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EULOGIES

Remembering James Baldwin

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Abstract

Associate Professor in the Department of Ethnic Studies, Ernest Champion was instrumental in bringing James Baldwin to the Bowling Green campus. Upon Baldwin's death, December 1, 1987, Champion wrote the following remembrance, which has not been previously published.

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In May 1976, I wrote a letter to James Baldwin inviting him to Bowling Green State University for a public lecture. I never knew him personally and I only had the address of his publisher in New York. I did not receive a reply for about a year and had forgotten all about my letter. Then one day, the reply came expressing his willingness to come to Bowling Green. Since then, James Baldwin has been closely associated with Bowling Green State University, as a writer-in-residence in the Department of Ethnic Studies and later as a Distinguished Visiting Professor.

Today, James Baldwin is dead at the age of 63.

James Baldwin left the United States in the 1950s saying to himself that—conditions were—some policeman in New York City would kill him or he would kill the first policeman calling him “nigger.” Therefore, his quiet return to the United States went rather unnoticed and he later revealed to us that the first public appearance since his return was at Bowling Green State University. Over the years, I have come to know Jimmy Baldwin as a writer, scholar, and as a person. I have been greatly impressed by the depth of his thoughts, the breadth of his vision, and most of all by his humanity. His deep concern for students in the classroom and his willingness to give freely of his time will, I am sure, be remembered by many of his students, graduate and undergraduate.

His books are a testimony to 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. In a speech delivered at Firelands campus in 1979, Baldwin went to the very core of the Black Experience when he said something that does not appear in any of his books—but those of us present were able to capture the importance of the moment and that statement. Baldwin said, “You landed us on the beaches and gave us the cross. You did not give us the Bible. We took that cross and fashioned a faith which you now do not understand.” He started life as a boy preacher. Baldwin’s style and themes almost parallel the exalted style of the King James version of the Bible and the theme of deliverance that runs from the Old Testament to the New.

Baldwin, however, was not a Christian in the formal sense. He had his own private quarrel with the Almighty. He once said, “If this is what the Almighty has given as his portion to Black children, then He and all his angels can go to blazing Hell.” However, there is another side to Baldwin which he very seldom revealed. On one occasion a group of students followed him from a class to the student union carrying on a conversation with him. At one stage, one of the students very abruptly asked him, “Mr. Baldwin, do you believe in God?” I was very interested in hearing what he would have to say. He thought for quite some time and finally said, “I believe that there is a purpose for my existence in this world. If I, for a moment, cease to believe that, life becomes intolerable. I believe there is a reason and a purpose for my coming to Bowling Green State University.” He did not say directly, “Yes, I believe in God.”

James Baldwin has been perhaps a writer who has been misunderstood and criticized for the wrong reasons. The criticism of James Baldwin in the 1980s is the criticism of those who think that he is only fighting the battles of the 1960s and, therefore, is of no relevance. The image is that of an angry Black man who has nothing new to say. This kind of criticism is not only misleading but most unfortunate. James Baldwin has been the most consistent of Black writers in America who has demanded and is demanding the impossible from the Western world. It is for that reason his relevance is going to be far greater in the 1980s than it has been in in the 1960s. His demand to the Western world is a demand for a new morality and a new conscience without which neither the United States nor the Western world has any future. In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin states the problem and the demand very simply. The impossible task that he calls for is that if “the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare and achieve our country, and change the history of the world.” The impossible is thus not a matter of convenience but a matter of conscience.

In *A Rap on Race* with Margaret Mead, Baldwin says, “You, your experience, and me, my experience, because your experience does not matter as Margaret Mead and my experience does not matter as Jimmy Baldwin. What does matter is what we can do with it, not for me, but for all those people who don’t know the discipline, the passion, the love.” It is because it is a matter of conscience that Baldwin also says in the same discussion, “It is terrible to watch people cling to their captivity and insist on their own destruction.” The meaning is very clear; the captivity of the Black man is also the captivity of the white man. What is of consequence is that the concern of James Baldwin is not the captivity and destruction of the Black man, but his concern is the captivity and destruction of the white man. His concern is about the captivity and destruction of all men and women who cling desperately to notions of power or superiority based upon considerations of color, race, or creed. One might even say it is a concern for the captivity of the Afrikaner in South Africa, the Catholic or the Protestant in Ireland, the Hausa in Nigeria—all the people who are unable to see that it is not possible to destroy or hurt other people without losing some part of one’s own self.

Perhaps the most famous of all James Baldwin’s writings has been *The Fire Next Time*. When he was on campus in 1979, he was invited to address an honors class and on that occasion for the first time revealed the circumstances leading to his writing *The Fire Next Time*. He had been invited by the editors of *New Yorker* magazine to visit the West Coast of Africa and to send them impressions of his experiences. His first stop was at Dakar, the capital of Senegal. He was taken on a visit to an elementary school. It was a lesson in history and the textbook read, “Our ancestors who came from Gaul.” Baldwin said he was surprised because he knew that Gaul was the ancient name for France and all the children in the classroom were African. In that instant he says his mind went back to Black children in classrooms in America. Riding in a Jeep the same day and the day after over

bumpy roads in West Africa, Baldwin started writing not about Africa, but about America and America's children. He said, "When a white child in America reads history, he hears the footfall of the Greek and the Roman, but when the Black child reads history, he does not hear the footfall of the African."

The Department of Ethnic Studies and Bowling Green State University have been greatly enriched by the presence of James Baldwin in our classrooms and corridors. I do know this—that we in the Department of Ethnic Studies have never been the same since Baldwin came to be with us and to be a part of us. It is a memory we shall always cherish.