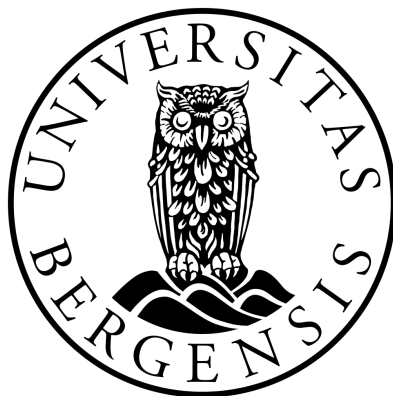


Un(w)rapping Ta-Nehisi Coates' Politics and Aesthetics

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Sammendrag

Denne oppgaven er basert på en analyse av hvordan forfatter og journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates representerer den afroamerikanske opplevelsen i sine litterære verk. Forfatteren har i de siste årene opparbeidet seg status som en av USAs fremste intellektuelle stemmer, spesielt når det kommer til spørsmål om rasisme i det moderne samfunnet. Oppgaven undersøker Coates sine tekster i relasjon til hip hop-sjangerens estetikk og politikk, og setter de litterære verkene i kontekst med kontemporære musikalske og visuelle uttrykk. Spesielt fokuserer jeg på hvordan Coates behandler temaer som oppvekst, politivold og massefengsling av afroamerikanske menn. Det første kapittelet tar for seg memoaret *The Beautiful Struggle* (2007) som dokumenterer Coates sin barndom og ungdomstid i Baltimore på 80-tallet. Jeg viser hvordan forfatteren bruker grep fra musikkjangeren hip hop og dens tilhørende kultur i memoarets oppbygging, samt argumenterer for at Coates bruker hip hop for å etablere sin egen kulturelle identitet. Kapittel to fokuserer på hvordan forfatteren representerer sårbarhet og vold i *Between the World and Me* (2015). Boken er inspirert av James Baldwins *The Fire Next Time* (1963) og er skrevet som et brev til hans sønn, Samori Coates. Kapittelet tar for seg hvordan den svarte mannen fra barndommen av må tilpasse seg et liv hvor man er under konstant fare for å bli utsatt for politivold. Kapittel tre setter to essays fra samlingen *We Were Eight Years in Power* (2017) i kontekst med Coates' representasjoner av fedre. Jeg argumenterer for at Coates på et vis er privilegert med tanke på at hans egen far var tilstedeværende gjennom hele barndommen og at dette separerer hans opplevelse fra et stort antall afroamerikanske menn. Her undersøker jeg også myten om den fraværende faren og hvordan massefengsling påvirker familiestrukturen.

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Introduction

You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity.

- James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (16)

The message James Baldwin wrote to his nephew in 1963 is just as relevant today as it was then. With documented cases of police brutality, discrimination, and incarceration rates, African Americans are indirectly and directly told that some lives are less valuable than others. Black activists and artists have together done much in recent years to give attention to and demand acknowledgement of racism and injustice in modern America, and to let society know that they refuse to make peace with mediocrity. These people are part of a movement and struggle that is motivated by the daily plundering of black lives, and their rhetoric is especially strong when it comes to the police force's treatment of young African American men.

In 2013, two days after George Zimmerman was acquitted of killing seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin, a group that would later be known as Black Lives Matter had its first meeting (Touré). Their aim was to show America that cases of police brutality are a result of institutional racism, and their influence and force are comparable to that of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements in the 1960s. The lyrics and composition of the song "Glory" by Common and John Legend illustrates the similarities between the old and new movements that have fought and currently fight for African American rights. The song was originally written for the film *Selma* (2014), which chronicles the 1955 Selma to Montgomery voting rights marches, but its message can also be applied to the struggle for equality today.

The song opens with Legend singing "One day when the glory comes/It will be ours, it will be ours" over a gospel tune. The line already signals that justice has still not been served since the marches in Selma but at the same time the "one day when" offers hope for change. The traditional gospel and choir accompanied by Legend's vocals stand in contrast with modern rap verses by Common. This technique of mixing the old with the new amplifies

the connection between the present and the past. When Common raps: “Now the war is not over, victory isn't won/And we'll fight on to the finish, then when it's all done,” the text draws a parallel between the Civil Rights movement and the demonstrations in Ferguson after the shooting of black teenager Michael Brown. His death is just one of many similar cases both in the past and the present, as is exemplified in this stanza that is rapped by Common:

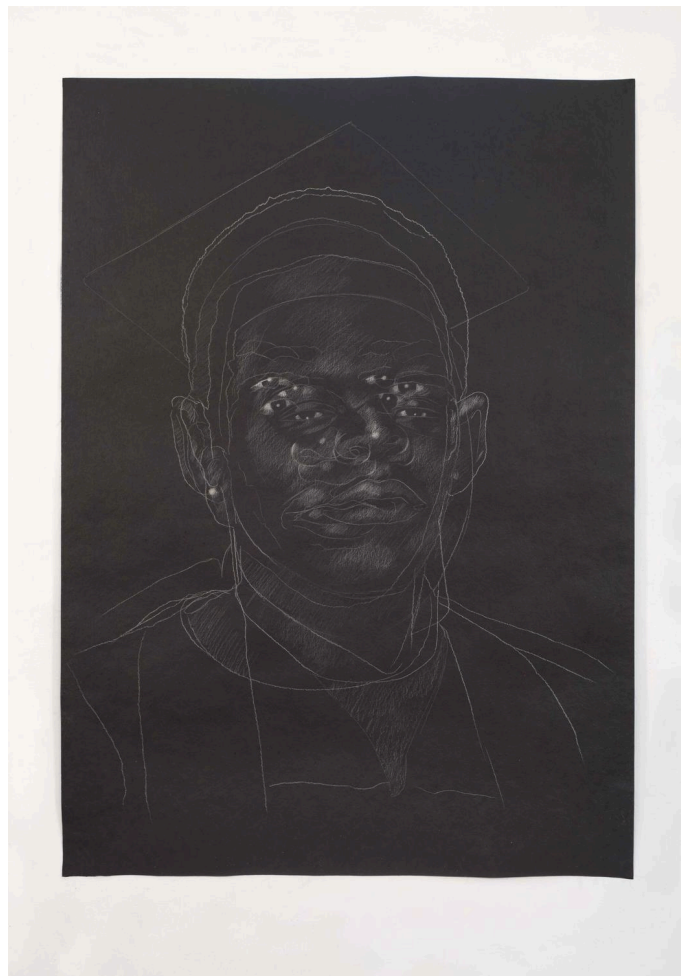
One son dies, his spirit is revisitin' us
True and livin' livin' in us, resistance is us
That's why Rosa sat on the bus
That's why we walk through Ferguson with our hands up
When it go down, we woman and man up
They say 'Stay Down' and we stand up

Who the “one son” in the text refers to can be many: it could be Jesus, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Jimmie Lee Jackson, the activist whose death catalyzed the marches in Selma. But the son can also stand for any black boy or man who has died at the hands of white men or police officers from the beginning of slavery up until today. Young black boy Emmett Till, for example, was murdered for allegedly whistling at a white woman in 1955, and his mother decided to have an open casket during the funeral for everyone to see. Images of the boy’s mutilated body spread across the nation and world, which in effect fueled the Civil Rights movement. Similarly, when a white police officer killed unarmed Michael Brown in 2014, the incident had repercussions that are still in effect. What separates the impact of Brown’s death from other similar cases is that his body was left out in the streets for more than four hours, allowing images and cell phone videos of his lifeless body to spread on social media. His body became a symbol of a black body that lacked respect, just like the images of Till. As a historical echo, images of Brown’s body sparked protests in Ferguson and gave Black Lives Matter national and worldwide attention. When “Glory” refers to both Rosa Parks and the protests in Ferguson, it is an expression of how history repeats itself, and that the struggle and message the protesters wish to convey are still the same.

As Brown’s body became a symbol for violence and racism, the black body functions as visible proof of years of oppression: the scarred and broken flesh testifies to the physical abuse and symbolizes the psychological scars. Together with remembering and saying the names of the victims out loud, activists and artists intentionally use images and videos of police brutality to force the people to see and understand the seriousness of systematic

racism. The names and images help remind us that the victims are not just part of statistics but also real people who had lives and families that loved them.

The themes from the Black Lives Matter movement can also be seen conceptually integrated in art installations among contemporary black artists, which shows that the influence of the movement has reached all mediums of artistic expression. An example of this is the painting *For Trayvon, Amadou, Sean, and Mike* (2014) by African American artist Titus Kaphar (b. 1976). For this painting, Kaphar used chalk on asphalt paper to sketch the faces of Trayvon Martin, Amadou Diallo, Sean Bell, and Michael Brown. They were all unarmed men that became victims of police brutality. The chalk on asphalt forces us to think about the outlines of lifeless bodies on the site of crime, and by overlaying the sketches, the artist reminds us of an ever-increasing number of victims who are dying at the hands of police officers. The artwork memorializes all the black lives that have ended on hard asphalt and the officers who got away with it without punishment or consequences.



Titus Kaphar, *For Trayvon, Amadou, Sean, and Mike*, 2014

Since October 2017, as a consequence of the Harvey Weinstein allegations, social media and journalists have focused extensively on men in powerful positions that get away with assaulting those who are vulnerable. The gender-political climate has allowed women and men who have been afraid to come forward with their testimonies. Even though the conversation has centered mostly on sexual harassment, its message can be applied across race, religion, and politics. At the 2018 Golden Globes, Oprah Winfrey held a powerful speech as the first black woman to accept the Cecil B. DeMille Award for outstanding contributions to entertainment. She used her voice to shed light on systematic inequality in the entertainment industry. Although the speech was made in relation to the #MeToo and the Time's Up movement, its message is universal for every struggle against inequality and oppression. A section of the speech that can be connected to discrimination of minorities is the importance of speaking one's truth, as she said:

What I know for sure is that speaking your truth is the most powerful tool we all have. And I'm especially proud and inspired by all the women who have felt strong enough and empowered enough to speak up and share their personal stories. Each of us in this room are celebrated because of the stories that we tell, and this year, we became the story. (Gilbert)

The message we can take from this speech is clear: the power that comes with using one's voice to testify the injustice one is exposed to. Telling stories is important, and Winfrey communicates that the times are changing: those who come forward will be taken seriously and their stories can help lead to change. To testify discrimination is especially important when the president of the United States, when referring to Haiti and other African countries, asked: "Why are we having all these people from shithole countries come here?" (Dawsey). This brings us to author and journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates (b. 1975) who has written an assertive essay that reveals Trump as a white supremacist who has built his power on the fact that he is white. Although Trump claimed: "No, I'm not a racist. I'm the least racist person you have ever interviewed," when speaking with a reporter after his blunder (Gearan), Coates' essay "The First White President" argues differently. The essay was published in the October 2017 issue of *The Atlantic* and later included in his essay collection. "To Trump, whiteness is neither notional nor symbolic but the very core of his power," Coates writes, and "In this, Trump is not singular. But whereas his forebears carried whiteness like an ancestral

talisman, Trump cracked the glowing amulet open, releasing its eldritch energies” (*We Were Eight Years in Power*, 343). Here, the author connects Trump’s power to American history, to the fact that white men have built their power by exploiting the black body.

Coates’ literary works strengthen the Black Lives Matter movement as he writes extensively on racial issues, racial history, and black experience. He was born and raised in Baltimore where he lived with his parents and many siblings, and we learn through his memoir that his father, William Paul Coates, was a former Black Panther member who started the publishing company Black Classic Press, while his mother, Cheryl Waters, was a teacher. Whenever Coates had done something wrong at school, his mother would force him to write an essay about why he did what he did. This, combined with the books he had full access to from his father’s library, made writing and literature a vital part of his upbringing.

Young Coates never really found his place at school and dropped out of Howard University to pursue a career in journalism. It took a long time before he got a steady job as a writer; however, he took some odd jobs for different newspapers while grooming his writing on a personal blog. The author has worked as a journalist for *The Atlantic* since 2007, a magazine that in its first issue in 1857 wrote a Declaration of Purpose that stated it would rank itself with a “body of men which is in favor of Freedom, National Progress, and Honor, whether public or private” (Murphy). The paper was known to write about abolition and prided itself on fostering intellectual thought and supporting great writers. It is in this climate that Coates has been allowed to write long and thorough pieces on black social issues in the past ten years, and it has been a platform on which he has been able to grow as a writer and intellectual.

Besides working with journalism, Coates has published *The Beautiful Struggle* (2008), *Between the World and Me* (2015), which won the 2015 National Book Award for Non-Fiction, and *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy* (2017), in addition to contributing to a comic book series on the Black Panther (2016-). Today, he is one of the most critically acclaimed African American authors and journalists who focuses on the subject of race, especially as a result of the reception of *Between the World and Me* and his writing on the Obama administration. The former earned Coates sudden celebrity, fueled by Toni Morrison’s comparison between him and James Baldwin. His position as a public intellectual has led him to be repeatedly asked to comment upon black matters and experience by media.

It is important to study representations of black experience, as racially motivated

discrimination is still visibly present in American society. This is proven by police brutality, mass incarceration, economic discrepancies, and the support to a racist president. How minorities represent and express the discrimination they are subjected to becomes an important tool to better understand the social effect and scope of oppression. By representing black experience and making black lives visible, it gives the oppressed a voice. A study of black representation can help establish that America has a deep structural problem that can only be solved by challenging prejudice and ignorance.

The aim of this thesis is to examine black experience as portrayed in Ta-Nehisi Coates' oeuvre, ranging from memoirs to shorter pieces and essays. The works that will be discussed are *The Beautiful Struggle*, *Between the World and Me*, and selected essays from *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy*. Each chapter of this thesis will discuss black experience with different focuses: through the lens of hip hop, from the perspective of a vulnerable and breakable body, and, finally an exploration of black fatherhood. I will relate Coates' representations to contemporary culture and social issues that have been put forth by the Black Lives Matter movement, black artists, and modern rap.

In *The Beautiful Struggle*, Coates incorporates elements from hip hop aesthetics both in terms of narrative composition and structure. His influence from the style is less pronounced in his other literary works, but it is still there in the background. Inspired by Coates' aesthetics, this thesis turns to rap in an attempt to see how its politics and legacy might help shed light on his texts. It is my contention that Coates' texts and hip hop aesthetics speak to each other both in terms of form and content.

What is more, Coates paints pictures of people and their struggles – from slavery to the present – both in terms of violence and in confrontation with the legal justice system that targets black men. In order to explore how he visualizes representations of violence, I will draw on the creative output of other black artists who have created similar images, be it in visual arts, poetry, or rap.

The texts I will explore in this thesis are memoirs and essays, or a combination of both. *The Beautiful Struggle* is written as a memoir, while *Between the World and Me* weaves the two genres together. In turn, *We Were Eight Years in Power* is an essay collection where each essay is preceded by an introductory note that chronicles a period in Coates' life when he wrote the essay. The presence of the author in the analyses in this thesis is therefore necessary because Coates, through the use of memoir, directly connects himself with the texts. How he represents himself in the public sphere and how we perceive him and his ideas are important

aspects in the readings of his works.

Reflecting on the process of autobiographical writing, Jerome Bruner explains, “how we construe our lives is subject to our intentions, to the interpretive conventions available to us, and to the meanings imposed upon us by the usages of our culture and language” (38). Bruner’s reflections on autobiographical writing are important because they remind us that the author’s representations are a result of how he both perceives himself and wishes to be perceived. Moreover, his accounts are limited by the cultural references and language of his environment. The advantage of the memoir is that personal experience is helpful in investigating representations of black experience. However, we can never be sure that a testimony from a lived life is reliable. We get a sense of how Coates wishes to present himself to his readers, though it is also important to question his stories when we sense that he is trying to present himself as something he is not. In his memoir, for example, Coates arguably tries to place himself with the hip hop crowd and disadvantaged youth in Baltimore, despite the fact that his father’s presence and exigencies in his teens challenge that view. The autobiographical narrative, then, is highly subjective, which is both its strength and its weakness: it offers testimonies based on real experiences, but we are only presented with one perception of the events it narrates.

In Chapter One I will discuss black experience of adolescence and coming of age through a reading of Coates’ personal memoir, *The Beautiful Struggle*. The memoir chronicles his early years in Baltimore during the 1980s and early 1990s. The narrative is deeply influenced and colored by the hip hop culture that flourished during the era, and my aim with this chapter is to discuss black experience through Coates’ use of hip hop aesthetics. I investigate how the aesthetics influence his language and structure, as well as how he uses hip hop to find his own place as a black man in a society built for those who are white.

Chapter Two focuses on the black experience of violence and a vulnerable body. Through the reading of Coates’ *Between the World and Me*, I suggest that the black body is constantly subject to racially motivated violence. The book is an essay written in the form of a letter to his son, Samori. The text is influenced by James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* (1963), but is less optimistic than Baldwin’s in its view on the future of African Americans. What I see as one of Coates’ main intentions in this essay is to give a full life and identity to some of the many names we read about in the media; young black boys or men who have been victims to police brutality.

In Chapter Three I will do a reading of the essays “This Is How We Lost to the White

Man” (2007) and “The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration” (2015), both originally published in *The Atlantic* and included in his essay collection *We Were Eight Years in Power*. While the relationship between fathers and sons is present in my first two chapters, the final chapter will discuss Coates’ representation of the black father more thoroughly. My reading will combine Coates’ personal experience with his father and being a father himself, with a discussion of the consequences mass incarceration has on the black family structure.

Chapter One

“Keeping It Real:” Hip Hop and Identity

I am an invisible man... I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.

- Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

Introduction

The opening lines from Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) come from the novel’s protagonist, an African American man who experiences himself as invisible and ignored by society because of the prejudice that is associated with the color of his skin. The story takes place during the Harlem Renaissance when black art and culture flourished although racism and segregation were still deeply rooted in American society. The protagonist-narrator recounts his spatial and educational journey towards adulthood, and ends his epilogue with the following questions about telling his story: “Being invisible and without substance, a disembodied voice, as it were, what else could I do? What else but try to tell you what was really happening when your eyes were looking through? And it is this which frightens me: Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” (Ellison 581).

The questions he asks are important because they sum up the African American literary tradition. From the slave narrative through the Harlem Renaissance, Black Power movement, to modern African American literature, and even in hip hop music, its function is to convey black experience to both white and black audiences, to tell the story of those who have been silenced, violated, and segregated throughout history. Ellison’s novel reveals a world that to many readers was unknown and which they could never experience themselves through other means than literature, music, or art.

Today, with the Black Lives Matter movement, as the name of the movement suggests, the focus in conversations is highly centered on the importance of individual African American lives. Black Lives Matter, like Ellison with *Invisible Man*, tries to make African American lives visible in US society. As a contribution to this conversation, we can

read Ta-Nehisi Coates' memoir *The Beautiful Struggle* as a representation of a particular African American man's life and experience of living as a young black male in America. The memoir offers insight into African American adolescence and the struggle to transition to adulthood in the black male body in a society that is made for white people.

The narrative chronicles Ta-Nehisi Coates' adolescence in the 1980s and 1990s Baltimore, a place and era characterized by the rise of crack, violence, murder, and hip hop. It begins with the young Ta-Nehisi who feels awkward about his body and who struggles with finding his place within his family, school, and society in general. Besides becoming familiar with the author, we also get to know central members of his family and people from their network in Baltimore. Particularly central in the narrative is Coates' father, Paul Coates. According to Coates, most fathers were absent in the lives of his friends in Baltimore while his father was very much present for him and his siblings. Paul Coates functions as a leader and authoritative figure in the family in his attempt to safely guide his children through adolescence. Besides his father, the most important influences in the memoirist's life during adolescence were hip hop culture and music. We follow Coates' educational journey where he learns about his heritage and position as a black man in America. The narrative ends with his initiation into, if not adulthood, then at least a degree of enlightenment, understanding, and self-awareness with help from his father's books and guidance, and hip hop culture.

One of Coates' main challenges in *The Beautiful Struggle* is to find himself and his place between two cultures: African American culture and white American culture. As a child, he only wanted to read comics and fantasy stories, predominantly written by and for white people, and his favorite wrestler character was a white man named The American Dream. His father, in turn, pressured him to replace comics with black classics and history books to help raise his consciousness. Out on the streets of Baltimore, he struggled to belong and feel safe. He was vulnerable because he knew that, at any moment, his life could be ended at someone else's will. While his big brother, Big Bill, became strapped and affiliated with the tougher, street-smart, crowds, Ta-Nehisi did not feel that he belonged with that crowd. He felt awkward in his young body, and he did not feel that he fit in with the other tougher kids on the street. If and when he got into trouble, he had a father that sheltered and saved him. Neither at home with street gangs nor with his father's philosophy and library did Coates feel that he belonged. In other words, his story is a story about displacement.

The hip hop community that flourished in the 1980s Baltimore had a great impact on defining Coates' identity and offered him a gateway into the world and history that his father

wanted him to know. In his memoir, references to rappers and cultural signifiers of hip hop, such as clothing, shoes, and body language, take up much space. His own individual identity is rooted in trying to put himself into this larger cultural structure. How he participates in the environment is not through violence and street activities, but rather through his gift for words and transferring the experience onto writing.

The aim of this chapter is to show how Coates finds self-recognition and escapes displacement through the culture and language of hip hop. In this chapter, I will argue that the concept and value of authenticity in hip hop culture help Coates merge his dual cultural identity into a better self. My aim is to analyze how different aspects of hip hop help construct *The Beautiful Struggle* both in terms of the narrative structure and language. Together, these characteristics map an African American culture and a black man's quest to break away from the oppressor's white American culture. The identity that Coates finds in the community helps him live with more confidence and ultimately defines him as a writer.

In her article "The Year of the Black Memoir" (2016), scholar of African American culture Imani Perry discusses the relevance of the "black memoir." As a response to Professor Kenneth Warren's claim that there is no longer any such thing as African American literature, Perry argues that black writing is still highly relevant, especially as black life continues to be an important subject in an unequal nation. Perry proposes that the African American memoir has had a strong position in depicting various representations of unique individual black lives and experiences in the last years:

If indeed Black memoir, and Black literature, are to be methods for us to understand race in America today in all of its messiness, then each should be understood as one cry in the ring, a small piece of mosaic, vast and ever changing. They should be set amidst other forms of knowledge, and considered carefully rather than treated with simplistic adulation. And at best we can hope they open a road.

I find the image of the memoir as a small piece of mosaic in a bigger picture as a helpful way to explain the complexity of representing black experience. It is important not to reduce black experience to just one experience – Coates' experience as a black boy in Baltimore is not necessarily the same experience as any other young black boy's. Time, space, and other social forces all affect experience. What we can do is look at different representations of individual experiences and present them as fragments of a bigger structure. The representations of

unique experiences can be used as contributions in a larger debate and conversation. I propose that we can also use Perry's description in a conversation about hip hop music. Each song represents different aspects of black experience, and, combined, a study of the music genre can illuminate the culture and experience it represents.

Writing One's Identity in Black Memoir and Hip Hop

Coates' feeling of displacement and inability to fit into the African American or American world can be connected to W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois writes:

[...] the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, —a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, —this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. (34)

Du Bois shows that the black man is divided between two identities, and in order to “attain self-conscious manhood,” he must find a way to merge these two identities together in one full identity that is the true self. In order to enter maturity, Coates must find a way to combine his African American and Anglo American culture and identity. Hip hop offers him an African American culture and community that he can embrace.

With *The Beautiful Struggle*, Coates represents his development towards finding his identity. In “Obama as Text: The Crisis of Double-Consciousness,” Simon Gikandi proposes what the autobiography, or memoir, is all about: “it is [about] the inscription of the crisis of selfhood, of doubts about origins and meanings whose goal is to lead, through writing, to a moment of self-recognition” (217). Through the memoir, Coates is writing his way from displacement and duality to self-conscious manhood. Imani Perry adds another perspective on how the memoir creates identity. She writes that with their literature, memoirists “are telling

you about something you don't know about, whether it is a set of experiences or feelings or a group of people [...] mostly they are appeals for the writers to be understood as individuals" ("The Year of the Black Memoir"). I propose that Perry's claim of the memoirists' mission also can be applied to rappers and hip hop. With his memoir, Coates is asking to be understood as an individual. He tells us about his experience, an experience that can only be his, and how that experience got him to the place where he is today. Through hip hop, rappers in general and Coates in his memoir are saying, like Ellison's protagonist in *Invisible Man*, "I am here" and force the listeners to recognize them as individuals.

The genre of the black memoir can be traced back to the beginnings of the African American literary tradition as it is the offspring of the slave narrative, and hip hop's roots can also be traced back to slavery and African traditions. In *The Hip Hop Reader*, Tim Strode explains how "The rapper's penchant for narrative can be traced back to the *griot* [ghree-o] or storyteller in traditional African societies. The music and the DJ continue traditions of the blues born, as Du Bois says, from "the rhythmic cry of the slave" (1). Hip hop has risen as an attempt to identify black experience and tradition and to capture a collective experience. In her book *Prophets of the Hood*, Imani Perry points out that "Hip hop is an iteration of black language, black music, black style, and black youth culture" (2), and connects the tradition of orality in black American culture and hip hop to charismatic black leadership: "Orality and verbal dexterity are highly appreciated skills in black American culture, and the appreciation has spilled into the mainstream through black American voices since the civil rights era. Charismatic black leadership of the past forty years has largely depended on the spoken word" (26). Examples of such charismatic black leaders are Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Oprah Winfrey, and Barack and Michelle Obama. After his increasing popularity following the publication of *Between the World and Me*, Coates can be said to be a charismatic black leader who reaches a wide audience with his writing. In *The Beautiful Struggle* he describes how he not only used to listen to hip hop but also to the tapes of Malcolm X's speeches. With his writing inspired both by Malcolm X's strong rhetoric and the spoken word from hip hop, Coates creates a powerful narrative that resonates with his readers.

The author fills both the role of the MC and the DJ in hip hop. The MC, or rapper, is the one who composes the narrative and the DJ is the one who mixes the beats and rhythm in the background. He creates a complete work with both rhythm and narrative. By narrating his own story and taking the role of a MC, Coates is creating a Self that stands out. Perry writes: "As the producers and DJs produce the show, the MC emerges as an actor on the stage, not a

supplicating performer, but a captivating one. In the composition, he or she engages the audience and gets its feedback and participation, but the MC still remains the leader, the distinguished Self among collective heads [...]” (*Prophets of the Hood* 89). The strength of Coates’ writing is that he combines the oral tradition of black leaders with the “fresher” forms of rhetoric we see in hip hop. His strong literary voice makes the claim that “I am here,” and he stands out as an individual.

Sampling

The memoir is structured by a complex web of fragments from hip hop, both by way of literal references and in the narrative style. Again, Perry’s image of mosaic is helpful to explain his use of the genre: the narrative is scattered with references and styles borrowed from the genre, highlighting a larger structure of African American culture and identity.

Coates’ influence is already revealed by the choice of the memoir’s title. *The Beautiful Struggle* borrows its name from hip hop veteran Talib Kweli’s album and song of the same name (2004), with which Coates takes the tradition of “sampling” from hip hop and incorporates it into his text. Sampling in hip hop is taking an excerpt, or sample, from someone else’s song, like a beat or a line, in order to reuse it in a different song. Imani Perry explains that “hip hop has always been an incredibly nostalgic music that has often paid homage to its ancestral origins through the sampling of songs and hooks from as far back as the 1960s” (*Prophets of the Hood* 54). Sampling and borrowing are not seen as appropriating someone else’s work, but rather as a way of showing of respect. This has to do with the concept of authenticity in hip hop, the role of “keeping it real” and truthfully representing the community. By sampling the memoir’s title from Kweli’s song, Coates is not only paying homage to Kweli but is also introducing what his memoir will be about. To illustrate how he does this, we can look at an excerpt from Kweli’s lyrics:

You fight in the streets, start bleedin’ ‘til the blood is pourin’
In the gutter, mothers cry ‘til the Lord be livin’ by the sword and
All that folks want is safety, they goin’ gun crazy
The same reason Reagan was playin’ war games in the ‘80s
The same reason I always rock dog chains on my babies
The struggle is beautiful, I’m too strong for your slavery.

Like Coates, Talib Kweli is known for being a political and social activist. When he says, “you fight,” he is speaking to African Americans who turn on each other. Violence between people from the same community is a result of fear and social conditions, a topic Coates brings up through his brother, Big Bill, who kept a gun on him because he got frightened after a confrontation with the gang called Murphy Homes. The common denominator in these lines is fear in its rawest essence: fear drove Reagan and politicians to start the war on drugs and prosecution of African Americans, just as fear drives black parents to try to hold their children on a leash. Everybody is afraid of something, both black people and white people, and fear is what motivates and controls their actions. The final lines “The struggle is beautiful,” is an oxymoron that he brings to his title. Both Kweli and Coates believe that fear and the resistance to oppression create beauty — beauty through people, culture, and art.

References to old hip hop are incorporated in the overall structure of the narrative; each chapter’s title is sampled from a song from around the same time period the chapter recollects. The samples have not been chosen randomly but can be connected to the bigger narrative in each chapter. For example, the title of the fourth chapter, “Africa’s in the house, they get petrified,” is a line taken from hip hop group Jungle Brothers’s “Straight Out the Jungle” from 1988. An excerpt from the lyrics in the original song goes like this:

Educated man, from the motherland
You see, they call me a star but that’s not what I am
I’m a jungle brother, a true, blue brother
And I’ve been to many places you’ll never discover
Step to my side, suckers run and hide
Afrika's in the house, they get petrified.

The man in the lyrics is a confident Afrocentric man. He is educated, or Conscious as Coates would say, with knowledge of his history and heritage from his “motherland,” Africa. With the line “Afrika’s in the house, they get petrified,” the lyrics refer to how white people are frightened by educated black men because their education threatens white supremacy. In the same way that Coates has sampled from Jungle Brothers, they have sampled the symbol of the jungle from an older song: Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s “The Message” (1982). Jungle Brothers sample the lines “It’ like a jungle sometimes/It makes me wonder how I keep from going under.” The jungle in Grandmaster Flash’s song symbolizes the wild and

dangerous “concrete jungle,” a popular term for big chaotic cities. In other words, Grandmaster Flash is wondering how he has been able to survive in the city with the struggles and dangers that come with it. Jungle Brothers take the image of the concrete jungle into their own song but they also twist the image of the jungle to also refer to the jungles in Africa. When they say “I’m a jungle brother, a true, blue brother/And I’ve been to many places you’ll never discover,” they are both claiming to be from the city and environment as Grandmaster Flash, as well as they celebrate their African roots.

This web of intertextuality illustrates the complexity of sampling in hip hop: the different beats or texts refer to each other. In his book *The Signifying Monkey*, literary scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. shows how black texts are signifyin(g) on each other, meaning that authors reuse and alter motifs from other works and change them to create their own new meanings. “Black formal repetition,” Gates writes in his introduction, “always repeats with a difference, a black difference that manifests itself in specific language use” (xxii-xxiii). He uses the example of jazz to illustrate this: “The most salient analogue for this unmotivated mode of revision in the broader black cultural tradition might be that between black jazz musicians who perform each other’s standards on a joint album, not to critique these but to engage in refiguration as an act of homage” (xxvii). Jungle Brothers have done a refiguration when sampling Grandmaster Flash and I argue that Coates, by sampling Jungle Brothers, has made this into an even more complex web of intertextual references.

Coates has taken the line “Afrika’s in the house, they get petrified” and used it to engage in a relevant refiguration that pays homage to their work. The title of the chapter is significant because it resonates with Jungle Brothers’ claim that white people are “petrified” by educated black people. Coates illustrates how white people feel threatened by black enlightenment by examining a conversation Coates recreates between his father and another unnamed Conscious black man. They are talking about how the book *As Nature Leads* by J. A. Rogers is out of print. The book is about black “blood” in the white race, and discusses how racist thought is dependent on the conception of a pure white race. The Conscious man says: “See, brother, those books are out of print. You know what that means? The white man ain’t gonna let you see those. He don’t want those books in print” (90). What the man is implying is that white people are afraid that black people will become educated, start a resistance, and destroy the idea of white supremacy. Paul Coates started Black Classic Press shortly after, driven by the vision of giving black people information and distribute Consciousness.

The chapter in question focuses mostly on Coates' father, but it also introduces strong black voices such as Malcolm X and Richard Wright. Coates Jr. notes that his father was strongly influenced by leading black voices who brought him on a further search for knowledge: "Baldwin, Wright, and Malcolm were the first signs that led him to another path, one he followed until enveloped by a forest of black books" (74). Paul Coates, Malcolm X, and Richard Wright were all role models for Ta-Nehisi in his adolescence, and he saw them as educated men with knowledge of history and structural racism and as men who contribute to the struggle against racial oppression. Their way of contributing to the struggle is through literature and powerful rhetoric: Paul Coates with his publishing company, Malcolm X with his speeches, and Richard Wright with his literature. Like them, Coates contributes to the struggle with his memoir and pays homage to the powerful black men who have been fighting for the generations to come. He adds to the fight not only by remembering their legacy, but also through modern rhetoric and contemporary cultural references. *Jungle Brothers*, in a way, are for the author as important as Richard Wright was for his father. Coates writes: "In Richard Wright, Dad found a literature of himself. He'd read *Manchild in the Promised Land* and *Another Country*, but from Wright he learned that there was an entire shadow canon, a tradition of writers who grabbed the pen, not out of leisure but to break the chain" (72). Wright showed Paul Coates that literature could be used to "break the chain," and similarly *Jungle Brothers* and other hip hop artists did the same for Ta-Nehisi and the younger generation.

Another example of a chapter's sampling technique is the title of the first chapter, "There lived a little boy who was misled..." The title is taken from Slick Rick's song "Children's Story" from 1988. The song was released two years after the period chronicled in the chapter, but the story it recounts is fitting for the beginning of the memoir. The song starts with the introduction of a young black boy: "There lived a lil' boy who was miss lead/By another lil' boy and this is what he said/Me and you, tonight we're gonna make some cash/Robbin' old folks and makin' the dash." In other words, the young boy was seduced by his friend to earn some easy money by robbing elderly people. The song goes on to narrate how the robbery spirals into catastrophe and ultimately ends with the boy's death: "The cops shot the kid, I still hear him scream/This ain't funny so don't ya dare laugh/Just another case about the wrong path." The tune's apparent style of nursery rhyme is contrasted with the dark storyline and message, creating an uncanny feeling. The final phrase, "Just another case about the wrong path," illustrates how horribly wrong it could have gone for Coates without his

father's support and guidance. The memoir begins with a flashback to when Coates and his brother were chased by the gang from Murphy Homes. It could have gone wrong for him that day had he not called his father who rushed down to save him. Even though Coates' story is not as grim as Slick Rick's, by drawing attention to the song with the title of the memoir, Coates is reminding us how easy it was in his adolescence and environment to end up on the wrong path.

“Keeping It Real”

In “From ‘Badman’ to ‘Gangsta’”: Double Consciousness and Authenticity, from African-American Folklore to Hip Hop,” Mich Nyawalo discusses the relationship between authenticity in hip hop and double consciousness. Nyawalo takes Du Bois's notion of merging one's “double self into a better and truer self” and brings it to a discussion on the concept of authenticity. “Authentic being,” Nyawalo says “is [...] the oppressed's ability to ‘break away’ from the oppressor's reality in order to forge a parallel system of meaning, one that provides more agency” (463). With authenticity I mean the concept in hip hop that focuses on realness and truth. An authentic rapper is perceived as truthful in representing the challenges familiar to his community. The authentic man breaks silence and conveys the oppression of African Americans in a convincing way, and this helps him on his own mission to become a truer self.

Authenticity and the value of truth-telling are especially important today with the Black Lives Matter movement. “The realism in rap music,” Nyawalo says, “can also have deep political undertones that generate a wave of controversy by spotlighting social issues which are sometimes swept under the rug” (471). A rapper can gain authenticity and reveal social issues by, for example, witnessing or testifying to the conditions in the ghetto, such as poverty, violence, and drug abuse. By witnessing and convincingly reporting on “the struggle,” one gains authenticity.

As an example of how to convey black experience “authentically,” the artist that has perhaps received the most international attention for the Black Lives Matter movement recently is singer Beyoncé with the performance of her song “Formation” at Super Bowl in 2016. Beyoncé appeared on stage with a set of dancers, all dressed in homage to the Black Panthers and the Black Power movement. Her lyrics and performance generated a wide debate around police violence and racial injustice. Interestingly, it is with “Formation” that Beyoncé is seen as authentic for the first time, in the sense of appearing to have any experience with the “struggle.” Earlier she has primarily been seen as a “typical” pop star, but

with “Formation” she applies the same device of referencing as Coates and other “authentic” rappers. She makes references to her roots in Alabama and Louisiana and mixes them with her childhood in Texas. She claims to have “hot sauce” in her bag, which is a typical black stereotype, and that she likes her men with “Jackson Five nostrils.” An overall message is that she has worked her way up from the countryside to stardom, but that she will never forget her roots or her mixed roots.

The song’s music video is more forceful in its rhetoric. In the beginning of the video, Beyoncé is seen posing on a sinking police car in what appears to be a reference to hurricane Katrina. Later a young black boy is shown dancing in front of an armed and masked row of police officers, and a wall in the background is tagged with “Stop shooting us.” By embracing her background as a minority who had to fight her way up, Beyoncé is able to bring up political questions and put the spotlight on topics that are often “swept under the rug,” such as police violence, with authenticity.

The knowledge one must acquire to gain authenticity is best learned by experience and participation in the community. For Coates, the cultural codes of the streets were learned by observing social codes and by performing them with his friends. By giving the codes names similar to real academic courses, he compares the process of being educated in the streets to the classical school system: “[The Street professors] lectured from sacred texts like Basic Game, Applied Cool, Barbershop 101. Their leathergloved hands thumbed through chapters, like “The Subtle and Misunderstood Art of Dap” (36). “Basic Game” is a phrase for elementary skills, like basic knowledge of how social interaction and the hierarchy work in the streets, similar to those of an introductory course before one can go on to the next level. “Applied Cool” is the art of how to act and dress without appearing as an outsider. The “Barbershop 101,” I propose, is referring to how to talk and what to talk about, as the barbershop is often seen as a place for conversations and hanging out in black culture. A dap is the knocking of fists together, a way of greeting each other and showing respect. By calling it “The Subtle and Misunderstood Art of Dap,” Coates is highlighting the importance of such a small gesture in street culture that can seem silly to people from the outside. This knowledge is unique for his community, and it has grown out of oppression, violence, and poverty. In order to survive the struggle in the streets, one cannot fail Basic Game or in the execution of a dap.

One way of claiming authenticity in hip hop is, like Beyoncé did with “Formation,” through the naming of people, places, and products, and shout-outs to cultural references. For

example, Coates provides several cultural references and seven different cultural characters when describing the year 1988:

The Grand Incredible was dead, KRS converted to Consciousness and assumed the sentinel pose of Malik Shabazz. All the world's boom boxes were transformed into pulpits for Public Enemy. Before now, the music was escapist and fun – some beats and the dozens, fat chains and gilded beltbuckles. But Chuck D pulled us back into the real. He premiered in the colors of Al Davis, did not dance; and when he grabbed the mic, it transformed into the lost rifle of Robert Charles. (104)

In most other memoirs, the extensive references to people and events just to state the year of a section would most likely be seen as unnecessary, but in *The Beautiful Struggle* this is a consistent literary device that gives Coates authenticity. His device of referencing is a way of “keeping it real” or “representing.” If we unpack the references Coates offers in this paragraph, we see that it contains numerous references that at first sight can only be understood by those with the same cultural background. Outsiders will be oblivious to its implications, unless they do extensive research to unravel them. This way, the memoirist is offering an additional narrative within the text. In this paragraph, further investigation displays that Malik Shabazz is a reference to the Muslim name Al-Hajj Malik Al-Shabazz that Malcolm X took. KRS-One, who is also mentioned above, released an album in 1988 titled *By All Means Necessary*, a play on Malcolm X's phrase “By any means necessary,” and the album is known as one of the first politically conscious albums in hip hop. Rap group Public Enemy was also known for bringing up serious and important topics from the community. By assigning the rappers political force, Coates highlights a shift in hip hop music from entertainment and gangster images to serious rhetoric and power. The strength and revolution of the music comes forward through the image of Chuck D in his silver-and-black bomber jacket, similar to that of American football coach Al Davis, as he uses his lyrics to start a resistance and riot, just like Robert Charles sparked a race riot in 1900 after shooting several police officers with a rifle. The effect of references, then, is double: he both provides the readers with an underlying historical narrative by way of allusion as well as he indicates that he was part of the community in the summer of 1988. In effect, he is “representing” an era and culture that he claims to belong to. Marcyliena Morgan explains the importance behind “representing” in hip hop culture:

To *represent* in hip hop is not simply to identify with a city, neighborhood, school, and so on. It is also a discursive turn – it is the symbols, memory, participants, and objects and details that together produce art of the space and time. Representation is accomplished through a fantastical and complex system of indexicality – literally shouting out places, people, and events when an interaction is framed around important referential symbols and contexts. (qtd. in Nyawalo 469)

The use of samples and shout-outs to a pair of Adidas, for example, authenticates Coates' narrative and his position as a storyteller. In a sense, Coates is like a rap artist who has full control of his projection of authenticity. With this authenticity, he can tell the truth of social injustice and oppression without the risk of being called out as a “poser.” When Coates writes, for example, “Ta-Nehisi, get the fuck outta here with those weak-ass N.B.A.s. Know what that shit stands for? Next time buy Adidas” (9), he enforces the validity of his representation of the ghetto culture. This shout-out to Adidas is especially convincing because the scene of the conversation took place in 1986, the same year Run-D.M.C. released their song “My Adidas.” The song was written after Run-D.M.C. made an endorsement deal with the company, which is made clear with the lyrics “Got blue and black, cause I likes to chill/And yellow and green when it’s time to get ill/Got a pair that I wear when I’m playin ball/With the heel inside, make me 10 feet tall.” By proving familiarity with the song’s influence in black youth culture, Coates claims the position of a truth-teller that has deep knowledge of the culture. Nyawalo explains how this also works in hip hop: “In order to give their image an aura of authenticity, rap artists often project themselves as truth-tellers – their lyrics are often imbued with a sense of realism that seeks to reveal the world of the ghetto in its naked form” (468). We see Coates repeatedly put this into practice in *The Beautiful Struggle*, as when, for example, he writes about a crisis of African American culture:

But you must remember the era. Niggers were on MTV in lipstick and curls, extolling their exotic quadrooms, big-upping Fred Astaire, and speaking like the rest of us did not exists. I’m talking S-curls and sequins, Lionel Richie dancing on the ceiling. I’m talking the corporate pop of Whitney, and Richard Pryor turning into the toy. Was like Parliament never happened, like James Brown had never hit. All our champions were disconnected and dishonored, handing out Image Awards, while we bled in the streets. (108)

With the music video channel MTV, S-curles, which is a hair product that loosens the hair texture of people of African descent, musicians Lionel Richie and Whitney Houston, and comedian Richard Pryor, Coates is referring to African Americans who at the time were known for appropriating white culture, or were accused of “selling out,” to please white audiences. Richard Pryor, for example, was a stand-up comedian who played the role of a human toy belonging to a rich white boy in a movie, a role that offended many African Americans. These people are, in other words, examples of Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness. Coates implies that the development towards a typically white culture for African American public figures is a disgrace, and that it is a set back after the previous work of proud black entertainers such as fifties funk group Parliament and “The Godfather of Soul,” James Brown. Coates critiques black public figures who are separated from the “real” world and are handing out awards to each other at The NAACP Image Award — an annual award ceremony that celebrates people of color in popular culture — instead of being aware of, and giving attention to, their struggling community. He juxtaposes them with the black people who suffer under everyday racism, poverty, and violence. Coates introduces the rappers, or MCs, as saviors who object to this development:

But now the word turned Conscious, De La refused to scowl and Stetasonic shouted across the Atlantic gap. First Chuck, then KRS, and then everywhere you looked MCs were reaching for Garvey’s tricolor, shouting across the land, self-destruction was at an end, that the logic of the white people’s ice had failed us, that the day of awareness was now. (108)

To be “Conscious,” a term used frequently in Coates’ texts, is best explained in his essay collection *We Were Eight Years in Power*, where he writes: “To reject hatred, to awaken to the ugly around us and the original beauty within, to be aware, to be “conscious,” as we dubbed ourselves, was to reject the agents of deceit – their religion, their culture, their names. To be conscious was to celebrate the self, to cast blackness in all its manifestations as a blessing” (95). The black celebrities discussed above would not classify as Conscious, but Coates’ new heroes would. With “De La,” Coates is referring to the hip hop trio De La Soul known for “jazz rap” and experimental hip hop whereas Stetasonic was another black hip hop group. When Coates says they “shouted across the Atlantic gap,” he is likely referring to Paul Gilroy’s book *The Black Atlantic* and cultural double consciousness. What he is saying, then,

is that De La Soul and Stetasonic refused to appropriate white culture and, instead, celebrated the black “original beauty within.” Chuck D was known from rap group Public Enemy, and KRS-One was a politically active rapper that started the Stop the Violence Movement. For Coates, these men stand for a sign of change and return of black power through hip hop. With “Garvey’s tricolor,” Coates is referring to the Pan-African red, black and green flag that is seen as an emblem for Black pride, emphasizing that his idols and other MCs had taken up the fight against oppression and racial injustice. The rappers with the Pan-African flag were a symbol for their power and mission.

Repetitions

Repetitions feature as a common literary device in *The Beautiful Struggle*. For James Snead, in “On Repetition in Black Culture,” repetitions “[find their] most characteristic shape in performance: rhythm in music and dance and language [...] Repetitive words and rhythms have long been recognized as a focal constituent of African music and its American descendants: slave-songs, blues, spirituals, and jazz” (150). To the musical descendants Snead lists, I propose to add hip hop. The repetitions in Coates’ text also resemble African praise poetry, a literature that Coates was likely to find in his father’s library. As an example I have included an excerpt from the Ngoni praise of the hero Ngwana:

[...] You who drank the blood of cattle.
You who separated from the people of Shaka, Shaka of Mbelebele kraal.
You who separated from the people of Nyathi the son of Mashobane; it thundered, it was cloudy.
Thou resemblest cattle which were finished by wolves.
You who originated with the people of Mzilikazi.
You who originated with the people of Mpakana son of Lidonga.
You who originated with the people of Ndwandwe. (Snead 25)

With a repetition of the interpellation “You who...” in the beginning of each line, followed by a series of African names, the excerpt calls out to different peoples of Africa, turning them into subjects, thus celebrating their memory. In “Structural Patterns in the Performance of a Xhosa Izibongo,” Jeff Opland writes about the centrality of names in African praise poems: “In general, praise poems are a concatenation of nominal appellations, referring either to one

person or to different people [...] often these names are extended by an allusive qualifying phrase” (96-97). This was helpful in recording historical events but it also gives the poems and the figures they praise authenticity. Coates used to read Afrocentric literature from his father’s library, so it is probable to assume that the form of praise poems can inspire him in his own writing. The function of repetitions in African music is to secure improvisation:

African music normally emphasizes dynamic rhythm, organizing melody within juxtaposed lines of beats grouped into differing meters. The fact that repetition in some sense is the principle of organization shows the desire to rely upon “the thing that is there to pick up.” Progress in the sense of “avoidance of repetition” would at once sabotage such an effort. Without an organizing principle of repetition, true improvisation would be impossible, as an improvisator relies upon the ongoing recurrence of the beat. (Snead 150)

As with African music and jazz, improvisation is also key in hip hop music, and it is easier to improvise with a recurring line and beat to stick to. For example, in the Dozens, a game in which two contestants try to beat each other with insults, it is very common to start every sentence with “Yo’ Mama...” (Chimenzie 401), and by having familiar beginning it is easier for the contestants to formulate their next insult. Another function of using repetitions is that it can make the message more persisting. An example of repetitions in *The Beautiful Struggle* is in Paul Coates’ address to his son who has grown to be six feet tall and weighs about 180 pounds. The father sees the son’s size as a potential challenge and cautions him with the following:

Son, you’re growing into a big man. You’re going to have to be more conscious of yourself. You are not a mean kid, but because of your size you will do things that will be seen as a threat. You need to be conscious especially around white people. You are big, and you are a young black man. You need to be careful about what you do and what you say. (172-73)

The five repetitions of “you” resemble the lines from the Ngoni praise cited above but they also bring to mind the “Ten Commandments.” Big Bill used to call their father “the pope” because “weekly he issued sweeping edicts like he had a line to God” (5). This speech

confirms Paul Coates' position as a "preacher" and leader in the family. The quote is structured on an AB poetic principle, whereby a cautionary warning or a milder version of command follows each declarative statement. The statement "you are growing," for example, is followed by the warning "you're going to have to." By way of giving his cautionary warnings in a repetitive pattern, they are easier to remember and pass on to the next generation. It is clear that the father's words had great impact on the author. We can see this in how his initial caution with a direct address — "Son" — is later included in his book *Between the World and Me*: his prize-winning personal essay with a message to his teenage son, Samori, opens with the same, simple word.

In a section where Coates describes his early relationship to the hip hop music, he quotes two lines from Jungle Brothers's song "Black is Black" from 1988. He writes:

I am still on my third listen and I do not understand.

They fought back with civil rights
That scarred the soul, it took the sight. (102)

Already here we see a reference to repetition as Coates is saying he listened to the song three times. The number three is not chosen at random; it copies the style of repetition in the song that continues:

The common foe you plainly see
On the streets or on TV
Segregation was the king
Vietnam was full in swing
Martin Luther had to shout
Let's get out, get out, get out
The situation's sort of changed
But what really makes matters strange
Is our foe is well disguised
We don't know where our fate lies
Still and all we cannot lack
The fact that black is black is black

The “common foe” on the streets and TV is a comment on how black men were presented and painted as the enemy in the eyes of white society. The lines continue to refer to historical segregation, the Vietnam War, and Martin Luther King, Jr’s influence, followed by a three times repetition of “let’s get out.” This is a historical presentation of the Civil Rights Movement, and the next four lines indicate that racism still is present in the 1980s, though it is just concealed better than in the sixties. The final lines, “Still and all we cannot lack/The fact that black is black is black” offer a pessimistic view, proposing that racism will always be an issue, proven by the repetition of racism that Jungle Brothers have illustrated.

By repeatedly listening to the song, young Coates hopes to better grasp its meaning, but realizes that he does not have the knowledge needed to get all the references. He understands that he has to read up on black history:

I can’t tell you what Mike G is running from. I have never heard of the Violators. I scrounge around the house in search of my father’s atlas, flip pages until I arrive at a map of their great and mythical realm, Strong Island. I expect a kingdom, but all I see is a bunch of dumb islands waiting to float away [...] (102)

That he has not heard about the Violators, for example, is not at all surprising. The Violators were a group of friends who at the time had attained a mythical reputation, and many thought they were a band, a gang, or Jungle Brothers’s bodyguards. In reality, they were just a crew that liked to party, who were friends with the members of Jungle Brothers, and were therefore often named in their songs. Coates, not knowing this, searched for answers in his father’s books without success. When looking for Strong Island in an atlas, he would not find it because it was simply slang for Long Island. Without referential knowledge, Coates is left to find his own meanings in the lyrics: “I’d search the liner notes for clues, play back lyrics until they were memory, and then play back memory until I gleaned messages, imagined and real [...]” (102). Here, repetition is connected to the process of creating meaning by repeated reading and interpretation. Coates listens to the song again and again, until he starts to see a deeper meaning behind the words:

And slowly I began to pull something from the literature. Slowly I came to understand why these boys needed to wear capes, masks, and muscle suits between bars. Slowly I

came to feel that I was not the only one who was afraid. (102)

At first, Coates does not understand the message behind “Black is Black” because he does not know all of the references that Jungle Brothers use, but by combining old literature and history with Jungle Brothers’s lyrics, he starts seeing a connection between his father’s history and his own modern culture. He realizes that hip hop and the struggle he experiences are connected to the roots in Africa and early slavery. He becomes aware of the fact that his struggle and fear are the same struggle and fear that black men have experienced since the day white men set foot on their shores. Coates understands that his experience of fear and vulnerability is not only his, but that it belongs to his whole black community and history. By learning this, he becomes more confident with his own identity as a young black man. The repetition in this part of the narrative, then, is threefold: first as repetition of words from Jungle Brothers’ lyrics and in Coates’ repetitions of ‘Slowly I.’ Second, Coates illustrates the repetition of listening and reading in order to process and create meaning. And finally, this section points out the repetition of racism in American society.

His newfound sense of belonging and fitting in in an African American community makes him reject white culture and oppression. We see this in how he gradually writes with a stronger sense of “we” against “them.” This new direction of confidence and community is apparent in a passage targeted at the politicians, news anchors, and activists who claim that young black men have gone mad by referencing to violent episodes between black men. Coates interrupts the narrative rhythm he has established with a break, or a change of style, by a violent language more typically associated with “gangstas:”

Fuck you all who’ve ever spoken so foolishly, who’ve opened your mouths like we don’t know what this is. We have read the books you own, the scorecards you keep – done the math and emerged prophetic. We know how we will die – with cousins in double murder suicides, in wars that are mere theory to you, convalescing in hospitals, slowly choked by angina and cholesterol. We are the walking lowest rung, and all that stands between us and the local zoo, is respect, the respect you take as natural as sugar and shit. We know what we are, that we walk like we are not long for this world, that this world has never longed for us. (177)

The first sentence immediately demands attention with the aggressive “Fuck you all,” and has

a similar effect as the protest song “Fuck tha Police” (1988) by rap group N.W.A. The use of combative language is often associated with hip hop and rappers. Now that Coates has secured our attention, he goes on with a repetition of “we” in the beginning of each sentence. The repetition and emphasis on “we” creates a dynamic in the passage with a clear division between “us” and “you,” blacks against whites. Perry comments on this separation of you and us: “Hip hop music celebrated Me and We, as opposed to You. At various moments in hip hop, the Other is the competing MC or DJ, the challenger in a fight, or white people” (*Prophets of the Hood* 89). Coates reports on the harsh conditions African Americans must endure while at the same time attacking the ignorance of privileged white people.

The Authentic Ta-Nehisi Coates

The Beautiful Struggle ends with Coates’ admission into Howard University, also known as “The Mecca.” “I had survived my formative world and all its trappings,” Coates says, “Down on Tioga, the reports of my old friends floated back to me. Their fates were maddeningly clichéd. Even the ones in whom I saw a tighter head game fell into shadow [...]” (220). Coates managed to stay away from the destiny described in Slick Rick’s “Children’s Story,” but many of his friends did not. What saved Coates was, besides his father’s guidance and help, the confidence and identity he found in heritage and hip hop. Instead of roaming out in the streets and affiliating with the tougher crowds, Coates found shelter and wisdom in his father’s library. Ultimately, his admission into The Mecca leads to maturity and a sense of self-recognition.

What is interesting with Coates’ memoir is that he uses it to claim authenticity and establish his wide knowledge of street culture and hip hop without ever really being a part of the tougher street crowd. In his coming-of-age story, he is never in any serious trouble and he is not actively a part of the “gangsta” community in Baltimore. Rather, he presents himself as a small and awkward boy who observes from the side and dreams of becoming tougher like his brother. “I pilfered his old Nike tees,” he writes, “and gray Adidas sweat suits in hopes that all his heart, his stones, his terrifying bop had seeped through in the wash and would now react with something latent and manly in me” (59). But it never really does. Rather, Coates’ respectability as a representative for the community is grounded in his writing and knowledge. He uses his gift for words to write his own identity into the hip hop community, by giving homage to its great artists and cultural heritage.

Chapter Two

The Vulnerable Body

Plant your toes in the cool swamp mud.
Step and leave no track.
Hurry, sweating runner!
The hounds are at your back.

*No, I didn't touch her
White flesh ain't for me.*

Hurry! Black boy, hurry!
They'll swing you to a tree.

- Langston Hughes, "Flight" (1930)

Introduction

True to his devotion to hip hop, Ta-Nehisi Coates frequently refers to rapper Kendrick Lamar when asked about his current influences. Lamar is considered one of the most powerful voices within contemporary hip hop, and part of his strength lies in how he, like Coates in his essays, imports narratives from his own life into his lyrics. His critically acclaimed album *DAMN* (2017), for example, is much about trying to survive and make it as a black man in American society. The song "FEAR." especially, featured on the album, chronicles how he from childhood up until today has been driven by fear. The rapper's narrative tells his life story in three lengthy stanzas that mark ten-year periods from the age of seven to twenty-seven, yet are narrated from different points of view. The first stanza expresses how, at the age of seven, he was afraid of his mother who constantly threatened to beat him:

I beat yo' ass, keep talkin' back
I beat yo' ass, who bought you that?
You stole it, I beat yo ass if you say that game is broken
I beat yo' ass if you walk in this house

[...] Nigga, you gon' fear me if you don't fear no one else

The text shows us how his mother used threats and installed fear in her son in order to keep him away from trouble, and Lamar translates the threat of punishment—"I beat yo' ass"—into a recurrent rhythmic beat. The scene resonates with how Coates in *The Beautiful Struggle* explains how his father would beat him with a belt out of fear for losing his son. The fear young Lamar conveys, then, is double: it is both the fear of his mother's threats, but also the fear that she as a mother had for her son's safety. Although not directly expressed, we get a sense that the mother is afraid that her son might, for instance, encounter the police if he does not behave well when out of her sight. His mother's reaction to fear is similar to Coates' descriptions of his father's punishment in *The Beautiful Struggle*, which preceded with a rhetorical question to his mother: "who would you rather do this: me or the police?" (141). The fear of police and their actions is more evident in the second verse where Lamar is speaking from a seventeen-year-old's point of view:

I'll prolly die from one of these bats and blue badges
Body slammed on black and white paint, my bones snappin'
Or maybe die from panic or die from bein' too lax
Or die from waitin' on it, die 'cause I'm movin' too fast
I'll prolly die tryna buy weed at the apartments
I'll prolly die tryna diffuse two homies arguin'
I'll prolly die 'cause that's what you do when you're 17

This section of the lyrics expresses a lack of control over the speaker's life. The artist's monotone performance of the verse and the repetition of "I'll prolly die" convey hopelessness: whatever you do, it can ultimately lead to the destruction of your body. In the same manner that he would get threats from his mother, his actions are still constrained by the reactions from police officers, implied by the "bats and blue badges." The older Lamar has learned the limitations set by the color of his skin, which leads to a sense of apathy over the fact that no matter his intentions, it is in the hands of other's to interpret them. Also, the repetitions sound as if someone else has reiterated these warnings several times, and that he is reciting them. By hearing these cautionary tales several times, it seems as if he were paralyzed with fear. The message is that fear has followed Lamar through his whole life, and it is this experience that he expresses through his music.

We can trace the concept of fear in the same manner in Coates' *Between the World and Me* (015). His text sets today's violence against African Americans in a historical and contemporary context and shows how the country is built upon violence. The violence in his essay is connected to fear, ignorance, and the Dream: upon the legacy of white supremacy and the need to maintain it. Coates' concept of the Dream is built upon the idea that there exist Americans who need to believe they are white. These people are the Dreamers, and their identity is vulnerable in that it rests on the oppression of black bodies: "And for so long I have wanted to escape into the Dream," Coates admits, "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" (11). The author uses an image of white Americans sleeping as a metaphor for their ignorance, and the only way to end the Dream is by waking up. The Dream is gorgeous and comfortable; it is "perfect houses with nice lawns" and "smells like peppermint but tastes like strawberry shortcake" (11). And because the Dreamers are asleep, they are unaware of what is going on outside their Dream. While they are sleeping comfortably, or living in denial, they do not realize that their comfort—the soft bed, or in reality their advantages and position in society—is resting on the backs of black people. In a sense, if they were to wake up, they would realize that their Dream is a nightmare for black people. They would see the horror in that their comfortable bed is, in fact, built upon the mutilation of black bodies.

With the essay, Coates tries to confront and deconstruct the Dream by forcing us to acknowledge that America is built upon the violence and destruction of black bodies. In this chapter, I explore how the author represents black experience in relation to violence and the vulnerability of the black male body. A central question in the essay is how a man can live freely in a black body in America, and I discuss Coates' attempt to answer this through a letter to his son. The young black boy must learn that his body can always be broken, and this chapter, by following the arguments posed by Coates, shows that he might never actually live freely and that he has to accept his vulnerability. I will argue that African Americans have never been, and are still not, in control of their own bodies, but that they must "negotiate violence" or perform rituals to shield themselves against violence. Finally, I show how Coates' fear for his own safety and his son's can be traced throughout the literary work.

Becoming One With the Disrupted Body

Between the World and Me has taken its title from Wright's poem of the same title, first published in 1935 in *Partisan Review* and later included in the 1957 collection *White Man Listen!* The poem also functions as the epigraph in Coates' book, setting the mood and theme for the essay. Wright's poem is dark and powerful in the way it describes the site where a lynching took place as a haunted place, and the black body represented in the poem is a site of disruption and brutal violence. In "Unmaking the Male Body," Jeffrey Geiger explains how, for Wright, "the black male body is the exemplary site of the contest, disruption, and emergence of African American identity in what might be called his highly personal vision of the South" (197). An examination of the poem reveals how Coates' treatment of the body in *Between the World and Me* is similar to Wright's.

The speaker in Wright's poem is a black man walking in the woods who accidentally stumbles upon a lynching scene. The evidence left on the site testifies that another black man has been tortured and burned till nothing but bones and ashes:

...There was a design of white bones slumbering forgottenly
upon a cushion of ashes.
There was a charred stump of a sapling pointing a blunt
finger accusingly at the sky.
There were torn tree limbs, tiny veins of burnt leaves, and
a scorched coil of greasy hemp;
A vacant shoe, an empty tie, a ripped shirt, a lonely hat,
and a pair of trousers stiff with black blood.
And upon the trampled grass were buttons, dead matches,
butt-ends of cigars and cigarettes, peanut shells, a
drained gin-flask, and a whore's lipstick;
Scattered traces of tar, restless arrays of feathers, and the
lingering smell of gasoline.
And through the morning air the sun poured yellow
surprise into the eye sockets of the stony skull... (18)

The violent language of the "torn tree limbs" and "tiny veins of burnt leaves" let us imagine

the terrors the flesh of the victim has been exposed to. The “vacant shoe,” “empty tie,” and “lonely hat” all amplify the feeling that a body has been destroyed—the body whose presence is obvious precisely because of its absence. This horrible evidence is in juxtaposition with the objects that testifies to the spectacle of lynching: the “butt-ends of cigars and cigarettes,” “drained gin-flask,” and the “whore’s lipstick,” all signify a festive event, a party of sorts, for the white men who performed or witnessed the lynching ritual. Through the process of witnessing, the speaker gradually transforms from being a detached observer to become one with the lynched man:

...The dry bones stirred, rattled, lifted, melting themselves
into my bones.
The grey ashes formed flesh firm and black, entering into
my flesh...

...And then they had me, stripped me, battering my teeth
into my throat till I swallowed my own blood.
My voice was drowned in the roar of their voices, and my
black wet body slipped and rolled in their hands as
they bound me to the sapling.
And my skin clung to the bubbling hot tar, falling from
me in limp patches.
And the down and quills of the white feathers sank into
my raw flesh, and I moaned in my agony.
Then my blood was cooled mercifully, cooled by a
baptism of gasoline.
And in a blaze of red I leaped to the sky as pain rose like water, boiling
my limbs
Panting, begging I clutched childlike, clutched to the hot
sides of death.
Now I am dry bones and my face a stony skull staring in
yellow surprise at the sun.... (18-19)

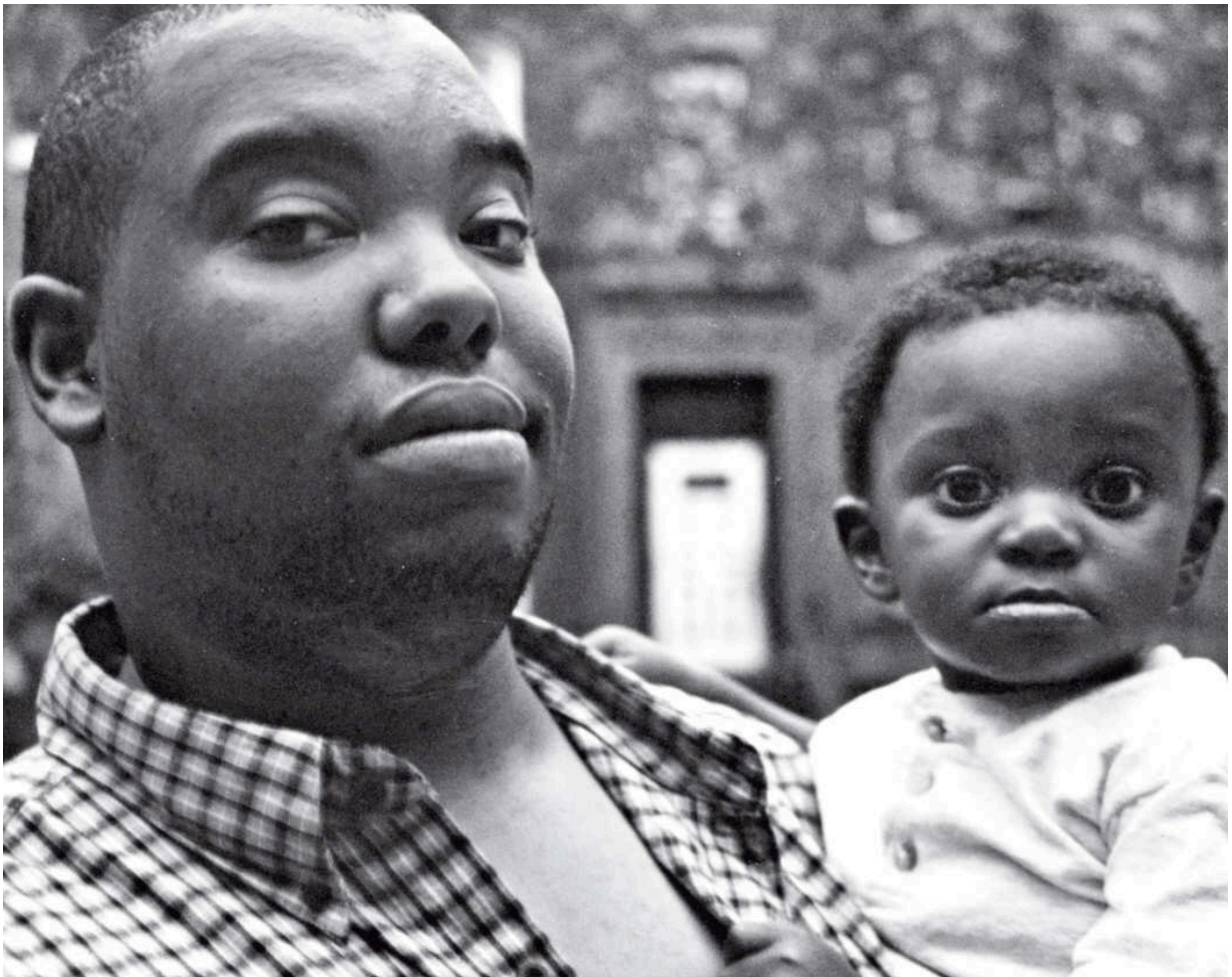
The poem makes a connection between violence, history, and the black body visible. In

“Richard Wright: The Meaning of Violence,” David P. Demarest, Jr. claims that “racial violence done to any single black involves all blacks,” and that “no black can escape awareness of white violence; no black can avoid an identification with the victims” (237). In the stanzas above, the speaker describes how the event unfolds before him and how he becomes one with the victim. The victim’s bones melt together with his own and the ashes become part of his own black flesh. As their bodies become one, the speaker experiences the violence upon his body and can hear the voices of the offenders. Finally, the poem ends with the speaker taking the place of the victim. In my reading of the poem, the speaker becomes the suffering victim because the violent black history is a part of him that he cannot escape. The poem makes us witnesses to the past, and shows that the past is forceful, just like the memory of Till and the other victims mentioned above are important in conversations about race in America today. This reading of the poem is important to this chapter because it speaks about what I read as the essay’s aim: to remove the distance between the readers of his essay and the victims of slavery, racial violence, and police brutality. He forces us to become more than detached observers who stumble upon a scene of racial violence.

One of the techniques Coates uses to reduce the distance between his readers and the experience he tries to convey is by addressing his own son; he is writing to a young black male about young black males, and the effect is that we, as readers, are also potentially addressed if we happen to be black, male, or both. This intimate relationship is established already in the first word of the narrative: “Son.” When Coates writes “I am writing to you because this was the year you saw Eric Garner choked to death for selling cigarettes; because you know now that Renisha McBride was shot for seeking help, that John Crawford was shot down for browsing in a department store” (9), the repeated “you” is not only addressed to his son; by referring to real events reported and discussed in media, Coates is also assuming that other African American readers also have learned about them; and if not, they will know now. By addressing the audience as a fifteen-year-old boy, he is not “dumbing” us down, but is bringing us to the same imagined stage of life as the victims of police brutality he writes about. In addition, by addressing his son, Coates makes the narrative personal and intimate, making it easier for the audience to empathize with his and other black males’ experience of violence.

A page in the first part of the book is dedicated to a photograph of Coates posing with Samori as a baby in his arms, making the narrative even more personal. The photograph is like an invitation into the private relationship between Coates and his son, which in effect

makes them vulnerable to the gaze of others. An especially interesting detail in this photograph is that Samori is seemingly gripping at his father's shirt, exposing his skin and flesh to the observer. The exposed skin and flesh mark Coates vulnerability as a black man, especially because the chest brings to mind the young black men who have been shot. The image conveys the experience of being a father to a black boy: Coates does not only fear for his own body, but for Samori's as well. The effect is strengthened by the first sentences following the photograph: "And I am afraid. I feel the fear most acutely whenever you leave me" (14). His confessed vulnerability breaks with the almost smug look the author has in the photograph. His look makes him seem confident, but the text reveals that behind the composed mask is a man who is afraid to put his son down and expose him to the world.



Ta-Nehisi Coates with his son (*Between the World and Me*, p. 13)

The photograph of the two together strengthens the credibility of the narrative because we are given a face to both the author and the boy the letter is written to. The visual evidence

of their bodies makes them appear real and breakable. The author extends this technique of making the people he writes about appear corporal to us in his writing. Originally working as a journalist, much of Coates' writing centered on statistics in articles and commentaries. Yet, in an article for *The Atlantic* about Kalief Browder, a young black man that committed suicide after his violent treatment in prison for a crime he had not committed, Coates asserts that "[n]umbers alone can't convey what the justice system does to the individual black body," and that:

The numbers which people like me bring forth to convey the problems of our justice system are decent tools. But what the numbers can't convey is what the justice system does to the individual black body. Kalief Browder was an individual, which is to say he was a being with his own passions, his own particular joys, his own strange demons, his own flaws, his own eyes, his own mouth, his own original hands. His family had their own particular stories of him. His friends must remember him in their own original way. ("The Brief and Tragic Life of Kalief Browder")

By saying that Kalief had "his own passions," "his own original hands," and "particular stories," Coates shows us that the personal and intimate rhetoric can have a stronger effect in conveying black experience of violence and discrimination than looking at statistics and numbers. In *Between the World and Me*, Coates continues with this technique and makes us see past the numbers by dragging the victims of racially motivated violence and inequality to an individual level. He does this not only by combining his text with a personal memoir, but by putting a face to the victims, by giving them names, feelings, a family, interests, hopes, and dreams.

Vulnerability and Fear

In her book *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler proposes that minorities as a community are "subjected to violence, exposed to its possibility, if not its realization," in other words, "each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies – as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of a publicity at once assertive and exposed (20). Her description of violence and its unpredictability resonates with the experience of vulnerability in the black body because it has historically been exposed to the threat of, for example, the whip or lynching, and today a police officer's gun. The black body and skin

will always be visible when engaging in society, and is therefore necessarily vulnerable. Butler explains this through the concept of a public sphere:

The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension. Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. (Butler 26)

Butler's assertion implies that we live side by side with others and our bodies are part of a public sphere. In this sphere, all individuals have a body that is mortal, vulnerable, and a possible vehicle of agency. As we all are vulnerable to touch and violence, we also have the ability to execute violence on others. This means that, for example, both the slaves and the white slaveholders had the physical ability to violate each other, but because the slaves were a minority and their bodies were politically constituted as property, they were never truly owners of their own bodies and were therefore kept docile by the threat of violence. In connection to slavery, Butler suggests that we might never lay claim to our bodies as our own: "Given over from the start to the world of others, [my body] bears their imprint, is formed within the crucible of social life; only later, and with some uncertainty, do I lay claim to my body as my own, if, in fact, I ever do" (26). The body's inseparability from the social sphere is connected to Coates' question of how one can live freely in a black body. The black body is, as Butler would say, "formed within the crucible of social life" and bears the imprint from the world of others. As a black man, even after the time of slavery, one is born into a body that is already marked by history and society.

Coates wonders if Samori understood that the black body is already marked, exposed and vulnerable when it enters the world when he learned that Michael Brown's killer would go free, when he says: "Perhaps that is why you were crying, because in that moment you understood that even your relatively privileged security can never match a sustained assault launched in the name of the Dream" (130). It taught Samori his place in the public sphere, and that his body is exposed to the touch of the white man – and especially that the police have the legal authority to destroy him:

And you know now, if you did not before, that the police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body. It does not matter if the destruction is the result of an unfortunate overreaction. It does not matter if it originates in a misunderstanding. It does not matter if the destruction springs from a foolish policy. Sell cigarettes without the proper authority and your body can be destroyed. (Coates 9)

In this passage, Coates urges Samori to understand that he is in no control over the police's actions, and that there does not need to be a good reason for their destruction of your body. The repetition of "It does not matter" conveys the same hopelessness as Lamar's "I'll prolly die" in "FEAR.," while also on another level implying that it does not matter what the reasons for the police's reaction were if you are already dead. It does not matter, for example, for Eric Garner who was choked by police while they were arresting him over selling cigarettes, that we can say today that the actions done by the police were wrong: his body is still destroyed.

Knowing that your body can be broken at someone else's will at any moment is an integral part of the black male experience. As human beings, we are always exposed to the will of another. The unreliability is terrifying in that if another person chooses to do so, he or she can perform violence upon our bodies. Therefore, the possibility of violence makes us vulnerable because we in reality have no control over it (Butler 28-29). Coates learned this when he was eleven years old in Baltimore, when a boy pulled out a gun from his jacket and stood across from him: "He did not need to shoot," Coates says, "He had affirmed my place in the order of things. He had let it be known how easily I could be selected" (19).

Another episode where Coates' place in the order of things was affirmed was when he took Samori to the movies. He describes the scene in which a woman pushes Samori and Coates reacts by speaking back to her. In his view, his reaction is a reaction any parent would have, especially because it reminded him of his own vulnerability: "There was the reaction of any parent when a stranger lays a hand on the body of his or her child. And there was my own insecurity in my ability to protect your black body" (94). Another white man then comes to the woman's rescue and says: "I could have you arrested" (95)! With this simple line, the white man literally affirms Coates' place, as if saying that as a white man, "I could take your body" (Coates 95).

Besides the historical tradition and white heritage of controlling the black body, an interesting question is how the white man, and Americans witnessing the reports in media,

can justify violating someone else's body. In relation to this question, Butler explains that "There are no obituaries for the war casualties that the United States inflicts, and there cannot be. If there were to be an obituary, there would have had to have been a life, a life worth noting, a life worth valuing and preserving, a life that qualifies for recognition" (34). The key in Butler's logic here is dehumanization: the violence and destruction applied can be justified because the black man is not seen as an equal human being but as a possible threat. In order to humanize the victims, it is important to remember they have an identity and a valuable life. In this line of thought, Butler stresses the need to write obituaries for all of the victims of war. It is through obituaries that a life becomes publicly grievable and noteworthy (Butler 34). Even though Coates is not writing obituaries for the victims of police brutality and race-inspired violence, he is doing an important job by making the victims come alive on the pages of his essay. If we do not give a name, a family, or hopes for the future to the victim, it is easier not to grieve the loss of that person, because we have dehumanized him.

The author forces the reader to grieve the lives of the victims as far back as to the victims of slavery. One of the most powerful passages in the essay, in my opinion, is the passage where he successfully removes the statistics and numbers from slavery, and shows us that one slave woman's story can be just as effective as giving a large number of violated slaves. Coates writes:

Slavery is not an indefinable mass of flesh. It is a particular, specific enslaved woman, whose mind is active as your own, whose range of feeling is as vast as your own; who prefers the way the light falls in one particular spot in the woods, who enjoys fishing where the water eddies in a nearby stream, who loves her mother in her own complicated way, thinks her sister talks too loud, has a favorite cousin, a favorite season, who excels at dressmaking and knows, inside herself, that she is as intelligent and capable as anyone. (69-70)

In this description of a slave woman, Coates gives the history of slavery a personality and an identity – he gives slavery an obituary. He describes the woman as if she were someone we might know; she could be your sister, your mother, your wife, or your daughter. The woman he describes, real or not, stops being an unidentifiable body in a black mass. By extending this technique with a description of his late friend Prince Jones, who he met at Howard University, he makes the reader not only identify with Jones as the victim of police brutality, but with the

grief of his family as well. Prince was shot eight times, where five of the shots hit his back, by a black undercover police officer who had been following him by car on wrongful suspicion. But for Coates, it is important that Jones is not only remembered as just another young black man who died:

And the plunder was not just of Prince alone. Think of all the love poured into him. Think of the tuitions for Montessori and music lessons. Think of the gasoline expended, the treads worn carting him to football games, basketball tournaments, and Little League [...] Think of all the embraces, all the private jokes, customs, greetings, names, dreams, all the shared knowledge and capacity of a black family injected into that vessel of flesh and bone. And think of how that vessel was taken, shattered on the concrete, and all its holy content, all that had gone into him, sent flowing back to earth. (81-82)

This passage forces us, by the extensive repetition of “think,” to imagine all the love and resources that are put into a child. The language Coates uses makes Prince almost sound like an investment or object, and this is effective in conveying the sense of hopelessness black parents must feel when they are not in control of the bodies of their children. Coates describes Prince’s body as a “vessel” that is “shattered on the concrete,” bringing to mind how easy it is, for example, to drop a glass on the floor, shattering it into a thousand pieces way beyond the point of being able to patch it together again. This passage describes the extreme fragility and vulnerability of the black body.

Negotiating Violence

In *Violence and the Body*, Arturo J. Aldama proposes that “[t]he propagation of fear in the social body attempts to keep people docile, numb, silent, and afraid to challenge the status quo of racist [orders] [...]” (1). During slavery, fear was propagated in the black body through violent punishments and random beatings. For Coates, this use of creating fear as per violence has become so indoctrinated into American culture that it has become heritage:

In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body – *it is heritage*. Enslavement was not merely the antiseptic borrowing of labor – it is not so easy to get a human being to commit their body against its own elemental interest. And so enslavement must be

casual wrath and random manglings, the gashing of heads and brains blown out over the river as the body seeks to escape [...]

[...] It had to be blood. It had to be nails driven through tongue and ears pruned away [...] It could only be the employment of carriage whips, tongs, iron pokers, handsaws, stones, paperweights, or whatever might be handy to break the black body, the black family, the black community, the black nation. For the men who needed to believe themselves white, the bodies were key to a social club, and the right to break the bodies was the mark of civilization. (103-104)

In this passage, Coates explains how random violence was key in order to keep the black man docile. The violent language Coates uses in this passage, such as “brains blown out over the river” and “gashing of heads” amplifies the banality of white man’s need to propagate fear and maintain supremacy. Also, by saying “It had to be,” “It could only be” and “whatever might be,” he further strengthens the image of the slaveholders as apathetic, ignorant Dreamers lacking independent thinking.

In a filmed conversation at the 2015 Aspen Ideas Festival, Coates explained how his youth in Baltimore was spent “negotiating violence everyday” and performing decisions and rituals, such as wearing the cap a certain way or taking a certain route to school with certain people “to keep physical violence from happening to [his] body.” Here he is referring to “The Knowledge” he presented in *The Beautiful Struggle*: the “Basic Game” and “the misunderstood art of Dap” (36) which I discussed in Chapter One. In *Between the World and Me*, Coates explains the knowledge through the image of the other boys in his neighborhood in relation to fear; by describing how their appearances and attitudes are driven by the same fear he himself felt as a young boy in Baltimore:

I think back on those boys now and all I see is fear, and all I see is them girding themselves against the ghosts of the bad old days when the Mississippi mob gathered ‘round their grandfathers so that the branches of the black body might be torched, then cut away. The fear lived on in their practiced bop, their slouching denim, their big T-shirts, the calculated angle of their baseball caps, a catalog of behaviors and garments enlisted to inspire the belief that these boys were in firm possession of everything they desired. (14)

I read this as if Coates is not only looking back at the other kids on the block from his childhood, but he is looking back at himself. The black boys discover the control they have over their own bodies, and the possible agency they have towards others because they are forced to do whatever they can to avoid violence and danger towards themselves. As a matter of protection they have to negotiate violence on an everyday basis.

Homecoming

Towards the end of the essay, Coates describes a scene in which he brought Samori to Homecoming at The Mecca. The scene stands in contrast to the scene described in Wright's "Between the World and Me." He sees a woman shaking "as though she was not somebody's momma," and the entire diaspora of "hustlers, lawyers, Kappas, busters, doctors, barbers, Deltas, drunkards, geeks, and nerds" (147) around him. A party is going on where "[t]he DJ hollered into the mic," and a girl "smiled, tilted her head back, imbibed, laughed" (147). Observing the party and the mix of people from The Mecca, Coates connects his narrative to Wright's poem again by saying: "And I felt myself disappearing into all of their bodies" (147). As the speaker in Wright's poem, Coates goes from being a detached observer to being part of a collective body. But in contrast to the dark spectacle of lynching and the destroyed victim in Wright's poem, the black spectacle and black experience at The Mecca is positive and empowering.

Despite the pain and fear that come with being black in America, Coates is still glad that he and his son are black. We see this in the passage where Coates tells Samori that being black brings him closer to the meaning of life:

Part of me thinks that your own very vulnerability brings you closer to the meaning of life, just as for others, the quest to believe oneself white divides them from it. The fact is that despite their dreams, their lives are also not inviolable. When their own vulnerability becomes real – when the police decide that tactics intended for the ghetto should enjoy wider usage, when their armed society shoots down their children, when nature sends hurricanes against their cities – they are shocked in a way that those of us who were born and bred to understand cause and effect can never be. And I would not have you like them. You have been cast into a race in which the wind is always at your face and the hounds are always at your heels. (Coates 107)

For Coates, the Dreamers are blinded by their imagined safety. While the white man feels a false safety for his body, a sense of being indestructible, the black man learns to protect himself and struggles for the safety of his body. And by living the struggle every day, the black “race” made by the Dreamers has made its own kind of dream with black power and culture. Coates points out that, in sadness and harshness, the Dreamers reach for the understanding black power and experience can give: “for it is Billie they reach for in sadness [...] Dre they yell in revelry, and Aretha is the last sound they hear before dying” (149).

Coates tells his son that he cannot arrange his life around the Dreamers or wait for them to change: “Our moment is too brief. Our bodies are too precious. And you are here now, and you must live – and there is so much out there to live for, not just in someone else’s country, but in your own home. The warmth of dark energies that drew me to The Mecca, that drew out Prince Jones, the warmth of our particular world, is beautiful, no matter how brief and breakable” (147). I read this as if the black male experience of a vulnerable and breakable body gives a special kind of strength and power, and that even though it is hard to live freely in a black body in a world made for the white, the common vulnerability and understanding between black Americans creates a beautiful and unique world.

Chapter Three

The Incarcerated Father

I am Sugar Ray Robinson, Booker T. Washington
W. E. B Du Bois, I'm the modern one
Yelling at Senators, Presidents, Congressmen
We got a problem that needs some acknowledgement
I am no prison commodity, not just a body you throw in a cell

- Nas, "Chains"

Introduction

As a contribution to the Black Lives Matter movement, the song "Chains" (2015) by artists Usher and Nas is an anthem that calls for those in power in American society to acknowledge the ongoing discrimination against black people. In order to confront us with the victims of police brutality and racial profiling, the song's music video is offered in an online interactive experience: the video presents a series of photographs of black victims to police profiling with the details of their deaths written over them while facial recognition technology through our computer's camera makes the video stop if we turn away from the screen (Kreps). The video demands attention with its cautionary warning — "Don't look away" — whenever the camera registers our averted eyes. With these experimental measures, the song is placed with the common project to humanize victims of racial discrimination in society.

"We still in chains," Usher urges in the song's chorus, connecting the chains from slavery to the modern enslavement of the prison system. Rapper Nas, by way of identifying himself with the figures of Robinson, Washington, and Du Bois, and by calling himself "the modern one," is pointing out that he is part of a rich cultural history and is following in the footsteps of African Americans who have stood up against oppression and tried to create change by discussing the black experience. He is marking a rebellion by yelling, or forcing, those in power to listen. The problem he is specifically addressing in this context is the incarceration of black men. He calls for attention that the black body is not just an object that someone owns, which was presumed during slavery, but that it belongs to an individual who

should have equal rights.

In *The Beautiful Struggle*, Coates observed that the children in his neighborhood were left without a father to guide them. “Mostly they all were products of single parents,” he wrote, “and in the most tragic category - black boys, with no particular criminal inclinations but whose very lack of direction put them in the crosshairs of the world” (115). The reasons why black fathers often are out of the family picture are manifold, but one explanation is that many of them are placed in prison cells throughout their brood’s childhood. In *13th* (2016) — a documentary about the structures behind mass incarceration — Ava DuVernay presents statistics that show there were 357,292 Americans incarcerated in 1970, and 2,015,300 in year 2000. In terms of ratio, one can estimate that one in three black men will be in prison at some point in their lives, as opposed to one in seventeen white men. Statistics, therefore, shows a clear pattern whereby black men are incarcerated in larger degree than white men, and incarceration is generally concentrated among those who are already socially disadvantaged (Western and Wildeman 228). The high increase in numbers from the seventies also signalizes that the current system is not working. It suggests that the state’s actions are only making crime worse and that they are fighting fire with fire.

An especially inconvenient consequence of the large number of African American men in prisons or jails is that their families are left behind. In “The Black Family and Mass Incarceration” (2009), sociologists Bruce Western and Christopher Wildeman discuss the consequences of mass incarceration on the black family and point out that a high incarceration rate of many fathers among the inmates means that there are correspondingly many children with incarcerated fathers, and that being behind bars ultimately hinders the men from playing the role of a father or husband (235-36). As Coates grew up in eighties Baltimore with the rise of crack, it is possible that many of his neighbors had lost their husbands or fathers to the justice system. Coates, then, is the exception that confirms the rule.

As a comment to the vast number of black men who have been put behind bars, artist Titus Kaphar started an art project in 2011 titled *The Jerome Project*. The inspiration behind the project was his incarcerated father: Kaphar was searching for his estranged father’s prison records when he found a website that shared photographs of recently arrested men, of whom many shared his father’s name, Jerome, as well as his last names (Studio Museum, “Titus Kaphar”). As a reaction to these findings, Kaphar created portraits of the different men named Jerome on wooden panels covered with gold leaf based on their police portraits, and finally dipped each portrait in tar.



Titus Kaphar, *Jerome (set)*, 2014

Each portrait presents a man who has been silenced and stripped of his voice, symbolized by the tar that covers his mouth. Collectively, the portraits speak of a community of incarcerated men. The gold makes the paintings resemble Byzantine icons. By combining the contemporary subject of the incarcerated black male with the classic style of icons, Kaphar drags the subjects back to the past. The portraits also brings us back to lynching and Wright's image in "Between the World and Me" when the speaker feels his skin cling to bubbling hot tar. The men the visual artworks portray could just as well depict slaves who had their freedom taken away from them, but the universal image is the black man who has had his citizenship taken away. Usher, Nas, and Kaphar's projects demonstrate the correspondances between slavery and incarceration in the same manner as Coates highlights the historical continuation of oppression in his body of work.

In the previous chapters, I have investigated how Coates represents the challenges with establishing one's identity as a black man in American society in *The Beautiful Struggle*, and how he conveys the experience of violence and vulnerability in *Between the World and Me*. However, a theme that has been present in both chapters is the role of black father. In order to circle in the author's ideas and values, the aim of this chapter is to investigate how he

has treated the subject of the black father in his oeuvre. I will argue that the black experience of fatherhood, both being a father and having a father, and the grand family structure are represented in Coates' narratives. I will also show that the personal experience of fatherhood that Coates represents does not fit with the old notion of the absent black father and broken family. His advantages breaks with how Coates wishes to present himself as someone from the streets, which is why he does not completely fit within the hip hop community. I will connect the problems of black fatherhood to mass incarceration, which is a modern form of slavery that maintains white power as well as it separates fathers from their families, enforcing their already existing disadvantages. This chapter will include readings of two essays from Coates' essay collection *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy* (2017): "This Is How We Lost to the White Man: The Audacity of Bill Cosby's Conservatism" (2007) and "The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration" (2015).

The 'eight years in power,' the collection's title, refers to the years of the Obama administration: there is one essay per year of this period. An introductory note that comments on where Coates was in his life at the time, the essay's context, inspirations, and errors precedes each essay. The introductory notes create the effect of an inverted call and response: it is a response to the essay's call, by way of reconsidering its implications. To do a comprehensive analysis of all the essays in the collection could be a thesis in itself, which is why I choose to focus on the essays that were written in the same years as *The Beautiful Struggle* and *Between the World and Me*. The choice provides me with a possibility of comparing and investigating how they speak to each other. Additionally, the information that the introductory notes offer enhances our understanding of the texts discussed in the previous chapters. In the introduction to *We Were Eight Years in Power*, Coates makes the link between himself as person and his work thusly: "[The essays] are me in motion, thinking matters through, a process that continues even as I write this introduction" (xv). This analysis, then, aims to discuss Coates' development as an author and intellectual by tracing the changes he tries to make through the introductory notes to his old essays.

Preceding the narrative of *The Beautiful Struggle*, the memoirist presents a detailed figure of his family tree titled "The Coates Clan." It shows that his father had seven children by four different women. But despite the chaos of who was the mother of whom, Coates' family was closely tied and he had his siblings and parents gathered in one house. While fathers in the neighborhood were mainly absent, Coates' father breaks from the pattern by being involved in his children's upbringing from start to finish: the finish line being set at

eighteen years when he expected his children to move out and become active participants in society. Part of what distances Coates from the hip hop culture he tries to identify with through the aesthetics in his memoir is exactly this: that his father stays by his side with guidance and strict rules. When Coates was in trouble, his father came to save him; and when he was doing badly at school, his father sat in the classroom with him. He fed him with books and knowledge, and his influence shaped Coates' later interest in black history, literature, and culture. As a result, Coates ends up outside the authentic hip hop experience if we consider being abandoned and involved with street gangs as the authentic experience.

If Coates' upbringing does not coincide with the hip hop culture he associates himself with in his writing, he can be considered more of an observer. Part of his challenge with representing his position in black society in *We Were Eight Years in Power* is that he does not completely belong to the working class, but because of his lack of formal education he is not completely elite either. In his essay collection, the author signals a relationship to hip hop early on by introducing the book with the quote "We don't just shine, we illuminate the whole show," a line taken from hip hop artist Jay-Z's "Dead Presidents II," but he arguably fails in incorporating hip hop references in the same manner as he did in *The Beautiful Struggle*. Nevertheless, the structure of the collection illustrates how he still continues to sample and pay homage to older texts. He applies this by the use of the introductory notes. The collection can be read as a result of the process where Coates is sampling his old texts: he gives them new meaning by signifying upon them in their introductions. Like African American authors have signified upon each other's texts in the past, Coates has kept up the tradition by repeating his old work with a difference. The difference is apparent because he alters our perception of his intentions behind the original essays and reflections on their contexts by way of giving additional information on what inspired him to write them and by setting the record straight regarding the choices he regrets today.

Father and Author

In the introductory note to "This Is How We Lost to the White Man: The Audacity of Bill Cosby's Black Conservatism," we see an example of how Coates tries to alter our perceptions. In 2007, at the time Coates wrote the essay, he was living in Harlem with his wife and son. The essay investigates Dr. Bill Cosby's black conservatism that preaches that black men must be twice as good and not blame white people for their failures. In the introductory note that precedes the essay he admits that, before he wrote it, he had lost his

third job and had trouble with securing his family financially:

I was a writer and felt myself part of a tradition stretching back to a time when reading and writing were, for black people, the marks of rebellion. I believed, somewhat absurdly, that they still were. And so I derived great meaning from the work of writing. But I could not pay rent with “great meaning.” (6)

Here he is inviting us to take part in a period of his life where he felt like a failure. In this confession, he posits two warring ideals against each other: writing nobly for a cause as an author and writing texts that generate a salary. He admits that he considered finding another career, but that his wife encouraged him to write more in order to succeed. His wife’s support is similar to the encouragement he received from his mother and father to read and write. This confession can be interpreted as the author’s attempt to create an intimate relationship with us by appearing vulnerable and transparent, but it can also be an attempt to excuse previous mistakes. I propose this because the essay, in hindsight, failed to acknowledge the controversy Bill Cosby is known for today.

Cosby is no longer remembered as “America’s Dad,” but for the allegations of rape and sexual assault posed against him by numerous women. Coates’ essay collection was published in the midst of the Weinstein allegations and the #MeToo campaign, and part of the conversation that followed was about all those who new about Weinstein’s behavior without reporting it. Similar for both the Cosby and Weinstein cases is that they today are reminisced as well-known secrets, and Coates is one of those people who admits that he had heard about Cosby’s allegations back in 2007. The issue with the essay today is that he cannot claim ignorance as he includes a reference to the allegations briefly in the essay in a parenthetical comment without investigating the allegations further in his discussion of Cosby’s ideology. In the introductory note he confesses that: “I knew about the allegations. They’d been written about by other journalists. I also know they deserved more than the one line they ultimately occupied in this piece [...],” but “I had my own fears of failure lingering” (11). What Coates indirectly says with his introductory notes is that “This Is How We Lost to the White Man” was written as a compromise between his two warring ideals. He tries to persuade us to see that it was an necessary evil for him to support his family and start the career that lead him to where he is today by claiming it was a sacrifice: “But the attention [the essay] garnered and the relationship it began with *The Atlantic* marked the first period in my life where I was

stable enough to make more attempts and thus fulfill my own dream of walking the same path as my heroes, as Baldwin, or Hurston” (11). His sacrifice, he urges, allowed him to start a relationship with *The Atlantic*, which ultimately allowed for him to write “with great meaning” on the topics on race that he finds important today.

As discussed in Chapter Two, Coates’ experience is largely driven by fear. In *Between the World and Me*, the fear was grounded in his vulnerability: in always being a possible victim of violence, and the fear he feels for not being able to protect his son from a dangerous society. But the fear represented in the introductory note to his essay on Cosby is the author’s fear of failure: he is afraid of not succeeding in providing for his family and he is afraid of not living up to his own literary ambitions. The pressure he feels to succeed can be connected to the idea that black men must be twice as good. Ultimately, these restraints led to his decision to not cover the darker side of the Cosby story. With an echo from *The Beautiful Struggle*, he admits that he has been failing all his life, as suggested by his relationship to school and education:

In the classrooms of my youth, I was forever a “conduct” problem, forever in need of “improvement,” forever failing to “work up to potential.” I wondered then if something was wrong with me, if there was some sort of brain damage that compelled me to color outside the lines. I’d felt like a failure all of my life – stumbling out of middle school, kicked out of high school, dropping out of college. I had learned to tread in this always troubled water. But now I found myself drowning, and now I knew I would not drown alone. (*We Were Eight Years in Power* 6)

But the familiar tale from *The Beautiful Struggle* about failing at school and feeling inadequate now has an additional layer, as he says “I knew I would not drown alone.” His failure is not just his own but would also entail his son and wife, who would suffer from it. This is where we see a separation between the author who writes for himself and the cause, and the working journalist who brings food to the table. As he described in his memoir, most of the kids in his neighborhood did not have fathers who supported them, so it seems reasonable that he is afraid of not creating a safe environment for his son. His own father, who worked several jobs to provide for Coates as a young boy and his siblings, functions as a role model. As Paul Coates with his publishing company and other jobs, his son sees writing as a way to both be a supporting father and a man who follows in the footsteps of important

black men who fought for equality through writing. Today, evidence shows that Coates, this generation's James Baldwin, has reached his goal of both supporting his family financially and of becoming an intellectual who can write influentially on subjects of race. His position as an influencer is the reason why he needs to make excuses for what he wrote over ten years ago: because his prominence and current position as a public intellectual demand him to reveal the truth.

Some people within the black community argue that black men fail in supporting their families because of a lack of effort and poor values. One of the public figures that expresses this view is Cosby. At the 50th Anniversary commemoration of the Brown vs Topeka Board of Education Supreme Court Decision in 2004, he delivered a speech that would later be known as the "pound cake speech." In his speech, Cosby criticized the new generation of black men for being lazy while at the same time urging the black audience not to blame the white man for their problems. Most controversially he said:

Looking at the incarcerated, these are not political criminals. These are people going around stealing Coca Cola. People getting shot in the back of the head over a piece of pound cake! Then we all run out and are outraged, "The cops shouldn't have shot him" What the hell was he doing with the pound cake in his hand? (laughter and clapping). I wanted a piece of pound cake just as bad as anybody else (laughter) And I looked at it and I had no money. And something called parenting said if get caught with it you're going to embarrass your mother. (Cosby, transcript)

For Cosby, the high incarceration rate is not a symptom of a society that is structured wrong, but a symptom of the fall of the black man. He accused today's youth of committing petty crimes as a result of bad parenting, as if criminals are created in a vacuum without external social forces. His assumption is highly debatable, as it is based on nostalgia rooted in the misconception that everything was better for the black community in the past. Cosby interprets hip hop culture, black-on-black crime and absent fathers as a sign of a disgraced community instead of trying to understand the underlying forces that has created said culture. Several years later, Coates would try to explain the responsible force in his essay on mass incarceration.

The Criminalized Black Father

In *Between the World and Me*, Coates had entered fatherhood and was responsible for the care and nurture of his son. By dedicating the essay to Samori, Coates continues his father's tradition of preparing his son for his status as a black man in society. The essay cautions black boys in America about the dangers and prejudice they will have to face, or try to avoid, simply because of the color of their skin. The focus is mainly on the dangers of police brutality and violence, while with "The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration," which also was published in 2015, the author expands his critique of the legal system to include the discriminatory mass incarceration of black men. In the latter, Coates introduces Daniel Patrick Moynihan's report called "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" (1965). Moynihan's report argues that centuries of oppression and racism have led to damage underestimated by the government and that at the core of all problems "lay a black family structure mutated by white oppression" (Coates 226). Media, on the other hand, ignored white responsibility and the report was used to reveal the "failure of Negro family life" (Coates 228). The first section of Coates' essay sets out to represent Moynihan as a fellow human being. It examines at length Moynihan's relationship to his own father and his troubled childhood, and includes a section from Moynihan's diary in which he wrote "Both my mother and my father – They let med down badly....I find through the years this enormous emotional attachment to Father substitutes – of whom the least rejection was cause for untold agonies – the only answer is that I have repressed my feelings towards dad" (224). While the reader may wonder why Coates has written on Moynihan's relationship to his father, upon a close examination the answer might appear to lie in his own attempt to understand why a white man would invest himself in the cause of saving the black family. Moynihan, as Cosby, saw the black family in crisis:

Within the family, each new generation of young males learn the appropriate nurturing behavior and superimpose upon their biologically given maleness this learned parental role. When the family breaks down—as it does under slavery, under certain forms of indentured labor and serfdom, in periods of extreme social unrest during wars, revolutions, famines, and epidemics, or in periods of abrupt transition from one type of economy to another—this delicate line of transmission is broken. (Geary)

The report explains how slavery and segregation broke the black family structure by way of hindering the father to function as a caring role model. Moynihan hoped the report would convince the state to provide measures of relief. Though his intentions might have come from a sincere wish to help the black family, as Coates suggests through his portrayal of him, his call for state action in order to “save” the black family had other consequences than might have been intended. Instead of admitting responsibility, white media used the report as an argument to let the black family fix their own problems. So when crime rates increased in society, politicians argued for harder punishment for minor crimes instead of investing in preventive measures. Ironically, Moynihan believed that the black family’s problems should be fixed through state involvement, but the situation only got worse by the incarceration of black men who were already vulnerable, often already on the outside of the law because of the long-term consequences of slavery and segregation. Coates writes: “Moynihan looked out and saw a black population reeling under the effects of 350 years of bondage and plunder. He believed that these effects could be addressed through state action. They were – through the mass incarceration of millions of black people” (231).

What allows for the structure of mass incarceration to exist is the criminalization of black men. In Coates’ opinion, “The American response to crime cannot be divorced from a history equating black struggle – individual and collective – with black villainy” (251). The documentary *13th* exposes a clause that allows for the exploitation of black men in the 13th amendment to the US Constitution, which states that slavery is unconstitutional, thereby granting freedom to all Americans. However there is a clause in the amendment that does not grant the inalienable right to criminals, which implies that they can be treated differently. Following the abolition of slavery and the Civil War, the rhetoric surrounding black people changed in a manner that allowed white Americans to again take control over their bodies: they arrested black men in heaps for minor crimes and forced them to labor to rebuild the South after the war as supposedly legal punishment. In other words, the new rebuilt America was erected on the exploitation of black bodies.

A similar rhetoric was used to criminalize black activists during the Civil Rights movement. They were declared criminals by the state and were consequently put in prison. *13th* shows the connection between the rise of crime rates and the baby boom generation, and exposes how politicians placed the blame with the Civil Rights Act and African American activism. In the documentary, Angela Davis submits that “crime” began to stand in as another word for “race” in political rhetoric. In that manner, the “war on crime” was directed at

people associated with Black Power, the Black Panthers, the antiwar movement, feminists and gay rights. In addition, in the 1980s, as Coates portrays in *The Beautiful Struggle*, the country saw a drug epidemic with the rise of crack and cocaine. Drugs were treated as a crime issue rather than as a health issue, so people who were arrested for possession of crack were incarcerated instead of being offered treatment for drug abuse. The war on drugs is responsible for a huge increase in arrests, and activist Pat Nolan explains in *13th* how it was experienced in black neighborhoods at the time: “All of a sudden, a scythe went through our black communities, literally cutting of men from their families, literally huge chunks just disappearing into our prisons, and for really long times.”

The “chunks just disappearing” creates an image of a strong external force that kidnaps men, almost like an alien invasion. This image of invasion is similar to the rhetoric Coates applied in *Between the World and Me* with the recurring use of the word “plunder,” and in his essay collection where he writes “[...] to be black in America was to be plundered” (211). The word “plunder” seems to be essential for Coates when describing the black experience. In *Between the World and Me*, the plunder referred to the treatment of slaves in the past, and the violence exercised towards black men by police officers in the present. In other words, plunder has been used to refer to the invasion and destruction of bodies. But in “The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration,” the plunder explains the brutality of taking away the freedom from a vast number of black men. In effect, it also breaks the family apart as fathers are separated from their wives and children.

The exclusion from social bonds through imprisonment inhibits the criminalized black male from creating or maintaining necessary relationships. In “Am I Not a Husband and a Father?: Re-membling Black Masculinity, Slave Incarceration, and Cherokee Slavery in The Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave” (2014), Keith Michael Green explains how black men, who were excluded from participating in the same legal codes as white men, were left passive in the family structure. Green points out that “[the] eternal irony at the heart of enslaved masculinity was to be in plain “sight”—physically present and able to witness one’s and other’s condition—yet removed from “mimetic view”— unable to participate in and revise the scripts that governed one’s condition” (25). In the same manner that the male slave could not function as his child’s protecting father, the incarcerated modern male is left outside as a by-stander. He can call his family and is allowed some visitation time, but he cannot participate or contribute to the upbringing of his children. He can witness his family’s struggle to get by, both financially and emotionally, but he cannot step out of his

prison cell. In other words, he is left without the chance to help secure his family on the outside, as well as he is not in a position to change his current situation. The state has physically taken away his possibility to be an available father. When, or if, he is released from prison, he still bears the stigma of failure. Bruce Western and Christopher Wildeman explain:

Women and children in low-income communities now routinely cope with absent husbands and fathers lost to incarceration and adjust to their return after release. Poor single men detached from family life are also affected, bearing the stigma of a prison record in the marriage markets of disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. (233)

The stigma the black man must bear when returning to society prohibits him from creating new stable relationships. As many men are imprisoned while young, this leads to a problem in their maturation process. Accordingly,

In modern times, arriving at adult status involves moving from school to work, then to marriage, to establishing a home and becoming a parent. Completing this sequence without delay promotes stable employment, marriage, and other positive life outcomes. The process of becoming an adult thus influences success in fulfilling adult roles and responsibilities. (Western and Wildeman 229)

Incarceration in an early adult stage is an issue in the African American man's maturation process: in his formative years, most often before he reaches adulthood, the young black man is associated with petty crimes and drug experimentation, for which the state separates him from his friends and family through imprisonment. Thus he is robbed of a stage in life where the white man would usually find a wife and steady job. Since other discriminating factors have already limited his chances, the final prison sentence it makes it even more difficult to succeed in life.

The Legal Continuation of Slavery

In his introductory note, Coates allows *Between the World and Me* to take precedence over "The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration" by dedicating the introductory note to reflections on his more famous book. Little room is left for additional information regarding the essay, which in turn misses the opportunity to elaborate on the text's intentions, as well as

other influences that can be connected to it. He lost the opportunity, for example, to show his awareness of the topic's treatment in hip hop. Common created a song titled "Letter to the Free" (2016) for DuVernay's documentary, and it summarizes the same arguments that Coates tries to make in his essay. The fact that he missed this opportunity to pay homage to other black artists strengthens the argument that he is starting to lose touch with hip hop culture. Common's song was written as a response to the history revealed in the documentary and plays over the film's credits. It portrays mass incarceration as a legal continuation of slavery:

The caged birds sings for freedom to bring
Black bodies being lost in the American dream
Blood of black being, a pastoral scene
Slavery's still alive, check amendment 13
Not whips and chains, all subliminal
Instead of 'nigga' they use the word 'criminal'

The caged birds are a symbol of the systematically enslaved or oppressed African Americans throughout American history, who have had their freedom taken away from them. Although the way of entrapment has changed since the times of slavery, black people are still limited by racially motivated oppression, which the high number of African Americans in prison cells is proof of. The song that the birds, or artists and activists, sing is the cry for equality and end of injustice, and theirs is a song that comes in many forms: through music, literature, art, movies, and other forms of expression. The lines, "Black bodies being lost in the American dream/Blood of black being, a pastoral scene," refer to the vast number of broken black bodies, the scope and brutality of violence committed in the name of the American Dream, has been watered down in modern memory. With "Slavery's still alive, check amendment 13/Not whips and chains, all subliminal/Instead of 'nigga' they use the word 'criminal'," the song comments on the rhetoric that is incorporated in the 13th Amendment, which in turn is used to criminalize black men in order to maintain power over them. The modern narrative is that African Americans, especially men, are criminals that need to be contained for society's best interest and safety. The caging of African Americans has not ended since slavery; it has just changed form and narrative. The song continues:

We staring in the face of hate again
The same hate they say will make America great again
No consolation prize for the dehumanized
For America to rise it's a matter of black lives
And we gonna free them, so we can free us
America's moment to come to Jesus

With the election of Donald Trump and events such as the demonstrations in Charlottesville, it is evident that the America is faced with a new wave of outspoken racism. “For America to rise it’s a matter of black lives” stresses the importance of the work done by the Black Lives Matter movement and African American people coming forward with their stories, as well as telling the stories of those who died in the name of the American Dream from slavery till, for example, police violence today. The only way for African Americans to truly live free, the song proposes, is by freeing white America from their belief in superiority or sheer ignorance of how their fellow countrymen are treated.

The song’s official music video further enhances these arguments by way of setting and images. The music video is shot in black and white in an old, abandoned prison. Musicians and their instruments fill the rooms and there is nothing left behind except for a few brown boxes stacked in a corner. A black 3D box is hovering in the air, at first reflecting the prison bars on its surface. At the end of the video, the frame puts the black box out on a field in front of some houses. As the box functions as a symbol of blackness, this image, symbolizes the absence of a black body. When the shot focuses on the field, the music ends and we only hear birds singing and the wind. But the lack of human presence reminds us of all men who have had their freedom taken away from them: both in slavery and through incarceration.

In the middle part of the music video, the 3D box is also framed in an empty prison cell. This image symbolizes the dehumanization of the person in the cell. By way of revealing the degrading circumstances that prisoners are forced to live with when incarcerated, Coates aims to reverse the dehumanization process: “‘They just kept overcrowding and overcrowding and not letting people go home,’ Tim told me. The prisons began holding two people in cells meant for one” (263), he recollects from an interview with ‘an inmate. The moment the body is put in a cell, its value has disappeared. It is no longer considered as a body, but as a commodity that generates profit for private prison companies. In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s

Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987), Hortense J. Spillers writes about how African men and women were thought about as cargo on slave ships, that were allotted a certain space, depending on age and gender (72). Her historical account shows that Africans from the beginning were seen as cargo and commodities. The overfilling of prison cells brings the Atlantic slave trade to mind, and illustrates a continuation of the captive body and how black incarcerated men are dehumanized. But by saying “Tim told me,” Coates uses an imprisoned man’s name to humanize him. He reminds us that the people incarcerated are human beings with names, feelings and thoughts.

Conclusion

Racism matters. To be an Other in this country matters
— and the disheartening truth is that it will likely continue to matter.

Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Origin of Others* (xvi)

In a foreword to Toni Morrison's *The Origin of Others* (2017), which draws on her Norton lectures, Ta-Nehisi Coates shares his pessimism for the American future. He cannot imagine a society where racism will no longer be an issue. This is not surprising, as the findings in this thesis show that racism and oppression are crucial in his representation of the black experience. His view on the future for minorities took an especially dark turn when Donald Trump won the presidential election in 2016, which the author illustrates in his assertive essay, "The First White President" (2017) that also functions as his essay collection's epilogue in which he claims that Trump has built his power solely on the fact that he is white. He argues that it is clear the 45th President is a white supremacist that does not accept black people as equal citizens in the country he has been elected to protect. In other words, the Black Lives Matter movement and artists that force awareness about white supremacy in US society are as important as ever.

In this thesis I have explored how Coates represents black experience in his body of works, and how his texts engage in a modern conversation about racism by incorporating the aesthetics and politics of hip hop. I have actively pulled from rap, visual arts, and poetry in an attempt to better understand Coates' texts: literary works that are placed in a large artistic and political movement that collectively tries to unravel the complexity of racism in the United States.

I began Chapter One by investigating how the author incorporates hip hop aesthetics into the story and narrative structure in *The Beautiful Struggle*. The chapter illustrates how he introduces the technique of sampling, which is characteristic of hip hop, into his chapters work and connects it to the literary tradition in which black authors often signify upon each other's works. My reading argues that Coates used his connection to hip hop culture to establish his identity as a young black man: it helped him to navigate a series of influences, both in relation to his neighborhood, school, and his father.

In the Chapter Two I discuss how vulnerability and fear are important themes in *Between the World and Me*. Coates connects black suffering from the past with the violence in the present through, for example, his critique of police brutality. By referring to Judith Butler's theories, I argued that the black man is always vulnerable to violence as a member of a minority group. His black skin is exposed in the public sphere, and therefore he has no control over who might break his body.

The third chapter examines the figure of the black father in Coates's oeuvre, with special focus on the essays "This is How We Lost to the White Man" and "The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration," both included in the essay collection *We Were Eight Years in Power* in which he writes about his fear of failure both as a writer and as a father. His fear of failure is connected to the notion that black men are absent fathers, in addition to the fact that they statistically are likely to be incarcerated at one point in their lives. This stigmatization is a consequence of the rhetoric that criminalizes black men and the effect of the legal justice system that discriminates on the basis of racial profiling. The chapter connects modern mass incarceration with slavery and proposes that the system is upheld in order to maintain white power.

While writing this thesis, Coates' name has become increasingly more famous. He has been discussed in American press on a daily basis, as much as he has been asked to comment on several subjects when a new question about race relations has been posed. At an event at Evanston Township High School in Illinois, for example, he was asked to answer why a white person should never say the word "nigga" when rapping along to a song (Ruiz-Grossman). He has become a representative for the modern black generation: those who are the children of the men and women who fought for equal rights during the Civil Rights era. This new generation grew up with hip hop, police brutality, and grew to finally see the first black president move into the White House. Although the experience is much the same for this generation as for their parents, the backlash of the Obama-era and the huge contrast that has been evident following Trump's racist blunders, this generation is perhaps even more focused today on raising awareness in the public eye.

The author has grown to become a prominent figure in the American public, and in the black community, his name itself is enough to signalize his values and ideas. Hip hop artists Joey Purp and Chance the Rapper, for example, make a reference to him in their song "Girls @" (2017): "Where all the girls with the book in the club/With the readin' glasses on, gettin' shook in the club/Readin' Ta-Nehisi Coates, hummin' SpottieOttieDope." Coates who has

always been interested in hip hop has now become a key figure in black culture and his name is used in the song to give it an intellectual stamp. Another example is found in the second episode of the TV-series *Dear White People* (2017). After an aspiring black journalist has published a story on a racist “black-face-party” for the college newspaper, he is met by his peers who shout: “Yo, we got the next Ta-Nehisi Coates in this motherfucker” and “Great piece man. Welcome to the revolution” (“Chapter II”). The shout-out signalizes that Coates has earned legitimacy and a reputation among young black students, and that he is a symbol of a new movement for them. That a comedy show uses Coates as a reference also proves that he has become a part of black popular culture. The “Yo” and “motherfucker” also affirm his belonging with hip hop aesthetics, as they are not only common in rap, but are also part of his own lingo.

How he got to where he is today, Coates explains in his essay collection. He claims it was a matter of timing and the opportunities that were made available by the election of President Barack Obama: “My contention is that Barack Obama is directly responsible for the rise of a crop of black writers and journalists who achieved prominence during his two terms [...] I was one of those writers” (8-9). In Chapter Three, I wrote about how Coates felt he was “drowning” when he could not properly support his family. But when Obama paved the way for black writers and awakened questions about African American identity among journalists, Coates writes that: “the wind was waking all around [him]” (*We Were Eight Years in Power* 9). The wind symbolizes a change of intellectual or political climate fitting for his writing and his wish to find “great meaning.” But by using the symbolism of the “wind” he is also expressing that he believes his success was out of his control: as if a natural force drove him to write.

Coates’ gratitude to Obama is not appreciated by everyone, and in December 2017, Harvard University professor Cornel West wrote a commentary in *The Guardian* in which he accused Coates of being the “neoliberal face of the black freedom struggle.” His critique lies in that he perceives Coates to have an “allegiance” with Obama and the black elite. West claims that the author,

[...] represents the neoliberal wing that sounds militant about white supremacy but renders black fightback invisible [...] Coates rightly highlights the vicious legacy of white supremacy – past and present. He sees it everywhere and ever reminds us of its plundering effects. Unfortunately, he hardly keeps track of our fightback, and never

connects this ugly legacy to the predatory capitalist practices, imperial policies [...] or the black elite's refusal to confront poverty, patriarchy or transphobia. (West)

With this, Coates is placed in a tradition where black intellectuals debate each other. Although West and Coates do not differ much in their views on racial politics and issues, the problem, from West's perspective, seems to lie in the racial issues Coates emphasizes in his writings. In an interview with *The New York Times*, West later went on to question Coates's authenticity. As I discussed in Chapter One, Coates places himself within the hip hop tradition and street culture when writing *The Beautiful Struggle*, although I conclude that his father's role in his life and other social circumstances placed him outside that community as a kind of observer. In spite of the fact that establishes authenticity through his writing and competence in linguistics, music, and social codes, I have questioned his true experience with "the struggle." This is also what West points out when attacking Coates' language and sense of community in *We Were Eight Years in Power*. "Who's the 'we'?" West rhetorically asks in an interview, "When's the last time he's been through the ghetto, in the hoods, to the schools and indecent housing and mass unemployment? We were in power for eight years? My God. Maybe he and some of his friends might have been in power, but not poor working people" (Cornish).

West places Coates with the black elite who he argues refuses to confront issues such as Wall Street greed and war. What becomes clear through this public confrontation is that Coates must face the consequences of his position as an influencer. His newfound role comes with the responsibility to represent black community in the public arena and testify to experiences of racism and oppression. His success and friends in high places, however, make it difficult to simply accept that Coates belongs to the "we" or at least we need to question who the "we" he is addressing are today. As I discuss in Chapter Three, Coates has, arguably been more privileged than he lets on in his writing. The privileged experience lies in how he has had both his mother and father present throughout his adolescence, and in acquiring a secure job with which to provide for his family. His success makes it difficult for him to belong in either group, which is a black experience in itself.

In a forceful passage from Ava DuVernay's *13th*, the documentary juxtaposes black and white footages from the Civil Rights movement with documented scenes from President Donald Trump's campaign rallies. The uncanny similarities between the past and present confrontations between black and white Americans testify to the setback African Americans have faced after the period of their first black president. The modern footage shows a white man repeatedly shouting: "Fuck you!" to a black man, and then spits him in the face. The

president is heard urging his supporters to: “Knock the crap out of ‘em, would you? Seriously!” while the film shows a group of young white men pushing a black woman out of the crowd. The images we see shift between violent scenes from both the past and the present, but nothing but the colors on the tape differ. The collage ends with a black and white photo of black protesters walking down the street. The group looks like it belongs with the Civil Rights movement but a poster with “Black Lives Matter” written on it relates it to modern activism. In that manner, the documentary amplifies the similarities between the past and the present, proposing that little has changed. White people’s hatred never went away during the Obama-administration; it is only with Trump’s election that outspoken racism comes to the fore.

To point out similarities between the past and the present is a device we have seen several times in this thesis: artists that through their mediums connect black history and oppression to the contemporary reality black men and women experience. For example, I have shown how John Legend and Common, with their song “Glory,” shift between old and new musical forms and references to connect today’s freedom struggle with past movements, how Nas connects the entrapment of the body through incarceration with the chains of slavery, and how Titus Kaphar combined classical and modern motifs in his artworks to convey the historical repetition of black oppression. Coates, too, has consistently looked back in his writing: he has looked back to the past to explain how society’s structure allows for racism and inequality; he has looked back to explain how he has experienced living in a black body; and he has looked back to explain how he matured as a writer. What this thesis has shown, and what all these artists express, is that the black experience is always connected to history and the past. My finding is that the black experience is a repetition of oppression with a difference: a difference in rhetoric and means to secure power over African Americans.

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