

The problem of racism in between the world and me

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



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The Nostalgic Perspective of History

In *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates, the author begins the novel by recalling an instance in which a talk show host asked what it meant to “lose his body”. Unbeknownst to the host, this particular question was a tired one. Coates expressed disappointment at this disconnect of not only the host, but also the audience because to him, the answer to the question could be blatantly found in U. S. history. In order to explain this complex concept of one’s body, Coates structures the novel in the form of a letter to his son, Samori, by reflecting upon his own past experiences.

The problem with most (white) Americans is that they look back at history in an idealized way, a perspective that makes them more comfortable.

However, nostalgia is not history. Coates states that this nostalgic perspective of history is harmful because it facilitates the injustices from history to persist which, in turn causes harm to black bodies. After the murder of Mike Brown, Samori was deeply effected by this injustice, but

Coates made no effort to console his own son because he believed that comforting him with false optimism would be worse than facing reality.

The Childhood of an Afro-American Kid

Coates first looks back at his difficult childhood in Baltimore. He described the teenagers in his neighborhood as “extravagant” in the way they dressed and acted; all of this was to hide their own vulnerability and acted as a distraction from the real dangers of white America. In Coates’ memory of Baltimore, parents would beat their kids, the education system was immensely flawed, and the police did nothing to protect African American children. As a result, these children lived in fear because all the authority figures in their lives did not protect them the way they are supposed to. Drugs, violence, or crime was used as a means of being in control of themselves and escape from their unwarranted fear. Similarly, the Civil Rights Movement generation of African Americans experienced constant fear from not only white segregationists, but also the presence of the United States government looming over them.

The Dream

Although laws and acts were passed to supposedly protect the rights of all citizens regardless of their skin color, the U. S. government did little to nothing to enforce these laws; progress was achieved by the strength, number, and perseverance of the black community. This lack of governmental support all throughout history has hindered African Americans from achieving the Dream, as Coates describes it. The Dream is to have the

ideal American life: white picket fences, cherry pies, and the 4th of July or dignity, social status, security, and even privilege.

Consequently, a lot of Civil Rights activists began to reject Martin Luther King Jr.'s doctrine of nonviolent action because they grew tired of the constant humiliation and violence endured by African Americans and became frustrated with the movement's stunted progress. Thus, notable figures such as Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X started the Black Power movement. As a man who grew up only knowing crime, poverty, racism, and violence, the Dream was essentially unattainable for Coates and many other African Americans like him. That is why Coates really resonated with Malcolm X's realistic beliefs of having the right to protect their body. Although some may argue that Malcolm X's words were bleak and uncomfortable, Coates associated his honesty with intellectual freedom.

When pursuing the Dream, it is always at the expense of minorities, specifically African Americans. Although there is nothing inherently wrong with wanting opportunities, safety, and happiness, Coates warns that racial inequality in the U. S. makes these desires not entirely innocent. When Coate's wife, Kenyatta, was pregnant with Samori, he worried about the security of his wife and son; they had very little money and did not have any furniture. When Kenyatta's mother visits them, she urges Coates to take care of Kenyatta. At this moment, Coates realized he not only had to look after his own body, but also his family's. Coates recalls a time when Samori was a toddler and was walking slowly. Suddenly, a white woman pushed him physically and verbally to go faster. Horrified by this woman's actions of

potentially hurting his son's body, Coates verbally retaliates. Forgetting that he was no longer in Baltimore or Howard University, these cutting words left his mouth without hesitation, and the result of this could have been bad as he was threatened to be arrested by a white man, another threat towards his body. The statement " I could have you arrested!" almost acts as a violation of his own body; this stranger was threatening him to take and destroy his body like many others in the past.

Throughout American history, the bodies of African Americans have always been threatened whether it was by slave owners, white supremacists, the government, or total strangers; all of these people are " the Dreamers". Even if the comment by " the Dreamer" was not racially charged, the history of the plunder of black bodies will always remain and it will be taken in that context. This event was another pivotal moment for Coates, as a father, because he will not always be there for Samori to protect his body.

Perhaps that is why Coates refuses to raise Samori as innocent as possible.

As Samori grew older, Coates could see that he enjoyed the abnormal amount of security of his body. This unusual security inadvertently leads to Samori's emotional reaction to the acquittal of Mike Brown's murderer. This response was exactly what Coates did not want to happen, but it did.

Although it may have taken this one incident to make Samori realize the true nature of the Dream, these crimes are universal and incessant.

Prince Jones

Coates also reminisces about somebody whom he admired at Howard University. His name was Prince Jones. According to Coates, Prince lived up to his name; he was a born-again Christian, handsome, warm, and generous. Even though Coates did not know him very well, his death made an extreme impact on his life. On his way to see his fiancée, Prince Jones was murdered by a police officer. The officer claimed that Prince attempted to run him over with his car but it was revealed that he was known to be dishonest and incompetent; additionally, he was looking for a suspect that did not look like Prince. In the end, the officer was acquitted. Coates ponders what would have happened if he had been in Prince's place. Prince was the model of an upstanding person from an affluent family. Unfortunately, these respectable characteristics were not enough to save him from his unjust death.

In Part III of the book, Coates visits Prince's mother, Dr. Mabel Jones. Like Prince, Dr. Jones was a respectable person. She had humble beginnings but her ferocious determination allowed her to attend Louisiana State University on a full scholarship, served in the navy, and become a radiologist. However, she had her experiences with racism. These opportunities allowed her to protect Prince's body as a child and even provide him with various opportunities. But her attempts at giving Prince's body security failed. Like the fate of Solomon Northup from *12 Years a Slave*, the free black man who was abducted and sold into slavery, Prince's life was treated like something disposable by "the Dreamers."

My Opinion on the Book

As I read *Between the World and Me*, I also listened to the audiobook narrated by Coates. I did not expect to enjoy this book as much as I did due to the subject of the writing. What I mean by subject is that I thought I would not enjoy it because I would not be able to relate to the author. And I didn't. Coates provided great insight on what it meant to be a black child, father, and man in America. I also had no idea what it meant to "protect your body" and how much it affected everyday life for African Americans. Although the end of the book was left with very little optimism, I think it is more of a letter to Samori about determination of truth rather than hope. Even after the death of Mike Brown, Coates refused to comfort Samori in order to show him the truth of what it means to be African American (though this truth is dismal). The death of Prince Jones was a moment that really struck me as unbelievable. I was in awe and horror at the complete neglect of Prince's murder and the lack of persecution of the officer. In class, we learned that essentially, African Americans could never "catch a break". Immediately after slavery was abolished, African Americans were left without reparations, faced Jim Crow laws, suffered the most during the Great Depression, and experienced years of segregation and discrimination. All of these events in history set the foundation for the African American struggle of protecting their bodies.