

Rafael Escoto

Program: Freedom and Citizenship at Columbia University

University: St. Lawrence University

Texts: James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* and Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

Bio: Rafael Escoto was born in the Dominican Republic and currently resides in Washington Heights. He attended Columbia University's Freedom and Citizenship program in 2019 and graduated Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning School in 2020. He will now be entering St. Lawrence University. Rafael has been a musician for over seven years and hopes to bring his talents to his campus.

Profile: Before joining Columbia's Freedom and Citizenship program, Rafael Escoto confessed he was unaware of the education inequities in America, even though they directly affected him. Before the program, he explains, "I was unaware of the value and strength of my voice." Something changed for Rafael as he read through the syllabus: "Through the broadening genres of texts, from philosophers such as Socrates and even Frederick Douglas, I was able to see life through not just a single lens."

For his Teagle Humanities Fellowship, Rafael probed similar themes of overcoming fear and oppression with his mentor Zach Roberts. Rafael turned to James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* and Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*. In his final paper, Rafael seamlessly connected the current pandemic with the context of Coates' semi-autobiography. He agreed with Coates' contention that "black bodies are always exposed to risk, and the exposure to risk leaves the black body in a vulnerable position." While sympathetic to Coates' experiences as a father to a black son, Rafael was concerned about the way Coates "leans towards fear."

Whereas Rafael found Coates' response to fear wanting, he was inspired by James Baldwin, who "uses his identity as a writer to move past the adversities thrown at him." For Coates, "fear is a limitation where stepping outside your home as a black person or person of color leaves you in a vulnerable state. Yet for Baldwin, fear is more of a motivating factor for grit. He need not worry about the expectations society has on him because he knows his worth." As Rafael discovered the strength of his own voice, he was particularly motivated by Baldwin's insistence on personal bravery.