
REMOVING THE VEIL:
COATES, NEOLIBERALISM, AND THE COLOR LINE

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The words of W. E. B. Du Bois, in his widely-acclaimed work *The Souls of Black Folk*, that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line”¹ were a visceral attempt to illuminate the plight of the “Negro” in the United States of America. With this phrase, Du Bois positioned racial valorizations² as the *modus operandi* of American society at the turn of the 20th century, with Black and Brown bodies bearing the brunt of societal dehumanization, bigotry, and hyper-visibility; as he claimed, it was as if the Black race were born some sort of “seventh son.”³ Du Bois brought race center stage as the dominant issue of his day, contending that the uplifting of Black bodies is paramount to the advancement of all society. In this regard, he reveals the connectedness of the Negro Problem and the human condition. To Du Bois, resolving the Negro Problem is prerequisite to being a humane and just society.

The focus of this paper is Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me* as an extension of the Du Boisian tradition of Black illumination. Coates’s narrative, like that of Du Bois, compels the reimagining of the oppression and mythologization of the Black experience. I will argue that through his articulation of the Dreamer, as a representation and metaphor for White privileged status, Coates avails himself of Du Bois’s philosophical analysis regarding the hyper-invisibility of Whiteness. Situated in this Black activist and intellectual tradition, Coates operationalizes White invisibility to expose its false yet covert maintaining of Whiteness as a way of life.

¹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1903), vii.

² Racial valorizations are the projection of value and worth to social groupings based solely on phenotype and skin color. Racial valorizations are the fruit of racist ideology and are meant to privilege Whiteness; Whiteness becomes the standard through which all other racial groups are judged. These projections extend notions of value and worth not corroborated by valid empirical evidence. The ascription of meaning and the subsequent construction of social conditions and the institutional legislation of violence meant to demean and subjugate particular subgroups based solely on phenotype and skin color is at the core of Du Bois’s thought in *Souls*. See Lucius T. Outlaw, *On Race and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

³ Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 3.

**THE AMERICAN DREAM, THE DREAMER,
AND THE NEOLIBERAL PROJECT**

Coates's notion of the Dreamer is premised upon the trope that is well-established in American culture as all that is a desirable way of life. The Dream, as Coates labels it, is flawed due to its continued commodification of Black and Brown bodies.⁴ The chattel slavery of old, separate but unequal policies of Jim and Jane Crow,⁵ and unabated violence visited upon Black and Brown bodies via the Prison Industrial Complex, continue the deadly terrifying reign of the Dream.⁶ Intrinsic to the Dream is a racially-based rigidity that disavows any inclusion of Black and Brown bodies within its borders, and an elusiveness making it impossible to be fully grasped by Black and Brown hands. The Dream is a category of thinking that is hegemonic; a category of thinking that transcends race, yet at the same time operates within the frame of a racial contract.⁷ It is premised on the ongoing subordination of the darker other. As such, the American Dream is a flawed project or, as James Baldwin emphatically characterized it, the Dream is a "nightmare."⁸

The Dreamer, the one who pursues the Dream, is a possessor of an ideology rooted in Enlightenment ideals of rationalism. Linda Alcoff posits that Enlightenment notions of reasoning require sufficient levels of objectification, distance, and even transcendence, if possible, from one's identity: one's set of interests, values, beliefs, and practices. Since White invisibility is dependent on Black hyper-visibility and the "strength of identity will exist in inverse proportion to one's capacity for rational thought,"⁹ the Dreamer's solutions to the issues of the urban Black community mostly follow an ahistorical and patronizing narrative of overtly racist solutions based on perceived notions of Black irrationalism.

The Dream as an instantiation of aspirational White supremacy, works in tandem with Neoliberalism in Coates's view. The objectification of the self in neoliberalism perpetuates a prescriptive and pernicious culture of silence upon the bodies of those on the margins. Coates understands this silence as a "nakedness"¹⁰ that is the intentional aim of policy. As is argued below, Coates

⁴ Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Random House, 2015).

⁵ Jim and Jane Crow is a stylistic device used in the African American community to bring light to the complexity and intersectionality of oppression and subjugation along the lines of race and gender, in this case among Black men and women. See Kimberlè Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991).

⁶ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012).

⁷ Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

⁸ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 89.

⁹ Linda Martin Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*, ed. Chesire Calhoun (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 38.

¹⁰ Coates, *World and Me*, 17.

operationalizes White invisibility by exposing the deleterious effects of neoliberalism that reinscribe mythologies of White supremacy and by extension Black subjugation, hence reinforcing systems of violence, oppression, and fear. Appearing to be coextensive with reality, this nakedness equates to a cultural invisibility and norm that is the ontological default of society. For example, the neoliberal ideology currently consuming American public education functions under the invisibility of Whiteness. The rampant and ever consuming discourse and policies of neoliberalism reproduce classical liberal prescriptive notions of individual freedom which locate the individual as devoid of “ethnic attachments,” only able to make qualitative distinctions “without, or prior to, group allegiance.”¹¹

The unqualified appeal to autonomy supports “forms of subjectivity consonant with the creation and efficient operation of market culture.”¹² The proliferation of a market culture affirms ontologies and epistemic realities rooted in entrepreneurialism and individualism over socially and historically saturated ontologies and epistemologies. Giroux and Giroux contend that the commodification of education allows the over determination of market discourse over “discourses of social responsibility and public service.”¹³ This over-determination allows the fruit of neoliberalism to be a consumerist existence—objects devoid of identity. This reoriented existence enables corporate culture to cancel out, or even “devalue,” instances of social, class-specific, and/or racial injustice.

COATES, DU BOIS, THE COLOR LINE, AND THE ANTECEDENTS OF NEOLIBERALISM

Coates, situated on the activist spirit of Du Bois, notes, that the storied tradition of “domination and exclusion” is a hallmark of being White.¹⁴ In fact, the normativity of Whiteness camouflaged by centuries and centuries of unfettered privilege and access operates without recognition. Post-racial politics and ideologies continue the racist heritages of the past through a color-blind agenda that maintains and reinscribes notions of White invisibility.¹⁵ Colorblind propaganda combined with broad ranging strategies to weaken public school systems, access to quality educational opportunities, and dilapidated school buildings, has replaced the “political economy of slavery and Jim and Jane Crow

¹¹ Alcoff, *Visible Identities*, 21.

¹² John Ambrosio, “Changing the Subject: Neoliberalism and Accountability in Public Education,” *Educational Studies* 49, no. 4 (2013): 317.

¹³ Henry A. Giroux and Susan Searls Giroux, *Take Back Higher Education: Race, Youth, and the Crisis of Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 252.

¹⁴ Coates, *World and Me*, 42.

¹⁵ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Colorblind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

with a political economy of industrialism and post-industrialism.”¹⁶ This shift furthers the marginalization and commodification of Black bodies, and introduces an “apparatus” that urges us to accept White innocence through invisibility, further continuing the dependence on actualizing the Dream using “the bedding made from Black bodies.”¹⁷

Coates’s problematizing of Whiteness as norm bears obvious similarity to Du Bois’s philosophical framework where the salience of race is unavoidable. To Du Bois, getting to the bottom of the race problem was central to advancement of all civilization. The central issue of the Negro Problem was to ascertain why there was subjugation and resolute refusal of Negro participation in the world. The content, nature, and reality of this refusal would establish the foundation for all of Du Bois’s inquiries into the eradication of the evils of racism. This is why he unreservedly proclaimed at the beginning of *Souls* that the problem was still the “color line.”

Du Bois’s thoughts at the turn of the 20th century illuminated the harmful realities of the rise of industrialization and signaled the need for Blacks and Whites to work side-by-side to heal the “vast sore” of racial strife.¹⁸ Du Bois was convinced that “no secure civilization could be built in the south with the Negro as an ignorant, turbulent proletariat.”¹⁹ The healing of the vast sore required Negroes to pursue education. But not just industrial education; Blacks needed the sense of permanency Negro colleges and universities brought. However, success, according to Du Bois, rested in Negro colleges maintaining the standards of “popular education,” seeking the regeneration of the Negro and the provision of solutions to resolve the issues prevalent within the Negro condition.

The aspiration of Du Bois for the Negro would have to contend with what Du Bois labels in *Black Reconstruction in America* as a “public and psychological wage” of Whiteness.²⁰ This psychological wage manifested itself in the preferential treatment of Whites simply because they were White. Whites received preferential treatment, courtesy, titles, voting privileges, and access to public spaces simply because of their phenotype and skin color. Such preference also included access to educational institutions that were situated in prime locations, and funded “twice to ten times as much per capita as the colored schools.”²¹ Jim and Jane Crow reproduced what was already at work since the inception of the country in light of the exploitation and genocide of indigenous folk, as well as the subjugation and commodification of Black bodies—entirely shut out of political participation in the so-called emerging democracy.

¹⁶ Giroux and Giroux, *Take Back Higher Education*, 193.

¹⁷ Coates, *World and Me*, 11.

¹⁸ Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 104.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1935), 700.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 701.

It must be noted, both Du Bois and Coates question the adequacy of racial constructs. Outlaw notes that crucial to Du Bois's framework for addressing the Negro Problem was a conviction that there was no valid evidence that suggests any "definitive set of heritable physical characteristics" were sufficiently credible ways to differentiate a race; it was the deeper psychological, affective, spiritual, and common historical narratives which made a group alike.²² Du Bois was so convinced of this fact that he actually felt pity for those engaged in idolatrous worship of the "new religion of whiteness."²³ Coates constantly wrestles with the resilience and devoted, yet futile, commitment to the Dream of "those who believe they are white." To Coates, Whiteness represents unbridled dominance and subjugation of Black and Brown bodies more than skin color. The problem of the 21st century remains the problem of the color line. The problems of the 20th century forwarded by Du Bois remain unaddressed, and are now clad in modern clothes: neoliberal policies and discourses.

What follows is a description of exactly how Coates operationalizes White invisibility in *Between the World and Me*. The following will discuss how Coates's participation in the Black activist and intellectual tradition reveals the deleterious effects of neoliberalism rooted in a mythologization of White supremacy and Black subjugation, unveiling a narrative and system of violence, oppression, and fear, specifically through the lens of the Dream and innocence, and the Dream and lie of meritocracy.

COATES AND NEOLIBERALISM: THE DREAM OF INNOCENCE

For Coates, memory, or the lack thereof, is a powerful tool that keeps the Dreamer within the illusion of the Dream. To awaken from the Dream, contends Coates, would force them ("those who believe themselves to be White") to "live down here in the world" and come to grips with the fact "they are an empire of humans and, like all empires of humans, are built on the destruction of the body."²⁴ Coates is convinced that an apparatus of White hegemony exists that urges passive acceptance of innocence.

INNOCENCE AND MEMORY

Innocence allows the Du Boisian public and psychological wage of Whiteness to exist unchecked. Coates maintains that the Dream of Innocence lacks a critical vantage point of American history and thrives on "generalization, on limiting the number of possible questions, on privileging immediate answers."²⁵ The accepted currency of innocence are epistemologies which privilege mythmaking on matters related to race. Mythmaking leads to the

²² Outlaw, *On Race and Philosophy*, 7.

²³ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1967), 56.

²⁴ Coates, *World and Me*, 143.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

construction of alternate realities, a “racial fairyland,”²⁶ to quote Charles Mills, that softens the blow of past actions through a White logic that allows good intentions to serve as “a hall pass through history, a sleeping pill that ensures the Dream.”²⁷

Innocence is necessary to maintain the narrative of American exceptionalism: the narrative of White dominance and subjectivity has no room for weakness.²⁸ As in Du Bois’s time, White dominance, and by virtue, White Supremacy maintained and promulgated itself through overt abuse and outright systemic dehumanization of Black and Brown bodies; Coates’s reality positions White dominance as overt, maintained by innocence, fragility, and as a perpetuating and presumptuous “legally addressable victimhood” that necessitates and sustains itself on Black and Brown “criminality, capability, and recognizability.”²⁹

Neoliberalism’s orientation towards strong private rights, free market, and free trade avails itself well within the Dreamer’s need for innocence. Innocence, like neoliberal policies and ideologies, disrupts and even stifles socially oriented thinking, desiring instead for “economic, performance-based banking methods that reinforce Anglo-merchant-centered global supremacy as the institutional and social status quo.”³⁰

Neoliberal movement towards individualistic frames of thinking privileges myth-making grounded in perspectives of individual social mobility devoid of historical narratives of privilege and White Supremacy. The privileging of mythmaking at the expense of accurate historical reflection maintains the Dream and enables White hyper-invisibility to flourish, resulting in habitual ignorance as the norm. Forgetfulness facilitates violence and oppression against Black and Brown bodies to be viewed outside of a historical hegemony of oppression and violence, disconnecting the Dreamers from any awareness of oppressive systems. For example, protests against police brutality by Black Lives Matter (BLM) are met with fierce opposition and rejoinders such as Blue Lives Matter, devoid of consideration of the historical context of policing in historically marginalized communities. Also, criticism of law enforcement practices and calls for greater accountability are met with retorts of a responsibility politic directed at Black and Brown communities, who are urged to emphasize more personal responsibility and discipline during traffic stops. Any challenge to the system is a challenge to their Dream and heritage.

²⁶ Mills, *Racial Contract*, 18.

²⁷ Coates, *World and Me*, 33.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁹ Lisa Marie Cacho, “The Presumption of White Innocence,” *American Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (2014): 1087.

³⁰ Giroux and Giroux, *Take Back Higher Education*.

INNOCENCE AND SCHOOLING

The reality of innocence manifests itself in unique ways in educational spaces. First, it allows privileged narratives of Whiteness to continue unchecked throughout the curriculum, thus “sanctioning particular forms of authority and exclusion.”³¹ The result are epistemologies, or as Gloria Ladson-Billings labels it, “systems of knowing”,³² that reinforce prescriptive silence and banking models of education, valuing compliance, discipline, and rote memorization over those that embrace alterity as normative and essential to the development of critical thought and the cultivation of conscious agents who actively and democratically engage in the creation and re-creation of meanings and values.³³

Prescriptive silence and banking model forms of education are neoliberal apparatuses of control that equip students for industry and social mobility at the cost of democratic equality and preparation for civic and political engagement.³⁴ These neoliberal apparatuses reproduce a form of domestication that seeks to control and discipline instead of fuel the fires of curiosity and critical agency. The tendency of schools towards domestication and control are what motivates Coates to distrust them. Coates accuses schools of hiding the truth and “drugging” students with a “false morality so that we would not see” and as a result question the atrocities that the Dream wages on Black and Brown bodies.³⁵

Secondly, in educational spaces innocence is held captive to neoliberal assumptions of individualism, which causes innocence to be calibrated through a consumerist framework. When this occurs and students are transformed into consumers, and thereby objects, identity becomes non-existent.³⁶ Little-by-little this process strips the object of their cultural, racial, and social clothing, replacing nakedness with new cultural clothes that are an identical copy of their masters: industry. This produces objects dependent upon a master. In this process, the individual—as well as corporate voice—is unauthenticated; his/her voice becomes nothing more than an echo of industry and the system. Schooling then becomes a space where banking models of education become the norm.³⁷

³¹ *Ibid.*, 102.

³² Gloria Ladson-Billings, “Racialized Discourses and Ethnic Epistemologies,” in *The Landscape of Qualitative Research: Theories and Issues*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2003), 399.

³³ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1968); *Cultural Action for Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).

³⁴ David F. Labaree, “Public Goods, Private Goods: The American Struggle over Educational Goals,” *American Educational Research Journal* 34, no. 1 (1997): 39–81.

³⁵ Coates, *World and Me*, 26.

³⁶ Giroux and Giroux, *Take Back Higher Education*.

³⁷ Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom*.

Education becomes a means of acquiring credentials that can be used solely as a means to engage in transactional acts in order to attain employment.³⁸

THE LIE OF MERITOCRACY AND THE DREAM

So far, considerable attention has been given to the impact of the Dream on Whiteness. However, to stay true to the beliefs of both Coates and Du Bois concerning the impoverished nature of racial constructs, we must consider the impact of the Dream on Black bodies. This exploration will consider the phenomenon through an examination of neoliberal ideals of meritocracy, specifically within the context of education.

MERITOCRACY AND BLACK BODIES

Meritocracy is based upon a replication of the “relationships of dominance and subordinancy in the economic sphere.”³⁹ A system based upon an idea of meritocracy gives rewards based upon ability and effort. Manifestations of dominance and subordinancy operationalize with striking difference in the urban ghetto compared to the affluent suburbs, especially within the realm of education. Coates shares this belief. When comparing the epistemic and ontological realities of Black males in urban areas to that of White males in suburbia, he states: “The galaxy belonged to them (White boys), and as terror was communicated to our children, I saw mastery communicated to theirs.”⁴⁰ The interesting association of Blackness with ontological exploitation, nakedness, and fear juxtaposed with colonialist notions of mastery and safety, preserved by “ancestral wealth,” echoes the sentiments of Du Bois and illuminates the Black experience, while at the same time unveiling a narrative and system of violence, oppression, and fear that is shepherded by public policy.⁴¹

The ghettoized state of many urban spaces and pristine conditions of many suburban spaces are maintained through rigid and insidious neoliberal hierarchal models. The market structures apparent in neoliberalism are purposely designed to stimulate elimination at particular junctions of the process to ensure everyone does not make it to the top.⁴² The apparatuses of elimination ensure differentiated educational experiences for all. Therefore, in a sense, the Dream and Violence are de facto interlocutors. Coates reflects on this reality:

The streets and the schools are arms of the same beast. One enjoyed the official power of the state while the other enjoyed

³⁸ Labaree, “Public Goods.”

³⁹ Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, “Education and Personal Development: The Long Shadow of Work,” in *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 125.

⁴⁰ Coates, 89.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴² Labaree.

its implicit sanction. But fear and violence were the weaponry of both. Fail in the streets and the crews would catch you slipping and take your body. 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 those two arms in relation—those who failed in the schools justified their destruction in the streets.⁴³

Coates recognized the risks to Black and Brown bodies. The interlocation between the school and the streets facilitated a revolving door of violence and fear on those who refused to acquiesce to the demands of the system. Since the subjugation of Black and Brown bodies is foundational to the Dream, apparatuses of elimination would ensure that failure in the schools guaranteed the official destruction in the streets.

MERITOCRACY AND THE INVERTED VALUES OF THE OPPRESSED

The interlocation between the Dream and Violence not only produces a sense of privilege, innocence, and inoculation of the Dreamer from awareness of injustice, but this relationship also results in an internalized meritocratic ethos. It manifests itself as a set of inverted values of the Dreamer in which there is a stark juxtaposition with the values of the other as being undeserving. Militarized policing, and other state sponsored responses devoid of consideration of systematic and historical narratives of oppression, only exacerbate the inherent problems in underrepresented communities. The oppressive and ahistorical responses of state agencies combined with rugged individualistic orientations and the absence of critical agency creates a cyclical effect of oppression maintained by generational poverty and over-incarceration,⁴⁴ manifested by social immobility. This cycle of oppression goes untreated because the meritocratic hermeneutic lens of the Dreamer validates the social inequalities of the oppressed as “justly deserved,” attributing social misfortune as a direct result of individual failure.⁴⁵

CONCLUSION

The solution to the issues of the color line remain in a revelation that Black and Brown liberation from domination and objectification is tied to the unveiling of Whiteness; the liberation of both groups is interconnected. Both Du Bois and Coates are convinced of this. To Coates, awakening White people from the Dream would reveal their humanity and “stain their nobility,” thus unveiling the White Supremacist narrative of domination and exclusion; “empires of

⁴³ Coates, *World and Me*, 33.

⁴⁴ Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*.

⁴⁵ Jonathan Mijs, “The Unfulfillable Promise of Meritocracy: Three Lessons and Their Implications for Justice in Education,” *Social Justice Research* 29, no. 1 (2016): 14–34.

humans built on the destruction of the body.”⁴⁶ Revelation of this would mean White Supremacy would cease to exist. Coates believes that Dreamers learning to comprehend that “the field for their Dream, the stage where they have painted themselves white, is the deathbed of us all” is the key to improving the condition of the oppressed.⁴⁷

Du Bois uttered similar sentiments decades earlier. He was convinced that both Blacks and Whites were suffering; however, one group (the Whites) was not aware of it. Du Bois pitied Whites because of their imprisonment to their Whiteness.⁴⁸ But Dubois remained focused on eliminating society of the Negro Problem because resolving this problem, and in the process, unveiling Whiteness, is the key to the advancement of society.

⁴⁶ Coates, *World and Me*, 143.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁴⁸ Du Bois, *Darkwater*.
