

No. 15766

The book, *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates, is an autobiographical narrative, addressed to his son, discussing his experiences growing up as a young black man in America. Throughout Coates' narrative, he discusses several themes, including pervasive fear versus softness and bliss, generational trauma, and the American Dream, all relevant to his own experiences confronting the anti-blackness that is deeply embedded in American culture. As such, it is important to note that Coates uses the "body" in a physical and spiritual sense as a vessel he can use to differentiate the sensations both fear and softness invoke in order to flesh out his own reflections on the systemic oppression he has faced throughout his lifetime. Also, Coates continuously refers to the concept of the "Dream" or essentially the American Dream, which is the picturesque, suburban setting of a happy nuclear family, who live in a promised utopia that is a reflection of prosperity, peace, and upwards social mobility that is meant to justify and even glorify the dark history of the United States through false promises and hopes. Essentially, the Dream directly upholds white supremacist ideals, which have directly contributed to the violent formation of the American political state through the acts of colonialism and slavery whose haunting legacies continue to exploit black and indigenous communities for the benefit of maintaining the power of whiteness as a phenomenon. Alongside the Dream, Coates notes the generational trauma black American communities experience as a response to the overarching fear they face due to systemic anti-blackness, which is then instilled within future generations by ensuring they learn to exhibit a heightened sense of caution to protect themselves from the dangers they are exposed to in the harsh world that exists outside of the Dream. Thus, Coates denies the utopic vision of the Dream that both white and marginalized communities uphold, as the reality is that black American communities continue to be negatively impacted by the anti-blackness that is

upheld through institutions such as education and law enforcement along with societal attitudes. As such, Coates argues that one cannot remain ignorant of the roots of the Dream that continues to idealize the violence perpetuated since the beginning of the United States creation because it is deeply intertwined within our country's history and a reflection on modern day behaviors as well. Through Coates' own reflections, he also addresses that the world has changed from when he was growing up, so he also instills a sense of reluctant hope in ongoing progressive change while maintaining that the Dream every American hopes to realize cannot exist without the end of anti-blackness in America. The hope Coates notes is related to the idea of softness or choosing to nurture oneself and others, which he, himself, experienced after meeting his future wife in college. Coates associates softness with those who have experienced aspects of the Dream and are aware of a different world outside of the violent one he experienced thus alluding to the idea that softness is the antithesis and solution to fear and caution.

Coates redefines the meaning of race while also connecting many of the broader themes of fear, softness, and the American Dream within his overarching narrative. For example, Coates says "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). Coates' idea of the Dream is racialized considering how the idea of "whiteness" itself was created in order to fulfill a generalized physical description of a group who was associated with greater privilege and power. In other words, "race is the child of racism, not the father. And the process of naming 'the people' has never been a matter of genealogy and physiognomy so much as one of hierarchy" (Coates 7). Coates believes that race is a byproduct of the innate need for a hierarchical social structure through establishing dominance among communities, which also applies to America's rewriting of historical narratives in order to justify violence perpetuated against marginalized communities.

Similarly, Coates reflects on how “the history of civilization is littered with dead ‘races’ (Frankish, Italian, German, Irish) later abandoned because they no longer serve their purpose—the organization of people beneath, and beyond, the umbrella of rights” (Coates 115). The concept of whiteness has changed throughout history, as various ethnicities such as the Italians or the Irish were considered non-white and thus marginalized in the past. Essentially, Coates believes that race is used as a tool to uphold a man-made hierarchy that equivocates whiteness with an innate sense of entitlement or advantage as a means to justify actions such as colonization and imperialism. For example, if race was no longer as deeply embedded as a form of identification, I would go as far as to say that another characteristic would serve the same purpose of organizing an overarching sense of community or familiarity in order to reestablish power dynamics within our society. As such, Coates’ definition of race is important to understand how “The Dream of acting white, of talking white, of being white” is able to work so effectively as a means to incentivize marginalized communities into believing that upwards social mobility is possible because of how these past “dead races” are now included under whiteness (Coates 111).

The Dream as a concept only works because there are a few individuals, who have reached this artificial sense of social mobility, thus making the utopic concept more of an attainable goal if one meets the criteria required. However, the Dream cannot exist in an America that does not address its history or roots let alone how institutional racism has a devastating effect to this day because the idea that there are only a few, who are able to attain an elevated status, indicates that there is a larger societal issue in which only some marginalized individuals are able to succeed compared to their white peers. As Coates says, “[The Dreamers] have forgotten the scale of theft that enriched them in slavery; the terror that allowed them, for a century, to pilfer the vote; the segregationist policy that gave them their suburbs. They have forgotten, because to remember would tumble them out of the beautiful

Dream and force them to live down here with us” (Coates 143). These “obstacles” are downplayed in the utopia echoed by the Dreamers, as in their hearts they wish to believe that they can be one of the chosen few, who are able to surpass their peers when in fact reaching true equality is impossible if marginalized communities believe in the Dream. In fact, Coates is “convinced that the Dreamers, at least the Dreamers of today, would rather live white than live free” (Coates 143). By aligning oneself with whiteness, marginalized Dreamers believe that they are able to escape a world that tells them that they are inferior and less than though accepting this illusion merely reinforces the innate hierarchy that places whiteness at the very top thus furthering marginalizing and oppressing communities of color. Instead, Coates believes that by rejecting the notion that the American Dream exists, communities of color will be able to progress and make further strides towards acknowledging the pain and violence inflicted upon them along with destroying the status quo established by racist thinking. Thus, marginalized bodies will be able to rest and heal and thus become softer in theory, no longer plagued with fear or the need to engage in protective or defensive behavior. Softness is the opposite or antithesis of fear, as fear creates hardness while softness indicates that fear has not overtaken one’s body. As Coates says to his son, “I am wounded. I am marked by old codes, which shielded me in one world and then chained me in the next ... I am now ashamed of the thought, ashamed of my fear, of the generational chains I tried to clasp onto your wrists. We are entering our last few years together, and I wish I had been softer with you” (Coates 125). While raising his son, Coates wants to introduce more softness and tenderness despite his innate desire to protect him by instilling fear and passing on protective measures as a form of wisdom because Coates realizes that his actions were a traumatic response to the cruelty and oppression he faced. When Coates discusses the idea of softness, he directly links his own change in thinking to him meeting his wife, who came from a world that was more open and trusting than his. In this regard, while I understand that

Coates is addressing his son in a very personal narrative, I would be interested to hear his wife's perspective on life, who was mentioned to have introduced softness and love in his life in direct contrast to the fear and jadedness Coates was accustomed to. Also, the intersectional perspective through which the women in Coates' life would be able to add onto his discussions on the idea of fear versus softness and attaining the Dream considering how misogynoir is perpetuated through all communities would have clarified more on the complex topics at hand. However overall, Coates' narrative is a poignant and touching dialogue that is distinctly American and discusses significant themes such as the purpose of race, generational trauma as it relates to both fear and softness, and the American dream in a powerful and relatable voice. I was able to absorb many of the broader themes at hand due to the structure and tone Coates uses, which is a testament to how well-crafted his book was in its entirety.

Works Cited

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. Spiegel & Grau, 2015.