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JUSTICE FRAMED

Introduction

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Introduction: Justice Framed

Bryanne Estes

In July, smoke from the West Coast wildfires rolled into our town in the American Midwest. Since 2017, large parts of my birthplace in California have been consumed by flames. From home, my only evidence of this fire had been news reports, accounts of family grief, and Google photos of charred buildings. Like with most other recent catastrophes, knowledge of the wildfires existed for me as a dull pang which I continually pushed aside, consigning it to an uneasy pile along with other tragedies: the femicides in South America, the hunger crisis in South Sudan, police brutality and racial injustice in the U.S. and elsewhere, and all the incursions on human rights, violations of personhood, punishments and privations, in short, all the injustice that forms so large and intractable a part of human experience globally. Occasionally, some sharp evidence of suffering breaks through and you must weep. Usually, though, tragedies live for those not experiencing them as ideas, abstractions that feel both real and unreal. Today, though, this smoke, acrid and foul-tasting, had travelled over 1,800 miles from my old home to reach my new one and reminded me of the connected nature of suffering. I could no longer ignore the smoke, and it was in the air I now breathed. I was unspared by my distance.

There is something in the nature of suffering that demands a response. To witness someone suffering is to witness an appeal: for empathy, aid, or simply for recognition. But once we know about injustice, how do we address it? The scope of human suffering is overwhelming, and attempts to intervene in it often feel inadequate. How can we avoid being engulfed by hopelessness, apathy, or bitterness as we face the collective weight of injustice in the world?

The current academic tradition in the West counsels us to understand injustice as a series of systems and structures through which people are made to suffer, often in the collective. Certainly, it is important to understand the systems, both actual and ideological, that perpetuate injustice. The figure of the institution is central in histories of exploitation and inequality. But this framework, dominant in academia for the last thirty years, is also flawed. It treats systems as anonymous, autonomous entities, with agendas of their own, even when these systems have often been created and controlled by small groups of people. By speaking of people as groups, it flattens and erases difference, even when striving to recognize it. And, most crucially, this theory fails to lead us towards any solution that recognizes our agency as individuals or communities, leaving us with no coherent path towards the future. Therefore, we are urged to “keep faith” in change but told that we are victims of a series of systems which prevent change from happening, in which we are powerless by design. The result is like being dashed against a rock by the sea.

It seems imperative, then, to me to insist on the individual, specialized nature of injustice as well as the broad frameworks which enable it. Climate change is a global crisis, but it is not

experienced equally by all individuals. It is an individual being, not an abstract entity, that performs, allows, and *experiences* each instance of injustice. Most people do not have access to the tools of structural change. It is at the level of the personal where it becomes possible for most of us to create change.

Philosopher Simone Weil suggests that this begins with an act of attention, which she calls “the rarest and purest form of generosity.” By paying attention, we start to recognize what others experience. The act of recognition is powerful and takes place at a personal level, between two individuals. To recognize another is to say to them: “I see that we are alike because we are human, and I see that you suffer.” The ability to empathize remains in our power no matter what we ourselves suffer, because, as Victor Frankl argues in his work as a Holocaust survivor, it is a choice made by the deepest and most human part of us, the part that doesn’t die unless we do. As long as we have the ability to recognize what others suffer, there is hope for the mitigation of suffering.

The essays in this issue recognize injustice in various forms, exploring questions of oppression, resistance, and reform and how they are interconnected with cultural phenomena like literature, performance, and social media. First, cover artist and prison reformer Ricky Hamilton discusses the influence of rapper Nipsey Hussle on black excellence and self-determination in a special feature. Next, Rachid Toumi examines the legacies of James Baldwin and Ernest Hemingway to contemplate the social responsibility of artists. In her article on the “Challenge Accepted” movement on Turkish social media, Ilayda Ustel studies activists that occupy social media platforms to challenge gendered violence and political oppression. Following this, Bethany Rose Lamont interrogates the ethics of child sexual abuse (CSA) studies in academia, questioning the ways in which academia has served to endorse CSA and to alienate the queer child as subject. The fourth article by Ankita Mathur analyzes Jean Black Sartre’s “Black Orpheus” in the context of Négritude criticism, exploring Sartre’s sentimentalized depictions of a pre-colonial Africa. Finally, Tyler Sehna examines agency in Nella Larsen’s *Passing* to argue that Larsen subverts White-authored antebellum tropes about Black happiness and self-determination. The next section features three nominated essays from the University of Iowa’s Craft Critique Culture Conference, written by Kathleen Shaughnessy on cosmopolitanism in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, by Tove Conway on Scottish novelist Ali Smith’s use of form to represent a borderless world, and by Devangna Singh, Dikshit Sarma Bhagabati, Ishan Vijay, and Malini Chidambaram on Maseit street magicians, whose props act as a form of resistance to state disenfranchisement. The issue concludes with reviews by K.A. Thilini Prasadika of *Animalia: An Anti-Imperial Bestiary for our Times* (Duke University Press), and Michaela Corning-Myers of *From Slave Cabins to the White House: Homemade Citizenship in African American Culture* (University of Illinois Press).

We hope that by paying attention to injustice, we will better understand how it works and how we can address it. We are grateful to the authors who contributed to this issue of the *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*. We would also like to thank the staff and faculty who make the continued functioning of this graduate student-run journal possible.

Artist Feature: Ricky Hamilton

Prison reform activist Ricky Hamilton composed the cover painting, a tribute to Nipsey Hussle, while incarcerated.



*Ricky (right) with motivational speaker Marlo Clarke
at Kewanee Life Skills Reentry Center*

Artist's Statement:

“Nipsey was a blessing for me during my incarceration. He came to me at exactly the right time. I was put up on him by a good friend (Henry McClay) and Nipsey simply spoke to my elevating state of mind, to the person I was becoming. Nipsey was the first rapper I heard that spoke of black excellence in such a form. He spoke of teaching his homies how to fish (how to make money for themselves). He spoke about using OPM (credit) to build wealth and then invest in our community. When he was taken from us in 2019 I was crushed because he was just coming into his own. His legacy and the seeds of his thoughts will continue to germinate in brothers like me as we attempt to make this a better world for all.”