

VESSELS OF FLESH AND BONES: POLICING AND RACIAL
(DIS)IDENTIFICATIONS IN TA-NEHISI COATES'S *BETWEEN THE WORLD
AND ME*¹

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ABSTRACT

The year when Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* (2015) was published has gone down as the deadliest year for black youth at the hands of policemen, with no less than 1,134 murders recorded. As he states in many interviews, this is one of the reasons that led Coates to pen his work: to publicly lament so many losses; to confront the difficulties to mourn such violent and untimely deaths; and to shed light on the murderous racist practices that black individuals deal with on a daily basis. To do so, Coates embarks on a journey through history in which he memorializes many black individuals who, until now, have lost their lives in racist violent attacks—from his friend Prince Jones and other several well-known individuals murdered in the last decades, such as Michael Brown or Sean Bell, to, as Toni Morrison puts it, “the disremembered and unaccounted for” (2010, 323). Far from only providing Coates and his son with crucial information about the sociality of blackness, witnessing the death of so many also instills in both a feeling of belonging. Coates's attempt at developing communal bonds through his narration riffs on the concept of “bottomline blackness,” which Elizabeth Alexander coined amidst her analysis of the public responses to Rodney King's beating, which she regards as an incident that ended up “consolidat[ing] group affiliations” (78) and forging a “traumatized collective historical memory” (79). Drawing on Ta-Nehisi Coates's celebrated memoir, and bearing into consideration Coates's telling his son that “there is no real distance between you and Trayvon Martin” (2015, 25), this paper engages in the ongoing discussion about whether Coates's representation of racial bigotries can foster empathic relations or, on the contrary, disavow easy identification from readers.

Keywords: Ta-Nehisi Coates; Racism; Policing; Empathy; Phenomenology.

“It begins with flesh. With meat and muscle. With a matrix of tissue.
It begins with the body —textured and text. The body as vernacular.
The body as song. It begins, simply, with black skin”
(Jason Parham, “The Flesh Gives Empathy,” 2020)

¹ This article is part of the research funded by the Spanish Government and European Union under an FPU Grant (Grant Number FPU15/00741).

Ta-Nehisi Coates's seminal memoir *Between the World and Me* (2015) features nowadays amongst the most important texts documenting racial bigotries of the last centuries (Smith 2013), as it records the vast array of discriminatory practices that “land, with great violence, upon the [black] body” (14). In fact, several critics have insisted that the text, which was published only a year after the horrific murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, makes a substantial contribution to the ongoing discussion on the expendability of black bodies (Alexander 2015; Nance 2015; Abramowitsch 2017; Quinn 2017).² Written in the form of a letter that in several ways mirrors that of James Baldwin's in *The Fire Next Time* (1952), Coates's memoir can be interpreted as an urgent warning that a concerned black father gives to his fifteen-year-old black son—that black bodies are trapped in a double-bind of social illegibility that renders them inhuman whilst simultaneously casting them as problems that need to be dealt with (Miller 2016, 16). To do so, Coates embarks on a journey through history in which he memorializes many black individuals who, until now, have lost their lives in racist violent attacks—from his friend Prince Jones and other several well-known individuals murdered in the last decades, such as Trayvon Martin or Sean Bell, to, as Toni Morrison puts it, “the disremembered and unaccounted for” (2010, 323).

Far from only providing Coates and his son with crucial information about the sociality of blackness, witnessing the death of so many also instils in both a feeling of belonging. As Emily J. Lordi posits, “representations of grief construct an ever-expanding black community, one that comprises ‘murdered sons’ as well as imagined future members” (2017, 45). Coates's attempt at developing communal bonds through his narration riffs on the concept of “bottomline blackness,” which Elizabeth Alexander coined amidst her analysis of the public responses to Rodney King's beating, which she regards as an incident that ended up “consolidat[ing] group affiliations” (78) and forging a “traumatized collective historical memory” (79). Other similar reactions to contemporary situations have been, to mention but a few, protesters yelling “I Am

² According to *The Guardian*, a total of 1,131 black people were killed by police officers in 2014 in the US. The rate increased the following year, and it reached an all-time record of 1,134 (Swaine et al. 2015).

Trayvon Martin” in the mass riots ensuing the boy’s murder in 2012, or the more recent cry for help “I Can’t Breathe” that appeared in the banners and flags that swamped thousands of cities worldwide and that replicated George Floyd’s last words in early 2020. Drawing on Ta-Nehisi Coates’s celebrated memoir, and bearing into consideration Coates’s telling his son that “there is no real distance between you and Trayvon Martin” (2015, 25), this paper engages in the ongoing discussion about whether Coates’s representation of racist bigotries can foster empathic relations or, on the contrary, disavow easy identification from readers.

YOUR BODY, MY BODY: ON HISTORICITY, BLACK PHENOMENOLOGY, AND FLESH MEMORY

The black body holds a very central position in *Between the World and Me*. In fact, it is such a recurrent *topos* in the memoir that Coates seems almost obsessed about it—by Tressie McMillan Cottom’s count, he alludes to it “some 101 times over 156 sparse pages” (2015, n.p.).³ At different times in the text Coates portrays the black body—which, as we will discuss, sometimes is not necessarily his—as a body that can be lost (5), “destroyed” (9), “shielded” (23), “robbed” (65), or even as a “vessel of flesh and bone” that can be “taken” and “shattered on the concrete” (83).⁴ As a result, some critics (Haile III 2017; Abramowitsch 2017) have maintained that to speak about Coates’s approach to corporeality is to speak about a phenomenology of the black body. Even though Frantz Fanon is considered today the father of black phenomenology (Johnson 1993; Gordon 1997, 2000; Haile III 2017), the first ruminations on the subject can be traced back to Frederick Douglass, in particular to his work *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), where he claimed to have realized his embodiment after engaging in a fistfight with Edward

³ For Haile III the number is significantly lower, as he claims that Coates “mentions it some forty-two times throughout the book” (Haile III 2017, 494). A fast search of the word “body” in the e-book version of the memoir provides a total of 114 results, 73 more if the word searched is “bodies.” Of course, these numbers are not precise, as the search does not specify whether they are black or white.

⁴ The word “vessel” has been central in theorizations about the phenomenology of the black body. In *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), Saidiya Hartman notes that it is the fungibility of slaves, that is, their characterization as chattel, that enables their being equated with vessels. “The fungibility of the commodity,” she writes, “makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others’ feelings, ideas, desires, and values” (21).

Covey, a slaveholder. Douglass's outstanding victory led him to claim that "this spirit made me a freeman in *fact*, while I remained a slave in *form*" (247; emphasis in the original) after acknowledging, earlier in the text, that he was "a *living embodiment* of mental and physical wretchedness" (172; my emphasis).

W.E.B. Du Bois also paid utmost attention to the phenomenology of the black body, as he evidenced with the concept of double consciousness (1903). In contending that blackness responds to a twoness that converges in a body (2007, 8), Du Bois was claiming for "a coming-into-being of consciousness" (Pittman 2016, n.p.)—an awareness of one's own body as perceived by others. Du Bois's exploration of double consciousness as an expression of phenomenology has been of particular interest to Paget Henry, who considered Du Bois's concept crucial in the development of a "comprehensive phenomenology of [black] self-consciousness" (2005, 85). Notwithstanding Du Bois's efforts to get to grips with the sociality of black bodies, and as we have already indicated, Frantz Fanon has often been considered the pioneer in the field of black phenomenology. Amongst Fanon's major remarks in one of his most renowned works, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), it is his contention that "I was an object in the midst of other objects" (109) that has garnered greater interest, as it encapsulates the most prominent principles of his theory—black bodies have been, and still are, transformed into objects by the power of whiteness.

The strong materiality attributed to black bodies in *Between the World and Me* stands out against the lack of corporality of whiteness that has been deemed problematic at many different levels (Gilroy 2000; Young 2010). In the view of Simon Abramowitsch, Coates's proclivity to depict "the embodiment of blackness and the abstraction of whiteness" (2017, 462) is conspicuous from the very beginning of the memoir, when the narrator is being interviewed by a white woman on a television studio. "When the host asked me about my body," Coates states, "her face faded from the screen, and was replaced by a scroll of words, written by me earlier that week" (2015, 5). According to Abramowitsch, Coates's description of the interview portends his investment in diverting the focus of attention away from whiteness. He writes, "though this face of whiteness precedes and provokes the despairing account that follows, it

vanishes. What becomes visible instead is Coates's own writing about the vulnerability of the *black body*" (Abramowitsch 2017, 460; my emphasis).

The opening pages of *Between the World and Me* set down the fundamental ideas that later underpin the text in its whole—from Coates's portrayal of whiteness as a fading abstraction (5); his fixation with the black body, its sociality, and its historicity (5); to his comprehension of racial discrimination as a multidimensional and interactional phenomenon (8); or even to his intentions behind penning down the memoir (9). Reflecting upon his son's reaction to the absolution of Michael Brown's murderer, one of the critical moments that he assures to have prompted him to write the letter to his son, Coates makes a statement that, for many (Abramowitsch 2017; Haile III 2017), encapsulates his approach to the black body. When he hears his son crying after learning about the tragic news, Coates decides "not [to] tell you that it would be okay, because I never believed it would be okay. What I told you is what your grandparents told me: that this is your country, that this is your world, that this is your *body*, and you must find some way to live *within the all of it*" (2015, 12; my emphasis). For James B. Haile III, who has worked extensively on, in his own words, the "black phenomenology of the body" (2016, 495), the latter contention breaks new ground for the understanding of the black body as a product of its historicity. Haile III writes,

There are key moments from Coates's passages that should focus our attention: . . . his emphasis on heritage as a historical site of/for memory —the destruction of the black body, then, acts as a site of/for national historical memory, . . . his usage of tradition as the symbolic linking to one's past —it is through the destruction of the black body that America links its past to its present, [or] the word choice of *within* rather than just with. (Haile III 2016, 494; emphasis in the original)

Coates figures the black body as the intentional result of a series of practices used to establish and maintain hierarchies of power, proving that, as Charles Johnson phrases it, "it is from whites that . . . the black body comes" (1993, 606). Pages after stating that "the black body is the clearest evidence that America is the work of men" (12), one of Coates's paramount declarations on the artificiality of black bodies, he adds that "I was black because of *history* and *heritage*. There was no nobility in falling, in being bound,

in living oppressed, and *there was no inherent meaning in black blood*” (55; my emphasis). “Black blood wasn’t black”, he concludes, “black skin wasn’t even black” (55).

Coates’s rhetoric ends up holding out the possibility of distinguishing between *two* bodies—the real body, an amalgamation of flesh, organs, and bones, also called the “physical body;” and the abstract body, a preconceived perception of the images projected upon the former, also known as the “conceptual body” (Young 2010, 7). Harvey Young attributes the creation of the latter to the mapping of “popular connotations of blackness . . . across or internalized within black people,” which results in the construction of a “second body, an abstracted and imagined figure, [that] shadows or doubles the real one. It is the black body and not a particular, flesh-and-blood body that is the target of racialized projection” (2010, 7). The problem is, as we have already surmised, that the abstract body often overshadows the real body, that is, that the meanings attributed to blackness prevail over the body understood as a material reality. Harvey Young explains this process thus:

When a driver speeds past a pedestrian and yells “Nigger”, she launches her epithet at an idea of the body, an instantiation of her understanding of blackness. The pedestrian, who has been hailed and experiences the violence of the address, which seems to erase her presence and transform her into something else (an idea held by another), becomes a casualty of misrecognition. *The shadow overwhelms the actual figure . . .* The epithet . . . brings together the physical black body and the conceptual black body. [It] blur[s] them . . . The slippage of abstraction into materiality frequently resulted in the creation of an embodied experience of blackness that was tantamount to imprisonment. (2010, 7; my emphasis)

In distinguishing between physical and conceptual bodies, Coates is also recalling Hortense Spillers’s influential essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987), where she claims that the physical body is never seen, insofar as it is always preceded by a first layer on which meaning is inscribed—the conceptual body or, in her own words, the flesh. Spillers describes the flesh as “the zero degree of social contextualization” and as “a primary narrative” (Spillers 1987, 67). She writes, “before the body, there is the flesh, [which] does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography” (Spillers 1987, 67). For Spillers, the

physical body is often hurt as a violent reaction against the abstract body, but injuries can be observed in both—in the former, violence takes the form of a cut or a bruise; but its marking is somehow transferred into the latter, which becomes proof, or a reminder, of the long history of suffering black individuals have been through. In his essay “Black Care” (2016), which revisits Spillers’s hypothesis, Calvin Warren offers important commentary on pain inscribing itself in another dimension that is not material. He writes, “what is stripped or ruptured leaves a mark—a sign of destruction . . . that can be felt or registered on a different plane of existence” (Warren 2016, 37). For Warren, then, “the laceration is not just a corporeal sign; although the body might bear its marks, it is registered somewhere else” (2016, 39); namely, in the development of a feeling of worthlessness in racialized communities or in creation of a traumatic environment shared in a community that is not only very much traversed but also actively constituted by violence. Last but not least, Spillers also defends that whilst the body is individual, that is, that it is a material reality that is particular to each one of us and that cannot be transferred, at least not in its completeness, the flesh, understood as the manifold signifiers attributed to the body, refers to a series of conditions that are shared by a group of similar individuals. For Spillers, the flesh contains “the long and brutal history of the violent annotations of Black being” (qtd. in Sharpe 2016, 115).

The body that is the object of racist violent assaults in *Between the World and Me* is often neither Coates’s nor his son’s, but rather a black body that seeks to represent black experience in general, but which does not belong to anybody in particular. Put another way, the discrimination described in the memoir is often witnessed, not experienced by the author himself, but nonetheless believed to be something that all black individuals might be subjected to. Simon Abramowitsch, who has been vocal in exploring Coates’s memoir in terms of empathy and readership, claims that “many of Coates’s examples of racial violence are from history, news reports, and the accounts of other writers” (2017, 464). Whilst one might consider that Coates’s distancing from the events purveyed might result in the disavowal of his readership, Abramowitsch contends that its effect is quite the opposite. “What emerges from these representations,” he writes, “is a form of witnessing intended not to engender

empathetic feelings toward another that *is not but might be the self*, but instead to provoke direct identification” (2017, 464; emphasis in the original).⁵ Abramowitsch seems to suggest that Coates does not need to have experienced everything he explains first-hand to awaken the empathy of his black readers. However, as a black man, he is entitled to identify with a history of communal suffering; put another way, it is his flesh, besides his body, that inscribes him into a tradition shared among black people.

Ta-Nehisi Coates’s acknowledgement that blackness predisposes all black individuals to living similar experiences, in particular in relation to racial violence, bespeaks of Elizabeth Alexander’s concept of “bottom line blackness” (1994, 80), which she coined as a reaction to Rodney King’s beating in Los Angeles on March 3, 1991, and in response to the backlash against the recording of the attack disseminated afterwards. After formulating the hypothesis that a feeling of kinship was generated amongst the black individuals who witnessed Rodney King being battered,⁶ Alexander highlights how the spectacle of black death has “forg[ed] a traumatized collective historical memory which is reinvoked at contemporary sites of conflict” (1994, 79). In her opinion, the constant subjection to the view of a black body in pain embeds black individuals into black communities, that is, makes black individuals feel connected to a community with whom they have in common, at least, their likeness to suffer racial discrimination. As Alexander puts it, witnessing the suffering of the black body “informs our personal understanding of our individual selves as a larger group” (79). It is precisely the feeling of collectiveness engendered by a shared history of discrimination that she dubs “bottom line blackness” (80)—the creation of a “‘we,’ even when that ‘we’ is differentiated” (80).

Coates’s illustrating that the strong probability of being a victim of racial brutality generates an empathic identification amongst black individuals is most

⁵ Harvey Young similarly states that “first-hand encounters with a racializing projection are not a requirement of embodied black experience” (Young 2010, 5).

⁶ Although she focuses on exploring the responses to Rodney King’s video, Alexander also draws upon two other cases to illustrate her point—slave narratives and Emmett Till, whose lynched body was displayed on an open casket by order of his own mother so that everybody could witness the heinous crime committed against him.

evident when he compares his son to other black men who have already been targeted, arrested, and even murdered as a result of racial profiling. Whilst it is Michael Brown's death from which Coates's son learns about his own vulnerability at the very beginning of the text (11-12), it is Trayvon Martin who Coates compares him to, by pointing out that "there is *no real distance* between you and Trayvon Martin, and thus Trayvon Martin must terrify you in a way that he could never terrify me" (2015, 25; my emphasis). Simply put, both of them were black boys living within the same historical moment, and whilst it was Martin who had been killed, Coates believes it might well have been Samori or, for that matter, any other black kid. Coates's contention bears exceptional testimony to the fact that "the violence that is watched . . . is experienced" (Alexander 1994, 85).⁷

In seeking to construct a communal memory of suffering amongst black individuals, "bottom line blackness" also has didactic purposes. In this respect, Alexander underscores that "corporeal images of terror suggest that experience can be taken into the body via witnessing and recorded in memory as knowledge. This knowledge is necessary to one who believes 'it would be my turn next'" (1994, 83). Coates's acknowledgment that blackness often equates with being "death-bound" (Moten 2013, 739) not only does it bring him closer to other black individuals, but it also informs his individual self. At several moments in the text, he intimates that only after the murder of Prince Jones was he able to learn most of the things he knows about blackness today (2015, 131).⁸ Witnessing the murder of black men provided Coates and

⁷ This also explains why, in the weeks following Trayvon Martin's murder, a lot of protestors wore hoodies and carried banners with the messages "I am Trayvon Martin" or "We are all Trayvon Martin." Interestingly enough, a sort of counter movement questioned those identifications, and protesters claimed that actually "We Are NOT Trayvon Martin." Adherents to the movement believed in the singularity of Martin's murder and, most important of all, believed that there was a fundamental difference between them and the boy—that they were alive, and Martin was not (Auslen 2013).

⁸ Prince Jones was a friend of Coates who was targeted, pulled over, and murdered by a police officer in Prince George County, Maryland, on September 1, 2000, in a case of mistaken identity. Coates describes the situation thus: "The officer had been dressed like an undercover drug dealer. He'd been sent out to track a man whose build was five foot four and 250 pounds. We know from the coroner that Prince's body was six foot three and 211 pounds. We know that the other man was apprehended later. The charges against him were dropped. None of this mattered. We know that his superiors sent this officer to follow Prince from Maryland, through Washington, D.C., and into Virginia, where the officer shot Prince several times. We know that the officer confronted Prince with his gun drawn, and no badge" (80).

his son with crucial information about the sociality of blackness, illustrating that, as Alexander also notes, “in order to survive, black people have paradoxically had to witness their own murder and defilement and then pass along the epic tale of violation” (1994, 90). Taking into consideration that Coates’s memoir has often been regarded as an inventory of the myriad forms of discrimination blacks are subject to (Alexander 2015; Nance 2015; Abramowitsch 2017; Quinn 2017), we could even claim that “bottom line blackness” operates also in an extra-diegetic dimension. In providing imagery of the black body in pain, Coates is passing his understanding of blackness onto other black readers, who might find it helpful to comprehend their being in the world.

Several scholars have identified an inherent problem in the belief that blackness predisposes all black individuals to suffer from racist discriminations in a similar way (Hall 1996; Gilroy 2000; Bennett 2015; Hilton 2015; León 2015; Lewis 2016; Abramowitsch 2017). Although Elizabeth Alexander noted it in passing, she already warned that “bottom line blackness” might lead to a form of “violence which erases other differentiations and highlights race” (1994, 81). This is why she keeps positing, throughout her text, that the collectiveness that emerges from living similar experiences, either in the past or in the present, or as victims or witnesses, must always be “differentiated” (1994, 81). Put another way, a common past can be indeed identified amongst persons sharing similar characteristics until individual differences are encountered as, in the words of Stuart Hall, “we cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about ‘one experience, one identity,’ without acknowledging its other side—the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute, precisely, uniqueness” (1996, 394). Paul Gilroy, in his work *Against Race* (2000), also offers fundamental insights into the notion that, even though black folks do indeed have certain phenotypical characteristics in common with each other, they also embody “different lived realities” (qtd. in Young 2010, 8).

In this way, Coates’s presumption that blackness is unified in its subjection to racist discrimination has provoked a backlash from literary critics. Black feminists such as Shani O. Hilton (2015) or Brit Bennett (2015) have been vocal in demonstrating that, insofar as Coates’s work bids for a generalized approach to blackness that oversees other

intersectional social coordinates, it speaks to a rather small readership. In their view, black women's stories are sidelined in the memoir, which provides a rather masculinized account of policing and other forms of racism and where "the dangers of living in a black female body are mysterious, forever unknowable" (Bennett 2015: n.p.). On the other hand, Cornel West⁹ has also scolded Coates for oversimplifying the subject of racial identification in his works, noting that the experiences he speaks about in *Between the World and Me* apply only to a "black elite readership" (Cornish 2017, n.p.) and that he cannot identify with the problems that Coates poses in the text. Coates's vagueness has also been discredited by Christina Sharpe, who maintains that Coates is apparently writing either to whites or to non-radical black individuals (Terrefe 2016, n.p.). To this first critique, she adds a second one—that the text focuses on Coates himself so much that it "abandons a certain criticality" (Terrefe 2016, n.p.), and so she ends up referring to *Between the World and Me* as "a narrative of profound failure" (Terrefe 2016, n.p.). Coates's belief that blackness is unified nurtures, in the end, a sense of disidentification, as he fails to account for how racial bigotries are also inflected by gender and class.¹⁰

As suggested above, collectiveness amongst different persons is mainly reached through memory, for it is the acknowledgement of a shared history of suffering that, as Coates very well illustrates, brings black individuals together (Spillers 1987; Alexander 1994; Young 2010). Certainly, it is precisely the historical backdrop of *Between the World and Me* that is one of the memoir's greatest strengths, as it does not only help keeping

⁹ Their differences in opinion date back to 2015, when, in a Facebook post, West accused Coates of being "a clever wordsmith with journalistic talent who avoids any critique of the Black president in power" (qtd. in López 2017, n.p.). Their hostility reached its peak when West published an op-ed entitled "Ta-Nehisi Coates Is the Neoliberal Face of the Black Freedom Struggle" (2017), where he accused Coates of "represent[ing] the neoliberal wing that sounds militant about white supremacy but renders black fightback invisible" (West 2017, n.p.). He then blamed Coates for not being critical of Barack Obama, and concluded that "the disagreement between Coates and me is clear: any analysis or vision of our world that omits the centrality of Wall Street power, US military policies, and the complex dynamics of class, gender, and sexuality in black America is too narrow and dangerously misleading" (2017, n.p.). In response to West's criticisms, Coates tried to defend himself by alleging that his knowledge is limited, and that he does not feel entitled to discuss issues he does not understand (Noah 2017).

¹⁰ For the sake of space and consistency with the article's purpose, only a brief analysis on the memoir's shortcomings has been included here. For more information on Coates's invisibilization of women, see Bennett (2015), Hilton (2015), Duffy (2015), and Bodenner (2015). For more information on Coates's class blindness, see Terrefe (2016), Cornish (2017), and West (2017).

track of the different expressions racial discrimination has taken on throughout history, but it also contributes to memorializing the victims and weaving different black experiences together. Although at points Coates resorts to the employment of allegories to recall the past, as when he claims himself to be shackled (30), he often draws upon history in a rather explicit, and at many times also chronological, manner. Most of his ruminations are triggered by his visit to “what remained of Petersburg, Shirley Plantation, and the Wilderness” (99) with his son and his nephew. Troubled by the fact that, whilst in the Petersburg Battlefield, visitors “seemed most interested in flanking maneuvers, hardtack, smoothbore rifles, grapeshot, and ironclads” (99) than in the important social changes that the conflict brought about, Coates recalls the situation previous to the war as a “robbery” of black bodies, and he concludes that “robbery is what this is, what it always was” (101). Summoning up slavery helps him contest whether any progress achieved by black individuals can be referred to as actual progress—he urges his readers to regard emancipation always in parallel with the bloodshed in the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, the Jim Crow laws, or even the Second World War. Two ideas are derived from Coates’s reasoning. First, that progress for certain black individuals was granted at the expense of the death of many several others; and, second, that black bodies today still bear the burden of chattel slavery. In fact, at the end of his analysis, Coates states that “there is no difference between the killing of Prince Jones and the murders attending these killing fields because both are rooted in the assumed inhumanity of black people” (110).

Coates’s presentification of the past¹¹ becomes a means of asserting that, today, black bodies inhabit “the afterlives of slavery” (Hartman 2007); in other words, policing and racial targeting are vestiges of past forms of racial brutality that are still very much present. It is in her acclaimed work *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007) where Saidiya Hartman first reads the contemporary condition of black

¹¹ My use of the expression is taken from Ana Lucía Araujo (2009), who defines it as the ways in which the past keeps affecting the present, turning “the present [into] a place or a moment of rupture, a process that very often involves the search for an identity that has been denied, lost, or suppressed” (2).

bodies as a reenactment of slavery (6). In her view, chattel slavery did not end in 1865, but rather metamorphosed into other forms of human exploitation. Accordingly, she writes,

Slavery had established a measure of man and a ranking of life and worth that has yet to be undone. If slavery *persists* as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because *black lives are still imperiled and devalued* by racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is *the afterlife of slavery*—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. I, too, am the afterlife of slavery. (2007, 6; my emphasis)

As a result, for Hartman, as well as for Coates, speaking of slavery as a reality of the past is a contradiction in terms, for a past that is reenacted in the present cannot be identified as past (Trouillot 1995).¹² In this respect, in her essay “Venus in Two Acts” (2008), Hartman urges for a need to “narrat[e] the time of slavery as our present” (2008, 12), a need that is also blatant in Coates’s memoir, as he constantly exhorts his readers to remember that the current aggressions exerted against black bodies are indeed “heritage and legacy” (2015, 10); that is, reminiscences of a past that keeps repeating itself.¹³ Hartman’s arguments had an important bearing on Christina Sharpe, who, drawing on the former’s concept of the “afterlives of slavery” (Hartman 2007, 6), regarded black bodies as living “in the wake” (Sharpe 2016). Although the descriptions of “the wake” purveyed in her work are numerous and varied,¹⁴ the term shares many similarities with Hartman’s, as it refers to

¹² Michel-Rolph Trouillot believed that the past is always relative, as he claimed that “the past is only past because there is a present, just as I can point to something over there only because I am here. But nothing is inherently over there or here. In that sense, the past has no content. The past—or, more accurately, pastness—is a position. Thus, in no way can we identify the past as past” (1995, 44).

¹³ Contrary to this idea, Trouillot contends that “the perpetuation of U.S. racism is less a legacy of slavery than a modern phenomenon renewed by generations of white immigrants” (1995, 49).

¹⁴ She acknowledges that “the wake” might have different meanings, and that her approach to the term seeks to bring all of them together. As a matter of fact, she claims for the need to “think the metaphor of the wake in the entirety of its meanings”, which she later lists as follows: “the keeping watch with the dead, the path of a ship, a consequence of something, in the line of flight and/or sight, awakening, and consciousness” (2016, 17-18).

living the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of our everyday black existence; living the historically and geographically dis/continuous but always present and endlessly reinvigorated brutality in, and on, our bodies while even as that terror is visited on our bodies the realities of that terror are erased. (Sharpe 2016, 15)

For Sharpe, persons who have not perished yet, have the moral obligation to engage in the “wake work,” which she describes as “a mode of inhabiting and rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives” (52) in a permanent antiblack environment that she dubs “the weather” (102). To “resist, rupture, and disrupt that immanence and imminence” (41) of death, black individuals must remember that their breathing today is conferred by the breathlessness of many others who died in the past. The two main practices of “wake work” that Sharpe devises are black annotation and black redaction, which in turn refer to a need to find “new modes of writing [and] new modes of making-sensible” (113) that Hartman also calls for in “Venus in Two Acts” (2008). In this vein, it is worth noting that both Sharpe and Hartman are major exponents of a discursive practice known as “critical fabulation” (2008, 11), which Hartman herself describes as the only way to “rewrite the chronicle of a death foretold and anticipated, as a collective biography of dead subjects, as a counter-history of the human, as the practice of freedom” (2008, 3). In inscribing itself in the intersection between critical theory, fiction, and historical and archival records, “critical fabulation” epitomizes an urgency to look for new ways to speak about black suffering.

Coates’s championing of the historical continuity of racial violence is reminiscent of Houston A. Baker’s “critical memory” (1994), which he later reconceptualized as “black memory” (2001), and also of Hortense Spillers’s “flesh memory” (2013). Houston A. Baker coined the term “critical memory” in his renowned essay “Critical Memory and the Black Public Sphere” (1994), where he described it as “the cumulative, collective maintenance of a record that draws into a relationship of significant instants of time past and the always uprooted homelessness of now” (Baker 1994, 3). Interestingly enough, for Baker, the history of blackness can be analyzed through two complementary attitudes: nostalgia and critical memory. Both are ways of identifying a shared history amongst black individuals, but whilst the former resonates with homesickness and with

the idealization of the past as a moment “filled with golden virtues, golden men and sterling events” (Baker 1994, 3), the latter claims for its ethical evaluation as a means to look for new ways to confront the present. Put another way, nostalgic memory prompts the “beautification of history” (1994, 4), but critical memory compels “the black intellectual . . . to keep before his eyes—and the eyes of the United States—a history that is embarrassing, macabre, and always bizarre with respect to race. The clarity bestowed by black critical memory is painful” (Baker 2001, 154).

Even though black bodies are central in Coates’s work, white bodies hover over the margins of the story and are often subsumed within an impersonal and abstract mass that acquires different names throughout the memoir regardless of being the main source of black distress. In fact, we could claim that there is an altogether generalized lack of referentiality when instances of inter-racial discrimination are purveyed. Coates’s presentification of the past prompts him to draw into the cruelty of slavery, the legalization of racial segregation, and the racism that is often implicit in academic disciplines. Nonetheless, the perpetrators of the aforementioned events are not individual persons, but instead the systems themselves, as if they emerged, settled, and operated without a human subject behind them. It is worth noting that he does not even mention the names of the murderers of Michael Brown nor Trayvon Martin regardless of the controversies that their exonerations stirred up, a fact that lays bare Coates’s investment in putting the spotlight on the victims, and not on their murderers.

The lack of corporality of whiteness in the text implies a lack of empathic identification from white readers that has been rendered utterly problematic (Alexander 2015; Abramowitsch 2017). Indeed, Coates’s focusing too much on the materiality of blackness and on the ethereality of whiteness has proven to be a two-edged sword. As Abramowitsch very well indicates, “if attention to the black body addresses the black reader, the white body’s erasure invites a strange spectatorship, *implicated* and *excused* at the same time” (Abramowitsch 2017, 469; my emphasis). In other words, as Kyle Smith also notes, Coates’s “paint[ing] all white people as equally hapless in their sin” ends up “comforting . . . his white readership” (2015, n.p.). The problem that ensues from Coates’s strategy is clear—if the abstraction of whiteness

offers whites a moral egress, that is, if they do not identify themselves with the facts retold, why would they be involved in seeking answers to the questions he poses?

CONCLUSIONS

In his memoir *Between the World and Me* (2015), Ta-Nehisi Coates approaches racial issues through such a vast array of modes that it should not be surprising that he has been appointed as “the single best writer on the subject of race in the United States” (Smith 2013, n.p.). Coates’s understanding of racism, which is both so visceral and heartfelt that readers have even claimed they could feel it in their own bodies (Alexander 2015; Khon 2015; Schuessler 2015), sets out from a phenomenological perception of the black body that, in a way that is reminiscent of Frantz Fanon’s contributions to the matter, interprets the latter as an object; in particular, as a vessel whose being is bestowed upon by virtue of its own emptiness. Either in their vulnerability, protection, or destruction, black bodies enjoy from a very strong materiality in *Between the World and Me*, so much so that several commentators have agreed that Coates succeeds in portraying blackness in all its splendor—just as he draws upon the pain and difficulties of being black, he also celebrates its beauty and its ubiquity.

Coates’s approach mirrors, in several ways, the concept of “bottom line blackness” (Alexander 1994) which, as suggested above, perfectly illustrates the extent to which group affiliations can be consolidated amongst individuals who feel a shared propensity to being victims of racist practices. As Claudia Rankine avers, “there really is no mode of empathy that can replicate the daily strain of knowing that as a black person you can be killed for simply being black” (2015, 146). That communities can be forged upon witnessing violent events is tethered to the phenomenon of communal memory, which suggests that all the racist interactions a person has been through are somewhat activated when an incident that is somehow reminiscent of all the former is viewed. As Alexander puts it, “bodily experience, both individually experienced bodily trauma as well as collective cultural trauma, comes to reside in the flesh as forms of memory reactivated and articulated at moments of collective spectatorship” (80). Alexander’s

words allow for the possibility of believing not only that empathic relations can be fostered when being exposed to violent events, but even that black individuals can indeed feel in their own bodies identical physical and psychological sensations to the victims' to the extent that the distinction between watching and experiencing ends up being eventually blurred (85).

Nonetheless, inasmuch as Coates cherishes the materiality of black bodies, he also approaches whiteness—at the risk of oversimplification, the root from which black suffering develops—as a fading abstraction. Coates's strategy is utterly problematic: because whiteness resists individualization, that is, because it is fathomed as ubiquitous and not necessarily comprised in a particular body, the attacks that Coates depicts in the memoir are seldom ascribed to a person. This is particularly evident in relation to the moments in which whiteness is blamed—something that might be interpreted as “disavowing . . . direct identification and empathy from white and non-black readers”, who are in the end offered “the individual escape that he intends for his son” (Abramowitsch 2017, 462). In all, *Between the World and Me* bears exceptional testimony to the slipperiness of empathic identifications. Through a powerful rhetoric and a poignant story, Coates seeks to provoke the identification of his black readers by noting that the flesh, rather than the body, brings them together. But the memoir also illustrates that in Coates's process of creating a collective “we” that is not defined through lived experiences, racist bigotries that are inflected by gender and class are sidelined, proving that, in the end, identifications occur at the expense of disidentifications.

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