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GONÇALO CHOLANT

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OF THE BLACK BODY**

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Praça D. Dinis

Colégio de S. Jerónimo, Coimbra

Correspondência:

Apartado 3087

3000-995 COIMBRA, Portugal

Coordenação:

Fernando Fontes

Gonçalo Cholant*

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Abstract: The aim of this work is exploring questions of identity construction and the body in a context of insecurity, violence, and trauma, as presented by Ta-Nehisi Coates. In *Between the World and Me* (2015), winner of the National Book Award (non-fiction), Coates delivers an exploration of his personal history in an eloquent letter to his son, approaching the matter of the insecurity of the black body in the United States. The author states: “America understands itself as God’s handiwork, but the black body is the clearest evidence that America is the work of men”, questioning the moral superiority of the American ideals and its exceptionalism, creating a deep analysis of blackness and Americanness, connecting the feelings of growing up in the 1960s and 1970s with the experience of black life in our days. Coates is in deep conversation with James Baldwin, weaving an argument that demonstrates the ever-present linear path of violence inflicted upon the black body in the United States, from slavery to Reconstruction, the Civil Rights era and finally to the present state of police brutality and mass incarceration.

Keywords: violence, African-American literature, trauma, racism.

Introduction

The black body is the locus in which the American ideals of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are evinced and contradicted, according to Ta-Nehisi Coates. In the aftermath of countless police shootings, acts of police brutality and the general feeling that a black body is never safe in the United States (regardless of its economic status, educational background, or abidance to the politics of respectability professed by the conservative establishment), Coates investigates how the insecurity of the black body is perennial in the American experience as a formative force of Americanness and its self-professed exceptionalism. The aim of this work is exploring questions of identity construction and the body in a context of insecurity, violence, and trauma, as presented by Ta-Nehisi Coates in *Between the World and Me* (2015). As a father of a teenage black boy, Coates writes about his preoccupations directly to his son, and ultimately to his readership, in a letter that touches several themes that are relevant to the (inter)national conversation regarding violence and racism in contemporary times.

The birth of a better world is not ultimately up to you, though I know, each day,
there are grown men and women who tell you otherwise. The world needs saving

* PhD candidate in American Studies at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Coimbra/Centre for Social Studies, Portugal. Contact: gcholant@gmail.com

precisely because of the actions of these same men and women. I am not a cynic. I love you, and I love the world, and I love it more with every new inch I discover. But you are a black boy, and you must be responsible for your body in a way that other boys cannot know. Indeed, you must be responsible for the worst actions of other black bodies, which, somehow, will always be assigned to you. And you must be responsible for the bodies of the powerful – the policeman who cracks you with a nightstick will quickly find his excuse in your furtive movements. And this is not reducible to just you – the women around you must be responsible for their bodies in a way that you never will know. You have to make your peace with the chaos, but you cannot lie. You cannot forget how much they took from us and how they transfigured our very bodies into sugar, tobacco, cotton, and gold. (Coates, 2015: 64)

This is one example of how Coates explores the themes of racism, colonialism, violence, and the body in *Between the World and Me*, winner of the National Book Award in the non-fiction category in 2015. He is also the author of *The Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons, and an Unlikely Road to Manhood*, a memoir about his father, a former Black Panther, and *We Were Eight Years in Power – An American Tragedy*, a compilation of pieces previously published in *The Atlantic*, concerning the Obama era with the addition of new commentary. Coates has long written for *The Atlantic*, contributing with social and political criticism, presenting direct and at times harsh commentary about the African-American experience, reflecting upon what it means to be black and American, two identities that often seem to be at odds. Like Toni Morrison, Coates deals with language in a manner that evades the need to explain the black universe to a white audience, being brutal at times. He commented on this impression stating that most of what he read in the 1990's was affected by such plague of explanation, which inherently diluted the experience of centuries of violence, exploitation, and oppression. He made his writing to be the opposite: blunt, authoritative, and unapologetic (León, 2015). Morrison, who considered Coates writing to be “required reading”, states in praise: “I’ve been wondering who might fill the intellectual void that plagued me after James Baldwin died. Clearly it is Ta-Nehisi Coates” (Morrison, 2016). Michael Eric Dyson, commenting on Morrison’s praise, points to the similarities between the authors:

What they [Coates and Baldwin] share in common, and what I believe Morrison meant in the comparison, is a forensic, analytical, cold-eyed stare down of white moral innocence. And the concomitant insistence that we awaken from the fantasies, and swear off the myths, of the *imago caucasii*, the collective white imagination that has made the world, or at least this country, in its image. (Dyson, 2015)

American Exceptionalism

The relation of Americanness, its flawed exceptionalism, and the black body is summarized by Coates in the politics of the black body in the United States, claiming: “America understands itself as God’s handiwork, but the black body is the clearest evidence that America is the work of men” (Coates, 2015: 15). The violence inflicted over subjects who possess black bodies is testament to the visceral need to contain and dominate all that does not participate in the ideological conception of the (American) Dream.

Between the World and Me is a letter addressed to Coates’ son, Samori, in which he expresses his concerns about the experience of carrying a black body in a society that sees it as unwanted, exploring the fragility and insecurity of being black and being American. The letter departs from the acquittal of Trayvon Martin’s killer, George Zimmermann, which caused Coates’ son to feel frustrated and upset, as he could have easily been the victim. The father refuses to give his son false hopes of a better future, he could only offer something he calls “the struggle”. Coates was not able to assure that everything would be all right, so he decided to share his own story of dealing with this reality, wishing that his son could somehow come to terms in his own journey as a black citizen in white America. The title of the book is related to a poem by Richard Wright published in 1957 (2008: 115), and in one of the epigraphs of the text, which describes the brutality of a lynching scene.

And one morning while in the woods I stumbled
suddenly upon the thing,
Stumbled upon it in a grassy clearing guarded by scaly
oaks and elms
And the sooty details of the scene rose, thrusting
themselves between the world and me....

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 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....

Coates speaks to his son, in a first instance, but also to all America, white, black and brown. The choice of a letter should come under consideration, since it offers a clear addressee, as well as makes clear that it is a conversation. It expresses the desire to reach the other person, to share a message, and in this case, it allows the readership to gain access to a private connection between a father and a son. Baldwin again appears here, since the artifice of a letter about race relations was also present in *The Fire Next Time*, in which we similarly find the advice of a parental figure to a younger black man, in this case, Baldwin's nephew.

He writes:

This innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish. Let me spell out precisely what I mean by that for the heart of

the matter is here and the crux of my dispute with my country. You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and for no other reason. The limits to your ambition were thus expected to be settled. 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. (Baldwin, 1963: 7)

Though this passage expresses the deterministic character of the African-American experience in the 1960s, it still sounds familiar in our times, where poverty and racism continue to define the possible spaces and positions that black Americans are able to occupy, and mass incarceration decries the value assigned to the large numbers of African-Americans, Latinos, and peoples of color in a white supremacist culture.

The Dream

In Coates' texts we are constantly reminded of "the Dream", the imaginary space where whiteness rules, where he, and his family, and his race, will never have access:

I have seen that dream all my life. It is perfect houses with nice lawns. It is Memorial Day cookouts, block associations, and driveways. The Dream is tree houses and the Cub Scouts. The Dream smells like peppermint but tastes like strawberry shortcake. And for so long I have wanted to escape into the Dream, to fold my country over my head like a blanket. But this has never been an option because the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies. (Coates, 2015: 12)

The reality of the Dream and the violence of Baltimore are somehow connected to the young Coates, who at the time, did not fully understand that the maintaining of the former depended on the policies applied to the latter.

This duality of black and white spaces and identities is also transferred to the text in respect to its possible readership, as stressed by Tressie Cottom in her article "Between the World and Me Book club: Two Texts Masquerading as One", in which the author claims that *Between the World and Me* could be read differently by a black audience and by a white one.

Even though the book begins with an address – (“Son,”) – Coates does not really introduce the reader to his son until page 69. That is the moment when we first hear his son’s name and begin to get a sense of their relationship. This is what gives me the sense of two different texts that were meant to be more cohesive than they end up being when read as ordered. (Cottom, 2015)

The first text is about the ugliness of America. The violence, the blood, the strife, and the racism that could only be perceived as novelty to a white audience that is not used to such reality. The second text deals with the relation between Coates and his son, a text perceived by Cottom as directed to a black audience. It can be summarized in the concerns of a black parent who fears for his child’s life in a society that is marked by rampant racism. This is the part black readers can learn from, and benefit. To see these feelings of insecurity being echoed in an eloquent manner, where the right words are able to shape sentiments still somewhat unspoken. It is also in this text that black communities can see their history, their leaders, and their culture being discussed and praised, where the urge not to dilute its roots is found.

The first text describes the dangers lived by the predominantly black communities in which Coates grew up. This text brings novelty only to a white/middle class audience, whose experience in the suburbs is distant from the reality of police brutality, discrimination, drug abuse and poverty found on the streets. Such experience is commonplace to a black audience, who benefits mainly from the second text, Cottom (2015) states:

He wants them [the white audience] to feel the strangulation of struggle, to rob them of breath for one heartbeat longer than is comfortable. He mainly does that by using some version of “the body” as a rhetorical device – employing it, by my count, some 101 times over 156 sparse pages.

Coates states unyieldingly: “Here is what I would like for you to know: In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body – it is heritage” (2015: 90). In one of the most brutal passages, Coates delves in to the way language serves to make opaque the real visceral experience of racism in America. Commenting on the action of the

police force, here simply called “destroyers”, Coates accounts for the violent physical acts performed on the black body in the name of America:

There is nothing uniquely evil in these destroyers or even in this moment. The destroyers are merely men enforcing the whims of our country, correctly interpreting its heritage and legacy. It is hard to face this. But all our phrasing – race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy – serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth. You must never look away from this. (*ibidem*: 12).

In his resolution, Coates may be even considered to be a pessimist, accepting that there is no hope for America, where racism is one of the strongest forces in the formation of the social imaginary of the dominant white culture. The whiteness of America is compared to a syndicate dedicated to the protection of right to be the sole controller of the bodies, which uses direct violence, such as lynchings, and police brutality, or insidious, as in redlining and the mass incarceration system. Coates states:

The truth is that the police reflect America in all of its will and fear, and whatever we might make of this country’s criminal justice policy, it cannot be said that it was imposed by a repressive minority. The abuses that have followed from these policies – the sprawling carceral state, the random detention of black people, the torture of suspects – are the product of democratic will. And so to challenge the police is to challenge the American people who send them into the ghettos armed with the same self-generated fears that compelled the people who think they are white to flee the cities and into the Dream. (*ibidem*: 69)

Judith Butler analyses the Rodney King trials, after the 1992 Los Angeles riots, in which an emblematic taping of racist violence conjugated with the use of disproportionate force by officials against a black body, is presented as evidence for the defense of the police force in question. According to the author, the attorney used such taping to cultivate an identification with white paranoia, in which a black body is always assumed to have performed an action which is the cause to such reprimand, or is about to perform such action, even when there is no evidence corroborating the case.

“This is an action that the black male body is always already performing within that white racist imaginary, has always already performed prior to the emergence of any video” (Butler, 1993: 19).

The police is there to protect whiteness from violence, a violence that is “the eminent action of that black male body” (*ibidem*: 19). Being an instrument of protection, the violence inflicted by the police is not perceived as such by the white audience. Which leads us to think that there is no real hope for black bodies in the United States as long as a white supremacist power engine continues to rule, at least in Coates perspective. DuBois asked in *The Souls of the Black Folk*, in 1903, “How does it feel to be a problem?”, Coates, in 2015 answers in a manner that reinstates that the problem is not yet solved. Coates opposes the view of Dr. Martin Luther King, who famously stated that “The arc of the moral universe is long, but bend towards Justice”, stating that for him “[...] the universe was physical, and its moral arc bent toward chaos then concluded in a box” (Coates, 2015: 28). The politics of the black body in contemporary America cannot say otherwise. What is clear is the resilience of African-Americans as stated by Dubois when describing “[...] 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” (DuBois, 1994: 2).

James Baldwin finished the letter to his nephew offering a positive perspective for the future of America, investing his hope in the processes of integration that slowly were taking place at the time. He urges his nephew to love and accept his white brothers, to make them see the reality of the black experience, so as to generate change in the construction of the mighty power America can be:

You don't be afraid. I said it was intended that you should perish, in the ghetto, perish by never being allowed to go beyond and behind the white man's definition, by never being allowed to spell your proper name. You have, and many of us have, defeated this intention and by a terrible law, a terrible paradox, those innocents who believed that your imprisonment made them safe are losing their grasp of reality. But these men are your brothers, your lost younger brothers, and if the word “integration” means anything, this is what it means, that we with love shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it, for this is your home, my friend. Do not be driven from it.

Great men have done great things here and will again and we can make America what America must become. (Baldwin, 1963: 9)

Coates, in the other hand, in resolute dry fashion, substitutes the idea of hope for the idea of the struggle as the only viable option for African Americans. He has given up in the possibility of equality as a viable path in our times, and what is left is only the acceptance of the struggle as the reality of the African-American experience. His non-religious upbringing is partly responsible for this substitution, since he was never taught to believe in a redemptive spiritual life. We are left with the physicality of the experience in the streets of Baltimore, the fear of having his body broken, the violence of stating his ground for protection, the cry that black lives matter even when society fashions new ways of stating the opposite. He writes:

Perhaps struggle is all we have because the god of history is an atheist, and nothing about his world is meant to be. So you must wake up every morning knowing that no promise is unbreakable, least of all the promise of waking up at all. This is not despair. These are the preferences of the universe itself: verbs over nouns, actions over states, struggle over hope. (Coates, 2015: 57)

Conclusion

The pessimistic view propagated by Coates contrasts bleakly with Baldwin's wishes for a unified reality of an integrated America. The present rise in racism in the Trump era is indicative that the integration sought for in the 1960s is still far from being reached, though it certainly exists in policy and law in clearer ways than in the past. It is fair to assess that the position occupied by the black body in The United States has not been safeguarded in the last centuries, though it has effectively changed. The present rise in police brutality and intolerance are indicators that despite the guarantees offered by law, the dilapidation of civil liberties and rights is an undeniable reality. Cornell West, in the end of 2017, accused Coates of being the Neoliberal face of the black freedom struggle, stating that his nihilism rendered the black resistance invisible, and that ultimately it fetishized white supremacy to an untouchable dominance. He finally asks: "One crucial question is why now in this moment has his apolitical pessimism gained such wide acceptance?" (West, 2017). This recognition comes from the resonance felt by Coates' readership, which is substantially different from West's generation wise. Coates'

investigation speaks directly to those affected by brutal policing and violence, as well as to a white audience that is concerned with matters of equality and discrimination. His success lies in effectively finding the words to express the feelings, and the physicality of a reality, that is pervasive for a large sect of American society that more frequently than ever feels powerless in the face of capitalist and military forces. However, the rise in social movements new forms of protest and its waves of intersectional thinking, namely the Black Lives Matter movement, are testament that apolitical pessimism may not be the most aptly way of describing the struggle of our days.

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