



THE WRITER'S PLACE IN CIVIC SPACE: Literature as a Means to Social Justice

Konrad Kelly

“The endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity, human authority, contains, for all its horror, something very beautiful.”

James Baldwin

Introduction

To write for social justice is to assert that seemingly ordinary subjective experience can be the grounds for greater insight, that the content of experience is rich and can be tapped into deeply through a common communicative fire. To write for social justice is to respect and bear witness to traditions of narrative and dreams of liberation that are rearticulated with each passing generation. Social justice writers can speak to the stark realities of our world, yet they retain a trust in the better angels of our nature.¹

Collective narrative and imagination become important tools to educate and to challenge the dominant ideologies and stigmas of our times. Some write in solitude, others amongst the movement of many. We may think of social change as acts performed around a pivotal turning point, such as when hundreds or thousands take to the streets. And yet, what often precedes such snapshots in history are the years of dedicated citizen activists sharing ideas and seeking the means to persuade. Written records can help one connect with the vast experiences of those who suffer and sing, fall and rise, and build newfound bridges of sympathy and compassion towards those who do not yet see. It is out of these convictions that three tremendous writers who emerged from the African diaspora—Ta-Nehisi Coates, Claudia Rankine, and James Baldwin—were keen on the

¹ The phrase “the better angels of our nature” was used by Lincoln in his First Inaugural Address; it connotes the positive, constructive, and good actions and feelings of human beings. Abraham Lincoln, [“Abraham Lincoln: First Inaugural Address,” Bartleby.com](#), 2015.

weight of words. They knew culture as a narrative that can be rewritten, transformed, and made found again. These visionaries make clear what is often so hard to accept or apprehend about the human condition by integrating their own subjective experiences with those of others and the greater cultural and historical context; they teach that in the struggle against oppression we may behold some glimmers of justice.

Ta-Nehisi Coates

What is startling when stepping into Ta-Nehisi Coates's writing is how quickly you are thrown into the raw subjectivity of his being in the world. Using the memoir style, and written as a loving letter to his son, *Between the World and Me* explores Coates's lifetime struggle to cultivate in himself the very tenderness of heart that is so often denied to black individuals in our white supremacist society. It is Coates's persistent challenge to combat the sometimes overbearing fear and self-hatred that has been inflicted upon him by American racism. Racism is woven into the fabric of his world, continually threatening to take away both his well-being and his body. Whether he is out in the inner-city streets of Baltimore or in the very schools that make him feel that he does not belong, for Coates, racism is visceral, found in the near-constant fear of becoming broken by the all-too-threatening cops and gangs.

Given the stark hostility of his world, Coates notices that he has a tendency to fall into delusional and idealistic imaginings as a means to cope. Coates recounts how desperately he sought to believe in something in order to quell his pain of living in an unjust society. He loses himself—whether in the American Dream, as flashed to him on the TV screen, or in the hopes of some inevitable black liberation. Yet Coates comes to see what African American poets had long retold and recounted: there is an inherent struggle in social change which is accompanied by both great loss and revived hope throughout generations. And although it is hard to accept the brutal conditions that reality might present, it is this existential acknowledgement that gives him the courage and humanity to confront racism.

In *Between the World and Me*, Coates recalls being in a theater with his son, Samori. He shares how a white woman shoved four-year-old Samori out of her way and then scolded him for merely dawdling. In that moment, Coates confronted that woman, pointing out clearly the wrongness in her belief that the violation of Samori's space was justified. However, some white people in the theater defended the woman and attempted to shut Coates down. But the author stood firm in his conviction that black bodies should be treated with dignity by walking out in defiance, hand in hand with his son. By teaching Samori that he can rightfully choose to defy acts of injustice, he affirms what is right and what is true. Coates teaches his son (and his readers, through his writing) that racism should not merely be tolerated, and he calls upon us all to engage with the beautiful struggle²

² In reference to his memoir: Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons, and an Unlikely Road to Manhood* (New York, NY: Spiegel & Grau, 2009).

that is life. His message can be understood most clearly when he tells his son: "I would not have you descend into your own dream. I would have you be a conscious citizen of this terrible and beautiful world."³

Claudia Rankine

Jamaican American poet, playwright, and professor Claudia Rankine recently caught attention after the publication of her newest collection of poems entitled *Citizen: An American Lyric*. In part, what is stunning about her work is its contemporary language, themes, and expressivity relevant to today's metropolitan discourse. She explores what it is like to experience twenty-first-century racism in American society. In *Citizen*, Rankine confronts this question and delves into the nuance and complexity of identity formation in the face of a white supremacist society. The book explores her own subjectivity and discomfort while experiencing "situations"⁴ of a racism that is often subtle and implied. These *microaggressions*⁵ often leave her perplexed and at a loss for words, and the ensuing rumination lingers from these accumulated moments.

Rankine's poems seem at times to be stream-of-consciousness, drifting from tableau to tableau through memory: micro to macro, personal to historical. She explores the subjectivity of racism from angles of both victim and victimizer. Beginning the book with her personal narrative, she interlaces her experience with those of other black Americans. From the tennis player Serena Williams's experiences of discrimination to the unjust execution of Trayvon Martin, Rankine attempts to reveal narratives that speak to racism's effects on the greater social condition, placing into light what was before implicit.

Another theme that Rankine explores is the belief that the United States has achieved the status of a "post-racial society," which gives white people a sense that they need not be cognizant of, or inhibit, the ways in which they still are racist. Paradoxically, this belief that we live in a "post-racial society" gives leverage and space to racism of a different and covert kind. Rankine examines how some white urban Americans shield themselves against the possibility of their own racism in order to maintain the perception that they have not fallen from a distinctive social grace. The author highlights the fact that contemporary racism often takes the form of microaggressions. She recounts being amongst a group of white urban professionals who accept the presence of microaggressions towards her while within their company. Rankine explores the effects of these experiences on her psyche and the aching desire to confront the very racism that meets her so often and unexpectedly.

³ Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 108.

⁴ Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2014), 13-8, 33, 41-51 78, 159.

⁵ "A microaggression is any comment, attitude, action, or gesture individuals experience as inappropriate or hurtful based on their personal history and characteristics" (192). For example: telling a Latin@ student that they are "articulate" simply for participating (196) implies lower expectations for Latin@ students and can make them feel like they are not seen as equally capable. Tamra Stambaugh, and Donna Y. Ford, "Microaggressions, Multiculturalism, and Gifted Individuals Who Are Black, Hispanic, or Low Income," *Journal of Counseling & Development* 93, no. 2 (2015) : 192-201.

One can see throughout the work's progression a rising confidence sung in her lyric. She contends with the utterances abounding from her heart: "*take your foot off your throat because just getting along shouldn't be an ambition.*"⁶ Here, as in other grappling moments, she acknowledges and defies the daily injustice hurled at her with an affirmation of her own right to presence, voice, and respect. And yet defiance for her does not require the validation or confrontation of the person who committed the microaggression. It comes, rather, through her own wisdom and resilience in moving on.

Rankine's message acknowledges the history of progress that has already been made in the social sphere while also recognizing that there are still more steps to be taken. What the book is asking white people to do is to become aware of the lingering scripts of racism that still persist in the United States. It is only when these socially prescribed scripts and conventions have been done away with that society will, in a holistic way, be able to move on. If we as writers, readers, and thinkers alike can be made aware of insights about our social condition and then act in diverse and creative ways to change it, then we will have done what writing often asks us to do—to *respond*.

James Baldwin

James Baldwin's 1963 book *The Fire Next Time* calls urgently for Americans of all races to see themselves as fellow countrymen in order to transcend the racism that corrodes American society.⁷ Baldwin recounts his experiences facing racism, from being stopped and frisked repeatedly by police in Harlem when he was a boy, to undergoing the fear and feelings of inferiority that come from living in a white supremacist culture. Baldwin interweaves narrative with essayistic prose in order to connect his subjectivity with the greater context. He reflects upon his Christian upbringing and abusive father who wanted him to become a minister. And although the Church does bring him some consolation through community, ultimately he realizes there is hypocrisy in their interpretation of the Bible. To him, the Church preaches passivity and suffering in this life in hopes of a changed afterlife. Baldwin, however, comes to see that people must confront the realities of their situation and stand up for justice to be realized in *this* world.

After breaking with Christianity, Baldwin finds himself agnostic, yet chooses to meet with members of the Nation of Islam, sensing the growing popularity and inspiration the group had been arousing. Baldwin comes to see the way whiteness is linked to American Christianity when he hears a black Muslim minister sing: "The white man's Heaven is the black man's hell." This lyric reminds him of the violent history of slavery and the separation experienced by members of the African diaspora from the continent's religions and spiritualities that were considered "pagan."⁸ Baldwin was intrigued by the radical political message of the Nation of Islam, and was introduced to its central religious and political Muslim minister, Elijah Muhammad. "The central quality in Elijah's face,"

⁶ Rankine, 55.

⁷ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial Press, 1963).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 59.

Baldwin writes, “is pain, and his smile is a witness to it—pain so old and deep and black that it becomes personal and particular. . . . One wonders what he would sound like if he could sing.”⁹

Baldwin writes of the Nation of Islam’s appeal, connection to African history, and the sense of empowerment that it brought to many of his African American peers. However, Baldwin did not himself convert, as he did not like the antagonization of whites and desire for power and superiority that were being preached as part of its dogma. Instead, he stood by the conviction that there could be a transcendence of racial strife in American culture, since, “Color is not a human or a personal reality; it is a political reality.”¹⁰ He believed the task of Americans was to stand united as countrymen rather than remain divided by race, class, and gender. This is why Baldwin insisted that “[t]he price of the liberation of white people is the liberation of the blacks . . . the total liberation, in the cities, in the towns, before the law, and in the mind.”¹¹ Baldwin says that it is only when America matures that she will see her imperialism at home and abroad, seek to heal her wounds, and realize the spiritual quality of those wounds as much as their social significance.¹²

It is interesting because although Baldwin is agnostic and *The Fire Next Time* was written as a secular text, he nonetheless has a deep reverence in his conviction that “[t]he political institutions of any nation are always menaced and are ultimately controlled by the spiritual state of that nation.”¹³ In saying this, Baldwin affirms that there is something more profound to structural racism than what could simply be explained through any social or political analysis. Instead, structural racism is embedded in the very cultural narrative passed down and reiterated generation by generation. The character of these cultural myths, ultimately, dictates and influences our interactions with other members of our society. In our divisive racist American mythos, groups are named and relations defined in terms of an essentialized group character. The narrative of racism, as that of classism, or patriarchy, prevents the expression of a unified national character amongst citizens because it maintains that we are within categories before we are people. Baldwin, through his writing, wants to illuminate the dominant cultural narrative. In recognizing the symbolic, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of racial oppression, he points to a crucial domain of social change.

Writing For Social Justice

What is powerful about the artistic and literary expressions of these writers is that they recognize cultural space as an avenue to expand civic space. This is to say that our culture’s narratives and myths have huge sway over our interactions with other citizens, whether or not this sway is perceived or subconscious. When, for example, Baldwin confides his personal experience to his readers, he is hoping to provoke empathy in them so that they may reconsider or even challenge the

⁹ Ibid., 78.

¹⁰ Ibid., 118.

¹¹ Ibid., 111.

¹² Ibid., 124-7.

¹³ Ibid., 102-3.

assumptions ingrained in their minds by the dominant narrative. For Rankine, throwing the reader into the stress, strain, and confusion of her everyday experience also provokes empathy and urges the reader to break past their complicity and consider the possibility of their own twenty-first-century racism. Likewise, in his heartfelt letter to his son, Coates's shifting use of memoir and essayistic styles captivate his readers by speaking to both their hearts and minds. Writing is not merely rational, but also capable of evoking emotive states of compassion and solidarity: it seeks to create a place where new voices can speak to the suffering and need for justice in our times. These writers call us to challenge the status quo that hides truth and leaves the dispossessed to the shadows.

As student writers we have the privilege to spend this valuable college time learning from diverse and marginalized voices in our society, whether locally, nationally, or globally. The humanities, whether at Evergreen or other higher educational institutions, are in the process of being pushed aside by a culture whose value judgements are driven by markets and materialism rather than grounded in our concern for quality of life and human dignity.¹⁴ When we engage seriously with the humanities, we are challenging the notion that our society is purely rational and beyond criticism. To engage seriously with the humanities is to value integrity over efficiency and consumption; writers who have understood this sought to elevate the quality of discourse, seeking and sharing wisdom rather than disengaging from a discussion that would, without them, be made by the powerful alone.

Coates, Rankine, and Baldwin understood the hurt in their culture and had the courage and vision to confront it. If we are to write for social justice, we must then learn to use the pen or the keyboard as a torch to illuminate our culture's ideologies. If we are to write for social justice, we must break with the dominant exclusive narrative; we must develop critical thought and concern for the marginalized; we must strive for a society that recognizes human dignity within all of us. And what better time is there to write than now? Whether that be to challenge the naive optimism of metropolitan techno-saviorists¹⁵ or the meritocratic and late-capitalist vision of progress that reinforces existing forms of oppression, your writing can bridge civic and cultural space. Who else will acknowledge the stark conditions that people face, the climate change denialism of the fossil fuel industries, and the endemic racism, xeno- and Islamophobia in modern twenty-first-century institutions and cultures? When we see how writing can be ripe with moral conviction and insight, we can better connect with our own agency and become aware of the conditions of others around us in society. Hold fast to the transformative potential of writing for self-reflection and social consideration that is necessary before there can be social change. If we can learn from the determination and hope of writers the likes of Coates, Rankine, and Baldwin, we might just become more resilient and wiser in the process.

¹⁴ Ella Delaney, "[Humanities Studies Under Strain Around the Globe](#)," *The New York Times*, December 1, 2013.

¹⁵ Techno-fundamentalism is the belief that technological advances and innovations will by themselves lead to social progress inevitably. Felix Stalder, "[The Googlization of Google](#)," *Computational Culture*, September 28, 2012.