

Kuniya Asobayire

Program: Citizens Thinkers Writers at Yale University

University: New York University

Texts: *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches* of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

Bio: Kuniya Asobayire is a first-generation Ghanaian-American and lives in New Haven, Connecticut. She participated in the Citizen, Thinker, Writer program at Yale University during the summer of 2019. Kuniya graduated from James Hillhouse High School in 2020 and will be attending New York University as an anticipated International Relations major. She enjoys debate, cooking, and cheerleading.

Profile: In Kuniya’s application to the Teagle Fellowship, she wrote extensively about what it felt like to grow up never quite fitting into the communities that she had lived in: “I was timid as a child. My early years were spent in a neighborhood where nobody looked like me, or whose hair curled and coiled like mine...I began to feel unimportant. When I moved to my parents’ home country of Ghana at seven years old, and was deemed the American kid, I felt out of place. Each time I was called chingilingi (an Akan slur towards underweight persons), or teased because I could not comprehend my Ghanaian Language lessons, I receded into a thick shell and fell mute.”

Indeed, as someone who could not find an easy place in either America or Ghana, Kuniya struggled at first to understand her own identity. But when she first read “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou, she discovered a kindred spirit: “I smiled each time Angelou acknowledged the hardships she faced then immediately shot back, declaring, ‘But still I rise.’ The hair on my skin tingled as the words seemed to speak to me and call me by my name.”

When Kuniya was selected as a Teagle Humanities Fellow, she came to the task knowing the power of words to redefine not only her understanding of the world but also her own self. In choosing to read *A Call to Conscience: the Landmark Speeches* of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates, Kuniya particularly wanted to analyze the multifaceted nature of racial injustice in America. Working with her mentor, Yanette Rosario, she contrasted the specific historical context of Martin Luther King Jr.’s advocacy in the Civil Rights Movement to the contemporary world of Ta-Nehisi Coates.

She saw Dr. King, who was fighting for basic rights in a time of lawful segregation and widespread disenfranchisement, as “demanding action through public speeches.” With the battle for racial equality left unfinished even fifty years later, she turned to Coates to understand why. Reading his letter to his son, Kuniya came to believe that one step towards racial equality is the “unlearning of ideas.” While Kuniya noted that race is an idea or construct “created as a concept to enforce superiority and division” she described real effects:

“Race in America means who gets called back for a job and who does not when the employer reads their name. Race in America means whose life is considered worth saving on a deathbed in the hospital room.”

For Kuniya and Ta-Nehesi Coates, the net effect of race in America is the ever-present existence of fear in the Black body. Kuniya explained how Coates uses the form of a letter to his son to “narrate with anger at America, but with images of fear in each paragraph.” She affirmed the sheer weight of fear that permeates through the Black body in America cannot be understated:

“Fear for Black people in America at large is a persistent, aching emotion. Once a Black body is birthed in America and gains consciousness of its surroundings, it retreats to crippling fear. How can one live confidently in a space knowing that they can be taken out of it in an instant?... Fear lives in the Black body and cannot escape for all the days it lives in America. The solution to Black fear eluded Kuniya, as she reflected, “there is no physical action that can be performed to instantly eliminate this fear.” She adds:

“To obtain racial and social justice, America must pinpoint that non-physical endeavors take precedence over physical endeavors. The erasure of racial inequity extends much deeper than physical actions; it involves the unlearning of ideas, reconstruction of systems, and eliminating fear.”