

**Bodies Deprived of a Dream: Racial Formation in *Between the World and Me***

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**May 12, 2021**

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Meditating on Ta-Nehisi Coates's novel, *Between the World and Me*, from the most abstract in thought to the most concrete and finite should allow one to holistically view how Coates's novel demonstrates Michael Omi and Howard Winant's excerpt in *Race Critical Theories*. Though the masterful inclusion of varying forms racial projects — from the abstract themes and national effects of them to the more concrete and personal — seems convoluted and mind-boggling in terms of intersectionality, Coates actually demonstrates the utter complexity of Omi and Winant's theories. Therefore, I will first dive explicitly into what Michael Omi and Howard Winant raise in a their work from *Racial Formation*, part of an astute compilation of works from authors on race and racism, and establish why it is that Coates's piece acts as a mechanistic model illustrating their final conclusions. I will then break down how Coates effectually demonstrates Omi and Winant's piece on racial formation and projects through more detailed analysis of arguably *the* central themes in the novel of the plundering of the black body and the 'Dream' Coates so eloquently conjures, staying abstract but diving into the execution of racial projects by Coates. Finally, highlighting multiple examples of micro racial projects from relevant passages to this body-plundering and 'Dream' in *Between the World and Me* will permit a well-rounded and end on the most concrete comprehension of Omi and Winant's philosophies on racial formation and racial projects.

In order to more accurately comprehend the significance of Ta-Nehisi Coates's piece to Michael Omi and Howard Winant's concepts of racial formation and racial projects, peering into

what Omi and Winant provide as foundational and semantic information will be useful. Their chapter on racial formation in *Race Critical Theories* covers race and racism in addition to formation and projects, and there still exists an interwoven nature to the subject, making a discussion on racial formation and projects about more than just those two semantically-significant topics. In fact, it is with analyzing race formation and projects that the two believe “a whole range of contemporary controversies and dilemmas<sup>1</sup>,” that can bleed into other subjects like sociology and politics, are morphed. It is at the core of this constant socio-political and philosophical evolution that Omi and Winant find racial projects resting. Racial projects, to them, seem increasingly based on action and connecting representation to the organization of race. These can be in the form of micro or macro-level action and can take a variety of shapes when put into effect such as being neoconservative, essentially excluding the consideration of race in the project or liberal, and including racial considerations out of innate necessity. It is crucial to note, however, that projects are in a constant state of change and thus alter race formation and the semantical significance of race and racism. On another hand, racial formation — the significant process of race and thus racism arising through procedures of categorization — is substantially dominated and swayed by these omnipresent racial projects. One way to allegedly peer into the minds of Omi and Winant in an extremely simplified manner is to view race, racial formation, racial projects, and racism as a web of interconnections, with the semantics of race and onslaught of racial projects helping to power racial formation, racial

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Omi and Howard Winnant, *Racial Formation* (Blackwell Publishers, 2001) 125.

formation pumping power to racism and back to race, etc.: they seem to work interchangeably and even outwardly not only to Omi and Winant but it is also shown in Coates's writing. With the context that Coates is writing to the specific audience of his son, one can better understand his intention to educate — he also seems to explicitly and bluntly state his motivation for epistemologically-capturing his inner dialogue for the growth of his son. It is with the style of a semi-stream of consciousness, intentionality of covering his life through the specific lens of the black person's experience, in addition to his transparency about writing with hope that a fruitful change in his son's life or some movement will occur through his wisdom story-telling, first-hand analysis and quasi-hidden advice that Coates is able to exemplify what Omi and Winant discuss regarding racial formation. One can see through Coates's apt usage of layered racial project examples and explanations as to why racial formation and projects played such a large role in his novel and equally how he thus adeptly illustrates Omi and Winant's concepts of complex interconnections and omnipresent racial philosophy.

Now that we have established what it is that Coates is demonstrating in his piece and why he is by and large qualified and proficient at covering Omi and Winant's ideas, we may continue on to a more pinpointed analysis of Coates's novel and thus his painted image of Omi and Winant's passage. I find it necessary to focus specifically on the theme of 'the body' omnipresent in *Between the World and Me* in addition to his utilization of the imagery surrounding a 'Dream' as they both act as a mechanism through which more finite racial projects form, an abstract way

of viewing projects and their macro/societal effect on racial formation. Basically, the bestowing of thought from Coates to his son can be seen as a micro project through which macro projects are explained, articulating Omi and Winant's concepts on racial formation. It is through these evocative and multilateral metaphors that Coates spends a substantial amount of his time, seemingly signifying its cruciality to the message he attempts to describe to his son; this lesson-appearing lesson addressed to him takes a second ontological being of embodying Omi and Winant's philosophies of racial formation due to it being revolved around the son's racial education, elements of 'the talk' given by black parents to their children regarding innate racist violence, and an assumed end-goal of some form of action stemmed from his minority voice being recorded. The destroying and plundering of the body is brought up when he first addresses his son, bringing up an interview where he was asked what it meant to lose his body, enveloping him in sadness and, through the lens of the reader, instigating a novel's worth of information and explanation: right off the bat, the concept of the plundered black body immediately sets the tone for the rest of the letter to his son. In a stereotypically-fathersome manner, he later writes, "Here is what I would like for you to know: in America, it is traditional to destroy the black body – it is heritage."<sup>2</sup> A macro-level racial project is being explained, with this choice in diction here and throughout the novel dramatizes his point. Coates summarizes the veiling and stealing of Black identity through not just culture and politics but something as fundamental as the human body. By contextualizing not just a destruction of the black 'body,' but the forceful taking of it by an

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<sup>2</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, (Spiegel and Grau, 2015) 103.

overwhelming potency of whiteness and white supremacy, Coates is underway to illustrating how racial projects such as this systemic epistemological/psychological project aids in forming the societal definition and general being of race not as a biological construct, as Omi and Winant distinguish, rather as a social entity. On the other hand, Coates demonstrates the other most prominent vessel for racial project introduction using his idea of the ‘Dream.’ Coates initially attests, “For so long I have wanted to escape into the Dream, to fold my country over my head like a blanket. But this has never been an option because the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies.<sup>3</sup>” This comes after a flowery, sensory description of strawberry shortcake, treehouses, and presumably spotless picket fences all wrapped around an American patriotism that he infers encapsulates white privilege. While black bodies are plundered, white bodies enjoy the fresh scent of peppermint; black identity is suppressed and fed on by this white leviathan of ignorance. Just as with his use of ‘body-plundering’ imagery, throughout the novel, Coates uses his construction of the ‘Dream’ to describe a macro-level racial project that once again lies in an epistemological/psychological and thus a societal realm. He has realized, and hopes to educate his son on the fact that seemingly permanent racial projects exist in the United States, perfectly laid out by his use of ‘body plundering’ and the ‘Dream,’ that he feels the need to explicate. By doing this, he is in fact educating and providing the readers with the execution of Omi and Winant’s abstract philosophies on racial formation.

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<sup>3</sup> Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 11.

Coates's finally includes apparent examples of racial projects changing racial formation within his story-telling, at the bottom-most step of abstraction, honing in to his son, and the audience, Omi and Winant's designs. Interestingly enough, he introduces two projects that have arguably antithetical intentions in forming race. The first revolves around what Coates refers to as his 'Mecca,' Howard University. This is where Coates attended college, met the love of his life, and indulged in his passion for educating himself but this place also has a deeper meaning. Coates's 'Mecca' is referred to in his novel as a positive community filled with like-minded peers, other members of the black community, and books in which for him to imbibe. Thus, this space takes on the significances and symbols of enlightenment, togetherness, authentic joy, and hope among other things. He possibly even hints to his son that it is with a community and resources like at Howard that the racial formation as it is now can be, if not feel different than the white supremacy and black subjugation that reigns. On the completely other side of things, Coates tells the story of his connection to Prince Carmen Jones who was a Howard alumnus, boyfriend, and much more, but ultimately became defined as a black man killed by police. One must ask themselves why Coates chose to include this anecdote and this man in his letter to his son. I believe that the next quote summarizes this answer: "The problem with the police is not that they are fascist pigs but that our country is ruled by majoritarian pigs."<sup>4</sup> With *Between the World and Me*, there seems to often be a principle teaching behind his stories, this one aptly painting a picture of the racial projects within police reform/police brutality. He allows for a

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<sup>4</sup> Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 79.

clearer understanding of Omi and Winant's opinions on racial formation and racial projects by also including basic examples of racial projects in his work, intertwined with the project-like and mechanistic themes.



## **Works Cited**

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. Spiegel and Grau, 2015.

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