

THREE VOICES, ONE ONGOING STRUGGLE



EDITED BY
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Three Voices One Ongoing Struggle

When I first sat with the letters written by James Baldwin, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X, I felt as if I was stepping into a conversation that has shaped generations of Black life in America. These letters were written in moments of struggle, self-reflection, and hope, yet they do not feel stuck in the past. They feel alive. They feel familiar. They feel like a reminder that the questions these men wrestled with are questions we still carry today. As an African American woman, I found myself reading these letters not as distant historical documents but as guides that speak to the emotions and challenges of navigating a nation that still works to define us before we define ourselves. My central argument in this collection is that these three letters together reveal a journey toward liberation that starts with naming truth, moves toward confronting injustice, and ultimately opens the possibility of transformation. Baldwin helps readers understand the hurt that racism creates. King explains why people must speak up and push for change. Malcolm X shares how his travels opened his mind and helped him see new possibilities for connection between people. When placed side by side, these voices form a powerful narrative about the emotional, moral, and spiritual work necessary for freedom.

Before choosing how to present these letters, I asked myself what kind of audience I wanted to speak to. I imagined readers who may know the names Baldwin, King, and Malcolm X but have not spent much time sitting with their words. I wanted this collection to feel open and welcoming, not overwhelming or academic to the point that it pushes readers away. My goal was to invite people into these texts gently and thoughtfully. I wanted readers to feel as though they were entering a living room filled with three voices speaking with honesty and conviction. The introduction needed to feel like an invitation and not a lecture. By approaching the letters in this way, I hoped to create space for anyone to engage with them, regardless of how much

background knowledge they bring. The letters themselves contain depth and power. My job is to bring readers close enough to feel that power without making them feel they must have a certain kind of education to understand it.

I organize the collection by beginning with James Baldwin's "Letter to My Nephew." Baldwin's voice is the most intimate of the three. He writes not to an audience of critics or to a public seeking moral clarity, but to a boy he loves. His honesty is sharp, and his affection is steady. He explains the violence that America tries to hide and the emotional cost of surviving in a place that refuses to see your full humanity. Starting the collection with Baldwin allows readers to enter through the doorway of family. It allows the story of liberation to begin with emotion and truth. Baldwin acknowledges the pain created by racism, but he never stops at despair. Instead, he encourages his nephew to understand his history and to hold on to his dignity no matter how the world tries to strip it away. For African Americans, the conversation Baldwin begins is familiar. It reminds us of the talks we receive from family members about how to move in the world with both caution and confidence.

After establishing this emotional truth, the collection turns to Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail." King writes with a different energy. Where Baldwin speaks like a guiding uncle, King speaks like a leader who has grown tired of the excuses that try to justify inaction. He responds to those who claim that civil rights leaders should slow down or wait for a more convenient time. King's letter is both patient and firm. He explains that waiting becomes a tool used by those who benefit from the current system. He calls for courage, community, and a willingness to disrupt the comfort of those who would rather see peace than justice. Placing King after Baldwin is important because it moves the reader from personal truth to social responsibility. Baldwin helps readers understand the emotional and historical conditions that

make resistance necessary. King shows what it looks like to take moral action in the face of those conditions. His letter expands the story by insisting that love must be paired with justice and that truth must be paired with accountability.

The final letter in the collection is Malcolm X's "Letter from Mecca." This letter offers the possibility of transformation. Malcolm X writes from a place of spiritual discovery, and his tone is unlike the fiery speeches many associate with him. He describes seeing people of many nations and skin tones join together in worship. He explains how this experience changes his understanding of race, unity, and human connection. Ending with Malcolm X opens a door into a new way of imagining liberation. It shows that growth does not require abandoning the fight for Black dignity but can expand what that fight looks like. His letter encourages readers to think about how travel, exposure, and spiritual reflection can reshape beliefs without weakening conviction. It adds a powerful layer to the collection because it shows that leaders and thinkers do not stay the same. They evolve. They question themselves. They move toward broader understanding. Malcolm X's transformation invites us to imagine what liberation looks like when it grows beyond national borders and enters the realm of shared humanity.

The combination of these three letters tells a story that cannot be told by any one of them alone. Baldwin gives us emotional clarity. King gives us moral direction. Malcolm X gives us a vision for transformation. Together, they teach us that liberation involves more than resisting injustice. It involves understanding ourselves, confronting systems of oppression, and imagining a world that has not yet been created. This is the story I want readers to experience in this collection. It is a story that reflects the real movement of human beings who are trying to survive, organize, and evolve inside a nation that often refuses to see their full potential.

By presenting the letters in this order, I hope to help readers feel the progression from internal understanding to external action to spiritual expansion. Each letter leads naturally to the next. Baldwin shows why action is necessary. King shows what action looks like. Malcolm X shows how action can change a person from the inside. This structure creates a pathway through the collection that feels both thoughtful and true to the experiences of many African Americans. The path from pain to protest to transformation is not only a historical one. It is a path that many people still walk today.

Readers will take away several important insights from this collection. First, they will see that the fight for justice is not simple. It requires emotional honesty, moral courage, and a willingness to grow. Second, they will understand that these letters are not just relics from the past. They are living documents that speak to the present moment. The issues Baldwin describes are still part of the lives of Black families. The arguments King makes about the harm of waiting are still used today. The transformation Malcolm X experiences challenges us to think about how personal growth plays a role in liberation work. Third, readers will see that liberation is a collective process. No single voice or perspective is enough. When these letters speak to each other, they create a fuller picture of what freedom requires.

I also want the collection to feel like an open space for reflection. For Black readers in particular, these letters may echo things we have heard throughout our lives. They may remind us of family conversations, community lessons, or feelings we rarely express. For non Black readers, the letters offer insight into a world they may not fully understand. A welcoming collection allows both groups to enter without fear of judgment or confusion. The goal is not to separate readers by identity but to invite them all into a deeper understanding of the words these men wrote.

In the end, I chose these three letters because they each offer a different angle on what it means to fight for justice. When placed together, they form a conversation about pain, responsibility, and growth that still matters today. My hope is that this collection encourages readers to reflect not only on the history of civil rights but also on their own place in the ongoing struggle for equality. The letters invite us to pay attention, to question our assumptions, and to imagine a better society. They challenge us to think about the kind of world we want to build and what it takes to move toward that vision. They also remind us that liberation is both personal and collective, something we work toward within ourselves and within our communities. If readers walk away feeling more aware, more grounded, and more responsible for the future we share, then this collection has achieved its purpose.

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DaJanae Smith is a 28-year-old writer and scholar from Memphis, Tennessee. She is currently studying English Rhetoric at the University of Colorado Colorado Springs and will complete her degree in December 2025. Her work reflects her interest in how language shapes identity, community, and the ongoing struggle for justice. Growing up in Memphis gave her a strong appreciation for Black literature and activism, as well as the ability of writing to inform, inspire, and connect people. These influences guide her approach to the letters of James Baldwin, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X. She enjoys reading nonfiction that explores history, society, and human experience. DaJanae also acknowledges the support and mentorship of Dr. Amicucci and Joe Brucker in the development of this project. She writes with the goal of making meaningful texts accessible to all readers, and this collection represents her contribution to the wider conversation about truth, justice, and liberation.

