

“Reflections”

By Emmanuel Agyemang-Dua L’22

I stared at the prompt long enough that it embarrassed me. I knew what was being asked of me; however, I was embarrassed. I was embarrassed that a writing contest was my reason for reflection and contribution. The sentiments of the *Fire Next Time* are part and parcel of a dialogue that has transcended time, fueled by a reality reluctantly transported behind poetic admonitions and engaging anecdotes. In his genius Baldwin understood that the promise to heal and reconcile the pains of injustice was not going to be fulfilled by external entities. His letter to his nephew served two purposes. The first was to confer lessons of ownership to his nephew against his unjust world. The second was a gift.

The ‘black dialogue’ is a bloody tapestry of shared experiences of injustice that effectively connects mothers mired in poverty to black Yale students found sleeping in the common area. It is the veil through which we understand the anger, and the heaviness experienced when a black body lies lifeless and cold. It is the discussion on CNN and the sermons in church about how twelve-year old Tamir Rice can be executed while playing with a toy gun. The ‘black dialogue’ however is inanimate; operated only by the rage of the system in which it exists.

What is concerning is the posture that has been assumed against injustice. The impression of the ‘black dialogue’ has been dissipated by gross injustice against black America. I am embarrassed to say that my realization that the weight of the ‘black dialogue’ had dissipated was a chance discovery. I was not old enough to have experienced the police brutalization of Rodney King but the emotions of anger and helplessness incited by the acquittal of the officers was not foreign to me thanks to the ‘black dialogue.’ What was missing for me was the sense of urgency, which I imagine fueled discussions in many spaces about black bodies in America.

Black bodies in multiple arenas of life have been a discussion point. To be specific, these discussions have been framed with the presupposition that black bodies are a liability in white spaces. To make a more vivid point, discussions about unwarranted killing of black teens, and the deterioration of the black psyche is underlined by the impressions that Baldwin relays in his writing: “[we] were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity...that [we are] worthless human being.” Yet still, efforts to ameliorate the plight of black America through discourse proved to be therapeutic. For many of my friends and family, it was a way to heal.

We revered this gift Baldwin conferred to us. But perhaps we revered it to our disadvantage. When Officer Darren Wilson was charged for the murder of Michael Brown some seven years ago, the urgency to act was readily available. Here was an experience unlike the King case that I could readily identify. The ‘black dialogue’ gave me perspective and comfort, but it robbed me of my security. It robbed me of ownership of my own body, and ownership of my circumstances.

The current anti-racism movement is infantile and dependent. The anti-racism movement is not the spark-plug for change that I imagined it would be; it is reactive and inconsistent. I wish it weren’t so. In my reflection of Baldwin’s *Fire Next Time*, I derived two purposes: the lesson of ownership to his nephew and the gift (‘black dialogue’). The ‘black dialogue’ is reactionary. The anti-racism movement is marketed to a people who have seared their conscience against the existence of racism. How would they know what they believe isn’t so? I see no impression of the movement on black people in the future. Black people must not be the addressees of the movement. Our posture against injustice should not turn on the possibility of change in our adversaries. Baldwin relayed to his nephew that “to act is to be committed and to be committed is to be in danger.” The danger however is not in the minds of white America, as he communicated, but in the minds of black Americans. The true gift was Baldwin’s lesson of ownership. As an aspiring black lawyer, I hope to repurpose the anti-racism movement not to react to injustice but to occupy white spaces. Our legal system

has been slow to evolve; refusing to address the discrepancies in the justice system. The urgency to change is, unfortunately, lost on those who have been the gatekeepers of our justice system. As an aspiring black lawyer, the onus is placed on me to evolve the system not only through dialogue but in deeds. If movement activist become the gatekeepers. If they commit against the dangers of change, there will be no need to make demands for change.