- Criticism -

Living in this Black Body

Ta-Nehisi Coates' Between the World and Me (2015)

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Abstract: This paper is based on a close reading of Coates' autobiographical narrative, Between the World and Me (2015). It examines the ways in which the author examines the vulnerability of the black body in America. His question "how can one live within a black body, within a country lost in the Dream?" (12) is symptomatic of the title of the book which implies that the author is both alienated and dispossessed within the larger American world. However, this dispossession is not his alone, but it is characteristic of other marginalized groups in America, especially African Americans. Coates presents his experiences of living as a black person in America in the form of a letter to his son, Samori, to ensure that the latter does not become a victim of "the American Dream" (11). Written as an autobiographical narrative, the book shows Coates in continual interrogations with himself and his younger self, leading to shifting perspectives about his place and how to survive in "White America."

Introduction

This paper is based on a close reading of Coates' autobiographical narrative, Between the World and Me. It examines the ways in which the author attempts to answer, what he refers to as, "the question of his life," by narrating his experiences of being a black person in America (Coates 12). Coates presents these experiences in a letter form to his son, Samori. And the purpose of the letter is to ensure that his son does not become a victim of "the American Dream," a Dream used to enslave and destroy the black body (11). The paper examines his key question, "how can one live within a black body, within a country lost in the Dream," and what this question could mean in the American society (12). In the attempt to answer this question, Coates explores notions like the "American Dream" and concludes that those are abstract ideas which may be limited to those belonging to "White America." However, his autobiography also demonstrates that belonging to "White America" is not only a function of race or color, it may also come from having economic and social privileges.

In the memoir, Coates performs his role as the autobiographical narrator by consciously engaging in the act of self-interrogation and re-evaluations of knowledge. He constructs distinct voices for himself as the adult narrator, and a voice for his younger self. Sidonie Smith

and Julia Watson refer to these voices as the "narrating 'I'" and the "narrated 'I'" (16). To make sense of the continued violence of the black person's experience in America, the narrating I (Coates' older self) engages in a sustained examination of the experiences of the narrated I, which is Coates' younger self. This continual attitude of reflection is what constitutes his "struggle" (Coates 97). It is both a struggle with himself to understand his place in the American society and a struggle with the society which, it seems, has no place for him. And in the end, he notes that "it is a struggle, not because it assures you victory but because it assures you an honorable and sane life" (Coates 97).

"How Can One Live Within A Black Body, Within A Country Lost In The Dream?" (Coates 12): Defining the Question

The key question in this autobiography is founded on Coates' realization that his black body is prone to destruction in the American society. The question itself suggests a number of meanings. First, it could be addressing the possibility of staying alive if you are a black person in America. Secondly, it could be addressing the ways to achieve this, that is the measures that one can adopt to achieve this purpose. Thirdly, it could also be a form of lament at the futility of trying to stay alive. In the context of this book, all of the meanings are relevant, and they show the narrator's fear(s) that the destruction or death of the black American seems inevitable.

The fear which the narrator expresses, is entrenched in his black community. Early on in the book, Coates explains that this fear is visible in the mannerisms and dressings of the black youth on the streets (14-16). It is visible in the violence of black music and in the corporal punishments which parents mete out to their children. However, these are experiences retrieved from the memories of a younger Coates and he did not originally recognize these behaviors in his black community as signs of fear. However, the older narrator tells his son, Samori:

> I am afraid. I feel the fear most acutely whenever you leave me. But I was afraid long before you, and in this I was unoriginal. When I was your age the only people I knew were black, and all of them were powerfully, adamantly, dangerously afraid. I had seen this fear all my young life, though I had not always recognized it as such. (Coates 14)

A young Coates did not understand that the excessive punishment instilled by parents was driven by fear because they were trying to keep their children from ending up vulnerable on the streets or victims of police violence. Coates (the "narrating I") is only able to identity this emotion as fear because of his own vulnerability to his son and his examination of his younger self who he poses as the "narrated I" (Smith and Watson 16).

The adult narrator is also only able to properly analyze the past by locating himself within memories of his community. In the context of this autobiography, Coates makes references to shared experiences and a shared slavery history because he is not telling his story alone. Thus, his narrative voice takes on the role of the "ideological 'I'" (Smith and Watson 18). Borrowing from Althusser, Smith and Watson argue that as the "ideological I", the narrator of an autobiography is actually interpellated in a pre-existing history and ideology (76). The narrator is, therefore, not able to tell her/his story divorced of an existing historical or cultural situation. Coates deliberately uses this autobiographical style as a technique to legitimize and emphasize the importance of his story. His references to his immediate familiar situation and his community's collective past (of fear) shows that the narration concerns a wider audience.

He structures the autobiography as an intimate letter to his son because this narrative form allows him to draw a parallel between a younger Coates (himself) and his son. This idea is reinforced by similarities in their experiences, like the unresolved cases of Prince Jones (Coates

77) and Michael Brown (Coates 11). In the two situations, the killers were not brought to justice showing that Coates and his son have the same form of vulnerabilities. But more than their personal experiences, the unresolved cases of Brown, Jones, the recent murder of George Floyd (unfortunately dramatized for the whole American/world viewership), and the ever-growing number of African American men, who have been unjustly murdered by the police and other self-proclaimed neighborhood watchers, shows that the vulnerability of the African American is an existing condition.

More than sharing his personal experiences with his son, or warning his son, it is the desire to discuss his community's experiences that motivates Coates' autobiography. Borrowing from Nietzsche, Judith Butler discusses fear as a catalyst for autobiographies. She explains that someone can chose to "give an account" so as to explain past actions and absolve him/herself of guilt (Butler, "An Account" 53). According to her, the 'I' giving the account is mainly motivated by "fear and terror" and gives the account in order to avoid some form of punishment (Butler, "An Account" 53). Butler's analysis of fear as a catalyst for writing autobiographies is a useful way to consider the "fear" which Coates expresses in his narrative. In his case, he is not only anxious that his son might be vulnerable to physical violence, he is also afraid that the actions and behaviors of his black community may be considered as random acts of violence by people outside his community who are unable to understand the root of their fear. By explaining how corporal punishment can emanate from love, Coates attempts to show the reader that his community is not unloving but merely conditioned by experiences of slavery and generations of unremitting hardships. Thus, his fear of unfair judgements motivates him into narrating the past.

The fear and vulnerability which Coates expresses is rooted in America's history of slavery. He recalls this history in the statement, "my own father, who loves you, who counsels you, who slipped me money to care for you. My father was very afraid…my father who beat me as if someone might steal me away" (Coates 15). The idea that his body might be stolen is obviously a reference to Transatlantic slavery when black people were sold almost as if they were commodities like sugar, tobacco, cotton and gold (Coates 71). He critiques this inhuman act by alluding to the fact that the enslaved black people were accounted for in actual monetary terms like mere goods (Coates 101).

The narration shows that the monetary value is not the value of human life; rather, it is the value of labor which African Americans provided for the American society. It seems that the lives of the descendants of those enslaved Americans are still expendable. His discussion brings to mind Giorgio Agamben's idea of the "homo sacer" who Agamben explains as (a person) who may be killed" (411). In line with Agamben's discussion of the homo sacer, when you remove people's citizenships, and they are reduced to bare life, killing those people will not be considered a crime by the state. Thus, when Coates speaks of being stolen away, it is not only a historical reference to stolen bodies that were converted to enslaved people, it is also a lamentation that those bodies are still being molested and killed without accountability.

But it is fair to argue that the citizenship which Agamben talks about was never accorded to the black person. Coates argues that from the beginning, African Americans were not included in "the people" mentioned in the Preamble of the Declaration of Independence:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men … That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government. (US 1776)

The words of the American declaration of independence, imply that equality, liberty, and fairness are available to all peoples. However, the "men" (people) referenced in the declaration does not include African Americans because they were enslaved. It did not help that those who signed this proclamation of independence were a part of the system which enslaved others, and up to 1863, black people were still treated as chattels.

Thus, from the beginning of the American society, blackness was always represented as inferior and undesirable, allowing the society to marginalize that group. In "The Fact of Blackness," Franz Fanon shows that the existence of color prejudice was used to marginalize and dehumanize the black person.

> Understand, my dear boy, color prejudice is something I find utterly foreign…But of course, come in, sir, there is no color prejudice among us…Quite, The Negro is a man like ourselves…It is not because he is black that he is less intelligent than we are…I had a Senegalese buddy in the army who was really clever… (Fanon 65)…sin is Negro as virtue is white. (Fanon 79-80)

Fanon also argues that blackness is deliberately constructed as a negative attribute. This form of color prejudice is evident in the America which Coates describes. As he suggests, it is not possible to speak about democracy, or "a government of the people," in a society which ab initio excluded some of its members.

Coates tells his son that this form of prejudice against the African American, which also originates from their history of a long period of enslavement, is still in place in America: "Never forget (he says) that for 250 years black people were born into chains – whole generations followed by more generations who knew nothing but chains"(Coates 70; my parenthesis). It is as Alexander Weheliye argues, the black body is still enslaved because they are inheritors of the "hieroglyphics of the flesh" which were created by instruments used to punish slaves (144). The notion of hieroglyphics (borrowed from Egyptian culture) means to carve or engrave sacred writings on an "object." This means that even after the slave is freed, such engraved markings "do not varnish;" rather, the bodies are "mapped" and the markings or mappings remain as reminders of the past for the bearers (Weheliye 145; Butler and Athanasiou, "The Logic of Dispossession" 128). In the first part of his autobiography, Coates writes about what appears to be a dualized America that shows "blacks" as the plundered (60) and "whites" as the plunderers. His narration evidences that fact that the marginalization of blacks in his society is not an accident; it is borne out of America's history of slavery and deliberate construction of blackness as inferior.

"How Can One Live Within A Black Body, Within A Country Lost In The Dream?" (Coates 12): Changing Perspectives About White and Black America

Coates' prior experience of being black largely informed his understanding as a child in Baltimore. At that time, he had a monolithic view of black Americans as descendants of slaves, with black skin color. As a child, he did not have a wider perception of other groups of vulnerable people in America. However, from his time at Howard University, he started to experience shifts in his perceptions of blackness and abuse. He started to realize that black people can also represent exploitative power and that this power can be used to abuse others.

Coates came to his new understanding of "the human spectrum" (60) mainly through his interaction with an unnamed girl who he refers to as "the tall girl with long flowing dreadlocks" (58). This is a significant turning point in his account because it is through this relationship that he acknowledges some of his own biases and ways in which these biases function to disenfranchise people other than blacks. As a younger child, he was unaware of these biases because his understanding was based on the collective system of knowing within

his community. Butler explains that this is a form of dispossession where people are limited by the "social conditions of (their) emergence" ("An Account" 52). In Coates' situation, his prior knowledge of the American society's socioeconomic circumstances comes from growing up as a black boy in a world where it seemed that only blacks were disadvantaged and abused.

He explains his re-orientation as a form of death and re-awakening: "I slept. When she returned I was back in form…I grew up in a house drawn between love and fear. There was no room for softness. But this girl with the long dreads revealed something else – that love could be soft and understanding…love was an act of heroism" (Coates 61). Through his association with this girl, he came to a re-interpretation of love as something other than what he experienced in his childhood. As discussed in the first part of the paper, Coates' younger self learnt about love from his community where this emotion was both rooted in violence and often expressed violently. As an older person, his association with "the tall girl" showed him that expressing love softly was equally powerful (Coates 58). It also enabled him to understand the nuances and diversities even within blackness.

Consequently, Coates started to also see whiteness, which is the symbol of power and belonging, as a construct. In the book, he explains that white groups in America are not only those who claim historical and biological whiteness. Instead, they include Catholic, Corsican, Welsh, Mennonite, Jewish peoples who have been involved in the "machinery of criminal power" (Coates 7). Although such people were once part of the disenfranchised, they have been able to achieve "whiteness" through economic and social success, as measured by the American society. Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek's critical study on whiteness support his idea. They contend that:

> Whatever 'whiteness' really means, is constituted only through the rhetoric of whiteness. There is no 'true essence' to 'whiteness'; there are only historically contingent constructions of that social location (293) … the discursive frame that negotiates and reinforces white dominance in U.S. society, operates strategically…This strategic rhetoric functions to resecure the center, the place, for whites. (Nakayama and Krizek 295)

Nakayama and Krizek conclude that people chose what to be called (white or other ethnic markers) because they recognized it as useful marks of identification. Furthermore, those who assume themselves "white," and are accorded superiority, re-enforce their "whiteness" (supposed superiority) by marginalizing others.

Although Coates explicitly mentions some socioreligious ethnic groups as the "new" whites, his narrative proposes that some socially and politically advantaged African Americans are also privileged and akin to white America. This includes African American police people who contribute to the ravaging of black people. Earlier in his narrative, he had warned his son, Samori, about the police's random acts of brutality against black people:

> The police department of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body. It does not matter if the destruction is the result of an unfortunate overreaction. It does not matter if the destruction springs from a foolish policy…There is nothing uniquely evil in these destroyers…The destroyers are merely men enforcing the whims of our country. (Coates 9-10)

But his discussion of the killing of Prince Jones especially shows that the black police are part of these random killings. Although the "black police" on "black" brutality may support Coates' earlier point that black people are accustomed to violence because of the historical violence they suffered (14). Nevertheless, in the context of Jones' murder, the black policeman is obviously part of a system that oppresses African American peoples (especially males) in the

name of law enforcement. Furthermore, Coates deliberate reference to Prince Jones' social background could be read as further proof of the argument that some classes of blacks may have white privileges. Like the black police who derive power from the American law enforcement, the victim was privileged by his Ivey league education and background.

Nonetheless, it would appear that the narrator questions this assumption of privilege because he infers that at critical times, such as when the police are involved, all they can see is just another random black man. This means that in Jones' case, for instance, the police who killed him may have profiled him, not as a person, but as a black person whose life is expendable. The mini narrative concerning Prince Jones' killing is important in the book because it shows that the black body is still vulnerable even when cloaked in whiteness factors such as education. The book implies that the danger in such outward markings is that, while it enables the black person to "act" white, it limits their perceptions of their own vulnerabilities (Coates 111).

"How Can One Live Within A Black Body, Within A Country Lost in The Dream?" (Coates 12): Living in The American Dream

Ultimately, Coates' changing perceptions cause him to question the concept of "dreaming," especially as it has been historically used within the American context. The significance of dreaming is central to this narrative because it is multilayered. It is used as an idea that can offer someone limitless routes to a "successful" life. But Coates also argues that it has been used as an excuse to limit or exploit weaker or vulnerable groups.

Coates critiques his early understanding of dreams/dreaming, where he uses his dream of a "black race" to cope with his life as a marginalized African American (45). The younger Coates, who arrives at Howard University, constructs a dream on the basis of a fictitious "noble" black history and this is a useful way for him to reject the identity of defeated blackness that the society thrust upon him. However, through learning and constant self-examinations, he comes to realize that this dream is a form of escapism.

Coates also critiques the notion of the American Dream which is presumably the right of every American. But as has been discussed thus far, the liberty and right to life or happiness encoded in the Declaration of Independence is limited to "white America" or those with privilege who act as "white America." He describes that America as a galaxy" as if to denote that it is foggy and far removed from reality (Coates 20). I suggest that the younger Coates refers to America as a galaxy because it is the only way he is able to understand the differences in standards of living, between the privileged "white America" that he sees on TV, and the world in which he lives. To this younger Ta-Nehisi Coates, this other world can only be a world of fantasy, something in outer space.

Because the so-called inalienable human rights are available only to those with privileges, Coates identifies it as a dream. As he describes, it is a dream in a very basic sense because it is unreal to black and disadvantaged people in America. Furthermore, he insists that the dream, which America likes to wallow in, actually rests on the backs of black Americans (Coates 11). This is obviously an allusion to the fact that the American dream was mainly built on the blood and sweat of black people. This can also be taken literarily because the cotton used as stuffing for the beddings are historically one of the products of slavery. And to him, the idea of keeping the American Dream alive is what causes white America to continue to subjugate the blacks and other marginalized people.

But ultimately, his use of dream/dreaming recalls and questions the assumption of equality

and freedom for all implicit in Martin Luther King's "I have a Dream" speech:

> When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check; a check which has come back marked insufficient funds. (King, par. 4)

The words of King's own "magnificent" speech is from 1963. Yet, it is still relevant in Coates contemporary American context because much of the hope which the speech represents remains in the realms of dreams. In the speech, King reminds the American government, and the unjust society it created, that freedom and the right to life should be for everyone, irrespective of visible differences.

But to a young Coates, the hope which King's words represent is a type of ideal which he is unable to comprehend. This is implicit in his question: "Why were only our heroes nonviolent? How could the schools valorize men and women whose values society actively scorned? How could they send us out into the streets of Baltimore, knowing all that they were, and then speak of nonviolence?" (Coates 32). This question characterizes the thoughts of the young and inexperienced Coates; they invariably query how the idyllic words of King's speech will help him to stay alive in a society where black men/people are frequently exploited or murdered. While he advocates for equality, he obviously wonders about the likelihood of the black community, certain classes of the black community, attaining the equality and freedom which is theirs by right. Perhaps, to the young Coates, it seemed like the non-violent form of activism was a form of tacit submission to the society's unrelenting subjugations. It is for this reason that an older Coates contrasts the dream of non-violent activism with Malcolm X's emphasis on, not just racial inequality, but the immediate security of the black body. He self-identifies with Malcom X because the latter's approach represents to him a way to conquer the fear that is always a part of his life.

Similarly, in the light of this autobiography, one could argue that while Coates does not advocate for violence, he wonders how the unjust society can avoid it when it has always enforced violence on some of its members. In this he echoes Fanon where the latter speaks about the inevitability of violence during decolonization. In The Wretched of the Earth, Fanon defines decolonization as:

> The encounter between two congenitally antagonistic forces that in fact owe their singularity to the kind of reification secreted and nurtured by the colonial situation. Their first confrontation was colored by violence and their cohabitation – or rather the exploitation of the colonized by the colonizer – continued at the point of bayonet and under cannon fire. (2)

Even though Fanon primarily writes about a colonial situation, the circumstance he describes is akin to Coates' America. It is a situation that was forged through violence and which may unavoidably degenerate to violence.

The violence which these writers warn against is currently playing out around the world in the wake of George Floyd's murder by a member of the American police. People who are angered by this brutal act demand for systemic change while tearing down values and symbols of oppression. Though many are predisposed to march peacefully, some others are pre-conditioned to address such heinous crimes with equitable violence. As Fanon reminds, the

violent protests are exacerbated by the response of the police and public authorities which appear designed to both suppress and incite protests. It is Coates' awareness of such potentiality for violence that causes his shift away from the idea of dreaming. He emphasizes that any form of dreaming, is not based on reality and may result in the loss of the dreamer's body.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper and the autobiography is to explore and attempt to answer Coates' life question, "how can one live within a black body, within a country lost in the Dream?" (12). The question is symptomatic of the title of the book which implies that the author feels alienated from his world or dispossessed within the larger American world. This dispossession is not his alone, but it is characteristic of black Americans and other marginalized groups in America. Coates contends that the progress of (white) America, or those "who believe that they are white, rests on the looting of black America (6).

In the autobiography, Coates shows that the breach which is implied in the title of the book is at some level healed through his associations and learning at Howard University (his Mecca). Howard University is significant because this is where he re-claims his sense of self-interrogation. Coates structures his narrative as a letter and an autobiography to enable him both engage in personal interrogations and involve his larger community. And through the constant re-examinations, he comes to see the vulnerability of his black body as an existing condition.

At the end, the reader is not certain if Coates' question is answered, is answerable, or if the narrative ends with a sense of futility. The suggestion is that while the author acknowledges death as inevitable, he finds solace in what he identifies as the call "to struggle" (Coates 97). This is the hope he passes on to Samori at the end. Coates explains the "struggle" as a deliberate effort to constantly examine one's world and oneself. For him, this is the way to be in control of his vulnerable body (97).

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