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A Hundred Years Later

Between the World and Me, by Ta-Nehisi Coates, was published in 2015. Skillfully written in an epistolary form, it is a treatise on the black experience in America. Drawing inspiration from James Baldwin's 1963 book *The Fire Next Time*, it is a modern-day response and continuation of *The Souls of Black Folk*—a 1903 masterpiece by W.E.B. Du Bois. *Between the World and Me* can be examined through critical race theory to explore the Du Boisian concepts of “the veil” and “double consciousness” in modern society; the idea of race as a social construct; the influence of race on the perpetration of violence and destruction of the black body; and the role of education as a tool for liberation and empowerment of African Americans.

In the first chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois looks at two components that affect black people: “the veil” and “double consciousness.” The veil is one of the central ideas in Du Bois's examination of race relations. He frequently discusses this concept throughout his work. He starts by arguing that the biggest problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line. This color line, although invisible, is almost tangible. As discussed by American sociologist Charles Lemert, it divides and separates white and black societies; whereas the veil, being an essential aspect of the communications between the divided, “organizes information that passes between—blinding [white people] who wish not to view [black people]; limiting [black people] in ways that affect in the deepest what they think of themselves” (386). The veil can be interpreted as a manifestation of the color line. Additionally, Du Bois shares with the reader the circumstances under which he first became aware of the veil. He explains that it exists

in the minds of African Americans and dictates to them how to view themselves and each other. It allows white people to racially discriminate against African Americans while prohibiting black folks from seeing themselves outside of racism.

When discussing this barrier between black and white people in his work, Coates uses a different metaphor: he talks about the Dream, the galaxy, or the mountain. Unlike Du Bois, Coates has been aware of this Dream throughout his entire life: perfect houses, nice lawns, cookouts, and treehouses. Initially, he did want to escape into the Dream. He realized, however, that for him it was never an option: the Dream is created by and for white society; it rests on the backs of the black people, “the bedding made of [the black] bodies,” Coates explains to his son (11). Even though many people view the Dream as the American dream—a path to a better life in this country—for Coates it is an extremely racialized concept. He argues that the most important notion of the Dream is the lack of accountability. If one is white within the Dream, on the top of the mountain, and somehow causes harm to someone on the other side who is black, there are and will be no repercussions. Coates observes this Dream being taught to white children on his walks in Manhattan: “The galaxy belonged to them, and as terror was communicated to our children, I saw mastery communicated to theirs” (89). When Coates was a child, a third of his brain was concerned at all times with how to behave to physically protect his black body whether it was from the police, or on the streets. Meanwhile, white children were raised to be utterly fearless and to know that the Dream is their reality. Another alarming, yet necessary, component of the Dream is forgetting. Forgetting is a habit that allows the Dreamers to not think about all the atrocities they have committed against black people. For if white people were to awaken, they would realize that they are, in fact, like everyone else: “vulnerable, fallible, breakable humans” (Coates 143). Just as white people see black society as a burden, Coates

recognizes living among Dreamers as a burden as well. He encourages his son to not strive to be like white people and ascend into a Dream. The essential difference lies in the fact that his son can grow up as a conscious citizen who “do[es] not have the privilege of living in ignorance” (Coates 107). This, perhaps, is one of the deepest and most powerful statements in the entire book.

Another crucial idea of W.E.B. Du Bois is the concept of “double consciousness.” He coined this term to describe the internal conflict experienced by minority groups: the sense of “always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (Du Bois 3). It is one of the most influential ideas in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Although not as regularly mentioned, it stems from the veil. According to Du Bois, black folk always feel their “twoness”—being both black and American—and will only be able to become truly free when they can reconcile these two strivings.

In *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates looks at double consciousness through a different lens. He examines it in the context of parenting. Parents of black children face a dilemma when raising their children: on one side, they wanted to be loving parents and give the best life to their children; on the other, they wanted to protect them and teach them how to survive in this world. Unlike in Du Bois’s work, there is an element of fear in *Between the World and Me*. Black parents fear for their children, and the fear of the children losing the autonomy of their bodies is so immense that the only option that the parents see is to resort to violence. Coates illustrates this concept several times: he remembers when his great-grandmother beat his grandmother for letting a man inside the house, or his father reaching for the belt after he ran away from his parents in the park. As Coates becomes a father, he is finally able to understand that same fear and love. “Black people love their children with a kind of obsession,” Coates

writes. “You are all we have, and you come to us endangered. I think we would like to kill you ourselves before seeing you killed by the streets that America made” (82). Coates demonstrates how extremely difficult the line between raising your child to be an American and raising your child to be black in America is. In his interview with the mother of a child who was murdered for playing music too loudly, he expresses this idea vividly. The reader can see a woman who has always wanted her son to stand for what he believed in, but also wonders whether she did enough to protect him. This idea is also present in his talk with Dr. Mable Jones—the mother of his college friend Prince Jones—who describes in great detail the childhood that Prince had, and the education he received. Sadly, even attending private schools and the ability to enroll in Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Columbia, or Stanford, did not save Prince from racism. Coates describes how Prince was chased by a police officer and killed because the officer thought Prince resembled a suspect of a crime.

One of the most essential ideas Coates discusses in his book is the definition of race. He argues that race is merely a social construct designed by some people to exercise their power over others. Many Americans recognize it as a natural phenomenon. However, “race is the child of racism, not the father,” Coates declares (7). Differences in skin color and hair texture have always existed; viewing certain physical aspects as somehow inferior was created later. To highlight this idea, Coates refers to white society as the ones who “believe that they are white.” He further develops this idea in his interview during the twenty-sixth annual Chicago Humanities Festival. He states that there are two types of identity when it comes to people. First, there is a racial identity that revolves around power. It is nothing but a box that one checks on a census form, Coates says. At the same time, there is an ethnic identity that includes the traditions and culture of a group of people. Black people in the United States possess a cultural identity, while

people who believe they are white do not have a common cultural identity. If the notion of the race were to disappear, white people would lose their power and have no common culture left (“Ta-Nehisi Coates...”). This shows that there is nothing natural about the concept of race; it is a man-made invention—a tool for oppression.

The concept of race allows inequality to prosper. In the United States, for hundreds of years, white people have emphasized the inferiority of black people. Systematic oppression has created ways to dehumanize African Americans. Consequently, the white population started seeing black folks in terms of bodies rather than as people. For that reason, Coates often brings up the theme of “black bodies” in his book. He is deeply concerned with the matter of bodily autonomy since the threat of “losing” one’s body is imminent. The ritual of destroying the black body in America is a tradition, “it is heritage,” he explains to his son (103). But this ability for the black body to be so easily destroyed is something that ultimately makes it “so precious” and beautiful. He urges his son to guard all black bodies: whether it is to protect hair from processing and lye, or skin from bleach, or noses and mouths from modern surgery. His admiration of black beauty is particularly highlighted when he writes about all the beautiful students he met at Howard University—a historically black university in Washington, D.C. Sadly, not everyone is capable of appreciating this beauty; and therefore, black bodies remain in danger of violence. The constant threat of violence and having to be prepared to defend yourself also “contributed to the fast breakdown of [their] bodies” as it required a lot of energy (90). This energy was also needed to be able to adjust to your surroundings, contort the body to “address the block...be taken seriously by colleagues...not to give the police a reason” (90). This effort causes African Americans stress and anxiety and takes up an enormous amount of mental space. It robs black people of their time, leaving them with almost no time to be themselves and be free.

Violence is another predominant theme in *Between the World and Me*. Coates shows that violence is and has been a ubiquitous epidemic throughout the history of the United States. In his book, he explores two types of violence. The first type of violence is racism and the resulting systematic destruction of the black body. This type of violence is a legacy of hundreds of years of slavery, followed by the Jim Crow Era. The history is saturated with violence; the democracy which Americans hold so dear—the country “of the people, by the people, for the people”—did not include African Americans or women until the passage of the Fifteenth and Nineteenth Amendments, respectively. Today, this violence can be seen in racial profiling, police violence, and mass incarceration levels. Coates provides a myriad of examples: Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Renisha McBride, Tamir Rice. Later, he shares a much more personal story of his friend and former classmate from Howard, Prince Jones. By sharing widely known cases as well as a heartbreaking personal story, he puts an emphasis on how acute the problem remains. Additionally, he points out that the presence of this type of violence explains why so many children are raised without fathers: the fathers are either killed or imprisoned. There is a second type of violence that Coates describes: “black on black crime.” He sees “black on black crime” as jargon commonly used by white people to justify racism. Ultimately, it is the product of fear and is woven into a network of laws that plunder African Americans of family, dignity, wealth, and ultimately their lives. “To yell ‘black on black crime’ is to shoot a man and then shame him for bleeding,” he writes (Coates 111). Being stripped of all other opportunities, people in black communities sometimes are left with no other choice but to employ violence.

Both Du Bois and Coates also emphasize the weight that education carries in black communities. Du Bois claims education to be the cornerstone of racial uplift. In “Of the Training of Black Men,” Du Bois identifies three streams of thinking that in his time were still lingering

since the beginning of slavery in America: the force and dominion of white society; the idea that black people are “a tertium quid”—a creature somewhere between men and cattle; and the thought within black society that they themselves are, indeed, less than men (Du Bois 37). Du Bois claims that education is the panacea for the belief in the inferiority of black men, enforced by fraud. He argues that education is beneficial for both blacks and whites: it will instill better ideals and morals in white people as well as liberate and empower African Americans, especially at a younger age. He insists on the importance of having an opportunity to receive a classical education as opposed to a trade education and provides the statistics of black men who successfully received higher education from leading universities. In “Of the Coming of John,” Du Bois shows that attending a college can evoke mixed emotions in black students. Although liberating, it allows black people to better understand the racial injustices they have endured. When asked by his sister whether education made everyone unhappy, John replied affirmatively; yet, he is grateful to have had this opportunity. The product of education, Du Bois argues, is men with broad and pure ideals.

The theme of education is also widely discussed in *Between the World and Me*. Coates is not scared to show the negative aspects of educational institutions in the United States. He describes his education before Howard as a way to rotely discipline black society, not inspire it or promote curiosity in learning. Educated children in Baltimore “always pack[ed] an extra number 2 pencil and work[ed] quietly...walked in single file on the right side of the hallway, raised their hands to use the lavatory, and carried the lavatory pass when en route” (Coates 25). By asking the question why “is the other side of free will and free spirit an assault upon our bodies?” Coates highlights the idea that schools are a part of an oppressive structure in America (26). Yet, his tone changes as he starts to describe his experiences at Howard University.

Although it was still a school, Coates was greatly inspired by it. Since Howard is a historically black university, it was filled with black students from different backgrounds. Coates could feel the “vastness of black people across space-time” and that is why he called it “the crossroads of the black diaspora” (41). Coates spent countless hours in the library discovering himself and found the pursuit of knowing liberating and empowering. After his time at Howard, he realized that the sacredness of possessing the gift of education lay in two ideas. First, his education granted insight into history and allowed him to draw inspiration from the past. Second, although it brought discomfort, it broke “myths of Africa, of America, and everywhere, and would leave [him] only with humanity in all its terribleness” (Coates 52). This knowledge brought Coates some hope that the myths would be undone, and the destruction of black bodies would stop.

Looking at some of the similarities between *The Souls of Black Folk* and *Between the World and Me*, it is evident that African Americans still fall victim to racism. Although I myself am not African American, I have personally witnessed my friends being discriminated against and racially profiled. Most recently, a black male friend and I went to a state park. He was driving. As he was trying to park the car, a police officer stopped to figure out what we were doing, because he found the actions of my friend suspicious.

Undoubtedly, strides in the direction of equality have been made since the abolition of slavery. Yet, according to Coates, ultimately not much has changed. Coates is certain that black people still can feel the presence of the veil described by Du Bois and continue to develop double consciousness. The construct of race continues to exist, and violence against its victims remains widespread. Both Du Bois and Coates emphasize the importance of education for black people. Although I agree with the significance of education for black people, I strongly believe that it is also pivotal to educate white people as well as other non-black communities about the

history of racism and its ramifications. Children are not born with racist tendencies. They adopt these negative attitudes from adults around them. Educating young children will help them critically think about racism or any kind of discrimination. However, I side with Coates that eradicating racism will probably never be possible, because racism stems from the hunger for power that many people will never cease to want. Nonetheless, I believe that if we expose society, especially children, to the innumerable injustices that African Americans face daily, we can significantly reduce racial discrimination. A hundred years ago, no one could have imagined electing a black president, yet Americans have made it possible. I hope that this nation continues to take steps in the right direction. If white and other non-black people in the United States join with black citizens in a fight to diminish racism, society will see positive changes in the foreseeable future.

Works Cited

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