

African american  
history in the present:  
cultural liberation in  
coates's writing



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There is no doubt that America is a racially divided nation, evidenced by the roots of slavery, the de jure segregation of the Civil Rights era, and even the de facto segregation of the modern school system and neighborhoods. The journey of the black man in America has been long and arduous and still continues today, despite the common belief that racial oppression is dead. Ta-Nehisi Coates, a modern black activist, attempts to uncover this white veil of ignorance in his 2015 account *Between the World and Me*. Through his analysis of the black struggle, Coates asserts that the history of race and blackness in America suppresses the African American people while simultaneously providing a means of cultural liberation and black identity.

In order to understand the profound effect that the past has on the present, one must first understand the history of the African American struggle. Throughout history, the black body has been consistently enslaved by white power; Coates contends that “ sometimes this power is direct (lynching), and sometimes it is insidious (redlining)” (Coates, p. 42). Whether the power is enforced directly through slavery and public beatings or insidiously through prejudiced literacy tests, the white man remains the clear victor. One cannot study American history without witnessing heinous crimes against the black race. In his youth, Coates attempts to find a history in which African Americans can pride themselves as the victors, attempting to find glory in his own black Tolstoy. He claims, “ they [white people] had their champions, and somewhere we must find ours” (p. 45). Coates becomes frustrated in his search as the narratives of black history are much more mangled than he had imagined. Instead of a clear story of black liberation and power Coates discovers that even the well-educated, respected black activists do not agree

on history. He states, “ I had come looking for a parade, a military review of champions marching in ranks. Instead, I was left with a brawl of ancestors, a herd of dissenters, sometimes marching together but just as often marching away from each other” (Coates, p. 48). To young Coates, black Americans have no clear historical identity to pride themselves in. The only history is that of oppression, lynching, and enslavement.

This bleak history continues to shape modern black life in America. Through the lens of suppression African Americans have been taught to live in fear, not only of whites but of each other and their destinies as well. Living in the ghettos of Baltimore, Coates feels destined towards a life of failure, “ everyone had lost a child, somehow, to the streets, to jail, to drugs, to guns” (Coates, p. 16). The cards are stacked against the inner-city youth and this destiny feels impossible to escape. This fear permeates the culture and translates into violence; young people use violence as a way to make a name for themselves, threatening innocent people as a way to establish power and dominance. Parents, on the other hand, use this fear and violence as a way to protect their children from the world. Coates’ father states, ““ either I can beat him, or the police”” (Coates, p. 16). This fear of reality causes one to feel as if they are not in control of their past, present, or future. Instead of being able to ponder intellectual thought or self-reflect, one must instead spend their time strategizing how to survive on the violent streets. Black Americans, such as Coates, have been robbed of the privileges of youth.

This theme of fear and violence, derived from history, is evident in the school system as well. Coates describes the school system in Baltimore as being <https://assignbuster.com/african-american-history-in-the-present-cultural-liberation-in-coatess-writing/>

concerned primarily with discipline and compliance, valuing this over education and success. The black community does not view schooling as a place of education but merely as a tool to hopefully escape their seemingly pre-prescribed destiny of a life of imprisonment. Coates demonstrates this when he describes the attitude of African Americans towards the school system, “ When our elders presented school to us, they did not present it as a place of high learning but as a means of escape from death and penal warehousing” (Coates, p. 26). Failure in school becomes the equivalent of choosing a lifetime of drug use, prison, and, essentially, mortality. Coates, however, later discovers how even education and apparent assimilation into white society cannot save the black man. His classmate from Howard, Prince Jones, had seemingly overcome his pre-prescribed destiny through his pursuit of education, but is senselessly murdered by a police officer because of his race anyway. This is proof of the history of oppression living on today, “ Prince was not killed by a single officer so much as he was murdered by his country and all the fears that have marked it from birth” (Coates, p. 78). The officer alone is not the bigot but it is the nation founded on fear and enslavement.

The black history of oppression cannot survive without a history of white supremacy. Coates consistently analyzes ‘ the Dream’ in which white people pride themselves on. The Dream consists of white picket fences, neatly trimmed lawns, and afternoon barbeques. This dream is what people who think they are white strive for, a symbol of white life in America. The Dream, however, is based off of an invented past and is ultimately intangible. It is built off of ignoring white privilege and black suppression. There is no place

for African Americans in this dream; it cannot be accomplished and frankly does not exist in their universe. Coates criticizes the Dream itself but instructs the black community to avoid struggling for the Dreamers. He states, “ The Dreamers will have to learn to struggle themselves, to understand that the field of their Dream, the stage where they have painted themselves white, is the deathbed of us all” (Coates, p. 151).

The burden of responsibility to demolish the Dream is on the people who believe themselves to be white, the Dreamers themselves, not on the black community. This point of view that the responsibility lies in the oppressors and not the oppressed is similar to the point of view of James Baldwin, who claims, “ we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it” (Baldwin, p. 10). White Americans must first realize the fault in their Dream by recognizing that it is built upon a false narrative before African Americans can make progress.

While the apparent history of social, political, and economic oppression of African Americans has suppressed the African American people in modern society, it has also provided a means for African Americans to develop a rich culture and shared black identity. This is evident in Coates’s experiences at Howard University, where black students of diverse backgrounds have come together in a greater pursuit of education and growth. The culture is also evidenced in music, in the powerful words of Dr. Dre’s poetry and Aretha Franklin’s songs. As much as the tumultuous history is polarizing for the nation, it is empowering for African Americans. Coates asserts, “ They made us into a race. We made ourselves into a people” (Coates, p. 149). Despite <https://assignbuster.com/african-american-history-in-the-present-cultural-liberation-in-coatess-writing/>

constant oppression and discrimination, African Americans have thrown out “ the identities imposed on [them] by Virginia planters obsessed with enslaving as many Americans as possible” (Coates, p. 42) and created a new legacy and culture.

Through *Between the World and Me*, Coates proves that the history of race and blackness in American culture continues to suppress the African American people, causing them to live in fear, while simultaneously providing a means of cultural liberation and black identity. The violence of the Baltimore ghettos, the lack of control over one’s own body and destiny, the police discrimination, and the education system all represent “ A society that protects some people through a safety net of schools, government-backed home loans, and ancestral wealth but can only protect you [African Americans] with the club of criminal justice” (Coates, p. 17-18). Society has a long way to go in terms of breaking down the racial-divide in the nation but Coates offers a beacon of hope for the future. When driving home from Prince Jones’s mother’s house, Mable Jones, Coates describes the desolate state of blackness in America, “ through the windshield I saw the mark of these ghettos—the abundance of beauty shops, churches, liquor stores, and crumbling housing—and I felt the old fear” (Coates, p. 152). However, he addresses a brighter future when he continues, “ through the windshield I saw the rain coming down in sheets” (Coates, p. 152). In literature, water is symbolic of rebirth; by describing the rain washing over his car Coates alludes to a better, equal tomorrow.