

## The Untouchable Box

Over the course of this semester, my GESM-110 classmates and I have covered many social and political topics within our discussion of poetry and plays. Politics has always been a topic that individuals avoid discussing because it's too "controversial". Yet, the writers we have studied took on their moral responsibility to express the truth about what was happening during their times. However, when writers reveal truth and convey their self-expression, they are often received with negativity and pressure. When writers write about the political climate they witnessed during their time, they expose the reality of peoples and institutions' sociopolitical views through their use of words and depict a picture to the audience. By doing this, they have touched the untouchable box, politics, which makes some people uncomfortable.

Carolyn Forché, an established anthropologist for human rights, addresses poetry of witness as the personal, political, and the social. She defines the personal poem as a "personal experience that is inner and may not be seen to be affected by larger concerns" (p.31). The political poem "conveys a point of view" (p. 31). This point of view is the writer's stance on the political climate. In our class discussions, we also discovered that most films embody a point of view that can either reject or reinforce the status quo. The third term Forché uses is the social, which she defines as a "blend of the personal and political concerns" (p.31). Another important term that Forché uses is voice. When one finds their voice, it means that one gets one's own feelings into one's own words and that the words have the feel of the personality about the individual. Written voices are connected to a writer's actual voice and mentions that it is "a conscious savoring of words". Forché's anthology presents poets who explored their voice in personal, political, and social ways during times of war, imprisonment, discrimination, and exile.

Growing up in a predominantly black and brown neighborhood, I constantly watch how the system instills fear amongst my community. I attended a high school in South Central Los Angeles where every other week, the school officers would pull out 5 of my classmates because we had “random searches”. I remember when I first got pulled out of class, I had this officer that was rather intimidating and made me pull out all my notebooks and flip through each page, take out all my pencils and markers from my pencil bags, go through my lunch bag, and dig every pocket of my backpack. Afterwards, he proceeded to say “*you're clear, you can go back to class*”. This was the first time I felt completely naked in a sense; this officer had just made me dig through my backpack and search me. I don't know if this procedure was preparing me for once I stepped outside school or if it was just another school procedure that was instilled in every school even outside of my community, which I highly doubt. Additionally, everyday after school when my friends and I would go to a mandatory tutoring session that was held at the university, the campus officer approached us and asked “*what are you young ladies doing here ?*”, and we responded by telling him that “*we were high school students that were partnered with the university, and we were just here for after school tutoring.*” We started leaving the campus, but the officer was still following; he eventually left us alone once we were outside the campus. I didn't understand why he was following us at all, for we had told him why we were here; this was certainly not the first time that we had come to campus.

On the other hand, not only were there officers at school and in my neighborhood, but they were also on public transportation. I would always take the 754 towards Harbor Freeway Station to get home and on *Vermont/ Normandie, Vermont/Slauson, Figueroa / Manchester, Western/ MLK*, and the transit officers would always get on the bus and check if we had all paid the \$1.75 fee. These officers also got on the train *Western/Exposition, Slauson Station, Florence*

*Station, 7th Street* and went from person to person, or they were on the stop waiting to check. I noticed that they were only present in my neighborhood and not in others. Was it not enough that my friends and I already received stares on public transportation or when we would go out to eat at Santa Monica or when we would randomly drive into a checkpoint when going home or when we hear the police helicopter roaming around every night because there's a "suspect" on the loose. These are just some encounters I have faced as a person of color in Los Angeles .

Claudia Rankine, an American poet and artist whose work focuses on racism and the call for social justice, helped me realize that the people and the institutions are all the same in the United States. Her book, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, recounts ongoing racial aggressions in the twenty-first century, both in one's daily life and in media. These encounters that Rankine depicts range from a casual slip in the tongue, microaggressions, to being intentionally offensive, like in sports fields, the supermarket, TV, classrooms- she eventually depicts it as being anytime anywhere.

As said previously, I attended a high school in South Central, and I was part of the Leslie and William McMorrow Neighborhood Academic Initiative. In my senior year, we were invited to watch *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* , and the special guest was Mark Hamill. At the end of the movie there was a Q and A. As he concluded, he said these 6 words that I will never forget: "*you guys are my favorite charity*". These words felt like he completely degraded my classmates and I. Not only is there a stigma attached to us, but this wealthy man/ icon that may have had some influence upon my peers said this about us. To this day, I still want to understand why he said this. Was it that if it weren't for his donations we wouldn't have access to higher education or that if it weren't for his money we would end up being like our parents and fall into bad steps or that maybe he just meant this is in a *nice way*. As Claudia Rankine states, "*The*

*accumulative stresses come to bear on a person's ability to speak, perform, and stay alive*”(p. 148). Not only did his words affect how I now perceive the wealthy, but made me work harder, not only for my family but also for myself and be capable of reaching my goals. Thanks to these words, I am now one step closer to achieving one of my goals. Someday in the future, I will be able to give back to my community. Mark my words.

2020 has definitely been the year of change. Not only were we exposed to a deadly virus, COVID-19, but we were also exposed to another virus, racism. Racism has always existed, and although slavery was abolished, anti-blackness is still very much alive as of today. Americans are sick of the system killing yet another Black American. When will their lives be valuable? When are they going to matter? Now there's several Americans that say why can't "All Lives Matter?" To them I say, until Black Lives Matter, All Lives don't Matter. If it weren't for Black Americans then People of Color wouldn't have the rights we have today. They fought with us in our battles, and it's only right for us to do the same. I recently learned that Los Angeles has a \$3 billion dollar budget and spent \$200 million in police. Some of that money can be spent on our low-income communities, the homeless community, schools, mental-health, employment, Planned Parenthood, eliminating fare fees, and meals for children. These are just some ways we can help improve our community instead of instilling fear.

In Los Angeles County, 902 citizens have been murdered by law enforcement since 2000 (LA Times, 2020). Several of them were unarmed minors. Despite evidence of police corruption and misconduct D.A. Lacey has publicly condoned each of these executions as a justified use of force. Mayor Garcetti has pledged to increase law enforcement funding. The safest communities in America have consistently maintained minimal police presence; this shows that there's more safety when there's less cops. However, in predominantly black and brown communities, there's

an overwhelming amount of police presence that has caused fear, violence, corruption, inhumane practices, and countless preventable deaths. History has proven that policing doesn't keep people safe. On average, the U.S law enforcement murders 1,000 citizens per year (Washington Post, 2020). In an interview with Nikki Giovanni, James Baldwin says that "*a cop is a cop, he may be a very nice man, but all I know is that he has a uniform and a gun, and that's how I have to relate to him*" (Soul! S1 E4) . It is so important for us to bring attention and speak up so we see the change.

In conclusion, I feel that as a society, as of now, we must acknowledge that politics is such an important factor in our everyday life. Having that political voice enables us to speak up when injustices are perceived. It's a call to action, and the overall purpose of a government is to be the voice of the people. We have to demand for change and expose the truth, and the writers we studied in class clearly do this in their work. It seems that before our generation and maybe still, no writer wanted to be associated with politics because they were either afraid of criticism or the effect this had on their career. As a society, we human beings have to normalize politics in all its ways, since it is ethical to be the voice of every American. Show up for the 545 children who are currently alone without their parents. Show up for everyone whose life has been lost due to COVID-19. Show up for those who have lost their innocent lives in the hands of the police. Show up for those who are undocumented. Show up for those that don't have the privilege to vote. Vote with all of them in mind.

Our voices are our power. It's the only way to demand change.

#### Work Cited

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