

A Voicemail to the Black Body: Ta-Nehisi Coates's 'Between the World and Me' is Our Lifeline

Kayla Russell

INTRODUCTION

Whiteness has an epiphany everyday. Black bodies receive sorrow from that epiphany everyday. What is that epiphany exactly? To continue to survive the ways in which they are slowly killing themselves or the black body is slowly killing itself. The system and symptoms of whiteness already live inside the black body, operating without being told to do so. That it lives inside the black body, as if to be as necessary as blood cells. But the disease is blamed on the body of which it is infecting. It could never be anything other than that body, therefore the black body is killing itself not the epiphanies that find new and old ways to reject blackness in the bodies it fills and fulfills. Black liberators argue that your voice, your body and your actions are all the power you need, an antibody against the disease of whiteness. To purge the black body of this oppressive cancer then, is to remove it "surgically"

from the mind first. Many malignant tumours entirely made up of ideology are supplanted when you become conscious that they are there in the first place. But what are they supplanted with in exchange? This is answered from Ta-Nehisi Coates's "Between the World and Me" that helps us dissect race by exteriorizing the black body, to find the common widespread 'disease' killing black life, whiteness. As his writing reminds us of the dangers of being hypercritical and uncritical of whiteness and its legacy. In this self-reflective and analytical essay, I will pathologize whiteness to typify a disease. This essay is a voicemail to the black community, please answer the call.

BACKGROUND CONTEXT & DESCRIPTION

Ta-Nehisi Coates' early days were spent sponging up Maryland's town jewel, Baltimore. After being raised in Baltimore alongside 6 other siblings to William Paul Coates, Black Classic Press founder and Cheryl Coates, teacher and American activist (Howard University, 2015). In the first chapter of the book Coates speaks to these personal relationships which shaped him into the writer that he is today. That led to his 5-year journalism

education at Howard University, as he describes in his novel, as well as his move into self-publishing, freelance writing, and other efforts to become a better journalist. Of which is still his current profession. The bestselling author's latest efforts speaks to his continued activism toward education and illumination of the theories and ways of knowing we have succumbed to but also the dangers against black life and also the legacy they have inherited. His latest work "The Message" grapples with the idea of ways of knowing. In his novel "Between the World and Me," he takes us on the trajectory to understand how our world socially organizes itself and moves through the mechanisms of the social construction of race. He writes the entire novel to his son, Samori Maceo-Paul Coates, but more importantly to the world and those who are responsible for the "plundering" of black bodies that he speaks to. As it addresses whiteness and its aliveness, Coates also explores concepts of community, trauma, and his romantic relationships, all of which he candidly shares with his son in an effort to help him see his side of the story that the world would otherwise prefer to ignore. His art embodies the Black Arts Movement's objective, which is to allow black bodies to not suppress the experience of being racialized, but to pass it down to their

offspring— the idea that their voice should and must exist in a racialized world. Coates' writing, particularly this novel, is how we may exist in our world, a lifeline for those who have been immobilized. His precise life story confronts whiteness and white supremacy.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Whiteness' epiphany is merely that it has power and enjoys being aware of that fact, as if it attained this power out of nowhere, but it also unavoidably maintains this consciousness. From the onset of the book we are brought into an interaction Coates has with a news reporter that sets off a chain of disturbance for him as she asks him what it means to lose his body. Now, I would qualify this as the exact function of how helpless, as in uncontrollable, whiteness is. It provides ideologies on the table for us to feed on and as Coates suggests it doesn't lead us to question what we are digesting or why we might ask the questions that we do in conjunction with the reporter, nonetheless, we must feast (Coates, 2015, p. 1). This is what this social construction does; it divides and operates to continue causing division. This is more than merely the entertainment of singling out Coates for a news story; she sees something within him and his world that prompts her question. In this we see race

doing its intended function of identifying and defining through division. Coates would define this as the reality of racecraft, saying, "But race is the child of racism, not the father" (Coates, 2015, p. 7). The reporter is thus perpetuating the notion of the "illusion of race" as put out by academics Barbara J. Fields and Karen E. Fields. But what Coates implies is that she is aware of this. She is aware of the invisible illusionary dividing line called 'race' that appears between her and Coates shortly after she asks her question, while Coates points out a "sadness wells up in me" (Coates, 2015, p. 6). This racial awareness or epiphany, then, brings sorrow, a sorrow that the black body, Coates, should expect to face in this world. So what does this mean for the black body? We are constantly witnessing the product of a social construction that values social imbalance and the social practice of 'othering'. Racism and racecraft is proof that race is the child, it is born from racism (Fields and Fields, 2022). Previously, I used the word "uncontrollable" particularly because whiteness is a form of cancer. There are two definitions that show it is as a disease, "a disease caused by an uncontrolled division of abnormal cells in a part of the body" and "a practice or phenomenon perceived to be evil or destructive and hard to contain or eradicate," (Oxford University Press, 2025). Coates is strategic in

beginning the novel in this way. He is speaking to whiteness' debilitating pervasiveness, like cancer. But also the ways in which whiteness is entitled, as it actively stands on the hierarchy it has built. While race is emphasized as an illusion meant to keep social domination alive, whiteness, the disease, becomes more aggressive when removed from the black body and the world. In the second chapter of the book, Coates explains the time he got into a conflict with a white patron at the movies with his son. The white patron, a white woman, proceeded to consciously push his son out of the way. There is a reason for this. Coates says the reality of race became externalized. He had seen his son and became increasingly aware of how much power he had in that moment. "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," (Coates, 2015, p. 112). Now, the point of this story serves Coates in demonstrating how this insecurity has been developing and reaffirmed to him his whole life. Of which that power was seemingly reduced to nothing when her white partner steps in and says "I could have you arrested," (Coates, 2015, p. 112). When he continues to argue back with the woman, she recoils, what's notable is him highlighting

that he had more anger to share with her but this was a “controllable” anger after remembering the small eyes watching him, his son (Coates, 2015, p. 112). Coates is signifying how uncontrolled whiteness is when you withdraw it from the body it resides in; this extraction is additionally recognized as calling out racism. Thus, this specific type of cancer attacks the mind. This disease is aggressive yet to get it “surgically” removed would require having tests done to prove its existence. Here is Coates confronting and putting whiteness to the test as it proved perilous without much effort. These epiphanies or racial awareness, rearticulate constantly that the tests will come back positive for being destructive to the black body. When her partner says “I could have you arrested,” Coates is able to translate what he is saying, and the patron understands what he is saying, but those exact words reveal something more is being practiced. Racism is essentially a social practice and this is what Field and Fields is propagating (Field and Fields, 2022). But how exactly does whiteness live in the black body if it is weaponized against them? When Coates is talking about the fear of not being able to defend his one and only child, this idea is not his own, but the invasiveness of whiteness that

tells him his body is no longer his, his son’s body is no longer his and there is nothing you can do to protect your son from the ‘helpless’ whiteness. He was stunned that he could think like this. Of which he says his son was endangered by him defending him. Thus, the black body is often unaware of the disease within them, making them insecure, terrified and reluctant to live out their truth, the truth that is blackness. It is an inherited disease, a genetic copy of the terrors black eyes and minds have witnessed for years. In Coates’s case he is witnessing the entitlement of the ‘plunderer’ who never wants you to expel the ideological control this cancer causes. When it is placed under that microscope, exposed in the light of language, it recoils. So we must put this whiteness to the test. The results are primed to Coates’ assertions of the great American nation as the catalyst in Black death.

Coates’ written work is exceptionally medicinal for this cancer. With the microscopic lens Coates is placing on whiteness inside the black body, it is a way of expressing what he witnesses from the body that is perceived to be state property. Everyday he is seeing how this disease is killing his people. Not just physiologically, but also in immaterial ways, they

are not immune to this malignancy. This malignancy is best described by American psychiatrist Dr. Frances Cress Welsing. "Psychiatrists and other behavioral scientists frequently use the patterns of overt behavior towards others as an indication of what is felt fundamentally about the self. If hate and lack of respect are outwardly manifested towards others, hate and lack of respect are most often found at deeper levels toward the self," (Welsing, 1974, p. 37). The colour confrontation theory she argues for is responsible for the legacy of whiteness. This added lens to the discourse around whiteness points out how deeply psychologically rooted it is; it has branched out to equate albinism to superiority and melanin as a mistake (Welsing, 1974, p. 35). This disease is aggressive because once exposed the house of cards named hierarchy begins to crumble. But this disease is also aggressive because it being confronted means the social and structural systematizing efforts of whiteness will soon crumble too. Welsing claims racism to be the maintenance of structural violence that is rooted in 'colour inadequacy'. Coate's work helps us visualize this reality as it infects and affects him inwardly, as we see the slow spreading of white ideals throughout his body. Whiteness as a structure of

entitlements has nothing to offer him, but when his thoughts emerge that endorse the narrative of whiteness as natural or in dominance, this supports the illusion of race further. White normativity, as academic Michael Morris claims, is to blame for this.

Whiteness serves a normative function by defining the expected or "neutral" range of human attributes and behavior. Other racial categories emerge as deviations from this norm, which places them outside the protection of the law and civil society. The normative function of whiteness has important, but unappreciated, implications for the treatment of whiteness as a legal category, and it complicates Haney López's call for dismantling the concept. White normativity accommodates and acknowledges the shortcomings of whites while simultaneously maintaining white privilege and whiteness's centrality in the U.S. racial classification scheme. Part I of this Book Review defines white normativity. Part II describes its operation in particular areas of U.S. society. Part III explores the durability of racial categories and the prospects for dismantling the concept of whiteness. Part IV concludes by examining potential avenues for reducing the influence of whiteness and rendering society more egalitarian and just. (Morris, 2016, p. 952)

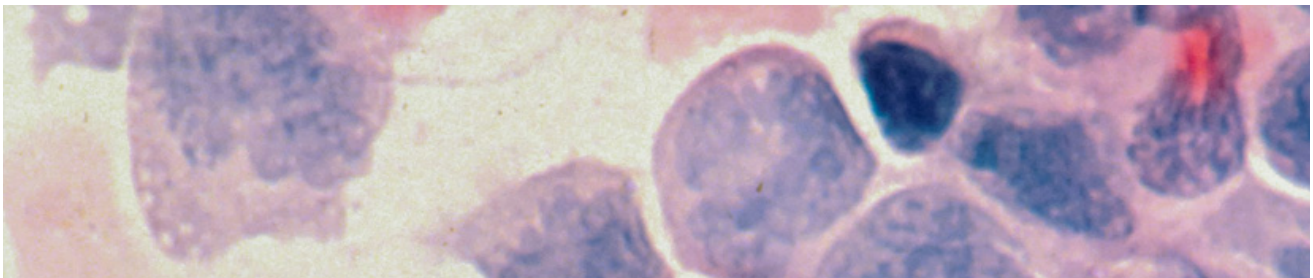
Whiteness serves a normative function by defining the expected or "neutral" range of human attributes and behavior. Other racial categories emerge as deviations from this norm, which places them outside the protection of the law and civil society. The normative function of whiteness has important, but unappreciated, implications for the treatment of whiteness as a legal category, and it complicates Haney López's call for dismantling the concept. White normativity accommodates and acknowledges the shortcomings of whites while simultaneously maintaining white privilege and whiteness's centrality in the U.S. racial classification scheme. Part I of this Book Review defines white normativity. Part II describes its operation in particular areas of U.S. society. Part III explores the durability of racial categories and the prospects for dismantling the concept of whiteness. Part IV concludes by examining potential avenues for reducing the influence of whiteness and rendering society more egalitarian and just. (Morris, 2016, p. 952)

This speaks to my earlier contentions on the idea of 'helpless whiteness'. Morris has classified "White as normal" and with this definition, this disease living inside of us telling us how to feel and who we can be, we think so too. When confronted with whiteness, we are often exposed to its malignancy from within, which are merely the psychological consequences that the perpetrator or racist wishes to implant. Additionally, author and educator, Maureen T. Reddy, speaks to the contentions around being critical or vocalizing the effect of whiteness. "Talking about whiteness is difficult. Being white - unless you are an out and out racist or a highly aware antiracist - generally does not include much consciousness of whiteness as a social signifier, as a state or condition of being freighted with meaning," (Reddy, 1998, p. 57).

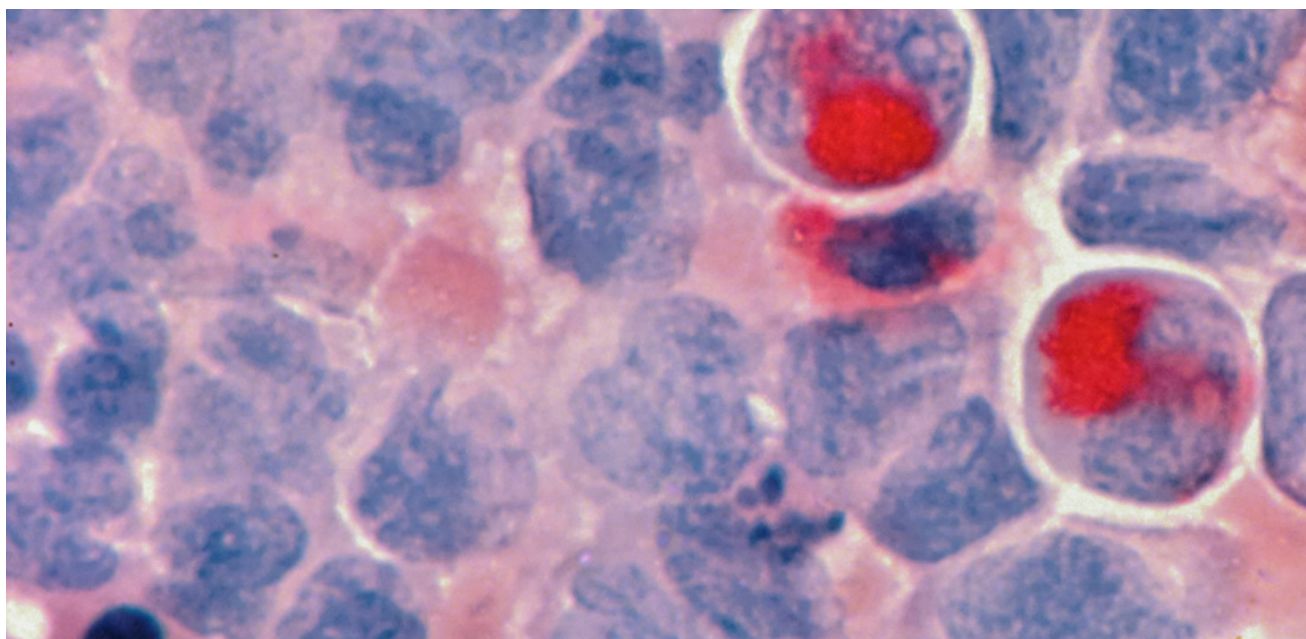
Since this disease exists and we believe that it is still killing many black people, we must still be critical of how it enters the black body. This is how it accumulates meaning socially by infecting us from within. Coates prescribes the pill of critical thinking (Coates, 2015, p. 35-37). As we witness him becoming critical of the American myths that have built his entire nation, he is burdened, still he encourages us and his son to realize the truth. "To acknowledge these horrors means turning away from the brightly rendered version of your country as it has always declared itself and turning toward something murkier and unknown. It is still too difficult for most Americans to do this. But that is your work. It must be, if only to preserve the sanctity of your mind. The entire narrative of this

country argues against the truth of who you are," (Coates, 2015, p. 98-99). The truth is Wesling, Coates and Reddy explain nobody wants or is ready for the truth but we all have some semblance of the white ideals within us keeping this illusion of race alive. Everytime he realizes how the 'plunderer' keeps him on his toes, questions his ability to protect his son and sees the logistics of black death take place, he is almost always reminded of white normativity and not colour inadequacy, racecraft or liberation.

The disease lives in the black body as its psychological compass. For this reason, we must be critical of the social construction of race while not being hypercritical. In reality, most black people cannot put into words the effects of this disease, but all of them and I mean all of them, know how it feels to be black. For this disease, it tells them how far and wide their blackness may reach the shores of the great nation of America. This stems from legal scholar Cheryl I. Harris and her cultivation of whiteness as property.



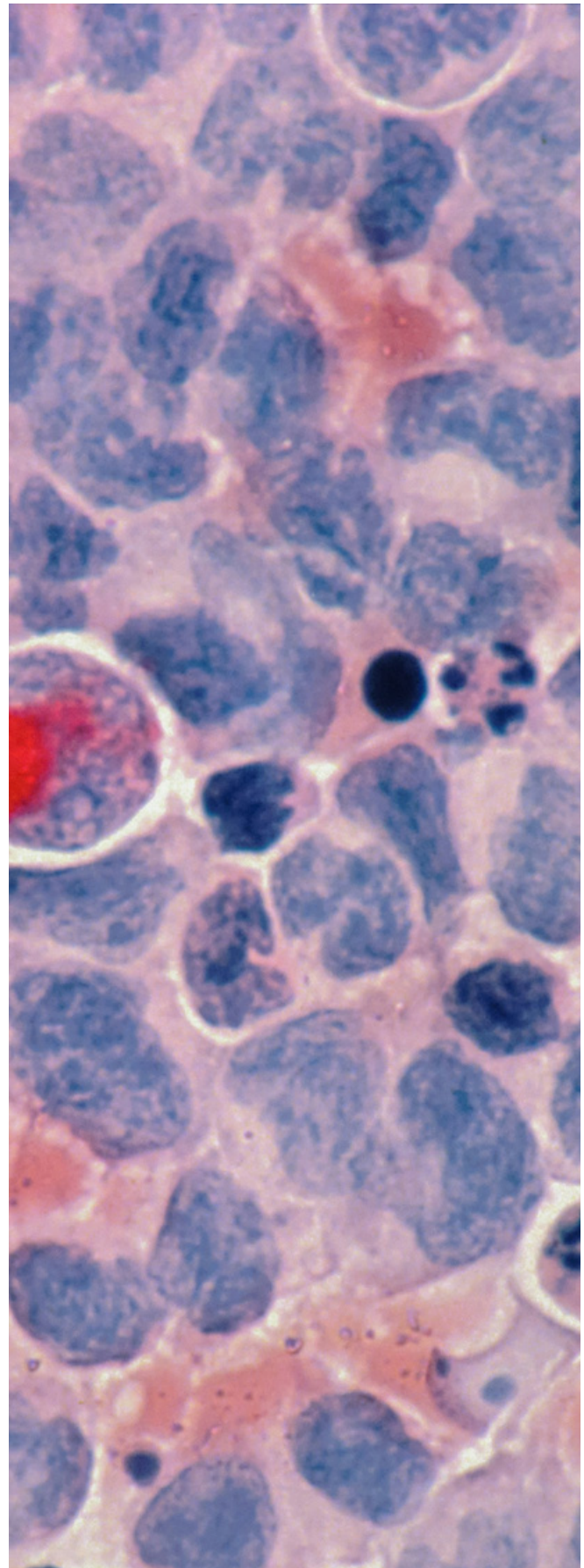
Possession of property includes the rights of use and enjoyment. If these rights are essential aspects of property, it is because "the problem of property in political philosophy dissolves into... questions of the will and the way in which we use the things of this world."¹⁴ As whiteness is simultaneously an aspect of identity and a property interest, it is something that can both be experienced and deployed as a resource. Whiteness can move from being a passive characteristic as an aspect of identity to an active entity that - like other types of property - is used to fulfill the will and to exercise power. The state's official recognition of a racial identity that subordinated Blacks and of privileged rights in property based on race elevated whiteness from a passive attribute to an object of law and a resource deployable at the social, political, and institutional level to maintain control. Thus, a white person "used and enjoyed" whiteness whenever she took advantage of the privileges accorded white people simply by virtue of their whiteness - when she exercised any number of rights reserved for the holders of whiteness. (Harris, 1993, p. 1734)



As stated previously, whiteness enjoys the crown it has bestowed upon itself. When witness is framed as a powerful instrument of dominance this means it is strategic as it spreads throughout the world. I like to think my experiences of racism, whether that be getting my hair done, being racially profiled and seen as the token at my workplace, have made me hypercritical to the experience of race in a black body. These are not small faults but eventually I am becoming hypercritical, I spend more time pointing whiteness out than finding ways to mobilize myself, again, falling into the social constructions strategic trap that wants to keep me immobilized. I give too much power to whiteness in those moments— I sign the deed to whiteness as property. Suddenly,

everywhere I look whiteness lies in some shape or form, but this leaves little room for the imaginative ideals that can take me farther than whiteness ever could. When I complain about the experience of this social structure it becomes more real, and whiteness sits back and enjoys the fruit of its labour. While I minimize my light to keep the golden star of whiteness visible, I leave behind what I know to be true in order to strengthen whiteness. You must know that black power is all you need. We live in a world that does not always remind us of this but Coates, in the final chapter of his book, would argue this is our cure. “And black power births a kind of understanding that illuminates all the galaxies in their truest color,” (Coates, 2015, p. 149). Black power is not about

spewing hatred or being overly critical of a social construction that has simple explanations for its existence. It is about learning how to exist in a world with a legacy of consequences owed to social domination and colour inadequacy. Disrupting the enjoyment of whiteness as property means realizing race is about building socially organized practices to life. Disrupting this enjoyment is black power because it does not have to overly prove whiteness' evils, it will always show and be exactly what it aims to be. When you realize this, spend your energy expressing how you feel without slandering ladies like the one at the theatre or her partner, but rather "give reality to" their use of words, exteriorizing their language and gestures, images, music, and films. Extract the social meaning we have given whiteness, take it out of your body and examine its contents, really try to find the ways it is slowly poisoning you more than it is them because it is. Spend your energy knowing who you are; this is your power and that is your compass.



CONCLUSION

Although there are no meaningful enough scientific links that support my claims, of which I am not saying it is fact that whiteness is a disease killing black people. It is doing so without being figurative. This should be the hardest pill to swallow. But not only that, if structural violence can infect us with whiteness, how much more for the individual role we play in implicitly agreeing to being infected, because we have no other choice, "that is just the way it is". The dice will always roll on whiteness then. I could have carried this essay over into using the metaphor of games or a game board as the broader idea of whiteness. Or a toxic best friend, a twisted movie, or a bad coworker. But the fact remains it is something so close to us that we have naturalized it to exist and pretended it doesn't. I like to use this metaphor of disease because it is the only thing that can alarm us and get our attention about whiteness. Viewing it as a disease, means we can die from it and we should change that narrative. You making that decision creates a different environment from the one whiteness wants to build in your home, your temple, that is the black body. Whiteness is not inevitable but it can be everywhere. Your internal organs

have seen this for centuries because it has passed down the symptoms of the systematic nature of this disease inside of you. Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Between the World and Me" is the kiss of life, helping us to exist in a world that depends on its ability to strengthen illusions of race. Do not think that whiteness should continue to exist within you; agency is a synonym for power, so live accordingly. END OF VOICEMAIL.

