

CENTERING BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS: AFROCENTRICITY AND POSTCOLONIAL COUNTER-DISOURSE IN *BETWEEN THE WORLD AND ME* (2015) BY TA NEHISI COATES

Abdoulaye NDIAYE

Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar (UCAD)

Laboratoire d'Études Américaines et Caribéennes

abdoulayendiaye21@gmail.com / abdoulaye43.ndiaye@ucad.edu.sn

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Bigué KA

Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar (UCAD)

Laboratoire d'Études Américaines et Caribéennes

kabigue2402@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper explores the centering of black consciousness by the means of a stark eye-opener counter-discourse in the form of a memoir entitled *Between the World and Me* (2015) and written by Ta Nehisi Coates. The author presents us with an unfiltered, stark and brutal narrative of the issues of race relations in America, the plunder of the black body and the realities of today's colorblind racism. Drawn from postcolonial, Afrocentric and Critical Race theory perspectives, this study seeks to highlight how the author demonstrates the extent to which racism is embedded in the American culture and history with deep-seated practices and institutions that favor it. It also brings to light how the author manages to put forward postcolonial arguments that offer a compelling counter-discourse, emboldened by Afrocentrist principles, which challenge the white mainstream's narrative by exposing their falsehood and limits, but also that reinforce the sense of black consciousness.

Keywords: black Consciousness, black body, afrocentricity, postcolonial, counter-discourse

LE CENTRAGE DE LA CONSCIENCE NOIRE: AFROCENTRICITÉ ET CONTRE-DISOURS POSTCOLONIAL DANS *UNE COLÈRE NOIRE: LETTRE À MON FILS* (2015) DE TA NEHISI COATES

Résumé: Ce papier explore le centrage de la conscience noire, par le truchement d'un contre-discours sous la forme d'un mémoire intitulé *Entre le Monde et Moi* (2015) et écrit par Ta Nehisi Coates. L'auteur nous offre une trame narrative sans filtre, saisissante et brutale sur les questions liées aux relations interraciales aux États-Unis, le pillage du corps de l'homme noir et les réalités du racisme structurel. Fondée sur les théories postcoloniales, afro-centriste et la théorie critique sur les races, cette étude cherche à mettre en exergue à quel point le racisme est inextricablement lié à la culture et à l'histoire de l'Amérique à travers des pratiques et des institutions qui s'y prêtent parfaitement. Cet article met aussi à nue comment l'auteur parvient à soutenir arguments qui confèrent un contre-discours convaincant, étayés par les principes afrocentristes, et qui défient les narratives des Blancs en exposant leurs supercheries et limites, mais aussi des arguments qui renforcent le sentiment de la conscience noire.

Mots-clés : conscience noire, corps noir, afrocentricité, postcolonial, contre-discours

Introduction

Between the World and Me (2015) can be regarded as a testimony of the ongoing issues of race and racism in the United States of America. In fact, this book is a letter written by Coates to his son Samori about the precarity of being black in America. His narrative encapsulates how he has intimately endured racism and how he has coped with its consequences in West Baltimore. This letter is also centered around the pervasive physical and psychological effects of racial segregation. The author delves into his past to illustrate how skin color influences a person's ability to live freely in his/her country. It would also be convenient to mention that when producing *Between the World and Me*, Coates drew inspiration from *The Fire Next Time* (1963) by James Baldwin, in which the latter examines racial relations from his personal experiences as a black man in one of his essays written as a form of letter to his nephew in a time of segregation.

Coates addresses the issue of police brutality that constitutes a widespread phenomenon in America. His letter exposes historical racism and violence of police force. It demonstrates the different mechanisms embedded to maintain racial power and white supremacy in America across different periods of American history. The continuum of violence and injustices inflicted on the black bodies did persist despite the abolition of slavery. It survived and evolved through different patterns of domination. In *Between the World and Me*, Coates illustrates that white supremacy still exists and appears across police brutality, black mass incarceration, white privilege and inequalities between Blacks and Whites. In that way, racism can be described as a modern representation of colonial power with the same perceptual structure of racial hierarchies, authorities and domination that took root from the colonial period. This is testified by Tatah Mentan when he argues that "In colonialism, the conquered polities or populations are not just ruled over by foreign conquerors but are configured as inferior to their occupiers—inferior in legal, administrative, social, and cultural terms" (T. Mentan, 2017:6). Consequently, Coates's personal experiences of racism operate as a postcolonial critique, describing how the colonial legacy is still visible throughout systemic racism in the political, economic and judicial system of the United States.

Historical racism can be perceived throughout a postcolonial reading. This latter perspective defines racism as an enduring relic of colonialism. As pointed out by Robert Ross in his book *Racism and Colonialism*, after colonial rule has ended, the ideology of racism may continue to remain through its power. (R. Ross, 1982). Similarly, outstanding works highlight the postcolonial dimension within contemporary American society. Among these are Edward Said (*Orientalism* 1978), Frantz Fanon (*The Wretched of the Earth* 1961) and *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), Homi K. Bhabha (*The Location of Culture* 1994), and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* 1988) to explore the persistence of colonial power relations within contemporary American society. These authors refer to concepts such as colonial discourse, othering, racialized power, resistance and counter-discourse to demonstrate how systemic racism is presented as an embodiment of the lasting legacy of colonial domination.

Critical Race Theory emerged in the United States in the 1960s during the Civil Rights activism. Drawn from the works of Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois or Antonio Gramsci, writers like Cornel West (1995) or Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) believe that contemporary racism can only be comprehended within the framework of its structural forms embedded in the various institutional rules and laws.

Afrocentricity is a theoretical perspective and approach that advocates for black identity, black agency, and black memories. Advanced and coined by Molefi Kete Asante, the term “Afrocentricity” refers “to the conscious process by which a person locates or relocates African phenomena within the context of African subjects, agency, and action”. More importantly, it is about “location as opposed to dislocation and centeredness as opposed to marginality”. (J. Conyers, 2017:165)

The main issue raised by the topic is the question to know how the author taps into the very essence of blackness to prove the lingering existence of colorblind and structural racism in America through a counter-discourse that challenges colonial and mainstream narratives. Indeed, in an era marked by the proclamation of a post-racial American society, our main assumption is that the author posits that it is still a utopia and that there is still a world separating Whites from Blacks in America as a result of still existing practices embedded in American institutions that carry on the legacy of the plundering of the black body and the flouting of the black man’s dignity. This paper aims to demonstrate that these approaches draw complementary analytical tools to examine the ways in which the author denounces the enduring structures of racial domination and simultaneously extends on the affirmation of black pride, identity and historical black agency.

The present study is divided into three chapters. The first heading focuses on the vulnerable black body as a continuation of colonial power. It describes how the black body can be regarded as a site of colonial domination and how police brutality can be viewed as a lasting effect of colonial power. The second heading expounds a critique of the American dream. It aims to deconstruct the Dream as a colonial narrative. The third and last one lays the emphasis on the black body as a site of identity and resistance. We will show that African legacy is restored through the use of African names, memory, writings and storytelling and how these elements function as cultural preservation and acts of Afrocentricity.

1. The Vulnerable Black Body as a Continuation of Colonial Power

Coates’s work revolves around the experiences of black people. The author writes to his son about the visceral and eloquent effects of racism and how it leads to the destruction of the black body. According to Coates, the plunder of the black body dates back to the period of slavery. It served to legalize the physical control and oppression of the black body. In that same vein, he also reflects deeply on how the Jim Crow Laws have affected the black community. These abuses lasted until the Civil Rights Movements with several forms of violence towards the black bodies, namely lynching, tear gas and the use of high-pressure water hoses. Until now, the destruction of the black body continues to intensify. Just twelve years after the settlement of the first successful settlement in Jamestown, in Virginia in 1607, the first black slaves were taken there in 1619. Since then, the lives of Black people in America have been marked by great sufferings and turmoil. Coates states: “In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body – it is heritage.” (Coates, 2015:103) Indeed, he strives to demonstrate how the American society was built over the blood of the minority groups in general, and black people in particular. From slavery to current systemic racism, in passing by the institutionalized segregation of the Jim Crow Laws, American laws and social codes were devised to bully and exploit black people, which accounts for these harsh words used by Coates to admit this painful reality:

White America” is a syndicate arrayed to protect its exclusive power to dominate and control our bodies. Sometimes this power is direct (lynching), and sometimes it is insidious (redlining). But however it appears, the power of domination and exclusion is central to the belief in being white, and without it, “white people” would cease to exist for want of reason. (T. Coates, 2015:42)

The killing of Trayvon Martin followed by a controversial trial revealed the persistent racial inequalities and injustice between Blacks and Whites. It also exposes the failure of the American justice system to protect black lives. The acquittal of the killer George Zimmerman sparked widespread outrage and led to the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement as a powerful response to systemic racism, police violence and a denunciation of the continued vulnerability of black bodies to racial inequality and violence. In fact, due to racial profiling, Blacks are more likely to be arrested, subjected to violence, jailed or murdered. In *Between the World and Me*, Coates highlights important cases of lethal police brutality. As a matter of fact, Coates’ major traumatic experience came with the murder of Prince Jones when he was at Howard University. His son’s one occurred after the killing of Michael Brown and the ensuing legal proceedings. More optimistic than his father and trusting the justice system of his country, Samori was completely taken aback by the outcome of this case and had to grapple with the existential questions haunting black people regarding how cheap their bodies are, but also their helplessness when it comes to seeking justice. Coates sadly relates this poignant experience:

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. It was not my expectation that anyone would ever be punished. But you were young and still believed. You stayed up till 11 P.M. that night, waiting for the announcement of an indictment, and when it was announced that there was none you said “I’ve got to go”, and you went into your room and I heard you crying. (T. Coates, 2015:11)

Afterwards, Coates did not try to comfort his son. He wanted him to come to terms with the reality of being black in America and the responsibility he had to try to protect his own body. Sadly enough, one of the peculiarities of African American parents’ responsibilities is to have “the talk” with their children about the gestures and behaviors to survive in their society and to avoid the plunder of their bodies. Coming up with the right time and the right way is the main challenge. This is the reason why many writers resort to open letters to address their children in particular and their fellow citizens in general. Lordi points out this tendency and the impact of these letters: “Amid and despite their blogospheric ubiquity, open letters have become powerful forms of literary activism for writers of color who have used them to protest anti-black violence and the rise of U.S. neofascism, as well as to build community.” (E. J. Lordi, 2017:35)

Likewise, these letters bear a political and social countenance and perfectly fit in any undertaking aiming to convey some messages under the guise of a literary work. It is a known fact that Coates drew his inspiration from the seminal African American writer, James Baldwin. The latter used this platform in the introduction of his literary masterpiece, *The Fire Next Time* (1963), to impart some astounding truths to his nephew at a time when Blacks were coping with racial segregation. He writes: “There is no reason,” Baldwin continues, “for you to try to become like white people and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent

assumption that they must accept you. The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that you must accept them” (J. Baldwin, 1963:8)

It is disheartening to notice how Baldwin’s message bears the same solemnity than the gravity of Coates’ words to his son. Yet, the two works are about fifty years apart. It simply reasserts the persistence of the systemic destruction of the black body as a legacy of colonialism, which mainly hinged on the exploitation of the black body. As a result, Coates refuses to simply lay the blame on the individuals who are the agents of the plunder, but mostly on the American nation’s exploitative foundations and multifarious systems. After Prince Jones’ murder, he makes it clear: “I knew that Prince was not killed by a single officer so much as he was murdered by his country and all the fears that have marked it from birth.” (T. Coates, 2015: 78). In the same vein, he adds “I would never consider any American pure.” (T. Coates, 2015: 86)

Besides, the guilty consent or silence of Americans constitute a ground for liability on the part of the whole American nation. He also points out the indirect role of the educational institution in the plunder of black bodies. Not only does he underline the failure of schools to provide a truthful report of the history of black people, but he also sees it as a burdensome haven from the torments of the street: “If the streets shackled my right leg, the streets shackled my left. Fail to comprehend the streets and you gave up your body now. But fail to comprehend the schools and you gave up your body later.” (Coates, 2015:25) Schools were then regarded by Coates as a safe house as opposed to the street. To Coates’ understanding, schools just served to delay the exposure to the dangers of the street. He describes them as a temporary shelter. However, the killing of Prince Jones shows that black people are safe nowhere in America. The following section examines how Coates manages to carry out a postcolonial deconstruction of the American Dream.

2. A Postcolonial Deconstruction of the American Dream

Between the World and Me is a powerful counter-discourse that deconstructs the conventional narratives and stereotypes of White people. In fact, no colonial or exploitative enterprise has ever thrived without a preconceived narrative justifying it. During slavery, black people were not regarded as full-fledged human beings. The first horrible lie white slaveholders spread was to convince themselves that a black person accounted for “three fifths” of a human being. That is the reason why the “We” that is in the constitution did not include black people, which justifies why some founding fathers were at the same time slaveowners.

In his seminal work, *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward W. Said offers a look at how control is kept not only through force but also through the stories and images that make empires seem normal or justified. He expounds on the notion of narrative and ponders over the extent to which they are of paramount importance for empires or hegemonic nations to assert their might and justify their deeds. He states:

The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course; but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans its future—these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative. As one critic has suggested, nations themselves are narrations. The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them. (E, Said, 1993:xiii)

In *Between the World and Me*, the first time the author mentions the notion of “Dream” is when the new TV presenter asks him to wake her from the most beautiful and comfortable Dream. Coates describes the Dream as “treehouses and the Cub Scout... peppermint but tastes like strawberry shortcake”. (T. Coates, 2015:11) Coates argues that people who believe they are white believe in “Dream”. So, they are “Dreamers”. African-Americans can also join the “Dream” and thus become “Dreamers”. The author explains that black people such as Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, John Crawford, Tamir Rice to name a few are the main victims of the Dream. Coates reveals that even his own friend Prince Jones has been victim of the Dream. Coates writes of his realization that “[b]eing black did not immunize us from history’s logic or the lure of the Dream. The writer, and that was what I was becoming, must be wary of every Dream and every nation, even his own nation”. (T. Coates, 2015: 53) According to Coates, racial violence is a manifestation of the Dream’s authority. He argues that the belief of white American moral superiority and benevolence enables those who murder black individuals, whether they be police officers or civilians, to avoid punishment. Meanwhile, black people are held accountable for the safety of their bodies and bear the weight of the actions of all black individuals. On moral grounds, Coates deems white America guilty of committing crimes that contradict the moral standards it has set itself against. After the fashion of a Thomas Paine who used a powerful rhetoric to justify why America was entitled to independence in his work *Common Sense* (1776), Coates also resorts to logic and rational thinking to make white Americans face up their responsibilities based on the supposed “American exceptionalism”:

America believes itself exceptional, the greatest and noblest nation ever to exist, a lone champion standing between the white city of democracy and the terrorists, despots, barbarians, and other enemies of civilization. One cannot, at once, claim to be superhuman and then plead mortal error. I propose to take our countrymen’s claims of American exceptionalism seriously, which is to say I propose subjecting our country to an exceptional moral standard. (Coates, 2015:8)

From there on, Coates undertakes a reality check to confront the narratives spread by white Americans with the actual events that are regular occurrences in the society. In this respect, America falls short by displaying savagery under the guise of a civilization that is implemented based on double standards: “The world, the real one, was civilization secured and ruled by savage means” (Coates, 2015:32). Police brutality against black people leading to infamous killings is an obvious illustration. He provides examples of how black homicides are rationalized through the victim’s supposed wrongdoing: Eric Gardner’s illegal sale of single cigarettes, John Crawford’s interaction with a rifle in a department store, and Renisha McBride’s request for help at a stranger’s door late at night. Additionally, Coates points out how the Civil War is portrayed as an act of Christian charity, rather than as a battle to uphold the exploitative labor practices of the Confederacy: “This lie of the Civil War is the lie of innocence, is the Dream. Historians conjured the Dream. Hollywood fortified the Dream. The Dream was gilded by novels and adventure stories.” (T. Coates, 2015: 102-103) To put it bluntly, the Civil War is usually and historically regarded as a war of abolitionism, whereas it was mostly waged for economic and political reasons. In other words, the industrialized northern states were in dire need of a labor force while thousands of black slaves who could fill that void were being enslaved in the agrarian South. The political reason was the necessity to preserve the Union with the eleven states that threatened to secede under the leadership

of Jefferson Davis. In truth, all the major breakthroughs that black people experienced in the history of the U.S. were made possible by favorable historical and social circumstances rather than a genuine will by the white establishment to grant them those rights. Coates specifies that stark reality:

You cannot disconnect our emancipation in the Northern colonies from the blood spilled in the Revolutionary War, any more than you can disconnect our emancipation from slavery in the South from the charnel houses of the Civil War, any more than you can disconnect our emancipation from Jim Crow from the genocides of the Second World War. (Coates, 2015:96-97)

From a postcolonial reading, the American dream can be regarded as an ideological construction. The American society rather reflects a hierarchical one based on race as a human construct. Therefore, Coates makes it a point to describe an unabashed picture of America, making sure to pinpoint the roles played by each community throughout history. His depiction is in stark contrast with the narratives in American history books, which is the whole point of his writing style and the use of the open letter as a memoir. In doing so, he combines personal experiences with free comments to engage some discussions that can shed light on important issues. Beyond the message addressed to his son, his work urges the reader to question conventional paradigms that were taken for granted and to think outside the box:

The power of Coates's prose lies in his dialogic engagement with concepts such as Dream and agency. He questions, interrogates, and demands new understandings. Readers' critical responses suggest that his rhetorical choices had their intended effect of encouraging participation in this dialogue and extending its purview to address experiences beyond the scope of the memoir itself. (K. Mack, J. Alexander, 2019:65)

Here, Coates talks about how white America's obsession with democracy and the way they represent America as a nation destined for glory because of its democracy and the rule of law, as if it were the greatest and noblest nation. A closer look at the American social stratification indicates racialized spatial structures that are reminders of the way Frantz Fanon describes in his postcolonial work *The Wretched of the Earth*, the colonial world as a world that is essentially racialized, where social and economic hierarchies cannot be separated from racial identity. The colonizer and colonized are perceived as different "species" and wealth is both cause and effect:

This compartmentalized world, this world divided in two, is inhabited by different species. The singularity of the colonial context lies in the fact that economic reality, inequality, and enormous disparities in lifestyles never manage to mask the human reality. Looking at the immediacies of the colonial context it is clear that what divides this world is first and foremost what species, what race one belongs to. In the colonies the economic infrastructure is also a superstructure. The cause is effect: You are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich. (F. Fanon, 2004:5)

From this perspective, we can easily understand why Whites constructed the notion of Race to set apart two categories of human beings so as to justify diverging treatments on the basis of skin colors. Only narrative colonial patterns could succeed in establishing the idea of race and Whites devoted many of their scholars, intellectuals, scientists, politicians

and decision-makers to the task. Unfortunately, they have for a long time succeeded in deceiving individuals, even within Black people, by convincing them that race does exist. Coates completely rejects this idea and underscores that: "... race is a child of racism, not the father" (Coates, 2015:7). Indeed, it is racists that used the existence of races to justify colonialism and imperialism and racism that go hand in hand together. Fanon provides further explanations in his groundbreaking work, *Black Skin, White Masks*:

For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. ... Overnight the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he has had to place himself. His metaphysics, or, less pretentiously, his customs and the sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him. (F. Fanon, 1953:82)

Civilization, along with democracy, are some of the words they have always used to exert their domination over black people. What is more, Coates shows how America has used its institutions to spread its narratives and hide its darkest misdeeds. He points out the roles played Hollywood to misrepresent the history of black people and the one played by schools and history books to mislead and somehow brainwash the new generations of Blacks. He warns his son: "The entire narrative of this country argues against the truth of who you are." (Coates, 2015:99) The Dream will only be dismantled through collective action, once the "Dreamers [...] understand that the field for their Dream, the stage where they have painted themselves white, is the deathbed of us all". (T. Coates, 2015:151) Coates asserts that the ignorance that fuels the Dream is the same one that endangers the planet and overpopulates prisons with black people. The next section lays bare the importance of Afrocentricity and to critically think about race in the struggles of Blacks for self-affirmation.

3. Afrocentricity as a Mode of Resistance and Self-Affirmation

Between the World and Me goes beyond exposing a powerful postcolonial counter-discourse. It seeks to provide an affirmation of black pride, black consciousness and black agency. Through African naming, memories of Howard University and black resistance, the text is an embodiment of the features of Afrocentricity as coined by Asante, advocating black people to embrace their past, their historical black knowledge and experiences. Similarly, Ama Mazama states that the primacy of the African experience belonging to African people should provide us "*our African, victorious consciousness*" while also defying "the European voice as just one among many and not necessarily the wisest one". She goes further and points out that the core meaning of Afrocentricity remains significantly in "*cultivating a consciousness of victory as opposed to dwelling on oppression.*" (A. Mazama, 2001: 388-389)

The pioneer of Afrocentricity, Molefi Kete Asante, describes in his seminal book, *Afrocentricity* (1988), the rationale behind the adoption and/or rejection of terms such as "African", "Afro-American", or "black" rather than "Negro" or "colored" as a significant impact in the struggle for black recognition and identity. (M. K. Asante, 1988:27) It is in that context that Ben Martin affirms that "Names can be more than tags; they can convey powerful imagery. So, naming proposing, imposing, and accepting names can be a political exercise. And the call for blacks to be called African American was for more than a manner of speaking." (B. L. Martin, 1991:83). This quotation stresses the importance of naming in African-American culture. Accordingly, African Americans, by refusing to accept their

names obtained from a history of racial violence and domination, acknowledge their own identity, their past and their cultural background. In that same vein, Asante openly affirms:

The practical value of changing our names is an identification of names with people. We are an African people and it is logical for us to possess African names. Already we are on the verge of a breakthrough, young black parents are seeking African names for their children in an attempt to assign meaning to their identity. (M. K. Asante, 1988:27)

By renaming themselves, African Americans provide an act of Afrocentric resistance which instills pride, dignity and black consciousness. Such perspective resonates in *Between the World and Me*. In fact, the author himself Ta Nehisi, his wife Kenyatta and his son Samori are named in relation to their African legacy. Coates's father William Paul Coates is a former Black Panther, a Black nationalist and Afrocentric who demonstrates his engagement to the adoption of African culture throughout the name of his son Ta Nehisi Coates. The latter's name comes from Africa. The meaning of his name represents African cultural identity. In his memoir *The Beautiful Struggle* (2008), Coates writes "why [he] could never be Javonne or Pete that [his] name was a nation, not a target, not something for teachers to trip over but the ancient Nubians and the glorious Egyptians of the 25th". Coates states "All my Dad had told me what I was, that Ta-Nehisi was a nation, the ancient Egyptian name for the mighty Nubians to the South". Coates's unusual first name Ta Nehisi is linked to Nubia, an ancient region of Egypt which means "Land of The Black" (T. Coates, 2008:112).

Coates indicates that the name of his son is related to African history that has been disrupted by slavery, looting and racial domination. So, we can argue that naming appears as an Afrocentric practice through which the author restores black identity, cultural memory, black agency and resistance in the society that stills crush black people. By invoking Samori Touré, the author reveals a historical continuity between African resistance to colonial dominance and the current fight against systemic racism that the black body is still facing in America, which has evolved into a new form of struggle and domination. He insists: "*And that is the deeper meaning of your name – that the struggle, in and of itself, has meaning.*" (Coates, 2015:69)

In his collection of essays, *We Were Eight Years in Power* (2017), Coates writes that Samori's and Kenyatta's names reflect a commitment to the dream of Pan-Africanism and "to the notion that black people here and now are united with black people there and then in a grand operative struggle." (Coates; 2017:25) The name of Coates's wife Kenyatta is particularly meaningful because it refers to an African country. In fact, Kenyatta evokes the famous Jomo Kenyatta anti-colonialist nationalist (b.1894, d.1978) who was elected as the first prime minister of united Kenya in 1963 and became later its first president. He fought against British colonial rule, which led him to imprisonment and became a symbol of resistance and struggle for Kenya's independence. By promoting Pan-Africanism, Jomo Kenyatta helped unite his countrymen against oppression and encouraged people to unite against European colonialism. Therefore, Kenyatta is an embodiment of an Afrocentric consciousness. She embraces her historical memory and black history and more importantly, she carries the struggle for black agency by highlighting the enduring history of resistance that the black body still continues to face from colonial period to the present day in America. Thus, African naming can be considered an Afrocentric practice of self-identity. It demonstrates how the black community defines itself through historical African figures rather than the imposed names by any form of racial dominant order such as slavery.

Similarly, in his book *Afrocentricity* (1988), Asante references several African Americans who have changed their names as a deliberate act of reclaiming their own Black identity. This practice can be seen through prominent Black figures such as Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, Louis Farrakhan, Elijah Muhammad and Asante himself, to name a few. As Asante concludes, “A Muslim takes an Arabic name; a Christian takes a Christian name; we take African names.” (M. K. Asante, 1988:29). These references deepen the fact that African identity through names is a strong form of resistance against the erasure of Black identity and consciousness. The adoption of African names resonates in Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1993) when Martin Robinson Delany assigns the names of outstanding African figures and diasporic descent to his seven children. Gilroy pinpoints: “There is something of the same attitude conveyed in the way that he named his seven children after famous figures of African descent: Alexandre Dumas, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Rameses Placido, St. Cyprian, Faustin Soulouque, Charles Lenox Remond, Ethiopia Halle.” (P. Gilroy, 1993:15) Paul Gilroy purports in his concept of the “Black Atlantic” that African and diasporic histories are viewed as interconnected, not contained by national borders.

By the same token, Coates speaks highly of his experience at Howard University. By attending one of the most prestigious Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Coates learnt a great deal about the history of the black world. Unable to get the answers to his questions from his parents or from school, Howard became a gold mine of information for him: “From them I knew that Mansa Musa of Mali was black, and Shabaka of Egypt was black, and Yaa Asantewa of Ashanti was black – and “the black race” was a thing I supposed existed from time immemorial, a thing that was real and mattered.” (Coates, 2015:45).

At Howard, he was able to draw so much information not only from the library, but also from the great many Blacks coming from all around the world. He clearly was enthralled by the diversity and beauty of black gatherings at Howard and does not even try to hide it: “My only Mecca was, is, and shall always be Howard University” (T. Coates, 2015:39). There, he developed a great sense of belonging and satisfied his thirst for knowledge. He was all the more gratified that he believed that Howard was a response to Whites’ narrative construction insofar it brought together Blacks from different backgrounds and turned them into a community: “We have made something down here. We have taken the one-drop rules of Dreamers and flipped them. They made us into a race. We made ourselves into a people. Here at The Mecca, under pain of selection, we have made a home.” (T. Coates, 2015:149)

In short, Howard University reinforced Coates’ black consciousness. Many African Americans crave for their sense of identity, but fall short to find their bearings. Trapped in a society where the mainstream makes them feel different and inferior, many of them come to the realization that their history started from Africa and they have to delve into the continent’s past to recover a sense of belonging and pride. This is what the passage to Howard allowed Coates to do. It has raised his awareness about the role played by Africa and Africans throughout history and the true existence of black agency:

What was required was a new story, a new history told through the lens of our struggle. I had always known this, had heard the need for a new history in Malcolm, had seen the need addressed in my father’s books. It was in the promise behind their grand titles – *Children of the Sun*, *Wonderful Ethiopians of the Ancient Kushite Empire*, *The African Origins of Civilization*. Here was not just our history but the history of the world, weaponized to our noble ends. (Coates, 2015:44-45)

Therefore, Howard is the illustration of the raise of black consciousness and it provides the evidence that black people need to be schooled about their true role in history, which reinforces their pride and compels them to achieve greater things.

Conclusion

All things considered; we have come up with three main findings after our analysis. The first one is that the destruction of the black body should never bear the responsibility of isolated individuals. It is rather a practice inherited from generations on end and enabled by rules and institutions. Mass incarceration, redlining, racial profiling and police brutality are the main modern manifestations of this phenomenon.

Secondly, Ta Nehisi Coates has brilliantly managed to weave a postcolonial counter-narrative that substantiates the lies and false accounts that have justified these practices for a long time. He rejects the notion of race as a human construct, asserts the pre-existence of racism over race, dismantles the structural foundations of Western civilization and sets America against its moral grounds. The outcome is the realization that America was built on the body of black people by the means of savage practices that are still going on.

Last but not least, the Afrocentric dimension of the work is striking and can be perceived mostly through African naming, African heritage, the contribution of Blacks in history and the powerful symbolism conveyed by Howard University. Through Coates's own name, Samori's name and Kenyatta's name, the author repositions the black body from an object of racial domination to a person who owns and understands his historical background, cultural memory and the power to define himself by the use of African names. The deeper meaning of their name goes beyond personal identification. It encapsulates the recovery of African historical identity and pride.

The slight limitation of Coates' undertaking, which also accounts for the limitation of this work, is his incapacity to embrace black faith or spirituals, in which he does not believe, making him pessimistic and somehow limiting black agency. Unlike some other black writers like Ishmael Reed and James Baldwin who draw the same remarks but acknowledge how instrumental black spirituals are, Coates has a very rational and scientific approach and rejects all forms of dogmas. Future research may track the evolution of his writings but also further interrogate this peculiar feature.

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