americans and that spatial discrimination and racism hurt us all. This goal has gained particular urgency

these days, when my colleague and I contemplate revising the course, given how much architecture has been affected by the horrific tragedy of failed levees in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.⁴

2. ASSIGNMENTS

The goals for the courses were as follows: (1) understand the critical nature of cultural studies through both space and narrative, (2) develop heightened sensitivity to space, (3) learn to read space and narrative together as systems of mutually informative, and sometimes mutually dependent, representation, (4) learn and understand complex levels of communication through collective and collaborative assignments, (5) understand and experience the potential of interdisciplinary learning, (6) collaborate on building and displaying spatial interpretations. Let me first sketch how we went about fulfilling these, and then focus on a couple of assignments that show the specific coming together of narrative and architecture at the core of the course.⁵

Group projects and presentations, and especially the final university-wide exhibit showcasing the students' work, instilled in them an understanding of the learning process as an interdisciplinary and collaborative enterprise. There were 3-4 groups of 3-4 students in each course, and the group members were selected by the teachers to work together throughout the semester. The groups collaborated on and presented in class 3 process-based assignments that included written and spatial/built components. The assignments moved from 2D to 3D – posters, to small built objects, to "contained" identities, to multidimensional and multimedia shows – and were based around the readings we studied in class (see FIG 1 – 4). Each presentation also involved writing a short essay, either collectively or individually, that documented the process and argued for its goal. The group presentations were occasions for sharing the work, peer review, and discussion of the issues involved.⁶ The instructors would offer their on-the-spot critiques in class and then write up an evaluation and grade the groups after class (the written critique would be shared by all the students, but not the grades, which would be given to each group separately). The final assignment was cross-group collaboration on designing, ob-

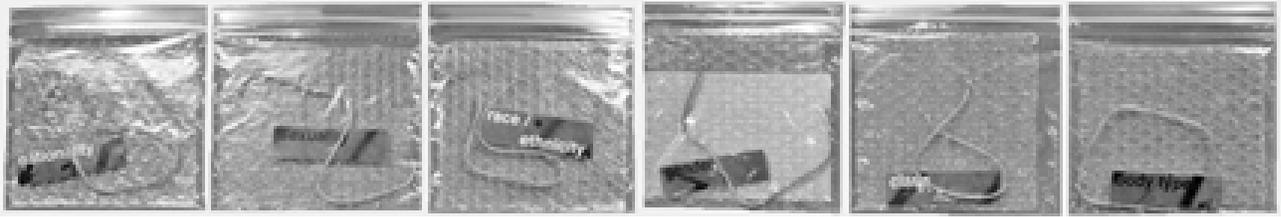


FIG 3. Assignment one: individual project of socially constructed containers that held topical photographs

taining material, construction, and running the closing, public exhibit for the course.⁷

Another important element was individual work and assignments: the creative journal, where the students were free to combine writing, art, clippings, music, and design to express their reactions to the readings, films, and discussion throughout the semester.⁸ We also devised a series of in-class exercises to lead the students to discover—rather than be told about—the ways in which the structure and design of our communities reflect the racialized and gendered divisions in the population. In the very first assignment, for instance, we asked the students to choose a random aspect of identity—race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or body type (they draw “lots” from a jar filled with slips of paper) and package their experience while reflecting on it the journal (see FIG 2). The assignment began with a lottery of identity aspects and instructions that the assignment had to be packaged in – in the case of the first class in the provided ziplock bag and in the case of the group assignment, in a baby food jar (see FIG 3). Then, armed with the cheapest, disposable camera in hand as their only recording device, the students walked around their neighborhoods and photographed places where they noticed “their” aspect of identity being somehow highlighted, built, or even repressed in the architecture. Following picture development, the students prepared a presentation in which they combined the visuals with a story they wrote documenting and explaining not just the final product, but also their individual process of getting there. For the teachers, as for the students who observed and commented on these first presentations, this was a good way to learn about those who were in the class with them; to see how they handled discussion and responses to their work.

For example, it was obvious to all in class that, while during the Jim Crow era the production of



FIG. 4 Assignment one: student, Kate’s, photograph of “plus size” department in dress store.

urban space was focused on keeping “blacks” and “whites” segregated, we could look for somewhat similar divisions elsewhere. But, “How about clothing stores?” as one of our students, who drew “body type” as her assignment, pointed out (see FIG 4). Kate (a slender person), visited a plus size shop for women for the first time in her life. Her discomfort in and sensitivity to her surroundings there, as well as her observation of the patrons at the store, made her aware of the stigma of “size” and segregation of body types in our society. She realized her own privilege as the owner of a more socially preferred figure; she felt like a trespasser among the plus-sized people inside the commercial space. She told us in class that she had never before realized it so acutely that segregated spaces were allocated to the bodies that were less acceptable and often stigmatized socially.

Kate’s narrative and presentation targeted her heightened sensitivity to how architecture and social space provide the backdrops in which we play out our lives, and in which we look at ourselves and see looking at us. In her write-up, she stressed that it is the emotional and phenomenal qualities of our lives that create and fill the spaces that we occupy daily. The discussion that followed



FIG. 5 Final public exhibit in the humanities building of the University of Michigan.

Kate's presentation helped the students to come to terms with the notions of identity politics and how identity understood as intersectional – or combing several aspects of identity at the same time – must be contextualized spatially. As Kate demonstrated, it mattered not only that the Plus Size clothes were set aside in the least attractive corner of the store, but also that most of the customers there were women, and that the store itself was next door to a Jennie Craig diet/weight loss center.

Final Exhibit: The exhibit is the most rewarding part of the course, for it gives a festive closure to the semester's work and, through audience's reactions, provides an immediate response to the students' finished collective project. We based the assessment of the exhibit on the overall final effect, as well as the process that was discussed and documented by the students individually and collectively. After the opening and reception, we met for the last class session in the exhibit area and talked about the final result and their feelings concerning it. (see FIG 5)

Overall, the course was successful in teaching students to effectively employ readings of architecture and space to discuss race and its effects on individuals and larger American society and culture. The students had a good sense about what each of the instructors did in her or his disciplines—we introduced ourselves and our work very thoroughly in the first class session and followed up on this in our respective presentations and minilectures throughout the semester. They also had a chance

to learn about it hands-on from the students who majored in those disciplines when they participated in the group assignments. All of the assignments reflected and facilitated learning about this as well, combing more "literary" projects with "architectural" ones, thus enabling the students to work with spatial interpretations and collaborative building of small-scale projects, as well as the large final exhibit that generated university-wide audience and linked their progress throughout the semester to a larger community.

WORKS CITED

(proper works cited yet to be completed)

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Kennedy, Liam. *Race and Urban Space in Contemporary American Culture* (2001)

Baldwin, James. *Giovanni's Room* (1956)

Essays

Baldwin, James. "If Beale Street Could Talk" (1965)

ENDNOTES

1. I taught the course with Prof. Magdalena J. Zaborowska from 2001- 06, and continue to repeated it. I am grateful to her for her feedback and comments on this paper.

2. While Baldwin's writings explore the complex inter-

sectionalities of gender, sexuality, and race all in equal measure, for the sake of clarity and due to spatial considerations, I am focusing mostly on race and how it inflects spatial practice and other aspects of identity in this paper.

3. The courses we ended up with lay foundations for courses that follow it and builds on what students had already learned in other courses, to a certain degree, in all of the disciplines we represent: very generally the 100- and 200-level offerings in American Culture (AC) and the Center for Afroamerican and African Studies (CAAS) provide basic introductory information on some of the literature and approaches that we take for granted in the students' background. The course attracts students from Magdalena's AC 205, "Narrating the Spaces of American Identity," who progressed beyond 300-level classes and, for the few able to take graduate-level classes, it is an excellent prelude to her AC 699, "In and out of the Burning House: James Baldwin's Architectures of Desire." For architecture graduate students preparing for thesis, it offers a good program of combining design-build, visual representations, and text-narrative ways of learning and performing.

4. When we teach the course again, we will include a component on New Orleans, where I conducted research in the aftermath of the disaster in 2006. This component would emphasize the "third world" image hiding like a skeleton in the closet in the midst of our "first world" superpower convictions.

5. I am skimming teaching strategies in the interest of space, but here they are briefly: (1) mini-lectures and multi-media presentations by the instructors (15-20 min max) with built in agendas for questions and lively discussion to follow, (2) ice breakers: epigraphs from readings or short announcements to open the session, (3) student reports or "news breaks" on anything of interest they might want to discuss in class, (4) discussing homework assignment and they worked out or not, before actually getting reports on them, (5) free writing on readings, (6) directed writing to get the class going toward the topics we want raised and addressed that day, (7) discussion, debates, prep in pairs before general exchange with the whole class, (8) Visual material presentations (slides, films, Power Point), (9) Film sessions held outside of class and structured as semi-social events and learning opportunities (we provided both pop-corn and hand-outs with information on the film and questions to be answered by students).

6. Group interactions were scheduled and conducted by the students outside of class. We could assess their effectiveness by the quality of work delivered in group presentation and the group dynamics during those. They students were all given the same grade for the assignment, as the grade reflected how well the work was shared by all.

7. I am grateful to all my units, and especially American Culture and CAAS for sponsoring the exhibits.

8. We'd periodically collect journals and give comments and grades. (We obtained everybody's agreement that we could share the journals in class and that any parts that a student wished to keep private could be excluded from those sessions). It was a little difficult to have

everybody use the journal as effectively as we would have wished, but by mid-term everybody had their own idea for it, although the final products still ranged from poor to excellent. We conducted a diagnostic session concerning the journals that helped us assess how it was working for each of the students.