Francisco Rodriguez

Professor Danielson

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Between the World and Me

Changing the public’s perception on law enforcement is a goal that Ta-Nehisi Coates set out to achieve when he wrote *Between the World and Me.* In the book, Coates breaks down how America’s law enforcement is being used by Americas elite to kill the poor black community which Coates describes as “taking their bodies.” The entire book is written as a message to his son, teaching him everything he has learned throughout his life so far. Coates goes back in time and tries to reflect on his past experiences, trying to paint the picture of a young Ta-Nehisi who grew up in Baltimore, Maryland with survival always on his mind. The section of Baltimore that he grew up in is not a kind area, it houses many poor African-Americans who are also commonly known as black. These so called “black” Americans are subject to racism on a daily basis, so much so that these people turn on themselves in order to survive. Race is best defined by Coates when he writes “Racism – the need to ascribe bone-deep features to people and then humiliate, reduce, and destroy them – inevitably follows from this inalterable condition” (Coates 7). The “condition” that Coates is trying to explain is that of the social construct that if a man or woman has different skin tone, facial features, culture, and ideas than the majority of the population, he or she is not seen as a person but only as that socially constructed idea; unfortunately, this will threaten the majority population of men, making them feel territorial of their land and woman.

Coates explains the constant survival mentality as a necessary precaution in order to survive in a “black body” to his son, with an emphasis on how the police have been made into a group that is employed to take his “body.” Coates is trying to point out that regardless of how high his son goes in life, with his future career or education, his son will still face a daily assault of his very being. Coates wants to teach his son that hope isn’t going to change racism, but, that only his actions and the people of America’s actions will; coming together, connecting as I have learned in “Mindwalk,” making a living system that is dependent on being connected. By changing the perceptions of others, they would humanize and remove the label of black, white, and any others, so that we the human race, only see the humanity in a person and not a socially constructed idea of a “condition.”

Another social construct that Coates believes needs deconstructing is the “American Dream,” because, it is what fuels the system that Americas elites depend on. I shall explain this Dream as best I can with the help of Coates who portrays it in his own way. He states “I have seen that dream all my life. It is perfect houses with nice lawns. It is Memorial Day cookouts, block associations, and driveways. The Dream is treehouses and the Cub Scouts. The dream smells like peppermint but tastes like strawberry shortcake. And for so long I wanted to escape into that Dream, to fold my country over my head. But this has never been an option because the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies. And knowing this, knowing that the Dream persists by warring with the known world, I was sad for the host, I was sad for all those families, I was sad for my country, but above all, in that moment, I was sad for you” (Coates 11). He’s sad, because, his son will never be in this safe dreamland; due to his skin color he will never know what it feels like to walk on a street without feeling threatened or wrong in some way, shape, or form. That higher society is forming these dreams into mirages, making them close enough to see but too far to reach; for those with darker skin, the dream is a prison of words with fear being the bars that holds black people in place. In order to shatter that dream, all those that believe in the dream must understand that it’s just a figment of their imagination.

Now for a lot of Americans today, this dream is as real as what everyone sees on their television, which is best explained by Plato’s “Myth of the Cave” where he states, “And now, I said, let me show in a figure how far our natures is enlightened or unenlightened: -Behold! Human beings housed in an underground cave, which has a long entrance open towards the light and as wide as the interior of the cave; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks changed, so that they cannot move and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show puppets” (Ogilvy 27). They believe what the puppets on their television screens are saying, how, if one just does what they are told, they too can live in this American dream. Coates brings this to light with this small excerpt, “The Dream seemed to be the pinnacle, then-to grow rich and live in one of those disconnected houses out in the country, in one of those small communities, one of those cul-de-sacs with its gently curving ways, where they staged teen movies and children built treehouses, and in that last lost year before college, teenagers made love in cars parked at the lake. The Dream seemed to be the end of the world for me, the height of American ambition. What more could possibly exist beyond the dispatches, beyond the suburbs?” (Coates 116). Coates once believed in this dream, it was his lighthouse in a sea of darkness; Americans have been blinded by this light, thinking it to be their true directional path. Unknowingly, that blinding light is used to blind people from the truth that keeps them distanced from the Dreamers. Using legislature, a Dreamer can enact racism into the society by giving it a new name like “stop-and-frisk” which uses police as their new weapons; with these new laws, the police and the rest of the population are forced to accept these “smoke and mirrors” also known as façades. If they do not, the newly blinded police that are living in the elite’s dreamland, enforce these new laws and physically force others to live in their dreamland.

It’s important to state that not all of these Dreamers are what society has deemed as “white” but are also black; Coates writes, “They were black people who elected their own politicians, but these politicians, I learned, superintended a police force as vicious as any America. I had heard stories about PG County from the same poets who opened my world. These poets assured me that the PG County police were not police at all but privateers, gangsters, gunmen, plunderers operating under the color of law” (Coates 53). Note that this evil has no color, for it is only seeking to be rich and all powerful, using “bodies” as the foundation on which it thrives on. However, they still need fresh “bodies” in order to survive on top of the mountain of skulls that has been inherited over time, collecting them with so called badges in the shape of a shield in order to feed their predatory desires.

The final construct that Coates shows everyone who reads his book is banking education, and how it is problematic because it suppresses creativity. As I learned with Paulo Freire’s work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Freire wants us to replace banking education with problem-posing education, which Coates lived and learned was not the way a free thinking mind learns the truth of earth’s history. The difference is best explained by Freire when he states, “Narration (with the teacher as narrator) leads the students to memorize mechanically the narrated content. Worse yet, it turns them into “containers,” into “receptacles” to be “filled” by the teacher. The more completely he fills the receptacles, the better a teacher he is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled the better students they are. Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the “banking” concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits” (Ogilvy 135). Without creativity we cannot grow as a human race. There will be no evolution in a sense, human growth would hit a plateau, just as Coates did while attending Howard University. He pens, “And I too felt bound by my ignorance, by the questions that I had not yet understood to be more than just means, by my lack of understanding, and by Howard itself. It was still a school, after all. I wanted to pursue things, to know things, but I could not match the means of knowing that came naturally to me with the expectations of professors” (Coates 48). Those expectations bound his free thinking mind, learning only what the professor or “oppressor” wanted him to learn. Coates had to find his own way of learning, looking into the problems that society tries to hide with his own method of problem-posing education. Coates explains it in his book by scripting, “The pursuit of knowing was freedom to me, the right to declare your own curiosities and follow them through all manner of books. I was made for the library, not the classroom. The classroom was a jail of other people’s interests. The library was open, unending, free. Slowly, I was discovering myself” (Coates 48). This quotation connects well with Freire’s idea of problem-posing education, as Freire writes, “Those truly committed to liberation must reject the banking concept in its entirety, adopting instead a concept of men as conscious beings, and consciousness as consciousness intent upon the world. They must abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems of men in their relations with the world. “Problem-posing” education, responding to the essence of consciousness-intentionally-rejects communiques and embodies communication. It epitomizes the special characteristic of consciousness: being conscious of, not only as intent on objects but as turned in upon itself in a Jasperian “split” – consciousness as consciousness of consciousness” (Ogilvy 140). Coates finally decides that banking education is useless to him and decides to leave Howard University and attains a career in journalism, shaping his idea of the world and gifting it to the world in his new position in life.

Coates ends his book on how the “Dreamers” are evolving, stating, “But the Dreamers have improved themselves, and the damming of seas for voltage, the extraction of coal, the transmuting of oil into food, have enabled an expansion in plunder with no known precedent. And this revolution has freed the Dreamers to plunder not just the bodies of humans but the body of the Earth itself” (Coates 150). Coates foresees the horrors that the Dreamers are unknowingly going to cause, trying to warn his son, Coates is always trying to teach his son to see through the Dream, to always see with his mind and not just his eyes. Teaching him to shatter the Dreams fragile frame into shattered glass, so that his son will never chase the “American Dream.”

Works Cited

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