

Henry J. Seyue

Program: Citizens Thinkers Writers at Yale University

University: University of Connecticut

Texts: *The Portable Frederick Douglass* and James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

Bio: Henry J. Seyue is a third year Political Science & Economics major From New Haven, Connecticut. He attended high school at Metropolitan Business Academy, where he graduated in 2018. Upon graduating from high school, Henry matriculated at Benedict College where he served as a Legislative Lead for Save the Children Action Network, as well as being a Dean’s List student, and the school’s first Frederick Douglass Global Fellow. Henry now attends the University of Connecticut, where he has since become an assistant Editor for the *UConn Political Review*, interned in the D.C. office of Senator Richard Blumenthal, and is currently pursuing his Master of Public Policy along with his Bachelor of Science.

Profile: Henry is no stranger to grappling with the personal implications of complex texts. In his application essay to the Teagle Humanities Fellowship, he wrote about reading W.E.B. Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folks* for the first time as a 17-year-old black man. He wrote that, initially, he “wholly rejected many of Du Bois’ propositions” because he wanted to determine his own course in life, rather than being “merely a victim to circumstances outside of my control.” But in grappling particularly with the chapter “On the Coming of John,” Henry found his still-malleable beliefs challenged by Du Bois.

Henry’s drive towards self-awareness through nuanced readings of classic texts carried into his work at the Teagle Humanities Fellowship, where with his mentor Stephanie Nevin, he tackled James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* and *The Portable Frederick Douglass*. He was particularly interested in modern political division, noting that “in a hyperpolarized America, the conversation over national symbols has again landed us in a house divided.” He dedicated his studies in the Fellowship to unpacking and understanding the varied histories of monuments and symbols currently receiving criticism.

Henry explored these symbols in America through the lens of Baldwin’s notion of deliberate construction by examining the intention behind each artifact. He noted that with symbols like the Confederate flag, “knowing its purpose tells us that it was unmistakably intended to perpetuate the exact white supremacy that we vehemently detest today.” While Henry found no redeeming qualities in the Confederate flag, he was more sympathetic towards symbols that were not created to be racist or incendiary, such as the Lincoln Emancipation Memorial. The Memorial, which was commissioned by freed slaves, depicts a half-naked black man kneeling at Lincoln’s feet. Quoting from Frederick Douglass’ speech at the Memorial’s dedication, he argues that modern Americans should be more sympathetic to the freedmen and women who chose to portray their own slavery in such a way. While criticism of Lincoln is valid, he writes, the Memorial has “effects which align with American values that work against racism, thus it is a symbol that should be embraced.”



Working to capture the essence of American values, Henry’s essay tackled the project of determining which symbols should be removed and which should be venerated. With so many discourses about removing racist statues in light of the Movement for Black Lives this summer, Henry’s essay makes strides in articulating a way to evaluate these attempts at removal in pursuit of a better future. “Douglass urges us to think holistically about the purpose and effects of a symbol,” Henry wrote, “and then to consider how some valuable symbols can be better depicted.” In the end, he returned to the ideas of self-exploration, humility, and curiosity that informed his reading of Du Bois in high school: “This whole effort should be guided by self-awareness, which will prevent us from unwittingly rejecting symbols that support values pertinent to our end goal of eradicating racist symbols.”