

Tabara Sy

Program: Freedom and Citizenship at Columbia University

University: New York University

Texts: James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*; Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*; Tanehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

Bio: Tabara Sy is a Senegalese-American college student studying Africana Studies, Politics and Journalism. A native New Yorker, currently residing in Harlem, she attends New York University as a rising undergraduate junior. Tabara is an Alumna of Columbia University's Freedom & Citizenship program in 2017 and graduated Central Park East High School in 2018. Aside from being a student, Tabara began modeling in 2019.

Profile: In her application essay, Tabara wrote about her mother's daily efforts to keep everybody fed, cared for, and put to bed. "Unlike my father," Tabara wrote, "her work and exhaustion was unacknowledged." Tabara saw a reflection of this dynamic in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*, where Bâ writes of the "dual task" of the working woman to put in the labor for the upkeep of the home and family on top of her own professional work. Labor, love, and recognition are intertwined in family. Noticing these trends in both her home and in larger society, Tabara explained how *So Long a Letter* helped her understand the complexities of womanhood.

As a Teagle Humanities Fellow, Tabara read James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* and Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*. With the help of her mentor Angela Xue, Tabara used Baldwin and Rankine to ponder a set of questions on vulnerability, pain, love, liberation, and justice.

Reading Rankine, Tabara found the poetic descriptions of anxiety and isolation perfectly described "exactly what it feels like to be black in a pool of whiteness." The lesson Tabara took from Rankine's poetics, though, is not to numb herself to those feelings but embrace them. As Tabara herself surmises: "To feel is to be human." While for Rankine, Tabara notes, "vulnerability is just as important as protection," that was not the case for Baldwin, who spoke of vulnerability as a weakness rather than a strength, urging his nephew to keep his guard up. Presented with two opposing views of vulnerability, Tabara delves into each authors' experiences, words, and audiences to search for truth.

Tabara reconciles Rankine's loving emotional expression with Baldwin's attempts to protect other black people by suppressing these moments of vulnerability, concluding that both ideas are attempts at protecting loved ones. She ends on the notion that love is a powerful force, one which both Baldwin and Rankine work to build and maintain, and one which harkens back to her stories about her mother in her application essay. To Tabara, love is the central unifying force for any community working to care for one another; as she writes in the final words of



her essay, “Community is essential to survive as a black person, especially during these times. Community is love...and love is healing.”