Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates

Book Synthesis

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Summary

Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote the book Between the World and Me as a letter to his son, Samori, explaining his experiences growing up in a white America that was built on the backs of blacks with violence and oppression. The major roots of American culture were explained to be tied to enslavement, injustice, theft and violence. Ta-Nehisi explains that America has subjugated groups of people into their natural born races and complexions rather than their national backgrounds which has led European decent Americans into believing they are white over their nationality and ultimately adopt the American white culture of violence amongst those who are not alike. For when a country has a justice system that preys on and hunts a group of Americans for the color of their skin with no repercussion, how can the progress of America not be built on violence and racism. He explains how the black body has been created fragile in the American progression where systemic oppression and racism aims to hurt this body. Growing up in an African American community in Baltimore, Ta-Nehisi witnessed how systematic oppression shaped the everyday lives of those around him where fear ultimately consumed the development of his culture. The 1990s is where Ta-Nehisi found his inspiration to do good as a writer with the inspiration of Malcolm X. Alongside Malcom X’s teachings, recent events like the Prince Jones killing fueled Ta-Nehisi’s ambition to show the injustice and impact of the American culture. Ta-Nehisi teaches his son Samori to remember the generations of black people who were born into chains and to remember it with all its nuance, error, and humanity. Through the history of America and his recounted experiences, he teaches his son about their place being built as the essential below of the country.

Synthesis

The material in this book has added to our understanding of racism through the lens of development of the black community throughout history. Although few suffer from systematic racism today like they did back in the 80’s and 90’s, the actions of a socially corrupt justice system bleed its effects into the current culture of black and white America. As outlined by Ta-Nehisi in the book, the black culture was built off of fear of oppression and injustice. This had led the black community to adopt standards and ideals that they thought would help them survive the best. These standards and ideals are then used against black Americans today as an arguing point of culture over color by all “whites” that that were forced to adopt the identity of white as outlined in the book. So, by the explanation that Ta-Nehisi gives on the roots of progress in America being built on black Americans, violence, and oppression, we can better understand how racism and anti-racism has developed into what it is today.

Ta-Nehisi Coates provided tons of sufficient evidence to support his view. Major points made in his explanation of social injustice and systematic oppression were supported with examples that he experienced and witnessed growing up. The most major piece of evidence that he points out to support his claims of a corrupt justice system for blacks in America was the killing of Prince Jones. This example was used to defend his stance on police brutality in America where he compares the level of violence to the terrorism of 9/11. This event fueled him into writing about the injustice where he spoke to politicians and government figures about the injustice. This is where he also found that the system that was meant to keep the for all Americans was just a smoke screen where supposed “safety” was of higher importance than justice. The disregard for black lives and systematic oppression was evident in the politicians he talked to and the police officer that faced zero consequences. This connection to the Prince Jones killing not only showed evidence for Ta-Nehisi’s claim on social injustice that targeted black Americans but also the extent to which it effected all black people, regardless of their social status.

This book reaffirmed my own personal ideas about racism and anti-racism. My current view on racism, in particular white on black or black on white racism, is that it is not a systematic thing in today’s generation and society but the culture and effects that racism has developed in America still lingers today. From Ta-Nehisi’s explanation on black culture being developed from the fear of oppression by whites, I really understood how history has had an impact on today’s black culture. Today’s black culture is the same that it was in the 80’s and 90’s where even though rates of injustice by police officers or the government are lower, black Americans still feel threatened by their government and are afraid to do things like interact with the police because of events like the Prince Jones killing. The point that Ta-Nehisi made on the melting pot of “whites” rather than separate nationalities also reaffirmed my own personal ideas about racism. Despite the hundreds of different nationalities that are in America, the complexion of an individual’s skin groups them into a race category that holds racial prejudice that is adopted by all members. Whether individuals are Italian, Spanish, British, or South African, in America they are white and white has a prejudice that is the same for all. This reaffirms my view on racism being an aspect of a “hive mind” or a group mentality that is adopted subconsciously overtime. Although we do not wish to contribute to systemic racism, sometimes, systemic racism forces groups to contribute. This contribution can come in the form of ignorance towards a history, or an experience as recounted by Ta-Nehisi’s interaction with the talk show host. Something that this book did change for my own personal ideas about racism is the emotional effects that it had and has on the black community. I had already known that systematic racism and oppression was hard for African Americans to endure but after learning about the violent parenting methods used, as outline by Coates, to protect the children of black household, I understood more deeply the emotional turmoil that racism has created. I originally thought that racist events and actions could be brushed off and walked away from but after reading this book I better understand how it effected so much more in the family of black Americans that I can understand.

A question that was stimulated for me after reading this book was how can we as a society reverse the hardships and effects that systematic racism and oppression have had on black American culture to free them from the fears of a socially unjust government system. This is a very perplexing question to me because it involves change in the mind and non-necessarily tangible things like the economy or government system. It makes sense for systems such as affirmative action to help reverse some of the effects of financial oppression but how does one reverse the cultural or physiological effects of racism. To accomplish this, I think that time and opportunity play a major role. Even from the racial events in the 90’s and 80’s that black Americans had to endure, Americas government has made massive strides in its reversal of systemic oppression where there is a little less fear for young black Americans. Although this fear is not completely eliminated, in time, I hope for the systemic fear of racism in black Americans to become obsolete.

Behaviors in my own life that I will change as a result of reading this book is to learn more about the roots of American history in relation to its racial development. Before this book, I had little to no experience or knowledge about the cruel history of America and how the country has treated different races. By learning more history about how different races have been affected by Americas roots and traditions, I hope to better understand how racism came to be in my culture today. This will help me better eliminate behaviors or actions that I have or that others have around me that resonate with a certain racial groups experience in systemic racism. To be unlike the ignorant TV host that Ta-Nehisi interacted with, understanding of experiences and education of history stands out to me as a behavior to adopt.