

Toni Morrison and the Sacredness of Art: A Reflection

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Art holds a special place in my heart due to what it has brought me in my life. Heavily introverted and quiet, it has been hard for me to see my value in social movements and advocacy. Sometimes one only views the big names who are powerful, charismatic orators, *who do have a vital place in activism*, as the sole option of what it means to be living a life driven by justice. Therefore, it is hard to see the other roles people have in movement work. Over the years, I have been drawn to the use of art as storytelling to imagine and inspire a better world and how that can be a form of sacredness. No matter what medium, there is a process of creation happening and it requires time, patience, and persistence. Interpretation happens between the viewer, the artist, and the broader community and that leads to differences in meaning, yet new insights that can imagine new possibilities in worldbuilding.

In my senior year of high school, I took a college course on art history, and it landed at a needed time in my life. I had entered a place of significant depression unlike anything I had ever had, and it became hard to push through each day. Art history offered a slight respite, giving me something more to look toward and examine. Particularly, I was drawn to a sculpture by Gian Lorenzo Bernini called the *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* completed between 1647-1652. The sculpture depicted the Catholic mystic, Teresa of Ávila, in one of her intense visions. The sculpture translated a divinely embodied experience that I, a Christian who grew up within a

predominantly white evangelical church, had never known. There were a lot of rules surrounding purity and perfection within evangelicalism. Those rules led to a detachment from the body and a devaluation of self and others. It left me with religious trauma, but art like the sculpture of Teresa of Ávila influenced me to explore spirituality in the way that best suited my strengths.

When I encountered art after that, I tried to think of how it made my body feel, how had it moved me to see the world differently, and whether it had guidance for how I could be in community with others. Therefore, when I read Toni Morrison's collected essays in *The Source of Self-Regard*, I knew I was entering a source of knowledge that would grow me just as the *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* did. What those essays communicated was not only was art beautiful, but it was a meeting place between artist and viewer. Art holds the potential to galvanize and inspire people to act for change that leads to the most marginalized obtaining justice and building a world where all people can flourish.

There is much evidence of how the arts link to the work of justice movements. For example, there was the Black singer, Mahalia Jackson, who sang at the 1963 March on Washington,¹ the Chilean feminists who sang and danced in the streets to bring attention to sexual assault and violence perpetrated by their society,² and there are the words of James Baldwin that still provide insight for contemporary times.³ The art energizes and speaks to the viewer, the experience aids in envisioning and charting paths of repair from harm caused by oppressive systems.

¹ Bev-Freda Jackson, "Gospel Singer Mahalia Jackson Made a Suggestion during the 1963 March on Washington – and It Changed a Good Speech to a Majestic Sermon on an American Dream," *The Conversation*, August 25, 2023.

² Gaby Hinsliff, "'The Rapist Is You!': Why a Chilean Protest Chant Is Being Sung around the World," *The Guardian*, February 3, 2020.

³ Jeffrey Brown and Lena I. Jackson, "A Look at James Baldwin's Enduring Influence on Art and Activism," *PBS News*, August 15, 2024.

Therefore, I felt it would be vital to link the experiences I had with Toni Morrison with the work of other artists, so that they could converse with each other on how art can inspire change. I chose to bring the text of the biblical Mary's Magnificat in the Gospel of Luke, a poem by Amanda Gorman, and the essays of James Baldwin into the space for this analysis. They are included because their creative work reaches beyond the physical piece of art and communicates to the viewer inspiration that could lead to social change and new understandings of community. There is a sacredness involved, and that can be understood through the work of the theologian M. Shawn Copeland. Copeland identifies sacredness as something that "can neither ignore nor mitigate the experiences that complexify being human and the real questions these experiences instigate."⁴ This means that sacredness is rooted in expanding what it means to be human, exploring how the sacred affects people's interaction with creation, and questioning the issues that arise by being in relationship across differences.

I center on this discourse on art because Toni Morrison wanted art that conveyed a message, and everything she put forth was a truth grounded in the hope for a flourishing community that included diversity, freedom, and love. She opened a way for people to look at life through her eyes, the eyes of her characters, and I see that as where art hits the deepest. Mary's Magnificat, Amanda Gorman's poems, and James Baldwin's essays converse with the energy of Morrison. They bring insight into stories that matter, and what I mean by that are the stories of the underrepresented, those who have been stereotyped and made invisible because of white supremacy, sexism, and other oppressive systems. Their work is a process of reclamation

⁴ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, Innovations (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 6.

of the untold stories and by telling them through different mediums, they expand the worldviews of their readers and viewers.

Interpretations on the Magnificat

Growing up, I cannot remember Mary's Magnificat ever preached in a sermon. Now, I see there were reasons for that rooted in silencing voices of dissent and the urge to depoliticize the role of a woman challenging the social order. The writer, D. L. Mayfield speaks on this in the *Washington Post* by explaining how, when they were a child, they were cast as Mary in a nativity play. They were told to be silent because Mary, in the conservative evangelical tradition, "Was a vehicle for Jesus: a holy womb, a good and compliant and obedient girl."⁵ Later in life Mayfield realized that they had never encountered the Magnificat because if they had, they would have seen a Mary who was not silent.

The Magnificat is in the Gospel of Luke, and it is a song performed by Mary after she learns she will bear a child named Jesus. Her words speak to a grand overturning of oppressive empires and centers those considered as the least and most marginalized. One of the powerful verses say:

His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.⁶

The verses have served as fertile ground for art, and one representation comes from the printmaker Ben Wildflower. Through progressive Christian left circles, Wildflower has gained attention for his depictions of biblical figures. One depicts Mary stepping on a snake, arm raised,

⁵ D. L. Mayfield, "Perspective | Mary's 'Magnificat' in the Bible Is Revolutionary. Some Evangelicals Silence Her," *The Washington Post* (WP Company, December 20, 2018).

⁶ Lk. 1:50-53 NRSV.

and the words “Fill The Hungry / Lift The Lowly / Send The Rich Away”⁷ surrounding the image. Printed in black and white, this Mary shows a different version of the Mary D. L. Mayfield and myself grew up around.

Mary, in evangelicalism has been demeaned and diminished to only a vessel for Jesus. Her story tends to end at the start of the Gospels and is not given much thought after that. Her motherhood, voice, and centrality to Jesus’ life are forgotten and erased from memory. Some of that has to do with the messaging of the Magnificat, where the powerful get challenged. Challenging power takes away the control Christian nationalism, a defining aspect of conservative Evangelicalism has and threatens its existence. Kristen Kobes Du Mez, a church historian, defines Christian nationalism as “the belief that America is God’s chosen nation and must be defended as such.”⁸ That belief is rooted in whiteness being the ultimate symbol of power and leads to the violence against anyone who differs from that vision. That can include queer communities, Black people, immigrants, women, and anyone who is seen as different.⁹

Du Mez’s work in the book *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* serves as an excellent historical account of how Christian nationalism has turned to fascist behavior to preserve control, leading to heavy policing of what gets shared. Attacks on sex education for young people serve as a facet of this control. Books like *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* and organizations like True Love Waits became resources that worked to maintain gender roles that deny queerness and advocate the bodily submission of

⁷ Mayfield, “Perspective.”

⁸ Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, First edition (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation, a division of W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2020), 4.

⁹ Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 4.

women toward men. The teachings then leech out of churches and into the public square leading to young people being blocked from learning comprehensive sex education.¹⁰

Toni Morrison identified the crime of censorship as a sign of fascist behavior in action. By looking at a portion of her essay on signs of fascism, we can see why something like the Magnificat would disrupt the role of fascist censorship:

4. Palisade all art forms; monitor, discredit, or expel those that challenge or destabilize processes of demonization and deification.¹¹

Art is powerful, and it influences people, communicating particular messages. Something like the Magnificat has the potential to empower people, and it has, to the point of censorship. India, Argentina, and Guatemala have done so before, during times of revolution against colonialist rule or violent government repression. Under British colonialism of India, the Magnificat was banned in the church, in the 1980s, Guatemala's government censored the song because of how it empowered the poor, and during Argentina's "Dirty War," the military forbade the Magnificat's words from being on public display.¹² The artist holds a central role in bringing these messages to the people. By returning to the previous example of Christian nationalism and attacks on sex education, the Magnificat becomes a way to disrupt the narrative that women must be submissive, cannot speak up, or cannot have access to bodily justice. Therefore, a multitude of potential disruptions to violence can occur because of the Magnificat. Morrison adds, "Make no mistake, this young writer said: art is fierce."¹³ It leads people to revolutionary action and lets

¹⁰ Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 170-71.

¹¹ Toni Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Vintage International, 2020), 14

¹² Jason Porterfield, "The Subversive Magnificat: Mary's Expectations of the Messiah," *Enemy Love*, December 17, 2017, <http://enemylove.com/subversive-magnificat-mary-expected-messiah-to-be-like/>.

¹³ Morrison, *Self-Regard*, 55.

people know they are not alone. There are others out there who support them, and their art is communicating a story to outside populations.

Art like the Magnificat has also found its way into new theologically-influenced interpretations. It connects to hope and the need to be valued and held as worthy. Knowing that no one is really in the thick of chaos on their own is empowering. The Reverend M. Jade Kaiser's interpretation says

From generation to generation, Love's Mercy is freely handed out; None are beyond the borders of God's transforming compassion. The power of God is revealed among those who labor for justice. They humble the arrogant. They turn the lives and truths of those on the margins. God is a feast for the hungry. God is the great re-distributor of wealth and resources. God is the ceasing of excessive and destructive production that all the earth might rest. Through exiles and enslavements, famines and wars, white supremacy and climate crises, God is a companion in loss, a deliver from evil, a lover whose touch restores.¹⁴

This interpretation helps visualize the different oppressions people experience. Language is shaped based on context and someone trying to make sense of their particular experiences.¹⁵ The Magnificat being adapted to suit the time of Kaiser's writing expands applicability and provides a place of contact for others to continue resisting against unjust practices. Morrison affirms this:

As writers, what we do is remember. And to remember this world is to create it. The writer's responsibility (whatever her or his time) is to change the world – improve his/her own time. Or, less ambitious, to help make sense of it. Simply in order to discover that it does make sense. Not *one* sense. What is the point of 2 billion people making *one* sense.¹⁶

The Magnificat makes sense for its contexts, and it provides strength and understanding where there feels like there is none. Mary speaks from a place of vulnerability. Mary knew there was deep injustice and saw that it was not God-ordained. There was still hope for Mary. Her words

¹⁴ M. Jade Kaiser, "Magnificat," *enfleshed*, April 21, 2021, <https://enfleshed.com/liturgy/magnificat/>.

¹⁵ Alex Shashkevich, "The Power of Language: How Words Shape People, Culture," *Stanford Report*.

¹⁶ Morrison, *Self-Regard*, 270.

carry through time, helping people make sense of the oppressions they are facing, and finding the faith to keep pushing forward despite the power used against them.

Wildflower was criticized by Evangelicals for his work, told he was being too political,¹⁷ even though he was pulling directly from scripture. Artists still have to share, as Morrison says they are “...frequently in conflict with the status quo. But the artist can’t help that; if she is to have any integrity at all in her art, she can’t help it.”¹⁸ The beauty of creation as a driver for change can come through in the art, and it attempts to persevere over powers that try to censor it. No matter how hard oppressors try to silence Mary or those who find strength in her, their voices still manage to come through due to the power of words.

Amanda Gorman: “The Miracle of Morning”

2020 was a conglomeration of grief and pain, alongside the exposure of different truths. The United States failed to help people who had been knocked down by the pandemic, failed to reckon with the push for racial justice, and made hope feel hard. Hope did not get diminished though, not for me. 2020 became the year when I discovered my need to go to seminary, and it called for me to look for beauty in the world. During the pandemic, I became immersed in poetry, discovering new voices and returning to those I had known prior.

One of the new poets I explored and felt a generational attachment to was Amanda Gorman. Her first book of poetry, *Call Us What We Carry*, carries so much connection to the artist's role as explained by Toni Morrison. One of the poems I gravitated toward was “The

¹⁷ Mayfield, “Perspective.”

¹⁸ Morrison, *Self-Regard*, 62.

Miracle of Morning.” It is a poem interweaving hope, truth, and grief. For example, the beginning verses says:

We thought we’d awaken to a world in mourning. / Heavy clouds crowding, a society storming. / But there’s something different on this golden morning. / Something magical in the sunlight, wide & warming.¹⁹

Personally, what I see in this is that hope and grief exist together because to push forward means grappling with loss, the pain felt by our ancestors, and the potentialities of a new future.

The “Sarah Lawrence Commencement,” by Morrison captured the energy I felt with Gorman’s poem. Human agency, imagination, and the value of life get underscored throughout, and it deals with both reality and future potential. One of the calls that Morrison makes in her speech is to dream:

Dream the world as it ought to be, imagine what it would feel like not to be living in a world loaded with zero-life weapons manned by police willing to loose them, develop them, or store them for money, or power, or data, but never for your life and never for mine. What would it be like to live in a world where the solution of serious, learned people to practically every big problem was not to kill somebody?²⁰

Morrison is addressing college students about to enter the world where violence is active in many different ways. She calls students to reimagine through whatever route they take in life to think what it means to build a life of peace and flourishing not predicated on violence. The threads being woven by Morrison can connect to the poetry of Gorman. As Morrison asks the question, Gorman provides an answer and exploration of what it means to live together in community that is healing, no longer violent, and full of flourishing. One of Gorman’s stanzas supports this:

While we might feel small, separate & all alone, / Our people have never been more closely tethered. / The question isn’t *if* we can weather this unknown, / But *how* we

¹⁹ Amanda Gorman, *Call Us What We Carry: Poems* (New York: Viking, 2021), 174.

²⁰ Morrison, *Self-Regard*, 70.

will weather this unknown together. / So, on this meaningful morn, we mourn & we mend. / Like light, we can't be broken, even when we bend.²¹

These words dream of a world that could be something more, a place of healing rather than pain. It calls for the everyday process of making it through together, valuing connection, and being responsible for each other. Healing is possible from the violence and grief that palpitates throughout the world. There is a fluidity in dreaming and knowing the story is not over. Doing things together is a way to dream of a world that acts differently from the violence that gets used.

Personal responsibility is part of the path of dreaming of a better world. How we treat other people counts and adds to a new world vision. There is a process of co-creation and creativity in dreaming and imagination. Morrison observes:

Imagine, envision what it would be like to know that your comfort, your fun, your safety are not based on the deprivation of another... That determined commitment must be redreamed, rethought, reactivated – by me and by you.²²

Dreaming of a new world is not individualistic but about thinking of a world where everyone can flourish. New questions can arise by considering what Morrison brings forward. What does it mean to live together communally, in a way that considers the wellbeing of all of creation? The process of imagination centers on change, and by engaging with change, new perspectives are gained and expanded upon.

One of the vital things I have learned on my faith journey is being open to change and evolution. I am not the same person I was in high school or as an undergraduate, even when I first started graduate school. I have been challenged and transformed where there are both pains and joy. Those changes I experienced were because of the acts of co-creation I engaged in with new communities. My mind expanded to see new perspectives and have different experiences

²¹ Gorman, *Call Us What We Carry*, 174.

²² Morrison, *Self-Regard*, 70, 73.

that taught me that I could not get through the troubles of life alone. Community is needed and Gorman continues by saying:

We ignite not in the light, but in lack thereof, / For it is in loss that we truly learn to love. / In this chaos, we will discover clarity. / In suffering, we must find solidarity.²³

Gorman continues the transformation and self-reflection of Morrison. She knows there is a lot to wrestle with, and relationships must exist to pull one through. Neither Morrison nor Gorman is painting an easy world. It is realistic, calling toward the best that resides inside us. We are responsible for each other. We share the pain and suffering and find a way forward through it all. It is not an individualistic process, but a collective energy seeded in life.

The commencement address from Morrison gives a hope-filled message of truth. It is not a cheesy, marketable message that barely scratches the surface. The power of words, dreaming, envisioning, and all sorts of creative endeavors are art. It is a duty to utilize the potential beauty we have to help all people flourish:

We are already life-chosen by ourselves. Humans, and as far as we know there are no others. We are the moral inhabitants of the galaxy. Why trash that magnificent obligation after working so hard in the womb to assume it?²⁴

Morrison identifies humans as creative agents in the world. Our existence has a reason and a responsibility that we should fulfill. As the philosopher Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak wrote, “To be born human is to be born angled toward an other and others.”²⁵ Angled toward creation, humans can ruin or create, and the choice lies within each person. At our best, humans need each other and can create something beautiful out of tragedy. These words value the bodies of human beings when there are oppressive structures aimed at tearing that truth away. These are healing

²³ Gorman, *Call Us What We Carry*, 175.

²⁴ Morrison, *Self-Regard*, 73.

²⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “A Moral Dilemma,” *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, no. 96 (2000): 99, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41802147>.

words rooted in the womb and telling us that we have a place in the world. The final stanza of Gorman's poem ends in a similar regard:

We'll observe how the burdens braved by humankind / Are also the moments that make us humans kind; / Let each morning find us courageous, brought closer; / Heeding the light before the fight is over. / When this ends, we'll smile sweetly, finally seeing / In testing times, we became the best of beings.²⁶

These words are resilient, written during a global pandemic, and they reach for the best within us. Art can serve as a call, not only a protest but an ethical way to do things differently. Taking each day as it comes, each step at a time preserves a sense of hope, and if we expect change to happen quickly, there is the chance for people to get stuck in a nihilistic hole.

One of art's possibilities is preserving hope and imagining a hopeful future. Sometimes we may think of poems, paintings, writings, and other types of art only leading to change when they depict suffering or sadness. That is not the only case. People need words that speak to hope, a new morning, or a new dream. Love, joy, and beauty are out there and can add sustaining power even amongst the suffering. Both Toni Morrison and Amanda Gorman showed those sides within their work. The multiplicity of being human can get looked at through different lenses, personalities, and expressions.

James Baldwin: The Role of the Artist

Toni Morrison and James Baldwin have deep connections due to their friendship and writing styles. Closing out this piece, I felt it was vital to put Morrison and Baldwin in conversation with each other about the role of the artist. Like Morrison, Baldwin talked about the

²⁶ Gorman, *Call Us What We Carry*, 175.

risks, importance, love, and accountability of what artists can be. One of his many essays, “The Creative Process,” communicates many of those feelings well.

Art is an ethical responsibility for Baldwin. The work he did throughout his life was to tell the truth about the human condition. He became heavily criticized due to his thoughts, but that is the artist's role, to bring into focus what is truly going on. He says:

It is for this reason that all societies have battled with that incorrigible disturber of the peace – the artist. I doubt that future societies will get on with him any better. The entire purpose of society is to create a bulwark against the inner purpose, in order to make life bearable and to keep the human race alive.²⁷

Morrison resounded by pointing out how the artist is “a questioner and a critic...she is frequently in conflict with the status quo. But the artist can’t help that; if she has any integrity at all in her art...”²⁸ Art can be categorized, kept in museums, setting standards that make it accessible only to a few, and blocking marginalized artists from telling their stories. The work of the artist collective, Guerilla Girls calls out this behavior, sharing that art should reflect the diverse experiences of various communities.²⁹

After Baldwin’s death, Toni Morrison delivered a powerful eulogy that honored the power of Baldwin’s ability to cut deep. She said:

Those who saw the paucity of their own imagination in the two-way mirror you held up to them attacked the mirror, tried to reduce it to fragments that they could then rank and grade; tried to dismiss the shards where your image and theirs remained – locked but ready to soar.³⁰

The resistance from being commercialized and controlled, made to fit a particular narrative, is a powerful place of navigation for an artist. Ultimately, it is a difficult path to travel because the

²⁷ James Baldwin, “The Creative Process,” in *The Price of the Ticket* (1985; reis., Boston: Beacon Press, 2021), 322.

²⁸ Morrison, *Self-Regard*, 62

²⁹ “WePresent | A Creative Manifesto by the Guerrilla Girls.”

³⁰ Morrison, *Self-Regard*, 230.

weight can be too much. There is pressure to have stability, fit in, and be agreeable to everyone, but some of the strongest art comes from subverting those categories. As Baldwin says:

The human beings whom we respect the most, after all – and sometimes fear the most – are those who are most deeply involved in this delicate and strenuous effort, for they have the unshakable authority that comes only from having looked on and endured and survived the worst.³¹

Artists like Baldwin carry a heavy weight with them, and he sometimes emptied himself openly of the pain and love he experienced. The relationship between Morrison and Baldwin shared mutuality, love, givenness, and respect, some of the rawest emotions to come from people. Their artistic connection had a kenosis energy of giving some of the best of themselves despite who criticized them. They lived authentically to who they were.

Baldwin's writing of “The Creative Process” was not only words. Baldwin lived out his practice. Being an artist requires following through on what you share with the world. One of the opening sections of his essay communicates this:

The precise role of the artist, then, is to illuminate that darkness, blaze roads through that vast forest, so that we will not in all our doing, lose sight of its purpose, which is, after all, to make the world a more human dwelling place.³²

Baldwin put a spotlight on top of what it meant to be human, and he was not faking it. The ability to publish and share these writings was a vulnerable act. It is increasingly hard to share the deepest wells of the self. Morrison eulogized:

Yours was the courage to live life in and from its belly as well as beyond its edges. To see and say what it was; to recognize and identify evil but never fear or stand in awe of it...The third gift was hard to fathom and even harder to accept. It was your tenderness. A tenderness so delicate I thought it could not last, but last it did and envelop me it did.³³

³¹ Baldwin, “The Creative Process,” 323.

³² Baldwin, “The Creative Process,” 321.

³³ Morrison, *Self-Regard*, 231.

Here Morrison underscores what made Baldwin a powerful artist. He was someone who lived by his word. He impacted so many people and continues to do so through his legacy, and those impacts are crucial. Even if an artist never gets famous, sometimes just one person needs to see their work, knowing they are seen. There is power in no longer letting the categories of success bind one down to how one creates, and it is a valuable place to be as an artist.

An interview featuring James Baldwin addresses his thoughts on Toni Morrison as an artist. Baldwin reaches toward what was previously said regarding the importance of uncovering the truth. As he says:

I was too occupied with my recent illness to deal with *Beloved*. But in general she's taken a myth, or she takes what seems to be a myth, and turns it into something else. I don't know how to put this – *Beloved* could be one about the story of truth. She's taken a whole lot of things and turned them upside down. Some of them – you recognize the truth in it.³⁴

The interview happened shortly before Baldwin's death, but he saw Morrison's examination of truth. No matter how difficult the truth is or uncomfortable, Baldwin felt it needed to be exposed and viewed. The truth in *Beloved* was the reality of white supremacy, the violence and assault directed at Black bodies, and the decisions made to try and survive those horrors.

Baldwin consistently wanted the truths of white supremacy to be heard and seen, and he desired to center the communities who were being left out of the history books. Baldwin's writing made sure to center the agency and resistance of Black communities in a United States that refused to recognize their work. In his essay, "East River, Downtown" Baldwin states:

What I find appalling – and really dangerous – is the American assumption that the Negro is so contented with his lot here that only the cynical agents of a foreign power can rouse him to protest. It is a notion which contains a gratuitous insult, implying, as it does, that Negroes can make no move unless they are manipulated. It forcibly suggests that the southern attitude toward the Negro is also, essentially, the national attitude. When the South has trouble with its Negroes – when the

³⁴ "Remembering Toni Morrison's Friendship with James Baldwin: Library of America," Remembering Toni Morrison's friendship with James Baldwin | Library of America, February 18, 2011.

Negroes refuse to remain in their “place” – it blames “outside” agitators and “northern interference.” When the nation has trouble with the northern Negro, it blames the Kremlin.³⁵

The relationships Baldwin brings to the forefront support the need for other stories to be told. His words broaden the landscape and invite people to confront assumptions, biases, and look for the histories that have been hidden. It is something Baldwin found in Morrison’s work in *Beloved* and he felt a connection to that.

Stories, like the works of Baldwin and Morrison, need centering because they carry messages of reclamation, rebuilding, and accountability to the harms caused and currently existing. Drawing from their strengths, the best of their communities, and finding their belonging, they contributed to telling this truth. As Morrison says of Baldwin:

In place of intellectual disingenuousness and what you called ‘exasperating egocentricity,’ you gave us undecorated truth. You replaced lumbering platitudes with an upright elegance. You went into that forbidden territory and decolonized it, ‘robbed it of the jewel of its naïveté,’ and ungated it for black people, so that in your wake we could enter it, occupy it, restructure it in order to accommodate our complicated passion. Not our vanities, but our intricate, difficult, demanding beauty; our tragic, insistent knowledge; our lived reality; our sleek classical imagination.³⁶

Unveiling the truth and its multiplicity helps people feel seen, and in honoring Baldwin, Morrison was following the path in her way. The novels, essays, speeches, and interactions Morrison gave the world drip with the experiential: the beauty, truth, complexities, and multiplicity of Black traditions. She could look at humanity through her lens and unveil different truths. One of her powerful passages in her writing says:

If my work is faithfully to reflect the aesthetic tradition of Afro-American culture, it must make conscious use of the characteristics of its art forms and translate them into print: antiphony, the group nature of art, its functionality, its improvisational nature, its relationship to audience performance, the critical voice that upholds

³⁵ James Baldwin, “East River, Downtown,” in *The Price of the Ticket* (1985; reis., Boston: Beacon Press, 2021), 271.

³⁶ Morrison, *Self-Regard*, 230.

tradition and communal values and that also provides occasion for an individual to transcend and/or defy group restrictions.³⁷

Communities of accountability help the artist stay connected to the people who mean the most to them. There is a seriousness and accountability for Morrison and Baldwin to be as authentic as possible to who they are. Neither stood on a pedestal, taking on a superior position. They wanted other people to come and share their stories. Ego was not an all-consuming presence throughout their work, as that can be a danger that comes with success. A deep love resonates and drives the passion of speaking the truth of who one is, the community one is from, and who they are writing toward.

These passages between James Baldwin and Toni Morrison only scratch the surface of their understanding of the artist's role. The dialogue between their work carries many messages to be learned and instill in communities that to do art is to connect with people. Baldwin and Morrison were creating art that was not solely for them but was created so that others could engage and interpret for themselves what it meant to build toward a flourishing world. Morrison and Baldwin did not see themselves as perfect, and by doing so opened the path for others to follow them, expanding, and reimagining their visions.

Conclusion

It matters that art has space to exist and be a source of strength, and a voice for people to use. Communities can access imagination and be empowered to do acts of justice, create beauty to share with others, and help make people feel less alone. Art does not gain legitimacy by placement within the confines of a museum's walls, deemed by powerful people to be of prime

³⁷ Morrison, *Self-Regard*, 267.

marketability. Art's power comes through how it connects to people, wherever they are in the world. Thinking back to the sculpture by Gian Lorenzo Bernini of St. Teresa of Ávila, I was reminded of why that piece was important to myself and my spirituality. The emotion and the expressiveness of spirituality in the sculpture were unlike anything I had encountered. Others have had their particular experiences like this, and it pushed them to be inspired and changed.

Focusing on pieces like the Magnificat, Amanda Gorman's poem, and the writing of James Baldwin provides a fertile ground for reflection. These different pieces were all placed in conversation with Morrison because they hit at areas of centering what has been previously obscured or disregarded. The Magnificat has served as a song of protest for oppressed people, Gorman's poem provides insight into what it means to dream and work toward an interconnected future, and Baldwin interweaves the artist's responsibilities.

All of them ring the truth in their ways. Whether through protest, poetry that visualizes, or writing that empowers, they all center on the truth. Truth means looking at the human condition, knowing there is pain, working through those emotions, being held together, and working to be accountable for the future. There is a community involved with artistic works because these artists did not keep their work private. They shared and proclaimed the truth of the message they wanted to deliver.

Toni Morrison's writings help expand upon and converse with these truths, showing a dynamic and interconnected world. There are many ways to connect with people, and being intentional, learning the best of one's traditions, and seeing the diversity of art is central to a good artist. These writings from Morrison and her connections to these artistic renderings hold possibility not only for me, but for others to value the artwork we bring forth. The ways people

respond to art matter, and there is a collective ability to express what we can about the different parts of life and how that affects the communities we are around.

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