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Ta-Nehisi Coates’s Embodied Discourse of the Black American Male Experience

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Abstract

This work analyzes how Ta-Nehisi Coates’s memoir, Between the World and Me is an example of how personal narratives can convey political arguments. By looking at the memoir and how it compares to writer James Baldwin’s memoir, I attempt to explore how memoir not only functions to convey individual struggle but also continues a legacy of intergenerational discussion through the realm of literary work. Living as a millennial in a time of racial injustice and prejudice, I have sought to find ways of interpreting these social issues through new perspectives. Coates’s work serves as a revolutionary text that enables readers to perceive American experience through the eyes of individuals who have been marginalized by its culture. I argue that Coates disassembles notions of a unified “American” viewpoint by taking shared cultural events and representing them through his personal view as a black man. Doing so gives agency to black men who have endured the bigotry and violence of a historically racist nation. By placing Coates’s work into the context of slavery, police brutality, family, and literature, this thesis will evaluate the importance of genre and its ability to conceive new ways of interpreting shared America experiences as it pertains to race. The overall analysis from this work will identify how methods of discourse affect the public in positive and negative ways. The criticism that I examine challenges Coates for his pessimism. I argue how memoirs with cynical perspectives such as this may influence the ways that we communicate struggle on a national level and how effective our strategies can be. Furthermore, it is this thesis’s intention to reveal how Coates exemplifies the current generation of writers dealing with the subject of race, but more importantly, how he stands apart from past authors.
There have been numerous writers that have influenced society on subjects of race, politics, and gender. However Ta-Nehisi Coates is a particularly important figure because he gives a personal insight into the experience of blackness in America. While analyzing Coates’s memoir it became difficult to find literature that defined this phenomenon of embodied discourse the way he uses it in his book. In all of the peer-reviewed works that include this phrase, there was nothing indicative of the kind of use that Coates accomplishes in his work. Cate Poynton wrote a piece, “Affect-ing Discourse: towards an embodied discourse analysis” that defined embodied discourse as, “the contemporary retheorisation of affect.” Therefore, the closest definition to what Coates achieves is declared as a discourse that affects readers through descriptions of human interpretation and analysis. This is true of Coates, but there is more to it with respect to *Between the World and Me*. Not only does his memoir succeed in affecting readers emotionally, it is also an elegy to the black body and its place in America over the course of history. It is most literally a discourse about the body and how it is treated.

Although it may flout scholarly convention, I feel that my own family’s history can be seen as an example of how America allows some races to be included in whiteness, while it continues to exclude others. I am Jewish, and my heritage consists of a history of oppression, destruction, and anti-Semitism. But in the modern world I do not walk around in fear. No one can see that I am Jewish. And yet, years ago I would not have been considered white. In fact, when my family came to the U.S., they were so certain that they would not be considered white compared to the others arriving, that

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when they filled out their papers, under race they wrote, “Jew”. And yet, in Pueblo Colorado, someone crossed that out and replaced it with, “white”.

![Personal Description Form](image)

(A copy of my family’s papers when they immigrated to the U.S.)

Somehow our number had been called, we’d made the cut and were officially documented as white. Additionally, the Irish or the Polish were not considered white, and still, over time, America revamped itself and somehow we all got mushed into that category of privilege—our oppression a historical memory. I use my own example because it captures what embodied discourse involves, being that it gives agency through personal accounts and provides new perspective on American experience. For my family, though anti-Semitism is still fervently alive, the U.S. is not a place we are constantly at risk for living in our particular bodies. However, in a black body that is conspicuous to everyone, you can’t hide your race. It makes a difference what kind of body you’re in.
Being black is not something you can hide, and it has certainly never been approved to make the same shift to assimilate as Jews, or the Polish, or the Irish have done.

Over the course of America’s history, racism has existed through all spheres of society. From slavery to Jim Crow, from The Civil Rights Movement to red lining in cities, discrimination towards minority groups has remained a disappointing characteristic of the United States. In literature, one has the ability to tell a story from a particular point of view. A writer can take real life occurrences and fashion them into an autobiography, a novel, or a memoir in order to capture an audience and convey some sort of message. American Literature with respect to racism has been a particularly powerful mode of communication. More specifically, African American literature has successfully expressed the tribulations of black Americans over the years. This discourse is full of a rich culture of empowerment and tenacity in the face of constant brutality and othering. It carries a tradition of writers who embody struggle and triumph, regardless of the genre it is written in. However, out of all the genres that discuss black culture and racism, I argue that the memoir is a particularly powerful method of conveying experiences of struggle. It is able to take a personal account and communicate it to a mass audience in a vulnerable and truthful nature. It is extremely intimate and therefore, moving. This thesis will explore how Ta-Nehisi Coates uses memoir to discuss white supremacy through a personal narrative. It will argue that in doing so, he disrupts a reader’s perceptions of equality in America. By analyzing his perspective on the U.S. and racism, comparing his work to the writer, James Baldwin, (whose books are devoted to describing the experience of racism as a black man in America), and close reading Coates’s memoir Between the World and Me (2015), this thesis will explore how Coates speaks for the
experiences of black American men and illustrates a legacy of black writing and its connection to America’s racist history. Undeniably, neither Coates nor I are suggesting that he is the voice of all black men, but rather his memoir embodies instances of racism that black men have endured overtime.

By narrating the ideologies of America the book illustrates how a person’s skin color is in fact a crucial factor in how easy it is for them to live freely. Coates describes the struggle of living as an American in a black body. He takes historical events of racism and constructs them into a memoir in order to represent a different America than the one that is projected as equal and homogenous. Coates’s memoir evaluates America through the perspective of at-risk citizens, through a black man’s narrative that consists of fear for his own body and the body of his son. The discourse of a black American man’s struggle is a foundational theme in Coates’s articles, blog posts, and books. He falls in line with a long history alongside many black men who have written accounts of the brutality they have faced because of the color of their skin; but Coates’s memoir, *Between the World and Me* is a distinctive manifestation of that struggle. This long history of writing examines how black bodies can survive in a country built on subjugating them. The title of Coates’s memoir is inspired by Richard Wright’s poem, “Between the World and Me”: “And one morning while in the woods I stumbled suddenly/ upon the thing/ […] And the sooty details of the scene rose, thrusting themselves/ between the world and me”-Wright.² Doing so reaffirms the lineage of black literature and its ability to convey experiences of oppression. Wright’s poem is an effective example because it describes images of whiteness and black bodies and the experience of death by lynching. Perhaps it also

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creates a representation of one’s body in the world. By using the thoughts and instances of other black men’s lives and using them in conjunction with his own, Coates is able to make personal stories political.

Coates’s memoir serves as a revolutionary text with the ability to challenge the reader’s perceptions of America in order to recognize it’s inherent biases against black men and to illustrate the importance of biological and historical lineage in black literature. Coates writes an embodied discourse that expresses the experiences of black American men enduring racism. Therefore, the text is not simply a representation of one man’s strife in an oppressive society, but rather a tribute to a community of a people whom have faced violence and hate throughout America’s history. History becomes a vehicle to give agency to a people and is carried with individuals throughout time. The book is a letter to Coates’s son, Samori about how to endure discrimination. When confronting the circumstance of his own existence Coates writes, “In accepting both the chaos of history and the fact of my total end, I was freed to truly consider how I wished to live—specifically, how do I live free in this black body” (Coates 12). Coates explores this question by exposing how America is fundamentally biased and how a black man must learn to brave that reality. In an effort to find solutions to this bigotry, Coates writes, “I have searched for answers in nationalist myth, in classrooms, out on the streets, and on other continents. The question is unanswerable, which is not to say futile”. The memoir argues that systemic racism is deeply rooted in America’s unequal history, therefore Coates believes that with little being done to change American ideology, one is left with the freedom to explore how to survive in a dystopia.
Focusing on Social Marginalization and American Identity

Coates follows an important heritage in black culture by passing a survival guide to the next generation. He tells his son to recognize the injustice and the violent crimes that surround black men, and to use it to form a perspective about this nation that will enable him to endure in it. The memoir encompasses the voices of those whose bodies are at risk on a daily basis and formulates their experiences into one discussion. It emanates from the fear and hatred Coates felt after his friend, Prince Jones was wrongfully identified as a suspect in a crime and shot by a police officer. In a *Fresh Air* interview with Terry Gross, Coates explains that Prince Jones was driving to his fiancé’s house and was being followed by an undercover cop. When he was approached, the cop was still unidentified, and Jones did not know he was being pulled over—only that someone was pointing a gun at him. So Prince Jones rammed his vehicle into the cop’s car in an attempt to get away from someone he thought was a criminal. For that, he was shot and killed due to a misunderstanding and an officer’s failure to show Prince his badge. “They killed Prince and that was it, end of story—nothing”, said Coates.³ That incident, as well as the deaths of Eric Garner and Michael Brown are what make this memoir a protest against the injustices in America’s system that allow the murders of black men to constantly be forgiven and justified. Coates uses the legacies of black victims of brutality to identify how America repeatedly destroys black bodies without hesitation or repercussions—a theme that Coates identifies as “common to black people” (Coates 9).

*Between the World and Me* documents how America has always put black bodies at risk of being destroyed, both physically and socially. Many great writers have

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documented this racist tradition throughout time, but Coates is an atypical writer in that he writes about American experience in divisive and crude ways that expose his reader’s to new realities of experience. The memoir provokes a reassessment of systemic marginalization and just how deeply rooted it is in culture.

Coates assesses American culture through the history of slavery. He writes, “To acknowledge these horrors [slavery and hate crimes] means turning away from the brightly rendered version of your country as it has always declared itself and turning toward something murkier and unknown” (Coates 98). The version of America that is portrayed in classrooms, billboards, and cinema, is not a full representation of the country’s discriminatory nature. American progress and economic success originated on the backs of slaves, and modern America has continued oppressing black Americans in ways that benefit rich, white citizens. Still today, black Americans are the highest population of impoverished citizens in the U.S. With that statistic it is difficult to believe that Americans are given equal opportunities to attain the American dream. Coates explains that black Americans live in a culture founded by a racially unfair “dream” created through slavery and violence. The dream suggests that in America, any man can succeed if he works hard. But as Martin Luther King argued, “it is a cruel jest to say to a bootless man that he ought to lift himself by his own bootstraps”. Therefore, as the dream exists to inspire Americans, it also exists to hold certain Americans back without causing any social conflict. Americans can live in blissful ignorance, influenced by a “dream”, and blind to its repressive characteristics that marginalize minority groups.

America’s economy feeds the wealthy and forces the poor to struggle, it preaches the American Dream but prohibits minorities to succeed with the same ease and privilege as white Americans. As Coates explains with respect to the Constitution, “In 1863 it, [“people”] did not mean your mother or your grandmother, and it did not mean you and me” (Coates 6). The American Dream was not conceived with the inclusion of African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and so on. It has always existed linked to a history of othering and oppression. Coates uses these historical ideologies to demonstrate how they enable systemic and social marginalization to live fervently in modern society. Racism has existed in America because racial distinction and classification fueled American progress in its earliest years. Therefore, Coates describes a history that is rooted in discrimination and exploitation of minority groups. “And the process of naming ‘the people’ has never been a matter of genealogy and physiognomy so much as one of hierarchy” (Coates 7). Race was constructed as a way to obtain power over others without evidential reason. Therefore, America was founded by an arbitrary power that claimed dominance over other people for political and social gain. Thus affirming Coates’s declaration that the nation in its very foundation is othering and discriminatory. The United States may have evolved over time to desegregate water fountains and schools, but its history still serves as a reminder of the marginalization and brutality that African Americans have endured since America’s beginnings.

This oppressive history is a key feature of modern America. It fuels the Black Lives Matter movement, it reaffirms the injustice of police brutality and racial profiling, and it is steeped in impoverished neighborhoods throughout the country. Coates’s college friend, Prince Jones was a good citizen without a criminal record, but his skin made him
vulnerable: “And you know now, if you did not before, that police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body” (Coates 9). Coates creates an embodied discourse for every black man that has existed through dread and vulnerability because of their black body. And so, embodied discourse not only means giving agency to a people, but also providing a representation of how their physical bodies are affected by racism. This murder serves as another link in a long lineage of black men who were robbed of their lives as Americans and instead, were treated like enemies. Black men live in a different America than white men. African Americans have been suppressed by America in many different ways. Black culture has been culturally appropriated for financial and social gain, and many black Americans are left without the ability to assume economic benefits that come from the mass production of rap, fashion, comedy, and so on. Even after the plentiful contributions black culture has made to America’s identity, racism is still fervently alive and is constantly marginalizing minorities by othering them through red lining in cities and underfunding schools. African Americans have remained displaced because slavery and Jim Crow still linger in modern life through economic inequality, gang violence, police brutality, and overall biases based on skin color. Coates uses slavery to identify how the black American man must exist in two time periods, the present, and the history of oppression that exists in his ancestry.⁶ This social marginalization has influenced literary efforts within black culture.

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⁶ This is a concept that comes from W.E.B. Du Bois’s essay, The Souls of Black Folk. The theory is a key concept I use in this thesis to convey how black Americans live two lives because of America’s suppressive nature. Du Bois influenced Coates as well as Baldwin in their memoirs. His theory of the black veil and double consciousness describes how black Americans function in white society and also have agency through their black communities. Du Bois, W. E. B. The Souls of Black Folk. Champaign, Ill: Project Gutenberg, EBSCOhost. Web. 23 Nov. 2016.
to claim identity and agency in the face of destruction and disaster. As Coates says, “struggle means something even when you’re not successful”.

Conveying struggle creates an environment in which those that have been victimized can speak out and take control over their own experiences. Like many before him, Coates uses memoir as a mechanism to convey struggle and experience as a marginalized individual. What makes him different however, is his ability to analyze America through a personal and political fashion that exposes readers to new interpretations of American experience. He writes about political moments like the death of Michael Brown through a letter to his son. This enables the memoir to speak to a reader’s emotions while simultaneously asking them to evaluate America’s racist system through Coates’s argument. Writing through this lens fuels a long history of black literature and storytelling as a way of exposing the plight of the black man.

**Obtaining Agency Through Literature**

Narratives of struggle have existed since marginalized individuals began writing. Literature and storytelling have not only been powerful methods for conveying struggle in black culture, but they also stem from that legacy of writing since slavery, and therefore continue a lineage of writers that expose readers to racism. Oral tradition begins even before slavery, and once in The United States, black slaves told stories in order to keep lineages alive and to tell future generations about their circumstances. Slaveholders suppressed black culture to take away African American’s agency and power. But storytelling was a way to secretly continue cultural expression without being

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reprimanded. Most stories during slavery had to do with religion, magic, and heroes that were used to distract one another from their harsh realities.\textsuperscript{8} This is the tradition that Coates grew up with.

Lineage has always been a crucial part of Coates’s life, and familial legacy serves as a large influence for his decision to write an epistolary memoir, (meaning a letter formatted memoir) to his son. By writing through an epistolary memoir, Coates enables the reader to interpret the social marginalization of black men in general, but through the specific example of Coates’s life as he is describing it to his own son. Doing so also identifies how black literature develops a legacy for future generations. Literature also played a crucial role in Coates’s childhood and has influenced his ideals today. His father, William Paul Coates, owned a bookstore that sold books by and about people of African decent. On reading the many works on African heritage, Coates explains, “When I was done, I emerged taller, my voice was deeper, my arms were bigger, ancestors walked with me”\textsuperscript{9}. Coates found his identity through his African roots not just by existing as a black man, but also by reading black experience on an intimate level that helped paint his own place within a rich culture. Using stories to assert one’s identity serves as a tool in contributing to a discourse of racial repression while influencing readers to reinterpret their perceptions of experiences of black men. Coates explains that in a repressive society, black people use literature and art to assert their agency even in the face of adversity, “they made us into a race. We made ourselves into a people”\textsuperscript{10}. Reading about the lives of African ancestors gave Coates a new awareness of his life, and a

passion to embody that heritage in his writing. Familial lineage enabled Coates to be inspired and uplifted by black writers of the past, and one could argue that in writing *Between the World and Me* as a memoir, Coates is placing his own work within that legacy of black experience and expression. Black literature enables people to form a fuller and more comprehensive understanding of political and social struggle. The memoir empowers black culture, and demonstrates through his father’s bookstore that his ancestry is highly acknowledged, and celebrated. Representing black culture as such demands that it cannot only be looked at through a history of suffering, but also through perseverance and unity. Rather, the history of slavery can ignite an even grander history of storytelling and intergenerational connectedness that can inspire current and future generations. Therefore, Coates’s epistolary memoir establishes itself as part of that heritage.

Coates addresses the memoir to his son in order to identify the past within the upcoming generation. Thus enabling black culture to confront America’s repressive and racist nature. Coates’s pessimistic voice throughout the book identifies the plight of black men but also the pride he feels for black culture, literature, and African American’s determination to outlast bigotry. Narratives of struggle such as this book are a description of how a person or a people fought to survive and carry on in the world—that is how struggle becomes perseverance. *Between the World and Me* proclaims a legacy for Coates’s family and black history, and is a declaration of how a black man struggled, but endured in America so that his son could have a life too. The book is an account of the prejudice Coates has endured, but it serves as a declaration of the trials that all black men have encountered. This discourse is written to Samori so as to encourage him to carry that
legacy throughout his life. This is a strategy famously used by many of the great civil rights activists and writers in American history. One specifically powerful writer who conveyed black American struggle and preached black American perseverance to future generations is one of Coates’s greatest influences, James Baldwin.

**Literary Lineage: Baldwin and Coates**

This chapter compares the ways in which Baldwin and Coates write about struggling in America as black men. It will establish how Coates continues Baldwin’s lineage on the topic of race and how they differ in their approach in commentating on a prejudice nation. Familial lineage is an important theme throughout *Between the World and Me*, but one could argue that literary lineage is also an extremely important element of black identity. Though Coates’s own father had an impact on his writing, Baldwin has been considered a father-like influence in Coates’s memoir. This connection displays a strong pattern in black writing that examines mentorship and tradition through memoir. Baldwin and Coates write letters to younger members of their families to teach them about how to survive white supremacy that is so deeply engrained in America’s history. By doing so, both writers recognize the tenacity and perseverance of black American men, and memorialize those that have been destroyed by racism through personal accounts of the black American man’s experiences. America’s inherent bias towards black individuals is validated through both memoirs, and how those individuals cope with incessant marginalization and profiling is addressed in order to display America’s double standard for minorities versus white people. Coates and Baldwin have been extensively
compared ever since *Between the World and Me* was published.\textsuperscript{11} *Between the World and Me* has been likened to Baldwin’s memoir, *The Fire Next Time* (1962), which is an epistolary memoir to Baldwin’s nephew. It too discusses the oppression of black men in America. Although both authors find ways to accurately expose America’s racist nature, the two are quite different in their approach.

Derik Smith writes in his article on Coates and his role amongst other black authors, “Ceding the Future”, writers such as Baldwin or Michelle Alexander “rearrange the furniture of ideas in the house of reform so that a critical mass might be invited in”.\textsuperscript{12} He argues that their writing is analytical and includes all types of readers in the discourse so that we might all relate and understand the issues they are voicing. He then argues that unlike these writers, Coates takes “planks from the old house of reform to build a new cabin haunted by Sisyphus, wherein the individual might read, study, and bide his time before the apocalypse” (Smith 184). Coates is separated from other writers on this topic and is represented as a cynical interpreter, doomed to forever discuss racism but never believe that progress or solution exists. Indeed, Smith believes that Coates’s pessimistic analysis of America distances his readers from sharing in his experiences or his “house of reform” in order to try to promote political change. However, Smith may have a close-minded interpretation of the memoir. Baldwin may write to invite readers of all colors to understand his feelings towards a racist America in order to build a better one, but Coates takes those negative elements of society and uses them to hold up a mirror to the old


Baldwin’s memoir, *The Fire Next Time*, is a letter to his nephew about how to live in a country that was built by exploiting black Americans. The memoir is about learning how to understand that [Baldwin and his nephew, to whom the memoir is addressed] live in an oppressive society. Baldwin explains that he is writing this to his nephew because, “I know what the world has done to my [Baldwin’s] brother and how narrowly he has survived it” (Baldwin 5). Baldwin is paying homage to the black men in his life that have suffered from the systemic racism in America, and he wants to warn his nephew of its influence before it consumes him as well. Baldwin prepares his nephew for a society that is programmed to hate him. He too attempts to create a survival guide for his nephew so that he can understand that American ideals are not what they claim to be. “I am writing this letter to you, to try to tell you something about how to handle them, for most of them do not yet really know that you exist” (Baldwin 6). Coates, in a very similar fashion writes, “I am writing you because this was the year you saw Eric Garner choked to death for selling cigarettes; because you know now that Renisha McBride was shot for seeking help. […] And you know now, if you did not before, that the police departments of your
country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body” (Coates 9). He uses his memoir to tell his son how to internalize the vehemence against black bodies in America, to recognize that his body is at risk, and to learn how to survive. His message is more direct and perhaps more violent than Baldwin’s. It worries more specifically about how the black man is affected by society rather than analyzing why he has been subjugated in such a way. But both writers use America’s cruelty as a mechanism to give agency to the black men who have been put on the wrong side of a country’s ideals and biases. The books are perfectly connected as the declarative epistolary memoirs on race of each of their times. The two’s relationship reiterates the importance of lineage and its ability to create embodied discourse for the black American man. Comparing the two writers enables this discourse to unite through historical and personal accounts in order to display a static symptom of American ideology that negatively impacts black men. Doing so however, also establishes a powerful intergenerational conversation about power and agency through literature. Each author accomplishes this by using influential and politically charged language throughout both memoirs.

Baldwin uses the word “innocent” similarly to how Coates uses “the dream” or “the dreamers”. It is purposefully facetious and yet, still evokes encouragement to pass on to his nephew. “This innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish” (Baldwin 7). Baldwin’s anger and fear towards the nation is illustrated by his description of the systematic hierarchy that challenges black Americans from succeeding. “You were not expected to aspire to excellence; you were expected to make peace with mediocrity” (Baldwin 7). Here Baldwin expresses that his
nephew was born into a history of slavery that lingers in modern society and hinders him from succeeding, but that does not have to be his nephew’s fate. He proceeds to tell him,

Trust your experience. […] If you know whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go. The details and symbols of your life have been deliberately constructed to make you believe what white people say about you. Please try to remember that what they believe, […] does not testify to your inferiority but to their inhumanity and fear (Baldwin 8).

Baldwin is realistic about America and its intent to discount African Americans, but he is compelled by hope and the belief that, white America is not the only America;

“remember, most of mankind is not all of mankind” (Baldwin 4).

Though Baldwin successfully declared this optimistic method as his style of writing, the 2017 documentary I Am Not Your Negro represents Baldwin in a different light. Overall, the documentary illustrates how Baldwin felt pinned between black Americans and white Americans. A quote from the movie suggests a powerful likeness to the title of Coates’s memoir, “I was in some way in those years, without entirely realizing it, the Great Black Hope of the great white father”. Like Du Bois, Baldwin is represented as someone who felt placed in the middle of two worlds; he too lived with a double consciousness. He was very much between the world and himself trying to expose systemic racism and preach ways of overcoming it. This could have very well been by his desire to do so, but it also could have been a role he was given by society.

Baldwin’s memoir focuses on how black Americans must overcome the injustices that try to break them. In a Fresh Air interview with Terry Gross, Baldwin commented on the gossip that his memoir was written to condemn white people: “They flatter

themselves,” he said. He then went on, “The expectation was to write from the point of view of the victim, but to take such a stance would simply be to corroborate all of the principles which had you enslaved in the first place”. By not writing from a submissive and oppressed perspective Baldwin began to be criticized for writing, and therefore seemingly advocating for violence during The Civil Rights Movement. But this was never his intention, and white America argued that Baldwin was the angry young man hashing out about white supremacy. But instead of writing to send white America a message, like Coates, Baldwin is writing, first and foremost, to describe a black American man’s experiences in a racist country. If white Americans read the memoir, it should serve as a new way of interpreting society, not as a personal attack. “There is no reason for you to try to become like white people and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that they must accept you. […] You must accept them. You must accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope” (Baldwin 8).

Baldwin’s disappointment in white America is melded into his analysis of how white people got to be so violent and oppressive, a key question in his life’s work. To accuse white Americans of being innocent is to playfully articulate the American ideology that is constructed through a white lens that overlooks the discriminatory traits of the system. Therefore, Baldwin’s intuition to see his oppressor as people with a lost identity allows him to view America with complete and utter faith in the black man’s ability to rise above. Doing so gives black society agency amongst a racist society incapable of accepting or understanding one’s identity. According to Baldwin, to be black in America

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is to defy how the country expects society to function, and Baldwin instills a sense of power and pride in his nephew, knowing that he can disobey the norm as long as he can live through the understanding that the white American is a lost and angry American.

Whether white readers accepted this argument or not has little interest to Baldwin, the purpose was to write a representation of the America he sees, and the people who fuel that false characterization of a land of equal opportunity. Perhaps then Smith gives Baldwin too much credit for reaching a mass public. When describing white Americans and their inability to fight racism, Baldwin argues, “To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case, danger, in the minds of white Americans, is the loss of their identity” (Baldwin 9). America’s long history of white superiority has dominated the ways in which even liberal white Americans may feel a responsibility to act. He goes on to say that, “the black man has functioned in the white man’s world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar: and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations” (Baldwin 9). Therefore the nature of white America is to believe that all of its discontent for the problems in its society should be blamed on someone else, and Baldwin believes that that someone is the black man. His theory is one of empowerment and is ignited by the very idea that for a black man to succeed, he is rocking the very foundation of a nation that has always expected a white hierarchy to triumph. He quotes from the spiritual, “You Got A Right” to reaffirm the need to challenge expectations, “The very time I thought I was lost, My dungeon shook and my chains fell off. […] We cannot be free until they [white people] are free” (Baldwin 10). Reading The Fire Next Time grants one the ability to look inside the mind of a brilliant writer and see how a black man experiences the same space a white man may inhabit.
Baldwin uses memoir and its ability to be intimate as a way of challenging reader’s perception of American ideals. Instead, the reader interprets white supremacy through the eyes of a black man that sees it as a scapegoat for America and its shortcomings.

Instead of lingering over the many ways in which white America oppresses black people, Baldwin tells his nephew how white America views him, but how he can conquer their biased assumptions. In 1962, one could argue that positive sermons such as Baldwin’s would be more successful than the cynical style of Coates’s writing today. I would argue that each writer uses their respective tones because the time period in which they lived calls for such a voice. Baldwin wrote during The Civil Rights Movement, and used the power of national unity and justice that was fervently alive to convey the racial injustices that needed fixing, while Coates writes in today’s divided nation that deals with police brutality and systemic racism in violent and corrupt ways and perhaps has a less substantial class of citizens fighting to change that. This circumstance calls for a more deliberate and harsh discourse than Baldwin may have needed to use during the time of Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Panthers. I argue that each style of writing is dependent on readers at the time that each book was published. While Americans in Baldwin’s time perhaps felt a greater urgency to do something about racism, Coates writes in an era of where the youth grew up with Barack Obama as president and the black lives matter movement—perhaps that enables this generation to be more complacent because they believe were have progressed beyond racist philosophies dominating American ideology. This makes Coates’s audience less reachable, perhaps even more unaware and so he is cynical as to whether people will attempt to evoke real change. Perhaps if he were writing today, his voice might be cynical like Coates.
One could argue that Baldwin truly did feel as pessimistic as Coates, but recognized society’s need for a discourse of perseverance more than one of skepticism. In a speech he distinguished how white men are praised for believing in certain ideals while black men are reprimanded for demanding access to those same standards: “If any white man in the world says, ‘Give me liberty or give me death,’ the entire white world applauds,” Baldwin tells talk show host Dick Cavett, in a scene from the doc. “When a black man says exactly the same thing, he is judged a criminal and treated like one and everything possible is done to make an example of this bad nigger so there won’t be any more like him”. Baldwin exposed the racist discrepancies of American politics throughout his career. Baldwin, like Coates, is frank about the realities of being black in America. Both authors use aggressive descriptions of how black Americans are treated to distinguish the black American experience from the way white people live. When describing his father, Baldwin writes, “he really believed what white people said about him”(Baldwin 4). His father is an example of the two perspectives black Americans are forced to understand. Similarly to Du Bois’s black veil, Baldwin suggests that black Americans have the ability to see themselves the way that white America sees them, or the way that their fellow black Americans do. But Baldwin suggests that the way you construct your perspective is a choice. A black man can decide if what he endures comes from a wrongful history of displaced anger and oppression, or if he truly is a lesser person than that of his oppressors. “You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a nigger” (Baldwin 4). Making that decision is based on one’s ability to escape their American-made destiny of being repressed by society for

the color of their skin. Even by dividing the two worlds of America by color, Baldwin instills a sense of empowerment or rebellion against the discourse that makes black Americans feel unsafe or overlooked in their own country. Coates uses this divisive language in his memoir to create an embodied discourse that speaks out against America’s history of racism for black American men.

In *Between the World and Me*, Coates tells his son how to survive in an America that is designed to abolish his existence. He tells Samori, “Your body can be destroyed” (Coates 9). Once again this violent, evocative language reaffirms inherent biases against black bodies, and reaffirms that the threat to those bodies is constant. Destroying a body, rather than killing it, implies a sense of extreme aggression and irrationalism. If something must be destroyed, the destroyer will go to all ends of the Earth to find out how that can be done. For Baldwin and Coates, using this word so frequently to describe the state of black bodies in America claims that America is desperate to find ways of violently and anarchically demolishing a people out of arbitrary racist notions. Baldwin reassures his nephew that being black is not the problem, that their race, was arbitrarily chosen to take the brunt end of all of America’s frustrations. With this reading, it is clear that Coates and Baldwin have similar insights into how America marginalizes African Americans, even if their approaches to memoir and race are quite different.

Believing in a fair society is erroneous because minority groups are not given the same privileges to succeed in America as white Americans are given. Baldwin eradicates notions of equal opportunity by identifying how freedom has never been truly awarded to the black man, for he still lives in a world that dehumanizes him for arbitrary reasons: “It
is only ‘the so called American Negro’ who remains trapped, disinherited, and despised, in a nation that has kept him in bondage for nearly four hundred years and is still unable to recognize him as a human being” (Baldwin 73). As Coates explains, “Destruction is merely the superlative form of a dominion whose prerogatives include friskings, detainings, beatings, and humiliation. All of this is common to black people” (Coates 9). The black man is accustomed to a culture that succeeds in repressing them. Coates illustrates how persistent and abusive marginalizing, physically harming, and conquering that person’s ability to have control or agency formulate the process of destroying someone. All methods he lists are ways of stripping a person of their humanity, power, and security—all so that they may become submissive, complacent, and small.

**A Genre of Subjugation: Understanding America’s Ignorance and Racist Roots**

Genre is a particular subject that is categorized as an individual compartment in literature. Memoir is a genre that powerfully conveys personal struggle to a mass audience. Using this particular literary realm to discuss racism is impactful because it serves to protest the subjugation that minorities have experienced in their lives. Devastation and obliteration are methods of subjugation that both authors use to identify America’s cultural roots as the instigator of all violence towards African Americans. Baldwin explains, “This is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives” (Baldwin 5). The words illustrate that black lives are constantly at risk of violence because of bigoted American philosophy and that is not something that can be forgotten in any way, shape, or form.
And yet, the end of this statement suggests something that both Coates and Baldwin seem to believe to some degree: “And are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it” (Baldwin 5). America lives in blissful ignorance. Coates denounces the country and declares that society wishes to remain unaware of what their fellow Americans experience. Black lives are undervalued and are told to stop victimizing themselves. Similarly, Between the World and Me discredits any notion of one, homogenous American identity, and instead, expresses the U.S. through the lens of the subjugated. I argue that doing so pays homage to black American men who are as angry and fearful of suppressive in society as he is. The innocent/dreamers that believe in a homogenous America only reaffirm its truly racist system. Baldwin and Coates suggest that white America chooses not to see its oppressive and systematically racist character. That much is clear when the nation believes we overcame racism by electing a black president. The University of Michigan released a study shortly after Barack Obama’s election announcing that “Obama’s election reduced perceptions of racism, but boosted opposition to race related policies”. This means that because we had a black president America thought we had less racism in the country and therefore did not need to pass policies to ensure the security of marginalized citizens. Coates is particularly intent on discussing Obama in much of his work. In his article, “My President Was Black”, that he wrote for The Atlantic, Coates argues, “A black president would always be a contradiction for a government that, throughout most of its history, had oppressed black people. The attempt to resolve this contradiction through Obama—a black man with deep roots in the white world—was remarkable.” Coates does not believe that Obama is an

accurate depiction of a black man overcoming white America. Rather, Coates seems to declare that his presidency confuses the public into believing that we no longer have racism in this country. But we know now that racism did not diminish in 2008, but rather what faltered was our determination to protect minorities. Obama recognizes this problematic outcome of his election. In his farewell address, Obama shares this belief, stating,

After my election, there was talk of a post-racial America. Such a vision, however well-intended, was never realistic. For race remains a potent and often divisive force in our society…. For white Americans, it means acknowledging that the effects of slavery and Jim Crow didn’t suddenly vanish in the ‘60s; that when minority groups voice discontent, they’re not just engaging in reverse racism or practicing political correctness; that when they wage peaceful protest, they’re not demanding special treatment, but the equal treatment our Founders promised.  

Obama is an important example to use in this context because like Baldwin, he carries the burden of speaking for both black and white Americans. His presidency was confused with a belief of a progressed nation that was no longer racist, and Coates is discontented by this and describes Obama as a black man who emerged from the best of white America”. To Coates, Obama’s presidency enables the dreamers to be complacent and ignorant of a biased society. But Coates does not seem to recognize that Obama was given an impossible task, to represent an oppressed culture while serving as the most powerful man in America—a land built by white people oppressing minorities. Obama was therefore alienated from both perspectives and carried with him a double consciousness of his black and white backgrounds. The piece of Coates’s argument that is fair and accurate reveals how America has decided to deny inherent racism; to believe it


is better today than it was twenty years ago and therefore does not need further repairing. As our former president said, “you cannot know the experience of another person unless you “climb into his skin and walk around in it”. As Baldwin and Coates suggest in their memoirs, America remains racist and othering towards its black citizens out of a chosen ignorance.

Slavery and The Civil Rights Movement may be taught in schools, but American society allows privileged, white Americans to retreat and live in their like-minded bubbles, ignoring the unfairness of society. Coates reveals this ignorance to Samori so that it is clear that America will never protect black bodies the way they deserve. “You would be a man one day, and I could not save you from the unbridgeable distance between you and your future peers and colleagues, who might try to convince you that everything I know, all of the things I’m sharing with you here, are an illusion, or a fact of a distant past that need not be discussed” (Coates 90). The rest of American can continue living complacent, unaffected lives while black Americans continue to endure subjugation. They, white America that is, can simply discount the racial injustice that exists for African Americans on a regular basis. This is where Coates’s cynical language is most prudent, most effective, and most valid.

Brianne Hastie and David Rimmington wrote a paper on white privilege in discourses of racial inequality, they sited Peggy McIntosh from Wellesly College stating, “White privilege, defined by McIntosh as the ‘invisible knapsack’ of ‘unearned assets’

Ibid.
that members of dominant racial groups ‘cash in’ every day.” All across liberal campuses and communities you hear the words “white privilege,” sometimes as a joke amongst friends as they complain about getting the wrong latte from Starbucks that morning, or in classrooms when a professor asks their students to rationalize why they are given more opportunities than others, but mostly as a way to poke fun at their ability to live freely and safely because of their wealth and skin color:

Coates explains that this idea of whiteness and superiority was arbitrary, that “race is the child of racism, not the father” (Coates 7). One day America developed ways of attaining wealth and power “not through wine tastings and ice cream socials, but rather through the pillaging of life, liberty, labor, and land; through the flaying of backs; the chaining of limbs; the strangling of dissidents; the destruction of families” (Coates 8). One day white Americans discovered the most effective way gaining total control over all other people for financial and social gain. But they do not overtly tell you that in classrooms when you learn about slavery. They do not tell you that destruction (and therefore success) was accomplished by, “the rape of mothers; the sale of children; and various acts, first and foremost, to deny you and me [Coates and his son] the right to secure and govern our own bodies” (Coates 8). Coates lists how America was founded on violence and then promised equality to those that made it what it is today and did not deliver. His discontent

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reverberates through the backs of young minds that were taught about colonialism and slavery but were never given current contexts in which to associate those acts by. Therefore, those young minds believe white privilege to be a pop culture reference, a joke to reprimand one another for a right that they were granted by arbitrary rules and ideologies. And those people are the future, and they are unaware of the society they live in that doesn’t just make white privilege the difference between going to college and getting Starbucks, but also the difference between life and death when confronted by a police officer. To live as a black American is to carry that list with you everywhere you go; every time you hear about police wrongfully shooting a black individual; every time you see the look on your friends of colors’ faces when others joke about the validity of what white privilege really is.

Coates’s embodied discourse in Between the World and Me was not written to teach white readers about white supremacy, it was written to give a voice to those that suffer under that hierarchy because their country has chosen to believe that solving segregation also somehow meant ending the destruction of black bodies. But what is a country that calls itself free if half of its population walks around afraid that the color of their skin will make them vulnerable of being subjects of violence? This fear is particularly unique for African Americans. Though there are many marginalized groups in history, time has allowed the “melting pot” of America to let the Irish, Jewish citizens, polish citizens etc. to assimilate in white culture.

Racism may in some ways be chosen through arbitrary characterizations, but the black Americans have been reprimanded for their ancestry without the same forgiveness that the Irish, Polish, or Jewish have received over time. As Coates points out,
“Americans believe in the reality of “race” as a defined, indubitable feature of the natural world” (Coates 7). Yet history has proven that this definition is malleable for certain groups of people. “In this way, racism is rendered as the innocent daughter of Mother Nature, and one is left to deplore the Middle Passage of the Trail of Tears the way one deplores an earthquake, a tornado, or any other phenomenon that can be cast as beyond the handiwork of men” (Coates 7). And this theory holds true. America today does not hold itself responsible for the past. It prides itself on this idea of a melting pot, that anyone can come here are assimilate into society. Yet the secret piece of that ideal is that it only applies to anyone who isn’t too dark to eventually be considered white. But Coates’s memoir demonstrates that black ancestry and literature should be celebrated, for in the face of oppression it has always stood as a pillar of strength, giving an identity to a people who are vulnerable of being stripped of that agency.

Baldwin wrote *The Fire Next Time* to tell his nephew how to deal with *them*, [the innocent Americans that seem oblivious to the injustice that surrounds them]. Baldwin calls them the innocent, Coates calls them the dreamers. Whoever they are, they are the Americans that believe in progress but do not feel a responsibility to ensure it. Baldwin calls them well meaning, Coates indicates them as a product of a failed attempt to show America what it truly is—the mirror held up to the “house of reform” failed to educate the nation. In either case, many citizens walk around assuming we all have an equal opportunity to do the things we want to do in life. And both Baldwin and Coates seem to feel sorry for those individuals. An ignorant America sits in the background pretending like society is equal, and meanwhile Baldwin is preparing his nephew for a life of
enduring the “innocent” that do not understand the realities of racist America. Coates does the same for his son.

The similarities between Baldwin and Coates are certainly there, but their overall intentions are different. Baldwin conveys his anger and frustration with the system, but still teaches his nephew to choose love, faith, and peace. Coates does not build up any kind of message resembling those qualities. It is clear from the way in which he discusses American examples of racism that he is not speaking to white readers but rather to black men that share in his discontent for an unaware population that reaffirms racist practices. However, there is one very astounding statement on the tribulations of black experience that Baldwin makes in his memoir that is continued in Coates’s memoir. While describing his oppressed peers growing up in Harlem, Baldwin writes, “And there seemed to be no way whatever to remove this cloud that stood between them and the sun, between them and love and life and power, between them and whatever it was that they wanted” (Baldwin 19). Richard Wright’s poem articulates the disparity between the black man and the rest of the world, “Between The World And Me” may or may not have influenced Baldwin, but the pattern of placing oneself on the other side of society, of life, of the world, is a powerful pattern used by many of the great race writers in history. “That summer, in any case, all the fears with which I had grown up, and which were now a part of me and controlled my vision of the world, rose up like a wall between the world and me” (Baldwin 19, 27). In addition to these writers, W.E.B. Du Bois argues that a black individual can see themselves through the eyes of the bigoted, or through the eyes of their culture. He describes that double consciousness in his essay, *The Souls of Black Folk*, “Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: […] They
approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? They say, I know an excellent colored man in my town.” The quote connects to Baldwin’s comments, Coates’s title, and Wright’s poem. It contributes to a long line of writers who have used the phrase when discussing a black man’s experience in a racist world. Baldwin, Wright, Du Bois, and Coates place themselves in opposition of society and therefore, of the world. “Between the world and me” illustrates that the black man does not inhabit the world, but rather, it is pinned up against him.

Each writer’s work embodies this concept, thus furthering this theme of lineage and legacy within black culture and literature. It is important to recognize the ways that Baldwin influenced Coates’s writing, but also to understand that Coates is writing in a new time. He is writing in a global society that is filled with controversy and social othering; that has had a black president and therefore denies that its problems mirror those of the 60s. Therefore, his writing, even if he desired, could not be a declaration of promise and change, because history identifies patterns of racism that still exist. Rather, *Between the World and Me* must serve as the title suggests, as a point of contention pinned between one’s identity and their society that attempts to repress them. By doing so, Coates identifies the characteristics of America that are overlooked by the general public and that allow marginalization to thrive.

Coates describes these innocent as, dreamers—Individuals that believe in a homogenous America where anyone can succeed if they work hard enough. “The Dreamers” like to think that if a few black and white Americans unite, racism has been

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extinguished. He begins his memoir by telling his son about an interview he had shortly after writing *Between the World and Me*. “But at the end of the segment, the host flashed a widely shared picture of an eleven-year-old black boy tearfully hugging a white police officer. Then she asked me about ‘hope.’ And I knew then that I had failed” (Coates 10). Determining that one white police officer hugging a black boy means that there is more love and acceptance than racism in the country completely contradicts Coates’s intentions for this memoir. An embodied discourse for black Americans fails if white readers then assume that Coates would be consoled by the image of a boy and a policemen sharing in an embrace. What he sees goes beyond the widespread image used to suggest a lie about American society—a façade used to blind America from what is really happening to black citizens. Like Baldwin says, “*most* of mankind is not *all* of mankind”, therefore the reverse is true as well; *one* policemen holding a black boy is not *all* policemen exhibiting equality; and to find some sort of closure or gratification in one photo disregards the hundreds of thousands of black people being destroyed by America. Furthermore, to read Coates’s rebellious memoir, to hear him tell his son that this world is designed to destroy him, and then to talk of hope because this time an officer wasn’t pointing a gun at that black boy, negates Coates’s declarative letter. It ignores that Coates is telling us that America is not America without its racist and violent history that still vehemently lives on. And apparently, this is Coates’s most fatal flaw. Critics believe that his pessimistic analysis of America leaves us stagnant, with no answers or resolutions. The writing is all over academia and the walls of that “house of reform,” America needs Coates to be Baldwin—to tell them that something is wrong but that it can get better. Coates however, refuses to give these dreamers what they want. His memoir is here, like Baldwin’s, to
give a voice to black America, to teach his son how to survive, and to resolve his anger about the death of his friend, Prince Jones; but it does not serve to instruct the public on how to treat black men humanely. It may not be a productive way of dealing with the marginalization of black Americans, but it is an effective way of giving marginalized voices a space to describe America.

**Criticizing Coates’s Pessimism**

Numerous critics have challenged Coates’s discontent for America. I argue that Coates does not hope to preach solutions so as to convey that America is too rooted in its racist history to ever be equal. Rather, the book functions to evoke the opinions and experiences of black American men in order to show how America’s racist nature challenges one’s ability to live rather than fight to survive. Thus, the memoir’s purpose can be interpreted as a method of representing black American men to give them agency in a repressive society. Like Baldwin’s memoir, Coates did not write *Between the World and Me* for white readers. In fact, perhaps Coates did not have an audience other than himself in mind while writing his memoir. The vernacular in the memoir is far more sophisticated than one would assume a fifteen-year-old boy in 2015 would appreciate—so perhaps this memoir is for Samori when he is older? I conclude that the memoir is both be a letter to Samori while also being to Coates himself. This theory reaffirms African American literature and its history of lineage and the passing down of experience to each new generation. Coates is writing to his son with the expectation that his son will understand America the same way Coates does. Therefore, the father and the son are likened to one another, and the memoir serves to connect the two generations through
shared cultural experiences of struggle. What a powerful and unified piece of writing—so then why has it received such harsh criticism?

As stated earlier in the essay, it would appear as though America desires Coates to be the next Baldwin. Perhaps we need Coates to be a writer who exposes problems with the country but provides uplifting discourse on how to overcome bigotry and pain. We need people to give us hope. It is the only way we feel that we can handle problems. Even if hope is unattainable, the public needs to be assured of their security and ability to resolve issues. But going back to America’s history of slavery and discrimination, hope is something that is only afforded to the privileged. Those that demand hope are those that feel they will be given something better—that they were promised something more. Yet for slaves, hope was not a feasible entity. It is clear that Coates looks down on the ‘dreamers’ who believe in equal opportunity and American ideals without recognizing its social climate. Therefore it would be absurd for Coates to present those dreamers an account of the struggles of black American men and then grant them the ability to feel absolved of their ignorance by promising change or solutions to a continuous and immovable problem within the U.S. The memoir is an embodied discourse for black American men; therefore it does not attempt to function as anything else that may implicate methods for improving the state of the nation. Still, it is important to analyze how the memoir may be perceived by academics that believe it to be incomplete and apocalyptic. As Michelle Alexander, author of the book, *The New Jim Crow* writes in a critique of Coates’s book, “I came to believe that the problem, to the extent that there is one, is that Coates’s book is unfinished. He raises numerous critically important questions that are left unanswered. Perhaps Coates hasn’t yet discovered for himself the
answers to the questions he poses in *Between the World and Me*. But I suspect that he is holding out on us. Everything he has ever written leads me to believe he has more to say.”23 This section will analyze those critiques and argue how they may or may not fully rationalize the intentions of Coates’s work.

Derik Smith’s key criticism of Coates is that his narrative is incomplete, cynical, and exclusive. As he argues in his essay “Ceding the Future, “Close reading of the text actually suggests that Coast has answered the principal question he sets for himself, which is ‘How do I live free in this black body?’ (Coates 12) His surprising and troubling answer is ‘with hopelessness and privatized Black Nationalism’ (Smith 183). I disagree with Smith’s close reading. It is imperative that we remember that this is a memoir to Coates’s son; therefore to propose such a hopeless and stagnant solution would be hypocritical of the exercise of writing this to a future generation. If Coates’s work is truly as apocalyptic as Smith believes, then why write to a younger individual? Coates clearly places his work within a tradition of intergenerational discourse; for that conversation to exist, he must believe in a future otherwise the writing would be irrelevant. Therefore I would propose an amendment to Smith’s key criticism. Instead of describing this memoir as apocalyptic I argue that Coates’s derisive voice embodies the disdain and suffering of the black man in order to give an identity to victims of historic bigotry. An embodied discourse accounts for the subject of the book, not the readers. If Coates wanted this to be literature on how to solve living in a racist nation, we must assume that his strong literary background would have urged him to choose a different genre.

Smith goes on to say that, “Coates seeks to educate, admonish, and entreat, but
abandons the reformatory structures of black public intellectuals before him” (184). Yet
this should not be seen as a disappointing characteristic of his work but rather a
revolutionary tactic to disconcert an otherwise ignorant readership. If the intention of the
book is how I have argued, it fully accomplishes its ability to account for the experiences
of black men, assert itself as a tribute to past writers, and reconstruct a reader’s
perception of American experience. Smith, as this paper has, compares *Between the
World and Me* to past writer’s works such as James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and
Malcolm X. He too argues that the memoir is a progeny of their work, but he then argues,
“Coates assembles a text that makes a series of unusual interventions in the black
intellectual tradition […] it quashes the salvific narratives of history and freedom dreams
that have long animated black religious, secular, and civic thought” (184). Instead, he
argues, “it recommends ‘struggle over hope’ (Coates 71), but is most interested in the
struggle of individual vocation and personal ‘study’” (Smith 184). Smith accurately
defines Coates’s unique account, but his antagonizing tenor seems to supersede the
elements of that distinctiveness that make the memoir so impactful. Yes, Coates is
influenced by great empowering intellects, but his articulation of individual struggle and
personal analysis should not be determined as a snide verbalization of black nationalism
and exclusivity. Rather, it is a meaningful embodiment of how America represses the true
and unjust ideals that predetermine black lives as lesser and threatening. Why is it bad if
a memoir communicates struggle through the personal experiences of someone who has
endured or witnessed it first hand? To demand something beyond the boundaries and
elements of memoir is to ask Coates to silence aspects of his beliefs in order to provide a
more academic and arguable stance on race. Coates chose memoir on purpose, therefore by doing so he chose to claim certain elements of literary theory and forgo others that would demand a more political analysis.

Smith’s critiques identify how Coates does not describe racism in terms of aiding the public, but that is straying off of the book’s purpose. Michelle Alexander wrote *The New Jim Crow* (2010) to offer an analysis of how America’s prison system is prejudice against African Americans in a time she describes as “an era of colorblindness”. She is perhaps the only author that has had their book become a mega best seller on this same topic. However, *The New Jim Crow* is not a memoir and therefore has different limitations and responsibilities than Coates’s work. The book powerfully articulates how mass incarceration targets black men. But Coates is not Alexander, and the two books are not comparable in that their purposes are intensely different. Other critics have had similar issues with Coates’s book.

As Dana A. Williams argues in her essay, “Considering *Between the World and Me; or, The Sins of Omission and Commission*”, “*Between the World and Me* enters this conversation of the limits of genre” (Williams 179). Though Williams considers this limit a flaw for the memoir, I argue that it freed Coates to focus on the elements of racism that he desired to discuss. It is clear from his previous work such as *The Case for Reparations* (2014), or *A Beautiful Struggle* (2012), Coates is capable of writing discourses of race and politics in various ways. His memoir serves as a new method of interpreting his views by looking at America through the vulnerable and unrestrained voice of the person Ta-Nehisi Coates. It is an embodied discourse for average American black men who

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endure prejudice; it is not a scholarly text on the subject for a reason. “Coates’s decision to situate his critique of racism in America as a personal conversation with his son is also a decision to deal with racism on an individual basis, not a collective one” (Williams 180). I argue that doing so allows past and future memoirs to be interpreted as personal declarations of political protest. They can be an individual account of a public pandemic and thus they can be revolutionary in their own right. The text is not incomplete, it is unconventional, and that disrupts traditional debate on race in America. An unfortunate tradition that Coates’s personal account does reinforce however is the lack of female voice throughout the memoir.

As an extremely venerated book, *Between the World and Me* has received praise from men and women alike. Yet, one could argue that this revolutionary personal account could potentially pose problems because of its masculine voice that perhaps alienates female readers. On the back of the book, Toni Morrison, a world-renowned female novelist praised Coates’s work as a “required reading”. This stamp of approval was a huge success for Coates and his book’s sales. However one might find that if this memoir does in fact pose as an example of how personal accounts of struggle can speak for an entire people, then should it not strive to be accessible by those very people both male and female alike? Though I fervently believe that it is within Coates’s right to convey the black American man’s experience, I find that I too am searching for the memoir to include a larger group in its discussion. Perhaps Coates is even too atypical for my preferences. To spend much time arguing how he should have included women would be contradictory to my thesis claim. Overall, although society may want Coates, the intellectual, intuitive, and eloquent writer to discuss America’s racism from all points of
view, it is still this thesis’s intention to argue why that is not the writer’s duty. In fact, by specifying this discourse to be a representation of strictly black American male’s experiences, the memoir poses as an example of how more writers can access small groups of people in order to convey their own personal strife within society. That in it of itself is meaningful even if it does not make all readers feel whole. Coates accomplishes something greater than an overall contemplation of racism in the U.S., instead, he creates a space in which the black man’s voice can be heard without the intrusion of the rest of society. Doing so makes readers witnesses of that experience rather than critics. And the ability to expose readers to Coates’s interpretations of America allows him to disrupt America’s perceptions of homogeneity.

Disrupting America’s Perceptions of a Homogenous Experience

Ta-Nehisi Coates takes shared American experiences and dismantles them in order to force the reader to reinterpret their own understandings of society and culture. One can conclude that Coates challenges reader’s perceptions by taking presumed cultural experiences and constructing them in new fashions in order to demonstrate his experiences in society. Doing so enables the memoir to serve as a political document in which the reader is exposed to events in one black man’s life in order to understand the prejudices of America that marginalize African Americans. The memoir creates a space in which readers can identify their misconceptions about America and reinterpret society through the experiences and declarations of Ta-Nehisi Coates. Therefore, I argue that the memoir successfully serves as a mirror being held up to the U.S and identifying the qualities of America that make it a repressive and excluding nation.
Coates disrupts conventional perceptions of this country by describing how historical moments resonate with an individual in different ways. This is most effective through memoir because he allows the reader to understand America through his own, concrete experiences and use them to understand how black American men exist—thus reestablishing perceptions of equality and freedom. Coates writes a powerful description of September 11th as a representation of this concept. He writes: “I kept thinking how southern Manhattan had always been Ground Zero for us. They auctioned our bodies down there” (Coates 86). Coates identifies this day much differently than others have described it. When he writes, “Manhattan had always been Ground Zero for us [African-Americans]”, it establishes a stark difference between white and black Americans. Coates takes a well-known city that represents life, production, and diversity, and reveals its exclusive and oppressive history. Instead of being a vacation destination for Broadway shows and the Empire State Building, New York is a place of persecution and pugnacity. I argue that it is both, but we repress social marginalization because it does not advocate for the ideal of unity we so passionately crave to identify by—so that history of repression is forgotten. And in return, African Americans are further displaced by concepts of a homogenous experience.

Where the financial district lies, its history as a place of destruction lies with it. The term ground zero was given to the city after the towers came crashing down, but Coates rejects this definition. Instead, the city did not become a volatile place because of one terrorist attack, it has existed in that state ever since it stood as a location to buy and sell black bodies. September 11th does not mean the same thing to every American because Manhattan, and America for that matter, does not have a universal definition. To
buy into one description plays into ideals of the American dream that overlook how society others minority groups in social and political ways.

Coates challenges readers’ perceptions of American culture by identifying that individuals have different definitions and senses of place. Coates argues his perceptions of a shared cultural experience so as to change how his reader’s might interpret America. “But I did know that Bin Laden was not the first man to bring terror to that section of the city. I never forgot that” (Coates 87). Public spaces can and do hurt certain people, and black Americans are consistently threatened and shattered in all parts of America. Manhattan is a space that has always meant ruin for people; it is just not publically identified for its racist and violent history but rather its culture that is only accessible to affluent Americans. This is another example of how lineage serves to enlighten perceptions in the memoir. Coates writes, “I never forgot that”, as if to say that this is a story or legacy that lives on through him. Making this event a piece of a tragic history rather than it’s own, unique event, gives agency to the many black lives that were devastated by Manhattan long before the city was what it is today. This history is crucial in the discussion of race because by simply believing in homogenous American experiences, Americans enable themselves to repress how foundationally oppressive the country really is. Coates exemplifies this ignorance through his discourse on a notable misconception of society: what constitutes someone as a hero?

Coates challenges universal admiration for police officers by identifying what those uniforms mean to a black American. All across the U.S., people praised policemen for their service in the wake of a terrorist attack, but Coates writes, “I could see no difference between the officer who killed Prince Jones and the police who died. […]”
They were the fire… which could - with no justification - shatter my body” (Coates 86). This example echoes that of the little boy hugging the police officer. It illustrates how on the other side of American perception, African Americans struggle to forgive or praise police because the ethics behind the force have always been contradictive when it comes to black Americans, and police have always controlled how much freedom a black man is able to feel. “The truth is that the police reflect America in all of its will and fear, and whatever we might make of this country’s criminal justice policy, it cannot be said that it was imposed by a repressive minority” (Coates 79). The point of using examples of police throughout this thesis is to demonstrate how affective and destructive their unregulated power is against minorities while it furthers the security of white Americans. Society has watched while many police go without repercussions for violent behavior, especially towards minority groups.

Coates establishes a communal experience for black Americans over many generations. He describes the events that take place after his friend Prince Jones has been killed by a cop. Coates repeats the words, “we know” as a demonstration of the realities every black American understands about the law because it has been engrained into them over and over again.

“We know that his superiors sent this officer to follow Prince from Maryland, through Washington, D.C., and into Virginia, where the officer shot Prince several times. We know that the officer confronted Prince with his gun drawn, and no badge. We know that the officer claims he shot because Prince tried to run him over with his jeep. We know that the authorities charged with investigating this shooting did everything in their power to investigate Prince Jones” (Coates 80).

The charges crescendo with every “we know” as if to haunt the complacent society that allows police to behave immorally and illegally without consequences. He states, “America’s problem is not its betrayal of ‘government of the people,’ but the means by
which ‘the people’ acquired their names” (Coates 6). Therefore he argues that black Americans have never been considered people under the same constitutional definition. This results in a segregated culture that represses an entire community and supports a different one on the basis of skin color. Coates’s list of accusations towards this cop is written as if it is its own dystopian constitution. In other words it suggests that black Americans know the realities of police encounters and recognize their immorality. “We know” illustrates a universal knowledge amongst black Americans that is so ingrained in history that it has been taught and explained over many years. This concept once again relates back to W.E.B. Du Bois’s black veil in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). He argues that black Americans live under a veil that produces a double consciousness. The veil depicts a fragmented self in which black identity and American identity cannot converge. Coates believes the two do not unite because America never granted black individuals the same agency as it did to white individuals. Therefore, believing in a just judicial system, or a moral police force is not possible if you are not given the same rights as other Americans. There is no “innocent until proven guilty”; there is only fear of being branded as guilty. Once again, this list of accusations demands that the reader recognize how starkly unfair society is to black Americans. While the rest of America waits to hear the details of Treyvon Martin, or Michael Brown’s death, hoping to find some means for justification, double consciousness and the black experience recognize that those investigations are irrelevant. “We know” echoes through every one of these cases, and indicates the shallowness of a policeman’s defense and the hopeless attempt to have justice.
Like war heroes, they are admired for their duties and expunged of their faults. Coates is demanding that his son, [and also the reader] recognize police as humans that are guilty of cruelty just the same as any citizen. He identifies black American’s anxieties as a fear of being “shattered” for the color of their skin. Coates uses this word to describe how fragile and vulnerable a black individual is in public spaces. A body that can be shattered is an individual that must step lightly, speak quietly, and live silently in order to survive. It depicts the very segregation that Coates argues Manhattan embodies; the police are choosing whom they save, and who they deem threatening to the uniform and ideals of a military driven police force based on seemingly arbitrary grounds. Yes, police should save people after a terrorist attack, but that is because they took an oath to protect Americans, and by allowing so many wrongful murders of black Americans to go without fault, America contradicts the standards it claims to hold to its police force.

Coates depicts how American ideology wants us all to believe that the country is unified and sets an example for the rest of the world. That is why it cannot recognize Manhattan as a place that has forever been tainted by wreckage—that wouldn’t fit into our ideal house of reform or what America stands for. This unfair hypocrisy continues when we choose to turn our backs to the tragedies happening in our cities everyday. The catastrophe that covered Manhattan on that day echoes the Manhattan that is polluted by a history of selling, enslaving, and killing African Americans. Usually in a scholarly piece I would refrain from my personal stance, but I feel that the nature of Coates’s memoir is to have our personal views altered by his dissertation. Therefore, my own perceptions of Sept. 11th may have initially been naïve. I was young when the attack occurred and as I’ve grown up the event has been a moment from my childhood when I
remember America being unified and supportive of its people. But reading Coates has changed my perspective. Manhattan has always been Ground Zero, but the general public only decided to recognize it as such after Bin Laden’s attack. It may not be a massive terrorist attack coming from overseas, but the wrongful death of any person at any point in time should be considered with an equal seriousness and devotion to justice. Moreover, the constant threat to American bodies on American soil should be cause for a united front determined to prevent this type of destruction from continuing.

If America can declare to heighten airport security in order to prevent another Sept. 11th, then why not also strive to prevent repeated destruction of black bodies by our own fellow Americans? Coates recognizes how violence onto black bodies is overlooked, unidentified, and repressed, while one event of violence is memorialized and mourned over. This is not to negate the importance of what happened on September 11th; rather, it is an example of how Americans choose to ignore their long history of terrorism against their own people. Many Americans perceive cops as heroes on days of calamity and on days of peace, but Coates is once again dismantling a shared American ideology in order to convey the realities of individuals who are apart of marginalized communities. Choosing to use Sept. 11th as a misinterpreted shared experience not only disrupts perceptions of a homogenous American identity, but it reaffirms how devastation and death effectively carry on one’s legacy. Police are not always heroes and black men are not inherently enemies. This is general knowledge and yet we seem to need to be reminded of that by wrongful shootings and the killings of innocent black Americans at the hands of a cop. Our black and white interpretations of America further its racist nature and hinder us from identifying how we allow certain people to struggle for
arbitrary reasons. Coates uses Sept. 11th to describe the ways black Americans experience events differently than white Americans because it is a symbol of threats on America and its people and of American perseverance and strength. It has the ability to powerfully deconstruct our ideas of shared experiences without consideration of our marginalizing traits as a country. Police brutality causes African Americans to deal with an anxiety that their children will not survive America. Police choose to continue evoking that same type of fear every time an officer shoots a black American without consequences or investigations. “I watched the ridiculous pageantry of flags, the machismo of firemen, the overwrought slogans. Damn it all. Prince Jones was dead. And hell upon those who tell us to be twice as good and shoot us no matter. Hell for ancestral fear that put black parents under terror” (Coates 87). Ancestral fear marks a lifetime for black citizens to wonder when the next terror attack will be. It does not need to come from overseas, it happens every day by the very individuals that are sworn to protect American bodies.

### Power to Protect Legacies

This history of being attacked has instilled a deeply rooted fear that a parent will lose their child to the racially charged brutality of America. “Black people love their children with a kind of obsession. You are all we have, and you come to us endangered” (Coates 82). A remarkable illustration of generational love and devotion is deconstructed by a violent history of hate in America. The reference defines black American children as a species vulnerable of being extinct. Coates deconstructs African American’s place by explaining that black bodies are constantly at risk of being destroyed. Doing so challenges Americans sense of place in the land of the free—because this land is built by
repressing cultures and threatening the bodies of minorities. The America that the reader might believe in never existed for black individuals. For example, “the killer [of Prince Jones] was the direct expression of all his country’s beliefs” (Coates 79). America has inherently, always functioned through its biases against certain people, and that bias is confirmed through the constant cruelty and murder of black Americans.

Coates goes further to establish how that fear affects the way a parent raises their child, thus demolishing America’s beliefs about growing up in a nation of freedom, liberty, or justice for all. After getting into a fight at school, Coates’s father hits him as punishment for his misbehavior. Coates writes, “Now I personally understood my father and the old mantra—‘either I can beat him or the police can’” (Coates 82). Coates takes a form of abuse and transforms it into a form of protection. Black bodies endure violence and pain as a means of preventing more suffering. Descriptions of how bodies are hurt and broken illustrate a tradition of brutality that black Americans endure at the hands of America’s system. Coates argues that families teach their children how to avoid the attention of authorities, and children recognize that the color of their skin makes them more likely to be investigated by the police. “To challenge the police is to challenge the American people who send them into the ghettos armed with the same self-generated fears that compelled the people who think they are white to flee the cities into the Dream” (Coates 79). The police serve as a symbol of American unity and security, but they threaten those very ideals for black communities. The difference however, is that most of America would rather allow that oppression to continue rather than to identify the police force as a destructive system that others certain Americans. “The problem with the police is not that they are fascist pigs but that our country is ruled by majoritarian pigs” (Coates
The United States is designed to put certain lives before others, and that hierarchy constantly exploits minority groups. Coates reminds his son throughout his memoir that he is no different from Treyvon Martin and that his body can also be destroyed at any point. This deconstructs what it means to feel protected by the police in one’s city by depicting how a black father teaches his son to protect himself from an America that was built oppressing his ancestors. Much like W.E.B. Du Bois’ veil, Samori must carry with him a double consciousness, one of pride and agency for his black body and ancestry, and one of a history of oppression.

A country that can devour one’s body out of arbitrary, racial biases disillusion Coates. The memoir illustrates the anger and hopelessness a parent feels in a society where their bodies and their children’s bodies are threatened. “I think we would like to kill you ourselves before seeing you killed by the streets that America made. That is the philosophy of the disembodied, of a people who control nothing, who can protect nothing” (Coates 82). This quote suggests that black parents do not have the power to protect their children from the dangers of being black in America. However, I would argue that the quote grants black parents with the very agency they may be presumed to lack. While Coates seems to suggest that the desire to kill your own child to avoid the system destroying them is an act of desperation and fear, I would argue that the figurative concept gives agency to those parents by advocating for a resistance to America’s violent tradition against African Americans. The disembodied have found ways throughout the years to be embodied, and the memoir itself functions as a way of doing so. Coates represents what comes from a desperateness to save one’s body and especially the body of one’s child—one’s legacy. In America where even people can be bought and sold, an
oppressed individual does not have the ability to protect their children from being destroyed. Therefore, Coates is suggesting that through obtaining agency, an individual would rather kill their own child rather than watch America shatter a black body. This claim, though grim and horrifying is less shameful than surrendering to the bigotry of America.

The Importance of *Between the World and Me*

*Between the World and Me* is a symbol of how African Americans protect themselves from being destroyed in order to keep lineages alive and to give agency to black culture. Coates asserts his power through literature and uses epistolary memoir to pass down his experiences to his son. The memoir serves as a method for black Americans to expose a common knowledge amongst most marginalized citizens in which one’s existence is reliant upon the ability to survive inevitable victimization. Coates attacks American ideology by reestablishing shared cultural experiences as examples of American ignorance. The example of Prince Jones illustrates how the philosophies of America can destroy even the most unthreatening people just because of their skin color. Therefore, *Between the World and Me* is pursuing ideas of how black bodies are destroyed for being just that—an American who is not protected by their authorities, betrayed by their government, and repressed by society.

When writing about how he views his son’s relationship to America, Coates writes, “That was the week you learned that the killers of Michael Brown would go free. The men who had left his body in the street like some awesome declaration of their inviolable power would never be punished. […] And you went into your room, and I
heard you crying” (Coates 11). Passages such as these allow Coates and his son’s vulnerability and personal pain to speak to a political problem that has destroyed black bodies while allowing America to believe in an equal society. The memoir declares America as inherently biased and violent towards the black man. It is an embodiment of the lives that have been shattered by slavery, by police brutality, by economic inequality, and by fear. It serves as a protest in honor of Prince Jones, and men who received the same fate, and is a way for Coates and Samori to deal with the anger, fear, but also the pride they have from being black in this country. It is a letter to Samori, and a diary-like declaration of Coates’s experiences. This manifestation enables Coates to propose a complex relationship between America and the black man.

“The black body is the clearest evidence that America was the work of men” (Coates 12) is a momentous demonstration of how Coates associates American progress with the exploitation of black bodies. Therefore, a belief in American social progression must be studied through an analysis of history and the marginalization of African Americans throughout time. By challenging perceptions of homogenous experience, Coates disputes American complacency. The cacophonous language that surrounds the experiences of black men throughout the memoir exposes readers to a new perception of American ideals. Instead, Coates enables readers to bare witness to his own personal experiences and thoughts in order to gain a new understanding of America without the propaganda and patriotism that repress its racist nature.

*Between the World and Me* is a declarative protest of how personal pain can stand as a political example for a mass community. It venerates black culture and literary themes that enhance concepts of legacy and intergenerational discourse, but it also
challenges perceptions of hope and solution. Doing so enables Coates to create this embodiment for black men who have endured America’s bigotry and been silenced by its brutality. When Coates asks the question, “how do I live free in this black body” (Coates 12) Smith argued the answer was cynical. I argue that the memoir itself is an emboldening embodiment of that answer. By using literature to convey personal struggle, Coates gives agency to black voices and represents America through the eyes of the repressed. As more and more people read the memoir, a black man’s voice can confront the oppression of modern culture without the intrusion of a homogenous ideology of equality. Besides being a powerful documentation of Coates’s experiences, the epistolary memoir is a genre that can turn the personal into a political declaration. If Coates can create a text communicate the black American man’s experience to a mass public through a genre of personal struggle, then perhaps more memoirs cold potentially serve as new insights on political and social controversy throughout all of academia in all realms of culture.
Bibliography:


