Between the World and Me

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TA-NEHISI COATES

Ta-Nehisi Coates was born to Cheryl Waters and Paul Coates, a former local captain of the Black Panther Party and founder of Black Classic Press. The name Ta-Nehisi comes from an Egyptian word for Nubia, which roughly translates to "land of the black." Coates had seven siblings on his father's side; his parents were strict and attentive, and his mother taught him to read at the age of four. Coates grew up during the crack epidemic, attending public schools in West Baltimore. He recalls that his middle school in particular was extremely violent, and that during these years he had to be especially careful in order to protect himself. Following high school, Coates attended Howard University, where his father worked as a research librarian. During his time at Howard, Coates began to work as a freelance journalist. It was during this time that he also met his future spouse, Kenyatta Matthews. After five years at Howard Coates left without graduating, and when they were both 24 he and Kenyatta had a son, Samori. Coates began publishing his journalism in a variety of outlets, including *The Village Voice*, *Time*, and *The New York Times*. He became a regular columnist for *The Atlantic*, a position he holds to this day, and it is in this forum that some of his most well-known essays have been published, including "The Case for Reparations" and an essay version of "Between the World and Me." In 2008, Coates published a memoir that focused particularly on his youth and his relationship with his father entitled *The Beautiful Struggle*. This was followed by *Between the World and Me*, published in 2015. Coates has been awarded numerous awards, including a MacArthur "Genius" Fellowship in 2015. He has taught at the City University of New York and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He travels frequently to Paris, and otherwise resides in Prospect Lefferts Gardens in Brooklyn, NY, with Kenyatta and Samori.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Between the World and Me was written in a context of renewed attention to anti-black violence in America, galvanized by the murders of Mike Brown, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Renisha McBride, and many others. Opposition to this violence and to the policy of mass incarceration disproportionately targeting black Americans took the form of the Movement for Black Lives, also known as Black Lives Matter. The Movement's demands include ending the criminalization of black youth, demilitarizing law enforcement, and distributing reparations to black people in the US. The movement forms a contrast to the view that, following the election of President Barack Obama in 2008, the US has entered a "post-racial" era in which issues of racist inequality and violence are no longer a major problem. *Between the World and Me* (along with the journalistic output of Coates and other African-American writers) points to the ongoing effects of the legacy of slavery and sustained racist injustice as evidence against this "post-racial" view.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Between the World and Me follows a tradition of African-American autobiographical work that also contains cultural and political criticism. The earliest examples of this genre can be found in the slave narratives of the 18th and 19th centuries; major 20th century figures working in this tradition include Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Maya Angelou. The format of *Between the World and Me*, which takes the form of an extended letter addressed to Coates' son, Samori, echoes the first essay in James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1963), which is addressed to Baldwin's nephew on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. One of the texts most influential to *Between the World and Me* is undoubtedly *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), a collaboration between Malcolm and the journalist Alex Haley. More recently, African-American writers have continued to expand the genres of criticism and memoir, pushing them into new directions. Claudia Rankine's most recent book, *Citizen* (2014), straddles the genres of poetry and criticism in order to examine the concepts of race, violence, and belonging in the contemporary US. Margo Jefferson's *Negroland* (2015) explores issues relating to race, class, and privilege through Jefferson's memories of growing up in an upper-class black family in the 1950s and 60s.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Between the World and Me
- **When Written:** 2014
- **Where Written:** New York, NY
- **When Published:** 2015
- **Literary Period:** 21st century African-American nonfiction
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** West Baltimore; Howard University; New York City; Paris
- **Climax:** The death of Prince Jones
- **Antagonist:** The Dreamers
- **Point of View:** First person (Ta-Nehisi Coates is the writer of the essay)

EXTRA CREDIT

Superhero stories. Since 2016, Coates has written the *Black Panther* series published by Marvel Comics, following the adventures of the black superhero T'Challa.

Fatherly pride. On learning that *Between the World and Me* was first on the New York Times bestseller list, Ta-Nehisi's father texted him: "You've now made up for all the dumb stuff you did as a kid. We're very proud of you."

PLOT SUMMARY

Coates begins the book with a direct address to his son, Samori. He describes a time when he is speaking on a talk show and is asked to explain what it means to lose his body. Coates reflects on the fact that white American progress has been constructed through the exploitation and oppression of black people, and that even though Americans "deify" democracy, this is hypocritical because the country has never truly been a democratic nation. When President Lincoln declared that the US would be ruled by a "government of the people," African Americans were not included in the category of personhood.

Coates is writing in the context of the recent racist murders of Eric Garner, Renisha McBride, John Crawford, and Mike Brown. These murders demonstrate the fact that the destruction of black people's bodies is part of the fabric of American society, and is a key component of the (American) **Dream**. Although we commonly think of the American Dream as an innocent pursuit of success and happiness, in reality this Dream cannot be unbound from violence against African Americans. As a result, black people live in a constant state of fear, knowing that their bodies are always at risk of destruction. Coates recalls the violence that surrounded him in his youth, and observes that although the young people he grew up with often claimed to "own" the streets, in reality the world around them was far beyond their control.

While the streets pose a threat to the young Coates, he is further constricted by the schools he attends, which seek to discipline black children rather than help them learn and grow. It is also not possible for Coates to seek escape in religion, because his parents raised him to distrust the "mysteries" of the church. On the other hand, he is able to learn from his father, Paul, who was formerly a local captain of the Black Panther Party and now works as a research librarian at **Howard University**. Coates prefers the precedent set by the Panthers and Malcolm X to the strategy of nonviolent resistance that is glorified at school.

After graduating from high school, Coates enrolls at Howard, which he refers to as "my Mecca." He is astonished by the diversity and vibrancy of the student population at Howard; this diversity teaches him that racial categories are too broad and expansive to represent real divisions between people. At Howard, he continues his exploration of black history and culture, reading voraciously and encountering the significant contradictions between the arguments of black intellectuals. He also begins to explore the wider Washington DC area, attending poetry readings and open mics where he meets other young writers. He falls in love with a series of three women who each challenge what he knows about himself as well as black people. The last of these women is Kenyatta Matthews. When Coates and Kenyatta are 24, she becomes pregnant with Samori, who is named after the Guinean Muslim cleric Samori Touré who resisted French colonizers and died in prison.

Soon after Samori's birth, Coates and Kenyatta's classmate from Howard, Prince Jones, is killed by the Prince George's County police. Coates and Kenyatta return to Howard for Prince's memorial, and Coates feels alienated by the emphasis on faith and forgiveness that occurs during the service. In the following weeks, Coates learns that the officer who killed Prince is known to be dishonest and incompetent, but was never reprimanded for past errors. Prince, meanwhile, was a kind, upstanding, beloved, very religious person, and the fact that he of all people was killed proves to Coates the inescapable intensity of racism.

In 2011, Coates and his young family move to New York, where Coates often feels anxious and out of place. He recalls an incident at a movie theatre on the Upper West Side during which a white woman manhandles Samori. Coates speaks harshly to her and another white man intervenes, telling Coates, "I could have you arrested!". Coates interprets this as a deliberate reminder of white people's power over black bodies. He recalls another episode, when he takes ten-year-old Samori and his cousin to visit historical sites from the Civil War. Coates feels a responsibility to teach his son the truth about the country in which they live, including the disturbing and violent history of white people sacrificing black bodies in service of the Dream. He cannot reassure Samori that everything will be okay, but he can ensure that his son has the knowledge necessary to confront the world as it truly is.

Coates' career as a journalist progresses, and he travels to Chicago to shadow the officers of the county sheriff. During this experience, he witnesses black people being evicted from their homes. On another occasion, he takes Samori with him to meet the mother of a boy killed by police. The boy's mother finds a sense of reassurance and redemption through her Christian faith, and tells Samori: "You exist. You matter. You have value."

At 37, Coates receives his first adult passport and makes a trip to Paris. Although he is anxious at first, the experience of being in Paris gives him a profound and thrilling sense of confidence and wonder. That summer, he returns along with Kenyatta and Samori. He reflects that Samori has enjoyed an "abnormal amount of security" in his own life, but that his son is still

nonetheless deeply aware of the injustice of the world. Coates meditates on the many terrible acts that are currently being committed in service of the Dream, including police brutality, mass incarceration, and the use of drone bombs in the Middle East.

One day, Coates goes to visit Dr. Mabel Jones, the mother of Prince Jones, at her home in a gated community outside of Philadelphia. Dr. Jones is a reserved, elegant woman, who tells Coates stories of her own life. Born in Louisiana, Dr. Jones became aware of racism early, but nonetheless managed to excel in school, win a scholarship to Louisiana State University, and train as a radiologist. Although she was the only black radiologist she knew at the time, Dr. Jones refuses to admit that she experienced any particular hardship.

Dr. Jones describes her son, Prince, as academically gifted and beloved by everyone. Although she wanted him to attend Harvard or another Ivy League school, Prince chose to go to Howard. Dr. Jones describes the immense pain she felt when Prince died, and remarks that no matter how much black people achieve, it only takes "one racist act" for all of this to be undone.

Coates leaves Dr. Jones' house, reflecting on the possibility that the Dreamers will "awaken" into an awareness about the reality of the atrocities and injustice in the world. He hopes that this is possible, but admits that it would be unwise to live one's life in the hope that it will happen. Coates considers the way that advances in technology have increased the power of the Dreamers over the world, and worries about the future. As he is driving home, he passes through the ghettoes of Chicago, and feels the same fear from his childhood coming back to him.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Ta-Nehisi Coates – Ta-Nehisi Coates is both the author and the main character of the book, which is written in the first person and addresses Coates' son, Samori. Born to Paul Coates and Cheryl Waters in 1975, Coates grows up in West Baltimore during the crack epidemic, and his childhood is haunted by the dangers of the streets and by Coates' unresolved questions about the injustices of the world, particularly those relating to the experience of black people in America. He attends but does not graduate from **Howard University**, where he meets his partner, Kenyatta Matthews. When he and Kenyatta are both 24, their son is born. Though it is not easy, Coates gradually manages to make a successful career as a writer, all the while continuing to explore the questions that have troubled him as a young person. Coates' life story, as well as his thoughts on American racism, the history of violence against black bodies, and the racist structures supporting "the **Dream**" make up most of the book's content. Coates is a harsh realist and an atheist, refusing to sugarcoat or mythologize the truth of what he sees, but he is also not without hope, and he finds a sense of freedom in his relentless pursuit of the truth.

Samori Coates – Samori is the son of Ta-Nehisi Coates and Kenyatta Matthews, and is 15 years old at the time the book is written. The book is addressed to him, and although he does not play a very active role within the narrative, Coates characterizes him as curious and sensitive, with a strong sense of justice.

Kenyatta Matthews – Kenyatta is the partner of Ta-Nehisi Coates and mother of Samori. She and Coates meet at **Howard University**. Coates mentions that Kenyatta grew up in a majority white neighborhood and that for this reason she rejected the **Dream** early in life, leading her to have an enthusiastic sense of adventure.

Prince Jones – Prince Jones is a classmate of Ta-Nehisi and Kenyatta at **Howard**. The son of Dr. Mabel Jones, he attends private schools as a boy and excels at his studies. At Howard, he is known as a warm, generous, and beloved person; he is also a born-again Christian. At 25, he is killed by an officer from the Prince George's County police, leaving behind a fiancée and baby daughter.

Malcolm X – Although Malcolm X does not play an active role in the narrative, he is undoubtedly the most important historical figure in the book. Coates discovers Malcolm X's work as a teenager, and it is the experience of reading about Malcolm's life and beliefs that awakens Coates to the reality of racial injustice in America. Born Malcolm Little in 1925, Malcolm became a member of the Nation of Islam during a period of incarceration. Malcolm went on to become a key figure in the black power movement, refusing to acquiesce to the strategy of nonviolent resistance advocated by some members of the Civil Rights Movement. In 1964 Malcolm broke ties with the Nation of Islam, and the following year he was assassinated by three of its members at the age of 39.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Paul Coates – Paul is Ta-Nehisi's father. Formerly a local captain of the Black Panther Party, Paul also spent time working as a research librarian at **Howard University**. He is a strict father who beat Ta-Nehisi, but also inspired his early intellectual development.

Cheryl Waters – Cheryl is Ta-Nehisi's mother. She teaches her son to read when he is four and forces him to write when he gets in trouble at school, thereby inspiring his lifelong love of writing.

Dr. Mabel Jones – Dr. Mabel Jones is Prince Jones' mother. Born in Louisiana, she receives a full scholarship to Louisiana State University, serves in the Navy, and works as a radiologist. In addition to Prince, she is also the mother of an unnamed daughter.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

AFRICAN-AMERICAN FAMILY AND HERITAGE

Between the World and Me is dedicated to Coates' son, Samori. The book is written in the second person, directly addressing Samori and referring to his family members as "your mother," "your grandfather," and so on. This format of an extended letter from father to son centers the theme of family and inheritance, creating the impression that the larger readership is secondary to the more immediate conversation between father and son. This framing also fits within a larger African-American tradition of intergenerational storytelling as a way to preserve African-American history, culture, and heritage.

The passage of culture and wisdom between generations was critically important for Coates himself. He emphasizes how his parents were hugely influential in developing his own understanding of the world—far more influential than his experience of formal education, at least until he enrolled at **Howard University**. Even at Howard, Coates suggests that the experience of learning from his peers—the people who were to become Samori's aunts and uncles—was also more formative and influential than what took place in the classroom.

When Coates speaks of family, though, he doesn't merely mean his immediate relatives. Rather, Coates creates an expansive notion of "family." In the African-American tradition, Samori's "aunts and uncles" are not necessarily related to him by blood, and much of *Between the World and Me* illuminates the notion that all black people in the US (and perhaps even around the world) are connected as an extended, symbolic family. Coates also expresses a bond to historical African-American heroes, activists, and revolutionaries who inspire his own struggle against racism and injustice: "Perhaps I too might wield the same old power that animated the ancestors, that lived in Nat Turner, Harriet Tubman, Nanny, Cudjoe, Malcolm X."

Similarly, Coates is inspired by the existence of his son, and views fatherhood and family life as a metaphorically sacred state of being: "There was before you, and then there was after, and in this after, you were the God I'd never had." Throughout the book, Coates points to moments in which black people have no one to rely on but each other, and develop intense familial and communal bonds. African-American family and heritage is thus a powerful force and site of resistance against oppression and brutality.

At the same time, Coates also explores the darker, more fearful side of black family life in the US. He notes the many people he knows (including his wife, Kenyatta) who grew up without a father, and illuminates the tragic fate of his classmate Prince Jones' fiancée, daughter, and mother who are left behind when Prince is killed by the police. In the final passage of the book, he portrays the loss experienced by Prince's mother, Dr. Mabel Jones, mournfully illuminating the plight of the disproportionate number of black parents who lose children to violence and incarceration. In many ways, the black family is characterized by a tragic sense of absence: "I knew that my father's father was dead and that my uncle Oscar was dead and that my uncle David was dead and that each of these instances was unnatural." Coates argues that because of this phenomenon, black parents are forced to live in a climate of fear. In Coates' case, this compels him to strive to protect and empower his son as much as possible. However, he notes that for many black parents, the fear that they will lose their child to state violence or the violence of the streets leads them to punish their children particularly harshly. Coates observes that his own father, Paul—like many other African-American parents—established strict rules and beat him for breaking them, something Coates himself refuses to do to his own son.

BLACK BODIES

Coates deals extensively with the theme of black bodies, arguing that "the question of how one should live within a black body… is the question of life." He shows how racism operates through the control, manipulation, and exploitation of black bodies and the resulting fragility of black bodies within a racist society. Coates traces this fragility back to the commodification of black bodies during colonialism and slavery, meaning the way in which black people were turned into objects with a monetary value. He urges Samori not to forget "how much they took from us and how they transfigured our very bodies into sugar, tobacco, cotton, and gold," and notes that by the time of the Civil War, "our stolen bodies were worth four billion dollars."

This theme helps explain how black people came to be treated – both when slavery existed and then beyond into the present-day – as disposable bodies within American society. Because of the tradition of treating black people as objects or animals whose value lay in their ability to make profit for white people, the very idea of what it means to be black in America is rooted in the constant danger of "losing" one's body. Although slavery has ended, the legacy of racism remains a kind of "terrorism" inflicted on black people's bodies, and Coates is keen to stress that racism is a visceral experience—that it "dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth."

For Coates, who is an atheist, exploring the meaning of black embodiment means coming to terms with the fact that there is

no soul that will survive the body, a view made especially painful by the fact that "in America, it is traditional to destroy the black body." In contrast to many of the people around him, Coates cannot be consoled by the notion that black people who are wrongfully harmed, incarcerated, and killed receive justice or peace in the afterlife. "The spirit and soul are the body and brain, which are destructible—that is precisely why they are so precious."

Although Coates struggles with the notion that there is no redemption or justice after death, he also finds strength in it, as can be seen by his explanation that it is the destructibility of bodies that make them "precious." Similarly, Coates also depicts the positive sides of black embodiment; for example, the tradition of seizing back autonomy over one's own body through dance. Coates also emphasizes the physical beauty of black people, particularly in the passages describing his time at Howard and the many attractive, stylish, and confident women he met there. Coates' reverence for these women's physical existence reminds the reader that in spite of the violence inflicted on black bodies, black embodiment remains a site of beauty and power.

CAPTIVITY, VIOLENCE, AND DEATH

Coates' exploration of black existence in America is inescapably haunted by legacy of slavery and Jim Crow, and of the current reality of mass incarceration and police violence. Early in the book, he notes that he began writing in the wake of the racist killings of Eric Garner, Renisha McBridge, John Crawford, Tamir Rice, and others. Later, he reveals a much more personal example in the form of his friend from **Howard**, Prince Jones, who was fatally shot by police at the age of 25. By citing both well-known and personal examples of lives lost to racist police violence, Coates emphasizes the scale of the problem and stresses the urgency of racial justice.

Somewhat unsurprisingly given this context, *Between the World and Me* is characterized by a deep distrust in the state and in mainstream methods for reforming the police, prisons, and other institutions that perpetrate violence against black people. Coates recalls that in high school, his teachers would focus on the nonviolent methods of protest used during the Civil Rights era as the correct model for activism. This strikes him as absurd: "How could they send us out into the streets of Baltimore, knowing all that they were, and then speak of nonviolence?" Although he admits that he himself is a decidedly nonviolent person, the violence black people are forced to live with is so extreme that, he believes, expecting black activists to respond passively is nonsensical and unjust.

Coates also emphasizes the fact that, no matter how much professional success or class privilege black people gain, no black person in the US is ever safe from the constant threat of violence. This thought is echoed during his conversation with Dr. Mabel Jones, Prince Jones' mother, who compares her experience to the story of Solomon Northup portrayed in the book (and film adaptation) *12 Years a Slave*. Both Dr. Jones and Northup were highly educated, respected, reasonably powerful people who "played by the rules" and were the image of respectability. However, it only takes "one racist act"—one act of violence—for all this to be undone. Coates argues that the ever-present threat of violence against black people becomes suffocating, a kind of metaphorical imprisonment that black people must suffer through every minute of every day, in addition to the disproportionate captivity of black people within the prison system.

YOUTH, EDUCATION, AND GROWTH

Given that *Between the World and Me* is addressed to Coates' 15-year-old son, Samori, it is unsurprising that much of the book focuses on the theme of youth, education, and growth. Rather than represent only the positive aspects of this topic, however, Coates conveys that it is an intensely charged issue, both for himself and African Americans at large. Indeed, one of the book's major arguments is that black people are not afforded the same experience of childhood and youth as white Americans. Whereas young white people are imagined as innocent and in need of encouragement, resources, and protection, very often black youth are demonized and neglected by the racist forces within American society. This was particularly true for Coates, whose own childhood took place in the shadow of the crack epidemic in Baltimore. He writes: "To be black in the Baltimore of my youth was to be naked before the elements of the world, before all the guns, fists, knives, crack, rape, and disease." Coates also shows how the education he received up until college was designed less to inspire him and the other children, and more to "discipline" them. "I sensed the schools were hiding something, drugging us with false morality so that we would not see, so that we did not ask: Why––for us and only us––is the other side of free will and free spirits an assault upon our bodies?" As this quotation shows, schools are often part of the overall racist structure of American society that oppresses, imprisons, and terrorizes black people.

Similarly, Coates provides a critical examination of the way in which the concept of (white) youthful innocence is deeply embedded in the **Dream**, the cherished American ideology that powers the racist structure of American society. Coates' description of the Dream explains that phenomena such as the Cub Scouts, strawberry shortcake, and the suburbs—all symbols of an idyllic American childhood—are not only systematically denied to black children, but used to justify racist phenomena such as segregation and policing in the name of keeping "innocent" (white) children safe.

On the other hand, Coates' portrayal of youth and education is by no means entirely bleak. His memories of growing up in

Baltimore show both the struggle and the joy to be found within the black youth culture of the time. And although he disdains the education he received as part of the Baltimore public school system, he contrasts this with the personal growth he gained through reading (particularly noting the influence of Malcolm X) and his extraordinary experience at **Howard University**. Coates states emphatically that "my only Mecca was, is, and shall always be Howard University." Coates is transformed not only by the formal education he receives at Howard, but arguably more so by the chance to be surrounded by a huge variety of other young black people in an environment in which they are safe to explore, grow, and be themselves.

Although Coates leaves Howard before graduating, he makes clear that education is a lifelong engagement, and that his learning continues far beyond the confines of the college classroom. "Godless though I am, the fact of being human, the fact of possessing the gift of study, and thus being remarkable among all the matter floating through the cosmos, still awes me." Coates treats education as a sacred endeavor for two main reasons: firstly, it allows him to gain knowledge of African-American history and draw inspiration from black people who have lived and struggled against injustice in the past. Secondly, he believes that true knowledge of the world dispels the myths upon which racism and injustice are built. Understanding how these myths originated and how they operate paves the way for them to be undone.

MYTH VS. REALITY

One of the central principles Coates lays out in *Between the World and Me* is that the popular view of American history is a dangerous myth that obscures the racist reality of the country's past and present. Part of this myth is the false belief in the reality of race itself. Coates argues: "Americans believe in the reality of 'race' as a defined, indubitable feature of the natural world. Racism… inevitably follows from this inalterable condition." It is important to note that Coates is not advocating that we deny the reality of race in a "colorblind" sense, by pretending we don't notice racial difference. Rather, Coates advocates acknowledging the fact that racial categorization was invented as a way of assigning some groups of people more value than others. This does not mean that race and racism are not "real," but that they are something that people have invented, rather than being a natural fact. For this reason, throughout the book Coates refers to white people as "those who believe they are white." This turn of phrase emphasizes both the social construction of race and the idea that whiteness is something people buy into, rather than simply having the identity thrust upon them.

Indeed, Coates' conception of whiteness is deeply intertwined with what he calls the **Dream**. This idea plays on the concept of the American dream, emphasizing the way in which the conventional understanding of the American Dream obscures the fact that the socioeconomic opportunities available in the US were and are made possible through the exploitation and suppression of black people. The Dream that Coates describes is thus an inescapably racialized project, rather than simply the belief in building a better life in the US. "I have seen that dream my whole 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." While Coates is not implying that there is anything inherently bad with any of these things, their existence as part of the Dream creates a false impression of the US that blinds people to the reality of immense racial injustice and suffering.

Coates makes clear that rather than simply being a single component of the US, the Dream is built into the very fabric of the nation; American history and identity are thus built on a (dangerous) myth and denial of reality. He demonstrates this in a variety of ways, arguing that aspects of the US such as democracy, the justice system, and the notion of equal opportunity are more like wishes or lies than real facts.

However, Coates is not only concerned with white American myths and the way that they obscure and deny reality. He is also wary of myths that exist within the African-American community, and that are similarly constitutive of African-American identity. The most major example is religion. An atheist, Coates is made uncomfortable by religion, an inclination that he inherited from his parents ("My parents rejected all dogmas"). As a result, Coates cannot find the solace that others do in religion, and is disturbed by the extent to which religion is embedded within reactions to racist violence. At Prince Jones' funeral, he notes that he feels like a "heretic," adding: "I have always felt great distance from the grieving rituals of my people, and I must have felt it powerfully then."

Similarly, Coates argues against the temptation to mythologize blackness and black people in the same way that racist ideologies mythologize whiteness. He warns that it is dangerous to argue that black people are an inherently "royal" race or deny that black people have ever perpetrated structural violence and oppression (such as the slave systems within Africa that pre-existed European colonization). Note that Coates is *not* arguing that there is a direct equivalence between intra-African slavery and the Atlantic slave trade, and he makes clear the fact that black people have never committed widespread genocide or enslavement against white people. However, he suggests that clinging to an overly romanticized, historically inaccurate understanding of blackness is not a helpful path toward racial justice. Instead, people must acknowledge and understand the world as it really is, and act from this place of knowledge and honesty.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE DREAM

One of the most important concepts in the book is the Dream, which is Coates' own twist on the idea of the American Dream. Traditionally, the American Dream refers to the idea that, due to the freedom and equality of opportunity built into the foundation of the country, anyone can achieve prosperity in the US as long as they work hard enough. Coates' version of this story is notably different. In *Between the World and Me*, Coates emphasizes the fact that the US was not built on a foundation of freedom and equality at all, but was in fact constructed through the exploitation and oppression of black people.

Rather than being disconnected from the Dream, however, this exploitation and oppression is deeply implicated within the aspiration for security and material success. White people have profited from the brutal treatment of black people since the slavery era and continue to do so in the present. Coates emphasizes that the Dream does not exist without racist injustice, as material prosperity in the US is inevitably tied to the exploitation of African Americans.

Coates refers to the people who buy into the Dream as "Dreamers." They are characterized not only by their choice to live in fancy houses in the suburbs and other cultural dimensions of the Dream, but also by their belief in the false myths of American history, including the idea that the country is equal and just and that pursuing the Dream is morally innocent. Although not all Dreamers are white, the Dream is deeply tied to whiteness. In many ways, those who pursue the Dream aspire to a white way of life, even if they are not white themselves.

HOWARD UNIVERSITY/THE MECCA

Coates tells Samori that "my only Mecca was, is, and shall always be Howard University." Founded in 1867 as a seminary for training African-American clergymen, Howard is one of the most illustrious historically black universities in the country; its alumni include Stokely Carmichael, Thurgood Marshall, and Toni Morrison. Coates' father Paul was a research librarian at Howard, and Coates attends along with Kenyatta, Prince Jones, and many of Samori's aunts and uncles.

When referring to Howard as "The Mecca," however, Coates draws a distinction between the university as an academic institution and as a vibrant community made up of young black people from every background, social class, and cultural orientation. It is this social community that truly rouses and inspires Coates. Although he never ends up graduating from Howard, the legacy of The Mecca stays with him throughout the book. In one of the final anecdotes, Coates describes the sense of joy and "black power" he experiences at Homecoming. Like the actual Mecca—the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad and holiest city in Islam—Howard becomes a source of strength and guidance for Coates throughout his life.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Spiegel & Grau edition of *Between the World and Me* published in 2015.

Part 1 Quotes

Son,
Last Sunday the host of a popular news show asked me what it meant to lose my body. The host was broadcasting from Washington, D.C., and I was seated in a remote studio on the far west side of Manhattan. A satellite closed the miles between us, but no machinery could close the gap between her world and the world for which I had been summoned to speak.

Related Characters: Ta-Nehisi Coates (speaker), Samori Coates

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

The opening makes it clear that the book will take the form of an extended letter from Coates to his son, Samori. Coates' account of his experience speaking on the news shows introduces many of the themes that will be of central importance within the narrative. Firstly, he writes that the host of the news show asks him to explain "what it meant to lose my body." This unusual phrasing immediately establishes the significance of the black body within the book, and also emphasizes the fact that the host is asking Coates a deeply personal question (even if she is perhaps not aware that she is doing so).

This quotation also contains a reference to the book's title when Coates mentions the "gap between her world and the world for which I had been summoned to speak." The host's world is what Coates will come to describe as the Dream—the world of whiteness, prosperity, security, and a false, mythologized understanding of American history. The world on behalf of which Coates has been asked to speak is

the world of black people, and arguably also the violent truth of America beneath the myth of the Dream. Although these two worlds exist side by side—Coates illustrates their proximity through the metaphor of the satellite—the gulf between them consists of a block in communication, experience, and understanding.

> Americans believe in the reality of "race" as a defined, indubitable feature of the natural world. Racism––the need to ascribe bone-deep features to people and then humiliate, reduce, and destroy them-––inevitably follows from this inalterable condition.

Related Characters: Ta-Nehisi Coates (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Coates has introduced his argument that the American people have a mythologized understanding of their own history and the history of their country. While they "deify" democracy, they ignore the reality that the nation was founded with the decidedly undemocratic belief that black people are not human. In this passage, he suggests that the popular understanding of race and racism is misguided and obscures how these phenomena actually work.

For Coates, race is not a "feature of the natural world" but rather a historical invention of white people that has come to seem "natural" because of the way it is embedded into our social reality. Furthermore, Coates holds that race is inherently tied to racism, and that it would be impossible to have a world organized into racial categories that did not also feature racist inequality and injustice.

> All our phrasing—race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy––serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth. You must never look away from this. You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body.

Related Characters: Ta-Nehisi Coates (speaker), Samori Coates

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Coates has continued to explain his theory of race and racism, pointing out that white identity has shifted over time based on the particular social dynamics of the era. The whole idea of whiteness in the first place depends on the violent rejection and destruction of blackness, and in this passage Coates urges Samori (and thus the reader) to pay attention to the physical element of this destruction.

Although Coates does not object to the study and discussion of race through social sciences and data, he seems concerned that focusing too much on these methodologies allows people to forget the lived reality of racism as a bodily experience. While urging his son to think of graphic descriptions of physical violence may seem alarming, throughout the book Coates shows that this attention to visceral experience is necessary in order to cut through the soothing myths of the Dream.

> For so long I have wanted to escape into the Dream, to fold my country over my head like a blanket. 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.

Related Characters: Ta-Nehisi Coates (speaker), Samori Coates

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

Coates has introduced the concept of the Dream, which is his interpretation of the American Dream, emphasizing the extent to which this idea is a willful delusion. Rather than being a morally admirable—or even morally innocent—quest for success and prosperity, the Dream is inherently built out of the exploitation and oppression of African Americans. In this passage, Coates explains that he does not resent the Dream outright, and has even longed to believe in it.

All "those families" he mentions are mostly white families who are able to go about their lives within the delusion of the Dream, never questioning its ethical validity or consequences. Yet even as Coates at times envies those who believe in the delusion, fundamentally he pities them—this is because, as Coates emphasizes throughout the book, no one can ever be free unless they see the world as it really is, rather than buying into myths. The Dream only exists by "warring with the known world," and thus those who pursue the Dream cannot fully engage or be at peace with the world around them.

> Some time ago I rejected magic in all its forms. This rejection was a gift from your grandparents, who never tried to console me with ideas of an afterlife and were skeptical of preordained American glory. 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?

Related Characters: Ta-Nehisi Coates (speaker), Cheryl Waters, Paul Coates

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

Coates has explained that he rejects the Dream, meaning that he refuses to accept a mythical account of American society in order to pursue his own path to success and ignore the inequality and suffering around him. Coates' suspicion of the Dream is in large part based on its disconnection from reality, and in this passage he explains that this rejection of myth began in his childhood, when his parents raised him as an atheist.

Whereas religion is often considered a source of strength and optimism, particularly in the black community, in this passage Coates reverses this idea. He argues that only by embracing "the chaos of history and the fact of my total end" is it possible to feel satisfied by the choices he makes. Rather than hoping that he will receive redemption in the afterlife, Coates approaches the matter of injustice with a sense of absolute urgency. For Coates, life must be guided by honesty and curiosity in order for there to be any hope of true freedom.

> What did it mean that number 2 pencils, conjugations without context, Pythagorean theorems, handshakes, and head nods were the difference between life and death, were the curtains drawing down between the world and me? I could not retreat, as did so many, into the church and its mysteries. My parents rejected all dogmas. We spurned the holidays marketed by the people who wanted to be white. We would not stand for their anthems. We would not kneel before their God.

Related Characters: Ta-Nehisi Coates (speaker), Cheryl Waters, Paul Coates

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

Coates has explained that as a child, he felt restricted by the violence and pressure of the neighborhoods he lived in. At the same time, his experience in school was hardly better; the education he received was overly disciplinarian and often irrelevant to his day-to-day experience. In this passage, he draws a comparison between the rules of the streets and the rules of school, and points out that the church—another potential avenue of escape—was not also not an option for him.

By making a connection between the streets, school, and the church, Coates highlights the authoritarianism that characterizes all three. Each of these three social structures requires Coates to surrender his own autonomy in order to obey a higher law, whether this is the law of "handshakes" or of God. Following the example set by his parents, Coates refuses to accept this authority for the same reason that he refuses to accept the Dream—because it would mean sacrificing his own dignity, honesty, and freedom.

> The black people in these films seemed to love the worst things in life—love the dogs that rent their children apart, the tear gas that clawed at their lungs, the fire-hoses that tore off their clothes and tumbled them into the streets. They seemed to love the men who raped them, the women who cursed them, love the children who spat on them, the terrorists that bombed them. Why are they showing this to us? Why were only our heroes nonviolent? I speak not of the morality of nonviolence, but of the sense that blacks are in especial need of this morality.

Related Characters: Ta-Nehisi Coates (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

Coates has recalled that in school, he and the other children would only be taught examples of nonviolent black protest. This is a contrast to the education he receives at home, which is dominated by the legacy of the Black Panthers and the influence of figures such as Malcolm X. The school's emphasis on nonviolent resistance puzzles Coates; nonviolent protest seems to suggest that the protesters "loved" the violence that was inflicted on them by racist individuals, the police, and the government.

By characterizing his confusion in this manner, Coates illustrates the double standard that governs the attitude of teachers (and America at large) regarding nonviolent resistance. Despite the fact that many black people in America are forced to endure violence as part of their every day lives, they are disproportionately encouraged and expected to resist by nonviolent means. Coates uses the bewilderment he experiences as a child to illuminate the moral hypocrisy of this position.

> Perhaps I too might live free. Perhaps I too might wield the same old power that animated the ancestors, that lived in Nat Turner, Harriet Tubman, Nanny, Cudjoe, Malcolm X, and speak––no, act––as though my body were my own.

Related Characters: Ta-Nehisi Coates (speaker), Malcolm X

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

Coates has recalled that, as a teenager, he was a huge admirer of Malcolm X. Malcolm's words felt like an antidote to the messages Coates received at school and in the wider world, which discouraged resistance to racist injustice and left Coates feeling powerless. In this passage, Coates explains that he was inspired by the revolutionary spirit of African-American leaders and activists who came before him. Although at times it can feel as if Coates is alone facing the impossible pressures of police brutality, street violence, inequality of opportunity, and the dishonesty of the Dream, he is also connected to the rich heritage of black resistance. Through the precedent set by those who came before, Coates is able to imagine the possibility of having and feeling control over his own body.

> I was admitted to Howard University but formed and shaped by The Mecca. These institutions are related but not the same. Howard University is an institution of higher education, concerned with the LSAT, magna cum laude, and Phi Beta Kappa. The Mecca is a machine, crafted to capture and concentrate the dark energy of all African peoples and inject it directly into the student body. The Mecca derives its power from the heritage of Howard University which in Jim Crow days enjoyed a near-monopoly on black talent.

Related Characters: Ta-Nehisi Coates (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

Coates has explained that his "only Mecca" is Howard University, the historically black institution where he attended college. By claiming that Howard is his "Mecca," Coates is referencing the city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia where the Prophet Muhammad was born; Muslims face towards Mecca when they pray, and are obligated to make at least one pilgrimage there (called Hajj) during their lifetimes. Coates' choice of his own Mecca reflects his atheism as well as his commitment to the search for knowledge and to black people.

As Coates points out in this passage, there is a distinction between Howard as an academic institution and what he thinks of as "The Mecca." The former view of Howard emphasizes the ways in which it resembles any other institution of higher education in the US. The latter, however, focuses on what is unique about Howard—particularly the fact that it has historically "enjoyed a near-monopoly on black talent." As a result, Howard has been a rare site within which black people have been able to learn, grow, experiment, socialize, and love one another safe from the oppressive reach of the Dream and the racist violence that is pervasive in the rest of the country. For this reason, Howard takes on a metaphorically sacred status within Coates' imagination.

The Dream thrives on generalization, on limiting the number of possible questions, on privileging immediate answers. The Dream is the enemy of all art, courageous thinking, and honest writing.

Related Characters: Ta-Nehisi Coates (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

Coates has been describing his intellectual development while at Howard, much of which took place outside of the confines of the university itself and in the city of Washington DC. He is particularly inspired by the artistic and intellectual work of other black people, and in this passage reaches the conclusion that the Dream prevents "courageous thinking and honest writing."

Throughout the book, Coates expresses a suspicion of false belief and easy answers. For him, life cannot be freely lived without confrontation with the world as it really is, no matter how painful this may be. In many ways, this assertion is supported by the history of artistic and intellectual expression, which has often thrived in situations of duress and which has been used by oppressed peoples as a method for making sense of the world.

She said to me, "You take care of my daughter." When she got out of the car, my world had shifted. I felt that I had crossed some threshold, out of the foyer of my life and into the living room. Everything that was the past seemed to be another life. There was before you, and then there was after, and in this after, you were the God I'd never had. I submitted before your needs, and I knew then that I must survive for something more than survival's sake. I must survive for you.

Related Characters: Ta-Nehisi Coates (speaker), Samori Coates, Kenyatta Matthews

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

While Kenyatta is pregnant, her mother comes to visit Kenyatta and Coates in their barely furnished apartment in Delaware. At the end of her visit, Kenyatta's mother urges Coates to "take care of my daughter," and it is at this moment that Coates feels he is transformed from a man into a father. He describes this transformation as being akin to a religious awakening. Whereas before he had lacked the sense of guidance and purpose provided by religion, Samori becomes a God figure to him—not in the authoritarian or divine sense, but rather by giving Coates a reason to "survive." Whereas Coates is not able to live with what he perceives to be the false dogma of religion, this connection to Samori is undeniably real, and thus forms a powerful shift in Coates' attitude toward life.

Part 2 Quotes

I have always felt great distance from the grieving rituals of my people, and I must have felt it powerfully then. The need to forgive the officer would not have moved me, because even then, in some inchoate form, 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.

Related Characters: Ta-Nehisi Coates (speaker), Prince Jones

Related Themes:

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

Coates and Kenyatta have traveled to DC to attend the memorial service for Prince Jones at Howard. During the service, Coates feels uncomfortable when those around him invoke religion and speak of forgiving the officer who killed Prince. This is one of the few—and certainly the most significant—moments in which Coates describes a sense of alienation from other black people. Although he can understand the importance of the church to the African-American community on an intellectual level, he cannot fathom how other black people are able to put their faith in an institution he perceives to be characterized by "dogma" and myth. By invoking the idea that Prince was killed "by his country," Coates draws a subtle connection between the myth of the Dream and the myth of religion.

The entire narrative of this country argues against the truth of who you are.

Related Characters: Ta-Nehisi Coates (speaker), Samori

Coates

Related Themes:

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

Coates has been reflecting on the history of racism in America, and has noted that the Dreamers are committed to ignoring the reality of racist injustice even when the evidence stares them in the face. He then tells Samori that the American narrative "argues against the truth of who you are." This is a deliberately abstract sentence, and thus could be interpreted in a number of ways. Coates is perhaps referring to the fact that, as he mentions earlier in the book, America was founded within the context of a system that dehumanized black people. Samori's humanity itself is thus at odds with the historical narrative of the country in which he was born.

At the same time, Coates could also be referring to Samori's youth. Many scholars of race have demonstrated that black children are routinely treated as adults, and that white people frequently overestimate the age of black children when interacting with them. On a more general level, black children are not afforded the same associations with "innocence" as white children (or even white adults) and are not protected from violence and injustice. The "truth," of course, is that as a black boy Samori *is* innocent, even if he cannot (and should not) remain within the delusional innocence of the Dream.

> Here is what I would like for you to know: In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body––*it is heritage.*

Related Characters: Ta-Nehisi Coates (speaker), Samori Coates

Related Themes:

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

Coates has been discussing the police murders of Eric Garner and others, and has explained to Samori that it does not matter whether the officer who murdered Garner intended to kill him or not. The officer's individual intentions are irrelevant, because violence against black bodies is "traditional" within America, and this tradition does not consist of the acts of any one individual but instead of a much broader, more powerful legacy.

Within this sentence, two forms of "heritage" are at play. One on level, Coates discusses the "heritage" of anti-black violence that has existed for even longer than America itself. By adding the phrase "here's what I would like for you to know," however, Coates highlights another, oppositional form of heritage—the love and knowledge passed down from himself to his son, which directly contradicts the racist heritage of America.

> I have spent much of my studies searching for the right question by which I might fully understand the breach between the world and me. I have not spent my time studying the problem of "race"––"race" itself is just a re-statement and retrenchment of the problem.

Related Characters: Ta-Nehisi Coates (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

Coates has admitted that if his younger self were to see him now, he would be pleased with the way his life has turned out. Along with a thriving community of friends and family, Coates is also in possession of a career as a writer—a career consisting of rigorous inquiry about the meaning of human existence. Coates' remark that he has been searching for the "right question" illustrates his curious, Socratic style of learning and writing; rather than seeking the right *answer*, Coates instead seeks further inquiry.

His clarification that he has not been studying "race" might seem confusing, as on the surface the book seems to focus entirely on race and racism. However, Coates suggests that claiming to study race adds legitimacy to the idea that race is a natural fact of the world, rather than an arbitrary invention with no real truth beneath the meaning humans have given it. Furthermore, Coates' words also remind the reader that his writing is about much more than just "race," addressing issues that affect all people and that fundamentally define the meaning of human life.

It was the briefest intimacy, but it captured much of the beauty of my black world––the ease between your mother and me, the miracle at The Mecca, the way I feel myself disappear on the streets of Harlem. To call that feeling racial is to hand over all those diamonds, fashioned by our ancestors, to the plunderer. We made that feeling, though it was forged in the shadow of the murdered, the raped, the disembodied, we made it all the same.

Related Characters: Ta-Nehisi Coates (speaker), Kenyatta Matthews

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

Coates has discussed an exchange he had with another black man; having accidentally bumped into the man, Coates remarked, "My bad," and the man replied "You straight." Although fleetingly brief, the exchange makes Coates aware that he is part of a "world"—a world with its own language, values, and codes of behavior. Coates makes two subtle clarifications about the nature of this world that can at first seem confusing, but that are in fact fundamental to his theory of race, kinship, and culture.

Firstly, Coates denies that the black world and its features are a natural, essential fact, meaning he refutes that they are built into the way black people are just because they are black. Rather, Coates points out that they are a social construction, "forged in the shadow of the murdered, the raped, the disembodied." However, Coates also clarifies that it is not the perpetrators of this violence that forged black culture and identity, but black people themselves who—in the midst of horror—created their own world.

Today, when 8 percent of the world's prisoners are black men, our bodies have refinanced the Dream of being white. Black life is cheap, but in America black bodies are a natural resource of incomparable value.

Related Characters: Ta-Nehisi Coates (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

Coates ends Part 2 with a survey of all the violence and injustice that is currently being committed in service of the Dream, including police brutality, the policy of drone bombing in the Middle East, and mass incarceration. On this last point, Coates emphasizes that white people are profiting from the large and disproportionate number of black people who are in prison, just as they did during the slavery era. He makes an important distinction between black lives—which are treated as "cheap"—and the use of black bodies as a way of creating capital that ends up in the hands of white people.

Of course, in reality this should be the other way around. As human beings, black people should not be treated as commodities (objects) whose value lies in their capacity to generate profit for whites. Rather, black people should be seen as valuable in themselves, and treated with the dignity, respect, and opportunities that all individuals deserve.

Part 3 Quotes

Perhaps that was, is, the hope of the movement: to awaken the Dreamers, to rouse them to the facts of what their need to be white, to talk like they are white, to think that they are white, which is to think that they are beyond the design flaws of humanity, has done to the world. But you cannot arrange your life around them and the small chance of the Dreamers coming into consciousness. Our moment is too brief.

Related Characters: Ta-Nehisi Coates (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

Having left Dr. Mabel Jones' house, Coates sits outside in his car and reflects on the state of black people in America—stuck in a country within which they are perpetually at risk, and unable to change things on their own. He wonders if "the hope of the movement" is that the Dreamers will come to understand that their desire to be right has caused so much damage, even as he also acknowledges the importance of not orienting one's life around the Dreamers.

Here Coates underlines the notion that simply the desire to "think that they are white" is behind white people's capacity to cause unimaginable amounts of suffering to black people.

Such a claim emphasizes the idea that it does not matter whether or not individual white people have racist or malicious intentions, and that racist injustice and violence is the result of phenomena that seem perfectly harmless on the surface.

This passage can also be interpreted as a reflection on the nature of the book itself. Some critics have argued that *Between the World and Me* seems to be addressing white people (even while it superficially takes the form of a letter to Samori). To a certain extent, this passage could be taken as evidence of this fact. On the other hand, Coates does warn against living in hope that white people will be brought "into consciousness," thus perhaps suggesting that the book is equally written for two audiences—one made up of people who are caught up in the Dream, and another of those for whom the Dream was never a possibility.

> Black power births a kind of understanding that illuminates all the galaxies in their truest colors. Even the Dreamers––lost in their great reverie––feel it, for it is Billie they reach for in sadness, and Mobb Deep is what they holler in boldness, and Isley they hum in love, and Dre they yell in revelry, and Aretha is the last sound they hear before dying. We have made something down here.

Related Characters: Ta-Nehisi Coates (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

Coates has described the moment of joy and vitality he felt when attending Homecoming at Howard. He reflects on the remarkable power of black creativity, which is such a strong force that even "Dreamers"—who refuse to fully acknowledge black people's humanity—subconsciously understand the beauty of black power. This is a moving and surprisingly optimistic interpretation of a well-known phenomenon—the fact that many people who don't respect and value black lives still love and consume black art. While this paradox is often cited as evidence of racist people's hypocritical and exploitative nature, Coates suggests that it may also indicate the possibility of the eventual end of the Dream.

> Through the windshield I saw the mark of these ghettos––the abundance of beauty shops, churches, liquor stores, and crumbling housing––and I felt the old fear. Through the windshield I saw the rain coming down in sheets.

Related Characters: Ta-Nehisi Coates (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis

Having left Dr. Mabel Jones' house, Coates drives home through the ghettoes of Chicago. He has been thinking of Samori and has urged him to "struggle" on behalf of his friends, family, and the memory of his ancestors. However, the final lines of the book return to a less optimistic, more haunted note. Having reflected on the beauty and power of black culture, Coates is then once more reminded of the injustice, suffering, and powerlessness that black people are forced to face. The return of his "old fear" highlights the relentless power of the past to return and haunt the present. In contrast to the view that black people should "get over" past injustices and move on, Coates suggests that the past never truly disappears. The rain signals ambiguity and uncertainty over whether progress will come in the future, and ends the book on a note of dark but lyrical uneasiness.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1

Coates begins the book in the style of a letter addressed to his son Samori. He explains that he was recently on a talk show where the host asked him "what it meant to lose my body." Coates feels that there is an enormous gulf between the host's world "and the world for which I had been summoned to speak." At the same time, he is used to being asked about his body, and understands that the woman is trying to understand why he thinks American progress—which, he clarifies actually refers to *white* American progress—has been made possible by "looting and violence." This question tires him, because he feels that the only answer lies within the myth of American history itself.

Coates opens by recalling an instance in which he is "summoned" to educate the world of white people about his views on racism and American history. However, this is made difficult by the fact that there is such a huge gulf between the world of black people (including Coates himself) and the audience he is asked to address. He points out that evidence of this gulf lies in the fact that he is being asked to explain his views, when in his mind all the necessary evidence already lies within the white mythologization of American history.

Coates argues that white Americans' tendency to "deify" democracy causes them to forget that their country has historically violated democratic values through "torture, theft, [and] enslavement." On the other hand, America is not unique in this violation, as many other democracies have committed the same crimes. When Abraham Lincoln declared that the United States would have a "government of the people" in 1863, the definition of "person" did not include black people. This leads to another problem within the US, which is the belief in the reality of race as a natural fact. Coates argues that this belief inevitably leads to racism and to the acceptance of racist atrocities as a natural (if tragic) part of life.

Coates is quick to point out instances in which people romanticize reality in a way that prevents them from acknowledging the truth. Often, this takes the form of telling stories that present the world in a more comforting light. The problem with this tendency is that it encourages people to turn a blind eye to injustice, thereby allowing injustice to continue. For example, if people willfully forget that the US did not always consider African Americans to be people, the dehumanization of African Americans will persist.

Coates explains that the boundaries of what counts as "white" identity are fluid, and that Catholics, Jews, and the Welsh (among others) did not used to be considered white people. The creation of the idea of whiteness took place through the violent torture and oppression of black people; in other words, white identity was made by denying black people autonomy over their own bodies. Historically, there may have been groups other than white people who systematically subjected entire races to genocide and enslavement, but Coates does not know of any. Americans themselves like to claim they are exceptional, but perhaps what is truly exceptional about America is its legacy of systematic violence.

Here, Coates expands on the argument that racial categories are not natural facts, but rather systems of human invention. When he argues that only white people have oppressed entire races, he is not willfully ignoring the persecution of particular tribes, religions, and ethnicities by groups other than white people. Rather, he is clarifying that only white people have grouped together and persecuted a huge range of these subgroups under the umbrella of a single, invented racial category.

At the time Coates is writing, his son Samori is fifteen, and has recently witnessed the violent, racist deaths of Eric Garner, Renisha McBride, John Crawford, and Tamir Rice. These killings make it obvious that police in America are "endowed with the authority to destroy" black bodies and that no matter what black people do, they will never be safe from this risk of violence. Coates argues that the language and academic tools we use to discuss racism encourage us to forget that racism is a "visceral," bodily experience. He tries to explain this on the talk show, but the segment ends with a picture of a little black child hugging a white police officer and Coates realizes he had failed to convey his message.

As a black teenager, Samori has been forced to understand early on that America is a hostile environment for black people. Although he did not personally witness the killings Coates mentions, the evidence of racism in these cases is unavoidable, such that black children cannot be kept in a state of "innocent" obliviousness in the same way as a white children. Coates' focus on the body conveys the idea of embodied knowledge, meaning a way of understanding the world through one's physical experiences and senses.

Leaving the TV studio, Coates walks around and observes white families going about their days. He feels sad, and realizes this is because they are living in "a gorgeous **dream**." This Dream, which encompasses all the desirable aspects of American culture, such as "perfect houses" and "Memorial day cookouts," has been built through the oppression of black people. It is tempting to avoid this reality and embrace the dream, but sadly not possible.

Here Coates explains why other people buy into the Dream, and also why he is not able to do so. On the surface, the Dream is not only appealing but seemingly harmless—however, once a person has been made aware of the connection between the Dream and the persecution of black people, it is impossible to forget that knowledge.

That same weekend, Samori learns that the police officer who killed Mike Brown will not be punished, something that does not surprise Coates but does surprise Samori, who walks out of the room crying. Coates chooses not to comfort him, deciding it would be wrong to provide false hope that everything will be ok, because Coates does not believe it himself. Instead, Coates reminds his son that trying to understand how to live in the world as a black person is a question that "ultimately answers itself."

Here Coates demonstrates how different being a black parent can be from the way that white parents are expected to behave. Although he is deeply affected by Samori's sadness, he reasons that it would be unforgiveable to lie to his son. To Coates, false optimism is always worse than dealing with reality, however grim that reality may be.

Avoiding false optimism and tidy resolutions puts Coates at odds with the "'goal-oriented' era" in which he lives. He explains that he inherited this suspicion of "magic" from his parents, who rejected both American exceptionalism and religion. Coates believes it is necessary to reject these myths in order to achieve personal freedom. He argues that although Americans like to think of their country as "God's handiwork," the treatment of black bodies in the US disproves this idea. Coates has sought answers for the question of how to live as a black person in the US through conversations with his family, his friends, and his partner Kenyatta, through reading and writing, and through music. Although the question is "unanswerable," the quest for answers is itself a form of freedom.

Here Coates illuminates a paradox within American national identity. The American dream is associated with freedom; yet Coates believes that people can only truly be free if they cease to believe in the comforting myths of the Dream, American exceptionalism, and religion. This belief raises the question of just what it means to be free. Does freedom lie in comfort and prosperity, or in autonomy and knowledge? While the latter version is more difficult and painful, Coates argues that this is the real meaning of freedom.

The freedom of this questioning makes Coates less afraid of "disembodiment," but he still remains fearful. He recalls that when he was Samori's age—fifteen—everyone he knew was black, and all of them were afraid. The narrative jumps back in time to this era, and Coates describes the "extravagant boys of my neighborhood," who disguise their fear through their cool, tough outfits and "customs of war." Coates recalls watching a street fight between two boys when he was five years old, and observes that these fights demonstrate "the vulnerability of black teenage bodies."

Throughout the book, Coates explores different ways that black people deal with the risks and fear associated with being in a black body in America. In this instance, the boys in his neighborhood disguise their vulnerability with performances of toughness; wearing clothes like "armor" and engaging in fights with elaborate rules. Such behavior distracts from the threat posed to them by white America.

Coates also recognizes the fear in the music he listens to, which is full of ostentatious boasts, and in the toughness of the girls he knows. He sees the same fear when he visits his grandmother and recalls the fact that many of his family members have died "unnatural" deaths. Coates also recognizes it in his own father, Paul, who gave him money to help raise Samori and who also beat Coates as a child—beat him with a severity that showed he was worried "someone might steal me away." Coates explains that this was reasonable because it happened all the time, with black youth being lost to violence, drugs, or prison. He recalls his father saying: "Either I can beat him, or the police."

By juxtaposing Paul's history of beating his son alongside his generosity when Samori was born, Coates shows that for many black parents, hitting their children is not an act of vindication or even of justice, but a desperate attempt to protect their children from the dangers of the world around them. However, as the deaths in Coates' family make clear, there is nowhere truly safe from these dangers. Coates' father's words emphasize that even children are not safe from anti-black police violence.

Coates understands the reasoning behind black parents subjecting their children to harsh physical punishments, but he is not sure if it is effective in keeping them out of trouble. Children learn to joke about it, but in reality they are "afraid of those who loved us most." In the Baltimore of Coates' childhood, he and other young people were deliberately exposed to the dangers of the world through policies designed to keep black people in a constant state of fear. The law did not protect black children from these dangers, and was in fact another source of violence itself.

Coates explains that beating their children doesn't necessarily mean that black parents love them any less, but that the children nevertheless end up unjustly afraid of their parents. He emphasizes that all the sources of authority that are supposed to protect children and make them feel safe are in fact threatening to black children. As a result, black children are imprisoned by the danger that surrounds them and by their own fear.

Coates recalls a particular time at age eleven, watching a group of older boys yell at a kid his age. The boys are stylishly dressed in ski jackets, and as Coates is watching one of them pulls out a gun. Coates has been hearing about murder all over the news, but the topic doesn't feel real until this moment. The boy's friends pull him back and he puts the gun away; Coates goes home and does not tell his parents or teachers about the episode. He feels amazed at the ease with which "death could so easily rise up from the nothing of a boyish afternoon," and thinks of another world where this is not the case—a world where children are safe, families are prosperous, and people's worries are minor. Although this feels like another planet, it is in fact just the world of white people and the **Dream**.

Even as an eleven-year-old boy, Coates must already face the most sinister aspects of the world. For him, the Dream is inaccessible not only because his family isn't rich and he doesn't live in a white suburb, but also because he cannot unlearn the knowledge he has gained about the realities of crime, poverty, racism, violence, and death. From this perspective, it is clear that the Dream is far-fetched and ridiculous—not so much for what it contains than for what it ignores, namely, the experience of Coates and other black children like him.

Coates observes that Samori's life is very different from his own. During Samori's youth, the president is black, social media is everywhere, and black women proudly walk around with natural hair. On the other hand, Samori's anger at the trial over the death of Mike Brown is the same feeling that Coates himself experienced at that age. Coates recalls striving to survive as a child and teenager, and says he understands why some people become addicted to the risk inherent within the streets. On the other hand, the claim to "own" or "run" the streets is inherently fictitious, because the "game" is not designed or controlled by black people.

Once again, Coates is sympathetic to multiple perspectives, but ultimately emphasizes the danger of myth. In this instance, myth refers to the idea that black people can gain ultimate control over the dangerous environments in which they live if only they play the "game" right. Although Coates understands that it is tempting to believe such things, he stresses that it is impossible to ignore the fact that there are always larger forces at play sustaining black people's oppression.

People who turn their fear into violent rage pose the biggest threat, and Coates recalls that he learned to avoid certain places and individuals in order to keep himself safe. He also learned to speak in gestures, to recognize "fighting weather," and other codes and practices of the streets. He remembers these rules better than the basic education taught in elementary school because "they were essential to the security of my body." Samori, on the other hand, does not have to spend as much time obsessively learning and enacting these rules. Coates sees this as a good thing, and does not wish to force Samori to become "tougher." At the same time, as a young black man, Samori will never be completely safe from violence.

Note that even as he emphasizes the centrality of the streets to his childhood, Coates refuses to glamorize this way of life. He understands why young black people engage in posturing and fighting, but maintains that it is better not to be so tough and to devote one's mind to other matters if possible. Indeed, life in the neighborhoods in which Coates grew up is perhaps more banal than anything, as it involves devoting inordinate time to thinking and behaving in a safe, correct way, rather than pursuing other things.

Coates argues that "if the streets shackled my right leg, the schools shackled my left"; however, Coates feels more resentful of the schools. While the rules of the streets were "practical," the schools were designed to discipline black children rather than give them a chance to grow. It was absurd, for example, that Coates and other black children learned French when it was likely none would ever go to France. Coates argues that, as a child, he felt "drugged" by the "false morality" taught in school. Education was not an opportunity for learning and development, but simply the more preferable institution to prison.

Over the course of the book, Coates argues that education can be empowering, but that it also often has a sinister side. In this case, the mission lying at the heart of the public education system in Baltimore is to control and suppress black children. School thus becomes a kind of metaphorical prison; although it is better than being literally incarcerated, it nonetheless suffocates people with myths and pointless discipline.

Coates did not imagine he or anyone he knew would escape this oppressive environment. Some of the tougher kids thought they would escape by asserting dominance on the streets, but this ultimately led nowhere. Coates felt he was in an impossible bind in which either being too violent or not violent enough could result in his death. Succeeding in school required absolute obedience to arbitrary rules and expectations. Meanwhile, he wasn't able to find solace in "the church and its mysteries," because his parents rejected what they saw as the myth of religion. Fear was omnipresent in Coates' life, and he knew that this fear was connected to the carefree lives of those living in the **Dream**.

The fact that the reader is holding Coates' book in their hands—and likely knows something about his life and career—proves that Coates was able to escape the dangers and dead ends that lay before him as a child in Baltimore. However, by emphasizing his certainty that he would not be able to escape, Coates reminds us how restrictive and threatening life is for most black children in America, and that supposed opportunities for social mobility often appear more like instruments of discipline and control.

As a child, Coates is curious about the way in which racism simultaneously sustains the **Dream** and perpetuates the oppression of black people like himself. However, there are no opportunities to understand how this works, as neither the streets, his school, nor religion provide any answers. On the other hand, his mother Cheryl had taught him to read at age four, and she makes him write reflective assignments when he got into trouble at school. These writing exercises allow Coates to develop a better understanding of himself, which in turn helps him understand other people and the world around him.

Because of Coates' emphatic rejection of "magic" and dogma, there is no one institution or authority that will provide answers to the questions troubling him. However, writing helps him because it is not an instructive activity, but rather a way of asking questions and deepening one's understanding of the world as it really is.

Coates finds further answers in the books supplied by his father, Paul, who works as a research librarian at **Howard University**. Paul "had been a local captain of the Black Panther Party" and Coates is fascinated by the BPP newspapers and books. He views the Panthers as much more reasonable than the Civil Rights heroes he learns about in school, who appear to "love" the violence inflicted on them so much that they refuse to engage in violent resistance. Coates is suspicious of the extent to which the schools glorify nonviolence, perceiving it to be a way to maintain the oppression of black people. Encouraging nonviolence seems especially strange given the amount of violence that surrounds Coates and other black children every day.

One of Coates' main aims in the book is to show how racial oppression operates in covert ways in addition to more obvious forms, such as police violence and the prison system. Teaching children about Civil Rights leaders is clearly not an obvious strategy of racial oppression. However, through critical analysis, Coates is able to show that there is a sinister ideological reason behind the decision to focus on nonviolent black activists—it encourages the children to accept the violence in their lives while rejecting the possibility of violent resistance.

Coates ends up viewing the streets and schools as "arms of the same beast." Both exert control over the population through fear and violence, and "failing" within either means risking imprisonment or death. He emphasizes that "intentions" are irrelevant, because most Americans do not advocate racist violence directly but do support the **Dream**, which indirectly oppresses black people. Coates brings his concerns to his parents. Paul rarely gives an answer but instead advises him to read more books, which do not provide answers, but help Coates to "refine" his questions.

In contrast to other narratives, Coates' intellectual development and political awakening is not a pleasant experience, but rather a frustrating and often painful struggle. He is aware of the kind of knowledge he hopes to gain, and is beginning to understand that he is surrounded by myths and other false views of reality, but feels fairly lost as to the best way to move forward.

Coates remarks that he is not alone on this journey toward political consciousness. The work of Malcolm X is being taken up within the developing hip hop community, just at the point when Coates is emerging into young adulthood. Coates idolizes Malcolm, inspired by his message that black bodies are sacred and "precious," and that black people have the right to defend violations to their bodies. Unlike the schools and **Dreamers**, "Malcolm never lied." Coates identifies with Malcolm's life story, and begins to feel hopeful that he might "live free" after all. He develops ambitions as a writer and feels that he is finally beginning to have answers to the questions that have troubled him throughout his life.

Malcolm X's writing inspires and reassures Coates not because it is particularly comforting, but because it refuses to indulge the myths that are found almost everywhere else in American society. Whereas another person might read Malcolm's work and feel despondent about the prospect of achieving personal freedom, for Coates the opposite is true. This is because Coates associates freedom with honesty and the rejection of false narratives and moralizing.

Coates listens to hip hop and takes inspiration from the Black Power movement. He begins to wonder if black people should "return to ourselves," concluding perhaps it's time they returned to **Mecca**. Coates goes on to explain that his only Mecca is Howard University. Coates' father, Paul, worked there, many of Samori's aunts and uncles attended, and it is where Coates and his wife Kenyatta met. Coates draws a distinction between Howard as an academic institution and "The Mecca" that shaped him, however. Because of Howard's unique history, it has exceptionally illustrious alumni, a heritage that powers the "dark energy" of its community in the present day.

Although Coates does not say so explicitly, there is a reason why the introduction of Howard follows the passage about Malcolm X. The actual Mecca is a city in Saudi Arabia in which the Prophet Muhammad was born. As a Muslim, Malcolm prayed to Mecca at least five times a day and made Hajj—the pilgrimage to Mecca required of all Muslims—in 1964. Coates suggests that Howard provides the same source of community and strength to him as Mecca does to Muslims.

Coates describes the students who pass through the Yard at **Howard**; students of different national origin, religions, styles of dress, talents, and tastes. He explains that "the vastness of black people across space-time… could be experienced in a twenty-minute walk across campus." To Coates, every student is "hot and incredible." His encounter with this black community makes clear the extent to which white people seek to repress and control black people's bodies. It also reveals the arbitrary nature of racial categories, which were invented by white people and imposed on everyone else.

Perhaps paradoxically, Coates' experience of attending a black university confirms his suspicion that race is an arbitrary social construct, rather than a factual, biological reality. He comes to this realization because of the enormous variation between the students at Howard, which feels like a whole world in and of itself. Although they are connected by the experience of being black, every black person is different.

Coates senses that whites oppress black people because they are intimidated by black people's power. He quotes the Canadian-American author Saul Bellow, who once asked: "Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus?". The question troubles Coates because it implies major intellectual and historical figures must be white in order to qualify as important. He feels that this denial of the significance and beauty of black culture is intimately tied to the "destruction of black bodies" that occurs through racist violence. As a result, black people are desperate to find a "new history," and thus risk manufacturing their own Dream in the form of a narrative of a super-powerful, majestic "black race."

Coates' logic here is complex, and can thus be difficult to follow. On one hand, he rejects the kind of racist thought that asserts that black people have not made significant contributions to human history and culture. On the other hand, he warns against reacting to this racism by creating a new myth of black achievement that is not based in reality. Black people have accomplished incredible things, and thus there is no need to embellish the truth.

Having made this warning, Coates admits that he himself held the view that black people were "kings in exile" when he first arrived at **Howard**. At the university library, he enthusiastically devours books, making pages of notes about black history and culture. He is astonished by the extent to which the books contradict one another, overwhelmed by the "brawl of ancestors" each with their own view. Nonetheless, Coates admits that "the pursuit of knowing was freedom to me," and feels more comfortable learning independently in the library than he does being taught in the classroom.

As a young person, Coates had been under the false impression that African-American intellectual heritage would contain a "grand theory" that would answer his questions and make sense of the world. However, in this part of the book he learns that this heritage is in fact messy, contradictory, and full of conflict. Completing his own research allows Coates to acknowledge this conflict, rather than be taught a false sense of unity and agreement.

Coates gradually gains a more solid sense of himself, guided by the things he is learning and the precedent of Malcolm X. He is accompanied on this journey of self-discovery by his friend Ben, whom he refers to as Samori's uncle and "a fellow traveler for life." Coates continues to write "bad poetry" and read it at open mics in Washington DC. He reflects on what it means to lose one's body, and concludes that "The **Dream** is the enemy of all art." Coates is inspired by black artists whose work embraces the "void" beyond the myth-making of the Dream. He argues with other poets after readings, discussing everything from politics to boxing.

Whereas Coates had previously found the process of learning to be a frustrating and often painful struggle, in this passage his journey of personal and intellectual growth is depicted in a much more positive light. Equipped with independence, determination, and the right resources, Coates is able to place himself in dialogue with other black intellectuals and artists, who both inspire and challenge his developing understanding of the world.

Coates describes a neighborhood in DC called Prince George's County, which has a wealthy black population. Although the residents of Prince George's County elect "their own politicians," they still have a brutal police force, a fact that proves to Coates that black people are capable of reproducing the same oppressive structures as whites. Coates expresses gratitude to the history department at **Howard**, where the faculty assure him that his search for new myths to replace the **Dream** will not end well. One of Coates' professors helps illuminate the fact that some black figures in history were oppressive to their own or other groups of people. In another class, Coates sees depictions of black people from the 19th century that are realistic, rather than racist caricatures.

Coates is tempted to believe that there is something noble or superior within black people that prevents them from inflicting the same violence and oppression on others as white people have done to them. However, he comes to understand that the whole concept of a black race with essential qualities (such as nobility) is part of the same racial thinking that is inherently linked to racism. In order to reject racist logic completely, Coates must also let go of the assumption that black people all share certain qualities (even positive ones).

Coates admits that this process of learning is "physically painful and exhausting," even as it is also rewarding. He also comes across an answer to Saul Bellow's question about Tolstoy by the African-American journalist Ralph Wiley: "Tolstoy is the Tolstoy of the Zulus." Yet while Coates comes to accept the fact that race is not "written in DNA," he also acknowledges that there *is* something that creates unity between black people across time and place—"on the one hand, invented, and on the other, no less real." The community at **Howard** reinforces this view, particularly the powerful social connection between the students.

Again, Coates' distinction between the false claim that race is "written in DNA" and his assertion that the connection between black people is "real" can be hard to understand. This is especially true given that we are taught to think of race as based on skin color and other physical features that are written into DNA. However, as Coates explains, the idea of race is only "real" because of the communities formed by the false science of racialization.

Coates describes the first woman he falls in love with at **Howard**, a half-Indian girl from California whose multiracial identity Coates at first does not understand. He then falls in love with another girl who is bisexual and who lives with two Howard professors (one male, one female) who are in an open, bisexual marriage. Coates is astonished, as he is unfamiliar with the idea that black people can be anything other than heterosexual. He is thus made aware of his own prejudice, and the fact that he has behaved in an oppressive way to others (for example, by using the word "faggot"). The bisexual woman inspires Coates to "love in a new way," which is more nurturing and less disciplinary than the love he received from his parents.

During the process of falling in love for the first few times, Coates develops intimate relationships with people who are unlike himself—and in doing so, comes to learn about his own false beliefs and prejudices. The implication of this passage is that in order to be open-minded and dispel the oppressive, false myths that cause people to behave in a discriminatory way to one another, it is important to be exposed to people who are different. Without such exposure, prejudice can easily develop.

Coates sometimes goes to local clubs where, although he is too scared to dance personally, he loves to watch other black people dance "as though their bodies could do anything." He strives to write in the same way as black people dance and begins writing for the local alternative newspaper, where his white editors are "afraid neither for me nor of me." Journalism allows Coates to investigate the world around him and understand how this has been shaped by history. The practice of writing continues to provide answers to the questions that have always troubled him.

This is something of a climactic moment in the story of Coates' development as a young person, in which his struggles for truth and freedom begin to bear fruit. His encounter with the white editors—while hardly disproving Coates' existing impression of white people as a whole—shows that it is possible for white people and black people to engage in a constructive, fair way.

The bisexual woman Coates mentions above was previously in a relationship with a boy who Coates admits he thinks about every day, "and about whom I expect to think every day for the rest of my life." This boy is Prince Jones and, because he is killed young, he comes to feel like an "invention" rather than a real person. Coates says that Prince lived up to his name. He was a born-again Christian, warm and generous, and although Coates never gets to know him very well, he loves him and feels that Prince's place in his heart is now like a "wound."

Coates admits that when people die young, it is almost impossible to avoid mythologizing them. Indeed, the case of Prince Jones is perhaps one instance where Coates is less resistant to mythologizing. Coates presents Prince as a truly exceptional person who exerted an entirely positive influence on the world. Although we don't yet know how he dies, we know it will be tragic.

The last time Coates falls in love at **Howard** is with Kenyatta, Samori's mother. Kenyatta does not know her father, which is true of most people Coates knows. She and Coates are both 24 when she accidentally becomes pregnant with Samori; others pressure them to get married, but they choose not to. Kenyatta's mother visits them while Kenyatta is pregnant, and Coates imagines her horror at the fact that they are living on very little money, with "almost no furniture." She urges Coates to take care of Kenyatta, and Coates feels this is a pivotal moment in his growth and understanding of the world.

Coates observes that the people he and Kenyatta know imply that marriage will save them from the risks of having a child when they are young and poor. However, he rejects this idea as another false myth. On the other hand, the encounter with Kenyatta's mother has a major impact on Coates. In this moment, he comes to understand his own responsibility as a partner and father, and vows to "survive" on behalf of his family.

When the baby is born, Coates and Kenyatta call him Samori, after Samori Touré, the Guinean Muslim cleric who fought French colonizers in the 19th century. Coates reflects on the wisdom of the streets that he gained in his youth, and remarks that Samori's name signifies the fact that "the struggle, in and of itself, has meaning." He encourages Samori to remember that slavery is not "an indefinable mass of flesh" but rather the individual thoughts, experiences, and hopes of unique people. He emphasizes the notion that for these individuals, enslavement was "damnation," and that they did not find redemption in the afterlife. This was true for 250 years, the majority of American history.

Coates' reflection on slavery and the life of Samori Touré shows the extent to which the history of persecution is bound up in every moment of black people's lives, including the joyous occasion of birth. Coates describes the feeling of wanting to give his son every opportunity alongside his hope that Samori has a deep and realistic understanding of history. This juxtaposition emphasizes that, to Coates, giving Samori access to the truth is more important than any material gift.

Coates encourages Samori to view American history realistically and to resist seeing enslaved people as "chapters in your redemptive history." Nothing that Samori achieves—no matter how great—can make up for the reality of slavery. At the same time, Coates urges Samori not to feel responsible for creating a better world, because as a black boy, he is already disproportionately responsible for keeping his body safe. Coates tells Samori, "I love you, and I love the world," and promises his son that one day he will "have to make your peace with the chaos" of the world.

Coates is already aware of the pressure that Samori will be under as a young black person, and thus his dreams for Samori's future are inherently tainted by fears and concerns about what the world will demand of his son. At the same time, the fact that Coates encourages Samori to love the world is one of the most optimistic moments in the book. Samori's birth is associated with hope and the desire to survive and flourish.

PART 2

Not long before Samori's birth, Coates was pulled over by the Prince George's County police. Coates is terrified, recalling the fact that the PG County police killed Elmer Clay Newman, shot Gary Hopkins, and brutally beat Freddie McCollum. The PG County police fire their guns more often than any other police department in the country; this leads to an FBI investigation, which results in the police chief receiving a raise. The month after Samori is born, Coates learns that the PG County police have killed Prince Jones. The story contains few details other than the fact that Prince had been driving to see his fiancée, and that there were no witnesses other than the officer who killed him, who claimed that Prince had tried to run him over with his car.

Coates begins the story of Prince Jones' death with his own encounter with the PG County police, thereby emphasizing how easily it could have been Coates himself who was killed. Every aspect of the story confirms the fact that the American police and overall criminal justice system is decidedly unjust and set up to incriminate, incarcerate, and murder black people. The knowledge that Prince was a kind, generous, promising man in the beginning of his life makes no difference against the force of this structural injustice.

Coates and Kenyatta travel to **Howard** for Prince's memorial, where people speak of Prince's deep religiosity, and some ask for forgiveness for the officer who killed him. Coates feels alienated by this experience; he is not comforted by the "grieving rituals" of black Christians and feels that Prince was killed "by his country" rather than by an individual police officer. He feels that "police reform" efforts are a waste of time, because the very concept of the police is designed to brutally sacrifice the feared minority according to the (unjustified) fears of the majority. Coates meditates on the fact that the police have destroyed Prince's body, and concludes that nobody should be forgiven for this.

Most of the time, Coates draws strength from the black communities around him, and uses this strength as antidote against the powerful forces of racist oppression. In this instance, however, he cannot be comforted by the community that has assembled to memorialize Prince at Howard. Coates feels that they are indulging in false myths about Prince, the officer who killed him, and the nature of death, and these myths make the fact that Prince has been killed even worse, not better.

Weeks pass, and it is revealed that the officer who killed Prince is known to be dishonest and incompetent, and that the man he was pursuing when he killed Prince looked nothing like him. Ultimately, the officer is not charged and returns to work. Coates imagines what would have happened if he had been in Prince's place, envisioning being taken away from his family. He points out that Prince was the model of an upstanding, respectable person—a "good Christian" whose parents were professionals—but that this could not save him from his fate. He reflects on all the tiny details and experiences that comprised Prince's life and the family members that are left behind in the wake of his death.

Coates contrasts the rich details of Prince's life with the police officer's blatant disregard for his existence. For Coates, it is important to demonstrate the value of each individual life outside of the context of a religious framework. Life isn't sacred because it is designated as such by God, but rather because each person is a unique individual who is valuable in themselves, and valuable through all the people who love them.

The death of Prince Jones leads Coates to better understand why his own father, Paul, beat him as a child. He remarks that "black people love their children with a kind of obsession," and live in a constant (and justified) state of fear that their children will be taken from them. Coates is filled with rage about Prince's death, and expresses his feelings through writing, including writing about the history of the PG County police. He is told that the wealthy black people of PG County want to be kept safe from crime, and to some degree he understands this desire for safety, but points out that it was never available to him personally. He argues that "the lack of safety cannot help but constrain your sense of the galaxy," suggesting that there are only very limited possibilities and futures available to you.

Here Coates identifies a major difference between the black people who live in PG County and those with whom Coates grew up in the poor neighborhoods of Baltimore. Again, Coates expresses a degree of sympathy for "the Dreamers," because there is nothing inherently wrong with wanting safety, opportunities, and prosperity. However, Coates urges the reader not to forget that—in a country as unequal and racist as the US—the desire for these things can never be viewed as wholly innocent. Rather, it is inherently tied to violent acts such as the death of Prince Jones.

In 2001, Kenyatta gets a job in New York and the young family move there together. On September 11th, Coates watches the towers burn and feels "cold," plagued by his own tragedies, including the death of Prince Jones. He feels "out of sync with the city," reminded of the fact that the financial district of Manhattan was where slaves were once auctioned. Coates and his family are living in Brooklyn during this time, and struggling financially. Paul visits and gives his son a check for $120, and Coates expresses gratitude that even though he hasn't always had money, "I always had people."

Coates finds it difficult to connect to the tragedy of 9/11 in the way that all Americans are supposed to. He feels alienated not only from New York City but from the US as a whole, inescapably reminded of the racism built into the foundations of the country. This lack of national feeling, however, is contrasted with the close ties between Coates and his friends and family. These ties give him the support he needs when times are tough.

When Coates takes Samori into Manhattan, he feels "ill at ease," aware of the fact that he will not ever truly be able to protect Samori from the world around them. He thinks of the people who have told him that black children need to be "twice as good," framing this in a way that implies it is a "noble" pursuit. However, Coates concludes that there is nothing noble about it. Coates is astonished by the variety of people in New York, although in his neighborhood in Harlem he encounters the same street culture as the one he grew up with in Baltimore.

Here Coates contradicts the widely-held view that "diverse" environments are automatically better places for black people to live. Although he has many positive feelings about the wide range of people and cultures in New York, he cannot help but be reminded of the fact that Samori will have to struggle to be valued to the same extent as non-black children are valued.

Coates recalls one incident in which he takes Samori to the movies on the Upper West Side. On the escalator, Samori is "moving at the dawdling speed of a small child"; a white woman pushes him and says "Come on!". Coates is alarmed by this woman putting her hands on Samori's body and horrified by her sense of entitlement. For a brief moment, Coates forgets that he is not in Flatbush or West Baltimore or **The Mecca** and speaks sharply to the woman. A white man approaches and tells Coates, "I could have you arrested!". Later, Coates interprets this statement as a claim on his body. If Coates had made a single mistake, one of Samori's first memories would have been seeing his father arrested.

This incident demonstrates the extent to which black people's bodies are always at risk. Indeed, this risk is amplified in the places that are generally considered the most "safe," such as a movie theatre on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. This pervasive sense of risk explains why Coates reacts so strongly when the white woman touches Samori. His instinct is to distrust anyone who handles his son as if they have a claim over Samori's body, as this is part of a continuum that often ends in violence and death.

Coates argues that the saying "It only takes one person to make a change" is a myth. He claims that African Americans have rarely achieved liberty purely through their own efforts, but rather that this always happens in conjunction with broader historical forces. Equally, it is meaningless for white people to declare that they are personally not racist, because racism is not about individuals so much as it is driven by broader, structural forces. Furthermore, racism is often the result of phenomena that appear innocent, which explains why racism is inherently connected to the **Dream**. In order for the Dream to function correctly, the people who buy into it must believe they are morally innocent.

Here, Coates explains that myths about oppression are problematic because they create the false impression that the choices and perspectives of individual people are what shape reality. While Coates places a lot of value on the lives of individual people, he is careful not to overestimate the impact that any individual can have on the world. The force of racism is so much more powerful than any individual that whether or not a particular person is individually racist becomes almost irrelevant.

Coates recalls a trip he took with ten-year-old Samori and his cousin to historical sites from the Civil War. Although the boys are young, Coates feels a responsibility to present them with challenging experiences that will help them to better understand the world. Coates is particularly fascinated by the Civil War because it is the historical moment at which the status of African Americans in the US shifted from that of commodities to human beings. He writes that during the war years, "the right to beat, rape, rob, and pillage the black body" was thrown into question.

Coates' parenting style runs counter to the instincts of parents who wish to keep their children in a state of "innocence" for as long as possible. Unlike these parents, Coates feels obligated to expose Samori to the truth of the world as it really is, and avoid indulging in any myths about the history of America. Coates maintains that rather than damaging him, this lack of delusion will help Samori.

The narrative that has emerged out of the Civil War, however, emphasizes the compassion of those who ended slavery rather than the horror of the fact that slavery existed in the first place. Coates takes this as evidence that "historians conjured the **Dream**." He wants Samori to be aware of the fact that it is "heritage" in America to "destroy the black body," and encourages him to truly understand the industrial, monstrous violence of slavery. He quotes Southern mistresses writing about the punishments inflicted on slaves. Coates argues that the nightmarish treatment of slaves was "aspiration," part of the longing for prosperity and high social status. He writes, paraphrasing the African-American historian Thavolia Glymph, that "a mountain is not a mountain if there is nothing below."

Coates' graphic descriptions of the horrors of slavery convey how desperately he wants Samori to understand the full, brutal extent of the truth of American history. Again, this runs counter to mainstream trends in parenting and education, which tend to sugar-coat horrible facts so they are more palatable to children. Instead, Coates employs the opposite tactic, taking social phenomena that are generally seen to be harmless and innocent and exposing the brutality at their heart.

Coates argues that without the right to "break" black bodies, white people might "tumble out of the **Dream**." Only if this happens will it be possible to build a country that is truly equal and just. However, the Dreamers instead choose to indulge a delusional worldview that blames black people for their own oppression. Coates apologizes to Samori because he "cannot make it okay," but adds that he is "not that sorry." Although it is difficult to be black in a country built on the oppression of black people, Coates wonders if this state of vulnerability is part of what makes life meaningful. Such vulnerability also means it is impossible to ignore the reality of the world, something Coates considers a gift (albeit a painful one).

This is the closest Coates get to any form of redemption from the chaos and cruelty of the world. By suggesting that vulnerability helps people access the meaning of life, Coates is not suggesting that this justifies or even soothes any of the violence and oppression to which black people are subjected. Rather, he indicates that those who buy into the Dream end up distancing themselves from life's meaning by denying reality and choosing to live in a state of delusion.

Coates recalls a day in which he was following officers of the county sheriff in Chicago as part of his research for an article on the history of segregation. He witnesses a black couple and their two children lose their home. The wife is shocked and the husband is ashamed, and Coates reflects on the man's seeming powerlessness. During this period of reporting, Coates visits black people in their 90s who tell him stories of their struggles in the past. He is struck by the notion that he is only "encountering the survivors." He concludes that policy and rhetoric can be every bit as violent as deliberate physical acts, and that they are all part of the same system of racist bodily destruction.

Coates continues his quest for truth, this time turning to the evidence of lived experience for answers. Indeed, Coates spends much of the book conveying knowledge and sentiments that can only be known through lived experience. Traditionally, this form of experiential knowledge has been dismissed as less rigorous than knowledge gained through scientific methods such as data. However, Coates suggests that there are some things that can only be known through the body.

Coates tells Samori that he wanted his son to "grow into consciousness," and recalls when he first took Samori to work with him when he was 13. They visit the mother of a child who'd had an argument with a white man and ended up killed. The white man turned himself in the next day, claiming that he acted in self-dense; he was not convicted of murder, but of shooting at the boy's friends afterward. The dead boy's mother expresses confusion over whether she failed her son by not preparing him for the world sufficiently. Coates tells her that the verdict made him angry, and she replies that she is calm, as God has pointed her "away from revenge and toward redemption."

Again, Coates is unafraid to expose Samori to the traumatic reality of black life in America, seeing this as an important part of his son's development. However, their experiences do not always confirm Coates' own view of the world. The mother of the dead boy chooses to process her son's loss in a manner that coheres with the African-American Christian tradition, finding redemption and forgiveness through her faith. As Coates mentions earlier in the book, such a reaction feels alien to him personally.

The boy's mother tells Samori: "You exist. You matter. You have value," and Coates is glad she says it. He expresses a kind of envy at the woman's faith; without faith himself, Coates is left afraid. He claims that "disembodiment is a kind of terrorism" that drastically impacts the way black people live their lives. Black people sense that there is someone benefiting from this terrorism, and Coates concludes that this suspicion is correct.

Here Coates reveals a sense of loss over the fact that, unlike so many others around him, he cannot turn to religion for comfort or guidance. Indeed, one useful thing about religion is its ability to give a sense of direction. As the passage about disembodiment indicates, racist violence robs black people of this direction.

Coates is writing at 40 years old, and he admits that, overall, his childhood self would be pleased to see what has become of his life. His struggle to understand the world has repeatedly "ruptured and remade" him, and this kind of rebirth is only possible when one rejects the **Dream**. Coates admits that Kenyatta let go of the Dream earlier than he did, perhaps because she was more familiar with it (having grown up in a majority white neighborhood). By rejecting the dream, Kenyatta was able to expand her sense of what was possible, and when she was 30 she went on a trip to Paris, something that puzzled Coates at the time.

For Coates, part of the problem with false myths is that they constrict the world by misrepresenting it. The Dream, for example, encourages people to aspire to have the exact same version of a "successful" life—a suburban house, a nuclear family, and lots of money. This is troubling not only because such things are out of reach for most people, but also because it prevents people from aiming for a wider variety of goals.

When Kenyatta returns, she is in a state of excitement about "all the possibilities out there," and for the first time, France feels like a real place to Coates. At this stage in life, Coates' own world is expanding, and he is meeting more people "with ties to different worlds." This in turn makes him more aware of his membership in his own world, the world of black people. Such awareness increases his certainty that race is a social construction that divides people arbitrarily. At the same time, it was necessary for Coates to confirm his sense of belonging in *a* world before he was able to travel and make connections to other worlds.

Here Coates touches on an aspect of the African-American experience that is less widely discussed than some of the other subjects on which the book focuses. As native citizens of a country that is decidedly hostile to them, African Americans can end up feeling homeless, and this sense of homelessness makes Coates less inclined to explore the world at large. Once he has a more secure sense of his own community and identity, he feels ready to venture outward.

At age 37, Coates receives his first adult passport; before leaving the US, he admits to Kenyatta that he is afraid. He feels this same fear when he arrives in Geneva, able to speak only a little French. However, as he reads a list of departures at the train station, the fear transforms into a sense of terrified joy that Coates describes as "an erotic thrill" that makes him feel truly alive. Having arrived in Paris, Coates wanders around, fascinating by the daily lives of the people there. He feels confident and ecstatic, buoyed by the anonymity of not having a place in the French social "equation." Although this is a form of disconnection and loneliness, Coates is sad he has not experienced it earlier in his life.

The thrill Coates experiences in Europe originates in the feeling of anonymity. In America, Coates is not only a part of the country's history and "equation," but he is perceived in a negative way by the racist mindset that governs the country. As a result, Coates is not only not anonymous but not safe, perpetually at risk due to the negative stereotypes imposed on black people and the violent structures of prisons and the police. His foreignness in France thus becomes a form of freedom.

That summer, Coates and Kenyatta take Samori to Paris, in the hope that they will give their son a life "apart from fear." Coates regrets not being "softer" with his son by letting go of his own fears. To make up for this, he shows Samori all the people on the streets of Paris who go about their days seemingly free from fear. Coates concedes that "France built its own **dream**" through colonization, but that the legacy of this dream plays out differently in France than it does in America—particularly in the context of being an African-American visitor in the country. However, it is also true that French and American histories of racism are deeply interconnected, and the family is reminded of the US when they encounter a man in Paris protesting the acquittal of George Zimmerman, who killed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin.

Some reviewers of "Between the World of Me" have criticized what they perceive to be Coates' glamorization of France, and particular his diminishing of the racism that exists in Paris (as well as the rest of the country). These critics point out that Paris is a deeply segregated city, and the site of structural as well as personal xenophobia and racism particularly directed at African migrants and Muslims. However, Coates does acknowledge this history, and the sense of freedom he feels in Paris is arguably more founded in his own personal trajectory than the city itself.

Coates reflects on the fact that he survived his youth, proving that "there was another way beyond the schools and the streets." He remarks that Samori must find a different path, and notes that Samori enjoys "an abnormal amount of security" in his body. This unusual security might be why Samori is so upset when he finds out that Mike Brown's killer will not go to prison. Although it may have taken this one incident to make Samori realize the true nature of the country he lives in, the reality is that the crimes of "the Dreamers" are expansive and relentless, stretching beyond Ferguson (where Mike Brown was killed), across the US, and across the world. Even as black lives are treated as disposable and "cheap," the **Dream** is still funded by the commodification of black bodies in the prison system and beyond.

Despite Coates' determination to show his son the true nature of the world, Samori has still grown up in a state of greater innocence than his father was able to. Coates feels that it's inevitable that this cannot last, even though he does not regret the unusual level of safety Samori has been afforded. In discussing the commodification of black bodies, Coates points out that black people are still treated as things whose value lies within their ability to make white people rich. This is true in the prison system, which incarcerates black people at a highly disproportionate rate in order to benefit whites.

PART 3

Coates often thinks of the family members who were left behind after Prince Jones' death. Prince's fiancée was pregnant, and his daughter thus grew up never knowing her father. One day Coates pays a visit to Prince's mother, Dr. Mabel Jones, who lives "just outside of Philadelphia in a small gated community of affluent homes." Coates describes Dr. Jones as "lovely, polite, brown," and says that she smiles "through pained eyes." She takes Coates into the living room, offers him tea, and explains that she is from Louisiana, where her ancestors lived as slaves. She recalls the first time she noticed the great distance between herself and wealthy people as a young girl.

Coates contrasts the affluent comfort of Dr. Jones' home with the palpable absence of her son, and her memories of first becoming aware of racial inequality as a child. Although Dr. Jones has achieved professional success, a degree of wealth, and high social status, she is never able to escape the loss and trauma inevitably associated with being black in America. Dr. Jones' calm manner suggests that she has long since resigned herself to this fact.

Coates reflects that awareness of racism reaches black children in different ways, but that none can ever escape it entirely. He observes that Dr. Jones has a reserved manner and is the epitome of "a lady," but that she also possesses a fierce determination that allowed her to escape her humble origins and achieve great things. She tells Coates that she made a pact with another girl that they would both become doctors in the second grade. She experienced intense racism at school and gave Bible recitations at church. Coates notes that his father, Paul, and Kenyatta also found their "first intellectual adventures" in reciting Bible passages, and wonders if he has missed something through his distance from the church.

In many ways, Dr. Jones is defined by the paradoxes encapsulated within her. While she experienced adversity as a young person, she went on to have an impressive career. Although her manner is graceful and polite, she is also tough and fierce. And though she laughs with Coates, her life has been shaped by the deepest form of tragedy. Rather than artificially resolving these paradoxes, Coates depicts them as they are, showing that each of them is integral to Dr. Jones' identity.

Dr. Jones attended Louisiana State University on full scholarship, served in the Navy, and became a radiologist. Coates mentions that she refuses to "acknowledge any discomfort" or admit that her story is "remarkable." Coates asks about Prince's childhood, and Dr. Jones tells him whimsical stories about things Prince did. Prince attended private schools throughout his life, but even though they were "filled with **Dreamers**" Prince had no problems making friends. He excelled in school, and Dr. Jones admitted that she wanted him to go to Harvard—"and if not Harvard, Princeton. And if not Princeton, Yale." However, Prince was drawn to the chance to experience relief from representing his race, and thus chose to attend **Howard**. At Howard, rather than being a "symbol" of black achievement, Prince could just be "normal."

Despite the extraordinary achievements of both herself and her son, Dr. Jones is emphatically humble. Similarly, she refuses to concede that she experienced any particular difficulty as a young black woman training to be a radiologist. To some extent, it is possible to interpret this humility as a kind of myth; whereas Coates believes in the importance of accurately describing the reality of life as a black person, Dr. Jones downplays this reality. However, rather than a dangerous myth, this seems to be a source of strength for Dr. Jones herself.

Coates compares Dr. Jones' disposition to that of Civil Rights protestors depicted in photographs—both display a kind of "armor" that appears like a lack of emotion. Coates is struck by the intensity of Dr. Jones' control over herself. When Prince died, she didn't cry, because "composure was too important." However, she tells Coates that she experienced intense physical pain and that all she felt able to do was pray. She admits that she expected Prince's killer to be charged, and compares Prince's fate to that of Solomon Northup, the free black man who was abducted and sold into slavery, and who chronicled this experience in *12 Years a Slave*. Dr. Jones points out that all the materials and signifiers of social status that Prince enjoyed throughout his life were not enough to protect him from a violent death.

Dr. Jones' display of supreme self-control is tragically ironic given the fact that there was ultimately absolutely nothing she could do to protect her son from death. This is reflected in her comments about Prince's social status; as much as possible, she ensured that Prince was surrounded by the very best opportunities and resources, but ultimately these proved meaningless in the face of the immense force of racist violence. Furthermore, the comparison to Solomon Northup shows how little the country has progressed even from the time during which slavery was legal.

Coates leaves Dr. Jones' house and reflects on his visit. He wonders if it is possible to "awaken the **Dreamers**" and, in doing so, raise the possibility of ending racist injustice. At the same time, Coates feels it is important not to orient one's life around "the small chance of the Dreamers coming into consciousness," if only because life is too short. He thinks about the joy he experienced during his recent trip to Homecoming at **Howard** and recalls a "joyous moment, beyond the Dream" in which he is overwhelmed by the black power all around him. He notes that black people have created remarkable things in the midst of unimaginable suffering.

For Coates, the joy to be found in life is inherently tied to life's shortness and the inevitability of death. While this may seem like a dark worldview, it also forms a powerful principle through which Coates finds the sense of purpose and guidance that others discover through religion. For Coates, life is precious because it is short, and it is through black people's own power and resourcefulness (rather than through God) that they are able to achieve beauty and meaning in the midst of chaos.

Coates reflects that in the past, the power of the **Dreamers** was curtailed by the "limits of horsepower and wind." However, as technology and capitalism have advanced, it has become harder and harder for the Dreamers to be restrained, and now they "plunder not just the bodies of humans but the body of the Earth itself." Coates suggests that the result of this plunder—climate change—threatens to destroy the Dreamers and everyone else. He drives away from Dr. Jones' house thinking about this threat and the struggle that lies before Samori. He encourages Samori to struggle for himself, his family, and his ancestors, but not for the Dreamers. Coates drives through the ghettoes of Chicago, and feels the same fear of his childhood returning.

The book does not end on a note of optimism, but rather of determination. True to form, Coates refuses to find any false consolation or hope, instead introducing another, even more existentially threatening problem—climate change. Similarly, he demonstrates that the haunting legacy of the past can never truly disappear, mentioning his old fear coming back as he drives through the Chicago ghettoes. On the other hand, Coates does provide words of encouragement and support to Samori, and thereby also encourages the reader.

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