UNIVERSITAT DE
BARCELONA

Bearing Witness to Atrocity:
Racial Violence and the Limits of Representation
in Ta-Nehisi Coates's Works

Eva Puyuelo Ureña

Ph.D. DISSERTATION

Bearing Witness to Atrocity: Racial Violence and the Limits of Representation in Ta-Nehisi Coates's Works

Eva Puyuelo Ureña

SUPERVISORS
Rodrigo Andrés González
Cristina Alsina Rísquez

UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA

Bearing Witness to Atrocity:
Racial Violence and the Limits of Representation in Ta-Nehisi Coates's Works

Eva Puyuelo Ureña

Tesi Doctoral
Universitat de Barcelona
2022

Direcció
Dr. Rodrigo Andrés González
Dra. Cristina Alsina Rísquez

Tutor
Dr. Rodrigo Andrés González

Programa de Doctorat "Estudis Lingüístics, Literaris i Culturals"

Línea de Recerca "Construcció i Representació d'Identitats Culturals"

Departament de Llengües i Literatures Modernes i d'Estudis Anglesos,
Facultat de Filologia i Comunicació, Universitat de Barcelona

UNIVERSITATDE
BARCELONA

The final exercise of representing violence has to be the most difficult; it is an exercise of good that remains shadowed by evil, sometimes trumped as itself the evil even when it attempts to be the good.

Bruce B. Lawrence and Aisha Karim, *On Violence* (2007)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements

The pieces I am, [you] gather them and

give them back to me in all the right order.

Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987)

This thesis would not exist had it not been for the unwavering guidance and support of my supervisors, Dr. Rodrigo Andrés and Dr. Cristina Alsina Rísquez. You have been exceptional mentors, and I have been the luckiest person to have had you both as my supervisors. You are two of the most thoughtful, generous, and inspiring people I know.

Rodrigo, we met almost ten years ago. I remember the first time I saw you—you were speaking enthusiastically about Frederick Douglass, Walt Whitman, and Henry David Thoreau. It was in that course when I heard about Toni Morrison for the first time, too. You know the rest of the story—after thinking that you had spoiled the novel's climax in class, I rushed out to buy and read *Beloved*. That day everything in my life changed forever. I realized many things back in those days, Rodrigo, thanks to you and to the deep devotion with which you spoke about those writers and their works. Your passion is contagious, and I am indebted to you in ways beyond any word can tell. Si no fos per tu mai hagués descobert el que realment m'apassiona i, d'haver-ho fet, segurament no hagués tingut l'empenta de continuar la meva recerca una vegada vaig acabar el grau. He après de tu com de poques persones en aquesta vida. Mai et podré agrair prou tot el que has fet per mi durant tots aquests anys.

Cristina, it was not until I was already a Ph.D. student that I met you—personally, that is, because I had already heard the most wonderful things about you. I remember the conversation I had with Rodrigo in which I told him that it would actually be a great idea to ask you to be my co-supervisor, and I also remember the beautiful e-mail you sent to

us after you accepted. You have challenged me in the most unthinkable ways, and you have always encouraged me to outdo myself. Suposo que recordes el dia que vas venir al despatx. Aquell dia em vas salvar, Cristina, i no em cansaré mai d'agrair-t'ho. Gràcies, a tots dos, per ser-hi, sempre, i per creure cegament en mi. Sense vosaltres aquesta tesi no existiria.

I am also extremely grateful to Dra. Helena González Fernández for encouraging me to push my own boundaries and to do a Ph.D. De no haver estat per la teva insistència crec que no hagués considerat mai la possibilitat de fer el pas. Formar part d'ADHUC ha estat una experiència increïblement enriquidora que no oblidaré mai. Gràcies per totes les oportunitats que m'has brindat. I am also profoundly indebted to all the former Ph.D. researchers I met in ADHUC, with whom I shared no time in the office but who provided me with generous support anyway. Special thanks to Dr. Lola Resano, Dr. María Teresa Vera-Rojas, and Dr. Katarzyna Paszkiewicz, for always asking and caring about how I was doing, and also for the gossip, laughs, and drinks.

I am also deeply grateful to the extraordinary people I have met at the University of Barcelona during these six years. David Fontanals, Irina Cruz, Arturo Corujo, Jana Baró, Catalina Mir, Meritxell Joan, Marina Bernardo, Sara Baila, Joana Videira, and so many others, you are the best colleagues I could ask for. I honestly do not know how I would have managed to finish without your help. Thank you for offering your support, for always being down for a drink, and for recharging my energy and bringing out the best in me each and every time we have met. Thanks to Toni R. Juncosa, with whom I have so much in common that we've often joked about how we were "separades al néixer." Toni, you are an inexhaustible source of affirmation, inspiration, and insight, and having met you is definitely one of the things that has made this journey worthwhile.

Gràcies per les paraules, per la complicitat i, en fi, per ser-hi sempre. Aquí tens una amiga per tota la vida.

My research would not have been the same without the wholehearted support of Dr. Cynthia Stretch. Cindy, your generosity is boundless. Thank you for inviting me to Southern Connecticut State University, for helping me find a nice place to stay in New Haven, and for adapting so quickly and readily to everything that happened when the pandemic hit. Even though things did not turn out as planned in the end, you managed to make me feel as if I were actually part of the Department of English and provided me with a great deal of wonderful opportunities to share my research and to meet very interesting people. Thanks to everybody at SCSU for making my virtual visit the most pleasant it could be given the circumstances. Thanks to Andrew Smyth for his generosity and for his patience with all the paperwork; to Brandon Hutchinson and Jennie Schindel for that stimulating—and hilarious—conversation we had about scholarly research, teaching, books, and also about our unbounded love for dogs, cats, and chicken; and last but not least, thanks to Audrey Kerr, for giving me the most precious advice, both professionally and personally. Audrey, I will never forget the conversation we had that afternoon, when you reminded me of something that I keep forgetting even though I know it is one of the most important things to keep in mind—that what we do matters.

A big thank you to everybody who is part of the project "(Un)Housing: Dwellings, Materiality, and the Self in American Literature." First of all, Rodrigo and Cristina, thank you—again—for including me in your project. Being part of it has been a wonderful opportunity to find out about a field of study that I did not know of, and which has sparked new interests in me. Thanks also to the wonderful people who are part of it, too, all of whom are generous sources of intellectual curiosity and have always helped me with my own research—Elena Ortells, Carmen Méndez, Cristina Garrigós, and Michael Jonik.

Thank you all. You have really made me feel *at home*. Special thanks to Vicent Cucarella-Ramon, with whom I have had the most interesting book discussions over *churros* and glasses of wine and who once was the best and most sophisticated "señora de bien" in Madrid. Thank you for always rooting for me.

Thanks to Dr. Simon Abramowitsch, whose advice and guidance in a moment when I felt completely lost proved invaluable. You provided me with all the bibliography I needed back in the day and have relentlessly offered your help even when I did not ask you to. Thank you for showing me the way. Your kindness and willingness to help know no limits. I am also indebted to Dr. Howard Rambsy for the long and incisive conversations we had about my project, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and his works. You gave me the most insightful feedback and encouraged me to refine some of my ideas and arguments.

I am also grateful to the brilliant scholars and fellow colleagues I met in conferences, virtual forums, and other academic activities, and with whom I got to share my interests and concerns. Special thanks to everybody I met in the SAAS and EAAS conferences in Cáceres, Salamanca, and Madrid.

I could not have done this either without the support of my dearest friends. Mireia, I am so grateful to have you in my life. You are one of the few people who has witnessed each and every part of this process and you have celebrated my accomplishments as if they were yours. You are a true inspiration, and I have no doubts whatsoever that without you none of this could have been possible. Danae, I am so happy we reunited after being so much time apart. I cannot thank you enough for your having my back over these last years and for always making me feel heard and seen. Talking to you always boosts my energy beyond measure. Andrea—I am so, so grateful for your friendship; it is easily one of the best things that has happened to me in these last few years. Thank you for never

doubting my capacity to do this. You are a fighter and a true role model, and hearing you say that you are proud of me means the world. Marta, thank you for having been such an invaluable source of support in the last couple of years and for that beer when I was on the brink of collapse right before finishing my writing process. Mònica, you are an exceptional artist. Thank you for designing the best cover for my project.

My family has also been crucial in fostering my curiosity and my willingness to learn. I am forever indebted to my parents, Lluïsa and Xavi, for encouraging me to follow my heart and intuition and for prompting me to do whatever it is that makes me happy. To my siblings, Laura and Marc, who have never stopped teasing me but who have never left my side either. Sé que no ha estat un procés fàcil, i que potser us heu cansat de sentir-me dir que això no era per mi, que no podria fer-ho, i que no podria acabar—gràcies per animar-me i per creure cegament en la meva dedicació, determinació, i capacitat de superació.

Thanks to Rubén, the best life companion I could ask for. You are the only person who knows what I have really been through, and I know it has not been easy for you. You have lived through all my mood changes, you have seen me despair, and you have seen me cry with joy when things finally worked out. No sé ni por dónde empezar—gracias por tu espíritu crítico, por tu forma lógica y razonada de ver el mundo, y por ayudarme a ponerlo todo siempre en una balanza para valorar lo que realmente importa cuando soy incapaz de verlo por mí misma. Soy increíblemente afortunada de tenerte conmigo, y quiero seguir aprendiendo y viviendo aventuras contigo hasta el final.

My dog, Sam, and my cat, Arya, have also been dedicated companions for the last six years. I cannot think of a day in which Sam has not been sleeping at my feet, lying on the couch, or just being there; or without Arya meowing nonstop for hours so that I would open the balcony door for her. It is funny because both are staring inquisitively at me as

I write these words, and I know that Sam would rather eat all the bread in the world and that Arya would rather mess around in the neighborhood than being acknowledged here, but I would be remiss if I did not mention them—they certainly are two invaluable sources of unconditional love in my life.

I had doubts as to whether I should finish my acknowledgements with this or not, but here it goes—thanks to myself. For being so perseverant, for striving through adversity, for always looking up, for standing up and falling but never surrendering. Whenever you think there is something you cannot do, remember that you managed to do this. You go, girl!

Abstract

Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* (2015) is nowadays considered one of the most detailed registers of the different forms that racial violence takes—from direct manifestations of physical assaults, including arrests, beatings, maimings, and murders; to less conspicuous expressions of racism, such as racist stereotyping, legal disenfranchisement, or redlining (Goodman 2015; Nance 2015; Guerrero 2017). *Between the World and Me* is the letter that Coates writes to his son, Samori, who is about to enter adulthood and will head off to university soon. Coates knows that once his son leaves, he will no longer be able to protect him; and so he writes driven by the need to caution him against all the threats that may endanger his life just as they had endangered those of countless others before him. Coates's concerns to protect his son are not unfounded. Trayvon Martin had been murdered in 2012 by a man who believed he looked suspicious; Michael Brown, in 2014, for trying to run away from a police officer. Both were teenagers and unarmed at the moment of their deaths. In between, thousands of others lost their lives to racial violence; and in the next years, the number of Black people murdered in the streets raised significantly. In 2015, when Coates published his memoir, the number reached a historical high—1,134 people of color were killed in the streets in the U.S.

The memoir attracted a vast variety of different responses. Many critics celebrated Coates's beautiful and sharp rhetoric and contended that the carefulness with which he approaches the contentious issues he deals with may in fact help a whole generation push forward (Bodenner 2015; Pollack 2015; Lewis 2016), but several others used Coates's position to cast doubts on the legitimacy of his arguments and criticized both Coates's pessimist stand and his understanding of racial brutality, which in his text is presented as a phenomenon that occurs almost only to cisgender heterosexual Black men (Alexander 2015; Bennett 2015; Chatterton Williams 2015; Hilton 2015; Kennedy 2015). Along

these lines, this dissertation draws upon the works of Ta-Nehisi Coates to study the extent

to which the representation of violence in general, and of racial violence in particular, can

be considered a violent act in itself, and it centralizes three main questions. To what

effects is racial violence represented, and what does the representation of racial violence

entail? Is there an ethical way to narrate racial violence? How does one represent racial

violence without creating more violence?

In my attempt to provide an answer to these questions, I have divided my thesis

into two different chapters that are framed as a chiasmus—it moves past the study of the

representation of violence in the first chapter to focus on the violence of the representation

of that violence in the second chapter. The first chapter is structured into three different

sections. The first one provides a theoretical approach to racial violence with the intention

of elucidating a concept that has traditionally been considered nebulous and complex; the

second one addresses how racial violence has been explored in the literary tradition that

informs Coates's writings; and the third one consists of an analysis of Coates's treatment

and representation of racial violence in his own works in general, and in his memoir

Between the World and Me in particular.

Also divided into three different sections, the second chapter of the thesis

addresses the question of whether it is possible to represent violence without perpetuating

it. The first section explores the theoretical underpinnings of the relation between

violence and the representation of violence and lays the groundwork for my subsequent

analysis of Coates's works. In particular, it addresses the centrality of photographic

images in documenting racial violence in U.S. history; it pays attention to how the literary

works that have inspired Ta-Nehisi Coates's texts have negotiated the relationship

between the representation of violence and violence; and it examines the extent to which

Ta-Nehisi Coates's work may be a form of "black witnessing"—a term that refers to the

ways in which Black people have represented, recorded, talked about, testified against and, in all, denounced the racial atrocities they have been subject to (Richardson 2017). The remaining sections focus on the two main ways in which Coates's work may be connected to violence—his pessimism and his biased approach to gender (Smith 2015, 2017). Whilst section two offers a critical reading of Coates's hopelessness, which has also been called despair (Kennedy 2015; Rogers 2015) and even nihilism (Bodenner 2015; Lowry 2015), and which critics have considered to be disabling for Black people; section three explores the extent to which Coates's memoir fails to account for the ways in which Black women are also victims of racist practices.

Taking everything into consideration, I mean this dissertation to intervene in contemporary debates on the vexed interaction between the representation of racial violence and racial violence itself, and to think anew the ethical possibilities of both writing and reading literature. In fact, I contend that many valences are at play in any act of representation, and for it to be ethical in its approach to atrocity it needs not only the artist's ethical engagement with that which is being represented, but also the reader's—or the viewer's, if representations are visual. In this thesis I explain that there are many ways for both writers and readers to develop forms of ethical witnessing—by reappropriating images of suffering, writers can in fact resist the normalization of pain and the threat of dehumanizing victims; and by viewing such images "with solemn reserve and careful circulation," readers, and witnesses in general, can resignify these representations as potential chances to heal and to learn from a past suffused with violence (Richardson 2020a, n.p.). In all, Coates's works are proof that, disturbing as it is, bearing witness to atrocity also is, in this way, critical and urgent—it both challenges and empowers us to think about new futures and about the limitless possibilities that exist not beyond, but rather *regardless of*, violence.

12

Resumen

Narrar la atrocidad:
Violencia racial y los límites de la representación
en la obra de Ta-Nehisi Coates

El libro de memorias *Between the World and Me* (2015), de Ta-Nehisi Coates, ha sido considerado por muchos uno de los registros más detallados de las distintas formas de violencia racial ejercidas contra la comunidad negra—desde manifestaciones directas, como asaltos físicos, arrestos, palizas, o asesinatos; hasta otras expresiones menos directas o visibles, como la estereotipación, la privación de derechos, u otras prácticas discriminatorias como el "redlining" (Goodman 2015; Nance 2015; Guerrero 2017). *Between the World and Me* es la carta que Coates le escribe a su hijo, Samori, que pronto entrará en la edad adulta y se irá a estudiar a la universidad. Coates sabe que, una vez se vaya, él ya no podrá protegerle; por ello, le escribe con la intención de advertirle de todos los peligros que le aguardan por ser un hombre negro. La preocupación de Coates, así como la necesidad de proteger a su hijo, son comprensibles. En 2012, Trayvon Martin fue asesinado por un hombre que creyó que estaba actuando de forma sospechosa. En 2014, un policía disparó a Michael Brown nada más que seis veces por intentar escapar después de un altercado. Ambos eran adolescentes y estaban desarmados en el momento de sus muertes. Entre ambos casos, miles de personas negras perdieron su vida en circunstancias parecidas; y en los años siguientes el número de personas de color asesinadas en las calles aumentó considerablemente. En 2015, el año que Coates publicó su libro de memorias, la cifra alcanzó un máximo histórico—1,134 personas negras fueron asesinadas en las calles de Estados Unidos.

La obra provocó una división de opiniones entre sus críticos. Por un lado, algunos lectores admiraron la retórica de Coates y defendieron que la delicadeza y el cuidado con

el que habla de ciertos temas dolorosos pueden ayudar e incluso salvar a una generación entera (Bodenner 2015; Pollack 2015; Lewis 2016). Por otro, muchos de sus críticos cuestionaron la legitimidad de sus argumentos y criticaron tanto su visión pesimista del mundo como su aproximación a la violencia racial, que en su texto parece referirse casi de forma única a aquella ejercida contra hombres negros cisgénero y heterosexuales (Alexander 2015; Bennett 2015; Chatterton Williams 2015; Hilton 2015; Kennedy 2015). Siguiendo estas ideas, esta tesis se basa en la obra de Ta-Nehisi Coates para estudiar hasta qué punto la representación de la violencia en general y la representación de la violencia racial en particular pueden considerarse actos violentos en sí mismos, y pretende abordar tres cuestiones principales. ¿Con qué fin se representa la violencia racial y qué implica su representación? ¿Existe una manera ética de narrar la violencia racial? ¿Puede representarse la violencia sin generar más violencia?

Para dar respuesta a las preguntas anteriores, esta tesis está organizada en dos capítulos—pasa de analizar la representación de la violencia, en el primer capítulo, a estudiar la violencia de la representación de esa violencia, en el segundo capítulo. El primero capítulo cuenta con tres secciones. La primera ofrece una aproximación teórica a la violencia racial con la intención de dilucidar un concepto que ha sido considerado, a lo largo de los años, elusivo y complejo; la segunda analiza cómo la violencia racial se ha representado en la tradición literaria en la que la obra de Coates se inscribe; y la tercera explora cómo Coates trata el fenómeno en su propia obra.

El segundo capítulo, que también está organizado en tres secciones, aborda la cuestión de si es posible representar la violencia sin perpetuarla. La primera sección explora la relación entre la violencia y la representación de la misma. En particular, pone de relieve la centralidad de lo visual para documentar casos de violencia racial en la historia de Estados Unidos; cómo los textos literarios que han inspirado la obra de Coates

han negociado esta relación; y la posibilidad de considerar la obra de Coates una forma de "black witnessing"—las maneras en que las personas negras han representado, registrado, hablado, y denunciado las atrocidades raciales a las que han sido sometidas durante siglos (Richardson 2017). Las otras dos secciones exploran los dos aspectos de la obra de Coates que podrían estar relacionados con formas específicas de violencia representativa—su visión pesimista del mundo y su masculinización de la violencia racial (Smith 2015, 2017). La segunda sección ofrece una lectura crítica del nihilismo característico de Coates (Bodenner 2015; Kennedy 2015; Lowry 2015; Rogers 2015) y que muchos críticos han considerado que priva a las personas afroamericanas de su agentividad; y la tercera sección explora cómo la obra de Coates no da cuenta de los modos en que la violencia racial también afecta a las mujeres de color.

En conclusión, mi intención es que esta tesis doctoral intervenga en los discursos contemporáneos sobre la interacción entre la representación de la violencia racial y la violencia racial y ayude a repensar las posibilidades éticas de escribir, pero también de leer, literatura. De hecho, en esta tesis defiendo que existen distintas maneras de establecer una relación ética con aquello que leemos—por un lado, los escritores pueden evitar la normalización del dolor y la deshumanización de las víctimas mediante una reapropiación de las imágenes de sufrimiento; por otro, los lectores pueden dar un nuevo significado a las representaciones de la violencia para reconvertirlas en oportunidades para sanar y para aprender de un pasado sumido en la violencia (Richardson 2020a, n.p.). De este modo, las obras de Coates nos ayudan a comprender que, por muy doloroso que sea, narrar la atrocidad es necesario y urgente—es un desafío y una oportunidad para pensar en nuevos futuros y en la infinidad de posibilidades que existen no solamente después, sino también *a pesar*, de la violencia.

PALABRAS CLAVE: negritud, Ta-Nehisi Coates, violencia racial, *Between the World and Me*.

Introduction

The first time I heard about Ta-Nehisi Coates was November 2015. *Between the World and Me* had been published a few months earlier and it had taken the world by storm. African American scholars, activists, and readers alike were completely carried away not only by the memoir itself, but also by an author whom Toni Morrison had acclaimed as the new James Baldwin. I vividly remember the day I paid a visit to Dr. Rodrigo Andrés and everything he mentioned about Coates and about the book that had catapulted him to international stardom. Dr. Andrés and I had known each other for four years—four years of learning and interrogation; of sharing an abiding passion for books; and four years of recommending to each other works that we knew would in some way inspire us and elicit from us, as Coates himself would have it, "a constant questioning, questioning as ritual, questioning as exploration rather than the search for certainty" (2015a, 24). At that point, I had already finished my B.A. in English Studies and begun my M.A. in Gender Studies, and I was as eager to learn as I was concerned about how literary works explored issues that felt both urgent and timely, such as intersectional feminism and racist policing, and about whether the very act of reading could bring about social and political changes. Dr. Andrés had some critical reservations about Coates's work, and he insisted that I should get hold of it as soon as I could. Today, after all these years, I have no doubts whatsoever that this dissertation is fully indebted to the conversation we had that day.

To say that 2015 was a difficult year, in particular for citizens of color in the U.S., would be somewhat of an understatement. Trayvon Martin had been murdered in 2012 by a man who had believed him to look suspicious; Michael Brown, in 2014, for trying to run away from a police officer. Both were teenagers and unarmed at the moment of their deaths. In between, thousands of others lost their lives to racial violence; and in the next years, the number of racialized individuals murdered in the streets raised

significantly. In 2015, when Coates published his memoir, the number reached a historical high—1,134 people of color were killed in the streets in the U.S. Rates did not go down in the following years. In 2020, when I was about to finish working on the first draft of this dissertation, Breonna Taylor was murdered when four officers forced entry into her apartment; Ahmaud Arbery was pursued and shot dead while he was jogging; the world witnessed George Floyd being choked to death by a police officer; and Jacob Blake was shot seven times in the back in front of his children. All these cases reverberate in my work. In a sense, I could claim that what I try to do with my project is not that different from what the authors I study in it do with their texts—to shed light upon very critical matters; to not let these cases and many other similar ones fall into oblivion; and to highlight the beauty and the possibilities of the lives that are constantly compromised by the threat and the reality of violence.

Few authors speak about these issues as whole-heartedly as Ta-Nehisi Coates does. *Between the World and Me* is the letter that he writes to his son, Samori, who is about to enter adulthood and will head off to university soon. Coates knows that once his son leaves, he will no longer be able to protect him; thus, he writes driven by the need to caution Samori against all the threats that may endanger his life just as they had endangered those of countless others before him. To do so, Coates gathers together the most significant memories he has of his own life—certain dramatic episodes he endured when being a kid in a gang-ridden neighborhood; the strained relationship he had with his relatives; his discovery of and later enrolment in Howard University; the circumstances under which he met his wife-to-be; all the way to the birth of his son and the key moments they both lived together. As the book comes to its end, Coates reaches a bitter conclusion—most of these events are somewhat tinged with, if not directly rooted in, violence.

18

My decision to narrow my research down and to focus exclusively on Ta-Nehisi Coates and his works, in particular when so many other African American authors are also discussing and denouncing the long-lasting effects of racism in their texts, is based on three main reasons—Coates's long and prolific literary career, the vibrant intertextuality of *Between the World and Me* with other seminal texts in African American literature and activism, and the polemic and controversial character not only of his works, but also of Coates himself. First, it is a well-known fact that Ta-Nehisi Coates has been contributing to discourses on racial reckoning for two decades, and that the amount of works that he has produced over this period is simply tremendous. Since the 1990s, Coates has published thousands of blog entries, hundreds of articles, two memoirs, a collection of essays, and the scripts of a comic book series. In addition to being a writer, Coates has also been a public personality—he has intervened in numerous TV and radio programs; has been involved in polemics of all sorts with other contemporary intellectuals; and was even invited to the White House by former U.S. president Barack Obama (Rambsy 2016; Bouie 2017). Coates is, in all, a leading public intellectual who, through all his works, weaves together the different perspectives, valences, and meanings that are at work in the phenomenon of racial violence. His messages have transcended U.S. audiences, and they have resonated internationally.

Second, many have considered the high level of intertextuality of his memoir as one of its most outstanding and beautiful qualities (Bodenner 2015; Pollack 2015; Lewis 2016). That Coates is an author who is well-versed and who has been influenced by major writers such as Richard Wright or James Baldwin is manifest in the memoir's paratextual elements—from the title of the memoir and its epigraph, which Coates takes from Wright's heart-wrenching poem "Between the World and Me" (1935), to the epistolary form that he favors in the memoir, which mirrors Baldwin's choice in *The Fire Next Time*

(1962). The memoir, therefore, as well as the messages it displays, the rhetoric it champions, and its symbolic and emotional load, is testament to the fact that many other Black authors have also left an important imprint on Coates. When going over the memoir, readers may hear the echoes of Frederick Douglass, Ralph Ellison, and Toni Morrison; or even of other contemporary writers, such as Kiese Laymon. The result of such level of intertextuality is a porous and hybrid text that offers a kaleidoscopic approach to the subjects it tackles.

Third, both Ta-Nehisi Coates himself, as well as many of his works, have been sources of controversy on an important number of occasions. As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, Coates's popularity burgeoned in a matter of just a few months, and the book raised very different reactions from critics. Many of them praised Coates's writing ability; others believed that the memoir provided a blinkered approach to the problem of racism. These included feminist critics stating that the reality endured by women of color with regards to racism was sidelined in Coates's work, or commentators who criticized that Coates's liberal identification with race fetishized white supremacy and disconnected it from class. Coates's entering into a heated argument with Black intellectual Cornel West also had a significant impact upon his public standing, and that, together with the disapproval with which some of his arguments had been met, fostered the development of a minor trend among his critics popularly known as "anti-Coatesism" (Bodenner 2015, n.p.).

1. Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

This dissertation draws upon the works of Ta-Nehisi Coates to study the extent to which the representation of violence in general, and of racial violence in particular, can be considered a violent act in itself. This hypothesis, which I started conceiving right after a

20

first reading of the memoir, gained stronger impetus when I realized the copious amount of mixed criticism that *Between the World and Me* had drawn, and was still drawing, from Black scholars and literary critics alike. Michelle Alexander, who just a few years earlier had published her renowned book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010), reviewed Coates's work and claimed that even though she had been captivated by Coates's "characteristic brilliance and insight, as well as the poetic manner in which he addresses his son" (2015, n.p.), she also realized that the work provided a tenuous grasp on reality and that it denied whatever control Black individuals may have to bring racial tensions to an end. Similar controversial remarks were made by Thomas Chatterton Williams (2015), Melvin L. Rogers (2015), Felice León (2015), Tressie McMillan Cottom (2015a, 2015b), Kyle Smith (2015, 2017), Dana A. Williams (2016), or Jason D. Hill (2017), who also suggested that Coates's work thrives upon the issues it supposedly denounces. All the previous considerations raised a set of persistent questions that now form the bedrock of this dissertation. To what effects is racial violence represented, and what does the representation of racial violence entail? Is there an ethical way to narrate racial violence? How does one represent racial violence without creating more violence?

This dissertation strives to address these questions through an analysis of Ta-Nehisi Coates's book, but it also resorts to his previous memoir, *The Beautiful Struggle* (2008), which provides deep and critical reflections upon the issues that this thesis centralizes. Similarly, it also relies upon many of the articles that Coates published in the years prior and contemporary to the publication of *Between the World and Me*, some of which dig into important subjects that the memoir mentions only in passing. I will pay attention to his op-eds "Earning the Temporary Hatred of Your Children" (2010), which addresses the extent to which family relationships are traversed by racism, "Why Don't

Black People Protest 'Black-on-Black Violence'?" (2012) and "Trayvon Martin Was a Victim of Black-on-Black Crime" (2013), where Coates takes a critical stance on Black-on-Black crime and intra-racial violence; "Hope and the Artist" (2015b) and "Hope and the Historian" (2015c), where he delves into the overemphasis that triumphalist and hopeful narratives are given in discourses directed to communities of color; and "The Clock Didn't Start with the Riots" (2015f), where he provides his most concise description of racial violence. In this way, this dissertation also examines several of Coates's non-fiction works, including both of his memoirs and many of the articles he published in *The Atlantic*,[1] and leaves his fiction out of the analysis—the issues that he edited for the comic book series *Black Panther* (2011-2019) will not be taken into account because they deviate significantly from the motifs studied in the dissertation; and his novel *The Water Dancer* (2019) will be similarly excluded from the corpus because it was published whilst this text was well underway.

My research is also greatly indebted to the other main pillars of the literary tradition that Coates engages with and which address concerns, motifs, themes, and topics similar to the ones that Coates examines in his texts. In the same way that an analysis of Coates's memoir that does not to take into consideration the strong bearing that authors such as Frederick Douglass, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, or James Baldwin had on it would seem lacking, it would also be incomplete without taking into account other contemporary works that are also informed by the same literary tradition and that also shed light on how racial violence is described in, and explored through, literature. Claudia

---

[1] His book *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy* (2017) is also part of the corpus that I draw upon in this dissertation. However, since most of the chapters in the collection had been previously published as op-eds in *The Atlantic*, whenever these texts are alluded to, the references provided will be those of the newspaper, not those of the book. These articles include "How We Lost to the White Man," originally published in 2008; "The Case for Reparations," in 2014; and "The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration," in 2015.

Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004), *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), and *Just Us: An American Conversation* (2020); Danielle Allen's *Cuz: The Life and Times of Michael A.* (2017); or Kiese Laymon's *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America* (2013) and *Heavy: An American Memoir* (2018) have been claimed to "reimagine the work of black racial salvation" (Guerrero 2017, 415) in ways akin to *Between the World and Me* and have proven particularly useful to my interpretation of Coates's work, as they address, each in its own way, the different ramifications of racial violence, and how they all affect the realities lived by racialized people today.

Although this dissertation brings the intersection between violence and its literary representation into sharp focus, at times it also resorts to other modes of representation that are not necessarily textual to both clarify and exemplify how the representation of violence works, to what effects violence is represented, and whether such thing as a faithful representation of violence exists. Amongst all the relevant visual material that I pay attention to, the circulation of the clip showing George Floyd's murder on May 25, 2020 is of utmost importance, as it reignited debates on the limits of representation, on the spectacular character of suffering, and on the position that we, as witnesses, are left to occupy after being exposed to images of the sort. In fact, in the aftermath of Floyd's murder, Elizabeth Alexander published "The Trayvon Generation" (2020), where she argued that the thoughtless reproduction of recordings such as Floyd's[2] was a double-edged weapon, since it incurred the risk of normalizing certain forms of pain while at the same time it helped form a community of witnesses. Alexander had already denounced the spectacular dimension historically conferred upon Black suffering in "Can You Be BLACK and Look at This" (1994), where she had explained that images of the sort

---

[2] Other cases in which the violence exerted against racialized people was recorded include Rodney King's in 1994, Eric Garner's in 2014, Sandra Bland's in 2015, Alton Sterling's in 2016, and Philando Castile's also in 2016. Each of these will be addressed in this dissertation.

nurtured the notion of "the spectacle of black pain" and contributed to a phenomenon commonly known as "the pornography of black pain"—the portrayal of "black bodies in pain for public consumption" (78).

Besides Elizabeth Alexander, many other Black critics and scholars have explored the close allegiance between the representation of violence and the act of violence itself. Not long after the publication of Alexander's essay, Saidiya Hartman, in her work *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (1997), explored the hypervisibility given to the suffering of people of color, the constant negotiations, as well as the porous boundaries, between looking and "being-looked-at," and the extent to which the narration of scenes of subjection may end up being a form violence in itself. She built on these ideas in other of her works, too, such as in her essay "Venus in Two Acts" (2008), where she discussed both the dangers and possibilities of revisiting history and where she strongly opposed the romanticizing of slave narratives. In more recent years, Andrew Dix and Peter Templeton's *Violence from Slavery to #BlackLivesMatter: African American History and Representation* (2020) has also addressed a similar set of concerns. Through a variety of chapters that aim to cover the span of over two hundred years, their anthology offers an insightful analysis on how racial violence works and how its representation has fluctuated in history.

All of these scholars concur that the representation, be it visual or textual, of racial violence can be considered a violent act insofar as it builds upon, and also reproduces, images of people of color as people whose lives are not only circumscribed, but rather actively constituted, by violence. Black individuals can, in these narratives, end up being portrayed as lifeless objects deprived of any agency and not as fully-fledged subjects with a capacity to act. This is, according to many scholars, the main flaw in Coates's argument—that his defeatist rhetoric renders people of color numb and helpless against

the pervasiveness of racism (Archie 2015; Kennedy 2015; Smith 2015, 2017; Stephens 2017). Most of them suggest, however, that it is not only the representation of racial violence that can be a form of violence on its own, but also the representation of violence in general, which, they claim, is tantamount to perpetuating it for several different reasons—namely, it re-victimizes the subject who suffered it in the first place, it plunges readers into a state of passivity and indifference, and, in focusing on an act in particular, all the other circumstantial events happening at the same time are neglected (Scarry 1985; Bryant 2003; Sontag 2003; Fliethmann 2006; Lawrence and Karim 2007; Wood 2011; Alexandre 2012; Dix and Templeton 2019).

2. Chapter Overview

To account for all the valences that are at play in the relationship between the concepts that form the bedrock of this dissertation, and for the sake of clarity, this thesis is divided into two different chapters that are framed as a chiasmus—it moves past the study of the representation of violence in the first chapter to focus on the violence of representation in the second chapter. There are two reasons why I have structured my project thus. To begin with, many scholars have claimed that the chiasmus is the best way to speak about the relationship between both concepts insofar as it suggests a pre-existent co-dependency between them; a co-dependency that will be problematized in this dissertation (Fliethmann 2006; Lawrence and Karim 2007; Noys 2013). The second reason, as I have already suggested, is that such an organization enhances good argumentation, clarity, and logical coherence. This also explains why the chapter that addresses the representation of violence precedes the chapter that draws into the violence of representation—the former introduces many concepts without which the arguments deployed in the latter might not

be properly understood; we cannot, for instance, speak about how representations are violent without having explained what constitutes violence in the first place.

Chapter one seeks to address three different questions: (1) what is racial violence?; (2) how has it been represented in the literary tradition Coates is part of?; and (3) how does Coates represent it in his work? Bearing upon the contributions to the field made mainly, but not only, by Kathleen Blee (2005, 2017), Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006), Loïc Wacquant (2009), and Edward González-Tennant (2012, 2018), and without losing sight of other meaningful pieces of research on violence that do not approach it from a racial viewpoint (Arendt 1970; Galtung 1969, 1990; Bourdieu 1984; Butler 2004; Žižek 2008), my analysis starts off by dismantling the misconception that racial violence is only triggered by racist motives, which, in turn, allows me to regard it as an interactional and multidimensional phenomenon. According to Kathleen Blee, one of the most influential scholars on the topic, racial violence is influenced by several different aspects, such as its contextual, communicative, or interpretive particularities (2005); and, as archeologist Edward González-Tennant has also been consistent in noting, it can be manifested through three different modalities—namely inter-personal, structural, and symbolic (2012, 2018).

After providing a theoretical framework to the concept of racial violence, the thesis moves on to address how that violence has been explored in the literary tradition that informs Coates's writings. In this section, I go back to the works of authors who have had a great bearing upon Coates, such as Frederick Douglass (1845, 1852, 1855), Richard Wright (1940, 1945), Ralph Ellison (1952), James Baldwin (1962), Toni Morrison (1977), and Kiese Laymon (2013, 2018), in order to identify parallels and connections in the literary representation of racial violence across different historical and geographical distances. Through critical studies by Stephen Butterfield, in *Black Autobiography in*

America (1974), Herbert Shapiro, in *White Violence and Black Response* (1988), Jerry Bryant, in *Victims and Heroes: Racial Violence in the African American Novel* (1997), and Andrew Dix and Peter Templeton, in *Violence from Slavery to #BlackLivesMatter: African American History and Representation* (2020), this section also explores the different genres and forms that writers of color have resorted to in order to speak about the atrocities they have been subjected to for centuries, but it also elucidates whether the context and the material conditions they lived in influenced in any way their ideas on, as well as their literary engagement with, racial violence, and whether they faced any challenges when carrying out said representations. Read together, all these authors and their works produce a metaliterary discourse that shapes my critical approach to the phenomenon of racial violence and its textual representation.

The chapter concludes with a critical analysis of the ways in which Coates represents racial violence in his memoir. As I am going to explain, Coates is a materialist, and so his reflections on racism always orbit around the body. The body that is at the heart of Coates's memoir, though, is not always his, or his son's, but rather a body that belongs to nobody in particular and that, in its being racialized and thus open to experiencing all forms of racism, can belong to any Black person. In this way, the final section of the first chapter explains that, through his approach to the body, Coates aims to foster empathic identifications with his readers even though he has had almost no first-person experience with police violence; to overcome distance between readers, victims, and himself by asserting identity through the concept of the flesh; and to reclaim the identity of a collective "we" that is defined abstractly rather than through lived experience. To this end, I am going to resort to Elizabeth Alexander's noteworthy theoretical contributions to the field, such as her analysis of a phenomenon that she termed "bottom line blackness," a feeling of collectivity that emerges when people of

color witness other racialized individuals experiencing violence (1994), and I am going to read them in parallel with Hortense Spillers's concept of "the flesh" (1987) and Saidiya Hartman's "the afterlives of slavery" (1997). Finally, this section also looks into Coates's processes of identification; that is, what the drawbacks and the stakes, if any, of said processes are.

Following a structure that bears many similarities with the first chapter, chapter two is divided into three sections. The first section of the second chapter explores the theoretical underpinnings of the relation between violence and its representation and lays the groundwork for my subsequent analysis of Coates's works. In this section, I first consider the most significant research published in the last decades that sheds light on the dangers of representing racial violence (Alexander 1994, 2020; Hartman 1997, 2007, 2008; Best 2012, 2015; Levy-Hussen 2016; Lloyd 2018), and then, through a detailed analysis of these works, I suggest that there are three main ways in which the representation of racial violence can end up being a form of violence in itself, in particular for those who identify with the victims—first, that it reproduces suffering; second, that it normalizes certain forms of violence; and third, that it denies the subjecthood of victims and portrays them as objects instead. After arguing that the Black literary tradition has persevered for centuries by countering these forms of violence, I introduce Aida Levy-Hussen's "therapeutic reading" (2016) as a practice that allows for a reinterpretation of the meaning of representing racial violence in literature in general, and in Coates's work in particular. In all, this section sets out to highlight the "power of language—its power to oppress and to liberate, to scar and to sanctify, to plunder and to redeem" (Popova, n.d.).

The extent to which Ta-Nehisi Coates's work shares some of the features that constitute the ethical praxis proposed by Elizabeth Alexander (1994, 2020) and Levy-

Hussen (2016) is addressed in sections two and three, which in turn focus on the main ways in which Coates's work can be considered to be violent—his pessimism and his biased approach to gender (Smith 2015, 2017). Section two offers a critical reading of Coates's hopelessness, which has also been called despair (Kennedy 2015; Rogers 2015) and even nihilism (Bodenner 2015; Lowry 2015), and which a number of critics have considered to be disabling for Black people. After providing examples from the memoir, where Coates tells his son that racism is a problem that is well beyond his control and that it is "so deeply rooted that it cannot be dug out" (Malik 2021, n.p.), I consider the possibility of reading Coates's pessimism as enabling and necessary. In fact, I defend that Coates's pessimism disavows all hopeful narratives in order to offer readers other coping strategies and ways to confront racist practices. To this end, I resort to ground-breaking studies on Afropessimism (Hartman and Wilderson 2003; Sexton 2011, 2012, 2016; Wilderson 2011, 2016, 2020; R. L. 2016), Afrofuturism (Anderson and Jones 2016; Steinskog 2018; Capers 2019; Glass and Drumming 2020), racial nihilism (West 1993; Brogdon 2013; Hayes 2015; Warren 2015), and hope (Warren 2015, 2018; Winters 2016, 2018).

The third and final section addresses the extent to which Coates's memoir fails to account for the ways in which Black women are also victims of racist practices. My analysis of the gender dynamics at work in Coates's memoir begins by approaching Coates's troubled relationship with his father, whom Coates depicts as a strong-willed and brutal man but whom he nonetheless describes as non-violent (2008, 65), to later also address a series of vexed issues that have long affected communities of color, such as the absence of fathers (Wideman 1994; Marriott 2000); the legitimacy of whupping and other physical punishments (Bradshaw 1994; Herron 2017; Patton 2017a, 2017b); and the extent to which racism meddles in parent and child relationships (Wideman 1994). The

second part of the analysis addresses the ways in which Black women have been erased not only in Ta-Nehisi Coates's works, but also in discourses on racism in general. In fact, the marginal position they occupy in Coates's memoir is symptomatic of a wider problem—although Black women are pulled-over, arrested, and killed, and although they are subject to experiencing gendered-based forms of violence, their cases are very seldom reported in the press (Crenshaw 2015; Brown and Ray 2020).

3. Significance of the Research

Regardless of the vast number of reviews, op-eds, papers, and all sorts of academic publications that exist about Coates's texts, my project pursues new lines of inquiry and seeks to offer alternative ways of interpreting many of the most contentious issues related both to Ta-Nehisi Coates and to his works through the resignification of ambiguous and complex concepts such as representation, violence, and racial violence, and of the relationship that can be established among them. In this way, this thesis seeks to make a contribution to academic fields as varied as Representation Studies (Barthes 1953; Hall 1986; Fliethmann 2006), Violence Studies (Galtung 1969, 1990; Žižek 2008; González-Tennant 2012, 2018), African American Literature and Culture (Bryant 2003; Warren 2010; King and Moody-Turner 2013), Race Studies (Saucier and Woods 2016), Gender Studies (Crenshaw 1989, 1991), Literary Criticism (Cottom 2015; Dix and Templeton 2020), Empathy Studies (Levinas 1979, 1985; Alexander 1994; Parham 2020), and Cultural Historicism (Baker 1994, 2001; Trouillot 1995; Young 2010), in at least five different ways.

First, it strives to provide a clear and comprehensive definition of violence and racial violence, all whilst acknowledging the changes that these concepts have undergone in history. Certainly, this is one of the major challenges that this project has posed, as

these two concepts refer to practices and processes that are, in the words of Stuart Hall, "far from simple or straightforward" (1986, 15). Theories on violence are as varied as the contexts in which it occurs, and so any attempt at providing a precise definition of the phenomenon is "both ambitious and daunting," Susanna Scarparo and Sarah McDonald contend, "in that everything and anything may come under the rubric of violence in a society that is by and large addicted to the images of violence that are an inescapable part of contemporary reality" (2006, vii). Like studies on representation, studies on violence and on racial violence also fluctuate both historically and geographically—which means not only that several contradicting definitions of the phenomenon can be found in different places at different times, but also that said contradicting definitions can also coexist in the same place and at the same time. In this dissertation, it is my intention to offer a theoretical approach to all three concepts that is attentive to these different changes, circumstances, and particularities.

Second, it attempts to document how all the aforementioned conceptual changes have played out in the Black literary tradition; that is, to identify resonant connections in the ways in which racial violence has been thought of and represented in the literary tradition that Coates is part of. For a number of scholars, the first texts authored by Black writers that delved into the phenomenon of racial violence were the slave narratives (Bryant 2013; Perry 2016; Dix and Templeton 2020), and so it was those texts that offered the first reflections on how material conditions influenced the ways in which Black authors talked about racial violence, on the ethical implications that these representations carried, and on the possibilities to attain historical repair through literature. Many of the concerns expressed in these narratives are also recurrent not only in texts written a hundred years later, such as Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) or Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), but also in contemporary texts such as Jesmyn Ward's *Men We*

Reaped (2013) and Coates's own memoirs. For Henry Louis Gates Jr., this continuity is testament to the fact that "black writers started reading and revising each other's works, situating their representations of their own experiences and those of other black people, in the tropes and metaphors of other black writers" (in Shirley and Moody Turner 2013, 1). Following Gates, I argue, in this thesis, that these significant relations of revision help put into context, and shed new light on, the idiosyncrasies of Coates's works.

Third, it aims at providing new paradigms to reinterpret Coates's work and the criticism it prompted. In fact, this dissertation joins current debates spurred mainly by Coates's memoirs with the intention of elucidating some of the most vexed and controversial issues about Ta-Nehisi Coates, including his approach to hope, progress, and love. Calvin Warren (2015, 2018), for instance, claimed that Coates's work helps contest the idea that hope can function as a conciliatory trope in communities of color; Joseph Winters (2016, 2018) noted that, for Black people, progress does not encompass a unidirectional and linear trajectory, which is often the case for white people; and Vincent Lloyd (2018) stated that Coates's view of love throws into relief a serious underlying problem in Black families, whupping. Coates's works did not only win critical acclaim, though, as they were also looked upon with disdain by other critics, who believed that his approach to the aforementioned concepts was inimical to the celebration of Blackness and to the belief in a non-catastrophic future (Alexander 2015; Archie 2015; Lowry 2015; Malik 2021). This dissertation navigates a pathway through all these different perspectives and seeks not only to put them into context, but also to inspect them carefully through new theoretical and critical frameworks, such as Afropessimism (Sexton 2011, 2015, 2016; Wilderson 2011, 2016) and Astroblackness (Anderson and Jones 2016; Rollins 2016).

Fourth, it also strives to elucidate Coates's own understanding of racial violence; a subject that, even if fundamental in Coates's thought, has turned out to be rather complex, ambiguous, and highly elusive. Even if most of his works orbit around how the phenomenon manifests itself in society, the truth is that Coates never provides a clear definition of it, which adds to the difficulty of studying the ways in which he theorizes and represents violence. In this dissertation, it is my intention to read and study Coates's memoirs, articles, and interviews in parallel in a bid to provide a definition of what Coates believes racial violence to be. As I am going to maintain through this work, Coates's approach to the subject is inextricable from the notion of "plunder," a word that is recurrent in many of his op-eds and in *Between the World and Me*, and which he defines in "The Clock Didn't Start with the Riots" (2015f) as "the taking from black people in order to empower other people" (n.p.). As Coates maintains on several occasions, plundering began with enslavement, it expanded well beyond its abolishment, and it acquired different guises through history—the Jim Crow laws, racial zoning, or "the stripping of black people's right to vote" (n.p.), for instance, are other manifestations of plundering. Coates, in this way, subscribes to an emerging consensus that considers racial violence a multidimensional phenomenon that is expressed through interpersonal, structural, and symbolic means. As I am going to contend later, intra-racial conflicts can also be considered a form of "plunder," because they are the culmination of long-running racist processes of spatial segregation.

Fifth and last, it sheds light on the peculiarities of how violence and representation interact within the particular context of the Black literary tradition. As I have already suggested, even though studies on the interplay between violence and representation have a long story already, most of them, including the research conducted by Barthes (1953), Sontag (1966, 2003), Armstrong and Tennenhouse (1989), or Lawrence and Karim

(2007), fail to account for the racial dimension of such a relationship. This is, however, the object of study of a growing body of research that started forming at the end of the twentieth century with the publication of books such as Saidiya Hartman's already mentioned *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), Frank B. Wilderson's *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (2010), Huey Copeland's *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and Blackness in Multicultural America* (2013), and articles such as Deborah McDowell's "In the First Place" (1991) and Stephen Best's "Come and Gone" (2015). Although this dissertation uses the canonical works of white scholars to track back the origins of the nexus between both concepts, it emphasizes the centrality that the studies by Black intellectuals have had in understanding the emerging literary body that aims to represent and condemn the myriad forms of violence communities of color are subject to on a daily basis. This project is, all in all, an intersectional work that revolves not only around Coates's memoirs, but also around the ethical and critical dimensions of both writing and reading; and around the limits and the possibilities of literature.

4. Terminology

4.1 On the Capitalization of the Word "Black"

I find it necessary to devote a section of this introduction to discuss a controversial subject that I have been grappling with ever since I began working on this project almost six years ago now—whether to capitalize the word "Black" and its derivatives or not. Although this discussion acquired greater impetus after the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020—when activist organizations such as Black Lives Matter opted for claiming power, understanding, and respect for people of color through the capitalization of the word—its origins can be traced back to W.E.B. Du Bois who, in a footnote to his work *The Philadelphia Negro* (1898), declared that "I believe that eight million Americans are

entitled to a capital letter" (2007, 2).[3] A few years later, *The Times* announced that they endorsed the use of the word in the uppercase, and by 1960, with the Black Power Movement, capitalizing it was regarded as a sign of resistance and empowerment. With the arrival of the twenty-first century, the discussion was back on the table. In 2014, Lori L. Tharps remarked that "Black with a capital B refers to people of the African diaspora. Lowercase black is simply a color" (2014a, n.p.), and newspapers of international renown, such as *The Atlantic*, on June 18, 2020, and *The New York Times*, on June 30, 2020, updated their style guides and argued in favor of using the words "Black" and "white," just as *The Seattle Times* had already done back in December 2019. In her blog entry "I Refuse to Remain in the Lower Case" (2014b), Tharps notes that

> Black with a capital "B" refers to a group of people whose ancestors were born in Africa, were brought to the United States against their will, spilled their blood, sweat and tears to build this nation into a world power and along the way managed to create glorious works of art, passionate music, scientific discoveries, a marvelous cuisine, and untold literary masterpieces. When a copyeditor deletes the capital "B," they are in effect deleting the history and contributions of my people. (n.p.)

After much careful deliberation, I opted for the use of uppercase "Black" in this thesis. Just as I abide by the capitalization of the word "Black" and its derivatives, I also refuse to capitalize the word "white" for the following reasons. First and foremost, the

---

[3] In "The Case for Black with Capital B" (2014), Lori Thaps explains that Du Bois even began a campaign for writers and editors to capitalize the word "Negro." "In 1926," she writes, "*The New York Times* denied his request, as did most other newspapers. In 1929, when the editor for the Encyclopedia Britannica informed Du Bois that Negro would be lowercased in the article he had submitted for publication, Du Bois quickly wrote a heated retort that called 'the use of a small letter for the name of twelve million Americans and two hundred million human beings a personal insult.' The editor changed his mind and conceded to the capital N, as did many other mainstream publications including *The Atlantic Monthly* and, eventually, *The New York Times*" (n.p.).

word has often been capitalized by white supremacist, separatist, and nationalist groups. Second, whiteness is already a form of privilege, and so dignifying it, enshrining it, or endowing it with recognition through language seems not only unnecessary, but altogether wrong.[4] In this regard, Luke Visconti writes, in "Ask the White Guy," that "capitalizing Black but not white makes sense, because, while Black people describe themselves as Black, 'people in the white majority don't think of themselves in that way. I don't think there's anything wrong with this—it's just how it is'" (Visconti in Appiah 2020, n.p.).[5] That I favor the uppercase "B" but the lowercase "w" in my dissertation does not mean that I will modify the quotes of the authors I refer to whenever they mention these two words. I will leave their passages just as they are in the original sources. Although this is most obvious with Ta-Nehisi Coates, who, in all the sources I rely on, never capitalizes the word "black," it also applies to many other scholars and references this text includes, such as Elizabeth Alexander's "bottom line blackness" (1994), as well as to her allusions to "the black interior" (2004).

4.2 On the Distinction between Black and African American

In her poem "I Am a Black," Gwendolyn Brooks rejected the term African American and claimed that she was "a Black and a Black forever" and that she was "other than Hyphenation" (2005, 253). In this dissertation, I favor the employment of the word

---

[4] Some Black scholars, such as Eve Ewing (2020), argued against the use of lowercase "white" by stating that, if the word "Black" is capitalized but the word "white" is not, it standardizes "whiteness," which means, in turn, that "whiteness" is not only not questioned, but also rendered omnipresent and invisible at the same time. "Whiteness is not only an absence," she writes. "It is not a hole in the map of America's racial landscape. Rather, it is a specific social category that confers identifiable and measurable social benefits. […] When we ignore the specificity and significance of Whiteness—the things that it is, the things that it does—we contribute to its seeming neutrality and thereby grant it power to maintain its invisibility" (n.p.). Although I consider her argument compelling, my decision is not to capitalize the word "white" for the reasons I explain in the main text.

[5] About the capitalization of the word "Black," Kimberlé Crenshaw writes, in her canonical essay "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color" (1991) that "I capitalize 'Black' because Blacks, like Asians, Latinos, and other 'minorities', constitute a specific cultural group and, as such, require denotation as a proper noun. […] By the same token, I do not capitalize 'white', which is not a proper noun, since whites do not constitute a specific cultural group" (1991, 1244).

"Black"[6] over "African American," with a few exceptions, for the following reasons. To begin with, I think the term "Black" works toward inclusivity, diversity, and plurality in a way that "African American" does not, at least to the same extent. In this regard, Alexandria Neason defended "the term Black as both a recognition of an ethnic identity in the States that doesn't rely on hyphenated *Americanness*—and is more accurate than *African American*, which suggests recent ties to the continent—and is also transnational and inclusive of our Caribbean [and] Central/South American siblings" (in Laws 2020, n.p.; emphasis in the original). Second, I refer in most of the instances to the Black literary tradition, and not to the African American literary tradition, because many of the critics I mention, such as Frantz Fanon, Dionne Brand, or Achille Mbembe, are not American. The third and final reason is that, in particular in my approach to materialism, phenomenology, and the body, I speak of people with dark skin, and so I put sharp focus on the meanings associated by racist readings of the body to certain phenotypical characteristics and not to their nationality.

4.3 On the Use of "Enslaved" and "Enslavement"

Black scholars and public personalities have recently insisted upon the urgency to employ the word "enslaved people" or "the enslaved" instead of "slaves" (Waldman 2015; Painter 2019; Zorn 2019), based on the fact that, as Nell Irvin Painter has also appropriately claimed, "how we use these words makes a crucial difference when we think about the meanings of our past" (2019, n.p.). Indeed, enslavement was part of the circumstances these people endured, and not part of their identity; and so "enslaved" is favored over "slaves" because the former stresses their humanity and showcases that enslavement was not something inherent but a "forced sociopolitical position thrust upon them" (Hylton

---

[6] My use of "people of color" and "communities of color" in this thesis also accommodates Latinxs, Arabs, Asians, Indigenous peoples, amongst others.

2020, n.p.). In a similar vein, the word "slavery," which similarly contributes to the dynamics of racist discourses, has been rejected in favor of the word "enslavement." For the reasons stated above, in this thesis, I advocate for the use of "enslaved people" and "enslavement" instead of "slaves" and "slavery."

4.4 On the Difference between Racial Violence, Racism, and Anti-Blackness

Three recurrent concepts in this dissertation may require previous additional description or disambiguation—racial violence, racism, and anti-Blackness. Following Mary Jackman (2002), Kathleen Blee (2005), and Edward González-Tennant (2012, 2018), racial violence comprises any action perpetrated against a racialized individual that inflicts any sort of injury that can have material, psychological, or social consequences. Racism, on the other hand, does not refer to the actions performed against somebody but to the animosity towards a social group that shares certain phenotypical characteristics, skin color being its primary marker. In this sense, my understanding of racism aligns with the OED definition of the term—"prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against someone of a different race based on the belief that one's own race is superior" (*Coalition* 2020, n.p.). Finally, anti-Blackness is a term that is rather new and that has acquired greater significance within the context of Afropessimism (Sexton 2008, 2012; Gordon 2010; Sharpe 2018; Vargas 2018; Jung and Vargas 2021). Anti-Blackness, like racism, does not refer to a single action, but unlike racism, it does not refer to the animosity directed against a racialized person either. Anti-Blackness speaks instead of a pervasive hostile climate in which Black people's lives are constantly distrusted, policed, abused, and brutalized; it speaks of their lives as being, always and in all circumstances, imperiled. Although this dissertation revolves mainly around the first of the three terms here discussed, racial violence, at times it also makes mention of the other two; something

that in turn showcases that most of the times these three concepts are not independent but instead shape and influence each other.

I cannot end this introduction without noting two further points. To begin with, the title of this dissertation, *Bearing Witness to Atrocity: Racial Violence and the Limits of Representation in Ta-Nehisi Coates's Works*, has its own *raison d'être*, too. As I explain in the second chapter of this thesis, my understanding of "bearing witness" is significantly influenced by Allisa V. Richardson's "black witnessing," a phenomenon that is "woven deeply into the historic narratives about human rights violations against marginalized groups" (2017, 674) and which refers to the ways in which people of color have represented, recorded, talked about, testified against and, in all, denounced the racial atrocities they have been subject to. Following Richardson's point, I believe that bearing witness is not only what Coates does with his work but also what the literary tradition he belongs to has strived to do for centuries, and so using the expression in the title is my own way of paying tribute to them. Second, I would also like to mention that the facts described in this dissertation are influenced and, to a certain extent, also constrained by my own experiences and my privileged subject position as a white woman. I tried to avoid at all points making value judgements, adopting an essentialist stance, and speaking about the Black experience, that is, about what it *means* to be Black, and instead to offer my own reading and interpretation of what racialized authors believe being Black implies. This is also why I tried to use as many secondary sources authored by Black scholars as possible; I wanted the arguments of Black scholars, thinkers, writers, and artists to be the bedrock of this project.

In her work *Playing in the Dark. Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1993b), Toni Morrison claimed that "writing and reading are not all that distinct for a writer" to later contend that "both require being mindful of the places where imagination sabotages

itself, locks its own gates, pollutes its vision. Writing and reading mean being aware of the writer's notions of risk and safety, the serene achievement of, or sweaty fight for, meaning and response-ability" (21). Taking everything into consideration, I mean this dissertation to intervene in contemporary debates on the vexed interaction between racial violence and its representation, and to think anew the ethical possibilities of both writing and reading literature. Besides analyzing Ta-Nehisi Coates and his works, my project also seeks to offer new frameworks from which to think about the reasons why violence is represented; about what, if any, the ethical possibilities of narrating violence are; about what these sorts of representations do to victims, to survivors, to writers, and to readers; about what part commitment and responsibility towards others play; and about what it all says about us, as *a* people.

1. The Representation of Violence

In his essay "Fear of a Black Pundit," columnist Jordan Michael Smith referred to Ta-Nehisi Coates as "the single best writer on the subject of race in the United States" (2013, n.p.). Smith's claim, even if considered an overstatement by a few critics (Kennedy 2015; Chatterton Williams 2015; Hill 2017), is not unfounded—starting at the end of the last century, Coates has been bearing exceptional testimony to the particularities of being a Black man in the U.S. with the publication of no less than two memoirs, a novel, several comic books, and thousands of articles, blog entries, and interviews (Rambsy II 2016). In fact, he has delved into racial issues through such a broad array of literary forms that it is difficult to ascertain "whether [he] is best labeled as a writer of fiction or nonfiction, a deft user of tweets, blogs and comments or a savant of journalistic essays and memoirs" (Hill, Page, and Whaley 2017, 392). His early days as a writer can be traced back to the 1990s, when he spent many years "practic[ing] short-form journalistic writing" at *Washington City Paper* (2017, 394) and setting down his thoughts about politics and racial issues in his own personal blog, which also helped him to start garnering the support of a small but loyal community of readers.

Coates's consolidation as a correspondent was not plain sailing, though. From 2000 to 2007, he worked for *Philadelphia Weekly*, *The Village Voice*, and *Time*, but was fired from all of them within relatively short periods of time (Smith 2013, n.p.). It was not until 2008, when he started working for *The Atlantic*, that Coates managed to build up his reputation as a writer with the publication of essays such as "This Is How We Lost to the White Man" (2008b), where he reflected upon Black conservatism through a critical

analysis of Bill Cosby's Pound Cake Speech.[7] That same year he also published his first memoir, *The Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons, and an Unlikely Road to Manhood*, which "consolidated his commitment to diagnosing social realities by glimpsing them through personal situations" but still "did not make Coates a household name" (Hill, Page, and Whaley 2017, 393-394).

After the modest success of his debut work, *The Beautiful Struggle* (2008), a memoir that reflects on the important bearing that Coates's father had on him when he was growing up in a gang-ridden neighborhood, Coates kept on exploring racial "tropes like invisibility, misnaming, and marginalization" (Hill, Page, and Whaley 2017, 392) through his numerous articles and blog entries, such as "Fear of a Black President" (2012), thanks to which, Howard Rambsy II points out, Coates ended up attracting a wider readership (2016). After Coates's initial hesitation about flagging up issues related to policing and racial targeting in his writings,[8] he ventured, in "Fear of a Black President," into discussing the mixed responses that Barack Obama's reaction to Trayvon Martin's murder drew.[9] In part thanks to his forthright views about racial discrimination, Coates

---

[7] The Pound Cake Speech was delivered by Bill Cosby on May 17, 2004, in Washington D.C. In it, he denounced the tragic situation faced by Black people in the U.S. focusing on the high—and still increasing—rates of incarceration, unemployment, and undereducation of Black people. Cosby summoned up a past in which "we protected our women and protected our children" (qtd. in Coates 2017, 14) and urged Black people to keep fighting. In Coates's words, "Cosby had been telling thousands of Black Americans that racism in America is omnipresent but that it can't be an excuse to stop fighting" (2017, 15). Coates's "This Is How We Lost to a White Man" was reissued as the first essay included in his compilation *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy* (2017).

[8] According to Howard Rambsy II, who has extensively studied the reception of Coates's work, the author "had followed similar incidents before and found the outcomes less than adequate for African Americans," so he had been avoiding discussing them in public for several years (2016, 198).

[9] When reporters asked him about Martin's murder, Obama appealed for empathy, claiming that "my main message is to the parents of Trayvon Martin. If I had a son, he'd look like Trayvon. I think they are right to expect that all of us as Americans are going to take this with the seriousness it deserves, and that we're going to get to the bottom of exactly what happened" (in Coates 2012, n.p.). Whilst Black critics celebrated that Obama was finally addressing racial issues, which he had not talked about in all his previous years as president, many white critics found Obama's contention problematic and wondered if "the president [is] suggesting that if it had been a white who had been shot, that would be okay because it wouldn't look like him" (in Coates 2012, n.p.). Obama's stances in similar occasions are addressed in sections 2.1 and 2.2.

42

soon started becoming "one of the most prolific writers on Martin and Zimmerman[10] at a major magazine or news outlet" (Rambsy II 2016, 198).

It was, however, "The Case for Reparations" (2014) that catapulted him to stardom. The op-ed, which offers a critical analysis of racial demography and the development of racist housing policies such as racial zoning, redlining, or the processes of ghettoization that many urban cities went through at the beginning of the twentieth century, shed light on the extent to which the deprivation of resources in racialized communities can be interpreted as a transfiguration of older manifestations of racism, such as enslavement. The commotion which, for good and bad, was caused by "The Case for Reparations," was unprecedented. According to Howard Rambsy II,

> By the end of the week, the article had been covered by approximately fifty journalists and other commentators […], and dozens of online publications. By the end of June [only a month after its publication, on May 21, 2014], more than 100 commentators had opined about the article. […] Eventually officials announced that [it] had set a single-day traffic record for a magazine article when it was published. (2016, 198)

The essay bestowed upon Coates great popularity, almost ensuring that his second full-length work, *Between the World and Me*, which would be published only a year after "The Case for Reparations," would also be a phenomenal success.[11]

---

[10] George Zimmerman killed Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, on February 26, 2012. Martin was unarmed and going back home from a grocery store in the middle of the night when Zimmerman saw him and thought he looked suspicious. After calling the police, who told Zimmerman to not do anything and to wait for them to arrive, Zimmerman confronted Martin. A fuller account of the murder is provided in section 1.1.1.

[11] Rambsy II argues that the expectation was such that the editing house, Spiegel & Grau, first moved "the publication date from October 13th to September 8th" (2016, 200). In the end, witnessing an unprecedented rising interest in Coates, they decided to set July 14th as the final publication date for the memoir.

As expected, *Between the World and Me* left nobody indifferent. Immediately after its publication on July 14, 2015, the text became a breakthrough in racial studies and literary texts dealing with racial reckoning and, by the end of 2015, Coates had already received the MacArthur "Genius Grant" Fellowship and the National Book Award for Nonfiction. Although, as I am going to explain, different polemical aspects of the memoir[12] caused serious dissension among critics, the rapturous reception of *Between the World and Me* turned Coates into an eminent writer of international renown. In the years ensuing the publication of his text, Coates was also in the spotlight not only for his work, but also for being caught up in many public controversies—he engaged in polemics with Cornel West in 2016,[13] and even slighted activist organizations like Black Lives Matter, with which Coates himself has been involved in a "sort of long war" (Levitz 2019, n.p.). His next full-length work was not issued until 2017, when, in the wake of Donald Trump's election, Coates published *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy*, in which Coates compiled several articles he had written in the span of Barack Obama's presidency. In 2019 he published his first novel, *The Water Dancer*, after several years of being the chief editor for the Marvel Comics series *Black Panther* (2016-2021).

The issues that Coates tackles in *Between the World and Me* do not differ that much from the ones he discusses in *The Beautiful Struggle*. In fact, many critics have pointed out that both texts might seem to be engaged in a chronological relationship of sorts, since *Between the World and Me* begins just a few decades after *The Beautiful Struggle* ends (Rambsy II 2016; Carney 2017; Hill, Page, and Whaley 2017). However,

---

[12] There has been much debate as to what literary genre *Between the World and Me* belongs to. In this study, I will consider the book a memoir, as it retells the story of the author's childhood, youth and young adulthood, including his opinions and perceptions of the events he witnessed for years. Besides, Coates himself also refers to his text as "a combination of memoir, history and analysis" (in Goodman 2015, n.p.). The inclusion of Coates's work in the memoiristic tradition will be further explored in section 1.2.

[13] For more information about Coates and West see section 1.3.1.2.

whereas the first memoir explores the difficulties that Coates faced during his childhood, the second one explores the difficulties that Coates is facing now as an adult and, most particularly, as a father. *Between the World and Me*, thus, takes the form of a letter that Coates writes to his adolescent son with the intention of warning him about the dangers that he will encounter in society for being a racialized man. Coates's choosing the letter format to convey such an important message to his son, which echoes James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1962), may be driven by Coates's wish to bequeath a legacy to him— a letter, "something that will endure beyond his own death" (Lordi 2016, 442).

   Between the World and Me received great acclaim from both readers and critics soon after it was published, but its "complexities and contradictions in terms of audience, address, and conclusions" (Abramowitsch 2017, 461) also turned it into a fraught object of criticism. Although, as I am going to study in this dissertation, there are several reasons why the memoir has drawn mixed responses, it is probably Coates's ambiguity in not reaching any closure that critics have found most troubling. In the view of Michelle Alexander, the memoir "challenges us" because, she states, "Coates hasn't yet discovered for himself the answers to the questions he poses" (2015, n.p.). For many, the problem is not only the text's lack of conclusions, but also Coates's sheer disbelief in the possibility of ever constructing a society bereft of racial bigotries (Alexander 2015; Kennedy 2015; Chatterton Williams 2015; Abramowitsch 2017; Smith 2017). Thomas Chatterton Williams claims, in his polemical essay "Loaded Dice" (2015), that in constantly reminding his son that there is nothing they can do to change the present circumstances, Coates is not only negating progress and being overly defeatist, but he is also constraining the agency of Black individuals, who are portrayed in the memoir as "hapless automatons" (n.p.). Along these lines, for Chatterton Williams, Coates believes racism to

be an "utterly intransigent and impersonal force, like a natural disaster, for which no one can be usefully held to account" (n.p.).

Many have been the times when Coates has been asked to respond to the trenchant criticism that his work has prompted, and his reply, which refers us to the ongoing and complex discussion about what the role of writers really is (Popova 2012), has always remained the same—he does not seek to do with his work anything other than offer his own understanding of the problems he addresses. In an interview with Jeffrey Goldberg, Coates contended that

> My job is different [from that of Black Lives Matter]. The job of activists is
> different. It's not that activists lie or bend the truth, it's that the job of activists
> is to get people to do something. That just requires a very different approach
> to the world. I'm not trying to convince people to necessarily do a thing. I am
> trying to interpret a problem as I see it and offer up my analysis of it. […] To
> be a writer, I think, is very different than folks who are called to go into the
> streets and to do certain things. (2018, n.p.)

Regardless of all the disparaging comments that the memoir has drawn, it has also been celebrated for a significant number of reasons. To begin with, Coates's prose has been deemed outstandingly beautiful by many; and his work "exquisite" (Bodenner 2015, n.p.) and also "thrilling and illuminating" (Lewis 2016). Besides, the memoir has also been praised for the visceral and detailed descriptions it provides about the different forms of violence racialized bodies are subject to. These descriptions, Harold A. Pollack believes, are so direct and intimate that they can actually exert a dramatic impact on society and even save a whole generation (2015, n.p.). Through a powerful rhetoric that is both harsh and highly evocative, Coates documents the history of racism in the U.S.—

how it all began with enslavement; how it has transmuted over the centuries; and how it still is a substantial part of the present.

Taking everything that I have just mentioned into consideration, this chapter is divided into three different sections, each of which constitutes its own attempt at addressing a particular question: (1) what is racial violence?; (2) how has it been represented in the literary tradition Coates is part of?; and (3) how does Coates represent it in his work? Bearing upon the contributions to the field made mainly, but not only, by Kathleen Blee (2005, 2017), Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006), Loïc Wacquant (2009) and Edward González-Tennant (2012, 2018), and without losing sight of other meaningful research that does not necessarily approach violence from a racial viewpoint (Arendt 1970; Galtung 1969, 1990; Bourdieu 1984; Butler 2004; Žižek 2008), my analysis starts off by providing a definition of racial violence that is attentive to the changes it has been through historically, which will help us regard it as a phenomenon that is both interactional and multidimensional. According to Kathleen Blee, one of the most influential contemporary scholars on the topic, racial violence is influenced by contextual, communicative, or interpretive particularities (2005); and, as archeologist Edward González-Tennant has consistently noted, it can be manifested through three main modalities—namely inter-personal, structural, and symbolic (2012, 2018).

Coates's approach to racial violence bears the traces of other canonical works in the tradition. As I have already claimed, the significant impact that authors such as Richard Wright or James Baldwin had on him is conspicuous from the very first pages of the book—from Wright, Coates borrowed the title of the memoir;[14] from Baldwin, whom

---

[14] Wright's homonymous poem, first published in *The Partisan Review* in 1935, describes a lynching scene the I-persona witnesses when wandering in the woods one morning. Coates uses the beginning of the poem as the epigraph of the memoir: "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

Toni Morrison compares Coates to on the back cover of certain editions, the form. But far from straddling only between the figures of Wright and Baldwin, Coates has also been compared to Frederick Douglass (Goldberg 2008);[15] Ralph Ellison (Lordi 2017a; Carney 2017); or to his contemporaries Kiese Laymon (Guerrero 2017) or Chimamanda Ngozi-Adichie (Ford 2017). It is my contention that Coates's memoir addresses certain controversial issues related to racial violence and its representation that many of these authors also centralized in their works. What attitudes are Black characters entitled to display when facing racist bigotries? What literary forms and "modes of writing" are to be used to portray pain and suffering in all their nuances without losing respect for the victims (Hartman 2008)? What repercussions do all the former have for the author, as well as for his or her readers?

The final section attempts to address an important subject that will also be central in the following chapter—can representations of racism foster empathic relations, or are such representations forms of disidentification for readers? To answer the question, four concepts that recur frequently in Coates's narratives will be employed—the flesh (Spillers 1987; Warren 2016), the body (Young 2010; Haile III 2017), empathy (Alexander 1994; Hartman 1997; Abramowitsch 2017), and readership (León 2015; Lewis 2016; Rambsy 2016; Williams 2016). As I am going to explain, Coates's strategy is to provoke identification with his readers even when they have had no first-person experience with police violence and to reclaim the identity of a collective "we" that is defined abstractly rather than through lived experience. For some critics, however, Coates's strategy has many downsides, and it results in a very curious phenomenon—whilst for a group of

---

rose, thrusting themselves / between the world and me…" The whole poem can be retrieved at <https://edhelper.com/poetry/Between_the_World_and_Me_by_Richard_Wright.htm>.

[15] The title of the interview conducted by Jeffrey Goldberg is "Ta-Nehisi Coates is the New Frederick Douglass" (2008).

readers Coates's portrayal of the body is indeed a call for empathy, for others it is discriminatory, and his experiences do not speak for theirs. Taking everything into account, this chapter aims at teasing out the most problematic issues raised by Coates's conceptualization of racial conflicts, namely the opposition between embodiment and lack of corporality, and its effects on the empathic relation fostered between readership and text (Bennett 2015; Hilton 2015; Kennedy 2015; León 2015; Lewis 2016; Abramowitsch 2017).

1.1 Conceptualizing Racial Violence

> We live in a country where Americans assimilate corpses in their daily comings and goings. Dead blacks are a part of normal life here. Dying in ship hulls, tossed into the Atlantic, hanging from trees, beaten, shot in churches, gunned down by the police or warehoused in prisons. Historically, there is no quotidian without the enslaved, chained, or dead black body to gaze upon, or to hear about, or to position a self against.
>
> Claudia Rankine, "The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning" (2020)

> To be black […] is to be the victim of the real world of violence and prejudice.
>
> Jerry H. Bryant, *Victims and Heroes* (1997)

> So the war goes on, from battle to battle, but with essentially the same things at stake, and for the same reason.
>
> LeRoi Jones, *Home: Social Essays* (1966)

Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* (2015a) has been described as a "searing indictment of America's legacy of violence, institutional and otherwise, against blacks" (Nance 2015). Indeed, the memoir seems to be a detailed register of the multifarious forms of violence Black people are exposed to—from direct manifestations of physical assaults, including traffic stops, arrests, beatings, maimings, and murders; to less conspicuous expressions of racism, such as public humiliations, legal disenfranchisement, or redlining. Coates's ambition to draw attention to the heterogeneity of racial violence results in the creation of a text that offers a promising, necessary, thorough, and complex evaluation of the phenomenon. Coates, who often intimates that his own life has been a "constant negotiation of violence" (2015a, 130), takes as a starting

point for his discussion policing, an expression of racial targeting that has been gaining visibility in the last decades. In fact, it is from his son's reaction to the legal absolution of Michael Brown's murderer, in 2012, that the memoir unfolds.

Throughout the text, Coates keeps cautioning his readership against believing in a fallacy that several of his contemporaries have also pointed out—that the forms of violence that are inflicted by an identifiable individual are the only forms of violence that exist (Blee 2005; Matthews and Goodman 2013; González-Tennant 2012, 2018). In general terms, we could claim that Coates's understanding draws from Johan Galtung's research, in particular from his "conflict triangle," which he first introduced in his essay "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research" (1969). For Galtung, acts of violence perpetrated by a clear actor are the most visible acts of violence—but there are other, less evident acts that are often unseen, but that sanction visible forms of violence. In his work, Coates makes it clear that it is critical to read the alarming rates at which people of color are being murdered in the streets as "merely the superlative form of dominion whose prerogatives include friskings, detainings, beatings, and humiliations" (2015a, 9), and as the manifest counterpart of the violence implied in "the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regression" (10). Examples of these less visible forms of violence include, to name but a few, the negative stereotyping of racialized groups, their legal disenfranchisement, or the development of the eugenics movement (Bonilla-Silva 2006; González-Tennant 2012, 2018). It is my intention, in this chapter, to resort to the significant contributions to the field made by Kathleen Blee (2005, 2017), Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006), Loïc Wacquant (2009), Edward González-Tennant (2012, 2018), and Andrew Dix and Peter Templeton (2020) to explore Ta-Nehisi Coates's approach to racial violence in *Between the World and Me*.

Coates's understanding of racial violence builds upon an emerging consensus (Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Perry 2002; Blee 2005, 2017; Bonilla-Silva 2006; Žižek 2008; González-Tennant 2012, 2018) that interprets it as a phenomenon that is interactional, in that it is informed by different factors (Blee 2005, 599), and multidimensional, in that it has several forms and expressions (González-Tennant 2018, 4). In 2005, sociologist Kathleen Blee provided one of the most relevant redefinitions of the term, which she described as "actions [which may be corporal, written, or verbal] that inflict, threaten, or cause injury" and which are directed towards victims who belong to a racialized group (Blee 2005, 606). Contrary to previous research in the field, which defended that racial violence was uniquely motivated by the racial animus of the perpetrator (Horowitz 2001), Blee's contribution is noteworthy for reading it as a phenomenon that is influenced not only by the perpetrator's animus but also by several other factors. One of the primary criteria that determines whether a violent act is racial or not is the racial fungibility of the victim, that is, whether "the victim is representative of a presumed racial classification" (607) or not. Concentrating on the victim's belonging to a racialized group "broadens the notion of what is violent beyond individual […] inflictions of harm" (606).[16] Blee, then, uses racial fungibility also to explain how collective racial violence works, as it accounts for the "collective harm against subordinate racial groups such as that evidenced in enslavement, or racial disparities in health care provision, criminal sentencing, the siting of environmental toxins, and migration policy" (606). In addition, placing less emphasis on the perpetrator also allows Blee to draw attention to other aspects that have been instrumental but rarely explored in previous studies of the concept (Horowitz 1983; Essed

---

[16] This means, as I am going to explain in section 2.2.3, that Black-on-Black crime is also considered racial violence.

1991; Jacobs and Potter 1998), such as its contextual, communicative, or interpretive implications.

First of all, moving beyond the perpetrator's intent sheds light on the ways in which racial violence is attuned to historical and social contexts.[17] Along these lines, the contextual aspect of racial violence provides significant insights into the situational and historical fluctuation of the phenomenon, which is no longer seen only as a "series of incidents motivated by racial animus" but as "an accomplishment […] of social actions, […] both the culmination of factors rooted in *past situations* at the same time as it is an impetus for *future acts*" (613; my emphasis). Blee's idea had already been extensively explored by sociologist Janet Abu-Lughod, who had provided thorough understandings of the ways in which a certain racist action had a tremendous impact on posterior patterns of racial violence (2000, 2007). In the conclusion to her book, and showcasing the contextual aspects of racial violence, Abu-Lughod states that "if the structural issues that disadvantage African Americans are not adequately addressed, ongoing police discrimination will continue to result in outbursts of violence during the twenty-first century" (qtd. in González-Tennant 2018, 71). That is, a violent act at a certain point in time is the result of previous expressions of, as well as the incentive to future events of, racial violence (Abu-Lughod 2007; Alexander 2010; Ritchie 2017).

Second, focusing on racial fungibility also allows for the interpretation of racial violence as a phenomenon through which messages on racial empowerment and racial vulnerability are spread. A violent act is, in this manner, often used as a reminder of the

---

[17] As González-Tennant also defends, during the 1950s lynchings were the most evident form of racial violence, something that changed during the 1960s, when the rising confrontations between protesters and authorities in race riots became the focus of study (Blee 2005, 613; González-Tennant 2018, 50-63). Recent research has also demonstrated that racial violence also exerts an effect on the context in which it occurs. If a violent act is not addressed properly when it first happens, it is likely to reappear later on in history (Abu-Lughod 2007).

existing power relations within a community, as it serves both to warn the victims' racial group of the dangers they are exposed to, and to sustain the privileged status of the perpetrators. In most cases, the intention of these messages is to "creat[e] fear in the victims' […] community, even those socially or geographically distant from the immediate victim" (608). Finally, it is important to bear in mind that violence in general, and racial violence in particular, is always subject to interpretation, as "its meaning is negotiated by and between various parties including bystanders, police, courts, and the press whose interpretations may differ considerably" (610). As I am going to defend later, the myriad responses to Trayvon Martin's murder best typify the interpretive facet of racial violence.

Taking everything mentioned so far into consideration, the first section of this chapter aims at documenting the changes that racial violence has undergone in history, which are testament to the complexity and the ambiguity of the phenomenon. In fact, as I have already suggested, many scholars have approached racial violence from very different perspectives, and so they have provided different and often contradictory interpretations of it. In this section, I seek not only to throw into relief these contradictions, but also to offer a clearer definition of the concept. To do so, I am going to focus on how racial violence has operated, and also on how it has been theorized, in the particular context of the U.S. Furthermore, I want to see if, and if so, to what extent, the different meanings attributed to the phenomenon have influenced Coates's understanding of it in any way.

1.1.1 Racial Violence in Context: Enslavement, Lynchings, Rioting, and Policing

In his work *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (2009), sociologist Loïc Wacquant identifies four main violent technologies of domination that contributed significantly both to the subjugation of certain communities and "to defin[ing], confin[ing], and control[ling] African Americans over the centuries in the history of the United States" (196). The first one is, he argues, "chattel slavery," which he describes as the "pivot of the plantation economy" and, most importantly, as the "inceptive matrix of ethnoracial division" (196). Wacquant's second technology of domination is Jim Crow, or "the system of legally enforced discrimination and segregation" (196), which, in turn, paved the way for the development of ghettos, which he considered the third system of domination. As for the fourth and last one, he speaks of "the novel institutional complex formed by the remnants of the imploding dark ghetto and the exploding carceral apparatus, which have become joined by a relationship of structural symbiosis and functional surrogacy" (196). Although Wacquant singles out four particular social technologies of domination in history, it is important not to believe that each of them exists on its own and is detached from the others. Wacquant's proposal stands out precisely because it bears testimony to the chronological continuity of racial violence—each form of oppression is not severed from, but rather warrants, the others.[18] His theory illustrates, as my work will also attempt to do, that "violence's modalities and intensities may vary across African American history […], but its enabling conditions persist" (Dix 2020, 191).

A great number of the studies recently published on racial violence follow Wacquant's hypothesis, and so they concur that enslavement was the first technology of

---

[18] To prove his point, Wacquant notes that the acquittal of the murderers of Black individuals today is not only reminiscent of, but also a residue of, the impunity with which slaveholders committed their crimes.

domination that endorsed the employment of violent practices as a means to bring certain communities under total control (Bryant 1997; Abu-Lughod 2007; Blee 2005, 2017; Wacquant 2009; Young 2010; González-Tennant 2012, 2018; Araujo 2017; Dix and Templeton 2020). In fact, the critical reflections provided by former enslaved people such as Frederick Douglass, in his speech "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" (1852), or Booker T. Washington in his works *The Future of the American Negro* (1899) and *Up from Slavery* (1901), must be considered the seed for all posterior studies on the topic. Even though neither Douglass nor Washington offered a theoretical definition of the concept in their works, they provided significant insights into its multidimensionality— rapes, beatings, maimings, whippings, murders, and all other sorts of physical attacks were just the visible manifestation of a violence that also operated under more covert forms, such as segregation, destitution, or disenfranchisement. In the aforementioned speech, Douglass attests to this reality when he claims that

> It is wrong to make men brutes, to rob them of their liberty, to work them without wages, to keep them ignorant of their relations to their fellow men, to beat them with sticks, to flay their flesh with the lash, to load their limbs with irons, to hunt them with dogs, to sell them at auction, to sunder their families, to knock out their teeth, to burn their flesh, to starve them into obedience and submission to their masters. (1852, n.p.)

For a significant number of academics, though, scholarly research about racial violence is relatively recent, even though it has been a recurrent literary topos for almost two centuries (Bryant 1997; Wacquant 2009; Araujo 2019; Evans 2019; Dix and Templeton 2020). In fact, they contend that the earliest theoretical research on racial violence needs to be traced back to the publication of W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), where the author does not mention the concept by name but where he

definitely offers a critical analysis of how it operates in society and of the many forms it takes. In this work, Du Bois introduces two concepts that for many (Miller 2016; Pittman 2016; Saucier and Woods 2016; Jackson 2020) laid the foundations of all the posterior studies on racial violence—"double consciousness" and "the veil", both of which he had already mentioned in his article "Strivings of the Negro People" (1897), later published as the first chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). In Du Bois's words, double consciousness seeks to account for the experiences lived by African Americans in the U.S., which are very much determined by their strivings to conform to the dominant white society whilst knowing that they are excluded from it. After noting that he feels "an outcast and a stranger in [his] own house," Du Bois contends that

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—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. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. […] He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face. (2007, 8-9)

Double consciousness works in tandem with the veil, which can be considered to be a glass ceiling of sorts that thrives on segregation and that forbids Black people to progress and to succeed in life. The veil accounts for their being barred from voting well until 1965; for their not having access to decent and efficient health and education

systems; for their experiencing discriminatory housing policies; and for their not having as many employment opportunities as white people. One could claim that Du Bois was, in this way, cataloguing the myriad forms that structural violence adopts when exerted against racialized individuals and, to a larger extent, reflecting upon how these trigger other, less obvious forms of violence—namely, the feeling of social despair, worthlessness, and self-loathing that he also alluded to when he discussed the valences of double consciousness. As I am going to discuss later, the significance of Du Bois's research was such that the concepts he developed were later applied to other fields of studies, such as colonialism and post-colonialism (Fanon 1952) and gender studies (Crenshaw 1989, 1991).

In 1933, sociologist Arthur F. Raper published *The Tragedy of Lynching*, a work credited as one of the major projects on racial violence of the twentieth century (Blee 2005; González-Tennant 2012, 2018). One of the main objectives of Raper's project was determining whether racial violence was endemic to the human condition or whether, on the contrary, other factors, such as place, poverty, or mental derangement, played a part in the assailants' willingness to attack Black individuals. In fact, Raper was among the first scholars to contest the traditional notion that perpetrators "suffer[ed] from temporary insanity" and he maintained that they rather acted under "rational behavior" (in González-Tennant 2018, 58), which, consequently, meant that their actions could by no means be exculpated. Raper's line of inquiry was closely followed by that of psychologist John Dollard (1937). Dollard ascribed the development of lynching practices to a need to satisfy "a psychological need for whites to regain social control over blacks" (in González-Tennant 2018, 59). Dollard was also vocal in claiming that lynching behavior was grounded on—and seemingly justified by—the alleged fear that mobs experienced when seeing Black individuals, an argument that was later considered irrational and

outrageous (González-Tennant 2012, 2018). In this regard, he noted that lynchings occurred "because whites feared their [black] neighbors, a fear that provided the impetus for the brutal punishment of blacks for even slight offenses" (59).

The second half of the twentieth century bestowed new contours on the conceptualization of racial violence (Myrdal 1944; Dahlke 1952). First and foremost, a series of historical circumstances brought about significant changes in both who the perpetrator of violent acts was, as well as in the intention with which said acts were committed (Blee 2005, 2017; González-Tennant 2012, 2018; George 2018). In this regard, Black individuals, who until then had been cast as the passive victims of racial brutality, decided to respond to the appalling conditions they had been enduring for years with the only means racist bigots seemed to understand—violence (Bennett and Nichols 1971; Bryant 1997). Although many regard Emmett Till's lynching in 1955 as the event that precipitated the Civil Rights Movement, others consider that beginning to have been triggered by a combination of different circumstances, such as "bad policing practices, a flawed justice system, unscrupulous consumer credit practices, poor or inadequate housing, high unemployment, voter suppression, and other culturally embedded forms of racial discrimination" that propelled the "violent upheaval on the streets of African American neighborhoods in American cities, North and South, East and West" (George 2018, n.p.).

Taking into consideration everything that has just been mentioned, studies on racial violence published from the 60s onwards no longer focused on lynchings but on race riots instead (Whitfield 1988; González-Tennant 2018; Dix and Templeton 2020).[19] In the view of González-Tennant, one of the most influential publications on rioting is

---

[19] It is important to mention that from that moment onwards, lynchings and race riots developed separately as two independent expressions of racial violence. González-Tennant, however, highlights that both must be read in parallel to fully understand how racial violence developed through time (2018, 78-85).

the report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, also known as the Kerner Commission.[20] The report, published in 1968, identified both racial frustration and the lack of economic resources in Black communities as the main causes spawning the upheaval that occurred during the summer of 1967, when 159 riots erupted in the U.S. over a period of two months.[21] Parallel to the publication of the Kerner Commission, Edward Ransford (1968), and later also Joe Feagin and Harlan Hahn (1973), suggested that riots had been instigated by "feelings of isolation from political processes [by the rioters]" and that "riots represented a form of political protest by the economically and politically disenfranchised" (in González-Tennant 2018, 63). In other words, it was "white racism—not black anger—[that] turned the key that unlocked urban American turmoil" (George 2018, n.p.).

Wacquant's fourth technology of domination, policing and the prison industrial complex, expanded in particular during the second half of the twentieth century as the country was steadily being ravaged by the War on Drugs and the number of racialized inmates in federal prisons was skyrocketing—in 1970, a total of 357,292 convicts were locked up in penitentiaries; in 2014, the number increased to 2,306,200 (Duvernay 2016). With the monopolization of power brought about by racist policing practices, whites would again assert their domination over communities of color in general, and Black communities in particular, through the enforcement of both racially biased legal practices and interpersonal forms of violence. For Wacquant, the imprisonment of African Americans is "entrusted with enclosing a stigmatized population so as to neutralize the material and/or symbolic threat that it poses for the broader society from which it has been extruded" (2009, 199). Although he only spotlighted the "growing

---

[20] It was named the Kerner Commission after its chair, Governor Otto Kerner Jr.

[21] This period of time has also been referred to as the Long Hot Summer of 1967.

disproportionality in incarceration" as the fourth technology of domination (196), it is important to read it in conjunction with the mass murder of Black individuals, as both are the direct results of racial targeting and policing, two practices that, even if all too present nowadays, have been used since the times of chattel enslavement (Alexander 2010).[22] Ta-Nehisi Coates precisely warns his readers against the misconception that policing is a new form of racism. In an interview conducted by Amy Goodman, Coates noted that "it seems like there's a kind of national conversation going on right now about those who are paid to protect us, who sometimes end up inflicting lethal harm upon us" (Goodman 2015, n.p.). "But for me," he added, "this conversation is old, and I'm sure for many of you the conversation is quite old. It's the cameras that are new. It's not the violence that's new" (Goodman 2015, n.p.).

If racial violence is a phenomenon that, as I have already argued, has a historical continuity and changes depending on the historical context it takes place in, then it follows that scholarly approaches need to be revised periodically in order to fully account for the different social and political ramifications of the phenomenon (Blee 2005, 2017; González-Tennant 2012, 2018). Many of these new contributions appeared between 1980 and 2000, and the great majority of them focused on the perpetrator's intent in order to establish whether a violent act could be considered racial or not. This idea finds important articulation in the most-recent and often-contested works of Donald Horowitz (1983, 2001), Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994), and James Jacobs and Kimberly Potter (1998), who kept narrowing the dimensions of the concept by providing "overly-restrictive definitions […] that fail to account for racial violence in which the perpetrator's intent is unclear, such as violence that is institutionalized" (Blee 2005, 606).

---

[22] As I am going to expand on, Ta-Nehisi Coates's work is product of the aforementioned historical context—the year in which *Between the World and Me* was published features among the more mortal ones for the Black community.

Fortunately, a concurrent group of scholars challenged the former's approach, and noted that deeming a violent act racial only by the criterion of the animadversion of the agent is overly problematic.

In 1993, W. Fitzhugh Brundage studied the concept in relation to economics, but prior to his contribution, other approaches, such as Hubert Blalock's (1989) and E. M. Beck and Stewart Tolnay's (1990), had showcased that "economic factors were the determining precondition" for racial violence to appear (qtd. in González-Tennant 2018, 65). Brundage's work was crucial in revealing that, inasmuch as one of the factors motivating racial violence could be economic inequality, "no single precondition sufficiently explained how, when, or why a lynching would take place" (González-Tennant 2018, 65). In a different vein, Michael Pfeifer (2004) was one of the first scholars who explored the ways in which past events have influenced present expressions of racial violence. Finally, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) and Patricia Hill Collins (1990) were vocal in demonstrating the intersectional nature of racial violence, claiming that this type of violence is the result not only of racial bigotries, but also of the intersection between racial bigotries on the one hand, and class and gender on the other. In this regard, many feminists have underscored the need to address how rape and other forms of sexual abuse in U.S. society still prevail as invisible yet common forms of violence against women of color (Davis 2003; Alexander 2010; Ritchie 2017).

Among all of the former, Kathleen Blee stands out as a prolific scholar who has devoted most of her long academic career to offering a clear definition of the term; to studying its implications; and to spotlighting the incongruities of adopting a narrow approach to the concept (Fishman 2013). In her essay "Racial Violence in the United States" (2005), she identifies several analytic problems in the contributions that, as many of the above, focus almost solely on the perpetrator's animus in order to ascertain whether

a violent event can be described as racial or not. First and foremost, defining racial violence as violence motivated only by the agent's racial resentment not only obscures the possibility to consider that it "can be motivated by non-racial motives" (603),[23] but also contributes to the naturalization of racial differences, which "are seen as a rationale for action" (602). The fact that the previous pieces of research cast racial violence as "an effect of performed racial categories" and not as a means to establish them (602) has been severely criticized by many scholars (West 2014; Coates 2015; Saucier and Woods 2016) who have contended that if racial violence is predicated on existing racial differences, it ends up being rationalized and perceived as an inevitable result of the course of events. Instead, they claim, it is key to acknowledge that race does not precede, but is in fact constructed in the course of, racial violence.

To a larger extent, the naturalization of racial differences also contributes to the perpetrators' moral exculpation when adopting racist behaviors by "provid[ing] an ideological basis for absolving social elites of historical wrongs" (González-Tennant 2018, 52). This notion has been extensively addressed by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006), who has noted that the fact that "[w]hites have developed powerful explanations that exculpate them from any responsibility for the status of people of color" has led to the creation of an environment in which racism pervades but nobody is held accountable for it that he describes as "racism without racists" (2). In his view, racism persists in the U.S. but it operates under covert and institutionalized systems that hamper the identification of cases of racism and the indictment of perpetrators. As I shall contend later, Coates believes something similar. In *Between the World and Me*, he illustrates that U.S. society

---

[23] As I explain above, Blee argues that factors other than the racial animus of the perpetrator, such as an eagerness to impress others, collegiality, peer pressure, or even class inequalities, might be enough to carry out an attack against individuals who have been racially constructed. Thus, focusing on whether the perpetrator is moved by racist motives or not is insufficient to account for all the expressions of racial violence. Instead, she claims that a fair definition of the term needs to take into consideration, in her own words, whether the victim is "racially fungible" or not (606).

today is working towards a "fantasy of innocence" (2015a, 33) that renders racism a collateral effect of history. In his own words, collective absolution is sustained by a "language of 'intention' and 'personal responsibility' [whose point] is broad exoneration. Mistakes were made. Bodies were broken. People were enslaved. We meant well. We tried our best. 'Good intention' is a hall pass through history" (33).

Both Blee and Bonilla-Silva give us the means to reinterpret policing, one of the most visible expressions of racial violence today (González-Tennant 2018, 4), as a monopolization of power and not as a means to uphold the public order. On February 26, 2012, watchman George Zimmerman killed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, after seeing Martin walking around at night in his neighborhood. According to Zimmerman's account, Martin "look[ed] like he's up to no good, or he's in drugs or something. It's raining and he's just walking around, looking about" (in Lowery 2017, 82). But Martin was just going back home from a supermarket when Zimmerman saw him and claimed he was acting suspiciously. He followed Martin on foot and ended up shooting him, ignoring the police's warning to stay away from him. Zimmerman was later acquitted because his actions were supported by the "stand-your-ground" laws, which made it acceptable for armed individuals to use their weapons, to kill if necessary, in self-defense (Love 2018, n.p.). In the aftermath of Martin's murder, reports disregarded Zimmerman's actions and focused on portraying Martin as a criminal who had been "suspended for the third time from Dr. Michael M. Krop High School in Miami, in this instance, for 10 days after drug residue was found in his backpack" (Botelho in Lytle 2017, 3). Along these lines, "media […] contributed to violence through the inclusion of irrelevant background information about the victim, [so that] the violence is seemingly justified" (Lytle 2017, 3).

64

Two years later, in Ferguson, Missouri, on August 9, 2014, 18-year-old Michael Brown was gunned down by officer Darren Wilson after the former attempted to steal a box of cigarettes from a liquor store. After an initial confrontation between Brown and Wilson, Brown ran away. According to journalist and activist Wesley Lowery, Brown then "turned around, put his hands up, and shouted out, 'don't shoot!'" (Lowery 2017, 23). Wilson approached Brown again and, after engaging in a fight, they ducked behind a car. In that moment, Wilson shot Brown six times (23).[24] Brown's body was then left lying lifeless in the street for four and a half hours, a fact that Lowery has described as conjuring up "images of the historic horrors of lynchings—the black body of a man robbed of his right to due process and placed on display as a warning to other black residents" (25).[25] During the following days, crowds gathered to protest against the cruelty and inhumanity of Michael Brown's murder, and the uprising lasted for several months. In fact, "more than 150 people were taken into custody by the Ferguson and St. Louis County police departments in the week and a half that followed Mike Brown's death on August 9, 2014" (4). In March 2015, Darren Wilson was acquitted upon testifying that he had killed Brown in an act of self-defense (Wyllie 2014; Saucier and Woods 2016; Lowery 2017).

Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown's deaths, as well as the absolution of their murderers, pinpoint the centrality that the perpetrator's intent still has when considering whether a violent act is racist or not. If the racial animus of the agent is regarded as the only precipitating factor, and taking into account that neither Zimmerman nor Wilson

---

[24] The rumor circulating around Ferguson at that time that Wilson had shot Brown in the back whilst he was running away was later proved untrue (Lowery 2017, 23).

[25] Brown's lifeless body left in the street as a warning could be conceived as an example of Kathleen Blee's communicative aspect of racial violence, as well as of Loïc Wacquant's chronological continuity of violence.

allegedly acted out of racial aversion, which is what both of them declared in their respective trials, these cases cannot be considered expressions of racial violence.[26] In this sense, Blee's contribution offers us a new approach that helps us interpret these and other similar murders as acts of racial violence. Indeed, her works usher in the possibility to regard said crimes as an effect of past forms of anti-Black violence (Blee 2005; Saucier and Woods 2016; Lowery 2017; González-Tennant 2018); as subject to interpretation between the parties involved (Blee 2005, 2017; Lowery 2017);[27] and as instances in which the victim's racial fungibility, rather than the perpetrator's stimulus, is crucial for considering a violent act racial and, therefore, to justly punish it as such (Blee 2005).

Edward González-Tennant (2012, 2018) has also provided new insights into the theorization of racial violence. González-Tennant, an anthropological archaeologist whose publications have mostly focused on implementing a virtual reconstruction of the 1923 Rosewood Massacre (2012, 2018), argues that any approach to racial violence that does not take into consideration intersectionality[28] limits the implications of that violence.

---

[26] This is one of the reasons why these cases created so much of a stir afterwards. The idea that they had killed in self-defense obscured any possibilities to consider their acts as racist.

[27] There were lots of rumors and conflicting views on the course of events circulating around after their deaths, most of which challenging the idea that the murderers had acted in self-defense. In Michael Brown's case, "several […] witnesses maintained their original statement that Mr. Brown had his hands in the air and was not moving toward the officer when he was shot" (Santhanam, Dennis, and Daub 2014, n.p.). In Trayvon Martin's, on the contrary, "there hadn't been any direct witnesses to the confrontation, but a handful of people who saw parts of it said they believed they saw Trayvon on top of Zimmerman, punching him" (Lowery 2017, 82). Both cases suggest that the interpretation of other parties needs to be taken into consideration when reconstructing the events, too.

[28] Intersectionality is a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 in her work "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," where she claimed that Black women are affected by multiple forms of oppression that, rather than operating independently, influence and reinforce each other. In her own words, intersectionality refers to how "structures of inequality draw on socially constructed dichotomies to reify differences between people. […] Black women are doubly represented as inferior, as both female and black" (qtd. in González-Tennant 2012, 71). The concept had already appeared—although under different terminology—in many works published prior to 1989. In fact, writers such as bell hooks (1984) or Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (1981) already tackled the ways in which gender is constantly informed by sexuality, race, or class, among others. After its first appearance in Crenshaw (1989), the concept found important articulation in *Black Feminist Thought*, a major text on Black feminism written by Patricia Hill Collins (1990).

In his view, "the methodological implication of intersectionality [in] the study of violence accepts that violence is multidimensional, and then moves beyond this realization to consider context" (2012, 72). In other words, not only does intersectionality add gender and class to the study of racial violence, but it also throws into relief the contextual and historical facets of the phenomenon, noting that past forms of racial violence are directly related to present forms of violence and disenfranchisement. For González-Tennant, racial violence acquires three different forms—intersubjective violence, structural violence, and symbolic violence (2012, 72; 2018, 1-52).

Intersubjective violence, also referred to as interpersonal violence, "includes visible actions with identifiable agents" (2012, 72), and so it is the easiest expression of racial violence to identify. Intersubjective violence has had different but interrelated forms in history, from lynchings and race riots to police brutality, which is considered one of the most current realizations of this form of racial violence. Structural violence, in turn, "refers to the ways in which social institutions harm people" (72). In other words, it alludes to the ways in which institutions have restrained the participation of African Americans in the social, cultural, and political life in the U.S., and so it is best illustrated with the Jim Crow laws and similar racist legislative systems. Finally, symbolic violence "masks, maintains, and enhances social inequality, and specifically refers to the mechanisms that lead those who are subordinated to misrecognize inequality as the natural order of things" (72-73). Symbolic violence is the most difficult form of violence to identify, as it has been naturalized and reified through eugenics (76) and cultural forms, such as cinema or cartoons, which have promoted the racist stereotyping of racialized people (75). In a very interesting way, González-Tennant suggests that whilst it might seem that these types of violence follow a sequential order, the three work as "bricolage"

(2012, 78).[29] Therefore, a visible attack perpetrated by an identifiable agent is not only the result of racist policies, nor are racist policies only the result of a racist cultural matrix, or of eugenics. Rather, all three forms are constantly informing each other. Intersubjective violence in part requires a racist system that authorizes it, but such system is also set in motion by the use of intersubjective violence (2012, 78).

González-Tennant's approach is inspired by a series of canonical contributions to the academic studies on violence, such as Walter Benjamin's (1921), Hannah Arendt's (1970), and Slavoj Žižek's (2008). From Benjamin, González-Tennant borrows the telling criticism against fair and unfair uses of violence that Benjamin articulated in his essay "Critique of Violence" (1921) and which addressed the question of whether violence can be justified "in a system of just ends" or not (269). As González-Tennant very well contends, Benjamin's distinction between "legitimate violence as the socially justified use of interpersonal violence by the state, such as police violence," and "illegitimate forms, represented by states as radical or revolutionary and [which] have as their central goal resistance to state violence" (Tennant 2018, 55), was crucial in public discussions about the appropriateness of resorting to violence during the second half of the twentieth century. What follows from Benjamin's claim is also key to understand the urgency to revisit the existing definitions of racial violence—if the violence inflicted by the police and other representatives of the state is deemed legitimate, then they will never be legally punished for exerting it. From Arendt, he is particularly fascinated by, in his own words, "her analysis of the ways in which hegemony and ideology, acting through modern bureaucracies, support the appearance of totalitarianism" (54), and also by her

---

[29] He contends that even though it might seem that symbolic violence precedes structural violence, and that structural violence precedes intersubjective violence, being the latter only possible if there is a system behind it that legitimizes it, these forms of racial violence do not follow a sequential order. In fact, they all affect each other (2012, 77-78).

denunciation of the extent to which social elites, in her view, ignored the fact that their accumulation of wealth was contingent upon the impoverishment of others.

As much as González-Tennant's research clearly reverberates with the arguments put forward by Benjamin (1921) and Arendt (1970), it is his familiarity with Žižek's research that is most evident. In his work *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (2008), Žižek distinguishes between two major modalities of violence—subjective and objective (1). Whereas the former refers to the most evident form of discrimination insofar as it "is performed by a clearly identifiable agent" (1), the latter, which is in turn subclassified into symbolic, the "violence embodied in language and its forms" (1), and systemic, "the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems" (2), is less obvious to spot. Except for a terminological substitution that González-Tennant attributes to his own need to employ "more familiar terms" (2018, 54), the similarities between them are all too evident. Žižek's subjective violence corresponds to González-Tennant's interpersonal violence; the former's systemic violence was renamed by the latter as structural violence; and symbolic violence is the only term used by both with the same meaning.

To make matters more complicated, González-Tennant's approach also seems to be informed by Johan Galtung (1969, 1990), who discerned, again, between two different registers of violence—personal or direct, and structural or indirect (1969, 170). Galtung contended that whereas the first expression of violence is conspicuous precisely because it is carried out by a person, the second one is not. As González-Tennant suggests when pointing out that all forms of discrimination may have material effects on the victim, Galtung also claimed that

> In both cases individuals may be killed or mutilated, hit or hurt in both senses
> of these words [i.e., physical and psychological], and manipulated by means

of stick or carrot strategies. But whereas in the first case these consequences can be traced back to concrete persons as actors, in the second case this is no longer meaningful. There may not be any person who directly harms another in the structure. The violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances. (1969, 171)

It was not until the publication of "Cultural Violence" (1990) that Galtung introduced yet another type of violence. "Cultural violence," Galtung writes, "makes direct and structural violence look, even feel, right—at least not wrong. One way cultural violence works is by changing the moral color of an act. […] Another way is by making reality opaque, so that we do not see the violent act or fact, or at least not as violent" (292).

At this point, I deem it necessary to justify my reasons to opt for González-Tennant's approach, instead of Žižek's or Galtung's, to study the phenomenon of racial violence throughout this thesis. My decision is grounded in two different reasons. On the one hand, González-Tennant demonstrates a critical awareness of the interdisciplinarity of his work. He acknowledges that his research has been deeply influenced by several different theories, which he reads in parallel in an ambitious attempt at providing a full scope of the multidimensionality and interactionality of the phenomenon. On the other, and most importantly, González-Tennant makes it explicit that his studies orbit around the very concept not only of race, but also of Blackness—a point of view largely absent in the formulations put forward by both Žižek and Galtung. González-Tennant resorts to their theories and gives them a new twist in order to account for the brutality, both implicit and explicit, that contributed to the sustainment of racial disparities throughout U.S. history.

70

1.1.2 "Breakable at Will, Endangered in the Streets, Fearful in the Schools": On Racial Violence and the Politics of Fear[30]

Fear plays a crucial part in all conceptualizations of racial violence—it has been employed by racist perpetrators to defend their actions, and it has rapidly spread within racialized communities and contributed to the expansion of self-disparagement and racial nihilism (West 1993). To begin with, fear has played a crucial part in the construction of presumptions about criminality, and it has been used to justify violent actions driven by racist motives that have remained unpunished. Darren Wilson's grand jury testimony of his encounter with Michael Brown, for instance, relies on Wilson's perception of Brown as a mortal threat he had to protect himself against. Wilson confessed that he had fired Michael Brown because "[he] looked up at me [Wilson] and had the most intense aggressive face. The only way I can describe it, it looks like a demon, that's how angry he looked" (qtd. in Saucier and Woods 2016, 371). After having shot Brown a third time, Wilson claimed,

> I kind of looked at him and he's still coming at me, he hadn't slowed down.
> At this point I start backpedaling again, I tell him get on the ground, get
> on the ground, he doesn't. I shoot another round of shots. […] At this point
> it looked like he was almost bulking up to run through the shots, like it was
> making him mad that I'm shooting at him. […] At this point I'm
> backpedaling pretty good because I know if he reaches me, he'll kill me.
> And he had started to lean forward as he got that close, like he was going
> to just tackle me, just go right through me. […] And when I grabbed him,
> the only way I can describe it is I felt like a five-year-old holding onto

---

[30] From Coates 2015a, 54.

Hulk Hogan… That's just how big he felt and how small I felt just from

grasping his arm. (qtd. in Saucier and Woods 2016, 404)

Wilson's characterization of Brown as an extremely violent individual seemingly justified Wilson's reaction. On top of that, many public figures believed and supported Wilson's account. As a matter of fact, Ben Stein, lawyer, conservative pundit, and commentator on political issues, appeared on TV claiming that "[Brown] wasn't unarmed. He was armed with his incredibly strong, scary self" (qtd. in Rothkopf 2014, n.p.).[31]

In the introduction to Cornel West's *Black Prophetic Fire* (2014), Christa Buschendorf contends that fear is a mechanism of power that works and is inscribed in society through a series of historical connections. It is in the repetition of certain associations that images and expectations rendering racialized individuals as threatening have been created and normalized, and that hierarchies of power have been reproduced. Franz Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), had already illustrated this idea with the description of an encounter between a Black man and a white child in which the man is feared precisely because he is associated with evil, ugliness, monstrosity, and rage:

"Maman, see the Negro! I'm frightened! Frightened! Frightened!" Now they

were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to

tears, but laughter had become impossible. […] My body was returned to me

spread-eagled, disjointed, redone, draped in mourning on this white winter's

day. The Negro is an *animal*, the Negro is *bad*, the Negro is *wicked*, the Negro

is *ugly*; look, a Negro; the Negro is trembling, the Negro is trembling because

---

[31] The extent to which fear also operates in instances of intra-racial violence will be explored in section 2.2, where I am going to defend that, for Coates, intra-racial violence is a direct result of inter-racial violence.

72

he's cold, the small boy is trembling because he's afraid of the Negro, the

Negro is trembling with cold, the cold that chills the bones, the lovely little

boy is trembling because he thinks the Negro is trembling with rage, the little

boy runs to his mother's arms: "Maman, the Negro is going to eat me!"

(Fanon 2008, 92-93)

In "The Affective Politics of Fear", Sara Ahmed offers an analysis of how fear operates in Fanon's encounter, and she explains that the excerpt proves that fear does not work in a one-sided manner (2004). The fear that is felt by the kid, as I suggested only a few paragraphs earlier, stems from "the repetition of stereotypes" (63) that deem the other man threating to the child's own safety. However, Ahmed also contends that his fear circulates, and that "it is the black subject, the one who fears the white child's fear, who is crushed by that fear" (69). The fear generated by historical associations and stereotypes, which is often used to justify the employment of violence against racialized individuals, also fuels the victim's fear for his or her own safety. Black experiences are in fact a constant negotiation between feeling and causing fear.

Fear is a recurring motif in Coates's works, too, and his approach to the phenomenon underscores precisely the many different ramifications that fear has. From the beginning of the memoir, though, and contrary to what Fanon does, it becomes clear that Coates's intention is not to focus on the fear generated by Ahmed's "past histories of association" felt by whites (63), but rather on the fear experienced by Coates and his own people. In other words, inter-racial fear gives way to intra-racial fear, which becomes a matter of utmost concern in Coates's text. For Tobias Skiveren, who has elaborated on the primacy of fear in Ta-Nehisi Coates's memoirs, the circulation of fear in communities of color is but "an extension of the fear provoked by the long history of racism and slavery" (2019, 227). Black individuals today are still "constantly on guard, not knowing

when you'll be stopped, captured, and violated," just as their ancestors were (218); and Coates is precisely haunted by "an endless nervousness, an urgent vulnerability, a sense of standing naked before an unsafe world of constantly lurking threats" (218). Drawing from Brian Massumi's significant contributions to contemporary affect theory (2002, 2005), Skiveren claims that fear is not rational; it is not the response to a present menacing object, but it rather shifts and reproduces to such an extent that at a certain point the original object that first caused fear ends up disappearing and all that remains is fear itself. In a similar vein, in his essay titled "Fear" (2005), Massumi states that "fear can potentially self-cause even in the absence of an external sign to trigger it, [which] makes it all the more uncontainable, so much so that it 'possesses' the subject" (41). Such logic explains, in this way, why Coates's fear that his body can be plundered at any given moment is ubiquitous. He is, in fact, chained by fear to such an extent that it at times prevented him from fully engaging with anything that was happening around him. "I felt that I had missed part of the experience because of my eyes," he tells his son, "because my eyes are made in Baltimore, because my eyes were blindfolded by fear" (126).

Coates's memoir also offers critical commentary on how fear operated within poor communities of color, where young people transformed their fear and vulnerability to anger with the aim of endowing their own bodies with a feeling of inviolability:

> The fear was there in the extravagant boys of my neighborhood, in their large rings and medallions, their big puffy coats and full-length fur-collared leathers, which was their armor against their world. They would stand on the corner of Gwynn Oak and Liberty, or Cold Spring and Park Heights, or outside Mondawmin Mall, with their hands dipped in Russell sweats. I think back on those boys now and all I see is fear, and all I see is them girding themselves against the ghosts of the bad old days when the Mississippi mob

gathered 'round their grandfathers so that the branches of the black body might be torched, then cut away. The fear lived on in their practiced bop, their slouching denim, their big T-shirts, the calculated angle of their baseball caps, a catalog of behaviors and garments enlisted to inspire the belief that these boys were in firm possession of everything they desired. (14)

Although Coates's fear apparently subsides when he goes to study to Howard University, one of the few places in the world where Coates feels that his body is secured against any potential dangers, it magnifies again as soon as he learns that his friend Prince Jones was murdered by the police. From that moment onward, fear takes control of Coates's life again; and it skyrockets right after his son is born. Coates's fear that his son may end up being plundered is not unfounded. In 2014, the year prior to the publication of his memoir, 1,131 Black individuals were killed in the streets of the U.S.[32] In 2015, the number reached an all-time high of 1,134 (Swaine 2015, n.p.).[33] Most of these cases share at least two features in common—first, that the persons who committed these murders were never indicted; and second, that no actual crimes were being carried out when these murders took place. In this regard, Coates writes:

It does not matter if the destruction is the result of an unfortunate overreaction. It does not matter if the destruction springs from a foolish policy. Sell cigarettes without proper authority and your body can be destroyed. Resent the people trying to entrap your body and it can be destroyed. Turn into a dark stairwell and your body can be destroyed. (Coates 2015a, 9)

---

[32] Numbers obtained from the online database *Mapping Police Violence* (www.mappingpoliceviolence.org).

[33] Of course, this figure includes only those cases that were reported.

His words further suggest the extent to which any action carried out by a Black individual, from selling goods to asking policemen about the reasons why they are being frisked, can be contested and misread as confrontation. Having one's hands in one's pockets might be interpreted as a sign of concealment, looking up into the officer's eyes might be interpreted as a sign of defiance. Claudia Rankine addresses this problem in her seminal essay "The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning" (2015), where, through a critical reflection on several of the most appalling racist massacres and lynchings in U.S. history, she lists a series of actions that can be misjudged only when carried out by Black people:

> no hands in your pockets, no playing music, no sudden movements, no driving your car, no walking at night, no walking in the day, no turning onto this street, no entering this building, no standing your ground, no standing here, no standing there, no talking back, no playing with toy guns, no living while black. (n.p.)

Such a warning also undergirds *Between the World and Me*. In the text, Coates hopes that his own memories will help his 15-year-old son, Samori, to be prepared "for facing police harassment and brutality" (Goodman 2015, n.p.). But Coates has not been the only author concerned with exploring the interconnection between race, violence, fear, and the role that parenthood plays in said interconnection (Cushay and Warr 2016; Ward 2017). Jesmyn Ward, in "Raising a Black Son in the U.S.," published in *The Guardian* in 2015, recalls the disturbing thoughts she had during her second pregnancy when she was told she was having a boy.

> My stomach turned to stone inside me and sank. "Oh God," I thought, "I'm going to bear a Black boy into the world." I faked joy to the white nurse and dropped the phone after the call ended. Then I cried.

I cried because the first thing I thought of when the nurse told me I would have a son was my dead brother. He died 17 years ago this year, but his leaving feels as fresh as if he were killed just a month ago by a drunk driver who would never be charged. Fresh as my grief, which walks with me like one of my children. […] There are so many. Many are from my extended family. They drown or are shot or run over by cars. Too many, one after another. A cousin here, a great-grandfather there. Some died before they were even old enough legally to buy alcohol. Some died before they could even vote. As the months passed, I couldn't sleep. I lay awake at nights, worrying over the world I was bearing my son into. A procession of dead Black men circled my bed […].

My son had never taken a breath, and I was already mourning him. (Ward 2016, n.p.)

As Coates, Ward knows that her yet unborn son meets all the requirements to be a victim of racial violence.[34] In the rest of the text, Ward also tackles the urgency of having a conversation with young children that has gone down in the social ethos as "the talk"—a conversation in which parents warn their children about the different dangers they will be exposed to for being Black and about how they must act if they are stopped by the police (Cushay 2016; n.p.). In a very interesting way, journalist Tess Martin suggests that whilst "the talk" for white kids often revolves around sex, it has higher stakes for racialized children. She notes, "if you're the parent of a Black or brown kid,

---

[34] Ward elaborates on how she lost five men with whom she had a close relation over the course of four years in her work *Men We Reaped* (2013). On a different note, I will address the masculinization of the victims and the exclusion of Black women from discourses on policing in section 2.3.

you don't get to stop with the sex talk. You have another talk too, and this one rips your heart out" (Martin 2018, n.p.). She summarizes it as follows:

> I told her that there were rules for dealing with the police. That she was to say yes, sir and no, sir instead of arguing, even if she was in the right. She was to give over her ID even if it wasn't warranted. She was to stay in her car during a traffic stop, with her hands on the steering wheel. I warned her not to go digging around in her pockets, her purse, the rest of the car. She was to tell the officer what she was planning to do before she did it—I'm reaching for my license; I'm going to lean over for my registration.
>
> She asked me, "What if I didn't do anything wrong?" and my heart grew almost too heavy to bear.
>
> My answer: "It doesn't matter what you did. Just do what the police officer tells you. It could mean your life." (Martin 2018, n.p.)

Parental dread also looms large in Coates's memoir.[35] Indeed, from the memoir being cast as a personal letter to his son, to the cautionary but determined tone he strikes in most passages, Coates writes *Between the World and Me* in an attempt to offer his son the gift of consciousness[36] and to prevent him from being a mortal victim of racial violence. Certainly, Coates's memoir resembles James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1963), a much-acclaimed essay where the author writes to his 15-year-old nephew with the hope of helping him survive as a Black boy in the United States. Nonetheless, as

---

[35] The way in which racism intrudes into family relationships is explored in section 2.3.

[36] The word "conscious" is laden with great symbolic significance in Ta-Nehisi Coates's works. As I discuss in section 2.3 in particular, "being conscious," for Coates, means being aware of one's meaning in the world and making sense of one's own existence through reading and studying works authored by Black writers, such as Malcolm X or James Baldwin.

similar as both narratives might seem at first sight, they significantly differ from each other. Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow* (2010), contended that whilst

> Baldwin implores his nephew to awaken to his own dignity, humanity and power, and accept his responsibility to help make America what it must become, […] Coates's letter to his son seems to be written on the opposite side of the same coin. Rather than urging his son to awaken to his own power, Coates emphasizes over and over the apparent permanence of racial injustice in America, the foolishness of believing that one person can make a change, and the dangers of believing in the American Dream. (2015, n.p.)

As I will explain in section 2.2, most of the ideas articulated in *Between the World and Me* fall in line with a school of thought known as Afropessimism (JanMohamed 2005; Wilderson 2008, 2010, 2011, 2016, 2020; Sexton 2011, 2012, 2016; Warren 2017b), which, at risk of oversimplification, showcases the extent to which the ongoing effects of enslavement and similar systems of domination have rendered Blackness a sign of ontological death (Fanon 1952; Sexton 2011; Mbembe 2017).

Bearing in mind the studies carried out by Stephen Butterfield (1974), Herbert Shapiro (1988), Elizabeth Alexander (1994) and Jerry H. Bryant (1997), the following section aims at illustrating how racialized authors have accommodated and responded to such massive waves of violence in their works. Even though my project may seem rather ambitious, I am going to limit my analysis to representations that illustrate Loïc Wacquant's four main "technologies of domination"—that is, I am going to focus on a few canonical works written during chattel enslavement, the lynching and rioting period, urban movements and ghettoization, and mass incarceration and police brutality. This revision prior to the analysis of Coates's is crucial for us to look back into the past in order to understand not only where his work comes from, but also how it negotiates the

different meanings of, as well as puts into conversation different and at times even contradictory approaches to, the broad, ambiguous, and exceptionally complex phenomenon of racial violence.

1.2 Racial Violence and the Black Literary Imagination

Certain kinds of trauma visited on peoples are so deep, so cruel, that unlike money, unlike vengeance, even unlike justice, or rights, or the goodwill of others, only writers can translate such trauma and turn sorrow into meaning, sharpening the moral imagination.

A writer's life and work are not a gift to mankind; they are its necessity.

Toni Morrison, "Peril" (2019)

The dead and the ways of our dying have been as much a part of Black identity as have been the ways of our living.

Karla F. C. Holloway, *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories* (2002)

I am what time, circumstance, history, have made of me, certainly, but I am also much more than that. So are we all.

James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955)

In the introduction to his book *Violence from Slavery to #BlackLivesMatter* (2020), Andrew Dix contends that "African American history is, from its beginnings, a history not merely coterminous with but actively constituted by violence" (1). Black thinkers have attested to this reality for centuries—from Frederick Douglass (1845) and W.E.B. Du Bois (1903), all the way to Hortense Spillers (1987), Saidiya Hartman (1997), and Frank B. Wilderson III (2016), they have all concurred that violence is not incidental to, but rather produces, the Black experience. This view is also endorsed by Ta-Nehisi Coates, who keeps assuring his readers that "violence is not even in our past" because it still "continues today" (2015f, n.p.) and that "the lives of African Americans in this country are characterized by violence" (in Siegel 2015, n.p.). It should not be surprising,

then, that racialized writers have long been invested in exploring the possibilities and limitations of narrating violence. In fact, the subject has been such a fraught object of discussion and interest in the Black literary and aesthetic tradition that Stephen B. Bennett and William W. Nichols speak of that tradition as being "soaked in blood" (1971, 222).

Racial violence has featured prominently in memoirs and autobiographies.[37] As Stephen Butterfield contends, it is a bid for veracity and authenticity that has led Black authors to favor autobiographical texts over other literary forms to discuss racist encounters (1974, 2). In his view, "autobiographies live in the two worlds of history and literature, objective fact and subjective awareness" (1), and so, contrary to other literary forms and genres, they succeed in creating and projecting conscious political identities with unmatched straightforwardness in such a way that "the self [the author] belongs to people [readers], and the people find a voice in the self" (3). That is, the fact that in autobiographical texts the author is so inextricably enmeshed with the story being told adds urgency to the topic being discussed—the writer is not divorced from the facts addressed but rather, as yet another character, is the means through which a real story, set in a real context and endured first-hand, can be individualized and effectively told to the public.

---

[37] Rebecca Hussey builds upon the differences between autobiographies and memoirs in her essay "What Are the Major Differences Between Memoir and Autobiography?" (2018). After acknowledging that both share some features—for instance, the use of first-person singular pronouns to tell about the author's experiences—, she identifies five main differences. In the first place, she pinpoints the time span that each of the genres covers—whilst authors in memoirs often focus on capturing only a particular moment in life, autobiographies cover "the author's entire life" (n.p.). Secondly, she mentions that in memoirs, authors are more concerned about telling their emotional truths about certain moments in their lives through a rather subjective and personal approach. On the contrary, autobiographies do not focus on how the author experiences certain moments, but instead on the facts that surround the author and on how she or he "fits into the historical record" (n.p.). Thirdly, she suggests that memoirs do not necessarily follow a sequential order, whilst autobiographies very much favor chronological precision. In the fourth place, according to Hussey, autobiographies are used to highlight all the major events a well-known person has accomplished. The memoirists are not necessarily famous at the moment of writing, even though they might become so afterwards. Tightly related to this last point, the fifth one focuses on the motivation that draws readers into them—whilst autobiographies are read to expand knowledge on a certain character, memoirs are read to learn more about a specific topic, and not necessarily about a specific character.

The fact that in many autobiographical narratives racialized authors reflect upon the extent to which their experiences in the world are very much shaped by racist interactions ushers in a new reading of their works not only as personal reflections but as calls for action (Butterfield 1974; Bryant 1997). In this way, these texts paint a full portrait of what U.S. society really is, and not a whitewashed impression that focuses on the greatest achievements of the nation whilst ignoring the social problems that underpin it. "Black writers," Butterfield explains, "offer a model of the self which is different from white models, created in response to a different perception of history and revealing divergent, often completely opposite meanings to human actions" (2). In casting light on a series of concomitant and painful realities that are not addressed in other texts, autobiographies have a two-fold aim—to tell one's coming-of-age story, which is usually shaped by racist practices, and to discredit the white fantasy that constructs "our national life" (3). As I will contend later, this duality makes Jerry H. Bryant claim that, in articulating their own deeds and apprehensions, these authors were "manufacturing literary weapons" (1997, 100).

Ta-Nehisi Coates is also mindful of the power of writing.[38] In an interview with Jesmyn Ward, he confessed that he writes "out of a deep sense of responsibility that has never changed" (in Ward 2019, n.p.) towards his community—to express their concerns, to honor their accomplishments, and to condemn a system that thrives on racial disenfranchisement. To do so, Coates explains that when he was a kid, he witnessed violent fights between different gangs; that when he was older, he was targeted, stopped, and frisked by the police; that he saw his best friend being murdered by an undercover agent; and that he was present when a racialized elderly man was evicted in Chicago.

---

[38] He elaborated on this idea at the 2018 SXSW Conference in an interview conducted by Jeffrey Goldberg entitled *The Power of Word*.

Certainly, *Between the World and Me* chronicles the manifold violent means that have been used to control his community. It is the rhetoric that Coates employs in these passages, as well as the critical reading he offers of them, that bring into the open the extent to which his work clearly bears the traces of other works that addressed similar issues in the past. In this respect, Coates's memoir draws from the dynamic relationship between history and the Black literary tradition—it underscores the diversity of slants that different Black authors have given to racial violence, and interprets them through new theories, paradigms, and critical approaches. Indeed, the text can be considered to be a result of "multiple aesthetics accompanied by varied and diverse, rather than monolithic, strategies for grappling with questions of race, gender, identity, and tradition" (King and Moody-Turner 2013, 3). Moreover, in taking into consideration that racial violence operates along a series of "unseen connections" (González-Tennant 2018, 124), Coates champions a multidimensional and interactional approach to the phenomenon. In this section, it is my intention to analyze *Between the World and Me* as both product and proof of the "signifying relationship with earlier works" and, consequently, as a work that "facilitates a dynamic relationship of continuity and change in a centuries-old literary tradition" (Gates in King and Moody-Turner 2013, 3).

1.2.1 Racial Violence in the Black Literary Tradition: From Frederick Douglass to Ta-Nehisi Coates

The ways in which racial violence is represented is contingent upon the historical facts taking place when texts are being written. In fact, there exists an evident reciprocity between violent historical moments and the literary themes that authors address in their works (Butterfield 1974; Bryant 1997; González-Tennant 2018; Jackson 2020; Lennon 2020; Plath 2020). According to Jerry H. Bryant, and at the risk of oversimplifying, the first literary works tackling racial violence focused on the atrocities of enslavement; after 1892,[39] they delved into lynchings; after 1920,[40] and stretching all the way well into the century, they highlighted the centrality of race riots; and in the twenty-first century, they mostly deal with the representation of policing and racial profiling without losing sight of all the former (Wacquant 2009; Dix and Templeton 2020).

Even though the motifs explored in these texts differ in a great deal from one another, there exists an underlying recurrent concern in all of them—the enormous ethical challenges that representing racial atrocities poses, in particular for racialized authors. Knowing that the standards whereby violent acts and individuals are judged are profoundly biased, these authors fear that, in their constructing characters who would glorify or abhor violence, they could be stereotyping and perpetuating controlling images of their own people (Bryant 1997).[41] In other words, the representation of racialized

---

[39] 1892 is the year in which the number of lynchings was the highest in all U.S. history.

[40] The 1920s marked the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance, a period in which, as I will analyze later, the diegetic treatment of racial violence underwent major changes.

[41] In the introduction to *Native Son* (1940), Richard Wright explained that, when writing about Bigger Thomas, he "felt a mental censor—product of the fears which a Negro feels from living in America—standing over me, draped in white, warning me not to write. This censor's warnings were translated into my own thought processes thus: 'What will white people think if I draw the picture of such a Negro boy?' Will they not at once say: 'See, didn't we tell you all along that niggers are like that? Now, look, one of their kind has come along and drawn the picture for us!'. I felt that if I drew the picture of Bigger truthfully, there would be many reactionary whites who would try to make of him something I did not intend. And yet, and this was what made it difficult, I knew that I could not write of Bigger convincingly if I did not

characters who fall victims to racial violence may be misread as a sign of submissiveness; but the representation of racialized characters who inflict violence may feed the fallacious perception that a whole group of people are actually criminals who must be disciplined or killed for the common good of humanity. Richard Yarborough explains this ambiguity in this way:

> Simply put, blacks were not granted the same freedom of action as whites, and yet they were condemned for not meeting popularly held norms of behavior. […] Moreover, black writers like Douglass must have realized at some level that to make their heroic figures too independent, too aggressive, might permit white readers to evade acknowledging that they themselves must intervene in order to end the horrors of slavery. Many African American authors saw no easy way to make their black male characters deserving of sympathy and at the same time to celebrate their manhood. (1990, 174)

Coates's memoir brings into conversation different attitudes towards the representation of racial atrocities, and so the text also raises profound ethical quandaries.[42] Consequently, in order to carry out a thorough interpretation of Coates's work, it is crucial to understand the different ways in which racial violence has been represented in the works that have informed Coates's own writing. In order to delimit a project that at first sight might seem way too vast and ambitious in its scope, I am going to pay particular attention to a limited selection of canonical works belonging to each of the different institutions of domination in Loïc Wacquant's typology (2009). In fact, as I will explain

---

depict him as he *was*: that is, resentful towards whites, sullen, angry, ignorant, emotionally unstable, depressed and unaccountably elated at times" (16-17; emphasis in the original).

[42] As I am going to explain later, Coates's own stand in relation to violence is ambiguous, too. Although in the memoir Coates opposes violence, where even after being violent himself he claims that "I have never been a violent person" (2015a, 95), in his previous memoiristic work, *The Beautiful Struggle* (2008), Coates admits to having been overly violent when he was a kid.

later, Coates's treatment of violence borrows from the sentimentalized sympathy and linguistic uses of slave narratives; the harshness with which authors described lynchings and the urgency with which they asked for change; the shift of focus from inter-racial brutality to the intra-racial conflicts occurring during the urban transformation of towns and cities; and, last but not least, the increasing interest in narrating how policing and other contemporary forms of racial violence operate.

One of the major contributions that explores the valences and changes that the representation of racial violence has undergone in history has been that by scholar and writer Jerry H. Bryant, who in 1997 published *Heroes and Victims: Racial Violence in the African American Novel* with the intention to comment on

> how the many black authors who have treated the topic [of racial violence] have reacted to the real-world violence committed by whites against them, and the debate over what they should do about it; what kinds of violence have drawn their attention, and what they found important to emphasize; what attitudes have they taken up; what literary methods and conventions have they used to express their perceptions. (2)

Not surprisingly, the first thorough reflections on racial atrocities in literary works in the U.S. appear in slave narratives, which directed rapt attention to exploring the physical dimension of pain and the emotional impact that violent acts had on the victims, as well as on the victims' circles of relatives and friends. With the descriptions provided in those narratives, which offered the highest level of detail about the brutal practices the enslaved community was subject to, narrators sought not only to bear witness to and to heighten awareness of the extent to which the enslaved were degraded, subdued, and ultimately destroyed, but also "to indict both those who enslaved them and the metaphysical system drawn upon to justify their enslavement" (Gates 2012, xiii). For

many (Sundquist 1993; Bryant 1997; Feblowitz 2010; Gates 2012; Neary 2017), Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) epitomized the dual aim of slave narratives. Douglass's approach to enslavement enabled a new reading of violence as a liberatory tool, too. Douglass, who saw forced submission as the most demoralizing characteristic of enslavement, insisted on defending "the physical power he uses to transform himself from a brutal slave into a man", which involved the employment of "a low-level, self-defensive violence that does permanent harm to no one" (1997, 31). Put another way, Douglass believed that nonviolent behavior was useless to change the tragic circumstances in which the enslaved found themselves, and so, in his works, retaliatory violence acquires a "transformative" dimension, to borrow Maria Choi's term (2020, 6). William Wells Brown's *Clotel, or the President's Daughter* (1853) and Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig: Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859) also exemplify the extent to which the enslaved used violent acts as a means to resist and to overturn the power of enslavers and masters.

Most of the works published at the turn of the century no longer addressed the cruelties of enslavement and explored the phenomenon of lynching instead (Abu-Lughod 2008; Wood 2011; González-Tennant 2012, 2018; Alexander 2010). Inspired by Ida B. Wells's journalistic style, many of the authors writing during that period, including Sutton E. Griggs (1905)[43] or James Weldon Johnson (1912), "strived for verisimilitude, [which] was, in fact, their main rhetorical weapon" (Bryant 1997, 98), and aimed "to present the reality of what is happening […] as recorded by its own observers" (99). Their vivid depictions of lynchings would also be accompanied by critical commentaries and harsh

---

[43] Lynching is central in many of Griggs's novels, from *Overshadowed* (1901) to *Hindered Hand; Or, the Reign of the Repressionist* (1905) where, according to John Grusser, refers to the phenomenon "twenty times" (2022, n.p.). Often, Grusser contends, Griggs used lynching as a means "to expose political and legal corruption" and to "highlight the inequality and iniquity of the criminal justice system, racist violence against women, and the 'sensational' reality of white mob violence" (2022, n.p.).

judgements on the extent to which lynchings changed the sensory perception of southern landscapes; the dialectics of possession they conjured up; or the emotional impact that they exerted not only on the victims, but also on their communities, and so they sought not only to bear testimony to the horrors of lynching, but also to elicit the sympathy of their readership (Butterfield 1974; Bryant 1997; Alexandre 2012).[44]

Black writers, particularly after the 1920s, attempted to find the most aesthetically pleasing literary strategies to represent racial atrocities, and evidenced, along these lines, a "shift from the perception of novelists as racial propagandists, politicians and apologists, and a claim for novelists as artists, whose responsibility to their art deeply modified their obligation to the racial struggle" (129). In their relying on clarity, economy of language, and emotional detachment, these writers presented themselves as aloof voyeurs who favored an impersonal and unemotional approach to racism. In these texts, Bryant contends,

> the narrative reporter is stylized, impersonal, unemotional. The feeling of horror that comes with the intrinsic inhumanity of the act is formalized and absorbed by the detached manner of the neutral eye, [which] tells us that we need not be involved in what we are viewing in a political way, that we can observe sympathetically […], that we can see this in ways other than those which convention has taught us. (1997, 131)

---

[44] Let us consider, for example, Griggs's description of the lynching Bud and Foresta Harper in *Hindered Land*: "The mob decided to torture their victims before killing them and began on Foresta first. A man with a pair of scissors stepped up and cut off her hair and threw it into the crowd. […] One by one her fingers were cut off and tossed into the crowd to be scrambled for. A man with a corkscrew came forward, ripped Foresta's clothing to her waist, bored into her breast with the corkscrew and pulled forth the live quivering flesh. Poor Bud her helpless husband closed his eyes and turned away his head to avoid the terrible sight. […] When it was thought that Foresta had been tortured sufficiently, attention was turned to Bud. His fingers were cut off one by one and the corkscrew was bored into his legs and arms. A man with a club struck him over the head, crushing his skull and forcing an eyeball to hang down from the socket by a thread" (1905, 134).

Even though a great majority of these authors, including Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, or Rudolph Fisher, gave "art priority over social concerns" (144) and believed themselves not to be social advocates,[45] another coeval group of artists, dubbed as moralists, and amongst whom we can identify W.E.B. Du Bois, Benjamin Brawley, or William Stanley Braithwaite, defended "art as the way to shape and energize their social concerns" (144), and so they tainted their writings with propagandistic undertones and harsh political and social critiques.

Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940)[46] marked a turning point not only in the conceptual and critical understanding of racism, but also in its representation in literary texts. For Jerry Bryant, Wright was amongst the first Black authors in history to display such an "unusual readiness to write plots in which black characters kill whites" (1997, 194); a view also endorsed by Abdul JanMohamed, who notes that Wright's approach to violence in the text "permits the [main character] to find the only exit from the confinement of social-death,[47] and it allows him to develop a consciousness of freedom that cannot be appropriated by the master" (2005, 425). *Native Son* describes Bigger Thomas's downfall after he kills his employer's daughter, Mary, by smothering her with a pillow in fear of being discovered with her in her room at night (Wright 2000, 117). After that, seeing no other solution, he quarters her body and burns it in the kitchen's furnace (122-125). When he is discovered and learns that everybody is after him, he tries to flee the city with his girlfriend, whom he also ends up raping and murdering (267-268).

---

[45] They approached racial discrimination through an aestheticized sensibility that contributed to the consideration of lynching as an event that could be artistically rendered even if it was not intrinsically aesthetic.

[46] As noted in the introduction to this chapter, Richard Wright's influence on Coates is evident. In fact, the title of Coates's memoir alludes to Richard Wright's homonymous poem published in 1935. The interrelation between both authors will be addressed in the following sections.

[47] This concept is appraised in section 2.2.

Bigger is eventually captured by the police, and the ending of the novel is set in a prison cell, where Bigger is awaiting his execution (303).

Native Son brought about a refinement in the conceptualization of racial violence. In a way, the novel represents "an awakening of a new mind-set" (Bryant 1997, 211) insofar as, in other works published prior to Wright's novel, characters never found any meaning in violence itself, but rather saw it as a means to a particular end. This view, however, was not only contested but altogether altered with Bigger Thomas, who feels exhilarated after killing. "He had murdered and had created a new life for himself," the narrator explains. "It was something that was all his own, and it was the first time in his life he had had anything that others could not take from him" (135). Bigger, who has always been accused of being incompetent and worthless, has finally achieved something; murder becomes the means through which he gains full control over himself and proves the people who criticized him wrong. In all, after smothering Mary, Bigger "was more alive than he could remember ever having been" (179). Bigger's elation blows out of proportion when he smashes his girlfriend's head in fear that she would betray his plans to escape. After that, the narrator tells us that

> Out of it all, over and above all that had happened, impalpable but real, there remained to him a queer sense of power. He had done this. He had brought all this about. In all of his life these two murders were the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him. He was living, truly and deeply, no matter what others might think, looking at him with their blind eyes. Never had he had the chance to live out the consequences of his actions; never had his will been so free as in this night and day of fear and murder and flight. (270)

The attitudes that Bigger displays throughout the text fall in line with a phenomenon that Stephen B. Bennett and William W. Nichols have termed "creative violence" (1971). In their opinion, the fact that racial confrontations are omnipresent in almost every work authored by a Black writer "makes necessary a search for meaning in the violence itself, a search that leads at least into two different directions: toward self-destruction and toward the creative violence of self-discovery" (222). Whilst the former would encompass a bid for achieving the respectability of Black characters in front of different forms of horror and oppression, mainly through personal and common sacrifices,[48] the latter would represent a path to discover one's own humanity. For Bennett and Nichols, it is Bigger Thomas's final words on why he killed Mary and Bessie that best explicate the feeling of personal redemption that can be achieved through creative violence. "When a man kills, it's for something," Bigger states, "I didn't really know I was alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em" (Wright 2000, 392). As ironic as it might seem, it is not until Bigger kills that he acknowledges his own dignity as a human being.

Wright's novel also stood out for its being set in an industrial city rather than in a small rural town, the context in which most of the texts approaching racial conflicts had been set until that moment (Bryant 1997; Wacquant 2009; Alexandre 2012; Dix and Templeton 2020). Indeed, Sandy Alexandre points out that prior to 1940, violence in literary works would take place in "rural and pastoral spaces" and that they would transform "the southern soil […] into something unnatural and brutal that belied its bucolic claims" (2012, 9). Particularly after the publication of *Native Son*, cities started

---

[48] They exemplify acts of self-destruction prompted by inter-racial violence by drawing on James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), a novel where a character, Richard, commits suicide after witnessing a racist incident with a group of white policemen (Bennett and Nichols 1971, 223). Sethe's killing her own daughter in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) in order to avoid her being taken to the plantation they escaped from would also illustrate how "violence towards self-destruction" works according to Bennett and Nichols.

becoming, in a metaphorical sense, alive (Scruggs 1978). According to Harold Bloom, Chicago, the city where *Native Son* is set, becomes a ruthless character in the text, as it actively plays a crucial role in fueling Bigger Thomas's anger (2007, 14). In other words, the city "lynches [him] figuratively; it does something to [him] that makes […] killing inevitable" (Bryant 1997, 212). By exploring the ways in which public spaces affect processes of subjectification (Lipsitz 2007; Alexandre 2012), Wright also spotlights a major form of structural bias that will also be of outmost importance in Coates's memoir—the flight of middle and upper-class residents to wealthier suburbs, the scarcity of resources in inner-city neighborhoods, the almost impossibility for Black people of renting and purchasing properties and, above all, the criminal activity that sprouts from all of the former.

Redlining can be interpreted not only as a prevailing manifestation of structural racial violence (Blee 2005, 2017; Bonilla-Silva 2006; Perry 2012; González-Tennant 2012, 2018), but also as a catalyst that also "leads inevitably to violence, the corruption of the soul, the suffocation of the self" (Bryant 1997, 218). In the view of Sharon Zukin, one of the most prolific researchers on ghettos and other similar segregation phenomena, "racial concentration, residential abandonment, and deconstitution and reconstruction of communal institutions" clearly turned inner-city neighborhoods into highly hostile spaces (2002, 516) or, in the words of sociologist Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh, into hustling areas (2000), as economic gains would often be generated by illicit activities, such as drug trafficking, prostitution, burglaries, and briberies. The fact that inner-city neighborhoods would be ridden by criminal gangs added to their being already dangerous spaces, not

only because they were places in which the threat of being assaulted was omnipresent, but also because said threat was often counteracted with more violence.[49]

After Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) also changed the predominant ways in which racial violence was represented in literature (Bryant 1997; Cheng 2001; Bloom 2008),[50] as it provided significant insights into Wright's belief that inter-personal assaults conceal other, less obvious, modes of discrimination. Ellison's novel relates the story of an unnamed Black man who, after being expelled from college, is forced to abandon the rural world and to live in poverty in Harlem, New York, where he himself becomes both witness and victim of many forms of violence. In fact, violence can be observed from the very first pages of the book, where the narrator brings back a painful recollection—one night he had "bumped into a man and, perhaps because of the near darkness, he saw me and called me an insulting name" (2014, 4):

> I sprang at him, seized his coat lapels, and demanded that he apologize. […]
> I butted him again and again until he went down heavily, on his knees,
> profusely bleeding. I kicked him repeatedly, in a frenzy because he still
> uttered insults though his lips were frothy with blood. […] And in my outrage
> I got out my knife and prepared to slit his throat, right there beneath the
> lamplight in the deserted street, holding him in the collar with one hand, and
> opening the knife with my teeth. (4)

---

[49] It is precisely in this context where Richard Wright grew up. Similarly, Ta-Nehisi Coates was raised in West Baltimore, where "the crews, the young men who'd transmuted their fear into rage, were the greatest danger" (2015a, 22). Coates's childhood will be explored in section 2.2.

[50] Together with Richard Wright and James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison also exerted enormous influence on Coates. This will be further addressed in section 1.3.2.

Reflecting upon that moment, the narrator suddenly realizes that maybe they had bumped into each other because the other man had not seen him. The trope of his "not being seen," which he already introduces in the opening lines of the novel, is recurrent in his work. In fact, the narrator states, numerous times, that he is invisible, and that

> The invisibility to which I refer occurs only because of a particular disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. […] You often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds. (Ellison 2014, 3-4; emphasis in the original)

This excerpt also showcases Ellison's interest in exploring the extent to which the identity of the main character is forged by the look of the observer; a dialectic that clearly resonates with colonialist assumptions. White individuals held control over systems of meaning and possessed "a will and a capacity to construct life within history" (Mbembe 2017, 42). Black individuals, on the contrary, were subject to being interpreted and had "neither life, nor will, nor energy of [their] own" (42). Ellison's narrator experiences the aforementioned processes of subjectification first-hand. In not looking through their physical eyes, but rather through their inner eyes, bystanders exhibit racist perceptions of Blackness that position the main character as either inhuman or all-too-human (Young 2010). These themes will also recur in Coates's works, where he insists that he is the product not of his ways of experiencing the world, but of white people's reactions to his ways of experiencing the world.

After Wright and Ellison, it was probably James Baldwin who best explored the notion of racial violence in all of its complexities through several different literary forms and genres—from novels such as *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), where the

protagonist's stepfather copes with the traumatic memory of his having witnessed a lynching; to poems, like the seminal "Staggerlee Wonders" (1985), which explores the racial plight, and theater plays, like *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964), which addresses issues of policing and racial targeting; but mostly in essays and memoirs, such as *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), *The Fire Next Time* (1963) or *No Name in the Street* (1972). In most of his works Baldwin was committed to straightening out a problem that also preoccupied both Wright and Ellison—that racism contributed both to creating serious difficulties for racialized individuals to succeed, and to spreading a nihilistic threat and a feeling of worthlessness that racialized communities must not only resist, but actively fight. Baldwin rejected triumphalist narratives of progress, and insisted that hope for a better future must always encompass the possibility of failure. His works ended up conforming a tradition that, as I will explain, constitutes a major source of inspiration for Coates, even if their perspectives towards progress and optimism differ in several different ways.

After 1955,[51] lynchings started ceding to a new form of racial violence—race riots. This period, as I claimed in the previous section, was characterized by a gradual shift in how Black communities responded to the atrocities they had been subjected to for centuries, as they started "turn[ing] to violence to protest the lack of changes in American society" (González-Tennant 2018, 176). It is for this reason that many scholars have posited that most literary works published during that historical period sought to galvanize readers into taking action rather than to merely represent the social unrest that was taking over the country (Franklin 1998; Breitman 1994; Abu-Lughod 2007). Black

---

[51] 1955 was the year when Emmett Till was lynched, and the year that marked the transition between the end of the lynching era and the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, which was characterized by race riots (González-Tennant 2018, 61-62).

96

authors started to consider the cathartic character of violence and used their texts as a strategy both to push the level of engagement of the readership and to set about a "new phase of the old pro-violence argument, renewing it with an unprecedented vigor and defiance" (Bryant 1997, 241).

Interestingly enough, during that period writers turned to autobiographical narratives under the belief that using their own experiences would add urgency to the facts explained and would foment revolution—Malcolm X's autobiography dates from 1965; Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* was published in 1968; Sonny Carson's *The Education of Sonny Carson* in 1972; and Assata Shakur's autobiography in 1989, even though it was written over the course of 1973. Such advocacy of violence, though, coexisted with pacifist movements, and figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. undermined the image of the Black violent revolutionary and rendered it "in terms of its weaknesses and dangers and its inevitable failure rather than its glorious martyrdom in which the Black community can take hope and pride" (Bryant 1997, 267).

Black women writers also provided wider and groundbreaking approaches to the subject of racial violence, even though their voices had long been muffled by a literary tradition that was highly dominated by a male sensitivity. As Angelyn Mitchell and Danielle K. Taylor claim, "while African American women writers have written since the eighteenth century, this distinct literary tradition and its importance went largely unnoticed and unacknowledged by literary critics" (2009, 2). During the second half of the century, though, a series of concomitant events, which included improvements in health-care systems, rise in job and educational opportunities, the creation of Black Studies programs, or the consolidation of the women's liberation movement, both enhanced the visibility of, and increased the accessibility to, the literature written by Black women. By 1970, a movement popularly known as the "Black women's literary

renaissance," spearheaded by Toni Morrison, paved the way for prolific writers such as Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, Octavia E. Butler, or Gayl Jones to start publishing their works; and in the following decades the literature produced by Black women skyrocketed (Drake 2007; Foley 2020).

Even though racial violence was a recurrent motif in many of their texts, it was Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) that dealt most pointedly with the issues that my thesis centralizes. Through the lens of intersectional feminism, Morrison tackles, in her novel, contentious subjects such as comradeship and relationships amongst men or the dynamics of racism in communities of color to such an extent that, together with Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), *Song of Solomon* earned a place amongst the most important works about racial violence ever written (Rigney 1991; Bryant 1997). In the novel, Bryant maintains, Morrison succeeds in "replac[ing] the old concern about white violence against blacks and how blacks should respond with a new concern: that the danger of violence now comes more from within than outside the community and it is self-destructive rather than socially protective" (Bryant 1997, 308).

Black women writers dismantled previous masculinist images of racial violence and widened the aforementioned field of research in at least two different ways. First, they showcased the gendered and sexual inflections of racial violence. In her canonical work *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), for example, Maya Angelou recalls being raped by her own father when she was a child, and Assata Shakur's *Assata: An Autobiography* (1988), bears exceptional testimony to the potential risks women are exposed to when locked up in carceral spaces. Other women writers, though, were not interested in portraying Black women as victims of violence—or at least not *only* as victims of violence. This is, in fact, the second way in which their literature plumbed new depths to the concept of racial violence and its textual representation—they also, for the

first time, portrayed female characters who, very much like Bigger Thomas, could obtain a sense of agency through the employment of violence. Gayl Jones's *Eva's Man* (1976), for example, explores how Eva, the protagonist, is imprisoned after murdering her own husband; and Toni Morrison's *Jazz* (1992) revolves around a woman who murders the young girl her husband was sleeping with. In all, these texts charted new directions for the conceptualization and the representation of racial discrimination, both providing many and often contradictory approaches to inter and intra-racial confrontations, and articulating forms of suffering that had not been tackled before, including sexual harassment and domestic violence, all whilst denouncing the gendered dimension of racial profiling.

Parallel to the proliferation of texts authored by Black women, an important shift from highbrow literary fiction to popular fiction led mainly by Walter Mosley also left an important imprint on the Black literary scene of the end of the century.[52] Mosley comes from a generation of authors who, very much like Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler or Chester Himes, the latter of whom "wrote about the deadly venom of racial prejudices which kills both racists and their victims" (Himes 1976, 1), had significantly developed the genre of hard-boiled detective fiction in the previous decades. Particularly in the Easy Rawlins mysteries series, which consists of fourteen novels featuring Ezekiel "Easy" Rawlins, a Black investigator in Los Angeles, Mosley sets the main action in a highly politicized context suffused with political corruption and racial prejudices in which Black characters are often blamed for crimes they have not committed. Mosley's novels coexisted with other literary genres which took a different tack in the fictional treatment

---

[52] On a side note, Mosley became well-known after he submitted one of his manuscripts, *Gone Fishin'*, to Black Classic Press, in Baltimore, a publishing house run by Ta-Nehisi Coates's father, Paul Coates.

of racial violence—the satirical novel, with Ishmael Reed (1974), or the tragedy, with John Edgar Wideman (1973).

It was probably with the murder of Oscar Grant III in 2008 that the representation of racial violence gained significant traction after a period that had witnessed a substantial drop in the publication of texts dealing with racial violence (King and Moody-Turner 2013). The inhumanity of Grant's murder, who had been killed by a police officer for not lying face down when instructed to and whose murderer was exonerated upon claiming that he had acted in self-defense, shed light on a problem that had been affecting Black communities for way too long—Black people had been, and still are, criminalized and exposed to the brutality exerted by the enforcement system "for no other reason than the color of one's skin" (Davis 2003, 30). It is in this context that Ta-Nehisi Coates published his first memoir, *The Beautiful Struggle* (2008).

Even if Grant's murder is often considered the factor that precipitated the development of a new literary trend, it was not until six years after his death, in 2014, with the killing of Michael Brown, that works denouncing the biased profiling of Black people really burgeoned. It is worth noting that Brown's murder occurred two years after Trayvon Martin's, in 2012, a brutal killing that ignited social unrest and prompted the formation of activist organizations such as Black Lives Matter. In the years between both deaths, many protests and demonstrations sprang up all over the country; but the response to Brown's death was unprecedented, so much so that many have claimed the need to refer to "two distinct worlds: pre-Ferguson and post-Ferguson" (Hosko 2017, n.p.).[53] It is not striking, then, that literary approaches denouncing racial profiling skyrocketed after Brown's death. The need to account for and to condemn the mass murder of young Black

---

[53] As I mentioned earlier in the text, Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson, Missouri, and so "Ferguson" has turned into a way of alluding to Brown's murder, too. For more information see Lowery (2017).

individuals started becoming a pressing matter, and literary texts appeared as the ideal means to "draw the attention of an increasingly alarmed public" (Bryant 1997, 310).

No consensus has been reached as to what term should be used to refer to the exceptional literary body that started emerging after Oscar Grant was gunned down in 2008 (Schur 2013; Weheliye 2013). Whilst several authors still wonder whether "in the annals of history, this extraordinary period of artistry will find a name, or a unifying sentiment that codifies it as a movement" (Mathis 2018, n.p.), others have dared to call it "post-racial literature" (Grassian 2009; Kite 2016).[54] Nonetheless, referring to literary works that denounce racist profiling as "post-racial" is a contradiction in terms, and it has generated great disquiet among Black writers, who have considered the label a "justifiably malign term" (Southgate 2013, 257).[55] For other authors it was not the label that was problematic, but the attempt to categorize Black aesthetics in general. Evie Shockley, in her work *Renegade Politics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* (2011), claimed that Black artistic movements are so nuanced and complex that any attempt to sort them out on the basis of their form or content is just absurd. For others, such as Richard Schur (2013) or Martha Southgate (2013), the problem lied in the particular employment of "post-racial" as a category. In fact, in the words of Southgate (2013), Black authors writing in this new literary tradition are "not

[54] This term, which was coined after Barack Obama's won the presidential election in 2008, has been considered to embolden racist practices. Insofar as denying racial differences implies denying a series of cultural, political, and social expressions, the Equality Institute deemed the term "post-racism" a minimization, that is, a form of symbolic racial violence, on September 3, 2019. Likewise, backing up on Kathleen Blee (2005, 2017), the notion "post-racism" can be problematic, as considering violence racial only on the basis of the perpetrator's intentions is completely wrong—if racial differences do not exist, crimes driven by racial animosity do not exist either.

[55] Toni Morrison, in conversation with Michel Martin, complained that the term post-racism "seems to indicate something that I don't think is quite true, which is that we have erased racism from the country, or the world. Racism will disappear when it's no longer profitable and no longer psychologically useful. When that happens, it'll be gone. But at the moment, people make a lot of money off of it—pro and con. And also, it protects people from a certain kind of pain. If you take racism away from certain people—I mean vitriolic racists as well as the sort of social racist—if you take that away, they might have to face something really terrible: misery, self-misery, and deep pain about who they are" (Martin 2008, n.p.).

past [race], ashamed of it or denying it. They operate fully within the context of being black" (257). Indeed, as Southgate points out, speaking about "post-racism" is also violent, as it silences racial differences and, with them, all their cultural, social, and political ramifications. Finally, a minority of writers lead by Ytasha L. Womack directly denies the existence of a "post-racial" society and suggests the use of "post-black" instead, as the latter "speaks to the new diversity and complex identity in African American culture" (2010, n.p.).

One of the texts that best represents the literary body emerging after the murders of Grant, Martin, and Brown is Claudia Rankine's awarded work *Citizen. An American Lyric* (2014). Adopting the stylistic features that she had already used in her previous work, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004), Rankine puts into words the multiplicity of forms that racist violence takes—from slanders, lack of recognition, or social isolation, into being constantly exposed to the threat and the reality of death. Aware that she cannot resort to conventional forms of writing to account for "the contradictory state of invisibility and hypervisibility, of aggressions and microaggressions, that black citizens endure daily in a society that continues to position them as 'other'" (O'Rourke 2014, n.p.), Rankine succeeds in employing prose without relinquishing the heightened imagery, emotional burden, and parataxic and allegoric content that is so emblematic of poetry. In her view, mixing different styles and forms is the only means to represent a topic that, in its being so complex, paradoxical, and hurtful, cannot be represented in any other way.

The novelty of Rankine's work paved the way for a new generation of poets who considered the disruption of conventional writing styles and forms as the only proper way to represent current racial dynamics (Coval 2015; Menand 2017; Robbins 2017). Whilst poet Kevin Coval has referred to the aforementioned group of young artists as "the break

beat poets" (2015), as they are "poets influenced by the breaks[56]—[by] the break down, polyrhythmic, funky sections of records [who have brought about] a rupture in narrative [and] a signifying of something new" (2015, xvii); others have called them "protest poets" (Cushay and Warr 2016, 13), insofar as they conceived poetry as a "blunt instrument for radical commentary and dreams of sculpting social transformation" (13); and Gavan Lennon, in his chapter "Formal Violence: The Black Lives Matter Movement and Contemporary Elegy" (2020), refers to them as the "Black Lives Matter elegists" (194).[57] Be that as it may, poetry has been considered to be a social artifact to protest against the uneven distribution of vulnerability among bodies, and as a call for the readership to get involved in seeking solutions to the unabated violence exerted against the Black community. Among these poets it is important to spotlight Tracy K. Smith (2007), Evie Shockley (2012), Reginald Harris (2013), Danez Smith (2014, 2017), Jericho Brown (2014, 2019), and Patricia Smith (2017).

As suggested in the previous section, another major genre through which Black authors have explored contemporary racist practices is memoirs (King and Moody-Turner 2013). That autobiographical texts are often chosen as a means to draw into racial concerns should not be surprising, though, as personal narratives about violence provide vivid accounts of everyday, domestic life, and about how it is influenced by violence. In her compelling study on the twenty-first century comeback of autobiographical projects, Lisa Guerrero claimed that Black memoirs sought "to not only make meaning of the complicated interrelationship and impact of time, circumstance, and history on one's personal subject formation, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to identify and name

---

[56] By using the word "breaks" here, Coval is establishing a metaphor based on the beats and rhythms performed by Hip-Hop and Rap artists.

[57] This concept will be of central importance in my analysis of the possibility of considering Coates's work an elegy at the end of section 2.1.

the ways in which you are so much more than the sum of your racialized parts" (2017, 414). In her opinion, the revival of said literary genres must be considered proof against the belief in the "post-racial" myth. In fact, authors such as Coates resort to their personal experiences and narratives to point out that, owing to the centrality that racism has had in Black people's lives, we cannot speak about being past racial differences just yet, and so memoirs offer "meditations on black subject formation [that] serve as vital scaffolding for building a new vocabulary about blackness, whiteness, and race in 'post-race' America" (421).

The proliferation of these memoirs during the last few years has been such that scholar Imani Perry referred to 2016 as "The Year of the Black Memoir" (2016). Indeed, she published her essay after two flourishing years in which the number of memoirs published skyrocketed. During 2015, Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* was published, along with Margo Jefferson's *Negroland: A Memoir* and Rosemary Freeney Harding's *Remnants: A Memoir of Spirit, Activism and Mothering*. In the years that followed, the number of Black memoirs that appeared in the literary market did not diminish. Mychal Denzel Smith's *Invisible Man, Got the Whole World Watching* saw the light in 2016; Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*, and Danielle Allen's *Cuz: The Life and Times of Michael A.* were published in 2017; and Patrisse Khan-Cullors's *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir* topped the New York Times best-sellers list in 2018. Among all of them it is probably Kiese Laymon's *Heavy: An American Memoir* (2018) that has received most attention. The text, brimful of autobiographical reminiscences, also addresses "the unfinished legacies of slavery, [and] the burden Black Americans have to bear from living in a country that distrusts, demonizes and all too often destroys them" (Sandhu 2018, n.p.). It is at the end of the

memoir, after his beloved grandmother passes away, that Laymon openly meditates on the possibility of escaping racial violence:

> I will watch them murder Tamir Rice's body for using his imagination outside. I will watch them call Toya Graham, a Black mother who beat her son upside the head during the Baltimore rebellion, "Mom of the Year." I will watch them murder Korryn Gaine's body for using her voice and a gun to defend her five-year-old child from America. I will watch them murder Philando Castile in front of his partner, Diamond Reynolds, and her child. I will watch, and hear, that Black child tell her mother, another Black child, "I don't want you to get shooted. I can keep you safe." […] I will watch them ridicule us and exonerate themselves for terrorizing the bodies of Black children they have yet to shoot. I will hear them call themselves innocent. (2018, 234)

Laymon's eventual acknowledgment that racial bigotries cannot be avoided, at least for now, clearly resonates with Coates's weariness in *Between the World and Me*. However, for Lisa Guerrero, the significant number of similarities shared by Laymon and Coates goes well beyond their nihilistic attitudes towards racial violence—in having been strongly influenced by James Baldwin, they both "reimagine the work of black racial salvation as a kind of intimate historiography that maps the interrelationship between individual and communal journeys, as well as links the temporal sites of past, present, and future blacknessess" (2017, 415). That both memoirists have so many points in common does not mean that their experiences speak of a shared understanding of Blackness, though. Perry cautions us against the dangers of believing that an individual story can represent the beliefs, emotions, or concerns of a whole community, and she insists that "each should be understood as one cry in the ring, a small piece of a mosaic,

vast and ever changing" (2016, n.p.). Almost a year after Perry's contribution, Guerrero slightly reformulated her statement and claimed that certain Black memoirs, such as Coates's or Laymon's, "are representative, not of a totalizing black experience, but of the genre of critical black memoir in the current moment" (415). Indeed, both texts offer a broad overview of many of the salient features that are intrinsic to contemporary critical Black memoirs—reading the perpetrator's intent in relation to the social context in which the violent incident occurs; establishing a link between different forms of oppression and, consequently, between different disciplines; retelling the deaths of acquaintances in a discouraging tone; or seeking extradiegetic reactions by directly engaging with the readership.

One of the most distinguishing characteristics of contemporary Black memoirs is that they move away from providing detailed and lengthy descriptions of the violent acts themselves, and they focus on their communicative, interpretive, and contextual aspects, as well as on the consequences they might have, at both an individual and a communal level (Blee 2005, 2017). Put another way, the *what* that caught the interest of a number of Black authors invested in denouncing racial confrontations during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been gradually replaced by a *why*. Insofar as providing such an interactional approach to violent acts requires a previous examination of the multiplicity of personal, cultural, social, and political factors that prompt them, Black memoirs also bear witness to the different intersecting forms of racist practices encompassed in González-Tennant's theorization of racial violence (2012, 2018). In other words, most of the texts that address racial violence illustrate the mutual dependency among inter-personal, structural, and symbolic forms of oppression.

This new generation of authors, be they poets or memoirists, that are so concerned with bearing testimony to the concomitant forms of violence racialized bodies are subject

to, are "defined by a shared, intersectional poetics of public grief, in which [they] develop [a] traditional elegiac balm of personal consolation" (Lennon 2020, 193). Indeed, the group of writers Ta-Nehisi Coates belongs to abridges the past and the present and establishes necessary connections between different disciplines so as to seek new ways to talk, teach, and write about a long history of racial oppression. Having framed *Between the World and Me* as a result of the dynamic relation between history and literature (King and Moody-Turner 2013, 4), it is now my intention to provide a critical analysis of Coates's representation of racial violence through the employment of four main concepts: the phenomenology of the body (Johnson 1993; Gordon 1997, 2000; Young 2010; Haile III 2017); Houston A. Baker's critical memory (1994); the memoir's target readership (Cottom 2015; León 2015; Schuessler 2015), and the ensuing empathic identification that may, or may not, be forged between readers and victims (Alexander 2015; Bennett 2015; Hilton 2015; León 2015; Abramowitsch 2017).

1.3 The Materialization of Racial Violence in *Between the World and Me*

> The body is neither given as an uncomplicated empirical rupture on the
> landscape of the human, nor do we ever actually "see" it. In a very real
> sense, the "body," insofar as it is an analytical construct, does not exist
> in person at all.
>
> Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color* (2003)

> I am an invisible man. […] I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber
> and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible,
> understand, because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see
> sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by
> mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they only see my
> surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed,
> everything and anything except me.
>
> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952)

Black bodies hold a central position in *Between the World and Me*.[58] In fact, the body is such a recurrent motif in the memoir that Coates seems almost obsessed with it—by Tressie McMillan Cottom's count, he alludes to it "some 101 times over 156 sparse pages" (2015, n.p.).[59] In the text, Coates portrays the body as something that can be lost (5),[60] "destroyed" (9), "shielded" (23), "robbed" (65), or even as a "vessel of flesh and

---

[58] As I am going to explain later, bodies are so central in his work that he often speaks of racial violence as a form of "disembodiment" (2015a, 114). For Coates, disembodiment refers to Black individuals' incapacity to have full control over their own bodies and over the ways they are perceived in the social ethos. In this first meaning of disembodiment, Coates casts "the disembodied" as "a people who control nothing, who can protect nothing, who are made to fear not just the criminals among them but the police who lord over them with all the moral authority of a protection racket" (2015a, 82). The disembodied, he later on posits, are "stolen bodies" (2015a, 101).

[59] 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 ebook 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 in the search it is not specified whether they are Black or white.

[60] At the beginning of the text he writes that a TV host asked him "what it meant to lose my body" (5).

108

bone" that can be "taken" and "shattered on the concrete" (83).[61] Coates believes that such objectification of bodies began with enslavement, a period when "human beings [were dissolved] into things, objects, and merchandise" (Mbembe 2017, 11), and that it has not ended yet. As a result, many critics (Haile III 2017; Abramowitsch 2017) have maintained that to speak about Coates's approach to corporality is to speak about phenomenology or, as James B. Haile III puts it, a "black phenomenology of the body" (2017, 495). Even though, as I am going to explain in the following paragraphs, 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 claimed to have realized his embodiment after engaging in a fistfight with Edward Covey, a slaveholder. Douglass's personal victory led him to claim that "this spirit made me a freeman in fact, while I remained a slave in form" (247) after acknowledging, earlier in the text, that he was "a living embodiment of mental and physical wretchedness" (172).

Phenomenology, a disciplinary field in philosophy that finds its origins in Edmund Husserl's *Logical Investigations* (1900), Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927), and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), approaches reality as perceived through our senses and focuses on the extent to which the body functions as an opening for consciousness, which precisely comes into being only in its relation to the world. Accordingly, the body anchors the subject and, in this way, "is the vehicle of being in the world" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 82). Phenomenology, however, acquires different undertones when studied in relation to racialized individuals, for whom their bodies gain meaning not through their own experiences in the world, but through the whites'

---

[61] The word "vessel" has been central in theorizations about the phenomenology of the Black body. The term will be explored in depth in section 2.2.

experiences in the world. In other words, "the meaning of the world," James B. Haile writes, "its values, its ideas and concepts, and the material orderings and actions follow not from a black lived experience but from one that is explicitly white" (2016, 495).

Black phenomenology had been first hinted at by W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903),[62] but it did not turn into a field of research until Frantz Fanon discussed it in his acclaimed work *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), where he placed special emphasis on exploring "the lived experience of the black man" (89). Black bodies are, Fanon defends in his work, transformed into objects[63] by the power of whiteness. "I am an object among other objects," Fanon writes to later explain that he had been "woven out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories" invented by the white man, and which could be used to further subdue him (2008, 90). To explain these relational dynamics, Fanon coined a term that acquired greater centrality later, in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1965)—sociogeny, which provides an explanation for how racialized groups are thought of as being predisposed to adopting certain attitudes or inducing certain circumstances when, in fact, both those attitudes and those circumstances are socially produced. As I already explained in the previous sections, sociogeny would also account for the extent to which racialized individuals are believed to be ontologically threatening or dangerous. For James B. Haile, sociogeny also refers to how "black death is not only the product of the social order but is the grounding for social order based within the natural world" (2016, 497).

The solid materiality attributed to Black bodies in *Between the World and Me* stands out against the lack of corporality of whiteness[64] that has been deemed problematic

---

[62] For more information on Du Bois and phenomenology see Meer (2018) and Pittman (2016).

[63] Fanon's perception of the Black body as being deprived of agency and transfigured into an object will be further addressed later in this chapter.

[64] The use of "whiteness" and not "white people" throughout this chapter is intentional.

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 in 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" (2015a, 5). According to Abramowitsch, Coates's description of the interview illustrates his investment in diverting the focus attention away from whiteness. Abramowitsch 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" (2017, 460).

One of the outcomes of Coates's obliteration of white bodies in the text is that structural and symbolic forms of discrimination outnumber interpersonal assaults. Coates insists that the lives of members of his community have not been lost to the actions of an individual person, nor to the actions of a group of persons, but rather to a very complex matrix of racist practices and structures, including biased housing policies; the school-to-prison pipeline; limited access to education and health systems; involvement in gang fights and problems with addiction; and legal destitution, among others. All the former are masked under a concept that is recurrent in Coates's work, the Dream, which refers to a fantasy that keeps privileged classes blindfolded to the brutal realities that racialized individuals go through on a daily basis. In this respect, we could claim that Coates's text epitomizes Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's concept of "racism without racists" (2006), which illustrates that regardless of the blatant racial inequalities that exist today in the U.S., nobody is held liable for them.

In opening up critical discussions on Coates's representation of violent acts, this final section acts as a guiding thread linking the two chapters of this dissertation. Coates's fixation with bodies, and particularly with the idea that they all share a similar predisposition to suffering racial violence, points toward Elizabeth Alexander's "bottom line blackness" (1994, 80). Alexander coined the term in 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). For Alexander, all sorts of discriminatory acts ever exerted against individuals of color have contributed to the creation of a "traumatized collective historical memory" (79). Blackness, Alexander states, becomes instrumental in collectivizing individual experiences—in a way that is very reminiscent of Coates's warning to his son, she seems to be claiming that Black persons viewing King's recording could step into his shoes and mirror themselves in the beating.

As I am going to defend in this section, "bottom line blackness" is, however, a double-edged weapon. In seeking to bring together individuals with similar characteristics, it also alienates those who are different. A similar phenomenon occurs in *Between the World and Me*. Whilst Coates's portrayal of Blackness provokes the identification of Black readers, who feel very much reflected in the matters he addresses, it similarly precludes the emotional involvement of readers who do not identify with the target victim that he devises—a cisgender, heterosexual, Black man. Among several others, Brit Bennett (2015) posits that Coates's view is rather masculinized, and that it silences the ways in which racial discrimination intersects with gender, sexuality, class, and other individual characteristics within the rather abstract and heterogeneous Black community. Particularly if read hand in hand with the works of Elizabeth Alexander (1994), Susan Sontag (2003), and Saidiya Hartman (1997, 2007), we could claim that, in

his attempt to purvey such representation of racial discrimination, his work might also be considered, to a certain extent, violent.

1.3.1 Inhabiting a Black Body: On the Flesh and "Bottom Line Blackness"

The opening pages of *Between the World and Me* set down the fundamental ideas that later underpin the entirety of the text—from Coates's portrayal of whiteness as a "fading abstraction" (5); his fixation with the Black body, its sociality, and its historicity (5); his understanding of racial violence as a multidimensional and interactional phenomenon (8); all the way to his intentions behind penning down the memoir (9).[65] Reflecting upon his son's reaction to the absolution of Michael Brown's murderer, Coates makes a statement that, for many, encapsulates his approach to the Black body (Abramowitsch 2017; Haile III 2017). When he hears his son crying after learning about the news, Coates remembers, he 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*" (12; my emphasis). For James B. Haile III, Coates's contention breaks new ground for the understanding of the Black body as a product of its history. Haile 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. (2016, 494; emphasis in the original)

As suggested in the introduction to this section, Coates's excerpt illustrates the extent to which his perception of the body draws from phenomenology. In fact, it is no secret that

---

[65] All these ideas will be further addressed throughout this section.

Coates has an abiding interest in the field—between 2012 and 2014, he devoted no less than six articles[66] in *The Atlantic* to revisiting Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651) in an attempt to understand both its "discussion of the relation among the phenomenal body, language, historicity, and the social contract," as well as "the social state through an interrogation of the material body" (Haile III 2016, 503).

Coates believes that racialized bodies are the intentional result of a series of practices used to establish and maintain hierarchies of power—as Charles Johnson phrases it, "it is from whites that […] the black body comes" (1993, 606). Accordingly, Coates underscores that race is but a technology devised to control individuals who are rendered different. Pages after stating that "the black body is the clearest evidence that America is the work of men" (12), 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). "Black blood wasn't black," he concludes, "black skin wasn't even black" (55). In a way that is reminiscent of Bryan Wagner, who stated that "blackness does not come from Africa," but that instead "Africa and its diaspora became black during a particular stage in their history" (2009, 1), Coates is implying that race is a construction, and that it cannot be understood without taking into account the circumstances under which it was produced.[67]

The logic that follows from these theorizations is fundamental to understand Coates's tack on the dynamics of racism. If it was a need to maintain hierarchies of power

---

[66] "Western Thought for Class Clowns and Erstwhile Nationalists" (the first part of which was published on February 8, 2013, and the second one on February 15, 2013); "Hobbes, Aristotle, and the Senses" (February 18, 2013); "Western Thought for Class Cutters and Schoolmen Reformed" (March 15, 2013); a short apology for lagging behind his weekly review on Hobbes's work entitled "The Leviathan', Cont." (April 15, 2013); and "Western Thought for Footmen and Aspiring Legionaries" (April 19, 2013).

[67] When and how Blackness was created will be addressed through the lens of Afropessimism in section 2.2.

that brought forth the classification of individuals into different groups, then it is clear that racism precedes races. Coates agrees, "race is the child of racism, not the father," and he adds, "the process of naming 'the people' has never been a matter of genealogy and physiognomy as much as one of hierarchy" (7). For Coates, the atrocities committed against his community could only be legitimized by way of deeming the people against whom they were perpetrated "the other" or even "the not-yet-fully-human" (Miller 2016, 15).[68] In the words of Lewis Gordon (2005), "each black is […] ironically nameless by virtue of being named 'black'" (2) and, in the view of Harvey Young (2010), Black individuals bear "the inscription of meaning onto skin color" (1). Again, they maintain that Black bodies do not exist as such—they are "an imprecise projection or designation" that is always in the making, and that is constantly recreated through epithets, withering looks, and other similar racist interactions (Young 2010, 7). Their contentions are echoed in Coates, who in a similar vein claims that "perhaps being named black was just someone's name for being at the bottom, a human turned to object, object turned to pariah" (55).

Coates distinguishes between two bodies converging within the same one—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 "popular connotations of blackness [that] are mapped across or internalized within black people," which results in the construction of a "second body,

---

[68] For more information on the "process" of becoming Black see Mbembe (2017). He writes, "the term 'Black' was the product of a social and technological machine tightly linked to the emergence and globalization of capitalism. It was invented to signify exclusion, brutalization, and degradation, to point to a limit constantly conjured and abhorred. The Black Man, despised and profoundly dishonored, is the only human in the modern order whose skin has been transformed into the form and spirit of merchandise—the living crypt of capital" (2017, 6).

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 I have already suggested, that the abstract body often overshadows the real body. 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)

In distinguishing between physical and conceptual bodies, Coates is certainly evoking Hortense Spillers's influential essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987), where the author 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" (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" (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 can also be observed in the latter, where violence is inscribed as a traumatic

memory. In his essay "Black Care" (2016), which revisits Spillers's thesis, Calvin Warren offers important commentary on pain registering 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 or 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 the 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).

In a way that is indeed reminiscent of Spillers's reasoning, 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. The violence described in the memoir is, on the contrary, often witnessed, not experienced by the author himself, yet nonetheless believed to be something that all Black individuals might be subject to. Simon Abramowitsch, who has explored 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 he describes might result in the disavowal of identification from 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 empathic feelings toward

another that *is not but might be the self*, but instead to provoke direct identification" (2017, 464; emphasis in the original). Indeed, as Young has also observed, "first-hand encounters with a racializing projection are not a requirement of embodied black experience" (Young 2010, 5). Coates, in this way, seeks to provoke identification without having been through everything he explains first-hand. In the end, it is his flesh, rather than his body, that inscribes him within a community. As I will explain later, Coates, in so doing, is not suggesting that Black individuals' experiences are homogenous, but rather that "a remarkable similarity, a repetition with a difference, exists among embodied Black experiences" (Young 2010, 5).

Ta-Nehisi Coates's acknowledgement 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. After formulating the hypothesis that a feeling of kinship was generated among Black individuals who witnessed Rodney King being battered,[69] Alexander highlighted that viewing images, as well as reading accounts, of racial atrocities has not only enhanced community bonds but also "forg[ed] a traumatized collective historical memory which is reinvoked at contemporary sites of conflict" (1994, 79). As Alexander put it, witnessing the suffering of others who look like us "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).

---

[69] 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.

Coates's illustrating that the strong probability of being a victim of racial brutality generates an identification among Black individuals is most 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 from whom Coates's son learns about his own vulnerability at the very beginning of the text (2015a, 11-12), it is Trayvon Martin to whom Coates compares his son, 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" (25).[70] 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 youth.

After exploring what being exposed to Frederick Douglass's explicit descriptions about whippings did to readers, Alexander reaches a conclusion—in its construction of a communal memory of suffering among Black individuals, "bottom line blackness" also has an edifying dimension. In this respect, Alexander underscores that viewing images of, as well as reading accounts on, corporeal terror might register in viewers and readers as a knowledge that "is necessary to one who believes 'it would be my turn next'" (1994, 83).[71] Coates's acknowledgment that racial identification equates being subjected to suffering from a particular form of violence does not only bring him closer to other individuals from his own community, but it also informs his individual self—at several

---

[70] "Bottom line blackness" also helps understand a phenomenon that occurred in the weeks following Trayvon Martin's murder. In many of the demonstrations that were organized, protestors wearing hoodies and banners saying "I Am Trayvon Martin" and "We Are All Trayvon Martin" could be spotted (Abramowitsch 2017; Moss III 2017). Something very similar happened again with the protests against George Floyd's killing on May 25, 2020, as his last words "I Can't Breath" appeared in the flags that swamped thousands of cities worldwide. In a very interesting way, a countermovement appeared almost simultaneously questioning those identifications and defending instead that "We Are NOT Trayvon Martin." This other movement, which drew special support from whites, claimed for the singularity of Martin's murder and defended that there was a fundamental difference between its supporters and Martin himself—that they were alive, and Martin was not.

[71] This notion will be further explored in section 2.1.

moments in the text, he intimates that the fear of losing his own body became all the more real with the murder of Prince Jones (2015a, 131). Following Alexander, and disturbing as it is, it seems that witnessing the murders of other racialized men provided Coates and his son with crucial information about their own sociality, illustrating that, as Alexander has also noted, "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 violence 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 the sociality of Blackness onto other Black readers who might find it helpful to comprehend their being in the world.

A number of 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" (81). Put another way, a common history can be indeed identified among 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 idea that, even though racialized folks do indeed have certain phenotypical characteristics in common, they also embody "different lived realities" (qtd. in Young 2010, 8).[72]

As suggested above, the feeling of collectiveness that Alexander's concept refers to is mainly reached through memory, for it is the acknowledgement of a shared history of suffering that, as Coates very well illustrates, brings individuals together (Spillers 1984; Alexander 1994; Young 2010). For Coates, being Black means sharing a common history—not only a present, but also a past, and most certainly a future as well. 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 track of the different expressions racial discrimination has taken on throughout history, but it also contributes to weaving different experiences together. Although at points Coates resorts to the employment of metaphors to recall the past, as when he claims himself to be shackled (30), he often draws upon history in a rather explicit 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. It is precisely when visiting the Petersburg Battlefield that Coates recalls the situation previous to the war as a "robbery" of bodies, and he concludes that "robbery is what this is, what it always was" (101). Black bodies today, he later contends, 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).

---

[72] As I am going to explain in section 2.3, Coates's presumption that Blackness is unified in its subjection to racist discrimination provoked a backlash from literary critics, in particular from Black feminists such as Shani O. Hilton (2015) or Brit Bennett (2015), who defended that Coates's work bids for a generalized approach to Blackness that oversees other individual idiosyncrasies.

Coates's presentification of the past becomes a means of asserting that Black bodies today are inhabiting "the afterlives of slavery" (Hartman 2007); that is, that policing and racial targeting are vestiges of past forms of racial violence 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 bodies as a reenactment of enslavement (6). In her view, chattel enslavement did not end in 1865, but rather metamorphosed into other forms of human exploitation. 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)[73]

As a result, for Hartman, speaking of enslavement as belonging to the past implies incurring in a contradiction in terms, for a past that is reenacted in the present cannot be identified as past (Trouillot 1995).[74] In this respect, in her essay "Venus in Two Acts"

---

[73] Hartman's theorizations may have been influenced by Spillers's in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" (1987), where she talks about the present condition of Black people as "post-emancipation neo-enslavement" (68). In a similar vein, bell hooks declares that "slavery is not just in the past but here right now ready to entrap, to hold and bind" (2013, 185).

[74] 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).

(2008), she emphasizes the need to "narrat[e] the time of slavery as our present" (12)[75] that is also blatant in Coates's memoir, as he constantly exhorts his readers to remember that the current aggressions exerted against Black people are indeed "heritage and legacy" (10); that is, reminiscences of a past that keeps repeating itself.[76] By blurring the boundary between present and past, Hartman, and Coates too, as I am going to expound in the following chapter, is also calling into question the existence of progress—if she believes that past and present have coalesced, that nothing has improved from the past until now, why should we believe that anything will get better in the future?[77]

Hartman's arguments had an important bearing on Christina Sharpe, who regarded racialized bodies as living "in the wake" (Sharpe 2016). Although the definitions of "the wake" purveyed in her work are numerous and varied,[78] Sharpe contends that it mostly refers to

> 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, everybody has the moral obligation to get involved in what she terms the "wake work"—"a mode of inhabiting and rupturing this episteme with our known

---

[75] For a critique of the extent to which the African American tradition has used the past to think about the present, see Levy-Hussen (2016).

[76] 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).

[77] For more information on the notion of progress in Black communities see Winters (2016).

[78] She acknowledges that "the wake" might have different meanings and that her approach to the term seeks to bring all of them together. She claims for the need to "think the metaphor of the wake in the entirety of its meanings," which she later lists: "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).

lived and un/imaginable lives" (52) in a permanent racist 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 has been granted by the breathlessness of many others who died in the past.[79] 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 the urgency to look for the new ways to speak about death that many contemporary racialized writers demanded (Shockley 2011; Cushay and Warr 2016).[80]

The fact that, in his narration, Coates abridges present and past forms of racist atrocities, bringing police brutality into conversation with enslavement, lynching, rioting, as well as with other forms of structural and symbolic discrimination, raises the possibility of reading his approach to violence through the lens of both Houston A. Baker's "critical memory" (1994), which he later reconceptualized as "black memory" (2001). Baker

---

[79] On May 25, 2020, with the murder of George Floyd, the issue of breathlessness acquired greater significance, as Floyd yelled that he could not breath multiple times whilst he was being choked by a policeman. "I Can't Breath" became the slogan in the massive demonstrations that followed.

[80] The ambitious projects conceived by Hartman (2008) and Sharpe (2016) are reminiscent of Hortense Spillers's concept of "intramural black life" (2006), which approaches Blackness "as lived on the ground, so to speak, defined […] by black people who inhabit and rupture this episteme with their, with our, livable lives" (Jenkins 2019, n.p.; my emphasis). In this regard, the concept shares many similarities with Elizabeth Alexander's "black interior," which, in her own words, "is not an inscrutable zone, nor colonial fantasy," but instead an "inner space in which black artists have found selves that go far, far beyond the limited expectations and definitions of what black is, isn't, or should be" (2004, 2).

coined the term 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 significant relationship of instants of time past and the always uprooted homelessness of now" (Baker 1994, 3). Interestingly enough, for Baker, Black history can be revised and approached through two complementary attitudes—nostalgia and critical memory. Both are ways of identifying a shared history among Black individuals, but whilst the former resonates with homesickness and idealizes the past as a moment "filled with golden virtues, golden men and sterling events" (3), the latter claims for the critical evaluation of that past as a means to look for new ways to confront the present. In other words, nostalgic memory prompts the "beautification of history" (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" (154).

Although, in general terms, Coates's understanding of the past is not based on, borrowing Baker's term, homesickness, both his admiration for Malcolm X and the historical moment "of blooming consciousness" that X lived in (34) clearly have nostalgic undertones. Coates writes,

> Seeds planted in the 1960s, forgotten by so many, sprung up from the ground and bore fruit. Malcolm X, who'd been dead for twenty-five years, exploded out of the small gatherings of his surviving apostles and returned to the world. Hip-hop artists quoted him in his lyrics, cut his speeches across the breaks, or flashed his likeness in their videos. This was the early '90s. […] If I could have chosen a flag back then, it would have been embroidered with a portrait of Malcolm X, dressed in a business suit, his tie dangling, one hand parting a window shade, the other holding a rifle. (35)

Coates's constant visits to Howard University, which he describes as "a machine, crafted to capture and concentrate the dark energy of all African peoples and inject it directly into the student body" (40), also trigger a feeling of "nostalgia and tradition" (39). Through a beautiful and vibrant evocation of names and important personalities who also went to Howard, Coates explains that, when he was there, he knew that

> I was literally walking in the footsteps of all the Toni Morrisons and Zora Neale Hurstons, of all the Sterling Browns and Kenneth Clarks, who'd come before. The Mecca—the vastness of black people across space-time—could be experienced in a twenty-minute walk across campus. I saw this vastness in the students chopping it up in front of the Frederick Douglass Memorial Hall, where Muhammad Ali had addressed their fathers and mothers in defiance of the Vietnam War. I saw its epic sweep in the students next to Ira Aldridge Theater, where Donny Hathaway had once sung, where Donald Byrd had once assembled his flock. (41)

Although nostalgic recollections abound in the text, Coates also offers a critical approach to the horrors of history; he, for example, wants his son to "struggle to truly remember [the atrocities that enslaved individuals endured] in all its nuance, error, and humanity" (70). Nonetheless, as much as he keeps reminding his son that "you cannot forget how much they took from us and how they transfigured our very bodies into sugar, tobacco, cotton, and gold" (71), Coates's approach to critical memory differs from Baker's in a crucial way—Coates may believe in the revolutionary potential of critical memory but, contrary to Baker, he conjures up the past as a means not so much to alter

the present situation, but rather to condemn a situation that has been endured for way too

long (Alexander 2015; Chatterton Williams 2015; Smith 2017).[81]

---

[81] For a more detailed analysis about this see section 2.2.

1.3.1.1 Interpersonal, Structural, and Symbolic Violent Acts: Reading *Between the World and Me* along Contemporary Theories on Racial Violence

Black bodies remain the direct and *only* recipient of racial violence throughout most of the text.[82] As I have observed, the fact that Coates speaks of a body that, even if individualized, bears within itself the brunt of history, ushers in, again, the possibility of considering racial violence an interactional phenomenon that is informed by different factors (Blee 2005, 2017; Bonilla-Silva 2006; González-Tennant 2012, 2018). As Janet Abu-Lughod (2000, 2007) stated, one of the main aspects that influences the form that racial violence takes is the historical context it occurs in. For her, if past forms of violence are not adequately addressed when they first burst out, then they will most certainly reappear or, in her own words, erupt again, in the future under different guises (2007, 8). Abu-Lughod's approach is also defended by Edward González-Tennant, who is invested in demonstrating the deep connections between past and present forms of racial discrimination through a cross-temporal analysis of lynchings and race riots (2012, 2018). The conclusions to which González-Tennant arrives have proved to be central in current understandings of racism—racial problems must be figured as interactional but also as multidimensional (178). González-Tennant's findings, as well as Abu-Lughod's, underpin the proposal that contemporary forms of racial discrimination are the vestiges of past forms of racial brutality. Black bodies today, then, can be interpreted as living "the afterlives of slavery" (Hartman 2007). Coates's belief in the centrality of context and history to understand policing and other current forms of racism sheds light into the communicative and interpretive implications of racial violence, too.

---

[82] In an interview conducted by Kevin Nance, Coates claimed that, in the memoir, "I was dealing with violence in a physical sense. You can't talk about violence without talking about the body. I felt it was important to talk about it that way and to make things as physical as I possibly could" (Nance 2015, n.p.).

Coates's approach to racial brutality also underscores its multidimensionality. In fact, *Between the World and Me* can be considered an inventory that records the multiplicity of manifestations that racial violence takes and that, in fact, illustrates that violent acts do work as assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; González-Tennant 2012, 2018). Interpersonal attacks, that is, physical confrontations between an agent and a victim, amount to a total of five in the text, and their descriptions are, according to Simon Abramowitsch, "distant, factual and curt" (2017, 464). Let us remember that Coates's being whupped by his father is only tackled once (69); that his witnessing a boy being almost shot and his being stopped whilst driving, although he intimates that both had a very traumatic impact on him, are only mentioned in passing (28; 76); and that his son's being rebuked by a white woman in an escalator, regardless of being one of the most discussed passages of the memoir, has often been considered anecdotical (Kennedy 2015; Smith 2017). Many critics posit that the interpersonal incident that receives most attention is probably Prince Jones's murder, but that Coates's approach to it is inconsistent and one-sided, as he does not discuss in depth the circumstances surrounding his friend's death (Alexander 2015; Kennedy 2015; Smith 2017; Abramowitsch 2017).[83]

That interpersonal attacks are so few is surprising given the vast number of symbolic and structural assaults that appear in the memoir. Symbolic violence, which refers to the cultural and biological representation of racialized individuals as inferior, might be best illustrated when Coates urges his son to remember that

> Black is *beautiful*—which is to say that the black body is beautiful, the black
> hair must be guarded against the torture of processing and lye, that black skin
> must be guarded against bleach, that our noses and mouths must be protected

---

[83] It should also be noted that in three of the five instances of interpersonal racism the agent is Black.

against modern surgery. We are all our beautiful bodies and so must never be prostrate before barbarians, must never submit our original self, our one of one, to defiling and plunder. (36; my emphasis)

In this excerpt, Coates is clearly articulating a criticism of beauty standards and the extent to which they operate along racial lines. In the view of Fernne Brennan, these phenomena "[are] a sign of the idea that to reach optimal beauty or even just to look good is premised on the notion that white imagery is the 'norm' and natural black features are to be shunned as lacking in these qualities of white/light skin and straight hair" (2017, 139). In his work, and along these lines, Coates contends that "the larger culture's erasure of black beauty was intimately connected to the destruction of black bodies" (44). The racist misconception that there exists a reciprocity between racialized bodies, ugliness, and worthlessness has also developed another form of symbolic racial violence that Coates is significantly preoccupied with—internalized racism (Du Bois 1903; Hall 1986; Pyke 2010; Johnson 2011).

Even though writers and thinkers such as Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois first tackled the ways in which racism can indeed bounce back and have a serious impact on how racialized individuals perceive themselves, it was Stuart Hall who coined the term "internalized racism" to refer to "the subjection of victims of racism to the mystifications of the very racist ideology which imprison and define them" (1986, 26). Simply put, internalized racism demonstrates that the effects of inter-racial violence are such that they also take on an intra-racial dimension. These effects, which, so far, I have explored in relation to physical appearance, extend well beyond the aforementioned self-loathing for having a body that does not conform to beauty standards and can also be observed into the circulation of presumptions of criminality in Black communities. In the words of Harvey Young, "the black body is both an externally applied projection blanketed across

black bodies and an internalization of the projected image of black folk. Black folk also suspect black folk" (Young 2010, 13).

Regardless of the weight that symbolic racism carries in the memoir, it is structural violence that is most looked into, in terms of both quantity and depth, so much so that it is difficult to point out singular events that exemplify it—instead, it runs deep and is omnipresent in the text. Let us remember, at this point, that González-Tennant described structural oppression as the "embedded forms of social inequality, […] [such] as the ways societies are organized to disenfranchise minorities and restrict their access to economic advancement, educational opportunities, and governmental representation" (2018, 56). Coates's proclivity to not identify the actual people behind racism undergirds his work, and although he discusses the legality of racial segregation through Jim Crow and similar systems in their full complexity, it is the lethal triad of housing, schooling, and the streets that receives greater attention. Even though Coates discusses the full implications of redlining in "The Case for Reparations" (2014a), he also tackles the problem of housing in *Between the World and Me*, where he remembers that, when he visited Chicago, "housing occurred to me as a moral disaster" (67).[84] He then remembers that, when in the city, he also witnessed the eviction of an old Black man, a situation that he ascribes to "a logic built on laws built on history built on contempt for this man and his family and their fate" (109) and which left him with a feeling of utter helplessness. It

---

[84] Although, for the sake of space, I cannot build extensively on this issue, it is worth noting that housing in Chicago is a very controversial topic. From the beginning of the twentieth century, Chicago was not only the second most populated city in the U.S., but also one of the most segregated ones—and it remains a city in which biased and strict housing policies are still pursued. Nowadays, "Chicago's affordable housing system perpetuates city's long history of segregation", since "government-backed affordable housing has largely been confined to majority Black neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty" (Ali 2021, n.p.). For more information on the imbrication between racial reckoning, housing, and Chicago see Hirsch (1986) and Biles (2001).

is in the description ensuing from his witnessing the incident that Coates provides the most vivid portrayal of the city:

> I had spent the week exploring this city, walking through its vacant lots, watching the aimless boys, sitting in the pews of the striving churches, reeling before the street murals to the dead. […] I admired them [Black people in that city], but I knew the whole time that I was merely encountering the survivors, the ones who'd endured the banks and their stone-faced contempt, the realtors and their fake sympathy—"I'm sorry, that house just sold yesterday"—the realtors who steered them back toward ghetto blocks, or blocks earmarked to be ghettos soon, the lenders who found this captive class and tried to strip them of everything they had. (109-110; my emphasis)

For Coates, housing shortages and racist spatial practices are just the first link in the chain of structural violence that catapults racialized individuals into criminality and, ultimately, into death. School and, ultimately, in a sort of feedback loop, the streets again, are the two remaining pieces of the jigsaw—in Coates's own words, "arms of the same beast" (33). "The streets were not my only problem," Coates intimates, "if the streets shackled my right leg, the schools shackled my left. Fail to comprehend the streets and you gave up your body now. But fail to comprehend the schools and you gave up your body later. I suffered at the hands of both, but I resent the schools more" (25). Coates's criticism of the schooling system and the racism intrinsic to it is trenchant. He regards schools as a sleeping pill of sorts that prevents children from dealing with the real problems that they will encounter after they leave school; as a means not of nurturing the mind but of disciplining the body; as a way of inducing in children a "false morality" (26). Coates's backlash at the education system underlines an appalling fact—"fully 60 percent of all young black men who drop out of high school will go to jail" (27).

133

Among many other scholars, George Lipsitz has been vocal in contending that "people of different races in the U.S. are relegated to different physical locations by housing and lending discrimination, by school district boundaries, [or] by policing practices," so much so that "the racial demography of the places where people live, work, play, shop and travel exposes them to a socially-shared system of exclusion and inclusion" (2007, 12). Simply put, the "design, construction, administration, financing, and policing" of public places follows a racial bias—whilst white people often occupy privileged spaces that foster upward mobility and social inclusion, people of color are confined to spaces of exploitation and exclusion (2007, 15). To an extent, Lipsitz's findings try to offer an explanation for a process I have already referred to—the school-to-prison pipeline, a means of criminalizing racialized children whereby they are expelled from, or forced to drop out of, schools at early ages to later be arrested and imprisoned (Ritchie 2017). Coates illustrates very well the workings of this system in his memoir—if you are Black and poor, you will most likely be targeted in, and also expelled from schools, swooped down again back to the streets, where, in order to earn a living, you may be involved in illicit activities that will have you arrested, if not directly killed. "Fail in the streets and the crews would catch you slipping and take your body," Coates notes, "fail in the schools and you would be suspended and sent back to those same streets, where they would take your body. And I began to see these two arms in relation—those who failed in the schools justified their destruction in the streets" (33). Coates's citation best illustrates his belief that the different forms of racial violence work as assemblages—they all inform, and are informed by, each other.

The idea that spaces often take on the qualities given to the individuals who inhabit them and that they also assign certain qualities to them can been interpreted as an expression of structural racial violence (Vidler 1992, 1993; Blee 2005; Bonilla-Silva

134

2006; Ahmed 2006; Lipsitz 2007, 2011; Alexandre 2012; González-Tennant 2018). In fact, Anthony Vidler called "spatial violence" the "techniques of spatial occupation, of territorial mapping, of invasion and surveillance [that] are seen as instruments of social and individual control" (1993, n.p.). Vidler's concept adds new dimensions to studies on architectural epistemologies, and it has proved particularly useful in understanding the far-reaching consequences that colonialism and imperialism still have in the present. In 2015, Andrew Herscher and Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi brought the concept under the spotlight again in *Spatial Violence*, where they defined it "not as something inflicted on architecture from the outside, but something that architecture inflicts even as it follows its own practices and protocols" (180). In their work, they also insist upon the need to regard space as "a social, political, and economic figure, rather than [as] an empty field upon which social, political, and economic forces act themselves out" (257).

From Coates's conceptualization of the different forms that racial violence takes we can reach two conclusions. First and foremost, that no sequential order exists among different expressions of racial violence, as they are all "deeply interrelated and reinforce one another" (González-Tennant 2018, 4). Along these lines, Coates explains that interpersonal assaults might be indeed triggered by racial hostility, but that hostility is also reinforced by them. Put into context, Coates believes that racial disenfranchisement—structural violence—has legitimized current racial practices, such as traffic stops and even beatings and murders—interpersonal violence—, and that, in turn, the latter also feed from, and enhance, the stereotyping of racialized individuals—symbolic violence. Second, that the imbalance between the number of cases of interpersonal, structural, and symbolic violences in the memoir is a telling sign of Coates's approach to antagonists in the text. In fact, many commentators have criticized him for the lack of explicit agents of the violent acts that he describes, noting that if he

believes it is white individuals who have to redress the harm inflicted against Black people, but he does not speak directly to them at any moment, no solutions will ever be reached (Alexander 2015; Kennedy 2015; Chatterton Williams 2015; Abramowitsch 2017; Smith 2017). Exploring the intersection between bodies, readership, and empathy, the following section sheds light on the part played both by whiteness and by the perpetrators of racial atrocities in *Between the World and Me*.

1.3.2 Aspiring to a White Fantasy: On Dreamers and the Racial Imaginary

Black bodies are central in Coates's memoir. White bodies, however, hover on its margins—in the words of Simon Abramowitsch, "despite numerous accounts of psychic and physical violence in *Between the World*, there are hardly any individual villains who symbolize the white supremacy that Coates describes" (2017, 462). In fact, the instances in which individuated white bodies are to be blamed for Black suffering can be counted on the fingers of one hand. The first one corresponds to Coates's being pulled over by two policemen who belong to a department known for having targeted and gunned down Black drivers with no penal consequences. Coates describes the situation as follows:

> Shortly before you were born, I was pulled over by the PG County police, the same police that all the D.C. poets had warned me of. They approached on both sides of the car, shining their flashing lights through the windows. They took my identification and returned to the squad car. I sat there in terror. By then I had added to the warnings of my teachers what I'd learned about PG County through reporting and reading the papers. […] These shooters were investigated, exonerated, and promptly returned to the streets, where, so emboldened, they shot again. […] These officers had my body, could do with that body whatever they pleased, and should I live to explain what they had done with it, this complaint would mean nothing. The officer returned. He handed back my license. He gave no explanation for the stop. (75-76)

The most important point in the description is, however, the one that is lacking: a direct allusion to the fact that the officers are white. Even though Coates tends to assert the racial identity of assailants in similar instances in the rest of the memoir, he does not do it in the aforementioned excerpt, and so it is assumed, not explained nor directly specified, that the agents who stop Coates, and owing to whom he fears he might be killed, are not

Black. It is thanks to Coates's used strategies in other parts in the text that readers are provided with enough tools to make such an assumption. In fact, in the rest of similar instances described, whether the individuals he interacts with are white or Black is among the first characteristics that are pointed out. Note, for instance, that Coates clearly states that the officer who kills Prince Jones is Black (83), or that the woman who shoves his son, as well as the man who backs her up, are both white (93-96).[85]

The second situation in which whiteness is individualized in the memoir is the confrontation between Coates, a woman, and a man in a theater. The situation is described rather hastily—Coates is with his five-year-old son in an escalator when "a white woman pushed [him]" (93) and "a white man standing nearby spoke up in her defense" (94):

> The theater was crowded, and when we came out we rode a set of escalators down to the ground floor. As we came off, you were moving at the dawdling speed of a small child. A white woman pushed you and said, "come on!" Many things now happened at once. […] I turned and spoke to this woman, and my words were hot with all of the moment and all of my history. She shrunk back, shocked. A white man standing nearby spoke up in her defense. […] The man came closer. He grew louder, I pushed him away. He said, "I could have you arrested!" I did not care. I told him this, and the desire to do much more was hot in my throat. This desire was only controllable because I remembered someone standing off to the side there, bearing witness to more fury than he had ever seen from me—you. (Coates 2015a, 94)

---

[85] It is worth noting that he does not even mention the names of the murderers of Michael Brown or 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 the bigots who killed them. From a logical point of view, then, Coates's decision about displacing whiteness from the center of the story is conscious and coherent. For more information on how "proper names indicate a certain ontological dignity" see Warren (2017, 392).

This moment, which is one of the most revisited by critics, has split the public opinion. Whilst many interpret it as a turning point in the story and as critical in Coates's realizing the vulnerability of his son (Abramowitsch 2017), for others it is given too much attention for what it is—an argument between two persons (Smith 2017; Hill 2017). Jason D. Hill suggests that "perhaps your [Coates's] interpretation of the incident is correct, […] or maybe she was just a rude New Yorker impatient to get on her way," and he concludes, "do not elevate the importance of that white woman in the eyes of your son," because "she's probably just some ordinary woman" (2017, n.p.). Thomas Chatterton Williams pushes the argument further than most other critics and points out that "it doesn't occur to him that she may not be an avatar of white supremacy but just a nasty person who would have been as likely to push a blonde child or a Chinese one" (2015, n.p.).

In the memoir, Coates also highlights the constructed character of whiteness, which he describes as "people who have been brought up hopelessly, tragically, deceitfully, to believe that they are white" (7) or, put another way, as a "modern invention" (7) that depends upon the exploitation of Black bodies. Whiteness thrives on an idea that Coates baptizes as "the Dream," a concept that lies at the heart of his work, and that he describes as "perfect houses with nice lawns. It is Memorial Day cookouts, block associations, and driveways. The Dream is treehouses and Cub Scouts. The Dream smells like peppermint but tastes like strawberry shortcake" (11). The Dream is a "sleeping pill" of sorts that helps those who have access to it to overlook and downplay the seriousness of racism and that makes them focus instead on "grow[ing] rich and liv[ing] in one of those disconnected houses out in the country, in one of those small communities, one of those cul-de-sacs with its gently curving ways where they staged teen movies and children built treehouses" (116). As suggested before, Coates's approach

to the Dream, which showcases and mocks the aspirations of middle-class citizens, also illustrates that its success hinges on the exploitation of Black communities. He writes, "the process of washing the disparate tribes white, the elevation of the belief in being white, was not achieved through the wine tastings and ice cream socials, but rather through the pillaging of life, liberty, labor, and land" (8); and, just a few pages later, he contends that the Dream rests on the backs of Black people and on the "bedding made from [their] bodies" (11). The Dream itself epitomizes a form of structural violence in which the success of some is contingent on the skewed life opportunities, uneven distribution of land and wealth, impoverishment, abusive surveillance, and death, of many others.[86]

Although, from Coates's description, one would infer that the Dream is only within the reach of whites, the truth is that certain Black people have access to it, too. In "Addressing Blackness, Dreaming Whiteness" (2017), Abramowitsch spots an incongruity in Coates's description of the Dream which, again, ensues from his problematic portrayal of Blackness as materiality and of whiteness as abstraction— whereas at some points, Abramowitsch contends, "the making of whiteness is distinct from Dream and its cultural markers; rather, whiteness is made through and dependent upon exploitation"; still, in many others, "exploitation and the Dream are indivisible […] and mutually constitutive" (469). Coates soon suggests, though, through the description of Prince Jones, that the Dream is also within the reach of Black individuals:

> He was handsome. He was tall and brown, built thin and powerful like a wide
>
> receiver. He was the son of a prominent doctor. He was born-again, a state I

---

[86] The close relationship between race and class is also explored in Joseph Winters's *Hope Draped in Black* (2016) where he claims, through a close reading of Hegel and Marx, that "the wealth that European capitalists have been able to accumulate […] is made possible through the exploitation of enslavement of Africans, Asians, and Native Americans as well as the usurpation of indigenous lands" (11). This logic also applies to Coates's interpretation of the Dream.

did not share but respected. He was kind. Generosity radiated off of him, and he seemed to have a facility with everyone and everything. This can never be true, but there are people who pull the illusion off without effort, and Prince was one of them. (75)

Prince Jones, along these lines, *was* also the Dream.[87]

After providing a graphic and factual account of the circumstances surrounding Jones's death, Coates adds a last detail—the officer who targeted him, forced him to pull over, and gunned him down, as well as "the politicians who empowered this officer to kill," were all Black (83). The explanation that follows from this realization is worthy of analysis; and it is striking, too, if we bear in mind his angry reaction when his son was pushed in the theater. Whereas in the other analyzed instances he berates the attackers, who are often cast as racist bigots, now Coates does not blame the officer for having murdered his friend. "I knew that Prince was not killed by a single officer," he states, "so much as he was murdered by his country and all the fears that have marked it from birth" (78).[88] Even if the attacker is Black, whiteness is ultimately at fault. This is telling of his belief not only in the ubiquity of whiteness, but also in the notion that Black-on-Black criminality does not exist on its own, but it is instead a result of inter-racial politics.[89]

---

[87] In "Ta-Nehisi Coates Is the Neoliberal Face of the Black Freedom Struggle" (2017), Cornel West accused Coates of also inhabiting the Dream that he so fiercely criticizes in his memoir. For West, one of the major ways in which Coates's text fails to address a Black readership is because Coates is, in fact, in power; that he is a wealthy man who discusses issues that he does not experience anymore; and that he has "no intention of sharing power or giving up privilege" (n.p.).

[88] Kyle Smith, in his article "Black Critics Shake Their Heads at Ta-Nehisi Coates" (2017), points out that Coates's proneness to exculpate Blacks and blame whites instead, even for Black-on-Black crimes, is recurrent in his text. To illustrate his point, he offers a reinterpretation of Coates's argument at the theater house: "If I were black and had been shoved by a black man [instead of the white woman in the story], this would also have been the fault of white people, who have been deliberately keeping black people poor" (2017).

[89] This idea will be further explored in section 2.2.

Many critics have found Coates's abstraction of whiteness problematic for many reasons (Alexander 2015; Abramowitsch 2017; Smith 2017). In devoting full attention to Black bodies exclusively, Coates erases even the sources from which racial discrimination stems, all of which end up subsumed within the concept of whiteness and the pervasiveness of the Dream. In blaming an ethereal mass, and not individuals, for the unremitting violence the Black community has always been exposed to, Coates is indeed "disavowing easy, direct identification and empathy from white and non-Black readers" (Abramowitsch 2017, 462), and, in so doing, he is also offering "his white readers the individual escape that he intends for his son" (462).

1.3.2.1 "Does a White Person Have Standing to Respond?":[90] Target Readership and Moral Commitment

In his work "How Fresh and New is the Case Coates Makes?" (2016), Thabiti Lewis admitted that "I am not sure what Coates wants of his readers, nor exactly whom, beyond the fact of his son, the intended audience is" (194). Lewis is not the only one who is uncertain about who Ta-Nehisi Coates is writing to other than to his son, Samori, who for many critics is the first and main recipient of the letter. For Abramowitsch, it is not Coates's son, but rather a second and unidentified readership that Coates speaks to, which takes control in the memoir, so much so that his son ends up being pushed to the margins and only appealed to at a few certain moments. "For a book framed as a letter from a father to his son, […] this distance is notable," Abramowitsch contends. "The space between address and intimacy foreshadows the general displacement of Coates's son in the text as a whole" (2017, 458). The question that remains, for many, is who Coates's

---

[90] From Brooks 2015.

target reader really is (Alexander 2015; Cottom 2015; Khon 2015; León 2015; Lewis 2016; Abramowitsch 2017).

Several critics have taken Coates's emphasis on the Black body as proof enough for maintaining that he is indeed speaking almost exclusively to a Black readership (Alexander 2015; Khon 2015; Schuessler 2015). Among many others, Michelle Alexander has been vocal in defending that Coates escapes from "the overall distortion that seems to happen […] when black people attempt to speak about race to white people," and that is, precisely, "one of the great virtues of [the book]" (2015, n.p.). Alexander's belief that *Between the World and Me* is not a text addressed to whites has also been endorsed by Sally Khon who, in her article "Why White Women Should Read Ta-Nehisi Coates's Book" (2015), draws into Coates's statements about the memoir's launch party happening "in an African American space" (in Schuessler 2015) to contend that "this is a book by a Black author for Black audiences about reality, identity, and outrage." "Also true," she adds, "white people can and should read it" (2015). Although Abramowitsch has similarly claimed that "Coates insists on the primacy of the black reader" (459), his words also open up the possibility of considering that Coates may well be writing to non-Black readers, too—if he is *mainly* speaking to Blacks, then he is also implicitly speaking to somebody else.

Other critics have rejected the idea that Coates is writing exclusively for an all-Black readership. Tressie McMillan Cottom's "*Between the World and Me* Book Club: Two Texts Masquerading as One" (2015) defends that "when Coates discusses what race in America feels like, he is not talking to black readers. Neither does he seem to be talking to his black son. Instead, he is talking to his white readers" (2015, n.p.). In a different vein, Dana Williams believes that the text is addressed not to two, but to three different readerships; and she sorts them by relevance—the first one is undeniably Coates's son;

the second one is his white readers, who, following Cottom, for Williams are much more central than his Black readers, who are the third group of people Coates is writing to. Williams writes,

> even as the text is written as a letter to his son, the secondary audience is white people, consciously or not. […] Black people know the horrors being narrated. Therefore, as a public text the default reader beyond young Samori is white people, who aren't as privy to the well-known truths of the black experiences that constitute *Between the World and Me*. (2016, 182)

Certainly, the memoir has received great acclaim from white readers, a fact that has caught many scholars, and even Coates himself, off guard. One of the articles that draws incisively into such a "paradoxical" phenomenon is Felice León's short but paramount "Ta-Nehisi Coates on Why Whites Like His Writing" (2015). In it, León, who has played a crucial part in the dissemination of reflections on contemporary racial issues mainly through her collaborations with the Black newspaper *The Root*, tries to offer a rational explanation as to why Coates's memoir keeps attracting large numbers of white supporters though the book is not, theoretically, addressed to them. León attributes Coates's having white followers not so much to the topics he discusses in the text but to the phenomenal success that he had notched up as a journalist in the years prior to the publication of the memoir, when he started forging a multiethnic community of readers. She moves on to identify two other reasons that might help clarify the situation. On the one hand, she posits that "white people gravitate towards Coates because they tend to like one intellectual at a time, and that intellectual's narrative is that the plight of black people is caused by white negligence" (2015). Now, she believes, it happens to be Coates's turn to be on the public spotlight. On the other hand, she underscores that white readers may

also feel attracted to Coates's text out of guilt—and reading the memoir offers a golden opportunity for them to attain personal exoneration.

Although Coates has, for the most part, avoided taking sides in this controversy, his interview at The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (2015) is one of the few instances in which he has directly tackled it. The conversation, which is full of moments that are worthy of analysis, is clearly an attempt at resolving the conundrum of Coates's intended readership. Nikole Hannah-Jones, who conducted the interview, bluntly asked him, "why do you think that so many white people love what you write?", at which he replied, "I don't know why so many white people read what I write. […] I didn't set out to accumulate a mass of white fans" (qtd. in León 2015). As the conversation proceeded, Coates reiterated that when he was penning down the memoir, it was clear to him that, other than his son, he was also addressing other Black individuals. In fact, in other talks, Coates has pointed out that "I wanted to be very clear about who the book was written for, how it was written, what it came out of" (qtd. in Schuessler 2015), and that it most certainly had nothing to do with whiteness. One of the elements that, for Coates, both justifies and illustrates that his target readership is definitely not white is that he did not feel "much burdened by the need to explain to white people" what, in his view, characterized the works of "many of the people that I was reading in the '90s, when I was in college" (qtd. in León 2015). Nonetheless, Coates knows that although he was not speaking to whites, whites would indeed read his work anyways. In this regard, he has claimed that he "harbors no malice toward white people, and that he speaks to them from the heart" (qtd. in León 2015). It is probably this remark on his diegetic treatment of whiteness that is the second most contentious point of the interview. Right after the previous answer, Coates quickly adds that "I'm not mean, I don't call people names, I don't personalize stuff" (qtd. in León 2015).

Coates's words most certainly make it possible to consider his abstraction of whiteness a result not only of a will to draw special attention to Black bodies, but also to be respectful and honest towards his white readers. He concludes, "you'll have to ask some white people, but from my perspective I try to give them the respect that they deserve, as readers" (qtd. in León 2015). Coates's contention establishes connections between readership and the notion, addressed in the previous section, that the lack of corporality of whiteness in the text implies a lack of empathic identification from white readers that can be problematic (Alexander 2015; Abramowitsch 2017). Indeed, his so-called politeness towards whites has proved 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" (2017, 469). 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?

In the memoir, Coates also pinpoints the difficulties of forging empathic relations across racial lines, which is a third and final tangent that converges in his own conceptualization of racial violence. In her text *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), Saidiya Hartman delves precisely into the paradox of exhibiting Black suffering to white audiences—whilst it aims at bringing victims and readers closer, it might also lead to a "misidentification from those who feel/are different" (18). Following her reasoning, the viscerality with which Coates depicts racist violent acts exacerbates the distance between Black victims and white readers who, also in not being appealed to, remain witnesses, or voyeurs, of the events recounted. For many (Alexander 2015; Smith 2017; Abramowitsch

146

2017), the main complication arises when Coates intimates to his son that it is not racialized individuals who must overturn the current situation. Coates's messages are not problematic in themselves; on the contrary, many individuals believe that if whites did construct and maintain systems of oppression based on racial premises, they should also bear all the responsibilities for overthrowing them (Williams 2016). Nonetheless, it is crucial to keep in mind that, as I have already illustrated, white individuals are largely absent from the memoir; it is not only that there appear almost no white bodies in the text but also that it is not primarily addressed to white readers. All that remains is an inconsistency that Jason D. Hill (2017) and Kyle Smith (2017), among others, have pointed out (Alexander 2015; Chatterton Williams 2015; Lordi 2017a). Is Coates asking whites to pay for reparations without mentioning them in his text? If so, can whites really feel interpellated by his call?

This problem also takes on an intra-racial dimension, as it is not only whites but also certain groups of Black individuals who do not identify themselves with the victim that Coates presents—a cisgender, heterosexual, Black man. Indeed, Coates's masculinized portrayal of victims has been a focus of concern for many Black feminists, who have claimed that they do not feel represented by the stories that Coates relates in his work (Bennett 2015; Hilton 2015). This is reminiscent of the drawbacks that Alexander herself identified when exploring the feeling of collectiveness triggered by Rodney King's beating. Believing that race makes all racialized individuals equal in their subjection to discrimination obliterates individual differences, and that, as Alexander also notes, is another, less conspicuous, form of violence (1994, 81). In this regard, can Coates's memoir be considered an enactment of the violence it seeks to condemn? Or, to be more specific, can violence, and its ensuing suffering, ever be represented without perpetuating it?

2. The Violence of Representation

On May 25, 2020, in Minnesota, Minneapolis, George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man, was murdered. Floyd had allegedly paid with a counterfeit bill in a shop, and its manager had called the local authorities on him. Two officers turned up and, shortly after, a back-up squad car arrived at the scene, too. A few minutes later, a bystander recorded Floyd being pinned to the ground by an officer, Derek Chauvin, who kneeled on his neck for nearly nine minutes whilst Floyd kept begging for help and constantly repeating that he could not breath (Hill et al. 2020). The recording spread incredibly fast—it went viral and swamped all social networks in the hours following the incident (Tillet 2020). Within a matter of weeks, the murder had turned into one of the racial crimes most reported on of the last fifty years as it generated over two million news items in the U.S. alone (Heaney 2020). Far from only strengthening social movements against state-sanctioned racism,[91] Floyd's death, according to Elizabeth Alexander, also reignited the concerns over the enormous moral implications of oversharing footages like this that had been previously raised after the cases of Rodney King, Sandra Bland, Eric Garner, Alton Sterling, and Philando Castille.[92] In the op-ed "The Trayvon Generation" (2020), which Alexander published in *The New Yorker* in the aftermath of Floyd's murder, she paid special attention to

> the question of who's watching, what happens when black people watch? To
>
> inform is one thing, to bear witness is another thing. But to just roll the video

---

[91] In the aftermath of his murder, protests erupted in more than 550 cities in the U.S., and polls estimated that about 15 to 26 million protesters participated in them (Buchanan et al. 2020). Later on, demonstrations also spread to more than 100 cities worldwide (Rahim and Picheta 2020).

[92] All of them were videotaped either when being abused by the police—in the case of King in 1994 and Bland in 2015—or when being murdered—in the case of Garner in 2014, Sterling in 2016, and Castile also in 2016.

without a moment that says a life was taken here, a person was dehumanized here in the way that black people have been dehumanized throughout our history? Seeing is important, and helps you understand. But I think the repetition of that image without thought to who's watching it and how it affects them is something that we could work on a little bit. (in Tillet 2020, n.p.)

As Alexander states, showing images of racist atrocities can be a means to fuel activism, but it also influences how the suffering of racialized communities is conceptualized and thought upon in the social ethos. In fact, as I am going to study in this chapter, the systematic and often thoughtless circulation of clips like Floyd's also runs the risk of normalizing Black suffering and of creating a nihilistic mindset owing to the "endless grief" that Black communities are stricken with (in Tillett 2020, n.p.). A similar phenomenon occurs when these representations are textual. Alexander had briefly alluded to this in her already cited essay "Can You Be BLACK and Look at This?" (1994), where she resorted to Frederick Douglass's and Harriett Jacobs's narratives to explain that, crucial as they are to endow visibility to the horrors of enslavement, those stories also register as a traumatic memory in certain readers; a memory that is reactivated every time readers read, witness, or experience something similar. Anne Cheng, in her analysis of Richard Wright's treatment of melancholy (2001), similarly showcases the dual character of speaking about violence when she notes that "it can be damaging to say how damaging racism has been, [but] it is surely equally as harmful not to talk about this history of sorrow" (2001, 14). But what exactly does she mean when she claims that speaking about racism can be damaging, and for whom? What are, if any, the harms implicit in the constant reproduction of these images? Can representations of violence escape violence? Or, put another way, is there an ethical way to represent violence in which said violence is not reproduced? If, as I suggested in the previous chapter, Coates's work can be

considered an inventory of the myriad ways in which the racialized body has been, and still is, violated, would it be farfetched to claim that his works are also violent in their own way by the mere fact of narrating violence?

If the first chapter of this dissertation delved into the representation of violence, the second chapter, also structured in three different sections, seeks to address the second part of the chiasmus and focuses instead on the violence of representation, that is, on exploring whether the representation of racial violence is, in and of itself, a violent act that dehumanizes both victims and survivors and that contributes to the expansion of traumatic memories among different generations. The first section of the chapter throws into relief the stakes that representing racial atrocities have for racialized artists. I first contend that any attempt at thinking about the representation of racial violence asks for a major consideration of the visual. Along these lines, and following the theories on ethical witnessing and photography put forward by Susan Sontag (1977, 2003), Elizabeth Alexander (1994, 2020), Marianne Hirsch (1999, 2001, 2008), and Allissa V. Richardson (2017, 2020a, 2020b), I defend that images of racial atrocities and their circulation in public spheres may normalize suffering and inure viewers to the pain of others but that, if viewed critically, these images also usher in an unparalleled opportunity to attain historical repair. A similar phenomenon occurs with textual representations of racial violence, such as Coates's. Through the concept of "therapeutic reading," I will explain how Coates's memoirs partake in the discourses of the imbrication between representation and violence, and I will defend that Coates's representations are dangerous, but they also offer readers different coping strategies and different ways of thinking about, as well as confronting, racism.

This chapter's second and third sections, in turn, focus on exploring the main ways in which Coates's work has been deemed violent; that is, on the extent to which his

representations of inter-personal, structural, and symbolic forms of violence may reproduce other forms of violence (Smith 2015, 2017). The second section addresses Coates's pessimistic mindset, which is most obvious in *Between the World and Me* (2015a), but which can also be observed in Coates's previous memoir, *The Beautiful Struggle* (2008), as well as in several of the op-eds he published in *The Atlantic*, such as "Earning the Temporary Hatred of Our Children" (2010), "The Case for Reparations" (2014a), "Hope and the Artist" (2015b), and "Hope and the Historian" (2015c). In this way, Coates's hopelessness in his second memoir must not be understood as an isolated incident, but instead as something that pervades most of his works. Taking this into consideration, and in order to offer a thorough appraisal of Coates's viewpoint, my analysis has to go beyond his second memoir and also cover not only his first one, but also a number of the articles I mentioned previously.

Coates's hopelessness, which critics have also variously called despair (Kennedy 2015; Rogers 2015), cynicism (Chatterton Williams 2015), defeatism (Archie 2015), and even nihilism (Bodenner 2015; Lowry 2015), can be interpreted from the framework of Afropessimism, which defends that Blackness did not exist prior to enslavement, but that it emerged with it instead; and so Blackness has its origins in, and in this way cannot be separated from, violence (Sexton 2011, 2016; Wilderson 2011, 2016, 2020; Douglass and Wilderson 2013). Drawing from the ground-breaking studies conducted by Jared Sexton (2011, 2016) and Calvin Warren (2015, 2018), my project eschews a reading of Coates's hopelessness as disabling and insists upon the need of regarding it as enabling and necessary. Coates's disavowal of traditional hopeful narratives,[93] which may well have

---

[93] As I am going to explain in 2.2, traditional hopeful narratives refer to those coping strategies that are based on a blindly optimistic belief in hope, uplift, and progress, and that do not take into consideration the extent to which these concepts, for Black people, are "intertwined with and chastened by the shadow of suffering and tragedy" (Winters 2016, 63).

been influenced by his already discussed belief in a materialist approach to the body, yields to other coping strategies. Coates, in this way, defends that, for him, it is love, not hope, that is central not only to the racial plight, but also to the development of his own understanding of Black consciousness.

The third and final section addresses what Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse have described as "the violence of representation [as] the suppression of difference" (2014, 281)—the elision of the extent to which racial discrimination is inflected by gender and sexuality. My analysis of the gender dynamics at work in Coates's memoir begins by approaching Coates's portrayal of paternity and masculinities, two concepts that also form the bedrock of *The Beautiful Struggle*—a memoir that is, at its heart, an attempt by Coates to get closer to his father, to his memories, and to his legacy. As I am going to explain later, Coates's troubled relationship with his father—a very complex character who throws into relief the multifaceted nature not only of Black masculinities, but also of Black paternity—serves to shed light on a series of vexed issues that many Black families have had to deal with for centuries, such as absent fathers (Wideman 1994; Marriott 2000); whupping and other physical punishments (Bradshaw 1994; Herron 2017; Patton 2017a, 2017b); and how racism influences parent and child relationships (Wideman 1994).

This third section also analyzes the ways in which Black women have been erased not only from Ta-Nehisi Coates's works, but also from discourses on racism in general. In fact, the peripheral position that Black women occupy in Coates's memoir is symptomatic of a wider problem—although Black women are pulled-over, arrested, and killed, and although they are subject to gendered and sexuality-based forms of violence, their cases are very seldom talked about in public (Crenshaw 2015; Brown and Ray 2020). This section showcases the gravity of the situation through a four-part analysis of

Coates's problematic approach to gender issues. First, Coates rarely acknowledges that Black women can be targets of racial violence. He does mention Renisha McBride and Marlene Pinnock at the beginning of the book (2015a, 9),[94] and he does resort to the pronoun "her" and the noun "girl," but he does so very few times. Second, and tightly related to the previous point, Black women are described always and only in relation to the Black men around them, who seem to be the real victims of the problems Coates exposes in his work. Third, at certain points in the narration Black women are approached not as fully-fledged and complex human beings, but as objects of desire or, quoting Laura Mulvey, as "image[s]," whilst men are "the bearer[s] of the look" (1988, 19). Fourth, and last, the ways in which the violence meted out against Black women is sexually inflected are not carefully scrutinized and, in the words of Misa Dayson, although Coates brings up certain forms of sexual harassment, no critical reflections on the phenomenon are provided (in Bodenner 2015, n.p.). As Josie Duffy also suggests, "Coates' description of violence to the Black body does not do justice to the violence to which Black women are and have historically been subject" (2015, n.p.).

In all, chapter two reflects on the inextricable link between the two concepts that lie both on the surface and at the core of this dissertation, racial violence and its representation, through the analysis of two issues featuring in Ta-Nehisi Coates's works—his hopelessness, which has been considered constraining, paralyzing, and inimical to Black freedom, and his slant at masculinities and gender roles, which, as I am going to explain, may be claimed to both endorse and reproduce unequal power relations between Black men and Black women. Coates's works and his thorough, visceral, and no less problematic approach to violence and suffering, offer new insights into the

---

[94] For more information on both McBride and Pinnock see section 2.3.2.

impossibility of speaking about a valid or correct representation of violence, and showcase that all representations are biased and fragmentary. Taking this into consideration, we could claim that writing about violence implies creating, in the words of Saidiya Hartman, "a second order of violence" (2008, 5); the violence of omission, of re-victimization and objectification, of legitimization and normalization. At this point, we must ask ourselves—is it worth replicating violence through its description, if it is with the intention of enhancing the visibility of certain forms of suffering; a visibility that may be crucial in preventing its perpetuation and helping the victims heal? In the words of Hartman herself, "do the possibilities outweigh the dangers of looking again?" (2008, 3-4).

2.1 Representing Violence, Inflicting Violence? Images, Words, and Ethical Strategies of Witnessing

> I did not want to look because then, I would have to *see*.
>
> Allissa V. Richardson, *Bearing Witness While Black* (2020)

> Looking is remembering, and remembering acknowledges and redeems past violence, prevents future violence, and inspires social change.
>
> Wendy Wolters, "*Without Sanctuary*: Bearing Witness, Bearing Whiteness" (2004)

> The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you.
>
> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987)

Graham Matthews and Sam Goodman's anthology *Violence and the Limits of Representation* (2013) offers fundamental insights into the interplay between violence and its representation and into how artistic and literary texts have negotiated this relationship. Their work is based on three premises that are also central to my analysis of Ta-Nehisi Coates's memoir—first, that the representation of violence is mediated by social, cultural, and political values in order to draw different emotional and ethical responses from readers; second, that the representational strategies that are employed to portray a violent act end up shaping our understanding not only of that act, but also of violence in general; and third, that it is really difficult to depict a violent act in all its nuances, since "representational strategies often fail to adequately convey the horrors of violent conflict" (1). Along the different chapters of the book, the contributors also address a major controversy that, for a long time, has occupied a central position in

156

scholarly debates on representation and on the ethical strategies of witnessing—that representing atrocity often means reproducing trauma.

In general terms, studies on the violence of representation can be grouped into two broad categories. As Bruce B. Lawrence and Aisha Karim maintain, although the complexities of representing violence have been a major object of study in the humanities in general, they have mostly been explored "through image and narration" (2007, 2). In the field of the visual, Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) features today among the most influential works about the risks of photographing scenes of suffering and about the ethical responses that being exposed to those photographs may elicit from beholders (Kleinman 2003). Sontag delves into the study of war photography to explain that far from arousing the indignation of viewers, witnessing the suffering of others often plays a crucial part in inuring them to the pain suffered by the people who appear in the pictures. Sontag's contention has been supported by many other scholars, including Barbie Zelizer, who argues that "photography may function most directly to achieve what it ought to have stifled—atrocity's normalization" (1998, 212). In all, both Sontag and Zelizer suggest that photographs bring up serious ethical questions for both photographers and viewers. As W. J. T. Mitchell has also claimed,

> The "taking" of human subjects by a photographer (or a writer) is a concrete social encounter, often between a damaged, victimized, and powerless individual and a relatively privileged observer, often acting as the "eye of power," the agent of some social, political, or journalistic institution. (Mitchell 1994, 288)

The research carried out by Marianne Hirsch on photography and the Holocaust (1999, 2001, 2008) has also been crucial to throw into relief the ways in which representations of atrocities can be forms of violence in and of themselves. In order to

reflect on the pictures of death camps victims, and in particular of children, she coined the concept of "total death," which she used to refer to how the bodies photographed underwent what Wendy Wolters[95] redefined, many years later, as "a triple death" (2004, 414)—the first or original killing, the violence meted out against the victim as he or she becomes the object of the gaze of first-hand witnesses when the atrocity is taking place, and the re-violation of the victim once he or she is photographed and becomes the object of the gaze of distant witnesses.[96]

Parallel to the growing scholarly interest in photography and in the ethical conundrums that both taking and viewing certain images present, studies that addressed the vexed relationship between racial violence and its literary representation also started proliferating at the end of the twentieth century. Following a very similar reasoning to Sontag's (1977, 2003), Mitchell's (1994), Zelizer's (1995, 1998), and Hirsch's (1999, 2001, 2008), these studies showcased that written accounts describing atrocities could also be double-edged swords. In 1989, Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse published *The Violence of Representation: Literature and the History of Violence*, where they delved into a series of historical and literary works in order to explain the imbrication between "forms of violence that are represented in writing and the violence committed through representation" (140). In a similar vein, Bruce B. Lawrence and Aisha Karim's *On Violence: A Reader* (2003) also centralized the question of whether one can "speak

---

[95] Wolters also uses Hirsch's concept of "total death" to interpret lynching photographs, and she observes that lynched bodies also underwent a "triple death" similar to the one experienced by Jews in death camps. When reflecting upon the photograph of the lynching of Laura Nelson, Wolters writes that Nelson "is killed by lynchers, she is the object of the violent gaze of the spectators on the bridge [from which her body was hanged], and she is subject to Allen's [the exhibition's curator, as I am going to explain later on] (and our) re-violation of her as fetishized, feminized object. […] The photograph of Laura Nelson's body is not just evidence of her lynching […], but of the theoretical gaze of the camera. It is not just evidence of the aggression of the camera, but the violence that lingers, that haunts, *that is remembered*, in every act of reexamination and relooking" (2004, 414-415; emphasis in the original).

[96] This is just a very limited account of the many works that address the relationship between violence and its visual representation. Another canonical study on the subject is, for instance, Barthes's *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980).

about violence without replicating and perpetuating it" (10). As much as these two works, as well as many other canonical ones in the tradition (Barthes 1980; Felman and Laub 1992; Hall 1997; Scarparo and McDonald 2006), provide important insights on the complex interrelationship between violence and its representation and offer nuanced explanations as to why this relationship should not be played down and inspected rapidly and uncritically, they do not necessarily address the extent to which such relationship may be inflected along racial lines, and so they do not focus on how the representation of racial violence works, to what effects racial violence is represented, and what the limitations and the dangers, but also the possibilities, of representing racial violence really are.

Black scholarship, however, has addressed these issues head on. The research carried out by scholars such as Deborah McDowell (1991), Jerry Bryant (1997), Saidiya Hartman (1997, 2008), Frank B. Wilderson (2010), Christina Sharpe (2010), and, most recently, Andrew Dix and Peter Templeton (2020), among many others (Spillers 1987, 2003; Alexander 1994, 2004, 2020; Copeland 2013; Lloyd 2018; Jackson 2020), has demonstrated that the stakes for Black people are much higher, and that representing scenes of suffering, both through image and word, in which victims are racialized not only contributes to the normalization of certain forms of violence and to the dehumanization of victims and the communities they belong to, but it also has traumatic effects on survivors, who may end up believing that "blackness is constituted by violence" (Douglass and Wilderson 2013, 122). Conversely, and while this may seem paradoxical to the thesis just presented, these scholars have also argued that these representations, however dangerous, also conceal an enormous healing and galvanizing potential. In this regard, Allissa V. Richardson writes that, painful as it is, bearing witness to racial atrocities is also "an unapologetic form of advocacy" (2017, 674). In the next pages I will

elaborate on this argumentation, suggesting that Ta-Nehisi Coates's works may well be read as a case in point to support this theory.

Memoirs, and in particular a subcategory of the memoir that Lisa Guerrero has termed "the contemporary critical black memoir" (2017),[97] offer important insights into how the complex relationship between racial violence and its representation operates. In "New Native Sons: Ta-Nehisi Coates, Kiese Laymon, and the Phenomenology of Blackness in the Post-Racial Age" (2017), Guerrero argues that, in view of the increasing visibility given to racist crimes and of the organization and mobilization of social and political action, many Black writers are turning to the memoir as a means to confirm their own inclusion in the plight of an oppressed social group, to offer their own view of the problem, and to keep up the fight "for black freedom" (Guerrero 2017, 415). It is my contention that, in being rooted in the real world and recounting experiences lived first-hand by the author, the accounts offered in those memoirs, closer to the ones offered in photographs and footages than to the ones provided in fiction books, pose several ethical conundrums.

To account for all the valences that are at work in the chiasmus that structures my dissertation, the representation of violence and the violence of representation, this section is organized into three different parts. The first part delves into the centrality that images have had in documenting racial violence in the U.S. history. As Shawn Michelle Smith claims, visual culture is fundamental to understand race, and "photographic archives [are] racialized sites invested in laying claim to contested cultural meanings" (2004, 33). Through the employment of concepts such as "black witnessing" (Richardson 2020a, 2020b), my analysis approaches the paradoxical quality of lynching photographs and

---

[97] The characteristics of "contemporary critical black memoirs" are listed in section 1.2.2 in the previous chapter.

current police brutality videos to explain that depending not only on how these images are reproduced, but also on how they are viewed, they can in fact have "the power to affect social and political change" (Richardson 2020b, 76). To this end, I rely on secondary sources that are at various geographical and historical distances from each other—including Susan Sontag, who worked extensively on photography and war journalism (1977, 2003); Marianne Hirsch, whose research focuses on the Holocaust (1999, 2001, 2008); Cassandra Jackson, who has delved into the ethical implications of lynching photographs and their public exhibition at historical societies and museums (2011, 2020); and Allissa V. Richardson, who has recently explored the centrality that police brutality videos have had in the consolidation of antiracist movements (2017, 2020a, 2020b). In this way, even though the historical contexts in which these studies were carried out, and that these studies address, differ greatly from one another, they are useful not only to shed light on the question that structures my thesis, but also to clarify how Ta-Nehisi Coates's work reinvigorates debates on the ethics of the representation of racial atrocities.

Part two, in its turn, pays particular attention to how the literary works that have inspired Ta-Nehisi Coates's own texts have negotiated the relationship between racial violence and its representation.[98] After an introduction that identifies both the strengths and the blind spots of the existing theoretical corpus that I selected to discuss the questions that my thesis approaches, I turn to Toni Morrison's fiction to explain that certain violent accounts can, in fact, turn into narratives that allow for personal healing and historical repair. Drawing on Aida Levy-Hussen's concept of "therapeutic reading"

---

[98] As I explained in the first chapter, Ta-Nehisi Coates himself has addressed his inclusion within this literary canon in many of his works, in particular in *Between the World and Me*, where he reflects upon the important bearing that James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and even Malcolm X had on him and his literary production.

(2016), I also defend that, as I have already suggested, writers can sometimes employ their works to trigger an ethical reaction from readers, who can eventually establish a critical relationship with the facts narrated. The third and final part of this section, in turn, examines how Ta-Nehisi Coates's work fits in the aforementioned discussion; how, in being considered a "Black Lives Matter elegy" (Lennon 2020), his memoir allows for Levy-Hussen's "therapeutic reading"; and whether or not his work re-inflicts, to a larger or lesser extent, the violence it denounces. In all, this section strives to discuss the hypothesis that structures my thesis, that is, that any representation of violence becomes a form of violence on its own, and to prove that, regardless of the risks that such representations entail, representations of racial atrocities have in fact "raged to create the most powerful black movement of this century" (Richardson 2020b, n.p.).

2.1.1 Black Witnessing, Lynching Photographs, and the Visual Representation of Racial Violence

It is virtually impossible to think about representation and racial violence without taking into consideration the fundamental role that the visual has played in it. As Allissa V. Richardson has stated, "every major era of domestic terror against African Americans—slavery, lynching and police brutality—has an accompanying iconic photograph" (2020a). The most iconic photograph taken in the period of enslavement is definitely "Whipped Peter," which displayed a man showing his scarred back;[99] photographs proliferated during the lynching period, and among them it is probably the one showing Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith hanging from a tree that has acquired more centrality as years have gone by.[100] In 1941, the widely circulated pictures of Emmett Till, one of them a close-up of his face, bloated beyond recognition after he was lynched, and the other one displaying an open casket with Till's body in it and his mother weeping by his side, served as a public indictment of lynching.[101] As I anticipated in the previous chapter, the technological advances that took place during the second half of the twentieth century ushered in new ways of documenting racist abuses and mobilizing social action. Photographs were soon accompanied by videos of all sorts—from patrol car's dashcam clips, to clips recorded with smartphones by witnesses who were present when the incident was taking place.

---

[99] For more information see Blakemore (2021).

[100] For more information see Richman and Diaz-Cortes (2010).

[101] While Emmett Till's pictures were circulated with the intention to exert an effect similar to the one produced by "Whipped Peter" and other pictures taken during enslavement, which were used to keep visual proof of the atrocities committed against enslaved people and to galvanize social action, lynching photographs sought to dehumanize the victims and were often sold as postcards among perpetrators. The fact that it was a Black photographer who took Till's pictures, as well as the fact that it was Till's mother who decided to distribute the pictures because she "wanted the world to see what they did to my baby" (in Richardson 2020b, 32), also gave new contours to the use of photography as a source of social change. For more information about the impact that Till's photographs had, see Richardson (2020a, 2020b), and Holland-Batt (2018).

Richardson, in *Bearing Witness While Black: African Americans, Smartphones, and the New Protest #Journalism* (2020b), coined the term "black witnessing" to refer to the ways in which people of color have been bearing witness to the suffering of their own people for almost two centuries now, and also to highlight the moral and emotional implications of such witnessing:

> Bearing witness while black—or black witnessing, as I call it interchangeably—needs its own scholarly categorization. It involves more than simply observing tragic images on TV or online. It is more complicated than picking up a smartphone and pressing "record" at the right time. When most African Americans view fatal police shooting videos, something stirs at a cellular level. They want to *do* something with what they just saw. And they want to link it to similar narratives they may have seen before. In this manner, black witnessing is reflexive, yet reflective. It despairs, but it is enraged, too. (2020b, 5; emphasis in the original)

Black witnessing, Richardson contends later, comprises both close or frontline witnesses, that is, the people who are present when the atrocity occurs, as well as distant witnesses, who are exposed to the events after they happened.[102]

Even if Richardson's constant allusions to TV and cell phones may suggest that it is only through videos captured by smartphones and shared over social networks that Black witnessing comes into being, the truth is that it finds its origins in, and it is also

---

[102] In her reading of John Durham Peters's "Witnessing" (2009), Richardson claims that witnessing can be defined in "four different ways: being there, live transmission, historicity, and recording. Being there is the strongest kind of witnessing, since it means that one was a part of an assembled audience. […] Live transmission is the next strongest form of witnessing, since it describes an audience that was part of a simultaneous broadcast. Historicity refers to witnesses who visit a museum or a shrine, where events happened long ago in the same spot, but not necessarily during the lifetime of the witness. Lastly, a recording, presented as a book, CD or video, is the weakest form of witnessing" (6). Through this chapter, and through a critical study of Ta-Nehisi Coates's works, it is my intention to contest Peter's notion that the visual and textual representations are the *weakest* forms of witnessing.

enabled by, photographs and literature, too. Black witnessing, in fact, has its roots in slave narratives, which Richardson describes as the first means through which African Americans could "document abuse at the hands of their owners, kidnappers, rapists, or wholesalers" (23). Photographs, newspapers, and magazines were later used to bear witness to lynching and to structural forms of racism, such as Jim Crow practices; talk radio burgeoned during the Civil Rights Movement; and TV and social networks are currently being used as the main means to testify to the many forms of oppression people of color are still subject to. Taking all of this into consideration, it is my contention that Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*, as well as other contemporary critical memoirs, are also forms of Richardson's "black witnessing." As I claimed in the previous chapter, *Between the World and Me* describes a series of injustices that, through the very act of writing and reading, both Coates and his readers can also bear witness to.[103]

The stakes of recording, broadcasting, circulating, and representing such violent scenes are high particularly for those who identify with the victims. According to a number of scholars, images that show people of color being abused may bring to the present historical injuries and may render suffering ubiquitous; they may end up legitimizing certain forms of violence; and they can also objectify the victims and, by extension, anyone who identifies with them (Marriott 2000; Hartman 2008; Sharpe 2009; Krippendorff 2012; Dix and Templeton 2020). In the following paragraphs it is my intention to consider the risks of representing violence and suffering. To do so, I will refer first to representations of lynching, and specifically to lynching photographs and postcards, and I will then study how these images can in fact help us reconsider the moral

---

[103] Whether or not he succeeds in doing so will be studied later in this chapter.

implications of contemporary visual and textual representations of racial violence in general, and Coates's in particular.[104]

In her work "Spectacle Lynching and Textual Responses" (2017), Wendy Harding writes that lynching imagery continues "to haunt the nation's collective memory" still today (3). Lynchings, which Harding herself also refers to as "rites of terror" (3), functioned as reminders of the existing racial prerogatives within a community. Spectacularity was a crucial aspect of lynching, in which "the aim [was] to make a spectacle out of the victim and to make that spectacle available for public consumption" (1)—lynchings were often announced in local newspapers in order to gather a community of spectators who wanted to bear witness to how an alleged wrongdoer was going to be punished. When the lynching finished, the body of the victim would be displayed in public as proof of racial divisions and power relations. Photographs would be taken, either during or after the act had finished, and afterwards distributed as postcards;[105] then, bodies would sometimes be mutilated and dismembered, and the severed body parts would be sold among the assistants as souvenirs (Sontag 2003; Young 2010; Harding 2017). The fact that these atrocities were in fact photographed and that the pictures taken were distributed is, for Harding, one of the reasons why lynching is still very much present in the nation's ethos. "Photographs extended the spectacle far beyond its immediate moment," she claims, "thereby enlarging the community of both participants and victims" (4).

---

[104] Wendy Harding claims that the title of Coates's memoir evokes lynching imagery and illustrates "that the violence of lynching actually produces racial difference" (2017, 10). As I explained at the beginning of this dissertation, Coates took the phrase from Richard Wright's homonymous poem, which precisely described a post-lynching scene. In Harding's view, both Coates and Wright took up the first line of W.E.B. Du Bois's canonical *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903): "Between me and the other world, there is ever an unasked question" (1).

[105] Although this practice was outlawed in 1908, lynchings kept happening and pictures kept being distributed anyway (Wood 2011).

Despite that private consumption of those images, most lynching photographs remained largely out of public view until the beginning of the twenty-first century, when some photograph exhibitions started being launched across the country. "Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America," a photograph exhibition sponsored by Emory University which opened in the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historical Site in Atlanta in 2002, figures today as one of the most prominent public exhibits on lynching photographs ever organized.[106] "Without Sanctuary" featured more than 98 lynching photographs, most of which had never been displayed in public. Although the curators' original intention was for the victims of lynching to be memorialized, many critics have claimed that, on the contrary, the display prompted the emotional distress of visitors and so it "reproduce[d], rather than interrupt[ed], the power relations of (black) lynching victim and (white) lynching spectator" (Wolters 2004, 402). Wendy Wolters (2004), for example, complained that, because of the biased information provided about the victims, the exhibition restaged what Saidiya Hartman had already called the original "scene of subjection" (1997).[107] Others, however, noted that "Without Sanctuary" was a space of

---

[106] The photographs that were included in the exhibition originally belonged to a collection by James Allen and John Littlefield, who had already decided to publish them in a homonymous book, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (1999). Before giving up all image copyrights to Emory and the Martin Luther King Jr. Center, Allen had already opened another minor exhibition at the Roth Horowitz Gallery in New York City in 2000, but it attracted a very small audience. After the Roth Horowitz Gallery exhibition, other museums also offered exhibits on lynching photographs, but none of it had the public impact that "Without Sanctuary" had. For more information see Wolters (2008) and Jackson (2020).

[107] In "Without Sanctuary: Bearing Witness, Bearing Whiteness" (2004), Wolters contends that one of the ways in which the exhibition failed to shift the power dynamics implicit in acts of lynching and to resist voyeurism was that Allen provided a lot of information about certain victims while he barely described many others. In her own words, "Allen rarely mentions race and gender in either the description or commentary portions of his notes. He does note gender when the photograph includes a woman, either as subject or spectator, but does not analyze the ways in which gender affected positions of lynching spectator or victim. Similarly, Allen rarely mentions the race of the onlookers, and is more likely to note the race of the lynching victim if he is white than if he is black. All of this serves to normalize the positions of white male spectator (both in the photographs and in the audience of the photographs now) and the black male lynched body" (411). She later concludes that, in the exhibition, visitors "were left with images of white lynchers that we can separate ourselves from, images of black victims that remain a spectacle, and a collective racial memory that plays like a soundtrack for our viewing position" (2004, 419). Interestingly, as I defend in section 2.3, the amount of information that Coates provides in his memoir about the victims he refers to is also slanted, and so Wolters's point can be extended to interpret a phenomenon that is at work in Coates's works, too.

reflection and recovery that allowed visitors and descendants of lynching victims to gather and mourn together (Harding 2017; Jackson 2020). In all, the mixed responses that the exhibit drew showcased precisely the paradox that also haunts Coates's memoir and that my dissertation centralizes—representations of racial violence "straddle the line between re-enactments of violence and powerful acts of resistance; between terror and testimony, the expansion of trauma and the creation of a community of witnesses" (Jackson 2020, 105).

The main criticism levelled against the exhibition revolved around the voyeurism that such display of lynching photographs encouraged, which has been a main concern of studies on photography since the second half of the twentieth century. Susan Sontag's research (1977, 2003) offered interesting insights into the extent to which observing pictures of human suffering can in fact inure viewers to violence rather than spur them into action. When reflecting upon the criticism that "Without Sanctuary" prompted, she contended that the exhibition "might dispute the need for this grisly photographic display, lest it cater to voyeuristic appetites and perpetuate images of black victimization" (2003, 82) to later claim that "all images that display the violation of an attractive body are, to a certain degree, pornographic. But images of the repulsive can also allure" (85).[108]

Sontag was not the only scholar who looked upon the galvanizing potential of photographs with suspicion. Sarah Holland-Batt, in "Ekphrasis, Photography, and Ethical Strategies of Witness" (2018), similarly suggests that violent photographs in general, and lynching photographs in particular, "bombard the viewer with a spectacle that incites either excitement or detachment from the events it depicts" (2); and Cassandra Jackson

---

[108] In the excerpt where she discusses the exhibition, she also wonders: "What is the point of exhibiting these pictures? To awaken indignation? To make us feel 'bad'; that is, to appall and sadden? To help us mourn? Is looking at such pictures really necessary, given that these horrors lie in a past remote enough to be beyond punishment? Are we better for seeing these images? Do they actually teach us anything? Don't they rather confirm what we already know (or want to know)?" (82).

also notes, in *Violence, Visual Culture, and the Black Male Body* (2011), that "the repetition of the figure [of the wounded body] as the central defining force of black experience comes with a serious danger" as "embracing the figure also means furthering its codification" (6). Following such conception of photography and visual representations of racial violence, these critics also posit that our capacity to react to them seems to be reducing as the exorbitant number of bodies in distress broadcast in the news is growing on a daily basis (Hartman 1997; Sontag 2003; Butler 2004, 2012; Matthews and Goodman 2013). The photographs, videos, and written accounts on human suffering that we are exposed to every day contribute to the creation of a "theatre of overstimulation" (Bogue and Cornis-Pope 1996, 2)[109] in which many scholars, including Graham Matthews and Sam Goodman (2013), David Lloyd (2018), and Elizabeth Alexander (1994, 2020) identify the potential danger of our becoming indifferent to the suffering of others. In the words of Ronald Bogue and Marcel Cornis-Pope, one of the greatest risks of this "ubiquity of violence" is that it "may desensitize [us] and alter our tolerance threshold" (1996, 2). In a similar way, owing to the constant and often thoughtless portrayal of Black people being abused, Rev. Jesse Jackson notes, "an amazing tolerance for black pain, […] [a] great tolerance for black suffering and black marginalization" has emerged (in Sharpe 2012, 2).[110]

---

[109] At this point it is worth noting the contributions made by Steven Pinker, who maintains that such overrepresentation is only a strategy for people to remain alert, but that in fact there is not as much violence as media outlets portray. In *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (2011), Pinker controversially suggests that conflicts are diminishing and that "the realization that violence is in decline could potentially lead to a false sense of security and operate as an ideological legitimization for the life-preserving functions of the state" (Matthews and Goodman 2013, 4).

[110] At work here is Karen Haltunnen's "the pornography of pain" (1995), a phenomenon which alludes to "a heightened awareness of the close relationship between the revulsion and the excitement aroused by pain" (318). "The literary scenario of suffering," Haltunnen states, "which made ethics a matter of viewing the pain of another, from the outset lent itself to an aggressive kind of voyeurism in which the spectator identified not just with the suffering of the virtuous victim but with the cruelty of her or his tormentor" (308-309). Describing such scenes may lead not only to the readers' fascination with pain, but also to the lessening of their sensibility toward that pain. The result is, as Bogue and Cornish-Pope (1996), Matthews and Goodman (2013), or David Lloyd (2018) also claim, that the constant viewing of scenes of suffering

169

Far from only inuring viewers to pain and contributing to the normalization of many forms of suffering, such distribution of images also perpetuates certain stereotypes about the victims and about the racial groups to which they belong. This is, precisely, the main argument offered in Lawrence Grandpre and Dayvon Love's *The Black Book. Reflections from the Baltimore Grassroots* (2014), which explores how the iteration of the suffering that Black communities have been through has played a crucial part in framing Black people as automatons incapacitated by violence and has stigmatized Blackness as pathological:

> The spectacularization of Blackness […] foregrounds the identity of Blackness in our narratives of suffering and oppression. What this means is that the notion of authentic Blackness is framed as being those who are closest in proximity to suffering. […] This gets so ingrained in how we understand what it means to the Black that we cannot see Blackness as something that has positive characteristics. […] This creates a standard for Blackness that frames out images of strength in Blackness. (168, 169)[111]

Lynching photographs proliferated in the twentieth century, and the twenty-first century is also haunted by images of suffering—now, however, pictures have been replaced with videos, and bodies lynched by white supremacists are now bodies

---

plays a crucial role in fostering the witnesses' insensibility. This, in turn, leads to a glaring contradiction that cannot be easily solved—violent moments must be described in all their horror for readers to be mindful of their moral commitment to others, but detailed portrayals of the kind also entail the risk that readers may end up tolerating, and even becoming mesmerized by, suffering.

[111] Their concern that specific events are often used to compress larger experiences and to flatten out distinct and heterogeneous identities relates to Kobena Mercer's heralded concept of the Black "burden of representation" (1990), which he coined to denounce that Black art in general, and Black literature in particular, are expected to stand for a totalizing Black experience. Even though, for the sake of clarity and space, I am not going to devote more time here to this issue, it is worth noting that Imani Perry also tackles it in "The Year of the Black Memoir" (2016), where she writes that "the varieties of our racial experience are one thing, and the sense we make of them is yet another narrowing distinction. Yet the sense one individual Black writer makes of his or her life, from the perch of our wounds, our aspirations, our bourgeois frames of reference, are often read as saying much more than they actually can about the broader experiences and thoughts of Black people. That is dangerous" (n.p.).

brutalized mainly by police officers. One of the first videos of the sort ever shown in public is the eight-minute clip of Rodney King being beaten by a group of four policemen in Los Angeles in 1991, which has often been used to reflect upon the challenges, dangers, and possibilities of broadcasting racial atrocities (Alexander 1994; Richardson 2020a, 2020b). After this video, many others followed—Eric Garner was videotaped being choked by an officer in 2014; Sandra Bland being threatened and abused during a traffic stop in 2015; both Alton Sterling and Philando Castile being shot in 2016; and George Floyd repeatedly crying for help under the knee of a policeman in 2020.[112] Just as lynching photographs did, these videos "[bring] oneself up against the limits of what one is willing and capable of understanding" (Simon 2014, 12).

In the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, Elizabeth Alexander applied the label "the Trayvon Generation" to "the young people who grew up in the past twenty-five years" and for whom witnessing videos of racial atrocities has become commonplace (2020, n.p.). In the op-ed, Alexander claimed that kids today "watch these violations up close and on their cell phones, so many times over," and that they do so "in near-real time, […] crisscrossed and concentrated, […] on the school bus, […] [and even] under the covers at night" (2020, n.p.). Alexander was very critical of how casually these images are distributed, of how easy it is to access them, and of the messages that they convey to younger generations and which, in her view, play a crucial part in the development of a nihilistic mindset.[113] Sometimes looking is too painful to bear, Alexander concludes, but it actually serves a purpose if done critically—that is, if these images are not viewed casually and if viewers know about the stakes and ethical implications that the circulation

---

[112] This is just a very limited list of some of the most notorious cases, but there are many others. For a more comprehensive account of the attacks against people of color recorded and broadcasted, see Richardson 2020b.

[113] Racial nihilism will be explored in section 2.2.

of these images have for the person who has recorded them, for the victim, and for his or her community in general.[114] A similar view is defended by Richardson, who also believes that "bearing witness has the power to affect social and political change. […] Reporting could redress excessive force policies in police departments across the United States" (2020b, 75).

While acknowledging the risks of said representations, it is my contention, together with Alexander and Richardson, that, paraphrasing Saidiya Hartman (2008), the possibilities outweigh the dangers of looking. As Richardson points out in her work, only if these images stop being seen "so casually" and are viewed instead "with solemn reserve and careful circulation" will they stop inuring viewers and will, instead, turn themselves into powerful forms of resistance and remembrance instead (2020a). One way of doing so is by reappropriating those images and by giving them a new signification. This process can be best explained by drawing upon Allen and Littlefield's "Without Sanctuary," where lynching photographs were meant to be interpreted not as forms of revictimization but as catalysts for change. As Cassandra Jackson explains in "Lynching Photography and African American Melancholia" (2020), "this appropriation, then, is an act of resistance because it not only assumes the humanity of the victims and their families, but also attempts to redress a crime and redeem the victim from a historical situation in which families were not allowed to claim remains" (108).[115] "Participants in

---

[114] I use "critically" here in consonance with Houston Baker's "critical memory," a concept I already used in section 1.3 to read Coates's approach to the Mecca (Howard University) and which can be defined as "the very faculty of revolution. […] To be critical is never to be safely housed or allegorically free of the illness, transgression, and contamination of the past. Critical memory, one might say, is always uncanny; it is also always in crisis. Critical memory judges severely, censures righteously, renders hard ethical evaluations of the past that it never defines as well passed" (1994, 264).

[115] As I am going to explain in the following section, a similar phenomenon occurs in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), a novel where white characters are placed off-stage and where Morrison herself describes violent scenes in which violence is mostly inflicted by Black characters—Sethe, an enslaved woman who has managed to escape from a plantation, kills her daughter as a way of preventing her from being taken back. Thus, although Sethe's "action mimics the exactions of the whites," Morrison demonstrates that, in

the exhibition [in particular survivors of lynchings and descendants of victims]," she later claims, "transformed the meaning of lynching photographs, making this experience into something intended to sustain themselves, their memory, identity and purpose" (109). Along these lines, I believe that it is not only photographers, artists, or writers who bear the responsibility for countering the violence that is implicit in representations of violence, but also witnesses, who must develop an ethical engagement with that which is being represented.

The fact that Ta-Nehisi Coates's work narrates a reality endured by the author and his friends, relatives, and acquaintances, as well as the visceral quality of his descriptions, offer the possibility of reading it along the theories that I have been presenting so far. To begin with, the memoir is in itself a form of witnessing to the myriad forms of oppression Black people have been through. As I am going to explain in the following section, Coates's constant allusions to Eric Garner, Renisha McBride, John Crawford, Tamir Rice, Marlene Pinnock, Trayvon Martin, and Michael Brown inscribe his story on the real world and turn readers into distant witnesses to all the crimes that he narrates. The great amount of graphic detail he uses in his descriptions, in this way, allows the text to be considered a form of Richardson's "black witnessing"—just as the mentioned photographs and recordings, Coates's memoir bears witness to suffering and memorializes the thousands of men, women, and children who have been, and still are, victims of racism in the U.S. The graphic quality of his writing can be particularly noticed in his definition of racism, which he describes as a "visceral experience [that] dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth" (10), and also later, where he punctuates that

---

that particular case, "mutilating one's own body or that of a loved one is a way of reclaiming one's identity by extracting it from the mythic structure that upholds white supremacy" (Harding 2017, 12).

It had to be blood. It had to be nails driven through a tongue and ears pruned

away. It had to be the thrashing of a kitchen maid for the crime of churning

the butter at a leisurely clip. It could only be the employment of carriage

whips, tongs, iron pokers, handsaws, stones, paperweights or whatever might

be handy to break the black body. (104)

Just as the exhibition of lynching photographs and the careless and systematic broadcasting of videos of people of color being brutalized in the streets did, Coates's lurid descriptions of individuals in pain have also drawn mixed criticism. While some celebrate Coates's work as being beautiful and unapologetic, and claim that it might offer readers an awakening of sorts (Hilton 2015; Pollack 2015), others contend that it provides a tenuous grasp on reality—not only does it portray Black people as numb and incapacitated by violence (Archie 2015; Kennedy 2015; Lowry 2015), but it also offers a gendered approach to the phenomenon of racial brutality that does not take into consideration the extent to which it affects women and other minorities (Bennett 2015; Hilton 2015). In the following section, I focus on the literary tradition that Ta-Nehisi Coates's is part of, as well as on Coates's own memoir, to study the complex relationship between racial violence and its literary representations. The section examines the enabling possibilities of writing about victims insisting both upon their humanity and upon their lives, as well as the lives of their acquaintances, continuing beyond, and regardless of, pain. In all, it seeks to offer new insights into whether or not Ta-Nehisi Coates adheres to this mode of writing about racial violence.

2.1.2 Racial Violence and the Limits of Representation in the Black Literary Tradition

A great deal of "political controversy over the ethics or dangers of representing an oppressed group through the pained retelling of unresolved historical trauma" has also emerged in relation to literature (Levy-Hussen 2016, 35). Renowned scholars such as Elizabeth Alexander (1994, 2020), Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Valerie A. Smith (2014), and Aida Levy-Hussen (2016) have claimed that the very act of writing about racial atrocities is both liberatory and condemnatory, and that it comes at a cost, in particular for people of color. While literary accounts in which racial violence is addressed in any of its manifestations can be actually considered to call for historical repair, they may also, these authors claim, enact a form of symbolic violence against the victims and the communities they belong to, and in this way sustain what Belinda Smaill calls "a loop of painful recrimination" (2007, 151). In a way, the risks of writing about racial violence run parallel to the risks that I mentioned in the previous section in relation to exhibiting photographs and broadcasting clips—scholars contend that writing about racial violence may prolong the pain and the suffering of those who identify with the victims (Spillers 1987; Alexander 1994, 2004, 2020); that it may raise the threshold of tolerance towards, and incur in the normalization of, certain forms of violence (Jean-Charles 2009, 2014; Sharpe 2010, 2016; Kilpatrick 2015); and that it may erase the subjecthood of victims and stigmatize them, too (Hartman 1997, 2007; Jean-Charles 2009, 2014; Copeland 2013; Grandpre and Love 2014).

As I am going to expand on later, many critics have openly accused Coates of reproducing the violence that he denounces through his representations in both of his memoirs, but in particular in *Between the World and Me*, where Coates adopts a pessimistic mood that plunges his readers into exasperation and despair (Alexander 2015;

Archie 2015; Chatterton Williams 2015; Kennedy 2015; Rogers 2015). Coates's negativity indeed prevails in the text—he apologizes to his son for not being able to save him (107) and he later denies the possibility of a world without racism. Along these lines, critics have claimed that Coates's nihilism passes along a rather discouraging message to Black people, who are reminded of the many atrocities both they and their ancestors have been subject to for generations and who are simultaneously disempowered and portrayed as objects without any will or capacity to act. In the memoir, racism is somewhat mystified—it precedes and outlives Coates and his son; it just exists, ubiquitously. The fact that Coates believes racism to be not only omnipresent but also unending, for critics, significantly contributes to the normalization of the suffering of Black people, since they are portrayed as "permanent victims" (Chatterton Williams 2015, n.p.). Also, as I explain in the final section of this chapter, Coates's sharp focus on how racism impinges on the male body pushes women to the margins of his narration, which does not seem to account for the ways in which racial violence is inflected along gender and sexual lines.[116]

The question that must be addressed now is whether, regardless of perpetrating certain forms of violence, these representations can actually also become what Frank B. Wilderson has termed "narratives of repair" (2003, 16); that is, whether these "stories always have a regressive, adverse effect, reinscribing violence and aggression even as they narrate its occurrence," or whether the "representation of violence [can] be used to effectively counteract violence" (Lawrence and Karim 2007, 492). As I claimed in the previous section, it is my contention that the narration of violent scenes can, in many cases, help buttress antiracist social and political claims and, in this way, "contribute to the project of black liberation, rather than to impede or even reverse it" (Dix and Templeton 2020, 8). Thus, I believe that representing violence has a dual power—to

---

[116] These critiques, though, will be contested in the following sections of this chapter.

176

destroy and to heal. As I will defend, all representations of violence are violent in themselves, but they can also offer a possibility to galvanize social and political will, to account for the ruptures caused by historical traumas, to heal, and to help us rethink our ethical commitment to others.

Black scholarship has been pivotal in considering the healing potential of language regardless of the porous boundaries that exist between the representation of racial violence as a tool for social progress and as a form of social constraint. In the preface of *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), Toni Morrison builds upon "the complicated process of healing in language" (v):

> I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive "othering" of people and language which are by no means marginal or already and completely known and knowable in my work. […] The kind of work I have always wanted to do requires me to learn how to maneuver ways to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains. (x-xi)

In another essay, "The Site of Memory," Morrison turns precisely to slave autobiographies and memoirs in general, and to Frederick Douglass's in particular, to argue that texts that address the brutal practices meted out against Black people are "instructive, moral, and obviously representative" (90), but that many of them have offered toned-down and even gapped accounts so that readers do not have to confront extremely traumatic experiences. "In shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it," Morrison writes, "[those authors] were silent about many things, and they 'forgot' many other things" (91). She goes on to claim that

although these narratives "*did* change things" (87; emphasis in the original) and worked significantly towards making visible the ways in which racial violence operated and of the effects that these brutal practices had on the victims, they also offered a skewed view of reality. In view of this, she urged contemporary Black authors to "rip down that veil drawn over proceedings too terrible to relate" (91).

Aida Levy-Hussen contends, in *How to Read African American Literature* (2016), that it is not only writers who have the chance of turning narratives of pain and suffering into narratives of healing, but also readers, who must develop an ethical engagement with the texts that they read. To get her point across, Levy-Hussen delves both into Morrison's fiction and non-fiction writings to claim that they allow for a form of reading that Levy-Hussen herself has termed "therapeutic reading" (2016)—a practice that arises from the reading of stories that recover a past of pain and suffering in order to offer ways of healing, of reflecting upon, and of coping with the present. Therapeutic reading is, in this way, "a hermeneutic premised on the reader's capacity for psychic transformation, by way of powerful textual encounters with the traumatic past" (18); and it provides a new critical framework from which to think about the representation of racial violence as a practice that is both transformative and necessary for Black liberation. For Levy-Hussen, therapeutic reading is particularly facilitated by works that Arlene R. Keizer, in *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery* (2004), had called "contemporary narratives of slavery," which encompass three major categories—first, neo-slave narratives and narratives of historical fiction, such as Morrison's *Beloved* (1987); second, works that are "hybrid" and "in which scenes from the past are juxtaposed with scenes set in the present" (2), such as Carolivia Herron's *Thereafter Johnnie* (1991); and third, works, both fiction and non-fiction, that establish connections between the

present in the U.S. and its traumatic past. Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*, I contend, is to be added in the last category.

The possibility of including Coates's work in Keizer's taxonomy is clear, but the ways in which Coates's work enables a form of therapeutic reading are ambiguous, for he does not recall the past as a means to offer a new orientation towards the present but instead to highlight that racist inequalities still persist nowadays. On the one hand, as I already claimed in the previous chapter, Coates's memoir wonderfully straddles all lines between the past and the present by sustaining a feeling of loss that, in his view, was first experienced by his ancestors but that is still ubiquitous and unending. It is, precisely, the fact that Coates tinges his memoir with melancholy that enables readers to approach his work, as Levy-Hussen would claim, in a therapeutic way—he delves into how the traumatic past of his community is fundamental to understand their present. On the other, however, if therapeutic reading "speaks to the desire to make sense of an unredeemed past and its painful legacy and to locate agency and a capacity for social change in the act of reading" (Hussen 2016, 4), many critics would posit that *Between the World on Me* cannot be read along those lines (Archie 2015; Bodenner 2015; Chatterton Williams 2015; Kennedy 2015; Lowry 2015; Rogers 2015). Both the following subsection and the two final sections of the second chapter seek to address how Coates's memoir paradoxically allows for and prevents the reader from engaging in Levy-Hussen's "therapeutic reading," and they also navigate the pitfalls of ascertaining whether, through his approach to racial violence, Coates manages to craft a "narrative of repair" (Wilderson 2003, 16) or whether, on the contrary, his work is, as Saidiya Hartman put in her analysis of the difficulties of reconstructing the atrocities of enslavement, "its own gift and its own end" (2008, 3).

2.1.3 *Between the World and Me* and the Black Lives Matter Elegy: The Controversial Case of Ta-Nehisi Coates

Taking into consideration that Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* is undergirded by descriptions of violence and human suffering, one cannot but wonder where in the aforementioned discussion the memoir fits—does Coates's work "facilitate and allow for relational witnessing and accountability" (Clark 2016, 3); or, on the contrary, does it hamper the development of empathic identifications and all possibilities to attain any sort of political, social, and historical repair? Whether Coates's representation of racial atrocities can be considered a violent act in itself or not has also spurred great controversy (Alexander 2015; Brooks 2015; Cottom 2015a, 2015b; Klein 2016a; Terrefe 2016; Evans and Dula 2018). A general overview of the backlash that Coates received after the publication of the memoir reveals that commentators found two issues particularly contentious—Coates's pessimism and hopelessness, which have been claimed to be incapacitating for Black people (Alexander 2015; Smith 2017; Evans and Dula 2018); and the biased approach to gender that is at work in his memoirs (Terrefe 2016; Abramowitsch 2017); both of which, in the words of Christina Sharpe, make his work gear towards, but simultaneously mispronounce, "the sound" of Black suffering (Terrefe 2016, n.p.). As I am going to discuss in the following section, the hostility with which Coates's pessimism was met probably owes to the fact that his admiration for Obama had misled his readers into expecting "some kind of comforting resolution" that is totally absent in the memoir (Winters 2018, 2408). As a result, many readers directly suggested that his work can be regarded as violent, as it thrives on, and allegedly does not seek to put an end to, the suffering of Black people (Smith 2017).

In "What Exceeds the Hold?" (2016), Christina Sharpe maintains that Coates's work exacerbates racial tensions (in Terrefe 2016). Sharpe's argument orbits around two

main interrelated points—Coates's position of enunciation and his fixation with making

Black suffering understandable for non-Black readers. For her, Coates seems to be writing

for "white liberals and non-radical black folk" and his work signals "a particular liberal

and neo-liberal mode of address"[117] that prevents him from delving deeper into the issues

that he discusses (in Terrefe 2016, n.p.). Through a comparison between Coates's

rhetoric, Barack Obama's speech at the Hyde Park Academy,[118] and the motif in Kendrick

Lamar's song "Alright" (2015),[119] which Sharpe herself qualifies as misleading, she

contends that *Between the World and Me*'s aim is no more and no less than to "quell one's

own anxiety [and] the anxiety of others" (Terrefe 2016, n.p.). Moreover, if interpreted in

parallel with several of his essays published in *The Atlantic*, such as "Acting French"

(2014b) or "Race, Culture, and Poverty: The Path Forward" (2014c), Coates's work not

only is "a space of white entry into the black body" (Sharpe 2009, 12), but it also betrays

a will to escape Blackness itself. Sharpe describes this idea as follows:

> I think about those moments in various Coates's essays in *The Atlantic*
>
> when he writes about learning French as if somehow learning French
>
> would get him outside of something. […] As if somehow this language

---

[117] Cornel West also subscribes to Sharpe's argument in "Ta-Nehisi Coates Is the Neoliberal Face of the Black Freedom Struggle" (2017), which West published in the aftermath of the publication of Coates's *We Were Eight Years in Power* (2017). In the article, West suggests that Coates's liberal identification with race fetishizes white supremacy and disconnects it from class and empire.

[118] In the aftermath of the murder of 15-year-old Hadiya Pendleton in Kenwood, Chicago, former U.S. president Barack Obama delivered a speech in which he expressed serious concern about the alarming rates at which Black boys and girls were being killed and about the need to enact stringent gun laws. Although Obama urged Black people not to give up hope, he adopted a precautious tone when noting that "it can feel like for a lot of young people the future only extends to the next street corner" (in Ziezulewicz et al. 2013), as if suggesting, Sharpe claims, that "we might not be able to save every child" (in Terrefe 2016, n.p.). For Sharpe, his refrain is problematic particularly if compared to the speech he delivered in Newtown, Connecticut, after the massacre at the Sandy Hook Elementary School, where he noted that "we must do everything we can to save every child" (in Terrefe 2016, n.p.).

[119] Sharpe and Terrefe interpret Lamar's song, which has become the chant of the Black Lives Matter movement, as being potentially misleading. Noting that, as the song goes, "we gon' be alright," is to deny that a form of vulnerability is inherent in Blackness or, paraphrasing Jared Sexton, that Blackness is lived in social death. In their own words, "to understand the reality of black suffering would be to acknowledge that no, everything's *not* going to be alright. That is our ontology, our political ontology. And until there's a revolutionary shift, or destruction of what we know, it's not going to be alright" (2016, n.p.).

that is not English will get him outside of a particular kind of black suffering, out of black unhumaning. And I think that those moments in essays [in English] that he would punctuate with, 'On y va', as a sort of punctuation of desire, a desire to be read as fully human. (in Terrefe 2016, n.p.)

In a nod to Sharpe's hypothesis, Selamawit Terrefe adds that "I read this desire for mastering another tongue as an extension of this compulsory desire for whiteness, or anything but antiblackness specifically" (2016, n.p.). The question that remains, and that will be addressed shortly is whether, because of his being an author and a public personality, Coates is expected to *do* something with his writing other than offering his own perception of the world (Goldberg 2018).

As I have already stated, Sharpe and Terrefe are not the only ones who have criticized Coates for his representation of Blackness. Randall Kennedy describes *Between the World and Me* as "a caricature of black reality" and believes that Coates's point of view on racial problems is so myopic that it "negates the will of black folks" (2015); Thomas Chatterton Williams, when discussing Coates's not fully addressing intra-racial crimes, posits that "in [his] view, no one has agency" (2015); and Jason D. Hill maintains that the book conveys a distorted view of reality as Coates is "trading on black suffering to create a perpetual caste of racial innocents" (2017). In general, Coates has tended to avoid entering controversial debates of the sort. In spite of that, and certainly in very few occasions, he has publicly reaffirmed his ideas (Klein 2016a, 2020; Goldberg 2018). In "I'm a Big Believer in Chaos" (2016a), he confessed to Ezra Klein that the variety of opinions expressed about his work have ended up displacing his original focus of attention, which was on the intricacies of being a father and on the threats and imminent dangers that racialized communities are exposed to. On the contrary, Coates notes, the

first thing that comes to mind when somebody thinks about *Between the World and Me* is neither the abuses committed against Black people nor all the deaths that motivated the writing of the book, but rather the controversy that it spurred and the blind spots of Coates's rhetoric. Coates admits that he first noticed this when, in the interviews he gave short after the memoir was published, attention was drawn away from the crimes he described in his work and devoted to what he considered banalities, such as the fact that he was being way too fatalistic or that the memoir had attracted the interest of white readers in excess. He states,

> First of all, I didn't expect the book to be so successful. I just didn't. Writers have to prepare themselves to not be read by a bunch of people. I had all my defenses up for that. I had no defenses for the idea that the biggest question about *Between the World and Me* would not be about my friend Prince Jones […], not about the communication between myself and my son; not about growing up in West Baltimore; but, "why are so many white people reading this book?" (Coates in Klein 2016a, n.p.)

Coates's frustration is understandable. According to a list provided by Howard Rambsy II in his blog "Cultural Front" (2015), out of the one hundred and eighty[120] articles published within the seven months after the publication of *Between the World and Me*, nearly half of them focused on exploring "whether [Coates] is too negative, or warrantlessly fatalist" (Cunningham 2015, n.p.), that is, on showcasing his "toxic world-view" (Lowry 2015, n.p.), or on looking for a plausible explanation as to "why white people dig [his work]" (León 2015, n.p.). For his part, Coates has also been vocal in denouncing that focusing on what he views as petty issues certainly impedes any progress

---

[120] In the same blog, Rambsy acknowledges that the list is incomplete because it does not include interviews and other materials, but that it helps readers get a sense of the magnitude of the reception of Coates's work.

at honoring the victims that appear on the memoir. "The black people in Harlem, in West Baltimore, in the South Side of Chicago, and in Washington, DC, who inspired that book, who empowered that book—they are erased," Coates notes. "They have no meaning for the interpretation of the book, and what matters is white people reading the book" (Coates in Klein 2016a, n.p.).

Among all the persons that, in Coates's words, inspired and empowered the memoir, his friend Prince Jones is of major significance (Coates 2015e; Klein 2016a). The excerpt where Jones is first introduced begins with a description of "a boy about whom I think every day and about whom I expect to think every day for the rest of my life" but soon edges toward a criticism of how "when the young are killed, they are haloed by all that was possible, all that was plundered" (74). From that moment onwards, Coates invokes Jones's murder every so often as a means to condemn a system that devalues Black lives and that sanctions the targeting and murder of Black individuals. In this way, death is not only addressed in relation to his friend; but it very much permeates the whole memoir, which in turn becomes an ultimate act of remembrance of all the Black people who have fallen victims to racism for centuries.

In "Formal Violence: The Black Lives Matter Movement and Contemporary Elegy" (2020), Gavan Lennon refers to the elegiac tradition that strives to mourn and honor the Black lives lost to racism as the "Black Lives Matter elegy" (193), which "is defined by a shared, intersectional poetics of public grief, in which poets develop the traditional elegiac balm of personal consolation to incorporate an aesthetic that mobilizes public grief to political action" (193).[121] Black Lives Matter elegies are characterized,

---

[121] Although Lennon states that elegists are poets, I would like to read his words taking into consideration John B. Vickery's contention that authors of works aimed at honoring the dead that do not follow poetic patterns can also be considered elegists (2009).

among other things, for mourning the violent murders of Black youth committed mostly by policemen and vigilantes, and so they are often brimful of well-known names such as "Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Martin and numerous others" (193). Another important distinguishing feature of the tradition is that while in conventional elegies a relation of intimacy is established almost always only between the elegist and the victim, in Black Lives Matter elegies that relation widens and incorporates the concepts of community and ethics. Lennon concludes, "in publicly mourning the twenty-first century victims of the white supremacist violence, Black Lives Matter elegists expand the ethical paradigm of the traditional elegy by positioning it in relation to national and global, community-level movements of remembrance and justice" (194).

Perhaps most evident of all, *Between the World and Me* can be branded as an elegy because it gravitates around the killing of Prince Carmen Jones—it is a lament for Coates's friend; a direct confrontation with the difficulties to mourn a violent and untimely death; and a wake-up call to shed light on the murderous racist practices that Black individuals confront on a daily basis. As early as 2015, in his acceptance speech for the National Book Award for Non-Fiction, Coates himself confessed that the writing of the book had indeed been motivated by the murder of his friend (2015e) and, in a later interview conducted by Ezra Klein, he clarified that "my friend got killed, and I was deeply angry about that for a long time," so he decided to write *Between the World and Me*, among other things, as a belated reaction to the incident (2016a). Nonetheless, a closer look at the text reveals that Jones's is not the only loss that Coates bemoans. In fact, he also mentions a number of well-known Black individuals murdered in the last few decades, namely Eric Garner (9, 96), Renisha McBride (9), John Crawford (9), Tamir Rice (9), Marlene Pinnock (9), Michael Brown (11, 21), Trayon Martin (25, 96), and Sean

Bell (96).[122] But he does not know the names of all the victims he commemorates—an overwhelming majority of them are, as Toni Morrison writes in *Beloved* (1987), the "disremembered and unaccounted for" (323),[123] that is, the "bodies [lost] to the advancing army of enslavement" (Coates 2015a, 102); to the absolute power of "privateers, gangsters, gunmen, plunderers operating under the color of law" (53); to "one racist act," which in the end is "all it takes" (145). In this way, Coates expresses deep sorrow not only for Jones, but also for all the others who had perished before him—and it is for this reason that his work undoubtedly qualifies for its inclusion in the "Black Lives Matter elegy" tradition (Lennon 2020) since Coates, paraphrasing José Esteban Muñoz, takes the dead along with him throughout the story (1999, 74).[124]

---

[122] Eric Garner was choked to death for allegedly selling unregistered cigarettes in Staten Island, New York, on July 17, 2014. In the video retrieved from the incident, Garner was recorded repeating "I can't breathe" for no less than eleven times before he passed out. He died several hours later in a hospital. His case bears many resemblances with George Floyd's, who was murdered in similar circumstances in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, and whose death sparked mass protests internationally. As I have already mentioned in this dissertation, Renisha McBride was killed on November 2, 2013, in Dearborn Heights, Michigan, after knocking at a neighbor's house while seeking aid. John Crawford III was gunned down by a policeman in Beavercreek, Ohio, on August 5, 2014. Crawford was in a store, picked up a gun that was for sale, and continued shopping. A woman nearby called 911, and two officers arrived at the store minutes later. Crawford was shot several times, and died later that day in the hospital. The security footage showed that Crawford had been buying peacefully and that he never posed a threat to anybody. Tamir Rice was fatally shot at the age of 12 in Cleveland, Ohio, on November 22, 2014, when he was playing with a toy gun in a park. Two officers, Timothy Loehmann and Frank Garmback, responding to a call that had informed them of a boy with a pistol that "was probably fake" (in Ferrise 2019, n.p.), arrived at the park and immediately shot Rice twice. He died the following day. Marlene Pinnock was straddled and repeatedly pummeled on the head by a police officer after he had had her pull over in Los Angeles, California. She survived the attack, but the brutality with which she was assaulted sparked off mass demonstrations all along the country. Although it still remains unclear why she was stopped, she has firmly maintained her innocence to this day. Sean Bell was shot the morning before his wedding, on November 25, 2006, in the borough of Queens, New York, following an altercation with several undercover officers in his bachelor party at a strip club. Witnesses have maintained that officers never identified as such (Jaccarino, Gendar and Siemaszko 2006, n.p.), and that Bell and his friends, fearing for their lives, tried to get away from them with a car. For a full appraisal of Michael Brown's and Trayvon Martin's murders, see section 1.1 of this dissertation.

[123] In *Beloved*, Morrison, when describing the character of Beloved, writes, "Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name? Although she has claim, she is not claimed" (323). Morrison is in this way recalling the thousands of enslaved people who were tortured and thrown overboard, or murdered in plantations, whose names will be forever unknown and whose bodies will never be retrieved. With my use of the quote, I similarly want to reflect on the lives lost to enslavement, and also on the lives lost to lynching and other forms of violence.

[124] In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance Politics* (1999), Esteban Muñoz describes mourning as "a mechanism that helps us (re)construct identity and *take our dead with us* to the various battles we must wage in their names—in our names" (74; my emphasis).

The fact that Coates refuses to offer any sort of comfort to his readers has also been regarded as a distinguishing characteristic of modern elegists (Spargo 2004; Vickery 2009; Fuss 2016), who, as Diana Fuss suggests, tend "not to achieve but to resist consolation, not to override but sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss" (2016, 138). In a similar vein, Clifton Spargo contends that elegies are "anticonsolatory forms of literary grief" (2004, 13), and John Vickery claims that "mourning and regret for past actions and events now come to be coupled with anxiety and foreboding concerning the future" (2009, 5). All the above-listed characteristics point towards a similar notion—that certain deaths are just in excess; that they cannot be assimilated; that they cannot be fully mourned; and so elegists cannot offer any form of consolation to readers because, plainly speaking, there is no consolation left to offer.[125] In this regard, Roger Luckhurst, in his analysis of enslavement and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), states that "the work of mourning, for genocide, cannot be allowed to end" (1996, 244). For all these scholars, the process of mourning cannot be accomplished either when the death is particularly violent, or when it is untimely (Spargo 2004) and, not surprisingly, both requirements are in fact met by all the losses that Coates laments, something that makes him expect "no end to mourning" (Spargo 2004, 13). Put another way, Coates's writing does not "forget the forgotten" and, precisely for this reason, it illustrates "a process of mourning to be repeated over and over" (Luckhurst 1996, 258).

The process of mourning never coming to an end has been termed "melancholia," a concept that Fuss describes precisely as "endless and irresolvable mourning" (2013, 138).[126] "Melancholia," Fuss adds, "has become the new consolation, relieving elegists

---

[125] This is, as I shall explain later in section 2.2, the case of Ta-Nehisi Coates.

[126] In Éva Tettenborn's words, the difference between both concepts lies in that "mourning has been classified as the desirable and normal response to loss because it has a finite duration. By contrast, melancholia has been seen as the opposite of mourning, and it has been deemed undesirable, pathological, and mentally or emotionally disabling because of its potentially infinite duration" (2006, 104).

of the burden of finding and providing emotional compensation, either for themselves or for the audience" (2013, 144). Both can be seen as different reactions to the loss of an object,[127] and so the differences that exist between them are evident. In his canonical essay "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), Sigmund Freud reads mourning as a temporary process; melancholia, however, is a pathological condition that is also the product of loss but that, in opposition to mourning, cannot be overcome. In his own words, melancholia can be described as a "profoundly painful dejection, abrogation of interest in the outside world, loss of capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings" that can even lead to suicide (153). Freud's point can be best understood if approached through the concept of cathexis, which he also introduced in the essay and which can be described as the projection of our emotions onto an object. In mourning, when the object passes away, a process of recathexis begins— that is, the subject accepts the passing, or maybe in some contexts the disappearance, of the loved object and eventually allows him or herself to establish emotional ties with a new one. On the contrary, recathexis never occurs in melancholic processes, as "the existence of the lost object is continued in the mind" (154).

Reactions to Freud's conceptualization of melancholy have been varied, and many scholars have dissented from his reading of it as a paralysis of the self (Hartman 1997; Holloway 2002; Spargo 2004; Tettenborn 2006). Among them, it is crucial to foreground the significant contributions made by Éva Tettenborn, who has extensively tackled the representation of melancholia in Black literature and who has emphasized the urgency to redefine Freud's concept, which she does not interpret as disabling but as enabling,

---

[127] Freud uses the word "object" to refer to anything, from a person, commodity, ideal, or even land, that somebody is attached to. His use of the word "object" applied to a "person," however, has been criticized by some scholars. See, for instance, Wurmser (2015).

political, and "constitutive of the self" (2006, 112). "Melancholic minds," Tettenborn

suggests, "[need to be regarded] as figures who are not to be pathologized but who must

be read as subjects engaged in acts of political resistance to dominant versions of memory

and historiography" (102). She terms this new approach to melancholia "black

melancholia" (103, 107),[128] and I will study it further in the following section in relation

to Coates's pessimistic worldview. Cassandra Jackson, in "Lynching Photography and

African American Melancholia" (2020), agrees with Tettenborn and claims that the lack

of consolation in elegies must not be mistaken for passivity.

For Tettenborn, melancholic processes are but "a form of political resistance […]

and productive action" (106, 109) insofar as they aim for the restoration of the humanity

of Black people, which has been denied for centuries—Black individuals have not been

considered human; not been considered subjects; and, consequently, have not been

"allowed to mourn and […] expected never to be melancholic" (118), as both processes

require a subject experiencing the loss of an object. That Black writers are so involved in

visibilizing and "carv[ing] out a public space for black grief" (Rutter et al. 2020, 865) is

a way to provide proof of the subjectivity of Black people. Memoirs such as Coates's,

which address the "endless black grief" that shapes a reality endured by many people of

color, must be considered ways of remembering the victims; of acknowledging the

humanity of survivors; of writing ethically and respectfully about death; and, most

importantly, of galvanizing political action; and so they can be claimed to portray

"resistant subjects created out of losses" (Tettenborn 2006, 107).[129]

---

[128] For more information on how melancholia affects Black people as a community, see Eng and Han (2003).

[129] She also insists that she is not "creating a celebratory discourse of melancholia," but instead "acknowledg[ing] its transgressive, powerful, and political potential" (118).

In the following sections it is my intention to shed light on the way Coates tackles the question that constitutes the basis of this dissertation—whether writing about (racial) violence necessarily reproduces a form of violence—and on whether Coates's representation contributes to the creation of the resistant subjects that Tettenborn defends (2006). To this end, I am going first to delve into the critics' conflicting opinions on the memoir, as they have identified several points of contention in Coates's representation of racial discrimination. Among all the modalities of violence that can be mapped out in *Between the World and Me*, most of which have already been addressed in the present section, I am going to direct attention to studying, in particular, the violence of omission, as it is the one that stands out the most in the memoir (Scarry 1985; Sontag 2003; Wilderson 2010; Matthews and Goodman 2013; Jean-Charles 2014; Bennett 2015; Hilton 2015; Plath 2020). My analysis will be divided into two different parts. The first one is going to focus on Coates's leaving on the margins of his account an essential facet of racial violence—intra-racial violence. To do so, I am going to follow the substantial contribution to the field made by Vincent Lloyd in "Black Futures and Black Fathers" (2018), where he establishes a clear nexus between Coates's hopelessness and his approach to masculinities, his views on paternity, and his opinions about intra-racial violence. In this vein, my study will start off with an introduction of Black pessimism and how it relates to Coates's upbringing. The second section, on the other hand, will focus on another omission that critics have found especially troubling—the invisibility of Black women in *Between the World and Me*.

2.2 Between Hopelessness and Despair: Afropessimism and Black Nihilism in Ta-Nehisi Coates's Works

> The end of our suffering signals the end of the human, the end of the world.
>
> Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (2020)

> Hope is a luxury afforded to those who are given the space to dream far beyond the limitations of their conditions.
>
> Darnell L. Moore, "On Mourning and Manhood" (2020)

> "How do I live free in this black body?" Coates asks on behalf of himself and his son. Reading his testimony, the answer is as simple as it is depressing: you don't.
>
> Tobias Skiveren, "On Good Listening, Postcritique, and Ta-Nehisi Coates' Affective Testimony" (2019)

Most of the criticism that Ta-Nehisi Coates received in the aftermath of the publication of *Between the World and Me* orbits around the pessimistic mood that permeates the memoir. Indeed, several times in the text Coates tempers his son's expectations about an end to racial conflicts, intimating that instead of any rapid resolution to racial problems, it is "the struggle [all that] I have for you, because it is the only portion of this world under your control" (107). For many critics, Coates's son being told that he holds power over struggling is not as hopeful as it may appear at first sight, and they have insisted that Coates's point verges on a contradiction—Coates encourages his son to fight, but he is also certain of the futility of fighting, as it is ultimately white people who have to withdraw their privileges for the common benefit of all communities (Alexander 2015; Archie 2015; Kennedy 2015; Smith 2015, 2017). Along these lines, Coates's work has been interpreted as a clear manifestation of cynicism and defeatism (Archie 2015), and critics claim that Coates's representation of racism not only denies the possibility of a

reality exempt from racism, but it also dismisses the possibility of Black agency (Chatterton Williams 2015). Coates's negativity is not only manifest in *Between the World and Me*, but also in several of the op-eds he had published earlier on in *The Atlantic*, in particular "The Case for Reparations" (2014a) and "The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration" (2015d), both of which have also been targets of criticism. In fact, in the view of Thabiti Anyabwile, most of Coates's works carry their "own heavy coat of despair" because "it's not that Coates simply leaves off hope; he in some respects *refuses* it" (2015, n.p.; emphasis in the original). For Anyabwile, that Coates rejects hope is problematic insofar as he may be actively refusing something that has been a fundamental constituent of racial progress. In this vein, Anyabwile subscribes to a tradition that includes the political thinking of James Baldwin (1971) and most recently Junot Díaz (2017) that highlights the centrality of hope in the fight for racial equality and in the development of Black culture:

> Hope was beneath the respectable Sunday-best attire worn to civil-rights marches. Hope was undergirding calls for respectable self-control among sit-in demonstrators while being inhumanely sprayed with condiments at lunch counters. Hope was resting in the weary hearts of respectable marchers and demonstrators packed in jail cells following protests. In the fight against the new slavery of mass incarceration, communities need the kind of hope whose back licked up flesh-splitting whips and dared dream of freedom anyway; the kind of hope that defied two centuries of educational oppression and disenfranchisement to elect black politicians in Reconstruction and establish institutions of higher learning; the kind of hope that managed to hold heads up high even when Jim Crow posted signs of white supremacy at every water fountain and public entrance; the kind of hope that marched all over U.S.

cities for equal rights, full enfranchisement and integration; and the kind of hope that gave rise to blues, jazz, protest songs, and gospel. (Anyabwile 2015, n.p.)

In other words, "the four-letter word [hope] helped African Americans surpass challenges in the past, and it should still be present in the face of today's struggles" (2015, n.p.).

Other critics, however, do not interpret Coates's negativity as disabling but rather as enabling, and insist upon the need to regard it as being inherently good (Orbell 2015; Gottschalk 2015; Brown 2018; Evans and Dula 2018; Winters 2018). In his text "Between the Tragic and the Unhopeless" (2018), Joseph Winters makes it plain that, in Coates's memoir, "a different kind of hope is made possible through melancholy, struggle, and anguished love" (2286).[130] A similar point is raised by Jonathan Orbell, who notes that he believes that "Coates's hopelessness may function, somewhat paradoxically, as a source of tangible change in public policy" and so "it may well be necessary for progress to be made" (2015, n.p.).[131] Coates, at a particular point in the memoir, also lends weight to the argument that being hopeful or not has never improved anything for Black people. "These are the preferences of the universe itself," he writes, "verbs over nouns, actions over states, struggle over hope" (2015a, 71). In this way, far from plunging into total despair and from exhorting his readers to be hopeless, Coates is instead offering other alternatives to resist and confront racism, even if he defends that putting an end to it is, as I mentioned earlier, ultimately up to whites.

Another controversial point in regard to Coates's negativity is whether, in being fatalistic, Coates is providing a dystopian view of the world or, on the contrary, he is just

---

[130] How these can offer "a different kind of hope" will be explored throughout this section.

[131] This idea is also mentioned in Austin Channing Brown's review of the memoir, where he points out that "the death of hope gives way to a sadness that heals, to anger that inspires, to a wisdom that empowers me the next time I get to work, pick up my pen, join a march, tell my story" (2018, n.p.).

being realistic. Whilst for commentators such as Andre Archie (2015), Thomas Chatterton Williams (2015), or Kyle Smith (2015, 2017) it is clearly the former, for others, such as Jared Sexton (2016), it is the latter—the memoir portrays a reality in which Black people are bound to suffer from a form of violence that is very much constitutive of Blackness; a violence that precedes and outlives them; a violence that cannot be escaped. The acknowledgement that Blackness is "a condition—or relation—of ontological death" (Wilderson 2010, 58) is precisely the hallmark of Afropessimism, a critical framework[132] that, paraphrasing Sexton, interprets Blackness as an imposed incapacity (2016, n.p.). As defined by Patrice Douglass, Selamawit Terrefe, and Frank Wilderson in *Oxford Bibliographies* (2018),

> Afropessimism is a lens of interpretation that accounts for civil society's dependence on antiblack violence—a regime of violence that positions black people as internal enemies of civil society. […] The claim that humanity is made legible through the irreconcilable distinction between humans and blackness is one of the first principles of Afropessimism, and it is supported by the argument that blackness is a paradigmatic position, rather than an ensemble of cultural, social, and sexual orientations. For Afropessimists, the black is positioned, a priori, as slave. (n.p.)

Taking everything that has been said so far into consideration, it would not be farfetched to cast *Between the World and Me* as a clear expression of Afropessimism. For Coates, racism is so deeply rooted in society that it cannot be dug out. This logic makes

---

[132] In relation to whether Afropessimism can be referred to as a school of thought or not it is important to bring up Jared Sexton's "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afropessimism and Black Optimism" (2011), where he dubs the movement a "motley crew" (25). He uses this term again in his article "Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word" (2016) after quoting Frank Wilderson's statement that Afropessimists "do not form anything as ostentatious as a school of thought" (2010, 79). Instead, Wilderson suggests that they "are theorists of black positionality" who share similar ideas "regardless of cultural and national discrepancies" (2010, 79).

his hopelessness easier to understand—what consolation is he to offer to his readers, if he foresees none?

Vincent Lloyd, in his essay "Black Futures and Black Fathers," sees a causal connection between Coates's narration of his upbringing and his negativity. According to Lloyd, and as I hinted at in the previous chapter when discussing the central part that phenomenology plays in Coates's work, Coates is a materialist—he believes in the body and he "reject[s] religious belief" (Eagleton 2017, 8). In other words, Coates rejects the narratives often attached to "the spiritual concept of hope" (Warren 2017a, 218), and he seeks to find answers to his questions in the material world—a world marred by injustices, discrimination, and violence. Thus, Coates's childhood in a gang-riddled neighborhood, in conjunction with his being involved in a series of violent incidents in high school, where he even shoves a teacher (2008, 140), are two factors that contribute to his developing a pessimistic worldview. In his memoirs, Coates reiterates that, as a kid, he was "unfit for the schools, and in good measure wanting to be unfit for them, and lacking the savvy I needed to master the streets, I felt there could be no escape for me or, honestly, anyone else" (2015a, 27).

As central as gang violence and other intra-racial conflicts appear to be in Coates's upbringing, they are only partially addressed in *Between the World and Me*. In fact, it is a matter raised only a few times and never explored thoroughly—only when Coates remembers a Black boy being threatened by another one with a gun when Coates was still a kid; when he acknowledges that the undercover policeman who killed his friend was, in fact, Black; and when he occasionally mentions that Black-on-Black conflicts do not exist on their own, but are a direct result of anti-Black racism. Nonetheless, inasmuch as intra-racial violence is only sketched in *Between the World and Me*, it is the heart of *The Beautiful Struggle*, where readers learn, in the words of Vincent Lloyd, that "in his youth,

the streets of Coates's Baltimore neighborhood were chaotic; the only way to manage the violence was to form neighborhood gangs and to understand the gang codes that were enforced with violence" (2017, 739). For Lloyd, as I will discuss later, it is precisely the rampant lawlessness of Coates's upbringing that makes him start thinking that "there is no reason to believe that racial justice is on the horizon" (739) and so "the only place [for Coates] to turn for comfort and security is the father [in *The Beautiful Struggle*] and the son [in *Between the World and Me*]" (739). Through the employment of concepts such as pessimism (Wilderson and Hartman 2003; Sexton 2008, 2011, 2016; Wilderson 2010, 2011, 2016) and hopelessness (Cottom 2015b; Winters 2018), as well as racial nihilism (Baldwin 1991; West 1993; Hayes 2001; Brogdon 2013; Chandler 2013; Warren 2015), this section seeks to address two main ways in which Coates's work has been deemed problematic—first, Coates's negativity and conceptualization of Black bodies as objects deprived of agency; and second, Coates's controversial approach to intra-racial violence.

2.2.1 In the Name of Love: Afropessimism, Hopelessness, and Black Melancholia in *Between the World and Me*

In his essay "Addressing Blackness, Dreaming Whiteness," Simon Abramowitsch states that Coates's "journey to define blackness leads to the conclusion that there is no black future without an antiblack future," and that "this ongoing linking of black futures and antiblackness is the source of emptiness and despair that the readers sense" (2017, 468). Indeed, Coates's cynical rhetoric, together with his proclivity to tell his son that there is nothing Black individuals can do to bring racist conflicts to an end, are certainly the two primary reasons why Coates has often been rebuked, as they lead readers to wonder whether or not "freedom or equality will ever be a reality for black people in America" (Alexander 2015, n.p.) and have also been considered an attack against Black agency (Chatterton Williams 2015, n.p.). Although Coates's pessimism is evinced throughout the entirety of the text, as in his allusion to Black individuals as "the disembodied: a people who can control nothing, who can protect nothing, who are made to fear" (82), it is most evident in the lessons he seeks to teach directly to his son, to whom he intimates that "the terrible truth is that we cannot will ourselves an escape of our own" (146) and that "I do not believe that we can stop them, Samori, because they must ultimately stop themselves" (151). In this section, I seek to problematize the critics' general agreement that Coates's messages are a sign of defeatism, weariness, and fatigue by interpreting Coates's hopelessness as a reaction against discourses of hope and progress that both rest on, and reproduce, Black suffering (Warren 2015, 2018).

Coates's belief that Blackness and violence are inextricably bound opens up the possibility of considering him an adherent of a critical framework that focuses on approaching Blackness as a form of suffering—Afropessimism. At the risk of oversimplifying, Afropessimists posit that Black lives are still subject to the principles of

enslavement, that is, that not only are Black individuals today haunted by a ubiquitous threat of violence, but they are also very much constituted by this violence. Although Jared Sexton (2016) notes that it is difficult to track the origin of the framework down to a particular moment in history, most pessimists concur that it is Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death* (1982) that fired the starting signal for its development. In fact, in the book, Patterson introduces the most fundamental concept on which Black pessimism is based—social death (JanMohamed 2005; Sexton 2011; Wilderson 2011, 2016; Marriott 2016).[133] Patterson believed that the enslaved were considered as absolutely "powerless in relation to another individual" (4), and even as objects and "social nonperson[s]" (5). For Patterson, the social death of enslaved people was brought about by the "constituent element[s] of slavery" (10), namely the subjection of the enslaved to gratuitous violence, their natal alienation, and their dishonor, since they "had no power and no independent social existence, and hence no public worth" (10).

Although it was Patterson who defined social death, the key concept of Afropessimism, he has insisted that he should not be alluded to as its forerunner, which, in his own view, is somewhat of a misnomer. In an interview published by *The Harvard Gazette*, Patterson noted that pessimism is not even mentioned in his work and, on top of that, that he does not consider himself a pessimist (Mineo 2018). "I find myself in an odd situation," he states, "because the Afropessimists draw heavily on one of my books, *Slavery and Social Death*, which is ironic, because I'm not a pessimist," since "I don't think we're in a situation of social death" (qtd. in Mineo 2018, n.p.). Certainly, regardless

---

[133] Although not under the same terminology, pessimism in the theoretical analyses of Blackness can be traced back to as early as 1903, with the publication of Du Bois's "Of the Meaning of Progress," an essay included in his canonical work *The Souls of Black Folk*. As I have discussed in the previous chapter, Du Bois contended that Blackness forbids Black individuals from being fully recognized as human, and that, along these lines, they are forced to occupy a liminal position in society. As I am going to explain later, traces of Afropessimism can also be observed in Frantz Fanon's works, especially in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), where he states that Black people are below the framework of human legibility and thus inhabit a zone of non-being.

of the many similarities that may exist between Patterson and other Black pessimists, their differences also stand out in relief. The major reason why Patterson's theorizations veer away from the ideas defended by Black pessimists is his belief in the transitory character of the condition of Blacks as enslaved people. For Patterson, enslavement worked by way of a process that he termed "recruitment" and that was followed by "enslavement" and "manumission" (13)—"free human beings" (22) were taken and turned into "objects of property" (22) but gained freedom again afterwards; and so "the slave who was freed was no longer a slave" (3).[134]

Although Patterson defends that manumission meant the recovery of freedom for the enslaved, Afropessimists suggest, on the contrary, that, at least for Black people in the U.S., and owing mainly to a process of deracination, the abolition of enslavement did not bring about the end of social death. As R. L. puts it, "the violence of anti-blackness produces black existence; there is no prior positive blackness that could be potentially appropriated" (2013, n.p.). For Wilderson and Sexton, as well as for other pessimists (Hartman 1997, 2008; Sexton 2011, 2016; R. L. 2013; Marriott 2016), the concept of Blackness did not exist before enslavement, but it emerged with it—which means, in turn, that, for former enslaved people, there was no previous state of equality to return to from their state of inequality. "Blackness is coterminous with slaveness," Wilderson writes, "blackness is social death, which is to say that there was never a prior meta-moment of plenitude, never a moment of equilibrium, never a moment of social life," and so "blackness […] cannot be disimbricated from slavery" (2016, n.p.).[135] This is, precisely,

---

[134] Patterson's conviction that suffering is not central to Blackness testifies to why he cannot be considered a pessimist himself. In fact, he notes that "one of the elements of social death is that you're not recognized as an integral member of the civic community, the public sphere, and we certainly are, on the political and cultural levels. And we're very integrated in the military, which is the quintessence of what defines who belongs" (in Mineo 2018, n.p.). In all, Patterson believes that although segregation still persists, Black people have undeniably achieved real progress in the public sphere.

[135] In the same line, Achille Mbembe, in *Critique of Black Reason* (2017), states that the concept of Blackness "arrived with the organized despoliation of the Atlantic slave trade" (2), which ended up

something that Coates staunchly defends in his work—that there can exist no Black future bereft of violence because the very concept of Blackness *is* violence.

Wilderson explicates the ontological character of Black suffering by way of the "vertigoes" to which Black individuals are exposed (2011, 3). He distinguishes between subjective and objective vertigo—whilst the first one refers to the feeling of disorientation produced by the "dizzying sense that one is moving or spinning in an otherwise stationary world" (3), the latter alludes instead to "the sensation that one is not simply spinning in an otherwise stable environment" (3) but in one that essentially rests upon violence. As he puts it, objective vertigo is "a life constituted by disorientation rather than a life interrupted by disorientation" (3). Wilderson writes,

> Black people's subsumption by violence is a paradigmatic necessity, not just
> a performative contingency. To be constituted by and disciplined by violence,
> to be gripped simultaneously by subjective and objective vertigo, is indicative
> of a political ontology which is radically different from the political ontology
> of a sentient being who is constituted by discourse and disciplined by violence
> when s/he breaks with the ruling discursive codes. (4)

The fact that "black subjectivity is a place where [both] vertigoes meet" (3), that is, where a form of ontological vulnerability and a form of political vulnerability overlap, makes Wilderson consider "the black [as] a sentient being though not [as] a human being" (4).

The comparison between Black bodies and objects is also prevalent in the work of Saidiya Hartman, also considered an Afropessimist by many scholars (Wilderson and Hartman 2003; Sexton 2011, 2016; Douglass and Wilderson 2013; Moten 2013). In

---

"dissolving human beings into things, objects, and merchandise" (11). People from Africa became Black by means of enslavement, and so, in his view, violence is a foundational element of Blackness.

particular in *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), Hartman notes that it is the fungibility of the enslaved, 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). Hartman's contention that Black bodies are but receptacles to be filled with the wills of others reverberates with the arguments deployed by Martin Heidegger in his essay "The Thing" (1971),[136] where he draws upon the concept of the jug in a bid to establish a distinction between objects and things in which the latter are claimed to be self-sufficient in a way that the former are clearly not.[137] That Afropessimism resorts to the analogy between Black bodies as vessels is thus no accident—as David Marriott states, "the [Black] person is a dead object filled, so to speak, by its own vertiginous absence, by its own force of disaggregation" (2016, n.p.).[138] In fact, the nothingness that fills Black bodies has been Frank Wilderson's object of study on several occasions (2008, 2010).[139] Although Wilderson's acknowledgement of his own nothingness pervades most of his works, it is in the following excerpt where it becomes most evident:

> How does one speak the unthinkable? […] I am nothing, Naima, and you are nothing: the unspeakable answer to your question within your question. This is why I could not—would not—answer your question that night. Would I ever be with a black woman again? It was earnest, not accusatory—

---

[136] Originally a seminar entitled "Das Ding" conducted by Heidegger in 1949 in Bremen, Germany.

[137] For Heidegger, "the jug is a thing. What is the jug? We say: a vessel, something of the kind that holds something else within it. The jug's holding is done by its base and sides. This container itself can again be held by the handle. As a vessel the jug is something self-sustained, something that stand on its own" (64).

[138] This notion is also explored by Calvin Warren in "Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope," where he writes that "blacks, then, have function but not being—the function of black(ness) is to give form to a terrifying formlessness (nothing)" (2018, 5).

[139] Wilderson's first acknowledging (2008) that Black people are nothing but later (2011) claiming that Black people are sentient beings—though not human—brings to light the contradictions that exist not only in his theorizations, but also within the field of Afropessimism itself, where, as I have already suggested, a lot of different perspectives conjoin.

I know. And nothing terrifies me more than such a question asked in earnest.

It is a question that goes to the heart of desire, to the heart of our black

capacity to desire. But if we take out the nouns that you used (nouns of habit

that get us through the day), your question to me would sound like this:

would nothing ever be with nothing again? (2008, 265)

Wilderson makes a connection between the so-called nothingness of Blackness and the

concept of social death in "Blackness and the End of Redemption" (2016), where he

renders social death "aporetic" (n.p.) because it can be located in its specificity nowhere;

it exceeds time and space; and it ultimately also exceeds not only all narratives but also,

by extension, all historicity.[140] Social death, in this way, does not have any sort of

narrative arc and is circumscribed by a "historical stillness" (Spillers 2003, n.p.) instead—

"a flat line that 'moves' from disequilibrium to a moment in the narrative of faux

equilibrium, to disequilibrium restored and/or rearticulated" (Wilderson 2016, n.p.). It is

this social death that, by extension, also "bars the slave from access to narrative, at the

level of temporality; but it also does so at the level of spatiality" (2016, n.p.).

Contrary to what some people may believe,[141] Afropessimism is not an attack

against the agency or the subjectivity of racialized individuals, but rather an attack against

the power structures that deny the agency or the subjectivity of racialized individuals. In

many of his articles, including "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and

Black Optimism" (2011) and "Ante-Anti-Blackness: Afterthoughts" (2012), Jared

---

[140] This is reminiscent of the "door of no return" Dionne Brand speaks of (2001). "Black experience in any modern city or town in the Americas is a haunting," she writes. "One enters a room and history follows; one enters a room and history precedes. History is already seated in the chair in the empty room when one arrives. Where one stands in a society seems always related to this historical experience. Where one can be observed is relative to that history. All human effort seems to emanate from this door" (25).

[141] Afropessimism has actually been met with backlash from a group of people who considered it to be "so very negative" and who believed "that things are getting better" for racialized individuals (Warren 2018). A longer study on these responses will be provided in the following sections.

Sexton[142] has dismantled the mistaken notion that Afropessimism champions the social and political apostasy of Black people. Instead, he suggests, it aims at throwing into relief the flaws of those forms of power that work toward, and sanction, that apostasy, noting that "blackness is not the pathogen in Afropessimism, the world is" (2011, 28). This notion is significantly expanded in his article "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism" (2011), where he contends that accepting that Black lives are lived in social death does in no way mean that Black lives do not exist, but rather that they are lived in a different dimension than white lives.[143] "A living death," Sexton anticipates, "is as much a death as it is a living" (2011, 28):

> Nothing in Afropessimism suggests that there is no black (social) life, only that black life is not social life in the universe formed by the codes of state and civil society, of citizen and subject, of nation and culture, of people and place, of history and heritage, of all the things that colonial society has in common with the colonized, of all that capital has in common with labor—the modern world system. Black life is not lived in the world that the world lives in, but it is lived underground, in outer space. (Sexton 2011, 28)

Sexton's contention that Black life does exist, even if under the shadow of Black death, also allows us to adopt a different approach towards Ta-Nehisi Coates's pessimism. As I am going to study in the following sections, the "need to affirm affirmation through negation" (Marriott 2016, n.p.) enhances the galvanizing dimension of Coates's hopelessness, which ceases to be perceived as a manifestation of violence but that can instead be read as a call for change (Winters 2018; Reid-Brinkley 2020). In this regard,

---

[142] In his essay "Ante-Anti-Blackness: Afterthoughts" (2012), Sexton writes that Afropessmism "has been misconstrued as a negation of the agency of black performance, even a denial of black social life" (n.p.).

[143] Fred Moten dubs this other dimension "our commons or undercommons or underground or outskirts" of whiteness (2007, 4).

Éva Tettenborn's "black melancholia" (2006), a concept that I already defined in the previous section, proves to be extremely helpful to understand the extent to which Coates's messages in both of his memoirs are not incapacitating for Black individuals nor do they deny, paraphrasing Thomas Chatterton Williams (2015), Black agency:

> To understand contemporary African American literature's use of melancholia, we must move beyond the idea of melancholia as a strictly disabling condition. The traditional Freud-based perspective fails to take into consideration the relationship twentieth century African American literature has to African American history, a history of numerous unidentified and uncounted losses. While African American literature should in no way be pathologized by this assumption, black melancholia does take on a distinct dimension of productive resistance within this literary realm by insisting on the importance of the loss and by offering a new way of redeeming those lost objects of melancholia. The melancholic's desire for the lost object has emerged as one of contemporary African American literature's subversive and resistant ways of claiming the African American self; such emotional responses are not rendered as pathological but rather portrayed as appropriate and, in fact, necessary. (107)

For Tettenborn, the melancholy experienced by Black people swerves away from other types of melancholy in that it is not disabling, but enabling and necessary. Put another way, mourners who suffer from this sort of melancholy, far from being pathologized, must be instead seen as sentient agents who "bear the etchings of history" (102). Tettenborn's words allow us to draw at least two conclusions from Coates's allegedly benumbing hopelessness. On the one hand, and perhaps most importantly, the fact that Coates does not foresee an end to mourning must not be mistaken for a paralysis

of the Black subject. Instead, mourning is in itself "an assertion of strength" and a form of empowerment that allows subjects to accept their traumatic past whilst coming to terms with their present (115). Also, as I hinted at in the previous section, mourning is a process that necessitates a subject that suffers the loss of an object. Along these lines, the Black person who mourns must necessarily be conceived as a fully-fledged subject, not as an object. On the other, Coates's grief cannot end simply because he knows that Blackness and suffering are coterminous, that is, that suffering is constitutional of Blackness. As Jared Sexton asks in relation to Coates's pessimism, "what would one hope for in a scenario where one's murder is required for others' peace of mind?" (2016, n.p.).

Afropessimism has gained momentum in particular during the last few decades, when the increasing visibility of the brutal deaths of Black youth in the streets, coupled with the acquittal of their murderers, seems to have ruled out the possibility for Black people to hold good prospects for their futures. Such despair has been, however, met with the skepticism of those who claim that Blackness and suffering are bound, but not inextricably so. In fact, the antithesis of Afropessimism, dubbed Black optimism, can be observed in Alain Locke's *The New Negro* (1925), James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1963) and Cornel West's *Race Matters* (1993), all the way to Paul Gilroy's *Against Race* (2000) or Daphne Brooks's *Bodies in Dissent* (2006), texts that throw into relief a will "either to fold blacks into humanity and resolve the ontological problem or to move beyond race and embrace an optimistic future of universal humanism" (Warren 2017a, 220). Black optimism may be best explained by way of West's politics of conversion— Black bodies have been degraded and devalued to such an extent that even Black individuals themselves have internalized their own worthlessness. West describes it as "the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and […] lovelessness" that results in "a numbing detachment from and a self-destructive

disposition toward the world [...] that destroys both the individual and others" (23). West urges Black people to resist through a politics of conversion—"a chance for people to believe that there is hope for the future and a meaning to struggle. A last attempt at generating a sense of agency among downtrodden people. [...] Self-love and love for others are both modes toward increasing self-valuation and encouraging political resistance in one's community" (1993, 29). West underscores that even though racism will most certainly not disappear, Black individuals should not succumb to the nihilistic threat, but instead keep fighting and believing in their own worth.[144]

Afrofuturism is one of the most recent expressions of Black optimism. Described as a "flourishing contemporary movement" (English 2017, n.p.) and a cultural aesthetic that figures Blackness as hopeful, celebratory, and even pioneering in technologically advanced counter-worlds (Capers 2019, 7), Afrofuturism was first introduced by Mark Dery in his essay "Black to the Future" (1994), where he linked it to "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future" (180). That Dery was the first to coin the concept does in no way mean that it had not been previously broached by other Black authors. In actual fact, according to several scholars (Anderson and Jones 2016; Steinskog 2018; Capers 2019; Glass and Drumming 2020), Afrofuturism finds its roots in the Black science fiction published starting in mid-nineteenth century, such as Martin R. Delany's *Blake; or, the Huts of America* (1857), a

---

[144] West's spirit aligns in particular with Baldwin's in "An Open Letter to My Sister, Miss Angela Davis" (1971), where he states that "the American triumph—in which the American tragedy has always been implicit—was to make black people despise themselves" (n.p.; my emphasis), to later conclude, employing a rhetoric that in several aspects will be mirrored by West, that "we must do what we can do, and fortify and save each other—we are not drowning in an apathetic self-contempt, we do feel ourselves sufficiently worthwhile to contend even with inexorable forces in order to change our fate and the fate of our children and the condition of the world" (n.p.).

work that recounts the getaway of an enslaved person from a plantation and his arduous journey to bring together Black communities from all around the world in a bid to create a thriving and independent all-Black nation.[145] Other outstanding examples of science fiction books that paved the way for the development of Afrofuturism are certainly Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) or most of the works by Octavia E. Butler, in particular the Xenogenesis trilogy,[146] published during the last two decades of the twentieth century. It was not until 1994, however, that Mark Dery coined the term Afrofuturism to refer to a cultural aesthetic which expanded well beyond the aforementioned sci-fi narratives, and which also encompassed music and both visual and plastic arts. This shift also ushered in new possibilities of stripping the representation of races of their colonialist implications, as Andrew Rollins suggested when he coined the concept of Astroblackness—"an Afrofuturistic concept in which a person's black state of consciousness, released from the confining and crippling slave or colonial mentality, becomes aware of the multitude and varied possibilities and probabilities within the universe" (in Anderson and Jones 2016, vii).

The fact that Ta-Nehisi Coates, who until now has been considered a major promoter of Black pessimism, has been the writer of the *Black Panther* series of Marvel Comics (2016), a landmark work thanks to which Black optimism started to gain traction,[147] has thwarted the possibility of considering him a supporter of either one. In

---

[145] Scholars have agreed that amongst the elements that allow for the consideration of Delaney's *Blake; or, the Huts of America* (1857) as a work of science fiction are his references to astronomy and other speculative sciences. According to Britt Rusert, "in addition to turning to comets, meteors, and extraterrestrial planets to ruminate on the conditions of black existence under slavery, Delany empties antebellum science of its rational core, revealing how the many fields of natural science, including but not reducible to the fields of racial science, are animated by a supernatural and mystical encounter with blackness itself" (2013, 802-803).

[146] The Xenogenesis trilogy consists of *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989).

[147] The character of Black Panther, the undercover identity of king T'Challa, was originally created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby and appeared for the first time in the 52nd instalment of the *Fantastic Four*, which dates back to 1966. T'Challa is the Black leader of a prosperous and technologically advanced Black community known as Wakanda, located in East Africa and undisclosed to everyone but its inhabitants. Although the

fact, the years following the publication of the memoir witnessed a clear transformation in Coates's public standing. First regarded as an author with "either a cynical or a woefully skewed way of looking at the world" (Chatterton Williams 2015, n.p.), Coates was now slowly becoming somebody who in fact believed that progress for the Black community was finally being achieved (Klein 2020, n.p.). His transition, as he himself claims in a conversation with Ezra Klein, is owed to the ways in which Black individuals are currently coming together, organizing, and fighting for their own rights. When asked about his feelings in light of the international mass protests staged in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder on May 25, 2020, Coates replied that "I can't believe I'm gonna say this, but I see hope" (Klein 2020, n.p.). Nonetheless, even if he "see[s] progress right now" (Klein 2020, n.p.), he did not do so right after the publication of *Between the World and Me*, when he told Klein, in a strikingly different conversation, that "there's not gonna be a happy ending to this story" (Klein 2016a, n.p.).[148]

The flood of reviews of Coates's works published after 2018 has addressed Coates's hopefulness rather than his lack of it. To mention but a few, Eric Levitz published a conversation with Coates entitled "Ta-Nehisi Coates Is an Optimist Now" (2019), which was soon followed by Ezra Klein's "Why Ta-Nehisi Coates Is Hopeful" (2020) and Nancy Letorneau's "Even Ta-Nehisi Coates Is Optimistic Now" (2020). Tobin Miller Shearer (2018) and Joseph Winters (2018) explain the critics' obsession with Coates's perception of progress by way of the analysis of the public impact of his

---

character appeared several times in different publications between 1966 and 1976, he earned its own series in 1977, and Ta-Nehisi Coates became one of its writers in 2016. *Black Panther* gained visibility in particular after it was adapted into an eponymous blockbuster film starring Chadwick Boseman and Lupita Nyong'o in 2018. Nowadays, the movie has turned into one of the clearest manifestations of Afrofuturism (Steinskog 2018; Capers 2019; Glass and Drumming 2020). Amongst other cultural assets that portray Afrofuturist ideas is also the 2019 HBO adaptation of the comic series *Watchmen*, in which two central characters, Angela Abar and Dr. Manhattan, who were originally white, are played by Black actors.

[148] With "this story" Coates was referring to Black struggle.

work. In fact, *Between the World and Me* has turned into, in Toni Morrison's terms, "a required reading" (2015) for many—not only has it been included in the syllabi of several university courses (Keaggy 2016), but it has also been granted a top position in *The Guardian*'s list of the best books of the twenty-first century (2019). In all, the book has turned into a signpost on racial issues, and the messages that Coates conveys are far-reaching and may have an enormous bearing upon his readers; which is, precisely, the main reason why Coates's hopelessness has been regarded with suspicion—what sort of messages is Coates sending to Black youth by being so fatalistic? Aware of this, Coates has also addressed the situation in two articles published in *The Atlantic*, "Hope and the Artist" (2015b) and "Hope and the Historian" (2015c), where he contends that both hope and despair are literary topoi whose real value lies on the aim with which they are used. "I've been thinking a lot about the implied notion that writing that does not offer hope is necessarily deficient or somehow useless," he notes. "To be less coy, I've been thinking a lot about the idea that my own writing is somehow cheating the reader because it seems so unconcerned with 'hope'. I admit to having a hard time with this notion" (2015b). And he goes on,

> If one observes the world and genuinely feels hopeful, and truly feels that the future is not chaos, but is in fact already written, then one has a responsibility to say so. Or, less grandly, if one can feel hopeful about a literal tomorrow and one's individual prospects one should certainly say so. […] But hope for hope's sake, hope as tautology, hope because hope, hope because "I said so," is the enemy of intelligence. One can say the same about the opposing pole of despair. Neither of these—hope or despair—are "wrong." They each reflect human sentiment, much like anger, sadness, love, and joy. Art that uses

any of these to say something larger interests me. Art that takes any of these

as its aim does not. (Coates 2015b, n.p.)

Joseph Winters contends that it is the fact that Coates's writing was published in the heyday of Barack Obama's presidency that had misled his readers into expecting his work to be hopeful and reassuring (2018). In his view, when critics contend that Coates is hopeless, they often mean that he is so in relation to the "kind of hope attached to triumphant narratives of achievement that subordinate dissonance to harmony, or instability to order" that ruled in the Obama administration (2018, 2452).[149] Calvin Warren approaches the issue of optimism by way of Lauren Berlant's "cruel optimism" (2011), noting that "it bundles certain promises about redress, equality, freedom, justice, and progress into a political object that always lies beyond reach" (2015, 221). In this way Coates would not be against optimism, but against the sort of optimism that flattens out the complexities of Black strivings. In his interpretation of Tressie McMillan Cottom's latest review of Coates's work (2015b), Joseph Winters punctuates that it is Coates's withdrawal from Obama's hopefulness that annoys his readers and that makes them think that Coates despairs—"because Coates departs from Obama's 'audacity of hope' mantra as well as the rhetoric associated with sanitized versions of the Civil Rights Movement, his 'hope feels stark and brutal'" (2018, 2464). "What critics expect from Coates," he goes on to explain, "is some projected resolution, some kind of benediction that converts, for instance, the police killing of Prince Jones into something positive, upbeat, and encouraging" (2018, 2464).

---

[149] Peter Dula and David Evans establish a comparison between Obama's "creedal or liberal reading of U.S. history," which is evocative of "Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and the early King," and Coates's "radical alternative that descends from Du Bois, Malcolm X, the latter King, and Critical Race Theory" that illustrates very well the opinion that each of them, Obama on the one hand and Coates on the other, holds about hopefulness (2018, 161).

Calvin Warren offers important commentary on the centrality that hope has had in antiracist movements in his essay "Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope" (2015), where he calls attention to the fact that, depending on the context in which it is applied, and in particular when coupled with "bio-political futurity, perfection, betterment, and redress," the concept not only sustains, but also reproduces, Black suffering (218).[150] For Warren, one of the main risks of hope stems from it "posit[ing] itself as the only alternative to the problem of antiblackness" (221) in a way that rules out all the other possibilities to confront racism. Certainly, as I will explain later, Warren's claims cast a new light on why Coates's pessimistic views in the memoir have often been discredited— because, for the hopeful, no forms of engagement other than hope itself are convenient, at least at first sight (223). "The politics of hope masks a particular cruelty under the auspices of 'happiness' and 'life'," he writes, "it terrifies with the dread of 'no alternative'" and "life itself needs the security of the alternative, and, through this logic, life becomes untenable without it" (222).

Warren notes that hopefulness becomes particularly dangerous for Black individuals, as the object they long for remains an impossibility—they keep drawing closer to an end that ultimately does not exist. To exemplify this, Warren draws upon Barack Obama's exhorting Black people to keep fighting and to not give way to despair in the aftermath of Trayvon Martin's murder—a message that did not hold down the alarming rates at which Black people were being maimed and murdered. In this way, Warren notes, Black individuals are trapped in "an unending pursuit" of progress (221)— they are told to be hopeful even though all solutions ever devised to put an end to anti-

---

[150] This idea will be explored in the following pages, as well as in section 2.2.2 and 2.3.

Blackness have only led to a dead end (Warren 2018, 3).[151] Lewis R. Gordon refers to this situation with the term "bad faith" (1995), which he defines as "the 'optimistic' and politically hopeful belief that antiblack structures can be transformed to provide vitality to blackness, despite all evidence to the contrary" (qtd. in Warren 2015, 242).[152]

The problem is exacerbated when hope is erroneously equated with action. This is precisely why Coates's point of view has been object of criticism—just as hopefulness is perceived as a direct exhortation to act, hopelessness is considered to be adjacent to passivity and even defeatism, and in this way "the nihilist is labeled 'pathological', 'troubled', 'faithless', 'suicidal', 'fatalistic', and 'reckless'" (Warren 2015, 242). Nonetheless, as Warren concludes, being hopeful can be as problematic as being hopeless, since hope rests upon the violent structures that sustain discrimination; that is, it operates along the violent structures that catalyzed its development in the first place.[153] "Black suffering is an essential part of the world," Warren writes, "and placing hope in the very structure that sustains metaphysical violence […] will never resolve anything" (244). In a similar vein, Coates also wonders why readers insist, oftentimes in a way that, instead of a suggestion, resembles a demand, that he must be hopeful when he clearly believes in the inherent character of Black suffering, just as David Marriott (2007), Frank

---

[151] In other words, hope "merely provides temporary reprieve from the fact that Blacks are not safe in an anti-Black world, a fact that can become overwhelming" (Warren 2018, 3); a view that, as I am going to explain, Coates endorses too.

[152] In a similar vein, Derrick Bell contends that "black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those Herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary peaks of progress, short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance. This is a hard-to-accept fact that all history verifies. We must acknowledge it, not as a sign of submission, but as an act of ultimate defiance" (1993, 12).

[153] This logic was already defended by W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), where he provides an extensive analysis on how the concept of hope relates to progress and optimism. In his interpretation of Du Bois's work, and in a way that bears many resemblances with Warren's contributions, Joseph Winters writes that "modern notions of progress and freedom are inherently flawed and problematic because they rely on and are intertwined with practices and conditions—capitalism, colonial expansion, racial hierarchies, endeavors, and incentives to usurp and possess the earth—that are harmful to non-Europeans, working-class bodies, women, and other groups" (2016, 8).

Wilderson (2010, 2011, 2016), and Jared Sexton (2008, 2011, 2013, 2016) also do. In "Hope and the Historian," Coates writes that "the point here isn't that white supremacy won't ever diminish, nor that it won't ever change form. The point is that it will always be with us in some form, and the best one can reasonably hope for is that it will shrink in impact" (2015c). In this way, Coates believes that

> The black political tradition is essentially hopeful. […] I was raised closer to the nationalist tradition. For many years, even after I grew distant from nationalism, I shared this faith in the primacy of black politics. But the problem is history. The more I studied, the more I was confronted by heroic people whose struggles were not successful in their own time, or at all. To the extent that they were successful, black politics was a necessary precondition, but never enough to foment change […]. This is neither the stuff of sweet dreams nor "hope." But I think that a writer wedded to "hope" is ultimately divorced from "truth." Two creeds can't occupy the same place at the same time. If your writing must be hopeful, then there's only room for the kind of evidence which verifies your premise. The practice of history can't help there. Thus, writers who commit themselves to only writing hopeful things, are committing themselves to the ahistorical, to the mythical, to the hagiography of humanity itself. I can't write that way—because I can't study that way. I have to be open to things falling apart. Indeed, much of our history is the story of things just not working out. (Coates 2015c, n.p.)

As I have been noting, Coates's hopelessness must not be confused with his denying Black people a future. Instead, in refusing to believe blindly in useless triumphalist narratives, Coates is in fact suggesting that hope is not the only motivating force, but one

amongst several, for Black people to get involved in the fight of racial equality (Lordi 2017; Shearer 2018; Winters 2018).

Amongst all the different ways of coping with racism that Coates devises in his works, love is of the greatest importance. My approach to the concept in this project rests on bell hooks's definition of it provided in *All About Love: New Visions* (2001), where she describes it as a conjoint of "care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication" (hooks 2001, 5). In *The Beautiful Struggle* readers learn about the extent to which Coates treasures his family; about the extent to which he loves his friends and his community; and, not less important, about the extent to which both his grandmother and his father instill in him a great passion for Black artists in general, and Black thinkers and writers in particular. Moreover, in *Between the World and Me*, Coates informs his readers that his rapport with the world as an adult is shaped by the affection he received as a kid—he focuses on expressing a deep love for his wife, for his son, for his deceased friend Prince Jones, and for all the other Black individuals that accompanied him throughout his life, such as the girl with the dreadlocks he met at Howard University or the man he visited Paris with when he was younger; similarly, he focuses on explaining the extent to which his devotion to Blackness, as well as to Black consciousness, has solidified over the years. Tobin Miller Shearer has extensively worked on the centrality of love in Coates's *oeuvre*:

> Coates finds his ultimate imperative in love. As expected, however, his idea of love holds no space for saccharine nostalgia, fawning sentimentality, or rose-scented romance. Rather, Coates allows for "softness" but centers on love as "an act of heroism" given freely, often unexpectedly, and rooted in protection and care for the black body. That love stems from his grounding in "people," his people, the black community that has sustained, nurtured, and

elicited the "broad love" that allows him to express a "specific love" for his son. The love shows up for Coates not only in relationships and family connections but also in poetry and art. (Shearer 2018, 2052)

Coates may not be hopeful, but he is not a nihilist either. Through his works, he seeks to offer his readers other narratives that allow Black individuals to keep fighting without underestimating their plight (Coates 2015a, 71), and he emphasizes that love is definitely "more immanent and in the moment than hope; love is conditioned by, and the condition of possibility for, discovery, intimacy, and openness to others" (Winters 2018, 2464).

2.2.2 Black-on-Black Conflicts and the Nihilistic Threat in Black Communities

In his work *Hope on the Brink: Understanding the Emergence of Nihilism in Black America* (2013), Lewis Brogdon contends that "over 90 percent of those who murder, rape, and assault black people are black people themselves" (Brogdon 2013, 29). As important as this reality is to understand all the valences that are at play in the complex phenomenon of racial violence, it is essentially erased from *Between the World and Me*, a memoir that places particular emphasis on inter-racial conflicts. Coates has explained the reason why he refuses to draw further upon intra-racial conflicts in several of his articles, including "Why Don't Black People Protest 'Black-on-Black Violence'?" (2012) or "Trayvon Martin Was a Victim of Black-on-Black Crime" (2013), and still in "Black People Are Not Ignoring 'Black-on-Black' Crime" (2014d), where he writes that "the policy of America has been, for most of its history, white supremacy. The high rates of violence in black neighborhoods do not exist outside of these facts—they evidence them" (n.p.). A similar notion is also mapped out in *Between the World and Me*:

> "Black-on-black crime" is jargon, violence to language, which vanishes the men who engineered the covenants, who fixed the loans, who planned the projects, who built the streets and sold red ink by the barrel. And this should not surprise us. The plunder of black life was drilled into this country in its infancy and reinforced across its history, so that plunder has become an heirloom, an intelligence, a sentience, a default setting to which, likely to the end of our days, we must invariably return. (2015a, 110-111)

Coates's contention raises a crucial point—focusing exclusively on Black-on-Black criminality often obscures the primal form of violence from which it initially derives. Put another way, for Coates, delving into intra-racial conflicts can lead to a serious misunderstanding—that Black-on-Black problems exist on their own, when in

216

fact they are the product of racial hierarchies of power. Moreover, for Coates, hostilities among Black individuals are not only used as a strategy to divert attention away from the real problem, inter-racial bigotries, but also as a pretext to further manifest that there is a sort of pathological constituent in Blackness. Coates offers important commentary on all these problems in "Trayvon Martin Was a Victim of Black-on-Black Crime" (2013), where he draws upon the murders of Derrion Albert and Hadiya Pendleton to exemplify the extent to which Black-on-Black gang criminality is often employed to smear Black individuals and to blame them for all the problems they have. In this vein, the deaths of Albert and Pendleton generated all sorts of discussions about whether Black parents raised their children well, and about whether Black individuals had an inherent proclivity for conflict, when in fact what should have been discussed is the "segregation funded and implemented by private citizens, realtors, business interests, the city of Chicago, the state of Illinois and the federal government," which are "the desired outcome of racist social engineering" (2013, n.p.). For Coates, this process is cyclical—Black people are pathologized and blamed for their own suffering; they end up internalizing their worthlessness and turning against each other, for which they are further vilified; all the while inter-racial violent acts, which are the heart of the problem at hand, are ignored.

In *Hope on the Brink: Understanding the Emergence of Nihilism in Black America* (2013), Lewis Brogdon similarly identifies racial nihilism as the onset of intra-racial conflicts, and he contends that racism has been ingrained in the U.S. for so long that many Black individuals have ended up internalizing "despair, self-hatred, and inferiority" (12). In a way that clearly reverberates with Cornel West's previously mentioned approach to the concept (1993), Brogdon concedes that

> Nihilism gives language to the increasing numbers of blacks who set
> themselves up for failure. They do so because they have internalized their

oppression. Internalized oppression recognizes the myriad ways in which blacks are turning on themselves and their communities, living out a self-defeating and, at times, a self-destructive way of life. Nihilism best explains the despair, animosity, resentment, violence, and other reckless forms of thinking and behaving rampant in some black communities. (Brogdon 2013, 6)

Brogdon's work is ground-breaking also because it sets out to explain the process whereby a concept, nihilism, which surfaced amid the epistemological crisis that shook most European countries after two world wars, could end up being applied to interpret the Black plight in the U.S. To do so, Brogdon draws upon Friedrich Nietzsche's understanding of nihilism, which is "rooted not only in the failure of foundational beliefs and values to give meaning to the world but also the realization that universal beliefs and values were fabricated to substantiate the status quo of the powerful" (16). For Nietzsche, nihilism reflects a way of confronting the loss of meaning and order in the world. In Brogdon's words, "the nihilistic turn is the decision to reject as senseless prevailing beliefs, ideologies, and practices that exploit, dehumanize, and destroy human thriving," and "people turn from prevailing beliefs, ideologies, and social practices to nothingness" (21).

For Brogdon, the racial nihilistic mindset in the U.S. flourished in particular during the 1970s, when the lack of employment opportunities, coupled with the economic downturn that hit Black communities in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement, made it extremely difficult for Black individuals to climb the social ladder. In such a situation of stagnation, many Black people started to get involved in underground economic activities, which seemed to be the only way open for them to amass the large amounts of money that were the sign of success in the U.S. According to Brogdon, those

conditions fostered the development of nihilism and intra-racial animosity in Black communities:

> The recession of the early nineties and the ever-widening gap between upper- and middle-class whites and a large black underclass, trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty, proved to be difficult for many blacks. Black communities felt the brunt of the recession of the early nineties and languished. These conditions were ripe for nihilism to flourish. And these conditions gave rise to rampant despair and violence. (27)

When inferiority is internalized, self-disparagement, as well as disparagement of others, emerges—a fact that also explicates Coates's avowal that "to yell 'black-on-black crime' is to shoot a man and then shame him for bleeding" (2015a, 111).

The truth is that instances in which Black individuals are blamed for the crimes they commit are rather unusual in the memoir. At this point, it is worth recalling Coates's words when he ruminates on his friend being murdered by a Black policeman in P.G. County—that it is not only the officer who must be prosecuted for the killing, but rather the system that allowed it to happen; something that, in turn, illustrates the extent to which he believes intra-racial crimes are a direct result of inter-racial bigotries. But other than in this situation, racial nihilism is surprisingly only addressed in depth in the first chapter of the memoir, which draws into Coates's upbringing in a neighborhood ravaged by gang violence. As indicated in the previous chapter of this dissertation, Coates's childhood was marked by fear—fear of losing his body (5),[154] either at the hands of the older Black boys who lived in his community or at the hands of the watchmen who were supposed to protect them (23); fear of not progressing (27); fear of not behaving as he was expected

---

[154] Coates's phenomenological approach to the Black body is addressed in depth in section 1.3.

to and of being punished for it by his father afterwards (28); and fear of raising a family, as almost all the ones he knew were tormented by the loss of "a child […] to the streets, to jail, to drugs, to guns" (16).

Out of all the memories he alludes to throughout his work, he is particularly haunted by the recollection of a Black boy who threatened another one with a gun when Coates was still a kid. He relates the story as follows:

> I was eleven years old, standing out in the parking lot in front of the 7-Eleven, watching a crew of older boys standing near the street. They yelled and gestured at… Who? Another boy, young, like me, who stood there, almost smiling, gamely throwing up his hands. He had already learned the lesson he would teach me that day: that his body was in constant jeopardy. Who knows what brought him to that knowledge? The projects, a drunken stepfather, an older brother concussed by police, a cousin pinned in the city jail. That he was outnumbered did not matter because the whole world had outnumbered him long ago, and what do numbers matter? This was a war for the possession of his body and that would be the war of his whole life. […] I focused in on a light-skinned boy with a long head and small eyes. He was scowling at another boy, who was standing close to me. It was just before three in the afternoon. I was in sixth grade. […] The boy with the small eyes reached into his ski jacket and pulled out a gun. I recall it in the slowest motion, as though in a dream. There the boy stood, with the gun brandished, which he slowly untucked, tucked, then untucked once more, and in his small eyes I saw a surging rage that could, in an instant, erase my body. […] The boy did not shoot. His friends pulled him back. He did not need to shoot. He had affirmed

my place in the order of things. He had let it be known how easily I could be selected. (18-19)

Certainly, Coates's description includes all the elements that Lewis Brogdon claims lead to the development of racial nihilism—dysfunctional families with no opportunities or prospects whatsoever; friends committing crimes and crowding into prisons; and boys with a defiant stand and unresolved animosity not only towards other kids, but also towards themselves. Resonating strongly with the terminology employed by Bakari Kitwana in his seminal work *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture* (2002), Brogdon refers to youth of the sort as "the ones who don't give a fuck" (2013, 66)—Black youngsters, particularly boys, who, sensing that society has failed them, become cynics and defeatists. This manifestation of racial nihilism, which for Brogdon is characteristic of "the new black youth" (126), is inimical to the progress of the Black community, as it "only ensures our continued suffering as victims of racism, instead of resisting racism and persisting in building strong communities and persons with healthy identities" (68).

No other significant moments alluding to the hardships he endured in his neighborhood when he was a child are mentioned in the memoir, and it is certainly his unwillingness to address intra-racial conflicts in their full complexity that a number of critics have found troubling (Bodenner 2015; Chatterton Williams 2015; Cornish 2017; López 2017; West 2017). In his already mentioned op-ed "Loaded Dice" (2015), Thomas Chatterton Williams notes that Coates's refusal to address Black-on-Black struggles any

further in the memoir gives a wrong impression about the intricacies of racial violence, a view that has also been endorsed by Kate W.,[155] who contends that

> When it is pointed out that the vast majority of black people who are murdered are murdered at the hands of other black people, Mr. Coates conveniently blames even this on white supremacy. For him, it's as simple as this: there is literally nothing a black person can do wrong that is their fault, in a cosmic sense. Every moral, ethical or legal crime is caused by the effects of white supremacy. […] Some people, including myself, characterize this as racism. Denying that black people are capable of being agents of their own life or destiny is the ultimate kind of bigotry. (qtd. in Bodenner 2015)

As much as intra-racial hostilities are only mentioned in passing in *Between the World and Me*, they are the bedrock of *The Beautiful Struggle*, a memoir that Coates himself has described as "a book largely about violence in black communities" (2012, n.p.). As a matter of fact, the first pages of the text already recount a fight that breaks out between Ta-Nehisi and his brother Big Bill on one side, and a group of "six to eight [young men], but up and down the street, packs of them took up different corners" on another (2008, 2). Coates clearly resorts to this memory in a bid to foreground the dangers of living in West Baltimore, which "in those days, […] was [so] factional, segmented into crews" that, "wherever they [Coates and Bill] walked, […] they busted knees and melted faces" (2008, 2). Although confrontations between rival gangs are recurrent in the entirety of the text, it is in the second chapter, entitled "Even If It's Jazz or the Quiet Storm," that Coates addresses them in depth. To this end, he delves into the comings and goings of his

---

[155] Her opinion is part of a longer compilation of responses to Coates's work documented in Boddener (2015). In it, she states that she refuses to provide her full name as she fears being related to a phenomenon that she very interestingly dubs "anti-Coatesism."

older brother Big Bill, who, in opposition to Coates, who is described as a quiet boy who avoids conflicts at all costs, has a rather violent disposition towards the world. Coates is particularly concerned with Bill's new friends, a group of "boys of our ilk, stuck in that undefined place between projects and the burbs. […] The most ordinary thing—the walk to school, a bike ride around the block, a trip to the supermarket—could just go wrong" (33). His description of Bill's friends refers us back to two important points already addressed in my discussion about Black nihilism—to begin with, it highlights the unwillingness to make progress that for Brogdon is the most salient characteristic of nihilism; and second, it also illustrates the extent to which nihilism often ends up provoking hostilities amongst Black people.[156] Coates moves on to contend that this dangerous environment did not only have an important bearing on Bill, but also played a crucial part in Coates's own poor academic achievement. "I came to conclusions easier than most," he writes, "but was increasingly disappointed in the world as it was, so invested almost nothing in studying it" (42).

As I have already suggested, young Coates is a foil to Big Bill—in a situation where the latter would have surely reacted with fury, Coates demonstrates total submission. The disparity between the two brothers is further thrown into relief when Coates finds himself unable to help his friend, Fruitie, who is ambushed by a group of older boys:

> They offered to let us go with no further damage. I accepted. But Fruitie had
>
> grown tired long ago. There is no other way to say this: I walked away. From

---

[156] With regard to these notions, Brogdon writes that "the description of the loss of confidence among blacks is intricately connected to accepting or internalizing the belief that blacks are inferior. As a result, […] blacks who accept this belief follow a downward spiral to self-hate, self-disparagement, and anger. In light of many African Americans who are ignorant and or conflicted about their history in America, a vacuum is created that is eventually filled with animosity directed toward oneself, which expresses itself in unfortunate ways including self-degradation, imitation of white culture, violence against oneself, violence against other blacks, and communal degradation" (46).

the safety of the bus stop I watched him. He was not Thor. When he swung his long arms, nothing shook on its axis. Within seconds he was on the ground. It was horror. They were on top of him, wailing away. Fruitie was gone. He thrashed wildly, kicked his legs. […] I was a boy like all boys, selfish in my own particular way. (62)

After the incident, Coates realizes that he has failed his friend and that he is now on his own; and it is only later in his life that Coates withdraws into himself, seeks to find refuge in books, and in this way discovers the consciousness that so accurately characterizes his father. Although this subject will be extensively addressed in the following section from the perspective of the model of masculinity that Paul Coates embodies, it bears mentioning now too, as it offers an explanation of how Coates manages to break away from the destructiveness that typified his neighborhood and to find alternatives to a dangerous lifestyle to which he at times seemed very much fated. After a lengthy and detailed depiction of his father's youth and his gradual involvement with the Black Panthers, Coates concedes that it was his father who personified the ideal of the Black conscious man that Coates himself was aspiring to be.

Paul Coates is described as an educated man surrounded by books; fully devoted to the racial plight; generous, serious, but with witty and sarcastic humor; a provider for his family; a father for sons to look up to; a born leader and, in all, an embodiment of the values defended by radicals such as Malcolm X that Coates could think of. Besides, Paul Coates not only was a being the living embodiment of wisdom, determination, and commitment, but he was also endowed with the gift of "Knowledge" (2008)—the ability of being mindful of one's position in the world.[157] Albeit to a lesser extent, Coates's

---

[157] Coates's full description of "Knowledge" is as follows: "the Knowledge was taught from our lives' beginnings, whether we realized it or not. Street professors presided over invisible corner podiums, and the Knowledge was dispensed. Their faces were smoke and obscured by the tilt of their Kangols. They lectured

fixation with both concepts, "Consciousness" and "Knowledge," is also manifest in *Between the World and Me*, where he not only recounts again his becoming a conscious man but also contends that he wants his son to wake up to his to consciousness too. "I did not want to raise you in fear or false memory," Coates confesses to Samori, "I did not want you forced to mask your joys and bind your eyes. What I wanted for you was to grow into consciousness. I resolved to hide nothing from you" (2015a, 111). Along these lines, Coates replicates the story that he once lived—the counsel offered by his father he now gives to his son; and the knowledge that helped him break away from his old neighborhood's violent streets lies now also in Samori's hands.

Structured into two distinct but correlated subparts, the final section of this dissertation sets out to present a study on the model of masculinity that Coates witnesses in his father and that he later enacts himself, and it concludes with a criticism of Coates's lack of attention to racialized women as victims of racism. To begin with, I am going to resort to *The Beautiful Struggle* with the intention of returning to the figure of Paul Coates, a complex character that evinces the plurality and dynamism of Black masculinities. I am going to defend that Paul comes to represent the form of masculinity that Raewyn Connell termed hegemonic masculinity (1987) and that refers to men who enjoy patriarchal privileges and who believe in their own ascendency not only over women, but also over other men, who would embody "subordinated masculinities" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832).[158] Although Coates's opinions on fatherhood

---

from sacred texts like Basic Game, Applied Cool, Barbershop 101. Their leather-gloved hands thumbed through chapters, like 'The Subtle and Misunderstood Art of Dap'. There was the geometry of cocking a baseball cap, working theories on what jokes to laugh at and exactly how loud; and entire volumes devoted to the crossover dribble" (2008, 44).

[158] This is, precisely, one of the main differences between hegemonic masculinities and hypermasculinities. Hegemonic masculinities are so because of the power that men hold in society and that is often granted by the system itself; hypermasculinities, on the other hand, refer to the ways, often violent, that are used only by certain men with the intention of maintaining such status of domination unaltered. For more information on the difference between both terms see Schroeder (2004) and Zernechel and Perry (2017).

and masculinities adopt slightly different shades in *Between the World and Me*, the memoir privileges a masculinist worldview that, for feminist commentators, disregards the important part played by Black women as victims of policing and of other forms of racial violence (Davis 2013; Bennett 2015; Bodenner 2015; Hilton 2015; Ritchie 2016, 2017).

2.3 "For the Glory of Ex-Cons, Abandoned Mothers, and Black Boys": Gender Dynamics in Ta-Nehisi Coates's Memoirs[159]

> Breonna Taylor's story is reminiscent of countless others, and reflects a long-standing pattern: for decades, black women have been targets of police violence and brutality. And for decades, their stories have been sidelined in public discussions about policing.
>
> Keisha N. Blain, "A Short History of Black Women and Police Violence" (2020)

> If you're a black man gazing through the nursery window at your newborn son, whatever else you're feeling, […] you cannot entirely escape the chill of the cloud passing momentarily between you and your boy. The cloud of race. No, it doesn't pass. It settles in the tiny mirror of the face you're searching, darkens the skin with the threat of bad weather. […] You've passed it onto your son. It may become as hateful and corrosive for him as it's been for his father.
>
> John Edgar Wideman, *Fatheralong* (1994)

> "Mamma, did you ever love us?" She sang the words like a small child saying a piece at Easter, then knelt to spread a newspaper on the floor and sat on the basket on it; the bowl she tucked in the space between her legs. […] "What you talkin' 'bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you."
>
> Toni Morrison, *Sula* (1973)

Between the World and Me is, at its core, a story about paternity—a story about fathers and sons; about difficult upbringings; and, in general terms, a story about manhood. In this regard, the memoir bears striking similarities with Coates's previous full-length work, *The Beautiful Struggle* (2008), which also navigates the pitfalls of Black

---

[159] Coates 2008, 107.

boyhood.[160] If the one published first is a coming-of-age story in which Coates retells his own childhood and the important bearing that his father had on it, *Between the World and Me* is a memoir that similarly hinges on intergenerational ties; now, however, he explores the struggles of being a father who seeks to help his son find the right path forward. In this way, Coates provides his readers with a panoramic view that traces the changes from the models of masculinity that Coates grew up looking up to to his current understandings of paternity. Beginning with the punishments that his father meted out to teach young Ta-Nehisi "the rudiments of manhood" (2008, 66), and extending well into Coates's whupping his own son until Coates himself questions the efficiency of such methods, both stories spotlight that ideals of both fatherhood and manhood are created, transmitted, and reproduced from generation to generation.

Certainly, Coates's memoirs also bring into the open the extent to which racism meddles in Black family relationships. Back in 1912, in a not widely known but still important essay entitled "Of the Giving of Life," W.E.B. Du Bois looked into the moral responsibility that having a child entails for Black parents. "Is it worthwhile?", he wondered. "Ought children be born to us? Have we any right to make human souls face what we face today?" (287). Du Bois's concern that Blackness is a burden transmitted from parents to children has also been addressed in a number of occasions afterwards. In *Fatheralong* (1994), John Edgar Wideman reflects precisely upon the extent to which having a child implies that "the shit's about to start all over again" (69-70) to later claim that "the paradigm of race works to create distance between sons and fathers" (71). As I am going to maintain throughout this section, all the previous reflections suggest that the

---

[160] In fact, the subtitle of Coates's first memoir is "a father, two sons, and an unlikely road to manhood" (2008).

responsibility for transmitting such burden lies almost uniquely on Black fathers, not on Black mothers, who are disregarded in these evaluations of Black parenthood.

The narrowing notion that Black fathers exclusively are charged with full responsibility for raising dutiful Black children gained traction in 1965, when Daniel Patrick Moynihan published a report called *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*,[161] in which he lashed out at "the 'matriarchal' family structure that resulted from unemployed or underpaid black family men" (Estes 2005, 112). In the report, Moynihan stated that fatherlessness in Black communities was problematic, because whilst "white children without fathers at least perceive all about them the pattern of men working, […] negro children without fathers flounder—and fail" (in Geary 2015, n.p.). Moynihan's contention produced a backlash from a great part of the U.S. Black population, who believed not only that it was unfair to point at Black fathers and blame them for the breakdown of Black communities, but also that statements of the sort reinforced stereotypes about Black families. Amongst several others (Swan 1974; Benjamin 2016; Eberhardt-Smith 2020), David Marriott was particularly critical of the report. In *On Black Men* (2000), he writes that Moynihan talked about fatherless Black kids as if

> They know no restraint, or discipline. Rootless, they are without origin. This issue of absent or inadequate paternity is never far from a cultural assessment—or narrative—of the nihilistic rage driving black men. In a society "which presumes male leadership in private and public affairs," writes Moynihan, when families fail, societies fail; only fathers can quell the bafflement and violent turbulence of black children; only responsible fathers can be proper men. (Marriott 2000, 98)

---

[161] The report is commonly known as the Moynihan report.

Interestingly, even though several of the ideas mentioned in it are clearly echoed in his works, Coates also objected to the conclusions reached in the report in his "The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration" (2015d), where he claimed that "Moynihan's aim in writing 'The Negro Family' had been to muster support for an all-out government assault on the structural social problems that held black families down. […] Instead his report was portrayed as an argument for leaving the black family to fend for itself" (2015d).[162] As he makes plain in many of his works, Coates agrees that Black fathers are largely absent in Black families,[163] but does not believe that that should be considered the reason why Black communities are breaking down. In fact, Coates believes Black fatherlessness to be symptomatic of a wider problem—Black men are still victims of legal disenfranchisement and other forms of racism; and so the root problem is not fatherlessness in itself, but the systemic racism that causes it (2015d). This notion is expanded upon in *Between the World and Me*, where he writes largely about the important part that fatherlessness plays in the lives of most of his relatives and acquaintances. Coates tells his son:

> Think of your mother, who had no father. And your grandmother, who was abandoned by her father. And your grandfather, who was left behind by his father. And think of how Prince's daughter was now drafted into those solemn ranks and deprived of her birthright—that vessel which was her father, which brimmed with twenty-five years of love and was the investment of her grandparents and was to be her legacy. (82)

---

[162] According to Coates, "Moynihan himself was partly to blame for this. In its bombastic language, its omission of policy recommendations, its implication that black women were obstacles to black men's assuming their proper station, and its unnecessarily covert handling, the Moynihan Report militated against its author's aims" (2015d, n.p.).

[163] Or at least they were during his childhood. In *The Beautiful Struggle*, for instance, Coates states that "fathers were ghosts" (2008, 16), and when he describes a reunion with the family who had bought his family's house, they appeared "trilling the dirge of our time—no father" (135).

For Coates, Black fathers do play a substantial part in the upbringing of their kids, particularly if they are boys.[164] In *The Beautiful Struggle*, he mentions that during his childhood he witnessed "the absence of men and fathers, men who could teach nuance and intelligence to boys" (2008, 46). Coates experienced, however, a different reality altogether, as his childhood very much orbited around his own father, William Paul Coates,[165] who was very much present both to him and his siblings—whatever Ta-Nehisi did, he did bearing in mind how his father would react; when he got into street fights and other conflicts, it was his father who saved him; when he failed in school, it was his father who admonished him and pushed him to do his best; and, ultimately, it was in his father that Coates saw the model of masculinity that he ended up enacting, too. In all, Coates's childhood can be best described as his constant striving for his father's approval.

Former member of the Black Panther Party and Vietnam War vet, William Paul Coates is described in *The Beautiful Struggle* as a powerful man; as a man of unwavering principles and integrity; learned, fair, courageous; with a strong sense of justice; and almost as a visionary. Paul Coates had his own faults, too. In fact, right after writing that "all [his own] friends were fatherless," Coates adds that "Dad was some sort of a blessing, but he made it hard to feel that way" (20). To begin with, Paul Coates "knew how to hurt people without knowing how he'd hurt them" (18); something that Coates exemplifies by drawing into the serious problems that his father had with commitment and fidelity, as he had simultaneous relationships with four different women, with whom he had seven children in the span of fifteen years. Coates describes how, when one of his father's

---

[164] As I am going to discuss later on, Coates also insists that many of his friends, having no fathers to look up to, would turn to the streets easily. When he writes about it, he states that "mostly they all were products of single parents, and in the most tragic category—black boys, with no particular criminal inclinations but whose *very lack of direction* put them in the crosshairs of the world" (2008, 115; my emphasis).

[165] In this chapter, to avoid confusion, Ta-Nehisi Coates's father will be referred to as Paul Coates, Ta-Nehisi's father, or Coates's father, but never as Coates alone. Ta-Nehisi Coates, in turn, will be referred to as either Ta-Nehisi or Coates.

partners was giving birth to his son in hospital, he visited her and told her that he had another child on the way with another woman (19). Another controversial fact is Paul Coates's take on physical violence. Although Coates insists that his father was not violent (2008, 65), the childhood memories he describes in his works tell a completely different story. Paul often beat his sons to the point that Coates even confesses that "my father scared me" (22). As I am going to explain further on, Paul Coates clearly embodies the multifaceted character of Black masculinities—Ta-Nehisi describes him as drifting between being caring and being violent; he is driven by a fear of doing too little, and also of doing too much; by a fear of not being taken seriously; of not living up to the standards of what being a man really means.

Research on fatherhood developed in great part from the studies on masculinities that proliferated during the turn of the twentieth-first century (Brod and Kaufman 1994; Ghaill 1994a; Marriott 2000; Pinar 2001; Haywood and Ghaill 2003; Orelus 2010). Chris Haywood and Máirtín Mac an Ghaill, in fact, stated that "fatherhood is part of the sociology of masculinity" (2003, 43) and stressed "the need to understand the concepts of men and family life as a gendered interrelationship, through which diverse meanings of both paternal masculinities and manhood itself are mutually constructed and maintained" (44). In this way, in order to fully understand the implications of being a father in general, and a Black father in particular, it is also fundamental to bear into consideration the notion of masculinity or, rather, of masculinities—a concept that has often been deemed unclear and complex (Bradley 2008, 2). According to Michael Kimmel, masculinities refer "to the social roles, behaviors, and meanings prescribed for men in any given society at any one time" and so "they are produced within the institutions of society and through our daily interactions" (2004, 503). The fact that masculinities are not natural so much as a product of society suggests that they are never

fixed nor monolithic, and so they can vary across different cultures; across different countries; over one person's life; and within a society at a given moment in time (Kimmel 2004, 504). Such heterogeneity, Kimmel writes, explains why the plural "masculinities" is favored over the singular "masculinity"—the concept is fluid, as it "means different things to different groups of people at different times" (2004, 504). In this study, the focus is placed on Black U.S. masculinities, in particular on Black U.S. hegemonic masculinities between 1975, the year when Coates was born, and 2015, the year when Coates's letter to his son was published.

By resorting to both *The Beautiful Struggle* and *Between the World and Me*, this section aims at analyzing Coates's approach to gender and power relations, something that at times can be claimed to be stigmatizing and which contributes to the normalization of certain violent behaviors. After an analysis of the concepts of Black masculinities and Black fatherhood, the first part of this section turns to Coates's memoirs to shed light on the phenomenon of whupping and other disciplining methods that some parents employ to physically punish their children. Coates is himself a victim of such violent practices in *The Beautiful Struggle*, and he publicly reflects upon the phenomenon years later in "Earning the Temporary Hatred of Your Children" (2010), where he contends that beating children with the aim of protecting them from other dangers they may encounter in the streets and of equipping them for adult life was normal in his community and admits to have been disconcerted by his readers' categorizing of the experiences he lived as illustrative of child abuse. He also devotes a strikingly brief part in his second memoir to explore how the ways in which he was raised influenced his own point of view about childrearing, and he does not approach the phenomenon from a critical stand again well until the end of 2015, in a conversation with Isaac Chotiner.

The second part of this section delves into another of the most vexed issues in Coates's works—his omission of the extent to which Black women are affected by the racist behaviors he denounces, which showcases that racism intersects and overlaps with other forms of oppression, such as sexism (Bennett 2015; Bodenner 2015; Hilton 2015; Rambsy 2020). Black women have been victims of racist practices for centuries and, for centuries, their stories have been subsumed within the experiences of Black men. Relying on the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989, 1991), which accounts for the manifold oppressions that converge in Black women's bodies, this section underscores the invisibility of Black women in discourses on policing and racism. A number of Black feminist critics of Coates's works have posited that *Between the World and Me* has contributed to the long history of silences around Black women's suffering (Bennett 2015; Bodenner 2015; Hilton 2015). Indeed, Black women's stories are sidelined in his memoir, which, as I have noted, focuses almost exclusively on delineating the dangers not of being Black, but of being a Black man in the U.S. today. This does not mean that Black women do not appear in the text—they do, but they are depicted as rather flat characters who tend to lack depth and dynamism. Worst of all, they are always exclusively described in relation to Black men, and so it seems as if, in Coates's view, Black women do not fear for the destruction of their own bodies, whereas they do for the destruction of the bodies of the Black men around them. In all, Coates's work ultimately feeds the widespread but mistaken assumption "that black women are somehow shielded from the threat of police violence" (Blain 2020, n.p.).

2.3.1 Between Black Fathers and Black Sons: On Hegemonic Masculinities and Coates's Path to Manhood

Coates's father, Paul, holds a central position in Ta-Nehisi's literary *oeuvre*. He is first introduced at the very beginning of *The Beautiful Struggle*, and he is portrayed as the restorer of order in a world ravaged by chaos and violence. Both Ta-Nehisi and his older brother, Big Bill, are looking for wrestlers, "the latest sensation" (4) at the time, but by accident they end up in the Murphy Homes,[166] a public housing complex in West Baltimore notorious for its high incidence of crime, violence, and drug trafficking. Outnumbered, unexperienced, and terrified, Coates and Big Bill try to run away, but Bill is chased by several gang members, beaten, and held against his will. Coates escapes, reaches a telephone booth, and calls his father, who assures him confidently—"son, I'm on the way" (4). The first description that Coates provides of his father comes right afterwards, and it is channeled through the eyes of Big Bill. Right after Paul saves both of his sons from the street fight, readers learn that

> He worked seven days a week. Big Bill called him the pope, for weekly he issued sweeping edicts like he had a line to God. He outlawed eating on Thanksgiving, under pain of lecture. He disavowed air-conditioning, VCRs, and Atari. He made us cut the grass with a hand-powered mower. In the morning he'd play NPR and solicit our opinions just to contravene and debate. (2008, 5-6)

Coates's description of his father anticipates what becomes evident as the memoir develops—that Paul Coates was the head of the family and so he expected his sons to obey him, and that his sons, in return, held conflicting opinions of him, and idealized,

---

[166] They were demolished in July 1999. For more information see Waugh and Miller (2008).

feared, and believed him to be despotic all at once. In the words of Vincent Lloyd, who, in his essay "Black Futures and Black Fathers" (2017), provided significant insights into the filial relationships that Coates describes in his works, Paul was a sort of "god-father" who "even invented quasi-religious dietary rules for his family, prohibiting meat and restricting other foods," among other things (Lloyd 2017, 616). In fact, later in the story, when Paul surprises his son Bill praying, he tells him that if "you want to pray, pray to me. I put the food on this table" (20), right after Coates confesses to his readers that "[his father] was a practicing fascist, mandating books and banning religion" (20).[167]

The description provided by Coates leads us to consider Paul as embodying a model of masculinity that will be studied later on in which the man holds total power "over other men and […] over other women" (Kimmel 1994, 125). The ways in which he does so are not clear at the beginning of the memoir, where Coates insists that his father "generated a fear that was supernatural" (2008, 57) but avoids addressing the reasons why Paul scared him so much. It is not until a few pages later that Coates confides that his father "was not a violent man," and he adds that "I never saw him argue in public. I never saw him hit anyone *but his kids*" (65; my emphasis). It seems, then, that regardless of Coates's claims that his father was not violent, he may have been so after all, at least towards his children. As a matter of fact, physical punishments played a central part in Ta-Nehisi's childhood, and even though he admits that it was his mother who "delivered [his] first beatings," she actually did not "protect [him] from [his] dad," whose violent reactions and unexpected outbursts of temper terrified them (58). Out of all the

---

[167] Paul Coates was, in fact, an atheist. In *The Beautiful Struggle*, Coates delves into how his grandfather was a highly religious man who sought to pass his beliefs on to his son, Paul, who firmly rejected them and turned to books—mainly of "Africana thought" (Lloyd 2017, 569)—instead. "These books," Vincent Lloyd states, "took the place the Bible had held for Coates's grandfather, revered as the exclusive source of sacred knowledge. Indeed, Coates's father was militantly atheistic, and there was a ban on religious expression in the Coates household" (2017, 611). Paul Coates's atheism is only partially sketched in *Between the World and Me*.

descriptions Coates provides of his father's brutal punishments it is the one that follows Coates's admitting to having lost a set of keys that is the most vivid. Following a brief and heated discussion about the whereabouts of the keys, Coates explains that a boy in school had taken them and had thrown them in the trash. Coates had been petrified, and so he had done nothing to either get the keys back or to confront the boy who had stolen them. Enraged at his son's passivity, Paul Coates threatens him with his belt. Coates describes the situation as follows:

> This is when Dad snapped. There was some calculation and illusion here. Dad wasn't the type to have a bad day at work and come home and start swinging. Equally, there would be days when the teacher called home and you were certain a beating was on the way, and he would sit at the table and talk. But this made it worse, because when we were wrong, we felt trapped in a horror movie. We never knew what was coming, how it was coming, or when. Dad walked up the stairs and came back with his black leather belt, folded so that the buckle met the tip. He jabbed me in the chest and asked who I was more scared of—him or them. "I bring this here to intimidate," he said. "To show you what I am. To show you that I mean business. But this isn't what it's about anymore." Then he dropped the belt on the brown carpet and started swinging. (68)

Even if he was overtly violent with his children, Paul Coates himself denounced the injustices he saw inflicted on other people, in particular if inflicted on women. When his son Big Bill beats his girlfriend after realizing that she is pregnant, his father intervenes and yells at him—"Have you lost your mind? I didn't raise you to put your hands on women. Get in the damn house" (120).

Roles are reversed in *Between the World and Me*, where Coates is no longer the son being educated by his father, but a father addressing his son—a son who is growing up and who Coates will soon not be in a position to protect anymore. In this last regard, *Between the World and Me* is driven by Coates's acknowledgment that the time he has left with his son "is limited because Samori is fifteen and plans to attend college in a few years," so he will be defenseless against the dangers of the world (Lordi 2017, 442).[168] Coates acts, in this way, as an intergenerational bridge between his father and his son—in his first memoir, a very young Coates is constantly being saved by Paul; now, however, Coates becomes the savior who seeks to teach his own son the most basic lessons to survive as a Black man in an anti-Black world. It is in Coates's son that Vincent Lloyd identifies the only flicker of hope that is given in *Between the World and Me*, which is, precisely, "hope for the son, hope that the son will join in the revel of questioning and study" (2017, 747).[169]

Coates's fixation with paternity is inscribed within a long tradition of Black writers who have explored the bonds they had with their fathers and who have devoted a central part of their works to delving into the broad and nuanced concept of fatherhood, such as Richard Wright, who gives a detailed account of the troubled relationship he had with his father in *Black Boy* (1945), or James Baldwin, who speaks at length about his father's bearing on him in his essay "Notes of a Native Son" (1955), and who also

---

[168] For Lordi, Coates's anxiety also explicates why he decides to employ the letter format to convey such information to his son. She writes, "his choice of the letter format is driven in part by his desire to give his son something that will endure beyond his own death. But the greater fear, which drives his letter, is that his son might not live to receive it. *Between the World and Me* thus reveals how the threat of black death at once compromises the structural optimism of the letter, as a form, and theoretically intensifies the act of composition: a letter to an imperiled black child must be completed and delivered before it's too late" (2017, 442).

[169] In a similar way, Ta-Nehisi Coates is also his own father's only flicker of hope in *The Beautiful Struggle*. The only difference between both cases is, I believe, how Paul and Ta-Nehisi adopt different strategies to educate their sons and, in this way, to protect that hope.

becomes his nephew's mentor in *The Fire Next Time* (1963).[170] In fact, according to John Edgar Wideman, these two authors verbalized "the failures of [their] black fathers" to such a significant extent that they had a major effect on the literary production on race and filial relationships that followed (1994, 72).

Wright's autobiography *Black Boy* (1945) delves into the author's difficult childhood in the South, where he lived with his father, a violent and alcoholic man whom Wright was terrified of. Wright's father abandoned him when he was still just a child, but Wright remained traumatized by everything his father had put him through, so much so that, at the end of the memoir, he resolves to leave his homeland in an attempt to blot out the memories of his father and to seek better opportunities up North. "If I did not leave," Wright writes, "I would perish" (1947, 226). In the view of David Marriott, who devotes an important part of his seminal work *On Black Men* (2000) to the study of Wright's text, the memoir is an attempt both to look into the relation Wright had with his father and to bring into the open the problems that he had to confront in the long run because of that relationship. In writing about his father, Wright's aim was to "orphan himself," that is, to sever all ties with him, whom he wanted to "bury or forget […], [and] to relinquish […] everything that he represents" (Marriott 2000, 99). Certainly, Wright's rejection of his father conceals a rejection of something deeper—of "a certain kind of violently repressive black masculinity" which mimed the "racist violence of (white) culture in the South" (Marriott 2000, 103).

Richard Wright's approach to paternity is akin to James Baldwin's in his essay "Notes of a Native Son" (1955) where, in the aftermath of his father's death, Baldwin

---

[170] This is yet another similarity that enlarges "the Wright-Baldwin-Coates continuum" even more (Lordi 2017, 445). Although, as I am going to explain, Wright and Baldwin did not hold their fathers in high esteem, their obsession with paternity and with the extent to which their fathers shaped their ways of being in and looking at the world is also shared by Coates.

reflects upon the complex relationship they had—a relationship, again, rooted in violence and abuse. Baldwin's father is described as a cruel, brutal, and erratic man; as somebody who laid down a set of strict rules to control his children. Just like Richard Wright, Baldwin feels a pressing need to walk away from his father's "powerful and overflowing" bitterness (1963, 79), and so he decides to move to New Jersey only to find out, weeks later, that his father, who had been ill with tuberculosis for several years, has passed away. When Baldwin goes back to Harlem, he heaves a sigh of relief as he realizes that now that his father is dead, Baldwin's siblings "could invite their friends to the house without fear that their friends would be insulted or, as had sometimes happened with [Baldwin], being told that their friends were in league with the devil and intended to rob our family of everything we owned" (80).

Coates's account also revolves around the notion of paternity, and as much as it offers a different reading of it,[171] it also reproduces the sort of masculinities that the other two fathers enact—they are all stern men, intimidating, at times even terrifying, and overtly violent with their sons. According to Kirby Schroeder, who draws from the ground-breaking research conducted by Leonard Glass (1984) and Varda Burstyn (1999), the exaggeration and overemphasis of certain violent behaviors and beliefs with the intention of maintaining a man's hegemonic position in society unabated is named hypermasculinity, which Schroeder describes as "unusually highly developed masculine forms as defined by existing cultural values," and so the term is often used to refer to men who are "strong, dependable, rough, mystified by women, rigid, unemotional, powerful" (2004, 418). Amongst all the studies conducted on hypermasculinities, it is probably

---

[171] As I am going to build upon later, Coates's works orbit around the figure of his father, who, like Wright's and Baldwin's, also enacts a form of hegemonic masculinity. However, contrary to them, Coates is full of admiration for his father; an admiration that at times even verges on fascination. Coates, in this way, ennobles the very same form of violence that Baldwin and Wright not only condemn, but also try to run away from.

Donald L. Mosher and Silvan S. Tomkins's "Scripting the Macho Man" (1988) that has received the most attention (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). In it, they approach the concept as a "personality constellation which consists of three behavioral dispositions justified by beliefs: (1) entitlement to callous sex, (2) violence as manly, and (3) danger as exciting" (61). Put another way, the ideology behind hypermasculinity is "a warrior's ideology," since the man is regarded as a "warrior [who] holds dominion over all he has conquered—he is master and patriarch" (64).

Hypermasculinities are comprised within the far-reaching and widely used framework of hegemonic masculinities,[172] a concept coined by Raewyn Connell in *Gender and Power* (1987) which applies to men who benefit from patriarchal systems "through culture, institutions, and persuasion" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832), and so it is only "men who are economically successful, racially superior, and visibly heterosexual" (McDowell 2003, 11) who conform to hegemonic notions of masculinity. Although it might seem a contradiction in terms to talk about Black men enacting hegemonic masculinities, many scholars (Awkward 1994; Conway-Long 1994; Ghaill 1994a, 1994b; Lorber 1998; Lemelle 2010) have insisted that Black masculinities can indeed be hegemonic, but that they can be so only in relation to Black women and to other Black minorities. As I have already explained, racism subdues Black men, but heteropatriarchy enables them to exert oppression against other Black individuals.[173]

The codes of Black masculinity that Paul Coates conforms to run parallel to the ones at work in the Black nationalist tradition and in particular in the Black Panther Party,

---

[172] This is, precisely, one of the main differences between hegemonic masculinities and hypermasculinities. Hegemonic masculinities are so because of the power that men hold in society and that is often granted by the system itself; hypermasculinities, on the other hand, refer to the ways, often violent, that are used only by certain men with the intention of maintaining such status of domination unaltered. For more information on the difference between both terms see Schroeder (2004) and Zernechel and Perry (2017).

[173] This casts light on how Black women are affected by an intersectionality of oppressions, a phenomenon that will be studied in section 2.3.2.

of which Paul himself had been a militant. Although, as Judith Newton notes, the dominant ideal of Black masculinity favored was often associated with virility, toughness, and a proneness to fight, the truth is that Black nationalist movements also served to reinvent different models of Black masculinity in which nurturing one's own family and community outweighed one's individualism, misogyny, and violent behaviors (2005, 61). In a similar vein, Matthew W. Hughey suggests that amongst all the different codes of masculinity that coexisted in the Black Panther Party, there prevailed two predominant forms—"the self-determined image" (2009, 42), which would focus on the cross-diasporic celebration and empowerment of Black men, and "the (counter) hegemonic image," which "struggled against, [but also] relied upon, hegemonic forces" (44).[174] In all, Paul Coates's masculinity is certainly a combination of both—he values the diversity underlying Black culture and knowledge, but at the same time he adopts hegemonic attitudes that reproduce forms of domination within his own community.

Matthew W. Hughey insists that, in his study, he seeks both to shed light on the multiplicity of masculinities that Black nationalists would embody and to avoid falling into the trap of assuming that Black masculinities can be thought of only in terms of the traditional dichotomy that has described Black men "as either unsophisticated, emasculated victims […], or as ultra-masculine, pathological monsters" (2009, 31). Understanding the process whereby Black men ended up being categorized into such a simplistic binarism requires contextualization. For Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2003), the ways in which Black masculinities are conceptualized in the present is contingent on the power relations established between masters and the enslaved, which, to a certain extent, are still reproduced nowadays. In fact, stereotypes about Black men, which later ended

---

[174] In fact, Erika Doss illustrates that this second form of masculinity also "reinscribed the most egregious forms of patriarchal privilege and domination from machismo and misogyny to violence and aggression" (2001, 178).

up defining Black masculinities, developed and took root during enslavement, a period in which Black men were mocked and stereotyped with the aim of reinforcing the moral superiority of white masters.[175] This could be particularly observed in minstrel shows, in which Black men were caricaturized and in which "the slave master legitimated his own role as the responsible agent acting on behalf of the irresponsible minstrel" (Wynter 1979, 153).

The figuration of Black men as pathological monsters did not appear until the end of the nineteenth century. "It was a myth," René Richardson explains, "that cast black men as sexually pathological, hyperbolized their phallic power, and construed them as inherently lustful and primitive" (2007, 90) as a way of protecting the purity of whiteness.[176] Angela Davis claims, in her essay "Rape, Racism, and the Capitalist Setting" (1978), that the construction of Black men as sexual predators and violent thugs was in fact a strategy used by whites to maintain their social, economic, and political prerogatives. It is also important to mention that whilst the image of Black men as being lazy, emasculated, and compliant began losing momentum at the beginning of the twentieth century, the myth of the rapist and violent Black man still stands today

---

[175] That my study focuses on Black men does not mean that no stereotypical images about Black women appeared, too. The image of the "mammy," "the faithful, obedient domestic servant" (71), appeared at the end of the nineteenth century and crystalized with the first appearance of the 1889 logo of Aunt Jemima; after that, other images that contributed to the objectification and further exploitation of Black women appeared. In her work *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), Collins describes three stigmatizing images besides the already discussed "mammy"—the "matriarch," an aggressive, hard-working, absent Black mother; the "breeder," which emerged in enslavement and gained strength after World War II, and which portrayed Black women as extremely fertile women and "able to produce children as easily as animals" (76); and the "jezebel," which Collins describes as a "whore; or sexually aggressive woman" that "is central in the nexus of elite white male images of black womanhood […] to control black women's sexuality" (77).

[176] In fact, U.S. president Andrew Johnson refused to grant former enslaved people citizenship and deprived Black men and women of their liberties because he considered them, in particular Black men, who were starting to be portrayed as dangerous criminals and sexual predators, to be a threat to the existing state of affairs. Images of the sort were reinforced, for instance, with the Scottsboro Boys, who were accused, without evidence, of raping two white women on a train in 1931. Similar cases have been occurring ever since, but probably most famous is the Central Park Five incident in 1989, in which five Black and brown boys aged between 14 and 16 were framed and incarcerated for allegedly raping and murdering a white woman in Central Park. For more information on these cases and others see Carter (1979), Alexander (2010) and Burns (2019).

(Kuumba 2006; Richardson 2007). In fact, one only needs to look at Darren Wilson's grand jury testimony, where he referred to Michael Brown as a monster, to see the extent to which the stereotyping of Black men as violent and dangerous has often been used to justify their lynching, maiming, arrest, and murder.[177] Coates also bears witness to all the aforementioned when he denounces that his friend was murdered precisely because a policeman had considered him to be a person of interest and had allegedly mistaken him for a dangerous criminal even though the physical differences between them both were obvious (80).

Racist stereotypes of Black men inform Black masculinities; and Black men are still "constrained by these images and […] underlying visions of masculinity" (Collins 2006, 75), which they often seek not only to defy, but to abolish altogether. Ta-Nehisi Coates, for his part, succeeds in illustrating the ambivalent and complex quality of Black masculinities, as the men he writes about in his works, including himself, undergo important changes regarding the sort of attitudes they comply with—and the hegemonic masculinities that he witnesses as a boy he first endorses, later challenges, and finally overturns. Both *The Beautiful Struggle* and *Between the World and Me* highlight the extent to which he was socialized into certain standards of manliness by his father, from whom he learns, among other things, that to be a man is to be daring and determined; to be always on the lookout; and, last but not least, to be in control of his feelings, which his father, "like us all, [had] long repressed" (2008, 73). Coates's belief that displaying emotions meant that his vulnerability was out in the open is again another of the main

---

[177] A transcript of Wilson's testimony is provided in section 1.1.2.

principles underpinning Black hegemonic masculinities.[178] As Michael Kaufman explains,

> The acquisition of hegemonic—and most subordinate—masculinities is a process through which men come to suppress a range of emotions, needs, and possibilities, such as nurturing, receptivity, empathy, and compassion, which are experienced as inconsistent with the power of manhood. These emotions and needs don't disappear; they are simply held in check or not allowed to play as full a role in our lives as would be healthy for ourselves and those around us. We dampen these abilities and emotions because they might restrict our capacity and desire to control ourselves or dominate the human beings around us upon whom we depend for love and friendship. We suppress them because they come to be associated with the femininity we have rejected as part of our quest for masculinity. (1994, 148)

Coates's hegemonic masculinity is particularly observed in his outright rejection of homosexuality, which has conventionally been deemed as being "inconsistent with manhood" (Kaufman 1994, 148) and "contrary to orthodox masculinity" (Plummer 2004, 392). In *Between the World and Me*, Coates's homophobic attitudes are most clearly displayed when he gets to know "the girl with the long dreads," an unnamed bisexual woman whom he meets at Howard University (2015a, 58). "She was raised by a Jewish mother in a small, nearly all-white town in Pennsylvania," Coates writes when he first introduces her, "and now, at Howard, ranged between women and men, asserted this not just with pride but as though it were normal, *as though she were normal*" (58; emphasis

---

[178] As I already explained in sections 1.1.3 and 2.2.2, and as I am also going to explore later in this section, the racial factor plays a crucial part in Black men's not displaying their emotions.

in the original).[179] Coates's reading of bisexuality in terms of abnormalcy throws into relief the fact that he had been raised in a family where heteronormativity prevailed.[180] Put differently, for Coates it was heterosexuality that was default, universal, and, using his own words, normal, and any deviation from that norm would be a sign that the natural order of things had been reversed.

Coates's attitudes illustrate that heterosexism tends to bring about homophobic behaviors, something that Adrienne Rich also explains in her influential essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980), where she writes that "the bias of compulsory heterosexuality" renders homosexual experiences "deviant [and] abhorrent, or simply […] invisible" (632). Interestingly, right after acknowledging that his friend sleeps both with men and women, Coates adds that he is not as surprised at her bisexuality in itself as he is at her being a Black woman who identifies as bisexual. Coates's wondering if "this was something black people did" (58) is one of the many outcomes of growing up in a Black community in which the fallacious argument that "homosexuality is fundamentally unblack" and that "blacks are not like gays, in other words, because gays are white" had been generally accepted; something that, according

---

[179] Right after this, Coates writes that "I know it's nothing to you now, but I was from a place—America—where cruelty towards humans who loved as their deepest instincts instructed was a kind of law. I was amazed. Was that something black people did? Yes" (58). Coates is, in this way, fully aware of how homophobic his comment was. He seems to indicate that he uses the word "normal" now because it was the word that he would have used back in the day, not because he still uses it now. Also, his contention seems to suggest that it was at Howard, after meeting this woman, that he realized how homophobic he had been.

[180] This is most certainly influenced by Paul Coates's involvement in the Black nationalist movement and in his reproduction of hegemonic attitudes, as "the heterosexist and homophobic brand of revolutionary black nationalism excluded black women and homosexuals" (Doss 2001, 178). As shown in both memoirs, though in particular in *Between the World and Me*, such prejudices are passed on from father to son.

to Devon W. Carbado, happened in the majority of Black neighborhoods in the 1970s (1999b, 284).[181]

Coates's prejudices against his friend are most evident when he meets her housemates, a middle-aged married couple who are engaged in a polyamorous relationship. "The girl with the long dreads lived in a house with a man, a Howard professor, who was married to a white woman," Coates writes. "The Howard professor slept with men. His wife slept with women. And the two of them slept with each other. They had a little boy who must be off to college by now" (58). Coates's account is suddenly interrupted by a critical reflection on his employment of sexual slurs to refer to non-heterosexual individuals; something that, in turn, leads Coates to question himself and to understand the privileges that he had enjoyed—and will most certainly keep on enjoying—as a heterosexual man:

> "Faggot" was a word I had employed all my life. And now here they were, The Cabal, The Coven, The Others, The Monsters, The Outsiders, The Faggots, The Dykes, dressed in all their human clothes. I am black, and have been plundered and have lost my body. But perhaps I too had the capacity for plunder, maybe I would take another human's body to confirm myself in a community. (58-60)

Coates's opinion of the woman, and by extension of non-heterosexuality, undergoes a radical transformation when she takes care of him after he falls ill. "I was afraid," Coates states. "I did not understand what was happening. My supervisor knocked on the door. Someone had come to see me. It was her" (61). As soon as she notices that

---

[181] For more information on the "racialization of homosexuality as white and the ontological conception of blackness as straight" (Carbado 1999b, 284), see Devon W. Carbado's *Black Men on Race, Gender, and Sexuality* (1999a).

Coates is in deep distress and that he is on his own at the university, far from family and friends, she resolves to take him to her house, where she puts him to bed and leaves him with an empty bucket and a jug of water before returning to class. When she gets back home, Coates has recovered and is "back in form" (61). Her commitment to help him is enough for Coates to change his perception of her, whom he now regards as being caring, empathic, and altogether worthy of his respect, and also the family she lives with, which now he sees as being "filled with all manner of love" (61).

Certainly, the girl with the dreads teaches Coates "to love in new ways"; or, in other words, in ways that stand in direct opposition to the love he received as a kid (2015a, 60). In fact, as he claims at the beginning of the memoir, affection and violence were inextricably entwined during his childhood, as his parents often punished him and his brothers with the intention of teaching them how to act in certain situations and of guiding their transition to adulthood. In *Between the World and Me* Coates vividly remembers that his father used to beat him under the pretext that "either I can beat him, or the police" (2015a, 16); something that he also mentions in *The Beautiful Struggle* when, eavesdropping on a conversation between his parents, he hears his father say, "Cheryl, who would you rather do this: me or the police?" (2008, 141). It seems as if Paul Coates punishes his son precisely because he loves him;[182] something that, in turn, threads not only throughout Coates's memoirs, but also throughout other contemporary texts, such as *Heavy: An American Memoir* (2018), where Kiese Laymon admits to having had a similar relationship with his mother, who also hit him with the intent "of pushing him to excellence" (Dorsey 2020).

---

[182] This is a conclusion Coates reaches too, right after having been punished. In *The Beautiful Struggle*, he writes that "my father swung with the power of an army of slaves in revolt. He swung like he was afraid, like the world was closing in and cornering him, like he was *trying to save my life*" (2008, 141; my emphasis).

In his work, Laymon states that, even though he had been abused by his mother for years, he could understand the reasons behind her behavior. "I remember forgiving you when Grandmama told me you beat me so much because something in Jackson was beating you," he tells her (2018, 87). In a way that bears striking similarities with Coates's effort to grasp his father's attitudes, Laymon struggles to portray his mother as a woman who hit him in a bid to protect him from a dangerous world, which in the past had inflicted great harm on her too; or, in the words of Poppy Noor, as a woman "who loved him but also beat him ruthlessly for fear of what white America would do to him if he wasn't perfect" (2018). In an interview entitled "Absent Fathers and Present Mothers," Laymon admits to Noor that her mother's severity was nothing but another form of loving. "My grandmother, mother and aunt were pretty good at loving," he says. "They tried. They failed often. But their ability to love is why I'm talking to you today. My book is all about love" (2018).

In her influential work *All About Love: New Visions* (2001), bell hooks casts light on a very complex phenomenon that is manifest in both Laymon's and Coates's memoirs—that abused children grow up thinking that "abuse is an expression of love" (9); something that, for Antwan Herron, is certainly one of "the most controversial and taboo aspects of black culture" (2017, n.p.). Just as Laymon worships his mother and has struggled to understand her behavior towards him (Dorsey 2020), so does Coates hold his father in high esteem regardless of his having administered heavy punishments on him when he was younger, something that leads Coates to claim that, during his childhood, "violence was administered in fear and love" (17).

John Bradshaw refers to this "defective love" as a sort of "mystification," which can be defined as "an altered state of consciousness in which a [kid] feels and believes that there is something wrong with them as they are" whilst they keep endorsing their

parents' violent behavior (1992, 42). It is not until they are adults, Bradshaw notes, that formerly abused children can allow themselves to revisit the relationship they had with their parents and, through a process of retrospection, they can "demystify" themselves (348).[183] Coates's demystification may be claimed to start at Howard University, after he distances himself from his father and meets the girl with the long dreads, who teaches him that love can also be "soft and understanding" (2015a, 62); and, as I am going to explain, it culminates with the actual fact of Coates's writing the memoir to his son. But Coates's process of coming to terms with his own past has not been an easy path, and it was not until he received the feedback from his readers that he realized he may well have been a victim of child abuse after all:

> This is hard for a lot of people to hear, but in my family, in my neighborhood, and in my community, this is part of what parenting meant. If you weren't feeling the edge of the sword on your ass, then you were responding to the possibility of it. One thing I learned, while touring for my book, was that a lot of people consider this to be child abuse. It really was news to me and ultimately unthinkable. Almost everyone I'd ever known had come up the same way. (2010, n.p.)

A final point that must be taken into consideration in my analysis is whether, when he becomes a father himself, Coates subscribes to the parenting practices that his father endorsed. As we have already discussed, even though the model of masculinity that Ta-Nehisi Coates displays in *Between the World and Me* swerves away from the ones already addressed in the previous paragraphs, at certain points it also verges upon

---

[183] Bradshaw defines "demystification" as "a process of waking up to the facts that surround us—especially the facts about people we relate to and interact with. When our mind is no longer fixated on the past, we can fix our attention on what is really before us. Really seeing and hearing others as they are is crucial if we want to love them" (1992, 348).

hypermasculinity—in particular in the passages in which he ponders over his youth, where readers are presented with a Coates who is willing to do whatever it takes to earn the respect of his community, who displays homophobic attitudes, and who always represses his emotions.[184] Coates justifies his behavior by admitting that he did not know any different and that he did not have any other models to follow. In fact, in *Between the World and Me*, he briefly outlines the extent to which his own understanding of fatherhood finds its roots in the violent practices adopted by both his father and his grandfather:

> I wanted you to have your own life, apart from fear—even apart from me. I am wounded. I am marked by old codes, which shielded me in one world and then chained me in the next. I think of your grandmother calling me and noting how you were growing tall and would one day try to "test me." And I said to her that I would regard that day, should it come, as the total failure of fatherhood because if all I had over you were my hands, then I really had nothing at all. But, forgive me, son, I knew what she meant and when you were younger I thought the same. And I am now ashamed of the thought, ashamed of my fear, of the generational chains I tried to clasp onto your wrists. We are entering our last years together and I wish I had been softer with you. […] And that is because I am wounded. That is because I am tied to old ways, which I learned in a hard house. It was a loving house even as it was besieged by its country, but it *was* hard. (2015a, 125-126; emphasis in the original)

---

[184] Coates, however, and as I am going to explain in depth later, resorts to those moments to explain who he used to be in the past and is trying not to be any more.

Coates illustrates how the process of socialization into certain standards of manliness operates—having been the sufferer of the beatings of his father, Coates grew up thinking that disciplining children was normal; so much so that he ends up even being violent to his own son, too. Coates does not mention his being hard on his son again in the text; but he does so in "Earning the Temporary Hatred of Your Children" (2010), where he states that he "smacked [his] son's hand until he was four. And then spanked him until he was seven. Most of this was about him sucking his teeth at his mother, or some such. We're done with that now, and at least in my presence, he doesn't exhibit that kind of disrespect" (n.p.). Coates's words suggest that he raised his child in a similar way to how he was raised by his own father; that is, bearing in mind that being violent might help him "[mold] […] a responsible black man" (2010, n.p.):

> That was my parents' mission, and it was dutifully enforced by my Pops. I think back on it now, and would say that between the ages of eight and seventeen, I really didn't like my Dad much. I respected the hell out of him. Loved the hell of out him. Thought he was the most honorable, most fair man I'd ever known. I was also intensely afraid (well into my 20s) that I would not live up to his example. But like him? No, I didn't much like him. If you asked him, I think he'd say that this was done by design. His guiding emotion was a fear that one of his seven kids would end up in jail, get killed over some dumb-shit, or be out on the corner. Childhood, in my house at least, wasn't a respite before the real work of adulthood, it was practice for adulthood. (Coates 2010, n.p.)

If Black parents are so strict with Black kids, Coates mentions in a number of articles (Coates 2010, 2015d) and interviews (Chotiner 2015), it is certainly because children need to understand that, contrary to white kids, "the consequences [of

misbehaving in the streets] for black folks are so much higher" because "you can pay with your life" (in Chotiner 2015, n.p.). In this vein, Coates insists that racism mediates family relationships, and that certain modes of domestic violence and child abuse and neglect are rooted in, and directly motivated by, inter-racial forms of discrimination Black people are victims of.[185] In fact, the central hypothesis of a major study on Black parenthood and whupping, Stacey Patton's *Spare the Kids: Why Whupping Won't Save Black America* (2017a), is precisely that "the violence our children face from the police, school systems, the streets, *and* from their parents is all interconnected" (20; emphasis in the original). For Patton, such parenting methods are a legacy of enslavement, a period in history in which Black parents began hitting their children to teach "them proper deference and demeanor in front of whites" (2017b, n.p.). Practices of the sort continued after emancipation, as Black parents still felt an urging need to prevent their children from being beaten by officers or even lynched by white mobs. In her view, then, whupping is so entrenched in Black communities that it has been normalized to the extent that parents who are violent but who succeed in holding up their families are praised despite their exercising violence.[186] At the end of her work, Patton urges her readers to revisit the phenomenon, noting that "black children raised without whuppings and fear can flourish" and insisting that "rooting out violence in all forms—from our families, schools, and communities—is an essential step to challenging racist devaluation" (2017a, 473). A similar conclusion is also reached by Coates himself in an interview with Isaac Chotiner published months after *Between the World and Me*, where Coates regrets his behavior and contends that "I told my son recently, and I hit him four times, that if I had to do it

---

[185] This follows a very similar logic to Coates's understanding of Black-on-Black crime, a phenomenon analyzed in section 2.2.2.

[186] In relation to this, Patton writes that "we put Mama on a pedestal and hesitate to call her out because she's holding up our families, often by herself. But that doesn't make it okay for her to beat the black off us" (2017a, 22).

again, I never would have hit him. I just wouldn't have done it. It's still violence. You are perpetrating the thing you are trying to get them to stay out of the way of" (2015a, n.p.).

As I have been trying to demonstrate, Coates's approach to the violent practices upheld by Black parents illustrates very well the dual function of representing violence that both Bruce B. Lawrence and Aisha Karim (2007), as well as Régine Michelle Jean-Charles (2009, 2014), underscored—to heal pain but to wreak havoc, too. In a similar vein, Stacey Patton states that verbalizing the problem of whupping in Black families serves to bring awareness to it; but that it confers upon it a present dimension, too. At the beginning of *Spare the Kids* (2017a), she claims that although her "book may […] bring up some old wounds" it is paramount "to talk about this" (22); and that she is writing in the hope that "this book will be so disturbing that it will make it difficult for people to continue hitting children in peace" (23). Coates's approach to fatherhood may be claimed to function in a similar way—it jolts readers as it enhances the visibility of, and pushes new conversations forward about, a serious problem that has often been overlooked in Black communities. However, following the arguments presented by Lawrence and Karim (2007), Matthews and Goodman (2013), and Dix and Templeton (2020), Coates is also treading on very thin ice—at what point does a representation of violence stop being a denunciation and turns instead into a normalization, if not legitimization, of said violence?

Another controversy that has broken out over Coates's memoir is that it elides how Black women are affected by racial violence—not only are they mostly absent in the family relations he describes, but also in his denunciation of the vulnerability of Black bodies. His omission of the extent to which Black women are also affected by racist practices builds upon a tradition that has largely assumed that Black men are "*the* racial subject" (McDowell 1991, 152; my emphasis). In fact, in her influential essay "In the

First Place: Making Frederick Douglass and the Afro-American Tradition" (1991),[187] Deborah E. McDowell complains that scholarship on enslavement—and by extension on other forms of racial violence—has traditionally placed far more emphasis on black men, which has in turn "served to support a sexist social order" (153) in which Black women's experiences have gone largely unnoticed. The final section of this chapter sets out to focus on the part played by Black women in discourses on racial profiling in general, and in Coates's works in particular.

Although Black women's visibility in policing and other forms of racial discrimination has increased in the last few years through the mounting of campaigns such as "Say Her Name" or "Black Girls Matter," both launched by Kimberlé Crenshaw at the beginning of 2015, the truth is that the scant attention directed to the phenomenon still remains a problem. In fact, it was Breonna Taylor's murder on March 13, 2020 that rekindled, after the cases of Renisha McBride in 2013, Rekia Boyd in 2014, and Sandra Bland in 2015, the national conversation on the extent to which Black women's struggles with racism do not often make it into the headlines (Azalia and Mackey-Hall 2020). As I am going to study later, the fact that their cases are seldom talked about in public does not mean that they are not serious or unfair—according to a report published in *The New York Times*, 48 Black women have been mortal victims of police brutality in the last seven years, but only two officers have been charged for the crimes (Gupta 2020). Taylor's

---

[187] In the essay, McDowell illustrates that the appropriation of the gendered violence(s) Black women are subject to has a long-standing history. In her work, she explains that Frederick Douglass's constant recreations of the whippings of Hester—in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845)—and Nelly—in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855)—make him enter into "a symbolic complicity with the sexual acts he witnesses" (158). She then extrapolates Douglass's case to several others, and writes that "unlike the male narratives, which portray graphically the sexual abuse of slave women by white men, female narratives barely mention sexual experiences and never represent rape or seduction as the most profound aspect of their existence. […] One could easily argue that, with perhaps the exception of his mother and grandmother, slave women operate almost totally as physical bodies, as sexual victims 'at the mercy […] of the fathers, sons, or brothers of [their] master'" (155).

murder, in this way, served to shed light on the "larger issue of the invisibility of black women and black womanhood" in cases of racism (Azalia and Mackey-Hall 2020).

Black women are pushed into the background also in *Between the World and Me*, where they seem to be impervious to the racial problems Coates addresses and where they feature only in relation to the Black men whose lives are the focus of the narrative. For feminist critics of the memoir, such as Shani O. Hilton (2015) or Britt Bennett (2015), the problem is not that Black women are not at the center of the narration, but that they are almost not even on its margins, either. Moreover, they claim, the few Black women that appear in the memoir never worry about the ephemerality of their own lives the way Black men do about theirs, but they do worry about the bodies of their fathers, husbands, brothers, or sons. The last section of this dissertation seeks to assess a final way in which Coates's work has been deemed violent—Coates focuses on the racist experiences lived by Black men to such a significant extent that he elides the hardships endured by Black women and other Black minorities.

2.3.2 "Overpoliced and Underprotected":[188] Racialized Gendered Violence(s) and
Between the World and Me

Ta-Nehisi Coates's neglect to regard Black women[189] as victims of racial violence constitutes the second most contentious subject about *Between the World and Me*, probably only after Coates's cynicism which, as I have already discussed, has often been interpreted as constraining the agency of Black individuals. Shortly after the memoir was published, a number of critics, most of them Black women, though not exclusively,[190] complained that Coates's approach to racial issues failed to take into consideration the complex dynamics operating among Blackness, gender, and sexuality (Bennett 2015; Bodenner 2015; Duffy 2015; Hilton 2015; West 2017). Authors such as Brit Bennett or Shani O. Hilton openly voiced their dissatisfaction with Coates's gendering of racial profiling, claiming that in his text "the dangers of living in a black female body are mysterious, forever unknowable" (Bennett 2015, n.p.), and Josie Duffy, even when trying to defend Coates's stand, insisted that "*Between the World and Me* is for all of us even if it is *not about all of us*" (2015; my emphasis).

---

[188] This phrase is taken from the title of the first report issued by the Black Girls Matter campaign in 2015. For more information see Crenshaw (2015).

[189] My use of the word women is inclusive of Black transgender women, even if they are not the focus of this study. However, I would like to highlight the precarity and vulnerability affecting the lives of Black transgender women. Black transgender victims of policing are notably absent from headlines and national reports on police brutality even if, according to a report published by the Human Rights Campaign and the Trans People of Color Coalition in 2017, "since January 2013, […] at least 102 transgender people […] were victims of fatal violence. At least 87 were transgender people of color" (Lee 2017, 34). However, and because of a systematic refusal to acknowledge the gender identities of the victims, it is difficult to "track [these] cases as they occur" (Lee 2017, 33). In his essay "Black Rights, Gay Rights: Civil Rights" (1999), Devon W. Carbado contends that the refusal to standardize Black transgenderism in contemporary society derives from a "mythologized historiography" that, in the opinion of gay rights activist Marlon Riggs and many others, has normalized the racialization of transgenderism as white and "the ontological conception of blackness as [cisgender]" (Riggs 1991 in Carbado 1999, 284). Because of this assumption, these individuals' bodies are perceived as "problem bodies" (Ritchie 2017, 53). For more information on the experiences of Black transgender women and policing see Carbado (1999), Lee (2017), and Ritchie (2017).

[190] Both Chris Bodenner (2015) and Cornel West (2017) have also been particularly critical of Coates's biased approach to gender in *Between the World and Me*.

Amongst other seminal works, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (1982), coedited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, had already argued that Black women are affected by many different but intersecting oppressions, such as those that are motivated by race, gender, sexuality, class, and other identity markers, such as religion, and they claimed for the need to develop a new framework from which to consider the meanings coalescing in the very definition of Black womanhood (xxi). As its title indicates, the work argued that discourses on womanhood focus on whiteness, whilst discourses on race focus on manhood. In a similar vein, Kimberlé Crenshaw, in her work "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" (1989), argued that "there is a tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis, with the result that lawsuits addressing discrimination are defined 'by white women's and black men's experiences'" (in Belknap 2001, 17). Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" to account for the overlapping forms of discrimination converging in Black women's bodies (1989, 1991).

For Mariame Kaba, the fact that Black women are left out of discourses on racial profiling even though they are one of the most overpoliced groups in U.S. society is yet another of the several outcomes of the multiplicity of oppressions that Black women are subject to; and, in her foreword to Andrea Ritchie's work *Invisible No More* (2017), she referred to such invisibilization as a manifestation of "racialized gendered violence" (xi). As Joy James puts it, the acknowledgement of women as targets of institutional and police violence "is an issue rarely raised in feminist explorations of women and violence or masculinist explorations of racism and policing" (in Ritchie 2017, xiv). In this respect, Crenshaw highlighted in an interview that whilst "it's understandable why there's so much coverage of black men being killed by police, the relative exclusion of women from this topic should be cause for concern" (Clifton 2015). Disregarding women from such

discourses results in two further problems. On the one hand, it provides a wrong perception of the dimensions of racial profiling. The focus on Black men being the only targets of racial violence fails to account for the magnitude of the problem, as the high percentage of victims constituted by Black women and girls, as well as by gender non-conforming individuals, is left out of the analysis. On the other hand, the focus on men also silences discriminatory policing practices that women are particularly subject to, such as strip-searches and other forms of abusive frisking, sexual fondling, or rape, even when women are pregnant or menstruating (Ritchie 2017, 51-59).

Black women do appear in Coates's memoirs, but they are described as being distant and ethereal, particularly if compared to the ways in which Coates approaches the unified Black body that I mentioned in the previous chapter, which is material, embodied and, in all, worldly. At the risk of oversimplifying, four shortcomings can be identified in Coates's portrayal of women. First, and as I have just established, they are described as if they were impervious to experiencing first-hand the forms of discrimination that Black men suffer from. Second, Coates devotes almost no attention to emphasizing the sexual dimension of the violence that women in particular are victims of. Third, women seem to be strategically placed in the narration only, in Laura Mulvey's terms, to be looked at (1988). Fourth, and in a way that brings together all the former points, Coates's approach in general ends up secluding women in, as well as reproducing, the "negative controlling images of black womanhood" that Patricia Hill Collins denounces in her work (1990, 10).

One of the first instances in which Coates states that Black women are also victims of racism can be found at the very beginning of *Between the World and Me*, when he elaborates a list that includes the names of several Black individuals murdered in the

streets in which the names of Renisha McBride and Marlene Pinnock are included.[191] At other points in the text, Coates also strives to raise awareness of the vulnerability of both Black boys and Black girls by using the generic "children," and on very few occasions he does so by maintaining both masculine and feminine nouns and pronouns, as when he claims that "all my life I'd heard people tell their black boys and *black girls* to 'be twice as good'" (2015a, 90-91; my emphasis), and that "the story of a black body's destruction must always begin with his or *her* error" (96; my emphasis). In all, Coates's extremely brief analysis of the ways in which Black women's experiences of policing are shaped by sexual harassment has been considered problematic, and "it feels odd for a narrator who is otherwise insatiably curious" (Bennett 2015).[192]

Almost no attention is paid to the extent to which racist practices are also gendered and sexualized. In fact, Coates only briefly hints at the singularity of said phenomenon when he warns his son that "the women around you must be responsible for their bodies in a way that you never will know" (Coates 2015a, 71). Coates's superficial approach to the subject has been met with the hostility of Black feminist critics, who have been taken aback by Coates's refusal to address sexual abuse, in particular when it is "the second most reported form of police misconduct after the use of excessive force" (Bennett 2015). Misa Dayson also finds Coates's lack of attention to the gendered dimension of racism problematic. In her review of the book, which features in Chris Bodenner's "*Between the*

---

[191] Coates writes, "I am writing to you because this was the year you saw Eric Garner choked to death for selling cigarettes; because you know now that Renisha McBride was shot for seeking help, that John Crawford was shot down for browsing in a department store. And you have seen men in uniform drive by and murder Tamir Rice, a twelve-year-old child whom they were oath-bound to protect. And you have seen men in those same uniforms pummel Marlene Pinnock, someone's grandmother, on the side of a road" (2015a, 9).

[192] Related to this, Misa Dayson contends that "I understood that as a letter written to his son, Coates' focus was on transmitting knowledge to his child on how to survive and thrive in the United States as a Black man. However, many times throughout the book Coates slips into generalizing language about Black people, without spending time reflecting on impacts of the various gendered expressions of white supremacy" (in Bodenner 2015, n.p.).

World and Me Book Club: Your Final Critical Thoughts" (2015), Dayson suggests that the very few times in which he refers to Black women being sexually harassed he does so using such general terms that it remains very difficult for readers to identify the perpetrators and to understand the pain that the victims experience. "Coates mentions the word 'rape' a fair amount when talking about the plunder of the Black body as a necessity in upholding The Dream," Dayson states.

> However, he never actually names who bore the brunt of these sexual attacks. The reader is left to assume that he means black women. It felt too easy to repeatedly invoke the image of sexual assault of black women at the hands of white men to make a point about the bodily effects of slavery and white supremacy. And it felt disappointing to have this image repeatedly invoked without spending some time reflecting on what it means for black women to navigate a white supremacist world that conceives of our bodies as always available to all men, regardless of race. (in Bodenner 2015, n.p.)

Such availability, which Deborah E. McDowell also denounces in her work "In the First Place: Making Frederick Douglass and the Afro-American Tradition" (1991), is best exemplified in the memoir in Coates's description of the Howard University Yard, in particular when he is told that the Mecca is "a place to be loved—for it was said, and we certainly believed it to be true, that nowhere on the Earth could one find a more beautiful assembly of women than on Howard University's Yard" (49).[193] Coates's portrayal of women in the previous excerpt recalls Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze," which she coined and developed in her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and

---

[193] Whilst I find this contention problematic, a radically different interpretation of this fragment is provided in "Black Futures and Black Fathers," where Vincent Lloyd claims that "if the body, as part of the natural world, is created good as well as beautiful, and if loving this beauty (regardless of gender) can orient us beyond the world, the beauty Coates witnesses among the Howard women need not be reduced to the (worldly) terms of libidinal desire that his prose invites" (2017, 702).

Narrative Cinema" (1988). In a way that bears resemblances with McDowell's argument (1991), Mulvey stated that women's bodies tend to be displayed as erotic objects for the delectation not only of other male characters, but of spectators or, in the case of Coates, of readers, too (62), and in the process women are turned into "(passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of men" (67).[194] Another problem that arises out of his description of Howard University, and which has largely been ignored by critics, is his omission of the names of the women he meets there. Readers know that it is at Howard where he befriends both Prince Jones and Ben, who ends up being his brother-in-law. However, the girls he meets are all unnamed—he first "fell hard for a lovely girl from California" (57); he then "fell again, […] for another girl, tall with long flowing dreadlocks" (58); and, finally, he "fell in love at The Mecca one last time, lost my balance and all my boyhood confusion, under the spell of a girl from Chicago. This was your mother" (64).[195]

Coates's stereotyping portrayal of women is also manifested in the last chapter of the memoir, which orbits around a conversation that Coates has with Mabel Jones, Prince Jones's mother. After some initial reflections on the ways Mabel is coping with the killing of her son, the interview leans towards more personal questions, and Coates soon notes that "she [Mabel] was intensely worried about her daughter bringing a son into America, because she could not save him, she could not secure his body from the ritual violence

---

[194] For Shani O. Hilton, the problem is that his emphasis on their beauty overshadows their intellectual potential. In "The Black Experience Isn't Just about Men," she writes that "when I was at Howard, the most frequently (jokingly) thrown around figure was that the freshman class was 7 to 1, women to men. Official numbers are somewhere around 65% female to 35% male. The sheer number of women on campus meant their influence was felt from all sides. Women were in student government leadership roles; women edited the student newspaper, *The Hilltop*; […] classes where women spoke up and weren't in the habit of being talked over by men, well-dressed, well-heeled women who were trained to chase career success just as much as love" (2015). The central role that Black women played in Howard University is also showcased by Audrey Kerr in her essay "The Paper Bag Principle: Of the Myth and the Motion of Colorism" (2005) and in her book *The Paper Bag Principle: Class, Complexion, and Community in Black Washington, D.C.* (2006). For both Hilton and Kerr, it is shocking that, taking into consideration that Black women have attained such high ranks at Howard, they are only portrayed as being beautiful in Coates's memoir.

[195] Coates has not said anything about this topic, and so the reasons why he decides to leave out the names of the women he meets at Howard are unknown.

that claimed her son" (2015a, 144). Two ideas can be inferred from his words. First of all, the fact that she does not seem to be worried about her daughter falling victim to racist practices, but about her daughter giving birth to a boy, reiterates that Black women are not considered victims of racial profiling in the social imaginary (Bennett 2015). Mabel's concerns can be read in a different light, too, as she may be worried not only about the wellbeing of her daughter's unborn son, but also about her own daughter's wellbeing— she does not want her to go through such a traumatic event; an event that, tragically, she knows too well. Second, the fact that the emphasis is placed on Mabel's daughter almost exclusively as a mother birthing a child could be read as an example of the extent to which Black women are secluded into oppressive categories of identity.[196] In so writing, Coates seems to be contending that Black women are not vulnerable for being Black nor for being women, but for having an affective relationship with Black men.

The delicacy with which Coates refers to the women in the text, by and large, verges on idealization, so much so that even though they are often depicted "lovingly, almost ethereally, […] they rarely appear as complicated, fully fleshed-out people" (Bennett 2015). When he focuses on revisiting his childhood and early adulthood, Coates adopts an awestruck, respectful, almost reverential tone to refer both to his grandmother, whom he describes as a strong and rough woman who taught him to read, to write, and "to ruthlessly interrogate the subject that elicited the most sympathy and rationalizing— myself" (2015a, 30), and his wife, whom he admires because of her bravery and smartness. Nonetheless, one could argue that these portrayals border on what Patricia Hill Collins called "negative controlling images of black womanhood" (1990, 10).

---

[196] As I am going to discuss later, this is not a one-off event, but something that is repeated multiple times in the narrative.

To begin with, Black women are often described as persons who, contrary to most of the men that appear in his works, are emotional and caring. In fact, it is Coates's wife who teaches him that loving his son would in no way increase his vulnerability as a Black man. He notes, "your mother had to teach me how to love you—how to kiss you and tell you I love you every night" (2015a, 126).[197] Secondly, Black women are always described in their relation to men, and so they are never represented as independent women with responsibilities of their own, but rather as mothers, grandmothers, sisters, daughters, or wives. This portrayal, in turn, as I noted above when analyzing Mabel Jones's reaction to the killing of her son, and as Shani O. Hilton convincingly argues, contributes to the normalization of Black women's experiences as being about loving and mourning, when in fact they should also be about "protecting oneself from physical plunder. It's about trying to live free in a black body, just like a man" (Hilton 2015).

In an attempt to defend himself against such critiques, Coates claimed, in his conversation with Isaac Chotiner, that this rather masculinized perspective could not have been otherwise, as *Between the World and Me* is the story of a Black man telling his Black son how to survive within the rampant racism that permeates U.S. society. "I understand that it is the male experience and I am a male writing the book," he maintained. "I don't know how to remedy that" (Chotiner 2015). Indeed, Coates's texts open up many questions, and his multifaceted representations of Black men, as well as the ethereality of Black women in *Between the World and Me* in particular, definitely foster conversations on crucial and very contentious issues.

---

[197] Even though I have largely explained this in the previous section, it is worth noting now that Coates's repression of his feelings and emotions, just like his father's, stems from fear; from a need to prove himself invulnerable and to protect both himself and the people he loves.

2.3.2.1 Visibility Matters: Exposing the Stories of Black Women and Racial Profiling

At this point it is clear, then, that the experiences of Black women as regards racial violence are downplayed and subsumed within the experiences of Black men (Belknap 2001). Nonetheless, as Andrea Ritchie elaborates in *Invisible No More*, Black women are pulled over and frisked in a similar proportion to Black men, and "the year before [Michael] Brown was killed, Black women in Ferguson were subjected to traffic stops more frequently than any other motorist" (2017, 10). Ritchie also contends that the disproportionate rates of incarceration of Black women are usually eclipsed by the number of Black men being imprisoned although "the number of women [of color] in jail nationwide is growing at a faster rate than any other incarcerated population" (2017, 44).[198] Similarly, even though Black women are not considered to be mortal victims of policing, they are in fact the second largest social group affected by it, second only to Black men.

Despite the alarming rates of Black women being arrested or killed, not many of their stories make it to the headlines and public awareness. Renisha McBride and Marlene Pinnock, mentioned by Coates at the beginning of his text, are two of the few women whose fatal experiences with police members caught national attention. Sandra Bland's murder was also considered critical in the fight for the visibility of Black women victims of racial profiling, so much so that it ended up triggering the creation of the #SayHerName campaign. Bland was pulled over by a state trooper in Hempstead, Texas, on July 10,

---

[198] According to Angela Davis, the invisibilization of Black women in discourses on racial profiling and mass incarceration owes to the fact that their offenses are usually related to mental illness rather than felony. In her own words, "deviant men have been constructed as criminal, while deviant women have been constructed as insane" (2003, 66). In a similar way, the oppression that Black women face when imprisoned is also overlooked. Davis contends that while Black men "experience a perilous continuity in the way they are treated in school […], in the streets […] and in prison […], for women, the continuity of treatment from the free world to the universe of the prison is even more complicated, since they also confront forms of violence in prison that they have confronted in their homes and intimate relationships. The criminalization of black […] women includes persisting images of hypersexuality that serve to justify sexual assaults against them both in and outside of prison" (2003, 79-80).

2015. He asked her to put out her cigarette, to which she replied that she was in her car and that she had the right to smoke if she wanted to (Davis 2018). The encounter soon escalated, and the officer decided to arrest Bland for allegedly assaulting him.[199] She was afterwards put in custody, and her body was found in her cell three days later, on July 13, 2015. Her death was ruled a suicide by hanging, which was later undermined by the autopsy results (Botelho and Ford 2015). According to Andrea Ritchie, Bland's story stands out from many others because of its particularities. In her own words, "there are many reasons Sandra's story gained national attention when so many women's [stories] had not" (2017, 9), such as the videos she had posted on social networking sites before being arrested, the recording of the officer's car dashcam showing her arrest, or her alleged suicide whilst she was in police custody. "When Sandra died," Hannah Bonner says in the documentary *Say Her Name: The Life and Death of Sandra Bland*, "we had not seen a woman's name have that staying power that we had seen with Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin. Women had died but we had not continued to say their names" (Bonner 2017 in Davis 2018).

On a more positive note, it is clear that significant changes started occurring after Bland's death. As mentioned above, the acknowledgement of the racist experiences endured by women of color such as Rekia Boyd or Sandra Bland herself, amongst thousands of others, has been critical to the development of the #SayHerName campaign, which was set up by the African American Policy Forum (AAPF) in early 2015.[200] Later that year a report entitled "#SayHerName: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black

---

[199] This could be contested after watching both a bystander's video displaying her arrest and the officer's car dashcam recording of that moment. Both are available in the documentary *Say Her Name: The Life and Death of Sandra Bland*, directed by David Heilbroner and Kate Davis (2018).

[200] Prior to that there were also many attempts to include Black women and girls in discourses on race, such as the 2014 "#WhyWeCan'tWait campaign, [which] argued against the exclusion of African American girls from President Obama's singular racial-justice initiative, 'My Brother's Keeper'" (Tillet 2015, n.p.).

Women" was published with the intention "to serve as a resource for the media, organizers, researchers, policy makers, and other stakeholders to better understand and address black women's experiences of profiling and policing" (Crenshaw and Ritchie 2015). The movement soon turned into a national phenomenon that brought, through demonstrations, activist campaigns, and public exhibits,[201] the status of the visibility of the murders of Black women and girls up to that of Black men. The subject has also received increasing scrutiny in academic research and scholarship. Amongst theorists who have engaged in the fight for the public recognition of women as being subject to racial profiling besides Crenshaw (1989, 1991, 2015) and Ritchie (2011, 2014, 2017), I must highlight Angela Davis, who, in 2003, published *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Michelle Alexander, with *The New Jim Crow* (2011), and Patrisse Khan-Cullors, whose autobiography and Black Lives Matter memoir *When They Call You a Terrorist* was published in early 2018.

With Breonna Taylor's murder on March 13, 2020, the movement started to gain momentum again after years of apparent calm. Taylor was shot to death in her own apartment in Louisville, Kentucky, by some undercover officers who had forced entry as part of an operation against drug dealing. Taylor's boyfriend, who was with her in the bedroom and who, like her, was oblivious to what was going on, fired a warning shot in the hope that the intruders would get scared and leave. As a reaction to it, officers opened fire on both Taylor and her boyfriend. He was hit by one bullet, but she was shot six

---

[201] Amongst many other acts organized by the movement, the art exhibit *Blood at the Root: Unearthing the Stories of State Violence against Black Women*, which opened in 2015, featured artistic works that elaborated on the long history of silencing that Black women have endured for being both Black and women. Also, drawings, artistic pictures, and spray-painted portraits of Rekia Boyd, Joanne Little, or Paris Knox, amongst many others, sought to honor their lives and urged visitors to keep fighting towards the inclusion of Black women in discourses on policing and racism. For more information on the exhibit visit <https://bloodatrootchicago.wordpress.com>.

times[202] and died right away. She was 26 years old. The apartment was never searched for drugs afterwards (Lovan 2020, n.p.). Taylor's murder did not attract much national attention at first. In the weeks following her death only small groups of protesters, including family members and other acquaintances, demonstrated in front of the mayor's office. Besides, a then minor but determined campaign was getting underway in social networks. Soon afterwards, and as more details about the circumstances surrounding the murder started being disclosed, Taylor's death was put on the spotlight and the internet campaign intensified. Activists, celebrities, and influencers took to social networks to protest against her murder, which brought "attention to Breonna and by extension Black women who are victims of police brutality" (Brown and Ray 2020, n.p.).[203]

But Taylor's murder did not draw as much attention as George Floyd's, which happened only two months later, on May 25, 2020, and which sparked mass protests at an international level that lasted for several weeks (Rahim and Picheta 2020, n.p.). In their thorough study on the public outcry motivated by both murders, Melissa Brown and Rashawn Ray (2020) contend that there exists a major difference in how people react to murders in which Black women are killed and murders in which Black men are killed, which seem to attract more interest and generate a wider response. "The online activism in support of Breonna Taylor did not appear to motivate the same public outcry as the protest activity that continues following the May 2020 death of George Floyd in Minneapolis," they claim. "While some argue that video evidence makes the difference

---

[202] In other reports, such as the one published by the CNN, it is stated that she was shot eight times, not six (Sanchez and Joseph 2020, n.p.).

[203] By September, "a grand jury […] indicted a former Louisville detective involved in the raid, Brett Hankison, for wanton endangerment of neighbors whose apartment was hit when he fired without a clear line of sight into the sliding glass patio door and window of Ms. Taylor's apartment. He pleaded not guilty. No charges were announced against the other two officers who fired shots, and no one was charged for causing Ms. Taylor's death" (Sanchez and Joseph 2020, n.p.). That an officer was indicted for damaging a piece of furniture but not for killing Breonna Taylor attests to the low value that Black lives legally have.

in the killings of Floyd and Taylor, the 2014 video in the beating of California resident Marlene Pinnock would seem to undercut that argument" (2020, n.p.). Kimberlé Crenshaw, in a recent interview with Robin Young and Serena McMahon, agrees with Brown and Ray that videotaping a murder does in no way mean that it will later attract public interest. In order to get her point across, Crenshaw reminds the audience of how Natasha McKenna, "a 37-year-old was tasered to death in jail while she was experiencing a mental health crisis" (Young and McMahon 2020, n.p.). Her death was recorded, and the clip distributed, but everything to no avail—almost nobody paid attention to it, and her death mobilized no social or political action. Although Crenshaw is critical of the ways in which Black women's experiences are sidelined, she also believes that cases such as Breonna Taylor's can at least shed light on a phenomenon that is largely unknown to the public. As Brown and Ray also highlight, "the groundswell of online activism in her name means that more people now know how the justice system disempowers Black women victims of police brutality" (2020, n.p.).

Taking everything into account, Ta-Nehisi Coates's approach to gender in his works, his concerns, and most importantly his silences, bring to the forefront a series of social and historical issues that are key for understanding the ongoing effects of racism in Black communities. On the one hand, the models of masculinity that Coates describes in both of his memoirs reveal that they are anchored in hegemonic behaviors. In *The Beautiful Struggle*, Coates praises his father and portrays him as a savior, but a deep analysis of the work reveals that Coates is in fact writing from a very complex position— behind Coates's idealization of his father lies a fear so deep and real that his texts end up manifesting his own terror more than they offer a truthful description of his father. In *Between the World and Me*, though, Coates's approach to masculinity has matured, and instead of only emphasizing the centrality of the hegemonic attitudes that he was exposed

to during his childhood and that he himself also enacted later on, he also disrupts such stereotypical behaviors and proves that there are ways of resisting such models of masculinity. In all, both works offer a rich and multifaceted representation of Black masculinities and highlight the extent to which racism has influenced not only the way Black men act, but also the way Black men are expected to act—Paul Coates, as well as Coates himself when he becomes a father, acted violently to protect their sons against the dangers of the world; to protect those they loved; to gain recognition within their own communities; to avoid bringing their vulnerability out into the open.

Largely portrayed as being impervious to all the problems that Coates introduces, Black women are described, on the contrary, and only with a few exceptions, as persons who lack a life of their own and whose own existence serves to complement the lives of men, who attract all the interest in Coates's narratives. The exclusion of Black women not only from Coates's works, but from discourses on policing in general, in turn, has proved to be unsettling, not only because it circumscribes the dimensions of the problem to the experiences lived by Black men, but also because it contributes to a long history in which Black women's voices have been silenced from mainstream narratives. Black girls are six times more likely to be suspended from high school than their male counterparts or twelve times more than their female white counterparts (Crenshaw 2015); Black women are subject to traffic stops at a higher rate than any other racial or gender group (Ritchie 2017); Black women's prison population is growing at a faster rate than any other prison population (Davis 2003); and Black women are the second group more prone to being killed as a result of an encounter with the police (Ritchie 2017). Even though it was never Coates's aim or intention to address these issues in his works (Chotiner 2015), it is important to highlight that Black women's experiences with policing and other forms of racism are critical to understand all the angles from which racial violence operates; its

long-term ramifications; all the forms it takes; and how it intersects with gender and sexuality, too. As Andrea Ritchie claims in her work, "if we fail to take women's experiences into account, we cannot confront the full measure of police violence, or articulate visions of justice that fully reflect the needs and experiences of all members of our communities" (2017, 239).

Conclusions

RACIAL VIOLENCE, ETHICAL WITNESSING,
AND THE POSSIBILITIES OF REPRESENTATION

When Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* was published in 2015, it enjoyed a remarkable reception. The memoir, which is set forth as a letter that Coates writes to his adolescent son in order to warn him about the mortal dangers of racism, soon topped best-seller lists in the most renowned newspapers of the country and later enjoyed international success (Egan 2020); and Coates himself, who had already been compared to Frederick Douglass (Goldberg 2008), was now also believed to be the heir to James Baldwin (Adams 2015; Morrison 2015). In fact, the public impact of the text was such that it also drew a great deal of mixed responses from readers. As Howard Rambsy explains, while "some reviewers critiqued aspects of the book," others "praised it and commended Coates for advancing concerns among African Americans that demanded more attention" (2016, 202). This strong split of opinion should not be surprising, in particular if one takes into consideration the extremely controversial issues that Coates broaches in the memoir—the text enlivens difficult conversations about the pervasiveness of racial injustices; about the hypocrisy of U.S. society; and about the extent to which violence actively constitutes a fundamental part of the lives of racialized people. My dissertation has drawn upon the works of Ta-Nehisi Coates not only to study the moral implications of narrating racial violence, but also to offer new ways of interpreting complex concepts such as racial violence and its representation and to present new perspectives and paradigms from which to interpret the harsh criticism that both Coates, as a public intellectual, as well as his works, have received. In all, my project has strived to answer the following questions. To what effects is racial violence represented, and

what does the representation of racial violence entail? Is there an ethical way to narrate racial violence? How does one represent racial violence without creating more violence?

Even though the number of memoirs that address the issues I have been mentioning so far has skyrocketed in recent years, I opted for focusing on Ta-Nehisi Coates and his works in my thesis for three different reasons. To begin with, Coates is, without a doubt, one of the most prolific writers on racial issues of the last decades (Smith 2013; León 2015; Lewis 2016; Rambsy 2016). As Howard Rambsy indicates, "from late 2008 through 2011" Coates did not only publish a vast number of articles in *The Atlantic*, where he had started working in 2008, but he also "produced approximately 350 entries" in his personal blog and published his first memoir, *The Beautiful Struggle* (2008). Second, the intertextuality of his works ushered in the possibility of reading them in relation to canonical texts and authors, such as Frederick Douglass (1845, 1852, 1855), Richard Wright (1940), Ralph Ellison (1952), James Baldwin (1955, 1961), or Toni Morrison (1987, 1995). The result of this intertextuality is a text that provides a heterogeneous and enriched approach to the subjects it deals with. Finally, both Coates and his works have been subject to public scrutiny and criticism. Coates's increasing popularity was not only a result of his prolific literary career, but also of his ideological and political positioning, which was met with the disapproval of many of his critics (Smith 2015), and of his involvement in public controversies with some of his contemporary intellectuals. Cornel West, amongst others, accused Coates of being "the darling of the white and black neoliberal establishment" (in Cornish 2017) and of using his works to try to speak both to and for a community to which he does not belong anymore.[204] The unparalleled reputation that Coates rapidly gained both as an author and

---

[204] In an interview with Audie Cornish entitled "Cornel West Doesn't Want to Be a Neoliberal Darling" (2015), West said that "when it comes to black leaders, if the model is to be successful but not publicly attack white supremacy—well, then that's really about success to fit in. Fitting in, in a neoliberal world, is

as an intellectual celebrity ended up "obscur[ing] his actual work," as critics soon began casting doubt on the legitimacy of his arguments and focusing on whether his rhetoric had attracted a white readership or whether, through his works, he was encouraging Black youth to develop a nihilistic world-view (Bouie 2017, n.p.). In "We Made Ta-Nehisi Coates into a Symbol" (2017), Janelle Bouie writes that the fact that Coates had been elevated to

> near-mythic status has centered analysis and conversation on his audience, not his arguments. Critics from the right began dissecting his popularity with liberals, blasting him as a grievance artist who opportunistically peddled guilt to white progressives. Those from the left had their own critique, holding him up as emblematic of those who advance an ephemeral, almost metaphysical view of racism, and whose views preclude a politics that could actually tackle the material. (n.p.)

My thesis has aimed to provide new avenues of investigation to address the copious criticism levelled against both Coates and his memoir. Through new theoretical and critical approaches to the most contentious issues that his texts deal with, such as racial nihilism (West 1993; Brogdon 2013; Hayes 2015; Warren 2015) or hopelessness (Warren 2015, 2018; Winters 2016, 2018), I have sought to put these critiques into context and to analyze them from different angles so as to offer readers new ways of interpreting Coates's stand.

Coates's literary production is vast, and to discuss the questions that my project centralizes I have particularly relied on his two memoirs and a number of the articles he

---

to be well adjusted to injustice. I'll give you an example: Dear brother Ta-Nehisi Coates has just come out with a new book." When Cornish then remarked, "Yes. *We Were Eight Years in Power*," West wondered: "who's the 'we'? When's the last time he's been through the ghetto, in the hoods, to the schools and indecent housing and mass unemployment? We were in power for eight years? My God. Maybe he and some of his friends might have been in power, but not poor working people" (n.p.).

wrote for *The Atlantic* between 2008 and 2016, many of which were later republished as part of his essay collection *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy* (2017). In this way, I have based most of my analysis on Coates's second memoir, *Between the World and Me* (2015), but at times I have also resorted to his previous memoir, *The Beautiful Struggle* (2008), which also offers important insights into subjects that my dissertation tackles, such as inter-racial conflicts, structural racism and segregationist spatial politics, and family relationships. Six of the articles that I have also relied upon among Coates's vast production must be underscored—"Earning the Temporary Hatred of Your Children" (2010), "Why Don't Black People Protest 'Black-on-Black Violence'?" (2012), "Trayvon Martin Was a Victim of Black-on-Black Crime" (2013), "Hope and the Artist" (2015b), "Hope and the Historian" (2015c), and "The Clock Didn't Start with the Riots" (2015f). These texts offer Coates's most critical and straight-forward opinions about very controversial issues and, most importantly, they also offer a fresh and heterogeneous approach to racial violence.

Chapter one opens with an account of Ta-Nehisi Coates's long and successful literary career and with a contextualization of his work within U.S. literary history. This introduction to Coates and his work is followed by an attempt at providing a definition of what racial violence is and how it operates in society. Through my analysis I learnt that racial violence is a very complex phenomenon that was not theorized as such until well into the twenty-first century, when the first pieces of research aimed at showcasing the social and political ramifications of the concept were published. According to these studies, racial violence is that violence which is directed towards racialized victims (Blee 2005, 2018; Bonilla-Silva 2006; González-Tennant 2012, 2018; Saucier and Woods 2016). In fact, scholars insist that placing the emphasis on the victim and not on the abuser

or murderer is crucial to properly identify cases of racial violence and to indict perpetrators accordingly.

Recent research has shown that racial violence should also be considered interactional, as it does not depend on a single factor but has a communicative, contextual, and interpretive nature instead (Blee 2005). In fact, as Kathleen Blee suggested in her seminal essay "Racial Violence in the United States" (2005), racial violence is communicative insofar as it seeks to convey messages on power relations and maintain racial hierarchies between victims and perpetrators; contextual, as a violent act can change depending on the context it takes place in; and interpretive, as its meaning is often contingent upon, and negotiated among, the different parties involved in the incident. The research carried out by Edward González-Tennant on U.S. massacres (2012, 2018) added another level of analysis to the concept and raised the possibility of considering it to be not only interactional, but also multidimensional. For González-Tennant, whose approach stands out for entering a dialogue with canonical works on violence such as Walter Benjamin's (1921), Hannah Arendt's (1970), and Slavoj Žižek's (2008) through Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory (1989, 1991), racial violence takes on three main manifestations—intersubjective or interpersonal, which refers to a violent act in which both the perpetrator and the victim are clearly identifiable persons; structural, which is exerted not by a single person, but by systems and institutions; and symbolic, which refers to the perpetuation of racial stereotyping through a cultural presentation of racialized people as biologically inferior.

With a few notable exceptions, the literary representation of racial violence has been explored mostly through autobiographical texts—autobiographies and memoirs. In section 1.2 I revisit the canonical autobiographical works of Frederick Douglass (1845) and Solomon Northup (1853) to explain that autobiography was "one of the most

important forums blacks have used to state their positions, to leave a record of their resistance, to inspire future generations, and to promote their national development" (Blassingame 1974, 2). Autobiographical narratives, in other words, showcased the extent to which racist interactions shaped the author's experiences of the world and, in so doing, they were also a call for action. Black Power revolutionaries, for instance, used autobiographical texts as political artifacts that would help them bring about profound social changes. After acknowledging the differences between autobiographies and memoirs, I explain that the latter stand today as the "offspring" of the former (Perry 2016, n.p.), and that nowadays the memoir "narrates and navigates the struggle for racial salvation and what the possibility of deliverance means in this post-racial world" (Guerrero 2017, 415). Regardless of their differences, both memoirs and autobiographies have been used to bear testimony to a particular moment in history and to condemn the rampant racism that still prevails in society.

Section 1.2, in this way, also highlights the intertextuality of Coates's memoir, a work that pays tribute to Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), and James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1962), among many others. Coates often alludes to them in his memoir, and in so doing he establishes significant relations of revision and transgenerational dialogues that show that, even though approached from slightly different perspectives, racial violence has remained a constant in the lives of all these authors. As Coates endeavors to build all these bridges, he also struggles to find his own place in the tradition, a task in which he succeeds—the memoir reached such a broad readership that Coates soon managed to make a name for himself; critics elevated him to the status of the eminent writers who had inspired his work; and he became "a star, quoted on network sitcoms, invited to the White House by the president, who, [Coates] admits,

278

made his career possible, and deemed a 'genius' with one of the most prestigious awards[205] in the world" (Bouie 2017, n.p.).

The last section of the first chapter focuses on the way in which Coates represents racial violence in his work. In it, I delve into how Coates's memoir stands out, amongst many other things, for both the accuracy and the audacity with which Coates identifies and denounces all the different forms that racial violence takes, and with which he illustrates that, as Edward González-Tennant also suggested (2018), they all work as assemblages. Despite the fact that in the memoir Coates exemplifies how racial violence works, he does not offer any clear definition of it; a definition that can be found, however, in two of Coates's articles, "The Clock Didn't Start with the Riots" (2015f) and "The Near Certainty of Anti-Police Violence" (2016), in which he refers to racial violence in terms of "plunder" and in which he describes it as the manifold ways in which Black individuals have been deprived of everything they have ever possessed—treasured objects and assets; but also labor, rights, and even their own bodies and lives.

Many critics have considered Coates's representation of racial violence, to different degrees and for different reasons, problematic (Alexander 2015; Archie 2015; Lowry 2015; Smith 2015; Abramowitsch 2017; Malik 2021). In particular in his memoir *Between the World and Me*, Coates provides a vivid and visceral approach to racism; he also insists on the primacy of the victims, as well as on the materiality of their bodies; yet he does not address the perpetrators, who are displaced from the narration. Whilst Coates's obsession with the materiality of racialized bodies results in a phenomenon called "bottom line blackness" whereby, through the experiences he narrates, Coates manages to "construct an ever-expanding black community, one that comprises

---

[205] Coates won the McArthur "Genius" Award in 2015.

'murdered sons' as well as imagined future members" (Lordi 2017b, 45), with his approach to whiteness as an abstraction, on the contrary, Coates does not seem to focus too much on the role played by perpetrators. In the words of R. L. Stephens, "what we find all too often in Coates's narrative universe are bodies without life and a racism without people" (2017, n.p.). Although many commentators have disapproved of this so-called incongruity, stating that "whereas Coates depicts black embodiment in all its joy and pain, and shows blackness as plural and individual, […] adherents to whiteness as ideology are for the most part a diffuse and abstract mass distant from the reality of the world" (Abramowitsch 2017, 462), I have tried to show that, through his descriptions, Coates seeks both to bear witness to the ubiquity of racism and to contest whether it is at all possible to bring racial conflicts to an end when, he points out, nobody is being held responsible for them. In the final section of the chapter I explore how empathy and readership play out in Coates's memoir and I contend that Coates's uneven approach to bodies and racism fosters empathic relations whilst it also disavows easy identification from different groups of readers.

Chapter two, in turn, examines what the implications of Coates's take on racial atrocities are; whether he follows an ethical approach to the narration of racism; and whether he succeeds in representing racial violence without reproducing it any further. After explaining that the vexed relationship that exists between violence and its representation has mostly been explored in the fields of the visual and the textual (Lawrence and Karim 2007, 2), I defend that viewing scenes of suffering brings up serious ethical quandaries. To this end, I resort to studies that emerged in, and also addressed, different historical contexts with the intention of explaining how Coates's work reinvigorates debates on the ethics of the representation of racial atrocities. Contributions as different as Susan Sontag's, who worked on the field of war photography (1977, 2003);

Marianne Hirsch's, who focused on photography and the Holocaust (1999, 2001, 2008); or Cassandra Jackson's, who explored the ethical implications of the public exhibition of lynching photographs (2011, 2020), help me explain that representing atrocities is dangerous since it risks "reinscribing the victim and reterrorizing the audience" (Wolters 2004, 420). By means of Allissa V. Richardson's theory of "black witnessing" (2017, 2020a, 2020b), I also contend that painful as bearing witness to atrocities is, it also endows visibility upon the cruelties many people have suffered; it also casts light on the transgenerational traumatic memories that may be experienced by their relatives and acquaintances in particular, and the communities they belonged to in general; and, most importantly, it helps the survivors heal. As Bruce B. Lawrence and Aisha Karim claim, any representation of violence has a dual power—"to wreak violence as well as to heal" (2007, 493).

It is true that Coates's memoir, as written text, responds to a different logic than that of visual representation. The second part of the analysis, along these lines, explores instead how the complex relationship between the representation of racial violence and the violent countereffects of said representations has been a controversial object of interest not only within the field of the visual, but also within the field of the literary. In fact, scholars such as Elizabeth Alexander (1994), Régine Michelle Jean-Charles (2009, 2014) and Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Valerie A. Smith (2014) have stated that the stakes of representing racial violence are particularly high for Black people; and that writing about racial violence may prolong the suffering of those who identify with the victims (Spillers 1987; Alexander 1994, 2004, 2020); that it may raise the threshold of tolerance towards, and incur in the normalization of, certain forms of violence (Jean-Charles 2009, 2014; Sharpe 2010, 2016; Kilpatrick 2015); and that it may erase the subjecthood of

victims (Hartman 1997, 2007; Jean-Charles 2009, 2014; Copeland 2013; Grandpre and Love 2014).

Following Elizabeth Alexander (1994, 2020) and Aida Levy-Hussen (2016), I later explain that, regardless of the many dangers of representing racial atrocities, these narrations can in fact help buttress antiracist social and political claims—but only if read critically. In other words, only if distant witnesses to atrocities, be they readers or viewers, stop seeing these images casually, and only if these witnesses know about the stakes and ethical implications that the circulation of these images, or the narration of these events, have for the person who has recorded or written about them, for the victim, and for his or her community in general, will they bring about social and political change. In the final part of the section, and after elucidating whether Coates's work enables the development of such an ethical relationship between readers and text, I contend that, even though the memoir does indeed intensify many of the problems it denounces, it also allows for a phenomenon that Aida Levy-Hussen termed "therapeutic reading"—"the elevation of textual immersion […] and the pursuit of transformative pain" in an attempt to reach "self-knowledge, authenticity, and psychic healing" (2016, 3).

The following section explores one of the most contentious issues in Coates's works—their negativity. My analysis began by suggesting that Coates's defeatist rhetoric, especially throughout *Between the World and Me*, corresponds to that of an Afropessimist. Afropessimism, a critical framework that started burgeoning at the beginning of the twenty-first century, is grounded in the fallacy of manumission and in the concept of "social death," which was coined by Orlando Patterson in *Slavery and Social Death* (1982) and which referred to the fact that the enslaved "had no social existence outside of his master" (38). The abolition of enslavement, these pessimists contend, did not bring about the end of social death. Veering significantly away from

282

Patterson, who did claim that social death finished with manumission, pessimists like Frank Wilderson (2011, 2016, 2020) or Jared Sexton (2011, 2012, 2016) insist that the very concept of "blackness" did not exist prior to, but instead emerged with, enslavement; and so "violence […] precedes and exceeds blacks" (Wilderson 2010, 76). Black people today, along these lines, still bear the brunt of social death.

Coates's inclusion in the Black pessimist tradition owes in great part to the rather discouraging messages he gives to his son in the memoir, which have been widely criticized by commentators (Smith 2015, 2017). In this thesis, I interpret Coates's pessimism in a different light, and I explain that, decontextualized, Coates's work can indeed seem fatalistic, but that, when approached through the lens of the aforementioned analytical framework, Coates, like most pessimists, does not deny the agency or the power of racialized people, but instead condemns those structures that do so. Following the ground-breaking studies on hopelessness and on the ambiguous meaning that progress has for racialized communities (Sexton 2011, 2016; Brogdon 2013; Warren 2015, 2016, 2018; Winters 2016, 2018), I defend that Coates's pessimism in the memoir is not disabling, but enabling, in that it offers his readers numerous consoling alternatives to resist racism and to engage in the struggle against racial violence. As Tobin Miller Shearer has claimed, Coates in fact "convinced [him] that hope is not the only option" (2018, 1867). Love is certainly one of the conciliatory instruments on which Coates places special emphasis. For him, love takes many forms—far from only exploring its romantic valences, which he discusses when he recalls how he met his wife-to-be at Howard University, Coates suggests that love is heterogeneous and multidimensional, and he also speaks about the affection he received from his parents, which is a controversial subject that I address in the final section of the thesis, as well as about the love he feels for his community and for the Black literary tradition that nurtured him not

only as an author, but as a human being. We could even claim that the memoir itself is also an act of love—not only for his son, but also for his friend Prince Jones, who was killed by a police officer, and for all the others who have been murdered.

Another reason why Coates has been in the public spotlight is his approach to gender dynamics, which has been regarded as yet another form in which his text can be considered to be, in its own way, violent. In order to analyze the different ways gender operates in the memoir, I decided to divide the final section in two different parts. The first one focuses on exploring the images that Coates provides of fatherhood and masculinity, and the extent to which both are affected by racism. To this end, I consider it crucial to resort to Coates's previous memoir, *The Beautiful Struggle* (2008), which offers insights into the models of masculinity that Coates witnessed growing up and that he later enacted himself. After describing the development of masculinity studies, I argue that Coates's father, Paul Coates, who played a vital part in Coates's upbringing, embodied a form of masculinity that can be considered hegemonic—a normative model of masculinity that thrives upon the subordination of other men and women. According to Coates, Paul was a violent man; he was authoritarian and short-tempered, but behind it all Coates also saw a learned man concerned about protecting the lives of his sons and fiercely committed to the Black plight. Even though the episodes that Coates narrates position him as an abused child and a victim of whupping and other forms of physical punishments, Coates considers his father a role model.

Although, in *The Beautiful Struggle* (2008), Coates does not reflect critically upon the complex affective dynamics that reigned in his parents' household, he does so in several articles he published afterwards. In "Earning the Temporary Hatred of Your Children" (2010), for example, Coates admits to having been surprised when his readers told him that the events that he recounts in the memoir illustrated different forms of child

abuse. In the op-ed, Coates mentions that he had also smacked his son until he turned seven, that practices of the sort were, "in my family, in my neighborhood, and in my community, […] part of what parenting meant" and that "childhood […] wasn't a respite before the real work of adulthood, it was practice for adulthood" (n.p.). In so claiming, Coates is suggesting that smacking children with the aim of protecting them from other dangers they may encounter in the streets was normal in his community and, in this way, he is also casting light on the extent to which racism meddles not only in the creation of certain models of masculinity, but also in family relationships. These ideas are further explored in *Between the World and Me*, where Coates explains how he managed to learn how to love in a safe environment and where readers finally get a sense that "Coates's solution when he becomes a father himself is to act as a better father, a more loving father" (Lloyd 2018, 759).

If Black men are at the heart of Coates's texts, Black women, almost like fading abstractions, linger on their margins, and their experiences are only called upon at certain times. The final section of the chapter addressed, precisely, this controversy, and sought to explain the gender biases that are at work not only in Coates's texts, but also in mainstream perceptions about racial violence. The almost complete exclusion of Black women from discourses on policing and other forms of racial violence, which Joy James termed "racialized gendered violence" (in Ritchie 2017, xi), is yet another manifestation of the intersectionality of oppressions inflicted on Black women—their experiences are disregarded in studies on women and violence, which tend to focus on white women, and also in studies on racism and policing, which tend to focus on Black men. The truth is, however, that Black women are also exposed to the threat of racial violence, and that they are murdered at rates that, even if lower than the ones at which Black men are killed, are also disproportionally high. In her work *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*

(2016), Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor maintained that "the police also kill black women" and that "the police also view black women's lives with suspicion and ultimately as less valuable, making their death and brutalization more likely, not less" (164). For Black feminists such as Shani O. Hilton (2015) and Brit Bennett (2015), *Between the World and Me* exacerbates this problem. In the text, explorations of the ways in which the lives of women of color are shaped by racist practices are sorely lacking.

With my analysis of the gendered dynamics that undergird *Between the World and Me* in particular, and *The Beautiful Struggle* too, I also seek to broach two other controversial subjects. The first one revolves around the legitimacy of narrating experiences that one has not gone through. This matter, which Deborah McDowell tackled head-on in her essay "In the First Place" (1991), where she discussed Frederick Douglass's appropriation of his aunt's pain through his shocking descriptions of her body being abused, gained relevance after Black feminists criticized Coates for sidelining the experiences of black women in his memoirs. Even if many of them condemned Coates for not speaking about the gendered dimension of racism, they also believed that it would have been wrong for Coates to closely inspect certain forms of violence that he is not exposed to (Bodenner 2015). The second one, which opens avenues of research that I did not have the space to pursue in this dissertation, relates to the unbalanced attention that victims of racial violence receive; that is, to why certain victims of racist violent acts seem to get all the attention whilst others rarely make it into the headlines. This glaring disparity operates mainly, but not only, along gender and sexual lines. Whilst it is true that the murders of Black women, in general terms, go largely unnoticed by the public and the mainstream media, there exists a clear asymmetry also among Black men. Out of all the thousands of Black individuals murdered each year, only a few of them receive

public attention; which suggests, in turn, that there is something, other than gender, that is at play. As Howard Rambsy wonders,

> Why have Martin and Brown gained so much more coverage than other black boys and black men who were killed? Why have black girl victims generated less widespread acknowledgment? Activists have rightly highlighted the extent to which American society places higher value on white lives than black lives, but does this imbalanced acknowledgement of African American victims suggest that some black lives matter more than other black lives? (2020, 27)

The conclusions reached open up other lines of inquiry, too. To begin with, for the sake of purpose and consistency, I have not dealt with how the pessimism that characterizes Coates's autobiographic texts is practically absent in his fiction, in particular in the comic book series *Black Panther* (2016-2021), which has been considered the paradigm of Afrofuturism (Capers 2019, 4), and *The Water Dancer* (2019), which puts forth new notions of progress and hope (Carroll 2019, n.p.). I found myself meditating on this many times as I was writing this dissertation, and what I now think of as a pertinent and difficult question kept coming to mind—what, if anything, does this imbalance between the different stances that Coates adopts, so fatalistic in his non-fiction, but so confident and hopeful in his fiction, tell us about his understanding of the world, and also about us as readers? The new avenues of research that this thesis has opened up are not limited to Ta-Nehisi Coates and his works, though. The research I carried out for the last section of the second chapter, which revolves around gender, racism, and policing, aroused my interest in how contemporary U.S. Black women writers have tackled issues similar to the ones Coates's narrates in his memoirs. I think that bearing witness to, as well as reading about, the particularity of their experiences is

fundamental to understanding all the valences that are at work in a phenomenon as complex and fraught as racial violence is.

In "Venus in Two Acts" (2008), Saidiya Hartman wondered "how does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence?" (4). This thesis has sought to offer a tentative answer to Hartman's question—that, objectively, it is extremely difficult to revisit the scene of subjection *without* replicating the grammar of violence. Ta-Nehisi Coates's work testifies to this reality. Through his op-eds, and most particularly through both of his memoirs, Coates has succeeded in reinvigorating debates on the dangers of representing violence and he has offered an unparalleled opportunity to reflect on the moral implications that representing violence has for Black authors. Many valences are at play in any act of representation, and for it to be ethical in its approach to atrocity it needs not only the artist's ethical engagement with that which is being represented, but also the reader's—or the viewer's, if representations are visual. In this thesis I explain that there are many ways for both writers and readers to develop forms of ethical witnessing—by reappropriating images of suffering, writers can in fact resist the normalization of pain and the threat of dehumanizing victims; and by viewing such images "with solemn reserve and careful circulation," readers, and witnesses in general, can resignify these representations as potential chances to heal and to learn from a past suffused with violence (Richardson 2020a, n.p.). In all, Coates's works are proof that, disturbing as it is, bearing witness to atrocity also is, in this way, critical and urgent—it both challenges and empowers us to think about new futures and about the limitless possibilities that exist not beyond, but rather *regardless of*, violence.

Works Cited

Abramowitsch, Simon. 2017. "Addressing Blackness, Dreaming Whiteness: Negotiating 21st-Century Race and Readership in Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me.*" *CLA Journal* 60 (4): 458-478. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26557006>

Abu-Lughod, Janet. 2000. *New York, Chicago, Los Angeles: America's Global Cities*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

—. 2007. *Race, Space, and Riots in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles*. Oxford: Oxford UP.

Adams, Tim. 2015. "How Ta-Nehisi Coates's Letter to his Son about Being Black in America Became a Bestseller." *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/sep/20/ta-nehisi-coates-interview-between-the-world-and-me-black-america>

Adorno, Theodor. 1997 (1967). *Prisms: Essays in Cultural Criticism and Society*. Translated by Samuel and Shierry Weber. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.

Agamben, Giorgio. 1999. *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford UP.

Ahmed, Sara. 2004. "The Affective Politics of Fear." *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Oxford: Routledge.

—. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology. Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham & London: Duke UP.

Alexander, Elizabeth. 1994. "Can You Be BLACK and Look at This? Reading the Rodney King Video(s)." *Public Culture* 7: 77-94.

<https://read.dukeupress.edu/public-culture/article-abstract/7/1/77/32180/Can-you-be-Black-and-Look-at-This-Reading-the?redirectedFrom=PDF>

—. 2001. "Narrative: Ali." *Antebellum Dream Book*. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press. Print.

—. 2004. *The Black Interior: Essays*. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press.

—. 2020. "The Trayvon Generation." *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/06/22/the-trayvon-generation>

Alexander, Michelle. 2010. *The New Jim Crow. Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press.

—. 2015. "Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*." *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/17/books/review/ta-nehisi-coates-between-the-world-and-me.html>

Alexandre, Sandy. 2012. *The Properties of Violence. Claims to Ownership in Representations of Lynching*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi.

Ali, Safia Samee. 2021. "How Chicago's Affordable Housing System Perpetuates City's Long History of Segregation." *NBC News*. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/how-chicago-s-affordable-housing-system-perpetuates-city-s-long-n1262119>

Allen, Danielle. 2017. *Cuz: The Life and Times of Michael A.* New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation.

Alpert, Harvey. 1958. "The Relationship of Empathy and Projection to Reading in Literary and Non-Literary Materials." *Journal of Developmental Reading* 1 (3): 22-29. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40009114>

Als, Hilton. 1988. "James Baldwin: Fathers and Sons." *Village Voice*. <https://www.villagevoice.com/2020/02/22/james-baldwin-fathers-and-sons/>

Anderson, Reynaldo, and Charles E. Jones. 2016. *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness*. New York: Lexington Books.

Anyabwile, Thabiti. 2015. "A Call for Hope in the Age of Mass Incarceration." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/why-there-needs-to-be-more-hope/404977/>

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. 2020. "The Case for Capitalizing the B in Black." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/time-to-capitalize-blackand-white/613159/>

Araujo, Ana Lucía. 2017. *Reparations for Slavery and the Slave Trade: A Transnational and Comparative History*. New York: Bloomington.

Archie, Andre. 2015. "The Hopeless Politics of Ta-Nehisi Coates." *The American Conservative*. <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/the-hopeless-politics-of-ta-nehisi-coates/>

Arendt, Hannah. 1970. *On Violence*. New York: Harvest Books.

Armstrong, Nancy, and Leonard Tennenhouse. 2014 (1989). *The Violence of Representation: Literature and the History of Violence*. New York: Routledge Revivals.

Austin, Tiffany; Sequoya Maner, Emily Ruth Rutter, and darlene anita scott. 2020. *Revisiting the Elegy in the Black Lives Matter Era*. New York: Routledge.

Avieson, Bunty. 2018. "Holding the Memories: Death, Success, and the Ethics of Memoirs." *Mediating Memory: Tracing the Limits of Memoir*. New York & London: Routledge.

Avieson, Bunty; Fiona Giles, and Sue Joseph. 2018. "Introduction." *Mediating Memory: Tracing the Limits of Memoir*. New York & London: Routledge.

Awan, Robert. 2015. "On Memoir & Memory." *Creative Nonfiction: True Stories Well Told* 55. <https://creativenonfiction.org/writing/of-memoir-memory/>

Awkward, Michael. 1996. "A Black Man's Place in Black Feminist Criticism." *Representing Black Men*. New York: Routledge.

Azalia, Loy, and Ciara Mackey-Hall. 2020. "Breonna Taylor and the Invisibility of Black Women and Girls in America." *Children's Defense Fund*. <https://www.childrensdefense.org/blog/breonna-taylor-and-the-invisibility-of-black-women-and-girls-in-america/>

Baker, Houston A. 1987. *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*. Chicago: The Chicago UP.

—. 1994. "Critical Memory and the Black Public Sphere." *Public Culture* 7 (1): 3-33. <https://read.dukeupress.edu/public-culture/article-abstract/7/1/3/32175/Critical-Memory-and-the-Black-Public-Sphere>

—. 2001. *Critical Memory: Public Spheres, African American Writing, and Black Fathers and Sons in America.* Athens: University of Georgia Press.

Baldick, Chris. 2001. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. New York: Oxford UP.

Baldwin, James. 1963 (1949). "Everybody's Protest Novel." *Notes of a Native Son*. New York: The Dial Press.

—. 1963 (1955). "Notes of a Native Son." *Notes of a Native Son*. New York: The Dial Press.

—. 1971. "An Open Letter to My Sister, Miss Angela Davis." *The New York Review of Books*. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1971/01/07/an-open-letter-to-my-sister-miss-angela-davis/>

—. 1992 (1961). *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son*. New York: Vintage International.

—. 1993 (1962). *The Fire Next Time*. New York: Vintage International.

—. 2013 (1964). *Blues for Mister Charlie*. New York: Vintage.

Barthes, Roland. 1973 (1953). *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers. New York: The Noonday Press.

—. 1980. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang.

Basu, Manisha. 2006. "The *Hamartia* of Light and Shadow: Susan Sontag in the Digital Age." *Postmodern Culture* 16 (3). <http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/issue.506/16.3basu.html>

Baudrillard, Jean, and Edgar Morin. 2004. *La violencia del mundo*. Barcelona: Paidós.

Bauman, Zygmunt. 2000. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

—. 2001. *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Beaulieu, Elizabeth Ann. 2006. *Writing African American Women*. Westport: Greenwood Press.

Beck, E.M., and Stewart E. Tolnay. 1990. "The Killing Fields of the Deep South: The Market for Cotton and the Lynching of Blacks, 1882-1930." *American Sociological Review* 55 (4): 526-539. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2095805?seq=1>

Belknap, Joanne. 2001. *The Invisible Woman: Gender, Crime, and Justice*. Berkeley: Wadsworth.

Bell, Derrick. 1993. *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*. New York: Basic Books.

Benjamin, Rich. 2016. "*The Beautiful Struggle* by Ta-Nehisi Coates Review—Subverting White Expectations." *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/sep/01/the-beautiful-struggle-ta-nehisi-coates-review>

Benjamin, Walter. 1996 (1921). *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings (1913-1926)*. Edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP.

Bennett, Brit. 2015. "Ta-Nehisi Coates and a Generation Waking Up". *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/ta-nehisi-coates-and-a-generation-waking-up>

Bennett, Stephen B., and William W. Nichols. 1971. "Violence in Afro-American Fiction: An Analysis." *Modern Fiction Studies* 17 (2): 221-228. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26279100?seq=1>

Berger, Karol. 1994. "Diegesis and Mimesis: The Poetic Modes and the Matter of Artistic Presentation." *Journal of Musicology* 12: 407–433. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/763970>

Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham and London: Duke UP.

Berrett, Jenni. 2017. "An Interview with Andrea Ritchie, Activist & Author of *Invisible No More*." *Ravishly*. <https://ravishly.com/people-we-love/interview-andrea-ritchie-activist-author-invisible-no-more>

Best, Stephen. 2012. "On Failing to Make the Past Present." *Modern Language Quarterly: A Journal of Literary History* 73 (3): 453-474. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00267929-1631478>

—. 2015. "Come and Gone." *Small Axe* 19 (3): 186-204. <https://read.dukeupress.edu/small-axe/article-abstract/19/3%20(48)/186/33425/Come-and-Gone?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

Bhabha, Homi. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.

Biemen, Walter. 1980. "The Development of Heidegger's Concept of the Thing." *The Southwestern Journal of Philosophy* 11 (3): 47-66. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/43155291>

Biles, Roger. 2001. "Race and Housing in Chicago." *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 94 (1): 31-38. < https://www.jstor.org/stable/40193533>

Birulés, Fina. 2007. "Reflexiones sobre vulnerabilidad y violencia." *Violencia deliberada. Las raíces de la violencia patriarcal*. Edited by Dolors Molas Font. Barcelona, Icaria Editorial.

Blain, Keisha N. 2020. "A Short History of Black Women and Police Violence." *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/a-short-history-of-black-women-and-police-violence-139937>

Blakemore, Erin. 2021. "The Shocking Photo of 'Whipped Peter' that Made Slavery's Brutality Impossible to Deny." *History*. <https://www.history.com/news/whipped-peter-slavery-photo-scourged-back-real-story-civil-war>

Blalock, Hubert M. 1989. *Power and Conflict: Toward A General Theory*. New York: SAGE Publications.

Blee, Kathleen M. 2005. "Racial Violence in the United States." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28 (4): 599-619.

—. 2018. *Understanding Racist Activism*. Oxford: Routledge.

Blee, Kathleen M.; Matthew DeMichelle, Pete Simi, and Mehr Latif. 2017. "How Racial Violence is Provoked and Channeled." *Socio* 9: 257-276. <https://journals.openedition.org/socio/3054>

Bloom, Harold. 2007. *Richard Wright's* Native Son. New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism.

—. 2008. *Ralph Ellison's* Invisible Man. New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism.

Bodenner, Chris. 2015. "*Between the World and Me* Book Club: Your Final Critical Thoughts." *The* *Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2015/08/between-the-world-and-me-book-club-your-final-critical-thoughts-ta-nehisi-coates/400421/>

Bogue, Ronald, and Marcel Cornis-Pope. 1996. *Violence and Mediation in Contemporary Culture*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 2006. *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and The Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Bontemps, Arna. 1969. *Great Slave Narratives*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Botelho, Greg, and Dana Ford. 2015. "Sandra Bland's Death Ruled Suicide by Hanging." *CNN*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/07/23/us/sandra-bland-arrest-death-main/>

Bouie, Jamelle. 2017. "We Made Ta-Nehisi Coates into a Symbol." *Slate*. <https://slate.com/culture/2017/10/ta-nehisi-coates-we-were-eight-years-in-power-reviewed-by-jamelle-bouie.html>

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Oxford: Routledge.

Bradley, Rolla M. 2008. "Masculinity and Self Perception of Men Identified as Informal Leaders." *The Athenaeum: Scholarship, Research, and Creative Works*. Doctoral thesis. <https://athenaeum.uiw.edu/uiw_etds/190>

Bradshaw, John. 1994. *Creating Love: The Next Great Stage of Growth*. New York: Bantam Books.

Brady, James S. 2013. "Remarks by the President on Trayvon Martin." *The White House: President Barack Obama's Archives*. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/07/19/remarks-president-trayvon-martin>

296

Brand, Dionne. 2001. *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*. New York: Vintage Canada. Print.

Brannon, Robert, and Deborah David. 1976. *The Forty-Nine Percent Majority: The Male Sex Role*. Reading: Addison Wesley Publishing Company. <https://archive.org/details/fortyninepercent00davi>

Bredekamp, Horst. 2015. *Théorie de l'acte d'image*. Translated by Frédéric Joly and Yes Sintomer. Paris: La Découverte.

Breitman, George. 1994. *Malcolm X Speaks*. New York: Grove Press.

Brennan, Fernne. 2017. *Race Rights Reparations: Institutional Racism and The Law*. New York: Routledge.

Brod, Harry, and Michael Kaufman. 1994. *Theorizing Masculinities*. London: Sage Publications.

Brogdon, Lewis. 2013. *Hope on the Brink: Understanding the Emergence of Nihilism in Black America*. Eugene: Cascade Books.

Brooks, Daphne A. 2006. *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*. Durham and London: Duke UP.

Brooks, David. 2015. "Listening to Ta-Nehisi Coates While White." *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/17/opinion/listening-to-ta-nehisi-coates-while-white.html>

Brooks, Gwendolyn. 2005. *The Essential Gwendolyn Brooks*. Edited by Elizabeth Alexander. Chicago: The Library of America.

Brown, Jericho. 2014. *The New Testament*. New York: Picador Poetry.

—. 2019. *The Tradition*. Washington: Copper Canyon Press.

Brown, Wendy. 1993. "Wounded Attachments." *Political Theory* 21 (3): 390-410. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/191795>

—.1995. *States of Injury. Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*. Princeton: Princeton UP.

—. 2005. *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics*. Princeton: Princeton UP.

Brown, William Wells. 1847. *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave*. Project Gutenberg. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15132/15132-h/15132-h.htm>

Brown, Melissa, and Rashawn Ray. 2020. "Breonna Taylor, Police Brutality, and the Importance of #SayHerName." *Brookings*. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/how-we-rise/2020/09/25/breonna-taylor-police-brutality-and-the-importance-of-sayhername/>

Bruce, Dickson D. 1979. *Violence and Culture in the Antebellum South*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Bruker, Malia. 2011. "Review: Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms by Frank B. Wilderson III." *Journal of Film and Video* 63 (4): 66-69. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/10.5406/jfilmvideo.63.4.0066.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A0dfcb9213d275bd9d07b4f87f3b6f620>

Brundage, W. Fitzhugh. 1993. *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Brunjes, Alexandra. 2017. "Summer Reading: *Between the World and Me*." *The Hoya*. <https://thehoya.com/summer-reading-between-the-world-and-me/>

Bryant, Jerry H. 1997. *Victims and Heroes: Racial Violence in the African American Novel*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Buchanan, Larry; Quoctrung Bui, and Jugal K. Patel. 2020. "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History." *The New York Times*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>

Burns, Sarah. 2019. *The Central Park Five: The Untold Story Behind One of New York City's Most Notorious Crimes*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

Butler, Judith. 2004. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London & New York: Verso.

—. 2005. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham UP.

—. 2009. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London & New York: Verso.

—. 2012. "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26 (2): 134-151. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/jspecphil.26.2.0134?seq=1>

—. 2020. *The Force of Non-Violence*. London & New York: Verso.

Butler, Judith, and Athena Athanasiou. 2013. *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Butterfield, Stephen. 1974. *Black Autobiography in America*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Bürger, Peter. 1984. *The Theory of the Avantgarde*. Translated by Michael Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Burstyn, Varda. 1999. *Rites of Men: Manhood, Politics, and the Culture of Sport*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Buschendorf, Christa, and Cornel West. 2014. *Black Prophetic Fire*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Capers, I. Bennett. 2019. "Afrofuturism, Critical Race Theory, and Policing in the Year 2044." *New York University Law Review* 94 (1): 2-58. <https://brooklynworks.brooklaw.edu/faculty/1049/>

Carbado, Devon W. 1999a. *Black Men on Race, Gender, and Sexuality*. New York & London: New York UP.

—. 1999b. "Black Rights, Gay Rights, Civil Rights: The Deployment of Race/Sexual Orientation Analogies in the Debates about the 'Don't Ask/Don't Tell' Policy." *Black Men on Race, Gender, and Sexuality*. Edited by Devon W. Carbado. New York & London: New York UP.

Carbado, Devon W., and Mitu Gulati. 2013. *Acting White? Rethinking Race in "Post-Racial" America*. New York: Oxford UP.

Carney, Kelly Walter. 2017. "Brother Outsider: James Baldwin, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and Exile Literature." *CLA Journal* 60 (4): 448-457. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26557005?seq=1>

Carroll, Michael Adam. 2019. "*The Water Dancer* by Ta-Nehisi Coates." *Ploughshares at Emmerson College*. <https://blog.pshares.org/the-water-dancer-by-ta-nehisi-coates/>

Carter, Dan. 1979. *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South*. Batton Rouge: Louisiana State UP.

Cavarero, Adriana. 2009. *Horrorismo: nombrando la violencia contemporánea*. Translated by Saleta de Salvador Agra. Mexico City: Anthropos.

Chandler, Nahum. 2013. *X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought*. New York: Fordham UP.

Channing Brown, Austin. 2018. "Standing in the Shadow of Hope." *On Being*. <https://onbeing.org/blog/austin-channing-brown-standing-in-the-shadow-of-hope/>

Chapman, Fr. Bonaventure. 2016. "Beyond the World and Me: A Challenge to Ta-Nehisi Coates." *Dominicana Journal*. <https://www.dominicanajournal.org/20260-2/>

Charney, Maurice. 1963. "James Baldwin's Quarrel with Richard Wright." *American Quarterly* 15 (1): 65-75. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2710268>

Chatterton Williams, Thomas. 2015. "Loaded Dice." *London Review of Books*. <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v37/n23/thomas-chatterton-williams/loaded-dice>

Cheng, Anne. 2001. *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation and Hidden Grief*. Oxford: Oxford UP.

Childers, Joseph. 1994. *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*. New York: Columbia UP.

Choi, Maria. 2020. "Necessary Violence in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative.*" *Monarch: Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creativity* 6: 5-11. <https://fdocuments.in/document/methodist-universityas-journal-of-undergraduate-research-cover-ie-untitled.html?page=7>

Chotiner, Isaac. 2015. "A Conversation with Ta-Nehisi Coates." *Slate*. <https://slate.com/culture/2015/07/ta-nehisi-coates-the-between-the-world-and-me-author-on-charleston-obama-and-harper-lee.html>

Clark, Natalie. 2016. "Shock and Awe: Trauma as the New Colonial Frontier." *Humanities* 5 (1). <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0787/5/1/14>

Cleaver, Eldridge. 1968. *Soul on Ice*. Bloomington: Delta.

Clifton, Derrick. 2015. "Black Women Are Getting Killed by the Police Too—So Why Aren't More People Discussing It?" *The Mic Network*. <https://mic.com/articles/117228/black-women-continue-getting-killed-by-police-why-aren-t-more-people-discussing-it#.B0xlbW98i>

Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights. 2020. "About Racism." <https://www.crer.scot/what-is-racism>

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. 2008. *The Beautiful Struggle*. New York: Spiegel & Grau.

—. 2008b. "This Is How We Lost to the White Man." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/05/-this-is-how-we-lost-to-the-white-man/306774/>

—. 2010. "Earning the Temporary Hatred of Your Children." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2010/01/earning-the-temporary-hatred-of-your-children/33835/>

—. 2012. "Why Don't Black People Protest 'Black-on-Black Violence'?" *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2012/04/why-dont-black-people-protest-black-on-black-violence/255329/>

—. 2013. "Trayvon Martin Was a Victim of Black-on-Black Crime." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/09/trayvon-martin-was-a-victim-of-black-on-black-crime/279691/>

—. 2014a. "The Case for Reparations." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>

—. 2014b. "Acting French." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/08/acting-french/375743/>

—. 2014c. "Race, Culture, and Poverty: The Path Forward." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/04/race-culture-and-poverty-the-path-forward/360081/>

—. 2014d. "Black People Are Not Ignoring 'Black-on-Black' Crime." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/08/black-people-are-not-ignoring-black-on-black-crime/378629/>

—. 2015a. *Between the World and Me*. Melbourne: Text Publishing Company.

—. 2015b. "Hope and the Artist." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/11/hope-and-the-artist/417348/>

—. 2015c. "Hope and the Historian." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/12/hope-and-the-historian/419961/>

—. 2015d. "The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/10/the-black-family-in-the-age-of-mass-incarceration/403246/>

—. 2015e. "2015 NBA Non-Fiction Award Winner: Ta-Nehisi Coates (Full Speech)." *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=150&v=j54cCLCWipQ&feature=emb_title>

—. 2015f. "The Clock Didn't Start with the Riots." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/04/ta-nehisi-coates-johns-hopkins-baltimore/391904/>

—. 2016. "The Near Certainty of Anti-Police Violence." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/07/the-near-certainty-of-anti-police-violence/490541/>

—. 2017. *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy*. New York: Penguin Random House. Print.

—. 2019. *The Water Dancer*. New York: One World Press. Print.

Coleman, Arica L. 2017. "James Baldwin Documentary *I Am Not Your Negro* Is the Product of a Specific Moment in History." *Time*. <https://time.com/4680673/james-baldwin-documentary-history/>

Coles, Romand. 2005. "Democracy, Theology, and the Question of Excess." *Modern Theology* 21 (2): 301-321. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1468-0025.2005.00287.x>

Collin, Françoise. 2009. "Beauvoir et la douleur: aliénation et altération dans la pensée beauvoirienne." *Simone de Beauvoir: Autour du* Deuxième sexe. <https://www.erudit.org/fr/revues/sp/2010-sp04852/1064008ar/>

Collins, Patricia Hill. 1990. *Black Feminist Thought*. New York: Routledge.

—. 2006. "A Telling Difference: Dominance, Strength, and Black Masculinities." *Progressive Black Masculinities*. Edited by Athena D. Mutua. New York: Routledge.

Collins, Randall. 2008. *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory*. Princeton: Princeton UP.

Connell, R. W. 1983. *Which Way Is Up? Essays on Sex, Class, and Culture*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

—. 1987. *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics*. Redwood City: Stanford UP.

—. 1995. "Men's Bodies." *Masculinities*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press.

—. 2003. "Australian Masculinities." *Male Trouble: Looking at Australian Masculinities*. Edited by Mike Donaldson and Stephen Tomsen. Melbourne: Pluto Press.

—. 2004. "Masculinities, Relations Among." *Men and Masculinities: A Social, Cultural, and Historical Encyclopedia. Volume I: A-J*. Edited by Michael Kimmel and Amy Aronson. Santa Barbara, Denver, & Oxford: ABC Clio.

—. 2005. *Masculinities*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Print.

Connell, R. W., and James W. Messerschmidt. 2005. "Hegemonic Masculinities: Rethinking the Concept." *Gender and Society* 19 (6): 829-859. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639>

Connell, R. W.; Sandra J. Kessler, Dean Ashenden, and Gary Dowsett. 1982. *Ockers & Disco-Maniacs: A Discussion of Sex, Gender and Secondary Schooling*. Stanmore: Inner City Education Centre.

Constitution Center. 2021. "Abolition of Slavery." <https://constitutioncenter.org/interactive-constitution/amendment/amendment-xiii>

Conway-Long, Don. 1994. "Ethnographies and Masculinities." *Theorizing Masculinities*. Edited by Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman. London: Sage Publications.

Copeland, Huey. 2013. *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and Blackness in Multicultural America*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Cornish, Audie. 2017. "Cornel West Doesn't Want to Be a Neoliberal Darling." *The New York Times Magazine*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/29/magazine/cornel-west-doesnt-want-to-be-a-neoliberal-darling.html>

Cottom, Tressie McMillan. 2015a. "*Between the World and Me* Book Club: Two Texts Masquerading as One." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/07/ta-nehisi-coates-book-club/398972/>

—. 2015b. "*Between the World and Me* Book Club: Not Trying to Get into Heaven." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/08/between-the-world-and-me-book-club-not-trying-to-get-into-heaven/400271/>

Couser, Thomas. 2012. *Memoir: An Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Coval, Kevin. 2015. "Introduction." *The Break Beat Poets: New American Poetry in the Age of Hip-Hop*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.

Craft, Ellen, and William Craft. 1860. *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*. Project Gutenberg. <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/585/pg585.html>

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1 (8): 139-168. <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=uclf>

—. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43 (6): 1241-1299. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1229039?seq=1>

—. 2015. *Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced and Underprotected*. New York: The African American Policy Forum. <https://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/BlackGirlsMatter_Report.pdf>

Cullors, Patrisse Khan. 2018. *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Cunningham, George P. 1996. "Body Politics: Race, Gender, and the Captive Body." *Representing Black Men*. Edited by Marcellus Blount and George P. Cunningham.

Cunningham, Vinson. 2015. "Why Ta-Nehisi Coates Isn't Our James Baldwin." *Intelligencer*. <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2015/08/why-ta-nehisi-coates-isnt-our-james-baldwin.html>

Cushay, Phil, and Michael Warr. 2016. *Of Poetry and Protest: From Emmett Till to Trayvon Martin.* New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Dahlke, Otto H. 1952. "Race and Minority Riots—A Study in the Typology of Violence." *Social Forces* 30 (4): 419-425. < https://www.jstor.org/stable/2572343>

Davis, Angela J. 2017. *Policing the Black Man: Arrest, Prosecution and Imprisonment*. New York: Vintage Books.

Davis, Angela Y. 2003. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories Press.

Delany, Martin R. 2017 (1857). *Blake; or, The Huts of America*. Cambridge: Harvard UP.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateus*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Dery, Mark. 1994. "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose." *Flame Wars: The Discourse on Cyberculture*. Edited by Mark Dery. Durham & London: Duke UP.

Dix, Andrew. 2020. "'The Baddest One-Chick Hit-Squad': Pam Grier, Angela Davis, and the Politics of Female Violence in Blaxploitation Cinema." *Violence from Slavery to #BlackLivesMatter: African American History and Representation*. New York: Routledge.

Dix, Andrew, and Peter Templeton. 2020. *Violence from Slavery to #BlackLivesMatter: African American History and Representation*. New York: Routledge.

Dizikes, Peter. 2013. "Using Literature to Understand Violence Against Blacks." *Massachusetts Institute of Technology News*. <http://news.mit.edu/2013/sandy-alexandre-the-properties-of-violence-0517>

Doddington, David Stefan. 2018. "Contesting Slave Masculinity in the American South." *Cambridge Core*. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/contesting-slave-masculinity-in-the-american-south/introduction/5ED13F710D654C96DC41B402D1F1ADA7/core-reader>

Dollard, John. 1937. *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*. New Haven: Yale UP.

Donaldson, Mike, and Stephen Tomsen. 2003. *Male Trouble: Looking at Australian Masculinities*. Melbourne: Pluto Press.

Dorsey, Kaliyah. 2020. "Kiese Laymon's *Heavy* Stresses the Importance of Revision." *34th Street*. <https://www.34st.com/article/2020/07/kiese-laymon-heavy-revision-

forgiveness-black-writers-relationships-healing-ivy-league-university-of-pennsylvania-upenn>

Doss, Erika. 1998. "Imaging the Panthers: Representing Black Power and Masculinity, 1960s–1990s." *Prospects: An Annual of American Studies* 23: 470–93. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/prospects/article/abs/imaging-the-panthers-representing-black-power-and-masculinity-1960s1990s/38441BEA25DEE8DB6218D4799F0BD7F4>

—. 2001. "'Revolutionary Art Is a Tool for Liberation': Emory Douglas and Protest Aesthetics at the Black Panther." *Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party*. Edited by Kathleen Cleaver and George Katsiaficas. Routledge: New York.

Douglass, Frederick. 1845. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Project Gutenberg. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/23/23-h/23-h.htm>

—. 1852. "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" *Teaching American History*. <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/what-to-the-slave-is-the-fourth-of-july/>

—. 1855. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Project Gutenberg. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/202/202-h/202-h.htm>

Douglas, Kelly Brown. 1999. "Stereotypes, False Images, Terrorism: The White Assault upon Black Sexuality." *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.

Douglass, Patrice, and Frank B. Wilderson. 2013. "The Violence of Presence: Metaphysics in a Blackened World." *The Black Scholar* 43 (4): 117-123. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5816/blackscholar.43.4.0117>

Douglass, Patrice; Selamawit D. Terrefe, and Frank B. Wilderson. 2018. "Afropessimism." *Oxford Bibliographies*.

<https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780190280024/obo-9780190280024-0056.xml>

Drake, Simone. 2007. *"Sometimes Folk Need More": Black Women Writers Dwelling in the Beyond*. Doctoral thesis. <https://drum.lib.umd.edu/bitstream/handle/1903/6911/umi-umd-4409.pdf?sequence=1>

Du Bois, W.E.B. 1912. "Of the Giving of Life." *The Crisis* 4 (6).

—. 2007 (1898). *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*. Edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Lawrence Bobo. New York: Oxford UP.

—. 2007 (1903). *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Oxford UP.

—. 2016 (1920). "The Souls of White Folk." *Religion Bites*. <https://medium.com/religion-bites/the-souls-of-white-folk-by-w-e-b-du-bois-354f91ca08ef>

Duffy, Josie. 2015. "*Between the World and Me* Is for All of Us, even if It Is not about All of Us." *Rewire News Group*. <https://rewirenewsgroup.com/article/2015/07/15/world-us-even-us/>

DuVernay, Ava. 2016. *13th*. Netflix.

Dyson, Michael Eric. 1995. *Making Malcolm: The Myth & Meaning of Malcolm X*. New York: Oxford UP.

Eberhardt-Smith, Alecia. 2020. "Stereotypes about Black Fathers." *Legacy*. <https://www.givelegacy.com/resources/the-truth-about-black-fatherhood/>

Edwards, Frank; Hedwig Lee, and Michael Esposito. 2019. "Risk of Being Killed by Police Use of Force in the United States by Age, Race-Ethnicity, and Sex." *PNAS*. <https://www.pnas.org/content/116/34/16793/tab-figures-data>

Egan, Elisabeth. 2020. "Happy 100th Best-Seller Week to *Between the World and Me*." *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/03/books/review/between-the-world-and-me-ta-nehisi-coates.html>

Eidsheim, Nina, and Katherine Meizel. 2019. *The Oxford Handbook of Voice Studies*. New York: Oxford UP.

Ellison, Ralph. 1964 (1953). "The World and the Jug." *Shadow and Act*. New York: Random House.

—. 2014 (1952). *Invisible Man*. New York: Penguin Essentials.

Eng, David L., and Shinhee Han. 2003. "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia." *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*. Edited by David L. Eng and David Kazanjian. Berkeley: University of California Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pp71r.19>

English, Daylanne K. 2017. "Afrofuturism." *Oxford Bibliographies*. <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780190221911/obo-9780190221911-0004.xml?rskey=bYDhIu&result=2&q=afrofuturism#firstMatch>

Ernest, John. 2014. *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative*. New York: Oxford UP.

Esposito, Roberto. 2013. *Terms of the Political. Community, Immunity, and Biopolitics*. New York: Fordham UP.

Essed, Philomena. 1991. *Understanding Everyday Racism: An Interdisciplinary Theory*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.

Estes, Steve. 2005. "The Moynihan Report." *I Am a Man!: Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Evans, Brad. 2019. "Histories of Violence: Slavery in America." *LARB*. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/histories-of-violence-slavery-in-america/>

Evans, David, and Peter Dula. 2018. *Between the World of Ta-Nehisi Coates and Christianity*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers.

Ewing, Eve L. 2020. "I'm a Black Scholar Who Studies Race. Here's Why I Capitalize 'White'." *Zora Medium*. <https://zora.medium.com/im-a-black-scholar-who-studies-race-here-s-why-i-capitalize-white-f94883aa2dd3>

Fanon, Franz. 2008 (1952). *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press.

—. 1963. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington. New York: Grove Press.

Feagin, Joe, and Harlan Hahn. 1973. *Ghetto Revolts: The Politics of Violence in American Cities*. New York: Macmillan.

Feblowitz, Joshua C. 2010. "Breaking the Cycle: Violence, Control & Resistance in American Slave Narratives." *Inquiries Journal* 2 (1): <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/126/1/breaking-the-cycle-violence-control-resistance-in-american-slave-narratives>

Felman, Shoshana, and Dori Laub. 1992. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*. New York: Routledge.

Ferrise, Adam. 2019. "Tamir Rice 911 Call-Taker Suspended." *Cleveland.com*. <https://www.cleveland.com/metro/2017/03/tamir_rice_911_call-taker_susp.html>

Fishman, Aleisa. 2013. "Kathleen Blee." *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*. <https://www.ushmm.org/antisemitism/podcast/voices-on-antisemitism/kathleen-blee-es>

Fliethmann, Axel. 2006. "The Violence of Representation." *Violent Depictions: Representing Violence Across Cultures.* Edited by Susanna Scarparo and Sarah McDonald. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Florida State Legislature. "Statute 776.012 Use or threatened use of force in defense of person." *Online Sunshine. The Florida State Legislature*.

Foley, Elizabeth A. 2020. *Political Fictions: Black Feminist Novels of Slavery and the Narrative of the American Left*. CUNY Academic Works. Doctoral thesis. <https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/3803>

Ford, Na'Imah. 2017. "Pedagogy of Empowerment: Approaches to Teaching Ta-Nehisi Coates and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie." *CLA Journal* 60 (4). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26557007?seq=1>

Foucault, Michel. 1990 (1978). *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage Books.

—.1997 (1975). *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*. Edited by Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana. New York: Picador.

Franklin, Bruce H. 1998. *Prison Writings in 20th Century America*. New York: Penguin Books.

Freud, Sigmund. 1917. *Mourning and Melancholia*. London: Vintage.

Fuss, Diana. 2013. *Dying Modern: A Meditation on Elegy*. Durham & London: Duke UP.

Gallego, Mar. 2007. "Love and the Survival of the Black Community." *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*. Edited by Justine Tally. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Galtung, Johan. 1969. "Violence, Peace and Peace Research." *Journal of Peace Research* 6 (3): 167-191.

—. 1990. "Cultural Violence." *Journal of Peace Research* 27 (3): 291-305.

Garrett, Paula, and Hollis Robbins. 2006. *The Works of William Wells Brown: Using his "Strong, Manly Voice."* New York: Oxford UP.

Gates Jr., Henry Louis. 2012. *The Classic Slave Narratives*. New York: Signet Classics.

Gates Jr., Henry Louis, and Valerie A. Smith. 2014. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature.* New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Geary, Daniel. 2015. "The Moynihan Report: An Annotated Edition." *The Atlantic.* <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/the-moynihan-report-an-annotated-edition/404632/>

George, Alice. 2018. "The 1968 Kerner Commission Got It Right, But Nobody Listened." *The Smithsonian Magazine.* <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/1968-kerner-commission-got-it-right-nobody-listened-180968318/>

Ghaill, Máirtín Mac An. 1994a. *The Making of Men: Masculinities, Sexualities and Schooling.* London: Open UP.

—. 1994b. "The Making of Black English Masculinities." *Theorizing Masculini*ties. Edited by Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman. London: Sage Publications.

Gholipour, Bahar. 2017. "Writing a Memoir Is a Strange Psychological Trip through Your Past." *The Cut.* <https://www.thecut.com/2017/04/what-happens-to-your-memories-when-you-write-a-memoir.html>

Glass, Leonard L. 1984. "Man's Man/Ladies' Man: Motifs of Hypermasculinity." *Psychiatry* 47 (3): 260-278. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1984.11024247>

Glass, Ira, and Neil Drumming. 2020. "707: We Are in the Future." *This American Life.* <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/707/we-are-in-the-future>

Gilmore, Leigh. 2001. *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony.* Ithaca & London: Cornell UP.

Gilroy, Paul. 2000. *Against Race.* Cambridge: Harvard UP.

Goldberg, Jeffrey. 2008. "Ta-Nehisi Coates Is the New Frederick Douglass." *The Atlantic.* <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2008/08/ta-nehisi-coates-is-the-new-frederick-douglass/8647/>

—. 2018. "The Power of the Word." *SXSW 2018*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3YCkgRAa-8>

Goldman, Alvin I. 2006. *Simulating Minds: The Philosophy, Psychology, and Neuroscience of Mindreading*. New York: Oxford University Press.

González-Tennant, Edward. 2012. "Intersectional Violence, New Media, and the 1923 Rosewood Pogrom." *FIRE!!!* 1 (2): 64-110. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5323/fire.1.2.0064>

—. 2018. *The Rosewood Massacre. An Archeology and History of Intersectional Violence*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

Goodman, Amy. 2015. "Ta-Nehisi Coates on Police Brutality: 'The Violence Is not New, It's the Cameras that Are New'." *Democracy Now*. <https://www.democracynow.org/2015/9/7/ta_nehisi_coates_on_police_brutality>

Gordon, Lewis R. 1997. *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*. New York: Routledge.

—. 2000. *Existentia Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought*. New York: Routledge.

—. 2005. *Not Only the Master's Tools: African-American Studies in Theory and Practice*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.

—. 2006. "Through the Zone of Nonbeing: A Reading of *Black Skin, White Masks* in Celebration of Fanon's Eightieth Birthday." *The C.L.R. James Journal* 11 (1): 1-43. <https://globalstudies.trinity.duke.edu/sites/globalstudies.trinity.duke.edu/files/file-attachments/v1d3_LGordon.pdf>

—. 2010. "Theory in Black: Teleological Suspensions in Philosophy of Culture." *Qui Parle* 18 (2): 193-214. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5250/quiparle.18.2.193>

Gottschalk, Marie. 2015. "America Needs a Third Reconstruction." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/americas-need-for-a-third-reconstruction/405799/>

Graham, Renée. 2020. "What Happened to Emmett Till Feels Like Today." *The Boston Globe*. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/08/25/opinion/america-too-many-emmett-tills/>

Grandpre, Lawrence, and Dayvon Love. 2014. *The Black Book. Reflections from the Baltimore Grassroots*. Baltimore: Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle.

Gramsci, Antonio. 2011 (1948). *Prison Notebooks: Volumes I-III*. New York: Columbia UP.

Grassian, Daniel. 2009. *Writing the Future of Black America: Literature of the Hip-Hop Generation*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

Griggs, Sutton E. 1901. *Overshadowed*. Project Gutenberg. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/36033/36033-h/36033-h.htm>

—. 1905. *Hindered Land; or, the Reign of the Repressionist*. Project Gutenberg. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/24577/24577-h/24577-h.htm>

Grusser, John. 2022. "Lynching in the Novels of Sutton E. Griggs." *Lynching in Texas*. <https://www.lynchingintexas.org/gruesser>

Guerrero, Lisa. 2017. "New Native Sons: Ta-Nehisi Coates, Kiese Laymon, and The Phenomenology of Blackness in the Post-Racial Age." *CLA Journal* 60 (4). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26557003?read-now=1&refreqid=excelsior%3A18637e731a952d12ba319f4d1444bf25&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents>

Gupta, Alisha Haridasani. 2020. "Since 2015: 48 Black Women Killed by the Police. And Only 2 Charges." *The New York Times*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/24/us/breonna-taylor-grand-jury-black-women.html>

Haile III, James B. 2017. "Ta-Nehisi Coates's Phenomenology of the Body." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 31 (3): 493-503. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/jspecphil.31.3.0493?seq=1>

Hall, Stuart. 1986. "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10 (2): 5-27.

—. 1996. *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: Sage.

—. 1997. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage.

Halliwell, Stephen. 2012. "Diegesis–Mimesis." *The Living Handbook of Narratology*. Edited by Peter Hühn, John Pier, Wolf Schmid, and Jörg Schönert. Hamburg: Hamburg UP. <https://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/node/36.html>

Haltunnen, Karen. 1995. "Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture." *The American Historical Review* 100 (2): 303-334. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2169001>

Harding, Rosemary Freeney. 2015. *Remnants: A Memoir of Spirit, Activism and Mothering.* Durham & London: Duke UP.

Harding, Wendy. 2017. "Spectacle Lynching and Textual Responses." *Miranda: Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed Journal on the English-Speaking World* 15. <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/10493>

Hartman, Saidiya. 1997. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*. Oxford: Oxford UP.

—. 2007. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar Strauss & Giroux.

—. 2008. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe* 12 (2): 1-14. <https://read.dukeupress.edu/small-axe/article/12/2/1/32332/Venus-in-Two-Acts>

Hartman, Saidiya, and Frank B. Wilderson III. 2003. "The Position of the Unthought." *Qui Parle* 13 (2): 183-201. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/20686156.pdf?seq=1>

Harris, John. 1992. "An Elegy for Myself: British Poetry and the Holocaust." *English* 41 (171): 213-233. <https://academic.oup.com/english/article-abstract/41/171/213/507207>

Harris, Reginald. 2013. *Autogeography: Poems*. Evanston: Northwestern UP.

Hayes, Floyd W. 2001. "Cornel West and Afro-Nihilism: A Reconsideration." *Cornel West: A Critical Reader*. Edited by George Yancy. Malden: Blackwell Publishers.

Haywood, Chris, and Máirtín Mac an Ghaill. 2003. *Men and Masculinities: Theory, Research, and Social Practice*. Buckingham & Philadelphia: Open UP.

Heaney, Michael T. 2020. "The George Floyd Protests Generated more Media Coverage than any Protest in 50 Years." *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/07/06/george-floyd-protests-generated-more-media-coverage-than-any-protest-50-years/>

Heidegger, Martin. 1971. "The Thing." *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Translated by Albert Hofstader. New York: Harper Collins.

Heilbroner, David, and Kate Davis. 2018. *Say Her Name: The Life and Death of Sandra Bland*. HBO.

Hellman, Caroline Chamberlin. 2019. *Children of the Raven and the Whale: Visions and Revisions in American Literature*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

Henry, Paget. 2005. *Africana Phenomenology: Its Philosophical Implications*. Worlds & Knowledges Otherwise.

<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/f3b3/b960ccba1637841401eb95d6199e70d3df2b.p
df>

Hermann, Peter. 2015. "Baltimore's Transgender Community Mourns One of their Own,
Slain by Police." *The Washington Post*.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/crime/baltimores-transgender-community-
mourns-one-of-their-own-slain-by-police/2015/04/03/2f657da4-d88f-11e4-8103-
fa84725dbf9d_story.html?utm_term=.82812d6246d5>

Herron, Antwan. 2017. "Why Whupping Your Kids Won't Save Black America." *Wear
Your Voice*. <https://wearyourvoicemag.com/black-whupping-review-stacey-pattons-
spare-kids/>

Hill, Jason D. 2017. "An Open Letter to Ta-Nehisi Coates: The Dream Is Real."
Commentary Magazine. <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/open-
letter-ta-nehisi-coates/>

Hill, Michael; Jessica Welburn Page, and Deborah Whaley. 2017. "The Audacity of a
Middle Period: An Introduction." *CLA Journal* 60 (4).
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26557001?seq=3#metadata_info_tab_contents>

Hill, Evan; Ainara Tiefenthäler, Christiaan Triebert, Drew Jordan, Haley Willis, and
Robin Stein. 2020. "How George Floyd Was Killed in Police Custody." *The New York
Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.html>

Hilton, Shani O. 2015. "The Black Experience Isn't just about Men." *Buzzfeed*.
<https://www.buzzfeed.com/shani/between-the-world-and-she>

Himes, Chester. 1976 (1955). *My Life of Absurdity*. New York: Doubleday and Co.

Hirsch, Arnold R. 1986. *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-
1960*. New York: Cambridge UP.

Hirsch, Marianne. 1999. "Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Memory." *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. Edited by Mike Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer. Hanover: UP of New England.

—. 2001. "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory." *Visual Culture and the Holocaust*. Edited by Barbie Zelizer. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP.

—. 2008. "The Generation of Postmemory." *Poetics Today* 29 (1): 103-128. <https://read.dukeupress.edu/poetics-today/article/29/1/103/20954/The-Generation-of-Postmemory>

Holland-Batt, Sarah. 2018. "Ekphrasis, Photography, and Ethical Strategies of Witness: Poetic Responses to Emmett Till." *New Writing*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2017.1421230>

Holloway, Karla F. C. 2002. *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories: A Memorial*. Durham & London: Duke UP.

Holt, Brianna. 2020. "Now I Understand Why my Parents Were so Strict." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2020/06/my-black-parents-had-be-strict/612610/>

hooks, bell. 1990. *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. Boston: South End Press.

—. 1992. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston: South End Press.

—. 2001. *All About Love: New Visions*. New York: Harper Perennial.

—. 2004. *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*. New York: Routledge.

—. 2013. *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice*. New York: Routledge.

Horowitz, Donald. 1983. "Racial Violence in the United States." *Ethnic Pluralism and Public Policy: Achieving Equality in the United States and Britain*. Lexington: Lexington Books.

—. 2001. *The Deadly Ethnic Riot*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hosko, Ron. 2017. "FBI Study Is Telling About Policing in a Post-Ferguson America." *CNS News*. <https://www.cnsnews.com/commentary/ron-hosko/fbi-study-telling-about-policing-post-ferguson-america>

Howard-Pitney, David. 1990. *The Afro-American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America*. Philadelphia: Temple UP.

Hughey, Matthew W. 2009. "Black Aesthetics and Panther Rhetoric: A Critical Decoding of Black Masculinity in *The Black Panther*, 1967–80." *Critical Sociology* 35 (1): 29-56. <https://journals-sagepub-com.scsu.idm.oclc.org/doi/abs/10.1177/0896920508098656>

Hull, Gloria T., Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (eds.). 2015 (1982). *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*. New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York.

Hussey, Rebecca. 2018. "What Are the Major Differences Between Memoir and Autobiography?" *Book Riot*. <https://bookriot.com/2018/11/27/difference-between-memoir-and-autobiography/>

Hutchinson, George. 1996. *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White.* Cambridge: Belknap Press.

Hylton, Bridgette. 2020. "Why We Must Stop Referring to Enslaved People as 'Slaves'." *Human Parts: Medium*. <https://humanparts.medium.com/why-we-must-immediately-cease-and-desist-referring-to-enslaved-people-as-slaves-85b0ddfc5f7b>

Hynd, Stacey. 2020. "Trauma, Violence, and Memory in African Child Soldier Memoirs." *Cult Med Psychiatry* 45: 74-96. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11013-020-09668-4>

Jaccarino, Mike; Alison Gendar, and Corky Siemaszko. 2006. "Pal of Sean Begs, 'No Violence'." *Daily News: The Front Page.* <https://web.archive.org/web/20070126004506/http://www.nydailynews.com/front/story/477344p-401515c.html>

Jackman, Mary. 2002. "Violence in Social Life." *Annual Review of Sociology* 28: 387-415. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3069247>

Jackson, Cassandra. 2011. *Violence, Visual Culture, and the Black Male Body*. New York: Routledge.

—. 2020. "Lynching Photography and African American Melancholia." *Violence from Slavery to #BlackLivesMatter: African American History and Representation*. Edited by Andrew Dix and Peter Templeton. New York: Routledge.

Jacobs, Harriett A. 1861. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Project Gutenberg. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/11030/11030-h/11030-h.htm>

Jacobs, James, and Kimberly Potter. 1998. *Hate Crimes: Criminal Law and Identity Politics*. New York: Oxford UP.

Jafa, Arthur. 2013. *Dreams Are Colder than Death*. <http://www.play-doc.com/en/film/dreams-are-colder-than-death/>

JanMohamed, Abdul R. 2005. *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright's Archeology of Death*. Durham & London: Duke UP.

Jean-Charles, Régine Michelle. 2009. "Beneath the Layers of Violence: Images of Rape in the Rwandan Genocide." *Local Violence, Global Media: Feminist Analyses of Gendered Representations*. Edited by Lisa Cuklanz. New York: Peter Lang: 246-266.

—. 2014. *Conflict Bodies: The Politics of Rape Representation in the Francophone Imaginary*. Columbus: The Ohio State UP.

Jefferson, Margo. 2015. *Negroland: A Memoir*. New York: Vintage Books.

Jenkins, Candice M. 2019. *Black Bourgeois: Class and Sex in the Flesh*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Johnson, Charles. 1993. "A Phenomenology of the Black Body." *Michigan Quarterly Review* 32 (4): 599-613. <https://poeticsofpop.files.wordpress.com/2017/03/scan-79.pdf>

Johnson, Walter. 2007. "Slavery." *Keywords for American Cultural Studies: Second Edition*. Edited by Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler. New York: New York UP. <https://keywords.nyupress.org/american-cultural-studies/about-this-site/>

Johnson-DeBaufre, Melanie; Catherine Keller, and Elias Ortega-Aponte. 2015. *Common Goods: Economy, Ecology, and Political Theology.* Oxford: University Press Scholarship Online. <https://www.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.5422/fordham/9780823268436.001.0001/upso-9780823268436>

Jones, Douglas A. 2016. "The Fruit of Abolition: Discontinuity and Difference in Terrance Hayes' 'The Avocado'." *The Psychic Hold of Slavery: Legacies in American Expressive Culture*. Edited by Soyica Diggs Colbert, Robert J. Patterson, and Aida Levy-Hussen. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP.

Jones, LeRoi. 1966. *Home: Social Essays by LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka)*. New York: Akashi Classics.

Jose, P. E., and Brewer, W. F. (1984). "Development of Story Liking: Character Identification, Suspense, and Outcome Resolution." *Developmental Psychology* 20 (5): 911–924. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1985-00860-001>

Juncosa, Toni R. "'My Proof of Life': HIV as Reification of Black Metaphysics in Danez Smith's *Homie.*" *452ºF* 25: 145-160. <https://452f.com/wp-content/uploads/pdf/numero25/7-mono-juncosa.pdf>

Jung, Moon-Kie, and João H. Costa Vargas. 2021. *Antiblackness*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.

Karr, Mary. 2016. *The Art of Memoir*. New York: Harper Collins.

Kaufman, Michael. 1994. "Men, Feminism, and Men's Contradictory Experiences of Power." *Theorizing Masculinities*. Edited by Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman. London: Sage Publications.

Keaggy, Diana Toroian. 2016. "First Year Reading Program Selects *Between the World and Me.*" *The Source: Washington University at St. Louis*. <https://source.wustl.edu/2016/05/first-year-reading-program-selects-world/>

Keen, Suzanne. 2007. *Empathy and the Novel*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Keizer, Arlene R. 2004. *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery*. New York: Cornell UP.

Kennedy, Randall. 2015. "Ta-Nehisi Coates's Caricature of Black Reality." *American Prospect*. <https://prospect.org/culture/books/ta-nehisi-coates-s-caricature-black-reality/>

Kerr, Audrey E. 2005. "The Paper Bag Principle: Of the Myth and the Motion of Colorism." *The Journal of American Folklore* 118 (469): 271-289. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4137914>

—. 2006. *The Paper Bag Principle: Class, Complexion, and Community in Black Washington, D.C.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

Khaleeli, Homa. 2016. "#SayHerName: Why Kimberlé Crenshaw Is Fighting for Forgotten Women." *The Guardian*.

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/may/30/sayhername-why-kimberle-crenshaw-is-fighting-for-forgotten-women>

Khan, Amina. 2019. "Getting Killed by Police Is a Leading Cause of Death for Young Black Men in America." *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/science/story/2019-08-15/police-shootings-are-a-leading-cause-of-death-for-black-men>

Khon, Sally. 2015. "Why White Women Should Read Ta-Nehisi Coates's Book." *ELLE*. <https://www.elle.com/culture/books/a29572/what-i-learned-from-reading-ta-nehisi-coates/>

Kilpatrick, Alexandra. 2015. "#BlackLivesMatter and the Legacy of Hurricane Katrina." *Generation Progress*. <https://genprogress.org/blacklivesmatter-and-the-legacy-of-hurricane-katrina/>

Kimmel, Michael. 1994. "Masculinity as Homophobia." *Theorizing Masculinities*. Edited by Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman. London: Sage Publications.

Kimmel, Michael, and Amy Aronson. 2004. *Men and Masculinities: A Social, Cultural, and Historical Encyclopedia. Volume I: A-J*. Santa Barbara, Denver, & Oxford: ABC Clio.

King, Lovalerie, and Shirley Moody-Turner. 2013. *Contemporary African American Literature: The Living Canon*. Bloomington: Indiana UP.

King, Tiffany Lethabo. 2019. *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*. Durham and London: Duke UP.

Kite, Lorien. 2016. "Man Booker Winner Paul Beatty on Race in a 'Post-Racial' World." *The Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/fd256bf0-9c47-11e6-8324-be63473ce146>

Kitwana, Bakari. 2002. *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture*. New York: Basic Civitas.

Klein, Ezra. 2016a. "Ta-Nehisi Coates: 'I Am a Big Believer in Chaos'." *Vox*. <https://www.vox.com/conversations/2016/12/19/13952578/ta-nehisi-coates-ezra-klein>

—. 2016b. "Ta-Nehisi Coates: 'There's not gonna be a happy ending to this story'." *Stitcher*. <https://www.stitcher.com/show/the-ezra-klein-show/episode/tanehisi-coates-theres-not-gonna-be-a-happy-ending-to-this-story-48533652>

—. 2020. "Why Ta-Nehisi Coates Is Hopeful." *Vox*. <https://www.vox.com/2020/6/5/21279530/ta-nehisi-coates-ezra-klein-show-george-floyd-police-brutality-trump-biden>

Kleinman, Arthur M. 2003. "*Regarding the Pain of Others*, by Susan Sontag." *Literature and Medicine* 22 (2): 257-261. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/48970>

Krippendorf, Klaus. 2012. "Representation, re-presentation, presentation, and conversation." *(Re)Presentations and Dialogue*. Edited by François Cooren and Alain Létourneau. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Kuumba, M. Bahati. 2006. "Gender Justice: Linking Women's Human Rights and Progressive Black Masculinities." *Progressive Black Masculinities*. Edited by Athena D. Mutua. New York: Routledge.

LaCapra, Dominick. 1994. *Representing the Holocaust: History, Memory, Trauma*. New York: Cornell UP.

—. 1997. "Revisiting the Historians' Debate: Mourning and Genocide." *History and Memory* 9 (1/2): 80-112. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25681001>

—. 2014 (2001). *Writing History, Writing Trauma.* Baltimore: John Hopkins UP.

Lamar, Kendrick. 2015. "Alright." *To Pimp a Butterfly*. Los Angeles: Top Dawg Entertainment. Song.

Larson, Shannon. 2021. "'Darnella Frazier Changed the World': Following Chauvin Verdict, Praise Pours in for Teenager who Captured Floyd's Murder." *The Boston Globe*. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/04/20/nation/darnella-frazier-changed-world-following-chauvin-verdict-praise-pours-teenager-who-captured-floyds-murder/>

Lauretis, Teresa de. 1987. "The Violence of Rhetoric: Considerations on Representation and Gender." *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP.

Lawrence, Bruce B., and Aisha Karim. 2007. *On Violence: A Reader*. Durham & London: Duke UP.

Laws, Mike. 2020. "Why We Capitalize 'Black' (and not 'white')." *Columbia Journalism Review*. <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/capital-b-black-styleguide.php>

Laymon, Kiese. 2013. *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America*. New York: Scribner.

—. 2018. *Heavy: An American Memoir*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Le Guin, Ursula K. 2004. *The Wave in the Mind: Talks and Essays on the Writer, the Reader, and the Imagination*. Boston: Shambhala.

Lee, Mark. 2017. "A Time to Act: Fatal Violence Against Transgender People in America 2017." *Trans People of Color Coalition and Human Rights Campaign Foundation*. <http://assets2.hrc.org/files/assets/resources/A_Time_To_Act_2017_REV3.pdf>

Lemelle, Anthony J. 2010. *Black Masculinity and Sexual Politics*. New York: Routledge.

Lennon, Gavan. 2020. "Formal Violence: The Black Lives Matter Movement and Contemporary Elegy." *Violence from Slavery to #BlackLivesMatter: African*

American History and Representation. Edited by Andrew Dix and Peter Templeton. New York: Routledge.

León, Felice. 2015. "Ta-Nehisi Coates on Why Whites Like His Writing." *Daily Beast*. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/ta-nehisi-coates-on-why-whites-like-his-writing>

Levinas, Emmanuel. 1979 (1961). *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. The Hague, Boston, & New York: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.

—. 1985 (1961). *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Translated by Richard A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP.

—. 1991 (1978). *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. Translated by Alphonso Dingis. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

—. 1996. "Peace and Proximity." *Basic Philosophical Writings*. Edited by Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington: Indiana UP.

Levitz, Eric. 2019. "Ta-Nehisi Coates Is an Optimist Now: A Conversation about Race and 2020." *Intelligencer*. <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/03/ta-nehisi-coates-race-politics-2020-elections.html>

Levy-Hussen, Aida. 2016. *How to Read African American Literature: Post-Civil Rights Fiction and the Task of Interpretation*. New York: New York UP.

Lewis, Thabiti. 2016. "How Fresh and New is the Case Coates Makes?" *African American Review* 49 (3): 192-196. < https://www.jstor.org/stable/26444247>

Lipsitz, George. 2007. "The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race: Theorizing the Hidden Architecture of Landscape Racialization of Spaces." *Landscape Journal* 26 (1): 10-23. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43323751>

Lloyd, David. 2018. *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics*. New York: Fordham UP.

Lloyd, Vincent. 2015. "From the Theopaternal to the Theopolitical: On Barack Obama." *Common Goods: Economy, Ecology, and Political Theology*. Edited by Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre, Catherine Keller, and Elias Ortega-Aponte. Oxford: UP Scholarship Online. <https://www.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.5422/fordham/9780823268436.001.0001/upso-9780823268436>

—. 2018. "Black Futures and Black Fathers." *Between the World of Ta-Nehisi Coates and Christianity*. Edited by David Evans and Peter Dula. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers.

López, German. 2017. "Cornel West's Attacks on Ta-Nehisi Coates, Explained." *Vox*. <https://www.vox.com/identities/2017/12/20/16795746/ta-nehisi-coates-cornel-west-twitter>

Lorber, Judith. 1998. *Gender Inequalities: Feminist Theories and Politics*. Cambridge: Oxford UP.

Lorde, Audre. 1978. "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action." *Sinister Wisdom* 6. <https://electricliterature.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/silenceintoaction.pdf>

—. 1984. *Sister Outsider*. Berkeley: Crossing Press.

—. 1997. "Afterimages." *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company Inc.

Lordi, Emily J. 2017a. "Between the World and the Addressee: Epistolary Nonfiction by Ta-Nehisi Coates and His Peers." *CLA Journal* 60 (4): 434-447. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26557004?seq=1>

—. 2017b. "'[B]lack and Going on Women': Lucille Clifton, Elizabeth Alexander, and the Poetry of Grief." *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International* 6 (1): 44-68. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/663275/summary>

Lovan, Dylan. 2020. "Grand Jury Audio Details Moments before Breonna Taylor Died." *The Detroit News*. <https://eu.detroitnews.com/story/news/nation/2020/10/02/breonna-taylor-grand-jury-recording/5893277002/>

Love, David. 2018. "'Stand Your Ground' Laws Encourage Racially Charged Violence." *CNN Opinion*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/08/03/opinions/stand-your-ground-law-racial-violence-opinion-love/index.html>

Lowery, Wesley. 2017. *They Can't Kill Us All: Ferguson, Baltimore, and a New Era in America's Racial Justice Movement*. New York: Penguin Random House.

Lowry, Rich. 2015. "The Toxic World-View of Ta-Nehisi Coates." *Politico Magazine*. <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/07/the-toxic-world-view-of-ta-nehisi-coates-120512#.VbYaafloYQo>

Luckhurst, Roger. 1996. "'Impossible Mourning' in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Michèle Roberts's *Daughters of the House*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 37 (4): 243-260. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00111619.1996.9937891>

Luther King Jr., Martin. 2010 (1967). *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* Boston: Beacon Press.

Lynn, Samara. 2020. "'Black-on-Black Crime': A Loaded and Controversial Phrase often Heard amid Calls for Police Reform." *ABC News*. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/black-black-crime-loaded-controversial-phrase-heard-amid/story?id=72051613>

Lytle, Cynthia. 2017. "Violence, Borderlands and Belonging: The Matter of Black Lives and Others." *Coolabah* 21. Print.

Malik, Kennan. 2021. "Want to Change the World? Then You'd Better Give Up on Self-Defeating Pessimism." *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/nov/07/bleak-pessimism-about-the-planets-future-is-as-lethal-as-blithe-optimism>

Marriott, David. 2000. *On Black Men*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.

—. 2007. *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity*. New York: Routledge.

—. 2016. "(A Reading That Is Too Black) Judging Fanon." *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* 29. <https://doi.org/10.20415/rhiz/029.e03>

Martin, Michel. 2008. "Toni Morrison on Bondage and Post-Racial Age." *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=98072491&t=1586179485704>

Martin, Tess. 2018. "'The Talk' is Different for Parents of Black Kids." *Medium*. <https://medium.com/@tessintrovert/the-talk-is-different-for-parents-of-black-kids-77d5e8238c64>

Martínez-Falquina, Silvia. 2020. "My Body Not My Own: An Intersectional View on Relationality in Fiction by Toni Morrison and Louise Erdrich." *Lectora: Journal of Women and Textuality* 26: 117-132. <https://revistes.ub.edu/index.php/lectora/article/view/32520/32371>

Massumi, Brian. 2002. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham & London: Duke UP.

—. 2005. "Fear (the Spectrum Said)." *Positions* 13 (1): 31–48. <https://read.dukeupress.edu/positions/article-abstract/13/1/31/21348/Fear-The-Spectrum-Said>

Mathis, Ayana. 2018. "Black Male Writers of Our Time." *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/11/30/t-magazine/black-authors.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur&mtrref=www.tadias.com&mtrref=www.nytimes.com&gwh=39DFEF5928545296B57A732376F21D0A&gwt=pay&assetType=REGIWALL>

Matthews, Graham, and Sam Goodman. 2013. *Violence and The Limits of Representation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mauer, Marc. 1990. *Young Black Men and the Criminal Justice System: A Growing National Problem*. Washington D.C.: The Sentencing Project.

Mbembe, Achille. 2003. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture* 15 (1): 11-40. Print. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/39984>

—. 2017. *Critique of Black Reason*. Translated by Laurent Dubois. Durham & London: Duke UP.

McDowell, Deborah E. 1991. "In the First Place: Making Frederick Douglass and the Afro-American Tradition." *Critical Essays on Frederick Douglass*. Edited by William Andrews. Boston: Hall.

McDowell, Linda. 2003. *Redundant Masculinities? Employment Change and White Working-Class Youth*. Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing.

Menand, Louis. 2017. "Can Poetry Change Your Life?" *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/07/31/can-poetry-change-your-life>

Mercer, Kobena. 1990. "Black Art and the Burden of Representation." *Third Text* 4 (10): 61-78. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09528829008576253?journalCode=ctte20>

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1962 (1945). *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Colin Smith. London: Routledge.

Metress, Christopher. 2003. "Langston Hughes's 'Mississippi–1955': A Note on Revisions and an Appeal for Reconsideration." *African American Review* 37 (1): 139-148. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1512366>

Michaels, Walter Benn. 2004. *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History*. Princeton: Princeton UP.

Miller, Monica R. 2016. "Black Lives Matter & the Mo(ve)ment of Black Life in America." *Ausgabe* 28. <https://fiph.de/veroeffentlichungen/journale/cover-downloads/fiph_026_RZ_Journal_Ausgabe_28_Monica_Miller.pdf?m=1570630394&>

Mineo, Liz. 2018. "The Kerner Report on Race, 50 Years on." *The Harvard Gazette*. <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2018/03/harvard-professor-reflects-on-the-kerner-report-50-years-on/>

Mitchell, Angelyn, and Danielle K. Taylor. 2009. *The Cambridge Companion to African American Women's Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Mitchell, W. J. T. 1983. *The Politics of Interpretation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

—. 1990. "Representation." *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. Edited by Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughin. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

—. 1994. *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

—. 2005. *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Morrissey, Miguel. 2018. "Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and the Social Sickness of Racism." *Fusion Magazine*. <https://www.fusionmagazine.org/frantz-fanons-black-skin-white-masks-and-the-social-sickness-of-racism/>

Morrison, Toni. 1993a. *Nobel Lecture*. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1993/morrison/lecture/>

—. 1993b. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage Books.

—. 1995. "The Site of Memory." *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*. Edited by William Zinsser. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

—. 2010 (1987). *Beloved*. New York: Vintage Books.

—. 2015. "Between the World and Me." *Ta-Nehisi Coates*. <https://ta-nehisicoates.com/books/between-the-world-and-me/>

—. 2019 (1988). "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature." *Mouth Full of Blood: Essays, Speeches, and Meditations*. London: Chatto & Windus.

—. 2019. "Peril." *The Source of Self-Regard*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf Editors.

Mosher, Donald L., and Silvan S. Tomkins. 1988. "Man: Hypermasculine Socialization and Enculturation." *The Journal of Sex Research* 25 (1): 60-84. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3812870>

Moss III, Otis. 2017. "We Are All Trayvon Martin." *The Daily Beast*. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/we-are-all-trayvon-martin>

Moten, Fred. 2003. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

—. 2007. "Black Optimism/Black Operation." *Double-Operative*. <https://doubleoperative.files.wordpress.com/2009/12/moten-black-optimism_black-operation.pdf>

—. 2008. "The Case of Blackness." *Criticism* 50 (2): 177-218. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23128740>

—. 2013. "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 112 (4): 737-780. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-2345261>

Mulvey, Laura. 1988. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Feminism and Film Theory*. Edited by Constance Penley. New York: Routledge.

Muñoz, José Esteban. 1999. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Myrdal, Gunnar. 1995 (1944). *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. New York: Routledge.

Nance, Kevin. 2015. "Ta-Nehisi Coates Brings Body of Work to Chicago Humanities Festival." *Chicago Tribune*. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/books/ct-ae-ta-nehisi-coates-humanities-festival-1018-20151016-story.html>

Neary, Janet. 2017. *Fugitive Testimony: On the Visual Logics of Slave Narratives*. New York: Fordham UP.

Nelson, Alondra. 2002. "Future Texts." *Social Text* 20 (2): 1-15. <https://read.dukeupress.edu/social-text/article/20/2%20(71)/1/32617/IntroductionFUTURE-TEXTS>

Newton, Judith. 2005. *From Panthers to Promise Keepers: Rethinking the Men's Movement*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Noah, Trevor. 2017. "Ta-Nehisi Coates's Extended Interview." *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*. <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/vbyz5z/the-daily-show-with-trevor-noah-exclusive---ta-nehisi-coates-extended-interview>

Noor, Poppy. 2018. "Kiese Laymon: Absent Fathers and Present Mothers." *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/nov/24/heavy-an-american-memoir-kiese-laymon>

Northup, Solomon. 1853. *Twelve Years a Slave*. Project Gutenberg. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/45631/45631-h/45631-h.htm>

Noys, Benjamin. 2013. "The Violence of Representation and the Representation of Violence." *Violence and The Limits of Representation*. Edited by Graham Matthews and Sam Goodman. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Olsen, Flemming. 2008. *Between Positivism and T.S. Eliot: Imagism and T.E. Hulme*. Odense: UP of Southern Denmark.

Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. 1994. *Racial Formation in the United States*. New York: Routledge.

O'Neill, Brendan. 2016. "Coates vs. Sanders: When Liberal Pieties Collide." *National Review*. <https://www.nationalreview.com/2016/02/ta-nehisi-coates-bernie-sanders/>

Orbell, Jonathan. 2015. "The Urgent Hope of Ta-Nehisi Coates." *Sojourners*. <https://sojo.net/articles/urgent-hope-ta-nehisi-coates>

Orelus, Pierre W. 2010. "Black Masculinity under White Supremacy: Exploring the Intersection between Black Masculinity, Slavery, Racism, Heterosexism, and Social Class." *The Agony of Masculinity: Race, Gender, and Education in the Age of "New" Racism and Patriarchy*. New York: Peter Lang. Print.

O'Rourke, Kenna. 2014. "On *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine." *The Androit Journal*. <https://theadroitjournal.org/issue-twelve-kenna-orourke/>

Oxford English Dictionary. "Representation." <https://www-oed-com.scsu.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/162997?rskey=XmtKht&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>

—. "Racism." <https://www.crer.scot/what-is-racism>

Painter, Nell Irvin. 2019. "How We Think about the Term 'Enslaved' Matters." *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/aug/14/slavery-in-america-1619-first-ships-jamestown>

Parham, Jason. 2020. "The Flesh Gives Empathy." *Black Futures.* Edited by Kimberly Drew and Jenna Wortham. New York: One World.

Patterson, Orlando. 1982. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, & London: Harvard UP.

Patton, Stacey. 2017a. *Spare the Kids: Why Whupping Won't Save Black America*. Boston: Beacon Press.

—. 2017b. "Corporal Punishment in Black Communities: Not an Intrinsic Cultural Tradition but Racial Trauma." *American Psychological Association*. <https://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/newsletter/2017/04/racial-trauma>

Perry, Barbara. 2002. "Defending the Color Line: Racially and Ethnically Motivated Hate Crime." *American Behavioral Scientist* 46 (1): 72-92. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0002764202046001006>

Perry, Imani. 2016. "The Year of the Black Memoir." *Public Books*. <https://www.publicbooks.org/the-year-of-black-memoir/>

Peters, John Durham. 2009. "Witnessing." *Media Witnessing: Testimony in the Age of Mass Communication*. Edited by Paul Forsh and Amit Pinchevski. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Pfeifer, Michael. 2004. *Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society, 1874-1947.* Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Pinar, William F. 2001. "Black Men: You Don't Even Know Me." *Counterpoints*, 163: 855-938. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42977764>

Pinker, Stephen. 2011. *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined.* New York: Penguin Books.

Pittman, John. P. 2016. "Double Consciousness." *Sanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/double-consciousness/>

Plath, Lydia J. 2020. "The Lynching Had to Be the Best It Could Be Done: Slavery, Suffering, and Spectacle in Recent American Cinema." *Violence from Slavery to #BlackLivesMatter: African American History and Representation*. Edited by Andrew Dix and Peter Templeton. New York: Routledge.

Plummer, David. 2004. "Homophobia." *Men and Masculinities: A Social, Cultural, and Historical Encyclopedia. Volume I: A-J*. Edited by Michael Kimmel and Amy Aronson. Santa Barbara, Denver, & Oxford: ABC Clio.

Pollack, Harold A. "*Between the World and Me*: Saving the Next Generation." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/08/between-the-world-and-me-saving-the-next-generation/400217/>

Popova, Maria. 2012. "E.B. White on the Responsibility and Role of the Writer." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/04/eb-white-on-the-responsibility-and-role-of-the-writer/256005/>

—. n.d. "Toni Morrison on the Power of Language: Her Spectacular Nobel Acceptance Speech After Becoming the First African American Woman Awarded the Accolade." *The Marginalian*. <https://www.themarginalian.org/2016/12/07/toni-morrison-nobel-prize-speech/>

Portelli, Alessandro. 2009. "Mastering the Master's Tongue: Bigger as Oppressor in Richard Wright's *Native Son.*" *Interpretations: Richard Right's* Native Son. Edited by Harold Bloom. New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism.

Prieto, Bianca. 2013. "Trayvon Martin: We Are Gathered Here Today to Demand Justice in Teen's Fatal Shooting." *Orlando Sentinel.* <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/seminole-county/os-trayvon-martin-shooting-death-rally-20120314-story.html>

Prince, Mary. 1831. *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, Related by Herself.* Project Gutenberg. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/17851/17851-h/17851-h.htm>

Pyke, Karen D. 2010. "What is Internalized Racial Oppression and Why Don't We Study It? Acknowledging Racism's Hidden Injuries." *Sociological Perspectives* 53 (4): 551-572.

Quinn, Caolan. 2017. "Violence on the Black Body: Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* Acts as a Memoir to the Suffering of the Black Masses in America." *American Literature and Culture at Queen's.* <https://blogs.qub.ac.uk/americanists/2017/02/27/violence-on-the-black-body-ta-nehisi-coates-between-the-world-and-me-acts-as-a-memoir-to-the-suffering-of-the-black-masses-in-america/>

Rahim, Zamira, and Rob Picheta. 2020. "Thousands around the World Protest George Floyd's Death in Global Display of Solidarity." *CNN.* <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/06/01/world/george-floyd-global-protests-intl/index.html>

Rambsy II, Howard. 2015. "Coverage of Ta-Nehisi Coates and *Between the World and Me.*" *Cultural Front: A Notebook on Literary Art, Digital Humanities, and Emerging Ideas.* <http://www.culturalfront.org/2015/06/coverage-of-ta-nehisi-coates-and.html>

—. 2016. "The Remarkable Reception of Ta-Nehisi Coates." *African American Review* 49 (3): 196-204. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/631991>

—. 2020. *Bad Men: Creative Touchstones of Black Writers*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

Rankine, Claudia. 2004. *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*. New York: Penguin Books.

—. 2014. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. New York: Penguin Books.

—. 2015. "The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning." *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/22/magazine/the-condition-of-black-life-is-one-of-mourning.html>

—. 2020. *Just Us: An American Conversation*. New York: Penguin Books.

Ransford, H. Edward. 1968. "Isolation, Powerlessness and Violence: A Study of Attitudes and Participation in the Watts Riot." *American Journal of Sociology* 73 (5): 581–591. <https://doi.org/10.1086/224532>

Raper, Arthur F. 2003 (1933). *The Tragedy of Lynching*. New York: Dover Publications.

Rediker, Marcus. 2007. *The Slave Ship: A Human History*. New York: Penguin Group.

Reed, Touré F. 2018. "Between Obama and Coates." *Catalyst* 1 (4). <https://catalyst-journal.com/2018/03/between-obama-and-coates>

Reid-Brinkley, Shanara R. 2020. "Debating While Black: Wake Work in Black Youth Politics." *The Future Is Black: Afropessimism, Fugitivity, and Radical Hope in Education*. Edited by Carl A. Grant, Ashley Woodson, and Michael Dumas. New York: Routledge.

Remnick, David. 2019. "Ta-Nehisi Coates Revisits 'The Case for Reparations'." *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-new-yorker-interview/ta-nehisi-coates-revisits-the-case-for-reparations>

Reid-Pharr, Robert. 2007. *Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual*. New York: New York UP.

Rich, Adrienne. 1980. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *Signs* 5 (4): 631-660. <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0097-9740%28198022%295%3A4%3C631%3ACHALE%3E2.0.CO%3B2-2>

Richardson, Allissa V. 2017. "Bearing Witness While Black: Theorizing African American Mobile Journalism after Ferguson." *Digital Journalism* 5 (6): 673-698. <https://criticalracedigitalstudies.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Bearing-Witness-While-Black.pdf>

—. 2020a. "Why Cellphone Videos of Black People's Deaths Should Be Considered Sacred, like Lynching Photographs." *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/why-cellphone-videos-of-black-peoples-deaths-should-be-considered-sacred-like-lynching-photographs-139252>

—. 2020b. *Bearing Witness While Black: African Americans, Smartphones, and the New Protest #Journalism*. New York: Oxford UP.

Richardson, Riché. 2007. *From Uncle Tom to Gangsta: Black Masculinity in the U.S. South*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.

Richman, Joe, and Anayansi Diaz-Cortes. 2010. "Strange Fruit: Anniversary of a Lynching". *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129025516&t=1643615737247>

Rigney, Barbara Hill. 1991. *The Voices of Toni Morrison*. Columbus: Ohio State UP.

Ritchie, Andrea. 2011. *Queer (In)Justice: The Criminalization of LGBT People in the United States*. Boston: Beacon Press.

—. 2014. *Violence Every Day: Police Brutality and Racial Profiling Against Women, Girls, and Trans People of Color*. Cambridge: South End Press.

—. 2017. *Invisible No More: Police Violence Against Black Women and Women of Color*. Boston: Beacon Press.

R. L. 2013. "Wanderings of the Slave: Black Life and Social Death." *Mute Books*. <https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/wanderings-slave-black-life-and-social-death>

Robbins, Michael. 2017. *Equipment for Living: On Poetry and Pop Music*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Rogers, Melvin L. 2015. "Between Pain and Despair: What Ta-Nehisi Coates Is Missing." *Dissent Magazine*. <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/between-world-me-ta-nehisi-coates-review-despair-hope>

Rollert, John Paul. 2015. "*Between the World and Me*: Empathy Is a Privilege." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/between-the-world-and-me-empathy-is-a-privilege/407647/>

Rollins, Andrew. 2016. "Afrofuturism and Our Old Ship of Zion: The Black Church in Post-Modernity." *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness*. Edited by Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones. New York: Lexington Books.

Romano, Aja. 2015. "A Transgender Woman Was Shot in Baltimore and no one Is Talking about It." *The Daily Dot*. <https://www.dailydot.com/irl/transgender-sex-worker-mya-hall-death-nsa/>

Rosenfeld, Alvin. 1980. *A Double Dying*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP.

Rowland, Anthony. 1997. "Re-reading 'Impossibility' and 'Barbarism': Adorno and Post-Holocaust Poetics." *Critical Survey* 9 (1): 57-69. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41556053>

Rusert, Britt. 2013. "Delany's Comet: Fugitive Science and the Speculative Imaginary of Emancipation." *American Quarterly* 65 (4): 799-829. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43822991>

Sanchez, Ray, and Elizabeth Joseph. 2020. "Louisville Seeks to Fire Police Officer in Shooting of Breonna Taylor." *CNN*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/06/19/us/breonna-taylor-shooting-officer-firing/index.html>

Sandhu, Sukhdev. 2015. "*Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates Review—A Now Exalted Writer and Spokesman for Black America." *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/08/between-the-world-and-me-sukhdev-sandhu-review>

—. 2018. "*Heavy: An American Memoir* by Kiese Laymon Review—Bodies and the Legacy of Slavery." *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/nov/01/heavy-an-american-memoir-review-kiese-laymon>

Santhanam, Laura; Vanessa Dennis, and Travis Daub. 2014. "What Do the Newly Released Witness Statements Tell Us about the Michael Brown Shooting?" *PBS*. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/newly-released-witness-testimony-tell-us-michael-brown-shooting>

Saucier, Khalil P., and Tryon P. Woods. 2016. *Conceptual Aphasia in Black: Displacing Racial Formation*. New York: Lexington Books.

Saunders, Patricia. 2008. "Fugitive Dreams of Diaspora: Conversations with Saidiya Hartman." *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* 6 (1). <https://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol6/iss1/7/>

Scarparo, Susanna, and Sarah McDonald. 2006. *Violent Depictions: Representing Violence Across Cultures.* Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Scarry, Elaine. 1985. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World.* Oxford: Oxford UP.

Scheff, Thomas. 2007. "War and Emotion: Hypermasculine Violence as a Social System." *Thomas Scheff: Professor Emeritus of Sociology, UCSB.* <http://scheff.faculty.soc.ucsb.edu/main.php?id=51.html>

Schroeder, Kirby. 2004. "Hypermasculinity." *Men and Masculinities: A Social, Cultural, and Historical Encyclopedia. Volume I: A-J.* Edited by Michael Kimmel and Amy Aronson. Santa Barbara, Denver, and Oxford: ABC Clio.

Schuessler, Jennifer. 2019. "4th Hour: Ta-Nehisi Coates's 'Visceral' Take on Being Black in America." *Songisite.* <https://song.ampisite.com/en/4th-Hour%3A-Ta-Nehisi-Coates's-'Visceral'-Take-on-Being-Black-in-America-Jennifer-Schuessler-145773120.html>

Schur, Richard. 2013. "The Crisis of Authenticity in Contemporary African American Literature." *Contemporary African American Literature: The Living Canon.* Bloomington: Indiana UP.

Scott, Robert L., and Wayne Brockried. 1969. *The Rhetoric of Black Power.* New York: Harper and Row Publishers.

Seidler, Victor J. 1989. *Rediscovering Masculinities: Reason, Language and Sexuality.* London: Routledge.

Sexton, Jared. 2008. *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

—. 2011. "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism." *InTensions Journal*, 5. <https://www.yorku.ca/intent/issue5/articles/pdfs/jaredsextonarticle.pdf>

—. 2012. "Ante-Anti-Blackness: Afterthoughts." *Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association* 1. <https://doi.org/10.25158/L1.1.16>

—. 2015. "Unbearable Blackness." *Cultural Critique* 90: 159-178. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/culturalcritique.90.2015.0159>

—. 2016. "Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word." *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* 29. <https://doi.org/10.20415/rhiz/029.e02>

Shapiro, Herbert. 1988. *White Violence and Black Response: From Reconstruction to Montgomery*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Shakur, Assata. 1988. *Assata: An Autobiography*. London: Zed Books.

Sharpe, Christina. 2010. *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects*. Durham and London: Duke UP.

—. 2012a. "Blackness, Sexuality, and Entertainment." *American Literary History* 24 (4): 827-841. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/490862/pdf>

—. 2012b. "Response to 'Ante-Anti-Blackness'." *Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association* 1. <https://csalateral.org/section/theory/ante-anti-blackness-response-sharpe/>

—. 2016. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham and London: Duke UP.

Shearer, Tobin Miller. 2018. "Hope's Vagaries: How Ta-Nehisi Coates and Vincent Harding Convinced Me that Hope Is Not the Only Option." *Between the World of Ta-*

Nehisi Coates and Christianity. Edited by David Evans and Peter Dula. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers.

Shockley, Evie. 2011. *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

—. 2012. *the new black*. Middletown: Wesleyan UP.

Siebers, Tobin. 1986. "Language, Violence, and the Sacred: A Polemical Survey of Critical Theories." *Stanford French Review* 10 (1): 203-220.

—. 1988. *The Ethics of Criticism*. New York: Cornell UP.

Siegel, Robert. 2015. "Ta-Nehisi Coates Criticizes Calls for Nonviolence in Baltimore." *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/2015/05/01/403597684/atlantic-staffer-criticizes-calls-for-nonviolence-in-baltimore>

Simon, Roger I. 2014. *A Pedagogy of Witnessing: Curatorial Practice and the Pursuit of Social Justice*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Sithole, Tendayi. 2020. *The Black Register*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.

Skiveren, Tobias. 2019. "On Good Listening, Postcritique, and Ta-Nehisi Coates' Affective Testimony." *Affect Theory and Literary Critical Practice: A Feel for the Text*. Edited by Stephen Ahern. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Smaill, Belinda. 2007. "Injured Identities: Pain, Politics, and Documentary." *Studies in Documentary Film* 1 (2): 151-163. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1386/sdf.1.2.151_1>

Smith, Danez. 2014. *[insert] boy*. Portland: YesYes Books.

—. 2017. *Don't Call Us Dead*. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press.

Smith, Jordan Michael. 2013. "Fear of a Black Pundit: Ta-Nehisi Coates Raises his Voice in American Media." *The Observer*. <https://observer.com/2013/03/fear-of-a-black-pundit/>

Smith, Mychal Denzel. 2016. *Invisible Man, Got the Whole World Watching: A Young Black Man's Education.* New York: Bold Type Books.

Smith, Kyle. 2015. "The Hard Untruths of Ta-Nehisi Coates." *Commentary Magazine*. <https://www.commentary.org/articles/kyle-smith/hard-untruths-ta-nehisi-coates/>

—. 2017. "Black Critics Shake Their Heads at Ta-Nehisi Coates." *National Review*. <https://www.nationalreview.com/2017/09/ta-nehisi-coates-black-critics-john-mcwhorter/>

Smith, Patricia. 2017. *Incendiary Art*. Hexham: Bloodaxe Books Ltd.

Smith, Tracey K. 2007. *Duende: Poems*. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press.

Smith, Shawn Michelle. 2004. *Photography on the Color Line: W.E.B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture*. Durham: Duke UP.

Snow, Nancy E. 2000. "Empathy." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 37 (1): 65-78. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20009985>

Sontag, Susan. 1966. *Against Representation and Other Essays*. New York: Picador.

—. 2003. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. London: Penguin Books.

Southgate, Martha. 2013. "Some Day We'll All Be Free: Considering Post-Oppression Fiction." *Contemporary African American Literature: The Living Canon*. Bloomington: Indiana UP.

Spargo, Clifton. 2004. *The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegiac Literature*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP.

Specter, Emma. 2021. "A Minneapolis Jury Has Found Derek Chauvin Guilty of Killing George Floyd." *Vogue*. <https://www.vogue.com/article/derek-chauvin-guilty-george-floyd-killing>

Spillers, Hortense J. 1979. "The Politics of Intimacy: A Discussion." *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature*. Edited by Roseann P. Bell, Bettye J. Parker, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall. New York: Anchor Books.

——. 1987. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17 (2): 64-81. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/464747?seq=1>

——. 2003. *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

——. 2006. "The Idea of Black Culture." *The New Centennial Review* 6 (3): 7-28. <https://artsonline.uwaterloo.ca/~wsiemerl/media/Hortense%20Spillers/Spillers%20 The%20Idea%20of%20Black%20Culture.pdf>

——. 2011. *Shades of Intimacy: Women in the Time of Revolution*. New York: Barnard Hall.

Steinskog, Erik. 2018. *Afrofuturism and Black Sound Studies: Culture, Technology, and Things to Come*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Stephens, R. L. 2017. "The Birthmark of Damnation: Ta-Nehisi Coates and the Black Body." *Viewpoint Magazine*. <https://viewpointmag.com/2017/05/17/the-birthmark-of-damnation-ta-nehisi-coates-and-the-black-body/>

Sundquist, Eric J. 1993. *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays*. New York: Cambridge UP. Print.

Swaine, Jon; Oliver Laughland, Jamiles Lartey, and Ciara McCarthy. 2017. "Young Black Men Killed by US Police at Highest Rate in Year of 1.134 Deaths." *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/31/the-counted-police-killings-2015-young-black-men>

Swan, Alex L. 1974. "A Methodological Critique of the Moynihan Report." *The Black Scholar* 5 (9): 18-24. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41065735>

Teeman, Tim. 2017. "Why Are So Many Transgender Women of Color Being Killed in America?" *The Daily Beast*. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/why-are-so-many-trans-women-of-color-being-killed-in-america>

Terrefe, Selamawit. 2012. "Phantasmagoria; or, the World Is a Haunted Plantation." *The Feminist Wire*. <https://thefeministwire.com/2012/10/phantasmagoria/>

—. 2016. "What Exceeds the Hold? An Interview with Christina Sharpe." *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* 29. <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue29/terrefe.html>

Testa, Jessica. 2015. "The World Watched Marlene Pinnock Get Beaten by a Cop, So Why Is She Still on the Streets?" *Buzzfeed News*. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/jtes/the-world-watched-a-cop-beat-marlene-pinnock-so-why-is-she-s>

Tettenborn, Éva. 2006. "Melancholia as Resistance in Contemporary African American Literature." *MELUS* 31 (3): 101-121. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30029653#?seq=1>

Tharps, Lori. 2014a. "The Case for Black with a Capital B." *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/19/opinion/the-case-for-black-with-a-capital-b.html>

—. 2014b. "I Refuse to Remain in the Lower Case." *My American Melting Pot*. <https://myamericanmeltingpot.com/2014/06/02/i-refuse-to-remain-in-the-lower-case/>

The African American Policy Forum. 2015. "Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women." <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53f20d90e4b0b80451158d8c/t/5edc95fba357687217b08fb8/1591514635487/SHNReportJuly2015.pdf>

The Guardian. 2019. "The 100 Best Books of the 21ˢᵗ Century." <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/sep/21/best-books-of-the-21st-century>

Thomas, Angie. 2017. *The Hate U Give*. New York: Harper Collins.

Thorsen, Karen, and Douglas K. Dempsey. 1989. *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket*. PBS. Film.

Tillet, Salamishah. 2015. "Female Visibility Matters." *The New York Times Magazine*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/07/magazine/female-visibility-matters.html>

—. 2020. "Endless Grief: The Spectacle of 'Black Bodies in Pain'." *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/19/arts/elizabeth-alexander-george-floyd-video-protests.html>

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 1995. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Turner, David C. 2021. "Making the World Go Dark: The Radical (Im)possibilities of Youth Organizing in the Afterlife of Slavery." *The Future Is Black: Afropessimism, Fugitivity, and Radical Hope in Education*. Edited by Carl A. Grant, Ashley Woodson, and Michael Dumas. New York: Routledge.

Vargas, João H. Costa. 2018. *The Denial of Antiblackness: Multiracial Redemption and Black Suffering*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Vargas, João H. Costa, and Joy A. James. 2013. "Refusing Blackness-as-Victimization: Trayvon Martin and the Black Cyborgs." *Pursuing Trayvon Martin: Historical Contexts and Contemporary Manifestations of Racial Dynamics*. Edited by George Yancy and Janine Jones. Plymouth: Lexington Books.

Vaziri, Parisa. 2016. "Blackness and the Metaethics of the Object." *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* 29. <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue29/vaziri.html#reading-position-8>

Venkatesh, Sudhir Alladi. 2000. *American Project: The Rise and Fall of a Modern Ghetto*. Cambridge: Harvard UP.

Vickery, John B. 2009. *The Prose Elegy: An Exploration of Modern American and British Fiction*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP.

Vidler, Anthony. 1993. "Spatial Violence." *Assemblage* 20: 84-85. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3181712>

Vukcevich, Mai. 2002. "Representation." *The University of Chicago: Theories of Media (Keywords Glossary)*. <https://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/representation.htm>

Wacquant, Loïc. 2009. *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*. Durham and London: Duke UP.

Wagner, Bryan. 2009. *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power after Slavery*. Cambridge: Harvard UP.

Waldman, Katy. 2015. "Slave or Enslaved Person?" *Slate*. <https://slate.com/human-interest/2015/05/historians-debate-whether-to-use-the-term-slave-or-enslaved-person.html>

Walker, Drew. 2017. "Two Regimes of the Human: Butler and the Politics of Mattering." *Butler and Ethics*. Edited by Moya Lloyd.

Ward, Jesmyn. 2016. "Raising a Black Son in the U.S." *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/oct/28/raising-black-son-america>

—. 2019. "The Beautiful Power of Ta-Nehisi Coates." *Vanity Fair*. <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2019/08/ta-nehisi-coates-jesmyn-ward-interview>

Warren, Calvin L. 2015. "Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope." *The New Centennial Review* 15 (1): 215-248. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.14321/crnewcentrevi.15.1.0215>

—. 2016. "Black Care." *Liquid Blackness: Black Ontology and the Love of Blackness* 3 (6): 36-50. <https://liquidblackness.com/liquid-blackness-journal-issue-6>

—. 2017a. "Black Mysticism: Fred Moten's Phenomenology of the (Black) Spirit." *De Gruyter* 65 (2): 219-229. <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/zaa-2017-0022/pdf>

—. 2017b. "Onticide: Afro-Pessimism, ~~Gay~~ Nigger #1, and Surplus Violence." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 23 (3): 391-418. <https://read.dukeupress.edu/glq/article-abstract/23/3/391/9943/OnticideAfro-pessimism-Gay-Nigger-1-and-Surplus?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

—. 2018. *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*. Durham & London: Duke UP.

Warren, Kenneth W. 2010. "On 'What Was African American Literature?'." *African American Literary Studies: New Texts, New Approaches, New Challenges* 55 (4): 739-742. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41158726>

Washington, Booker T. 1899. *The Future of the American Negro*. Project Gutenberg. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/26507/26507-h/26507-h.htm>

—. 1901. *Up from Slavery*. Project Gutenberg. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2376/2376-h/2376-h.htm>

Waugh, Dylan, and Megan Miller. 2008. "Murphy Homes Gone, Not Forgotten." *Capital News Service*. <https://cnsmaryland.org/2008/12/19/murphy-homes-gone-not-forgotten/>

Waxman, Olivia B. 2020. "'What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?': The History of Frederick Douglass' Searing Independence Day Oration." *TIME*. <https://time.com/5614930/frederick-douglass-fourth-of-july/>

Webb, Frank J. 1857. *The Garies and Their Friends*. Project Gutenberg. <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/11214/pg11214-images.html>

Weheliye, Alexander. 2013. "Post-Integration Blues: Black Geeks and Afro-Diasporic Humanism." *Contemporary African American Literature: The Living Canon*. Bloomington: Indiana UP.

Welang, Nahum. 2018. "Triple Consciousness: The Reimagination of Black Female Identities in Contemporary American Culture." *Open Cultural Studies* 2 (1): 296-306. <https://www.degruyter.com/view/journals/culture/2/1/article-p296.xml>

West, Cornel. 1993. *Race Matters*. Boston: Second Vintage Books Edition.

—. 1999. "The New Cultural Politics of Difference." *The Cornel West Reader*. Basic Civitas Books: New York.

—. 2017. "Ta-Nehisi Coates Is the Neoliberal Face of the Black Freedom Struggle." *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/dec/17/ta-nehisi-coates-neoliberal-black-struggle-cornel-west>

White, Aaronette M. 2008. *Ain't I a Feminist? African American Men Speak Out on Fatherhood, Friendship, Forgiveness, and Freedom*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Whitfield, Stephen J. 1988. *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP.

Wideman, John Edgar. 1994. *Fatheralong: A Meditation on Fathers and Sons, Race and Society*. New York: Vintage Books.

Wieviorka, Michel. 2009. *Violence: A New Approach*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

Wilderson, Frank B. 2008. *Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid*. Cambridge: South End Press.

—. 2010. *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Durham and London: Duke UP.

—. 2011. "The Vengeance of Vertigo: Aphasia and Abjection in the Political Trials of Black Insurgents." *InTensions Journal* 5. <https://www.yorku.ca/intent/issue5/articles/pdfs/frankbwildersoniiiarticle.pdf>

—. 2016. "Afro-Pessimism and the End of Redemption." *Humanities Futures: Franklin Humanities Institute*. <https://humanitiesfutures.org/papers/afro-pessimism-end-redemption/>

—. 2020. *Afropessimism*. New York: Liveright.

Williams, Dana A. 2016. "Everybody's Protest Narrative: *Between the World and Me* and the Limits of Genre." *African American Review* 49 (3): 179-183. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/631988>

Winters, Joseph. 2016. *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and the Agony of Progress*. Durham and London: Duke UP.

—. 2018. "Between the Tragic and the Unhopeless: Coates, Anti-Blackness, and the Tireless Work of Negativity." *Between the World of Ta-Nehisi Coates and Christianity*. Edited by David Evans and Peter Dula. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers.

Wolters, Wendy. 2004. "*Without Sanctuary*: Bearing Witness, Bearing Whiteness." *JAC* 24 (2): 399-425. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20866631>

Womack, Ytasha. 2010. *Post Black: How a New Generation Is Redefining African American Identity*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books.

—. 2013. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books.

Wood, Amy Louise. 2011. *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Wright, Richard. 1947 (1945). *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth*. The World Publishing Company: Cleveland and New York.

—. 2000 (1940). *Native Son*. New York: Vintage Classics.

Wurmser, Léon. 2015. "Mourning, Double Reality, and the Culture of Remembering and Forgiving: A Very Personal Report." *Grief and its Transcendence: Memory, Identity, Creativity*. Edited by Adele Tutter and Léon Wurmser. New York & London: Routledge.

Wyllie, Doug. 2014. "Why Officer Darren Wilson Wasn't Indicted." *Police One*. <https://www.policeone.com/ferguson/articles/why-officer-darren-wilson-wasnt-indicted-b3DTGpEkDemKS2P5/>

Wynter, Sylvia. 1979. "Sambos and Minstrels." *Social Text* 1: 149-156. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/466410>

—. 2015. *On Being Human as Praxis*. Edited by Katherine McKittrick. Durham and London: Duke UP.

X, Malcolm. 1964. "The Ballot or the Bullet". *Social Justice Speeches*. <http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/speeches/malcolm_x_ballot.html>

—. 1973 (1965). *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Yarborough, Richard. 1990. "Race, Violence, and Manhood: The Masculine Ideal in Frederick Douglass's 'The Heroic Slave'." *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays*. Edited by Eric J. Sundquist. New York: Cambridge UP.

Young, Harvey. 2010. *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body*. Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.

Young, James. 1988. *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*. Bloomington and
    Indianapolis: Indiana UP.

Young, Robin, and Serena McMahon. 2020. "#SayHerName Puts Spotlight on Black
    Women   Killed   by   Police."   *Here   &   Now*.
    <https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2020/06/16/black-women-deaths-protests>

Zahavi, Dan. 2014. *Self and Other. Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame*. New
    York: Oxford University Press.

Zelizer, Barbie. 1995. "Reading the Past Against the Grain: The Shape of Memory
    Studies." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12 (2): 212-238.
    <https://blog.richmond.edu/memorializing/files/2017/01/zelizer_reading-the-
    past.pdf>

—. 1998. *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory Through the Camera's Eye*.
    Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Zernechel, Alex, and April L. Perry. 2017. "The Final Battle: Constructs of Hegemonic
    Masculinity and Hypermasculinity in Fraternity Membership." *College Student Affairs
    Leadership* 4 (1). <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/csal/vol4/iss1/6>

Ziezulewicz, Geoff; Quinn Ford, and Mark Konkol. 2013. "President at Hyde Park
    Academy: 'Too Many Children Taken Away from Us'." *DNA Info: Chicago*.
    <https://www.dnainfo.com/chicago/20130215/chicago/obama-visit-chicago-friday-
    afternoon/>

Žižek, Slavoj. 2008. *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. New York: Picador.

Zorn, Eric. 2019. "Language Matters: The Shift from 'Slave' to 'Enslaved Person' May
    Be   Difficult,   but   It's   Important."   *Chicago   Tribune*.
    <https://www.chicagotribune.com/columns/eric-zorn/ct-column-slave-enslaved-

language-people-first-debate-zorn-20190906-audknctayrarfijimpz6uk7hvy-story.html>

Zukin, Sharon. 2002. "How 'Bad' Is It? Institutions and Intentions in the Study of the American Ghetto." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 22 (3): 511–20. <https://www.ijurr.org/article/how-bad-is-it-institutions-and-intentions-in-the-study-of-the-american-ghetto/>