Re-Presenting Black Masculinities in
Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*

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ABSTRACT

Ta-Nehisi Coates's memoir and letter to his son *Between the World and Me* (2015)—published shortly after the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement—provides a rich and diverse representation of African American male life which is closely connected with contemporary United States society. This study explores how Coates represents and explains black manhood as well as how he defines his own identity as being excluded from United States society, yet as being central to the nation. Coates's definition of masculinity is analyzed by focusing on his representations of boyhood and fatherhood. By analyzing Coates's projection of his own role as a man and as a father as well as his complex and multifaceted representations of black manhood, I demonstrate how Coates promotes a caring masculinity and, most importantly, how he presents resistance to hegemonic notions of masculinity. Thus, the goal of this study is to examine the ways in which Coates asserts models for progressive masculinities through his portrayals of boyhood and fatherhood. Coates's depiction of his adolescence and of black youth in the streets of Baltimore, and his descriptions of fatherhood, particularly of his own role as a father and the depiction of his parents, are key in assessing Coates's rendering of a caring masculinity.

Keywords: Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, black masculinity, stereotypes, boyhood, fatherhood, caring masculinity, progressive black masculinities.

DEDICATION

To my father, Boughaleb Aaouinti

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Re-Presenting Black Masculinities in Ta-Nehisi Coates's
Between the World and Me

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

"And you know now … that the police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body" (Coates 9). Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* was published on July 14, 2015. The time of its publication was marked by two events happening in the United States: on the one hand, the visibility of police brutality against African Americans and, on the other, the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement. Months prior to the publication, the fatal shooting of Michael Brown by police officer Darren Wilson on August 9, 2014, sparked protests and riots in Ferguson, Missouri. The subsequent acquittal of Wilson intensified the Ferguson protests which lasted until August 11, 2015. The Ferguson protests caused national and international debate about the relationship between police brutality and African Americans. Coates decides to write the letter to his son on his fifteenth year because it is the year he has witnessed more destruction of black bodies. It is the destruction of black bodies in the United States that leads to the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013: a social movement organized by three women—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi—and conceived as a twenty-first century Civil Rights movement, that campaigns against violence, systematic racism and the destruction of black lives at a national and at a global level.

My choice of author, Ta-Nehisi Coates, is largely based on the fact that he, as an emerging voice, has become a leading public intellectual on race who transcends United States audiences. In an endorsement of the back cover of *Between the World and Me*, Coates has been defined by Toni Morrison as the writer who has filled "the intellectual void" left by James Baldwin. Most importantly, Coates has become a bridge of understanding between the larger communities—national and international

audiences—and a plural and diverse African American community. Coates's significance as a writer is reflected in the great deal of thought and discussion that his book *Between the World and Me* has generated by leading scholars in African American Studies such as Michelle Alexander, Cornel West, and Robin D. G. Kelley as well as white audiences and moderate conservatives such as David Brooks.

Brooks acknowledges the significance of Coates's work, yet he disagrees with his depiction of American history. Brooks described the book as a "mind-altering account of the black male experience" and as a "great and searing contribution" to the "public education" concerning the killings of African Americans in Ferguson, Baltimore, and Charleston, among other cities. While Brooks encourages all "conscientious American[s]" to read Coates's *Between the World and Me*, he takes issue with Coates over his representation of American history. According to Brooks, Coates "distort[s] American history" in that he presents violence as the predominant force of the United States. Moreover, Brooks disagrees with Coates's depiction of the American Dream, given that, for him, the Dream is a unifying element which signifies democracy and hope for the future: "By dissolving the dream under the acid of an excessive realism, you trap generations in the past and destroy the guiding star that points to a better future" (Brooks, "Listening to Ta-Nehisi Coates While White").

In a different way, Michelle Alexander also references to Coates's lack of hope, particularly in relation to James Baldwin's 1963 work *The Fire Next Time*. Alexander distinguishes between Baldwin and Coates. For her, Baldwin's effort to convey a belief in "revolutionary change" and to emphasize his nephew's "power and potential" stands in opposition to Coates's emphasis on "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." Alexander explains

that because Coates poses questions throughout the book which remain unanswered, she regards the book as "unfinished." Nevertheless, although Alexander favors Baldwin's encouraging message, she acknowledges that Coates's focus, unlike Baldwin's, may not be to urge people to take action, but rather to challenge the readers to "wrestle with the questions" individually (Alexander, "Ta-Nehisi Coates's 'Between the World and Me'").

Cornel West also expresses discontent at Toni Morrison's comparison of Coates and Baldwin. A day after the publication of *Between the World and Me*, West used his social media platform to claim that, while Baldwin's work encouraged "collective action," Coates's work conveys individual inaction: "Baldwin's painful self-examination led to collective action and a focus on social movements. … Coates's fear-driven self-absorption leads to individual escape and flight to safety" ("In Defense of James Baldwin"). Most importantly, West takes issue with what he considers Coates's omission of an examination of power structures interconnected with racial inequality in the United States: "without an analysis of capitalist wealth inequality, gender domination, homophobic degradation, Imperial occupation (all concrete forms of plunder), and collective fightback (not just personal struggle) Coates will remain a mere darling for White and Black Neo-Liberals" (West, "Ta-Nehisi Coates is the neoliberal face of the black freedom struggle").

West's disagreement with Coates transcends the publication of *Between the World and Me* as his criticism is further reinforced by the publication of Coates's *We Were Eight Years in Power* in October 2017. West claims that Coates's lack of connection to a "collective action" presents white supremacy as "almighty, magical and unremovable." West states the root of his disagreement with Coates: "any analysis or vision of our world that omits the centrality of Wall Street power, US

military policies, and the complex dynamics of class, gender, and sexuality in black America is too narrow and dangerously misleading." Therefore, West emphasizes on the connection between white supremacy and other "forms of domination," such as class and patriarchy (West, "Ta-Nehisi Coates is the neoliberal face of the black freedom struggle").

Robin D. G. Kelley, on the other hand, although he acknowledges having disagreed with Coates in certain parts of *Between the World and Me*, believes in the reconciliation between Coates's and West's perspectives. Kelley states: "the purpose of critique is dialectical, to reach a higher synthesis, which in turn reveals new contradictions demanding new critique" ("Coates and West in Jackson"). Initially, Kelley argued that Coates's description of violence against black bodies as heritage presented an incomplete image of the complexities that perpetuated such violence and, in turn, nullified the significance of resistance:

> To identify anti-black violence as heritage may be true in a general sense, but it obscures the dialectic that produced and reproduced the violence of a regime dependent on black *life* for its profitability. … Violence was used not only to break black bodies but to discipline *people* who refused enslavement. … If Africans were entirely compliant and docile, there would have been no need for vast expenditures on corrections, security, and violence. Resistance is our heritage. And resistance is our healing. Through collective struggle, we alter our circumstances; contain, escape, or possibly eviscerate the *source* of trauma; recover our bodies; reclaim and redeem our dead; and make ourselves whole. ("Black Study, Black Struggle")

Despite his disagreement with certain parts of the book, Kelley describes Coates's writing as "generative, thoughtful, and startlingly honest," encouraging him "to think harder and deeper about the depth of racism in both the public and inner life of black America" ("Coates and West in Jackson"). Kelley's assessment of Coates's and West's conflicting perspectives illustrates the significance of both insights. Kelley regards Coates's perspective as "deeply pessimistic" because of his focus on the structures of oppression; however, he believes in merging West's belief in victory and Coates's concern for survival, as he states: "our movements have had to do both–find ways to survive and dare to win" ("Coates and West in Jackson").

As is evidenced by the amount of criticism and praise that Coates's book has received, his work contributes to both intellectual and public discussions about African American life. The impact of his work illustrates the plurality within the African American community and the ongoing need for a dialogue about race relations in the United States. *Between the World and Me*, Coates's memoir and letter to his son, provides a rich and diverse representation of African American male life which is closely connected with contemporary United States society. This study explores how Coates represents and explains black manhood, but also how he defines himself, his own identity, as an outsider of United States society. My goal is to analyze the ways in which Coates presents resistance to received notions of black masculinity. This study will refer to the term "masculinities" in order to acknowledge the hybridity of male identities (Kimmel 2). I will analyze the ways in which Coates asserts models for progressive masculinities through complex and multifaceted representations of black manhood that subvert notions of hegemonic masculinity. Athena D. Mutua's coinage of "progressive black masculinities" as "performances of the masculine self" which both reject notions of domination and "validate and

empower black humanity" (7) is essential in analyzing Coates's representation of black masculinities. In order to illustrate how Coates presents resistance to normative notions of masculinity, I use Raewyn Connell's definition of hegemonic masculinity.

Connell explains that hegemonic masculinity has been conceptualized as the "normative" model for masculinity, an essentially white and heterosexual model which embodied "the most honored way of being a man, required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men" (832). However, Connell emphasizes the significance of the notion of hegemony, in contrast to the notion of domination, as it includes the agency of the subordinated groups (841). Furthermore, Connell argues that, in assessing hegemonic masculinities, it is important to consider the "cultural framework" of a particular masculinity, i.e. the geographical location (850), as well as the dynamics of masculinities as they change through time (852). Therefore, Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as a dynamic social ideal in which the "plurality of masculinities" and the "hierarchy of masculinities" are combined to produce models of masculinity; "symbols that have authority despite the fact that most men and boys do not fully live up to them" (846). Hence, hegemonic masculinities do not represent actual men, but are rather exemplars which express "widespread ideals, fantasies, and desires" (838). Although the figure of Coates's father is explored in detail in his first memoir *The Beautiful Stuggle* (2008), this study will only address Coates's representation of his father in *Between the World and Me*. Coates's brief representation of his father in *Between the World and Me* deviates from the representation of his own fatherhood, and also conforms to hegemonic notions of masculinity.

I will analyze Coates's definition of masculinity by focusing on his representations of boyhood and fatherhood; how he describes his adolescence, the young males in the streets of Baltimore, and the kind of fatherhood he projects as well as the depiction of his own father. In addition, I will place Coates's *Between the World and Me* (2015) in conversation with James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1963) as a means to explore how the past speaks to the present, and whether their historical context affects how they conceptualize black masculinities and humanity. My decision to connect Coates's *Between the World and Me* and Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* is based on their commonalities in terms of form and content. Both authors use the form of a letter to younger males in their family to write about the construction of race in the United States: Baldwin writes to his fifteen-year-old nephew, Coates writes to his fifteen-year-old son. Moreover, a central theme in their texts is the struggle for recognition of the black body. Coates deconstructs the notion of an ideal United States society as he traces the exploitation of black bodies through slavery, segregation, and post-segregation, i.e. contemporary United States. In analyzing Coates's text, I will focus on the element of fear as he presents it as a dominant emotion in the African American experience, in particular the fear of disembodiment; fear of imprisonment and of losing the black body.

The present study is divided in five chapters, including this one in which I set the context of Coates's text and the purpose of my study. In the second chapter, I define the notion of *black masculinities* and I incorporate a historiography of black male stereotypes as they relate to Coates's text: I draw from the stereotypes of "Sambo" and "the Brute" in order to trace the historical evolution of contemporary black male stereotypes associated with "gangsta culture." The stereotypical image of "Sambo," which originated during slavery with caricatures of childlike, docile,

happily enslaved people was personified in Minstrel shows during the nineteenth century. I argue that characteristics associated with the "Sambo" stereotype are still prevalent today in representations of black men as lazy and irresponsible. The "Sambo" image stands in opposition with the stereotypical image of "the Brute," which emerged in the Post-Emancipation era, particularly during the Reconstruction period, representing black males as savages, criminals, and rapists. Such characteristics which are associated with "the Brute" stereotype are connected with contemporary black male stereotypes such as the "thug," "the rapist," and "the gangster."

The third chapter is an exploration of boyhood in Coates's text: firstly, I focus on Coates's adolescence, the relationship with his father and, most importantly, his experience in the streets of Baltimore; the ways in which growing up in an inner city shape his understanding of manhood. Here I explain how Coates evidences the struggle for recognition of black bodies and the ways in which the lack of recognition is related to the construction of stereotypes about black male humanity. I focus on the notion of fear as it relates to the loss of black bodies. Secondly, I analyze Coates's re-definition of the American Dream: the ways in which he deconstructs the notion of an American utopia as he relates it to the African American experience in the United States. Finally, I discuss the similarities in the depiction of black women's and black men's experience as I place Coates's *Between the World and Me* in conversation with Melissa Harris-Perry's *Sister Citizen*. I argue that Harris-Perry's examination of the impact of stereotypes on black women's lives is key in exploring Coates's representations of boyhood: both texts illustrate the ways in which stereotypes about black manhood and womanhood serve to control and disempower black bodies as

well as the strategies employed by them in an effort to resist lack of recognition about their humanity.

In the fourth chapter, I focus on Coates's description of his role as a father. In analyzing Coates's relationship with his son I illustrate the significance of *the advice* he gives to his son as well as Coates's promotion of a caring masculinity through fatherhood. I argue that Coates's deviates from a hegemonic model of masculinity as he represents the notion of "new fatherhood." He defines his masculinity and fatherhood as being characterized by "active parenting, the display of empathy, domestic involvement, nurturance, and the prioritizing of [his son]" (Requena-Pelegrí 117). Most importantly, Coates's fatherhood is defined in opposition to a hegemonic model of masculinity, that is, in opposition to "dominance, emotional control, lack of involvement, absence, or authority" (Requena-Pelegrí 117). In this chapter I address the implications of Coates transmitting the knowledge he gained from his mother to his son and I establish connections between Coates's text and Baldwin's "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation" in *The Fire Next Time*.

This study concludes with an outline of Coates's representation of black masculinities as well as his definition of his own identity. By focusing on his representations of boyhood, especially how stereotypes affect his portrayal of young black males, and his representations of fatherhood, that is, the role he has as a father and his projection of a caring masculinity and "new fatherhood," I demonstrate the ways in which Coates resists received notions of masculinity. This fifth chapter explains how Coates embodies a progressive view of black masculinity and how he provides diverse and complex representations of African American males. In order to carry out this research I draw from literary, historical as well as sociopolitical sources

related to Masculinity Studies and Black Women's Studies. With this study, I wish to contribute to the emerging field of Masculinity Studies, African American Studies as well as to Feminist theory and literary studies.

CHAPTER 2: BLACK MALE STEREOTYPES

> These images, cast in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, were contrasted with those created after enslavement, the Sambo caricatures I had always known. What was the difference? In my survey course of America, I'd seen portraits of the Irish drawn in the same ravenous, lustful, and simian way. Perhaps there had been other bodies, mocked, terrorized, and insecure. Perhaps the Irish too had once lost their bodies. Perhaps being named "black" had nothing to do with any of this; perhaps being named "black" was just someone's name for being at the bottom, a human turned to object, object turned to pariah. (Coates 55)

Stereotypes about black manhood play a major role in the ways in which society in the United States has viewed and continues to view black men. Generalizations and negative assumptions about African American men and women originated during the colonial era in the United States, specifically during enslavement. Throughout the years, negative assumptions about the humanity of the enslaved continued to influence not only the ways United States society viewed black Americans, but also the ways in which black Americans viewed themselves. Lack of recognition about the humanity of black Americans, both at a personal and at an institutional level, has led to the experience of W.E.B. DuBois' notion of "double-consciousness," that is, a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others;" being black and American, "two unreconciled strivings" (8). The construction of black masculinity in the United States relates to the construction of stereotypes about African American men. This chapter will explore the ways in which black masculinity has been defined by sociologists, historians, and literary scholars in relation to stereotypes. Specifically, this chapter will draw from the stereotypes of "Sambo" and "the Brute" in order to trace the historical evolution of contemporary

black male stereotypes associated with gangsta culture, such as the image of the lazy black man and the thug.

Although both stereotypes reveal contrasting images and emerged at different historical moments, both of them reinforce misrecognition of black male bodies. On the one hand, the Sambo stereotype emerged during slavery and presented an image of black males as docile, childlike, and irresponsible. On the other hand, the Brute stereotype emerged during Reconstruction period as a backlash against the enfranchisement of African Americans and presented black males as a threat as they were innately savage, violent, and sexual predators. While authors such as bell hooks, Frantz Fanon, and Timothy J. Brown establish connections between the construction of black masculinity and stereotypes in their respective texts, they do not center their arguments on the historical background which originated such stereotypes. Other authors, however, including Joseph Boskin, Riché Richardson, Toni Morrison, and Kelly Brown Douglas, have been especially helpful in exploring the historical background of contemporary black male stereotypes, as well as the connections between stereotypes and the conceptualizations of black masculinity.

The construction of notions of masculinity in the United States is closely connected to the history of the nation. As sociologist Michael Kimmel suggests, the understanding of masculinity is enabled by the understanding of United States history and vice versa (2). For Kimmel, United States history has been influenced by the "efforts to test and prove manhood," reflected in the wars, the border divisions, and the admired leaders of the nation (2). Manhood, like race, is a social construct and its meaning depends, as Kimmel puts it, on "one's class, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, region of the country" (5). That is why, in order to acknowledge the hybridity of male identities, we should refer to "*masculinities*" as a plural concept (Kimmel 5).

Stereotypes about black males' humanity play a significant role in the definition of black masculinities. Since the post-Emancipation era in the nineteenth century, black men in the United States have been subjected to negative stereotypes such as "animals, brutes, natural born rapists, and murderers" as well as irresponsible and lazy (hooks xi). As a consequence of the overflow of such images in the representation of black men, bell hooks argues that "they are victimized by stereotypes" (xi). hooks provides an articulate description of the relationship between stereotypes and the construction of black masculinity in her 2004 book We *Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*:

> The price of visibility in the contemporary world of white supremacy is that black male identity be defined in relation to the stereotype whether by embodying it or seeking to be other than it. At the center of the way black male selfhood is constructed in white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy is the image of *the brute*— untamed, uncivilized, unthinking, and unfeeling. … Negative stereotypes about the nature of black masculinity continue to overdetermine the identities black males are allowed to fashion for themselves. (xii, my italics)

As hooks states, black masculinity is defined either by subscribing to negative stereotypes or by defying them. Nevertheless, although hooks describes the connection between black manhood and stereotypes, especially the Brute, she does not provide a historical background to the stereotype.

Moreover, in her 1992 book *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, hooks explains the ways in which black masculinity has been defined, in particular her chapter entitled "Reconstructing Black Masculinity." Here hooks maintains that "many black people have passively absorbed narrow representations of black

masculinity, perpetuated stereotypes, myths, and offered one-dimensional accounts. Contemporary black men have been shaped by these representations" (89). hooks proposes alternative, more truthful representations of black men which deviate from the prevailing stereotypes and hegemonic views of masculinity. She explains that notions of black masculinity emerged during slavery as the "white colonizer" "imposed the [ideals] of manhood and masculinity" and states that black males' identities have been defined in relation to the "patriarchal ideal" (90). In other words, hooks proposes a reconstruction of black masculinity based on a collective effort to counter notions of hegemonic masculinity.

Frantz Fanon, in his 1952 book *Black Skin, White Masks*, also explores some of the connections between black manhood and stereotypes as he analyzes the psychology of racism in the context of colonialism. In his sixth chapter "The Negro and Psychopathology," Fanon presents an assessment of what he terms "the phobia of Negroes," in which black men are perceived as a "biological danger," as an animal who is "fixated at the genital" (165). Fanon focuses on the stereotype of the Brute, specifically on the image of "the black rapist." While he focuses on the image of the Brute in the context of the Civil Rights era (1950s-1960s), Timothy J. Brown focuses on the contemporary image of the Brute which he relates to the notion of a "Hip-Hop Black Masculinity." In his 2006 essay, "Welcome to the Terrordome: Exploring the Contradictions of a Hip-Hop Black Masculinity," Brown states that "historically developed stereotypes about black men," are definitions of black male identity imposed by a white male-dominated society "to control and minimize their potential" (191). Brown explains that a hip hop black masculinity is an innovative identity which is free from definitions imposed by a white male-dominated society. He states that a hip hop black masculinity has both regressive and progressive elements. On the one

hand, hip hop culture idealizes hyper-masculinity centered on materialism, sexism and violence. On the other hand, a hip hop black masculinity is progressive in that it enables black men to define their identity based on "African American cultural values and practices" as well as to "elevate blackness" (299). Although both Fanon and Brown point at the historical development of the stereotypes associated with the image of the Brute, they focus their arguments on the gaze which perpetuates stereotypes about black manhood, not on the origins of such stereotypes.

Stereotypes associated with gangsta culture, that is, circulating and recurring images which define black men as violent, irresponsible, lazy, and animalistic criminals, find their origins in the historical stereotypes of Sambo and the Brute. The evolution of both stereotypes evidences a connection to present-day stereotypes about black manhood in that the traits associated with the Sambo and the Brute constitute the basis from which stereotypes related to gangsta culture are defined. While the Sambo stereotype perpetuated an image of African American men as perpetual children, irresponsible, lazy, very happy, and ignorant, the Brute stereotype perpetuated an image of African American men as born savages, criminals, sexual predators, and animals. As literary scholar Riché Richardson points out in her analysis of the construction of black masculinity in the United States South, the evolution of historical stereotypes about black manhood—particularly, the Uncle Tom, which overlaps in some instances with the Sambo stereotype, and the black rapist, which refers to the Brute stereotype—"were paradigmatic in helping to establish the foundations for a perennially complex politics of black masculine representation in the United States" (3).

The presence of the Sambo stereotype in United States popular culture and history, historian Joseph Boskin explains, was characterized by its humorous image

and its embodiment of the "perfect stereotype" (4). The Sambo stereotype acquired a performing identity when it first appeared personified in Minstrel shows during the nineteenth century. The first minstrel shows were performed in 1830s New York, by white people with blackened faces. The first blackface popular character was "Jim Crow," who was developed by Thomas Dartmouth Rice in the 1830s (fig.1). According to historian Dale Cockrell, it was "poor and working-class whites who felt 'squeezed politically, economically, and socially from the top, but also from the bottom, [who] invented minstrelsy' as a way of expressing the oppression that marked being members of the majority, but outside of the white norm" ("Blackface"). At the heart of these performances of blackness, with blackface and exaggerated costumes, was racial mockery as well as the stereotyping of black men.

Fig. 1. Litograph by Edward Williams Clay used as a cover to "Jump Jim Crow" music sheet, circa 1832. This image had a strong influence on later Jim Crow representations.

Sambo, as a social construct of the white American imagination, was, as most stereotypes about black humanity, a subtle type of social control. Literary critic Sylvia Wynter, for instance, establishes a relationship between the construction of Sambo and the "self-conception" of the master and of whiteness: "the social construct of

Sambo … was necessary to the self-conception not only of the master, but to that of all whites in the South who patterned their own self-conception on the master-model" (150). Poor working-class whites therefore based their equality with rich whites on the basis of their equal power, so to speak, to "exercise forms of mastery," forms of domination over African Americans (150). According to Wynter, the construction of Sambo responds to the "need of the dual psyche of the white–as settler and as the bearer of the egalitarian creed" (150), that is, a "dual psyche" that promoted assumptions of white superiority and simultaneously a moral duty to civilize, as it were, those considered "the others." In order to resolve that contradiction, Wynter continues, the "ideology of paternalism" was created: "by constructing Sambo as the negation of responsibility, the slave master legitimated his own role as the *responsible* agent acting on behalf of the *irresponsible* minstrel" (153). The stereotypical image of Sambo was not mere entertainment; it thrust a definition of childlike, irresponsible black manhood on the identities of African American men, and it legitimated white men's power as paternal figures.

Furthermore, the construction of the Sambo image contributed to the economic benefit of the white performers as well as to the commodification of the black body. For instance, Eric Lott notes, as he quotes from Frederick Douglass' 1848 review in *The North Star,* "blackface imitators … were 'the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow citizens'–a denunciation that nicely captures minstrelsy's further commodification of an already enslaved, non-citizen people" (223). Joseph Boskin describes the character/stereotype of Sambo as "the American national jester [with] a childlike figure whose enticing abilities centered on working *and* entertaining, producing *and* laughing, servicing *and*

grinning" (13). Sambo's prolonged duration in American popular culture enabled the perpetuation of the stereotype in American society. Boskin provides a detailed explanation of the forces behind the construction of the Sambo stereotype:

> Sambo was an extraordinary type of social control … To make the black male into an object of laughter, and, conversely, to force him to devise laughter, was *to strip him of masculinity*, *dignity*, and *self-possession*. Sambo was, then, an illustration of humor as a devise of oppression, and one of the most potent in American culture. The ultimate objective for whites was to effect mastery: to render the black male powerless as a potential warrior, as a sexual competitor, as an economic adversary. (13-14, my italics)

The stereotypical image of Sambo as well as its historical development illustrate the impact of misrepresentations and stereotyping on the construction of notions of black masculinity.

Although the character of Sambo no longer exists in American popular culture or literature, the remnants of the racial trope still prevail and continue to inform contemporary representations of African American manhood, especially in mass media and popular culture. Misrepresentations about black male identity in the United States which echo the Sambo stereotype today are mostly associated with laziness, such as the lazy welfare recipient, and the watermelon-eating caricature of the child-like Sambo. For example, the watermelon stereotype about African Americans is still prevalent into the twenty-first century. Spike Lee's 2000 satirical film *Bamboozled* employed the watermelon stereotype as a theme. Also, watermelon imagery was used by Barack Obama's detractors during his 2008 presidential campaign.

The stereotype of the Brute, as mentioned previously, originated after the Sambo stereotype, during the post-Emancipation era. Specifically, the image of the

Brute did not emerge until the Reconstruction era, when many enslaved African Americans were emancipated and the Fifteenth Amendment granted African American men the right to vote. Andrew Johnson, as the seventeenth president of the United States, strongly opposed the Fifteenth Amendment as he argued that black men represented a threat to the status quo. The stereotype of the black brute promoted a view of black men as sexual predators, that is, black men were not only represented as a threat for alleged innate primitiveness and violence, but they were also represented as a threat to white domination and particularly to white women, who "ensured the purity of the race" (Richardson 4). As Richardson maintains, the stereotype of the Brute, and specifically the myth of the black rapist, "cast black men as sexually pathological, hyperbolized their phallic power, and constructed them as inherently lustful and primitive" (4). The dichotomy between the stereotypes of Sambo and the Brute proves that people of African descent have historically been relegated to a dehumanizing discourse of "human versus animal" (Morrison x). Novelist and literary critic Toni Morrison poignantly describes the similarities, I suggest, in the conception of the stereotypes of Sambo and the Brute:

> For centuries the debate of human versus animal has rested on the backs of blacks, thus relegating to them the essence of contradiction. Even when permitted conceptually the kingdom of *Homo sapiens*, blacks have historically been viewed as either submissive children, violent ones, or both at once. … Therefore when race is at play the leap from one judgement (faithful dog) [read Sambo] to its complete opposite (treacherous snake) [read the Brute] is a trained reflex. (x-xi)

Unlike the Sambo stereotype, which cast black men as innately inferior and subservient, the Brute stereotype, otherwise referred to as the "black buck" (Douglas

45), cast black men as sexual predators who posed a threat to white womanhood. The imagery of the Brute, and particularly the myth of the black rapist, served as a "primarily rationale" for lynching and castration (Richardson 4; Douglas 47). By the eighteenth century, theologian Kelly Brown Douglas explains, castration "became a punishment primarily in accusations of rape" (47). Lynching, however, was the most odious crime against black bodies. As Douglas argues, lynching was "a primary weapon employed to control Black men and women socially, economically, and politically" (48). According to data from the NAACP, "from 1882-1968, 4,743 lynchings occurred in the United States. Of these people that were lynched 3,446 were black" ("History of Lynchings"). Indeed, lynching was not only a means of exercising violence and control against black bodies, but also a means of instilling fear into African American communities; fear of disembodiment. Most importantly, lynching was an act of terrorism used as a means "to enforce and uphold White patriarchal hegemony" (Douglas 48).

Arguments about the animalistic nature of black men were reinforced with the publication in 1900 of Charles Carroll's *The Negro A Beast, or, In The Image of God?* (fig.2), which described black men as being more similar "to apes than to human beings" (Pilgrim, the Brute caricature"). Additionally, the 1915 movie *The Birth of a Nation*, directed by D. W. Griffith and based on Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman* (1905), ratified assumptions of white supremacy and reinforced negative assumptions about black humanity and the myth of the black rapist.
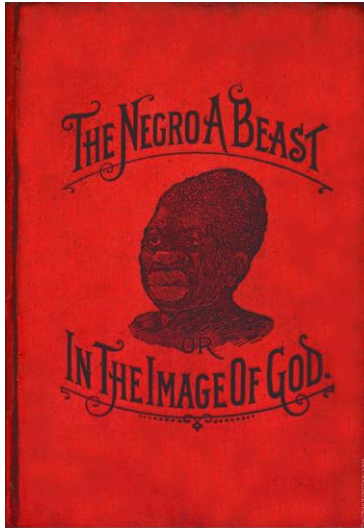
Fig. 2. First edition book cover of Charles Carroll's *The Negro A Beast* (1900), *Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture.*

Historical images of the black Brute continue to inform misrepresentations of black men in present-day mass media and American popular culture. Contemporary images of black men as rapists coupled with violence and criminality represent a continuation of the Brute stereotype. For instance, in the early 1970s, during the Black Power movement, the popular film genre of "Blaxplotaition" emerged. "Blaxpoitation" films were characterized by the stereotypical portrayal of African Americans in general and by the portrayal of hyper-masculine black men in particular. In films such as *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), black men are portrayed as aggressive and dominant males who subscribe to the stereotypical image of the Brute. Another example of the continuation of the historical stereotype of the Brute was the popular reception of the O. J. Simpson case in 1994. In her interpretation of the case, Morrison argues how the dominant narrative of the case portrayed by the mass media "began to look like a media pogrom, a lynching with all of its iconography intact: a chase, a cuffing, a mob, name calling, a white female victim, and most of all the heat, the panting, the flares nostrils of a pack already eager to convict" (xiii). Morrison also highlights the parallelisms between the O. J. Simpson narrative and Griffith's 1915 movie *The Birth of a Nation*:

The Simpson spectacle has become an enunciation of post–Civil Rights discourse on black deviance. Both of these sagas have race at their nexus. … Like *Birth of a Nation*, the case has generated a newer more sophisticated national narrative of racial supremacy. But it is still the old sham white supremacy forever wedded to and dependent upon faux black inferiority. … The official story has thrown Mr. Simpson into that representative role. … He has become the whole race needing correction, incarceration, censoring, silencing; the race that needs its civil rights disassembled; the race that is sign and symbol of domestic violence … This is the consequence and function of official stories: to impose the will of the dominant culture. It is *Birth of a Nation* writ large—menacingly and pointedly for the 'hood. (xxvi-xviii)

Another scholar who also identifies the connections between the historical stereotype of the Brute and contemporary representations of black masculinity is sociologist Michael Eric Dyson in his assessment of gangsta rap within American culture. Although Dyson's main arguments are focused on the ways in which hip hop culture has provided black youth with an outlet for resisting bleak urban conditions and exploring different aspects of their lives, he acknowledges that gangsta rap echoes historical stereotypes about black male sexuality, violence, and criminality. Dyson explains the connection between the violent rhetoric and stereotypical imagery of gangsta rap as "economic exploitation" (178):

The link between the vulgar rhetorical traditions expressed in gangsta rap and the economic exploitation that dominated the marketplace is real. The circulation of *brutal images* of black men as sexual outlaws and black females as "ho's" in many gangsta rap narratives mirrors *ancient stereotypes* of black sexual identity. Male and female bodies are turned into commodities. …

> Equally troubling is the glamorization of *violence* and the romanticization of the culture of guns that pervades gangsta rap. (178-179, my italics)

According to Dyson, gangsta rap is not only a way of subscribing to racial stereotypes to obtain economic benefits; "gangsta rappers are viewed as the black face of white desire to distort the beauty of black life" (179). Thus, Dyson's assessment of gangsta rap illustrates an inherent relation between the historical stereotypes of Sambo and, to a larger degree, the Brute and the contemporary stereotypes embraced by gangsta culture.

The historical development of the stereotypes of Sambo and the Brute connects to the development of contemporary stereotypes associated with "gangsta culture," especially with those images which portray black men as lazy, irresponsible, innately savage, aggressive and prone to criminality. Authors like bell hooks, Frantz Fanon, and Timothy J. Brown establish connections between the construction of black masculinity and stereotypes as they define black male identities in relation to stereotypes: black manhood is defined, in their respective texts, by either subscribing to the stereotype or by defying it. In other words, black male identities have been marked by the experience of Du Bois's notion of "double-consciousness." Although these authors explain black manhood in connection to black male stereotypes such as the thug, the black rapist, and the gangster, they focus their arguments on the external gaze which perpetuates the negative stereotypes, not on the historical background and circumstances which originated such stereotypes. Nevertheless, other authors such as Joseph Boskin, Riché Richardson, Toni Morrison, Kelly Brown Douglas, and Michael Eric Dyson provide explicit evidence of the link between the development of Sambo and the Brute and contemporary stereotypes about black masculinity. The origins of the Sambo and the Brute stereotypes are closely connected: while the Sambo

stereotype originated during slavery, with caricatures of childlike, docile, and happy enslaved people, the stereotype of the Brute originated during the Reconstruction period, in an effort to maintain the white supremacist status quo. The historical development of stereotypes associated with gangsta culture, that is, Sambo and especially the Brute, evidence how lack of recognition about black male humanity has affected and continues to affect African American lives both at a personal and at an institutional level. The social construction of stereotypical black masculinities provides the historical context for my analysis of Coates's representations of boyhood and fatherhood in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 3: BOYHOOD

> But you are a black boy, and you must be responsible for your body in a way that other boys cannot know. Indeed, you must be responsible for the worst actions of other black bodies, which, somehow, will always be assigned to you. … And this is not reducible just to you–the women around you must be responsible for their bodies in a way that you will never know. (Coates 71)

Ta-Nehisi Coates's depiction of his adolescence and of black boys in *Between the World and Me* evidence black males' struggle for recognition in United States society. Coates presents black males' experience in a framework that correlates to Melissa Harris-Perry's notion of the "crooked room" in *Sister Citizen* (2011), a concept that this chapter will explain further on. Both Coates and Harris-Perry illustrate in their respective texts how stereotypes about black male and female identities serve to control and disempower black bodies. On the one hand, this chapter is going to discuss the ways in which Coates's depiction of his adolescence counteracts stereotypical images that subscribe to the hegemonic ideal and, in turn, reflects alternative ways of inhabiting black masculinity. In order to describe distinct forms of masculinity, Judith Butler's conception of the "performativity of gender" (177) will be valuable. On the other hand, the chapter is also going discuss the ways in which Coates explores the consequences that black boys, including his son, face as a result of being subjected to stereotypes. Therefore, this chapter will also tackle some aspects of Coates's fatherhood which will be explored further in the next chapter. Raewyn Connell's conceptualization of "masculinities" is especially useful in contextualizing Coates's representation of black masculinities. Connell's work will be used in addition to Harris-Perry's assessment of the impact of stereotypes on black women's identities to analyze Coates' portrayal of black male identities.

Coates's representation of black masculinities runs parallel to Connell's definition of "masculinities." The concept of masculinity, Connell suggests, is constructed around three variables: its inherent relation to the concept of femininity, its relation to the human body, and its dynamic nature. The concept of masculinity therefore cannot be defined without the concept of femininity; they are "inherently relational" (Connell 68). Furthermore, as Connell explains, the body is an essential element in the construction of different kinds of masculinities, given that "true masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men's bodies–to be inherent in a male body or to express something about a male body" (45). Thus, Connell continues, the body is "inescapable in the construction of masculinity; but what is inescapable is not fixed" (56). In other words, bodies have various forms of resistance to "social symbolism and control" (56); "some bodies are more than recalcitrant, they disrupt and subvert the social arrangement into which they are invited" (Connell 58). Additionally to the significance of the body, the interaction of gender with other forms of domination such as class and race is key in conceptualizing the dynamic nature of masculinities (80). Connell's conceptualization of "masculinities" and their dynamic nature is epitomized by Coates's representation of black males in *Between the World and Me.* Coates presents black male bodies as both disrupting and resisting hegemonic models of masculinity as well as stereotypical designations. Coates's representation of his adolescence and of black boys and young adults deviates from attributes associated with the hegemonic ideal in that, in his representation, masculinities are built in an effort to resist forms of misrecognition.

Throughout his boyhood, Coates describes himself as embodying an alternative model for masculinity that involves the struggle for recognition of black bodies, especially those of black boys. Coates's transition from boyhood to young

adulthood is clearly marked geographically and racially. Coates not only narrates that his adolescence was shaped by the specific environment in the streets of Baltimore, but he also relates his lived experience to the experience that his son now lives in present-day United States:

> To be black in the Baltimore of my youth was to be naked before the elements of the world, before all the guns, fists, knives, crack, rape, disease. … The nakedness is the correct and intended *result of policy*, the predictable upshot of people forced for centuries to live under fear. The *law* did not protect us. And now, in your time, the law has become an excuse for stopping and frisking you, which is to say, for furthering the assault on your body. … what matters is *the system* that makes your body breakable. (17-18, my italics)

Coates sees himself inhabiting a city alienated from the rest of the country; he sees the United States as a "galaxy [that] stretched from the pandemonium of West Baltimore" to the "happy" spaces belonging to the American Dream (20). He recalls the impact of being exposed to inner-city violence during his adolescence, those specific environments within American cities where he and his family and friends lived:

> I remember being amazed that death could so easily rise up from the nothing of a boyish afternoon, billow up like a fog. I knew that West Baltimore, where I lived; that the north side of Philadelphia, where my cousins lived; that the South Side of Chicago, where friends of my father lived, comprised a world apart. … I was obsessed over the distance between that other sector of space and my own. I knew that my portion of the American galaxy, where bodies were enslaved by a tenacious gravity, was *black* and that the other, liberated portion was not. … I felt, but did not yet understand, the relationship *between the world and me*. (20-21, my italics)

Inner-city violence, specifically police brutality against black boys and young adults, is an overarching theme throughout Coates's text which informs his adolescence as well as his son's adolescence. Indeed, he decides to write to his son in his fifteenth year, because it is the year when his son has witnessed more deaths of black people at the hands of police forces. He informs his son: "the police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body" (9). As Coates recounts how the death of Prince Jones at the hands of a black police officer left an imprint on his conscience, he states: "the problem with the police is not that they are fascist pigs but that our country is ruled by majoritarian pigs" (79).

As illustrated in the above quotations, by establishing a close relationship between the specific spatial environment in which he transitions from boyhood to young adulthood, i.e. West Baltimore, Coates also elaborates a pervasive critique of United States society. He takes an active stance against social structures and public policies employed by the federal and state governments to maintain the white-supremacist status quo. The depiction of his adolescence runs parallel with Connell's conceptualization of black masculinities in that he presents his identity as being shaped by the circumstances of the space he inhabits, that is, outside the realm of the American Dream, outside an ideal United States society as a consequence of structural inequalities and misrecognition. As Connell states, using Robert Staples's pioneering study of racial difference *Black Masculinity* (1982), "the level of violence among black men in the United States can only be understood through the changing place of the black labour force in American capitalism and the violent means used to control it. Massive unemployment and urban poverty now powerfully interact with institutional racism in the shaping of black masculinity" (Connell 80; Staples 39-53). The conditions in West Baltimore, and in specific urban areas where his family and

friends live, form Coates's adolescence. Coates defines his identity as being excluded from United States society and promotes Athena D. Mutua's coinage of "progressive black masculinity." Coates promotes this type of masculinity by stating how his personal struggle is predicated on eschewing and actively standing against, as Mutua puts it, "social structures of domination" as well as on valuing, validating, and empowering "black humanity" (7).

Furthermore, Coates's representation of black masculinities is inherently relational to the concept of black femininity. The inherent relation between black masculinity and black femininity is evidenced by the similarities in Coates's depiction of black males' experiences and Harris-Perry's depiction of black women's experiences in *Sister Citizen*, specifically how stereotypes affect their lives. While Harris-Perry analyzes the impact of stereotypes on black women and society, Coates explores the consequences of stereotypes on black males. As explored in the previous chapter, stereotypes about African Americans have substantially altered recognition about black humanity both at a personal and at an institutional level. At the heart of their respective texts is African Americans' struggle for recognition as full citizens. Both Coates and Harris-Perry draw from notions of ideal states to evidence the lack of recognition of black males and black women in society. On the one hand, Harris-Perry explores the Hegelian concept of *Anerkennung* in relation to the democratic social contract to provide evidence of black women's misrecognition as citizens in the United States; on the other, Coates employs the utopian notion of the American Dream to explore black males' misrecognition as citizens. Moreover, both authors attach importance to the presence of violence as a vehicle to exercise domination on black bodies, particularly Coates, and present how stereotypical designations compel

black women and men to adjust their behavior in order to accommodate to an external gaze formed by society's expectations.

Melissa Harris-Perry explains that black women's struggle for recognition is "inherently political" due to the fact that black women in America have always had to contend with "derogatory assumptions" about their identity. These stereotypes, she states, "shape the social world that black women must accommodate or resist in an effort to preserve their authentic selves and to secure recognition as citizens" (Harris-Perry 5). Further, by being subjected to such stereotypes, black women are compelled to stand in what Harris-Perry terms a "crooked room" and consequently compelled to find a way to stand upright. However, the overflow of negative images about their identity and character causes some black women to "tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion" (Harris-Perry 29). The negative stereotypes about black women's humanity are core tools that cause the room to be crooked (49). Harris-Perry identifies three recurring stereotypical figures which influence the way in which black women are perceived: Jezebel, characterized by her hyper-sexuality and promiscuity; Sapphire, characterized by her "emasculating anger," otherwise known as the "the angry black woman" (34), and Mammy, characterized by her "[Motherly] devotion to white domestic concerns" (49). Other stereotypes that affect black women's role in society are "the welfare queen" (33), associated with laziness, and the "matriarch," which is associated with motherhood and aggressiveness (94). As a result of these distorted images about black women's identity, the "misrecognition" of their humanity, Harris-Perry identifies black women's struggle to stand upright in the crooked room as a "problem of recognition" (35).

Harris-Perry explains "the politics of recognition" as central to the Hegelian notion of *Anerkennung*, which she describes as the "mutually affirming recognition

that allows citizens to operate as equals within the confines of the social contract" (35). Therefore, as Harris-Perry contends, recognition is "a core feature in the relationship between citizen and state" (36). In other words, citizens not only desire "a fair distribution of resources," but also "desire meaningful recognition of their humanity and uniqueness" (36). Black women's misrecognition in the public sphere prevents them from enjoying the rights of a full citizenship as a result of not being seen as unique individuals. Black women's misrecognition in the public sphere is evidence of an unfair system given that, in order for a system to be considered fair, it "must offer its citizens equal opportunities for public recognition, and groups cannot systematically suffer from misrecognition in the form of stereotype and stigma" (37).[1]

While Harris-Perry employs the Hegelian concept of *Anerkennung* as an ideal state, Coates employs the utopian notion of the American Dream to explore black males' lack of recognition in United States society; he illustrates how the Dream is made possible through oppression and through the invention of race itself. Similarly to Harris-Perry, Coates depicts some of the negative assumptions, i.e. stereotypes, about black males' identity and the ways in which black males "tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion" (Harris-Perry 29); the ways in which they struggle to stand upright in a crooked room. As both authors illustrate how stereotypes about black masculinity and femininity serve as a mechanism to disempower and control black bodies, Coates emphasizes the interconnection between the misrecognition of black males and America's history of violence against black bodies. He states: "in America it is traditional to destroy the black body–*it is heritage*" (103). Coates

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[1] In a similar fashion, in her groundbreaking book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, legal scholar Michelle Alexander argues that "racial stereotyping can permeate [in many ways] subjective decision-making processes at all levels of an organization, with devastating consequences" (4).

explains in the letter to his son that "race is the child of racism, not the father," that is, the invention of race in America has its roots in the desire for "hierarchy." The invention of whiteness and the illusion of white supremacy is inextricable from "the machinery of criminal power" (7):

> The elevation of the belief in being white, was not achieved through [the American Dream], but rather through the pillaging of life, liberty, labor, and land; through the flaying of backs; the chaining of limbs; the strangling of dissidents; the destruction of families; the rape of mothers; the sale of children; and various other acts, meant, first and foremost, to deny you and me the right to secure and govern our own bodies. (8)

Coates explains to his son the impossibility to secure himself in the American Dream, in the ideal of freedom and equality: "And 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" (11). In the same way, James Baldwin expressed in his 1965 speech "The American Dream and the American Negro" how the Dream evidenced the misrecognition of black Americans:

> We speak about expense. … the economy, especially in the South… could not conceivably be what [it is] if it had not been (and this is still so) for cheap labor. … The American soil is full of corpses of my ancestors, through 400 years and at least three wars. Why is my freedom, *my citizenship*, in question now? What one begs American people to do, for all sakes, is simply to accept our history. ("The American Dream," my italics)

As previously mentioned, Coates also critiques the social structures and the public policies used by the economic system to perpetuate exploitation and to ensure black

people's exclusion from the Dream. Coates defines his identity as being excluded from Unites States society; he is critical of laws, of redlining, of housing covenants, and particularly of the school systems:

> I came to see the streets and the schools as arms of the same beast. One enjoyed the official power of the state while the other enjoyed 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. … What any institution, or its agents, "intend" for you is secondary. … "Good intention" is a hall pass through history, a sleeping pill that ensures the Dream (33)

Though his critique of the school systems, Coates presents a view that correlates to philosopher Michel Foucault's conceptualization of "the disciplines," i.e. school systems, as forms of imprisonment and control (Foucault 146-148). Furthermore, both Coates and Harris-Perry identify the connection between the commodification of the black body and violence: "The rape of black women, like the lynching of black men, was both a deep personal violence and a form of community terrorism that reinforced their vulnerability and lack of self-ownership" (Harris-Perry 56). As a result of stereotypes, black bodies are objectified in a way which "limits African American women [and men] to prescribed roles that serve the interests of others" (Harris-Perry 96).

Black male bodies, like black female bodies, are placed in a room made crooked by negative assumptions about their humanity, that is, by misrecognition. In *Between the World and Me*, Coates depicts the challenges that black boys and young adults face in United States society. His complex and multifaceted representations of

black boys and young adults present the emotions of fear and shame as driving forces in adjusting their behavior in order to gain recognition. Coates's narrative presents black boys' resistance to misrecognition in connection to hegemonic models of masculinity. In other words, it is through the struggle for recognition of black bodies that Coates presents alternative models for masculinity which deviate from the hegemonic ideal.

One of the central emotions that dominate black males' behavior is fear. Coates tells his son about the fear that surrounded him as he was growing up in Baltimore; the fear that he had seen in the black boys of his neighborhood, a fear which was related to the loss of their bodies:

> The fear was there in the extravagant boys of my neighborhood, in their large rings and medallions, their big puffy coats and their full-collared leathers, which was their *armor* against their world. … 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, my italics)

Fear is the factor that compels black boys to shift their outward behaviors, to create what Harris-Perry terms "self-constructions" about their identity (184), such as the tough gangster image which Coates describes. The stereotypical image of the tough gangster runs parallel with what Timothy J. Brown terms a "hip-hop black masculinity." Coates describes how he also "heard the fear" in the hip hop music that the boys in his neighborhood played: "The boys … loved this music because it told them, against all evidence and odds, that they were masters of their own lives, their own streets, and their own bodies" (15). As Brown contends, the hip hop culture that

Coates alludes to in the above quotation is not only a site for promoting "capitalist-based materialism" and patriarchal domination, but is also a site for showcasing an identity free from definitions imposed by a white male-dominated society, that is, an identity free from "historically developed stereotypes about black men to control and to minimize their potential" (191). Brown argues that, as a means of resisting "white appropriation and definitions of them," black males have crafted new identities based on a hip hop culture (200). However, a hip-hop black masculinity is inherently contradictory in that it contains "progressive elements of racial pride" and "regressive elements drawn from American culture" (Brown 191). As Brown remarks:

> [Regressive elements] are associated with an identity that glamorizes a hypermasculinity centered on materialism, sexism, and violence. … Nevertheless, a hip-hop masculinity is a progressive black masculinity in that it enables … the hip hop generation to define their identity based on African American cultural values and practices that have shaped and been shaped by hip hop culture. In essence, through hip-hop culture young black males are able to demonstrate a black identity or to elevate blackness … by defining and retaining aspects of an authentic black self within a racially oppressive society. (200)

In the same way as what Michele Wallace termed "the myth of the superwoman," portraying black women as "oversexed, physically strong, and warlike" (Wallace xx), the stereotypical black male image of the tough gangster is also a "self-construction" which aims to counter "difficult circumstances" (Harris-Perry 184). As Coates describes, some black teenagers dress extravagantly and act in a certain way as a means to counter the vulnerability of their bodies. While black males' self-construction of the tough gangster serves as an "*armor* against their

world" (Coates 14, my italics), black women's self-construction of the strong black woman serves as a "*shield* against shame-inducing negative stereotypes of the crooked room" (Harris-Perry 185, my italics): "To protect against always being seen as inferior, they declare themselves uniquely capable, but this strength is a shield full of holes; it sets up new possibilities for being misrecognized" (185). For instance, Coates describes the consequences of black males' fear turning into rage, or, in Harris-Perry's words, the consequences of "self-reliance" (200):

> The crews, the young men who'd transmuted their fear into rage, were the greatest danger. The crews walked blocks of their neighborhood, loud and rude, because it was only through their loud rudeness that they might feel any sense of security and power. They would break your jaw, stomp your face, and shoot you down to feel that power, to revel in the might of their own bodies. (Coates 22)

The consequences of "self-reliance" have the same impact on both black males and women: they prevent the full expression of human emotions such as vulnerability or sadness. Like Coates and Harris-Perry, bell hooks contends that, "whether in an actual prison or not, practically every black male in the United States has been forced at some point of his life to hold back the self he wants to express, to repress and contain for fear of being attacked, slaughtered, destroyed" (xii). Due to "self-reliance" the black boys that Coates describes perform a masculinity which approximates the hegemonic ideal. They do not embody the hegemonic ideal because such performances of masculinity are the outcome of self-reliance and a posturing as they lack the economic ability to be self-reliant. Coates's representation of black boys illustrate Judith Butler's conception of gender performances since the kind of masculinities that "they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured

and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (Butler 173).
Moreover, as Connell and Messerschmidt argue, "hegemony works through the production of exemplars of masculinity …, symbols that have authority despite the fact that most men and boys do not fully live up to them" (846).

Another emotion central to Coates's depiction of black males' experience is shame. Both Harris-Perry and Coates present shame as a trigger for rage. Harris-Perry states: "rage helps ward off shame by protecting the self from further exposure." Coates explains his sensation after having felt humiliated for trying to defend his son: "I came home shook. It was a mix of *shame* for having gone back to the law of the streets mixed with *rage*–'I could have you arrested!' Which is to say: 'I could take your body'" (94, my italics). In an effort to protect his son's "sense of worth," Coates feels what Harris-Perry identifies as "humiliated fury" (122). Another instance in which shame triggers "humiliated fury" in the book is the scene of the black man losing his home: "The man was *humiliated*… he had probably for some time carried, in his head, alone, all that was threatening his family but he could not bring himself to admit it… So he now changed all that energy into *anger*… His manner was like all the powerless bodies I'd ever known, exaggerating their bodies to conceal a fundamental plunder that they could not prevent" (108, my italics). Anger or rage is, as Harris-Perry suggests, a way to "accomplish self-protection" (123):

> In an effort to protect their core sense of worth, black women [and men] must shunt some of the demeaning and painful stereotypes away from themselves. Anger is an effective, if sometimes destructive, way to accomplish this self-protection. … African American men are also subjugated to racial and gender stigma that makes them vulnerable to shame. Strength, independence, and invulnerability are received social norms of masculinity in the United States,

but black men's racial and class status requires them to interact with a world that often makes them feel weak, inadequate, or helpless. Research shows that men are particularly uncomfortable with the humiliation that results from this sense of weakness. In an attempt to mask this shame, man can react with violence and anger. (123)

Shame is, along with fear, a central emotion in Coates's depiction of black boys, concrete emotions which cause them to perform a kind of masculinity that approximates the hegemonic ideal as a consequence of self-reliance. According to hooks, "shame—the shaky foundation on which many black boys must try to construct a self—always collapses. Yet most black males cannot confront the collapse so they focus on performing, on doing rather than being, hiding their deep-seated feelings of hopelessness" (91).

Coates, however, finds a different way to resist the demeaning assumptions about his and his son's humanity. While the black males that Coates describes find a means to counter the vulnerability of their bodies and the emotions of fear and shame through self-reliance; through the denial of emotions such as vulnerability so as to subscribe to received social norms of masculinity, Coates finds a means of resistance through the "struggle to understand" his human emotions (106); through the knowledge of his condition. It is through the understanding of his emotions that Coates is able to empower himself and, in turn, encourage his son to resist misrecognition. As hooks argues, "if black boys and black men do not allow themselves to feel, then they are not able to take responsibility for nurturing their emotional growth; they cannot access the healthy parts of themselves that could empower them to resist" (93). Although his immediate response to his sense of helplessness is anger, Coates finds solace in "the struggle to understand" his human

emotions; *knowledge* and understanding of the struggle is what enables him to control his anger: "the struggle to understand is our only advantage over this madness. … I like to think that knowing might have kept me from endangering you, that having understood and acknowledged the anger, I could control it" (106).

In an effort to protect his son, Coates acknowledges the effects that his actions will have upon his son. Coates explains to his son how he will be held responsible not only for his actions, but for the actions of other black bodies as well (71). As Patricia Hill Collins suggests, "personal accountability to self and others means rejecting [subordination of the black masculine self] and redefining black male strength in terms of relationships with others" (93). Accountability for the actions of other individuals who belong to the same group is a result of what Harris-Perry terms "fictive kinship" (102):

> The term *fictive kinship* refers to connections between members of a group who are unrelated by blood or marriage but who nonetheless share reciprocal social or economic relationships. Fictive kinship makes the accomplishments of African Americans relevant to unrelated black individuals. … If one's sense of self is connected to the positive accomplishments of other African Americans, then it also linked to the negative portrayals and stereotypes of the race. The flip side of pride is shame. (102)

In order to resist being associated with negative images about their identity, black males and women shift their behavior in order to adjust to "other people's expectations" (Harris-Perry 35). In an effort to adjust to the outside gaze, black women and men enact what Darlene Clark Hine calls a "culture of dissemblance," which emphasizes a "politics of silence" so as to "protect the sanctity of the inner aspects of [their] lives" (382). The culture of dissemblance is therefore a mask of

respectability. Indeed, as Hazel Carby describes, the mask of respectability was an integral part of black women's lives during and after slavery, as they developed ways to be recognized as women within the "requirements of the convention of true womanhood" (38). The culture of dissemblance, as Harris-Perry maintains, serves as a "tactic to find the upright in the crooked room" (60). Nevertheless, in order to enact a "politics of respectability" through a culture of dissemblance black males and women are required to shrink and contort themselves to fit into the outside gaze, to find the upright position in the crooked room. Coates explains to his son the ways in which he will have to contort himself in the crooked room in order to protect his body:

> So I feared not just the violence of this world but the rules designed to protect you from it, the rules that will have you *contort* your body to address the block, and *contort* again to be taken seriously by colleagues, and *contort* again so as not to give police a reason. … It struck to me that perhaps the defining feature of being drafted into the black race was the inescapable robbery of time, because the moments we spent readying the *mask*, or readying ourselves to accept half as much, could not be recovered. (90-91, my italics)

Like black women, black men confront stereotypes which distort images about their humanity. Black males also struggle to figure out which is the upright position in a crooked room. In order to navigate a crooked room built by demeaning assumptions about their identity, black males are required to contort themselves to accommodate to the outside gaze. By performing a "politics of respectability" through dissemblance, black males attempt at resisting negative assumptions about their humanity. Nevertheless, as Harris-Perry points out, the "politics of respectability" fail in many ways (62). A clear example of this failure in Coates's letter to his son is the example of the life and death of his friend, Prince Jones. He was the embodiment of a perfect

student and the perfect son, he "exhibited the whole of his given name" (64), yet he was killed "by his country and all the fears that have marked it from birth" (78). Coates's representation of black boys depicts the strategies employed by them in an effort to gain recognition for their humanity and resist stereotypical designation. On the one hand, the black boys represented in Coates's narrative enact a kind of masculinity which approximates the hegemonic ideal of self-reliance, yet they lack the economic ability to be self-reliant. In other words, they approximate the hegemonic ideal as a consequence of trying to fit the distortion to find the upright position in the room made crooked by stereotypes. On the other hand, Coates resists misrecognition and, in turn, urges his son to resist misrecognition through the knowledge of their struggle, by embracing their human emotions as well as through personal accountability to themselves and others. Thus, Coates's resistance to misrecognition signifies resistance to the hegemonic ideal of masculinity, which is characterized by domination, aggressiveness, and invulnerability.

Ta-Nehisi Coates's representations of boyhood illustrate the ways in which black males struggle to attain recognition in United States society. Coates's portrayal of his adolescence not only reflects resistance to stereotypical designation, but also resistance to hegemonic notions of masculinity. His transition from boyhood to young adulthood is marked by the specific environment in the streets of West Baltimore; the circumstances in the urban city inform both Coates's and his son's adolescence. Coates's masculinity is defined in terms of rejection of the system; he defines his identity as being excluded from United States society. Throughout the book, he actively stands against social structures and public policies used by the economic system to perpetuate the exploitation of black bodies. Coates promotes a progressive black masculinity in that his masculinity is based on the struggle for recognition of

black bodies: he rejects "social systems of domination" and, in turn, "values, validates, and empowers black humanity" (Mutua 7).

Coates demonstrates that Melissa Harris-Perry's notion of the "crooked room" applies not only to black women's experiences, but also to black males' experiences in the United States. Both writers draw from notions of ideal states in order to evidence the lack of recognition of black bodies: while Harris-Perry explores the Hegelian concept of *Anerkennung* to provide evidence of black women's misrecognition as citizens in the United States, Coates employs the notion of the American Dream to explore black males' misrecognition. Moreover, they both attach importance to the presence of violence as a vehicle to exercise domination on black bodies and evidence how stereotypes compel black women and males to adjust their behavior; to shrink and contort themselves in an attempt to navigate a room made crooked by distorted images about their humanity. In Coates' depiction of the black male experience, fear and shame are the main factors that cause black boys to shift their outward attitudes in order to counter the vulnerability of their bodies and resist stereotypical designation. Yet, the impact of shame on their lives is twofold: it causes black men, as well as women, to conform to negative stereotypes and it is a means of control and disempowerment of black bodies. Coates's complex and diverse representations of black males illustrates how black boys deviate from the hegemonic ideal in that their identities are built in an effort to resist forms of misrecognition. On the other hand, Coates's own resistance to misrecognition represents resistance to hegemonic notions of masculinity since he finds strength through the knowledge and the understanding of the struggle for recognition. It is by knowing the origins of the struggle and by embracing his human emotions that Coates is able to empower himself and his son to resist.

CHAPTER 4: FATHERHOOD

"There was before you, and then there was after, and in this after, you were the God I'd never had. I submitted before your needs, and I knew then that I must survive for something more than survival's sake. I must survive for you." (Coates 67)

Ta-Nehisi Coates's caring and emotional involvement to his son, as well as his commitment to the struggle for recognition of black bodies constitute the basis from which he builds an alternative model for masculinity and fatherhood in *Between the World and Me*. Coates resists what has been termed "old fatherhood" (Wahlström 1) or hegemonic fatherhood as the authoritative, breadwinner figure only since he represents a caring and progressive masculinity. Through the advice he gives to his son, Coates prioritizes his son's life and displays emotional involvement and care. Moreover, the themes that arise from Coates's advice to his son run parallel to the themes in James Baldwin's 1963 letter to his nephew "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation" from *The Fire Next Time*. This chapter is going to discuss the ways in which Coates projects a caring masculinity through his role as a father in his letter to his son. Scholars such as Karla Elliott, Glenda Wall and Stephanie Arnold, and Helena Wahlström are especially useful in analyzing Coates's personal definition of fatherhood, particularly the elements that form his promotion of a "new fatherhood" (Wall and Arnold 509). Coates's brief representation of his father, his relationship with the women in his family, his descriptions of black fathers, and the significance of the advice he gives his son are essential in assessing Coates's definition of fatherhood.

Coates' fatherhood deviates from the model represented by his father as he refuses to use violence as a means to protect his son's body. Although the figure of Coates's father, Paul Coates, is explored in detail in his first memoir *The Beautiful Struggle* (2008), this chapter only addresses Coates's representation of his father in *Between the World and Me* as the text deals more particularly with Coates's own sense of fatherhood. Despite the fact that Coates provides a rather brief description of his father, he presents characteristics of his father which not only differ from his own sense of fatherhood, but also conform to hegemonic notions of masculinity. In a similar way as the boys represented in Coates's narrative, explored in the previous chapter, fear is for Coates's father the dominant emotion which causes him to use violence in an effort to protect his son's body, and therefore to approximate the hegemonic ideal of masculinity:

> And I saw [the fear] in my own father, who loves you, who counsels you, who slipped me money to care for you. My father was so very afraid. I felt it in the sting of his black leather belt, which he applied with more anxiety than anger, my father who beat me as if someone might steal me away, because that is exactly what was happening all around us. Everyone had lost a child, somehow, to the streets, to jail, to drugs, to guns. … All I know is, the violence rose from the fear like smoke from a fire, and I cannot say whether that violence, even administered in fear and love, sounded the alarm or choked us at the exit. (15)

While Coates is able to control his own violent reactions by understanding and embracing his human emotions, his father used violence as a means of deflecting the emotion of fear. In other words, Coates's father subscribes to hegemonic notions of masculinity, such as aggressiveness, as a result of fear. Nevertheless, as Raewyn

Connell and James Messerschmidt argue, the characteristics contained in the concept of hegemony are not only those of "violence, aggression, and self-centeredness" (841). Those characteristics, they state, "may mean domination, but hardly would constitute hegemony" since the concept of hegemony implies "consent and participation by the subaltern groups" (841).

Furthermore, Coates describes his father as an important figure in his acquisition of knowledge and awareness of the struggle for recognition of black bodies. His father transferred to him the passion for books, specifically "books about black people, by black people, for black people" (Coates 30). Having been a "local captain in the Black Panther Party" (Coates 30), Coates's father provided him with a complex understanding of violence as an alternative means of accomplishing self-protection and gaining recognition. Indeed, Coates questioned the need for school systems to disregard African American leaders who did not fully embrace nonviolence: "Why were only our heroes nonviolent? I speak not of the morality of nonviolence, but of the sense that blacks are in special need of this morality" (32). However, unlike his father, Coates does not embrace violence as a means of protection since he regards it as "the crudest form of communication" (95). In fact, he tells his son: "I've never felt the pride that is supposed to come with righteous self-defense and justified violence" (95). Coates's father, on the other hand, embodies what has been termed a "Black Panther masculinity" ideal (Newton 61) in that his sense of masculinity is simultaneously associated with violence and a commitment to "black liberation" (59). Even though Coates portrays few instances in which his father appears, and is depicted as a present and involved father as well as grandfather to Coates's son, the hard lessons he taught Coates are equally present.

Coates's relationship with the women in his family, particularly his mother and his wife, is key in assessing his role as a father as well as his projection of a caring masculinity. While Coates's father transferred to him the passion for books related to the black struggle, it was his mother who taught him how to read and how to write at a young age. Most importantly, Coates's mother instills consciousness in him as she teaches him how to ask questions as a means of examining his own identity:

> Your grandmother taught me to read when I was only four. She also taught me to write, by which I mean not simply organizing a set of sentences into a series of paragraphs, but organizing them as a means of investigation. … I have given you these same assignments. I gave them to you not because I thought they would curb your behavior—they certainly did not curb mine—but because these were the earliest acts of interrogation, *of drawing myself into consciousness*. Your grandmother was not teaching me how to behave in class. She was teaching me how to ruthlessly interrogate the subject that elicited the most sympathy and rationalizing—myself. (29-30, my italics)

Becoming a father, in an later stage of his life, Coates transmits the knowledge he gained from his mother to his son, that is, he teaches his son to elaborate questions as a means of "exploration" (34). Both Coates's father and his mother avoided providing answers to him. Instead, they encouraged him to find the answers by himself. Coates explains to his son how such process of questioning learned from his mother enabled him to develop a political consciousness not by attaining concrete answers, but by refining his questions: "a constant questioning, questioning as *ritual*, questioning as *exploration* rather than the search for certainty" (34, my italics). It is the knowledge that Coates gains from his mother as a child that he now transfers to his son: "what I

wanted for you was to *grow into consciousness*. I resolved to hide nothing from you" (111, my italics). He urges his son to develop his own consciousness in the same manner as he did, that is, through "the struggle to understand" (106). The process of interrogation as a means of investigation of his own identity and of his place in the world is what forms the basis of the advice Coates gives to his son.

Moreover, Coates's wife also has a strong influence on his subjectivity as well as on his role as a father. Coates's wife teaches him "how to love" his son and how to externalize his emotions (125). By trying to shield himself against fear, Coates explains that his human emotions were constrained. Because of the dominant presence of fear in Coates's life, he has been "wounded" and "marked by old codes," old codes which, in his own words, have "shielded [him] in one world and then chained [him] in the next" (125). His ability to display care and affection to his son is therefore enabled, to a large extent, by his wife:

> We are entering our last years together, and I wish I had been softer with you. Your mother had to teach me how to love you—how to kiss you and tell you I love you every night. Even now it does not feel a wholly natural act so much as it feels like ritual. 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. (125-126)

It is because of his wife that Coates is able to deviate from the authoritative and normative model of fatherhood, and masculinity, represented by his father. Unlike his father, Coates not only rejects the use of violence towards his son, but he also embraces his emotions, especially his vulnerability. While Coates's father epitomizes the "'old' fatherhood" ideal (Wahlström 10) by enacting a masculinity that conforms to traditional and normative values, Coates epitomizes the progressive notion of the

"new father" (Pleck; Wall and Arnold; Wahlström) by becoming a loving and caring father; by developing a "closer emotional relationship" with his son, and sharing "the joys and work of caregiving" with his wife (Wall and Arnold 509). Thus, Coates's sense of manhood refers back to the women in his life, specifically to his mother and his wife. Coates promotes a caring masculinity in that his role as a father, on the one hand, represents gender harmony and equity, and, on the other, as sociologist Karla Elliott writes, "seeks to integrate values and practices of care and interdependence, traditionally though not inescapably associated with women, into masculine identities" (243).

Coates's role as a father epitomizes "new fatherhood" because caring and emotional involvement constitute the predominant features of his fatherhood and masculinity. Coates's masculinity and fatherhood are characterized by "active parenting, the display of empathy, domestic involvement, nurturance, and the prioritizing of [his son]" (Requena-Pelegrí 117). Most importantly, fatherhood for Coates is defined in opposition to a hegemonic model of masculinity, that is, as Teresa Requena-Pelegrí puts it, "in opposition to dominance, emotional control, lack of involvement, absence, or authority" (117). Coates represents a "new father" in that, as previously mentioned, he differs from the model of fatherhood, and masculinity, represented by his father. While his father embraced violence as a means of protecting him when he was growing up, Coates embraces his emotions and encourages his son to do likewise: "I am speaking to you as I always have—as the sober and serious man I have always wanted you to be, who does not apologize for his human feelings, who does not make excuses for his height, his long arms, his beautiful smile" (107). Helena Wahlström describes the concept of "new father" in the following terms:

The new father, then, stands against the traditional "old" father of the nuclear family ideal, marked by authority and/or absence. An important element in this ostensible transformation in fatherhood is the entry of fathers into their own families as nurturers and "involved fathers" who parent their children more actively than men have "traditionally" done. The new fatherhood is perceived as a legitimate way for men to access a broader register of emotions than those conventionally coded masculine. (24-25)

As Wahlström argues, "nurture" and "emotional involvement" are essential traits of the "new father" (23). By epitomizing the notion of "new fatherhood," Coates embodies a caring masculinity. However, Coates finds limitations to his caring; limitations which stem from the fear of losing his son, the fear of "disembodiment" (114): "*Take care of my baby*, your grandmother had said, which is to say *Take care of your new family*. But I now knew the limits of my caring, the reach of its powers, etched by an enemy old as Virginia" (81).

Nevertheless, Coates finds strength in "the struggle to understand" (106), that is, in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding of the struggle for recognition. As a matter of fact, it is the struggle that enables him to become a loving and caring father. Through the struggle, Coates is able to evolve and escape from "old codes" associated with the hegemonic ideal of masculinity:

[T]he *struggle* has *ruptured* and *remade* me several times over—in Baltimore, at The Mecca, *in fatherhood*, in New York. The changes have awarded me a rapture that comes only when you can no longer be lied to, when you have rejected the Dream. But even more, the changes have taught me how to best exploit that singular gift of study, to question what I see, then to question what

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I see after that, because the questions matter as much, perhaps more than, the

answers. (115-116, my italics)

Coates urges his son toward that same struggle as he informs him that that is their

"only advantage over this madness" (106); the only way they have to empower

themselves in order to resist the lack of recognition of their humanity. At the heart of

Coates's advice is urging his son to undertake the struggle: "The struggle is really all I

have for you because it is the only portion of this world under your control" (107).

Most importantly, the struggle is what will enable him "to preserve the sanctity of

[his] mind" (99). Coates's urges his son to do what his mother taught him to do: to

question everything as a means of "investigation" (29) so that he can grow into

consciousness and live "an honorable and sane life" (97). Coates's definition of

fatherhood dovetails with the definition of caring masculinity by sociologist Karla

Elliott and philosopher Virginia Held. Coates's role as a father as well as his

promotion of a caring masculinity are marked by the prioritizing of his son's life.

Coates's masculinity is predicated upon "moral values" such as "responsibility to self

and others, sensitivity, empathy, and interdependence" (Elliott 251). In his

relationship with his son, Coates is not seeking to advance his "own *individual*

interests," instead his interests are "intertwined with the persons [he] care[s] for"

(Held 12), primarily his son.

Coates's accountability to himself signifies accountability to his son. The

knowledge which "the struggle to understand" (106) has provided him with, is the

foundation from which he builds his identity as a man and as a father: "But there is

wisdom down here, and that wisdom accounts for much of the good in my life. And

my life down here accounts for you" (68). Indeed, Coates chooses to name his son

after "The Struggle": he names his son after Samori Touré, "who struggled against

French colonizers for the right to own his black body" (68). The struggle and resistance are embedded in the name of Coates's son. It is through "the struggle to understand" (106) and by embracing his "human feelings" (107) that Coates is able to empower himself and his son to resist lack of recognition about black humanity. The fundamental meaning of Samori's name is that, Coates states, "the struggle, in and of itself, has meaning" (69). Through fatherhood, Coates promotes a caring masculinity which is built on his commitment to the struggle and his accountability to his son: "The truth is that I owe you everything I have. Before you, I had questions but nothing beyond my own skin in the game, and that was really nothing at all because I was a young man, and not yet clear of my own human vulnerabilities. But I was grounded and domesticated by the plain fact that should I go down, I would not go down alone" (66). By becoming a father, Coates embraces his "human vulnerabilities" (66) and enacts an alternative model for masculinity that, as Elliott describes in her assessment of caring masculinities, "exclude[s] domination and embrace[s] the affective, relational, emotional, and interdependent qualities of care" (252). Rejecting domination, which is, as Elliott points out, an integral characteristic of "traditional hegemonic masculinity," is essential to the fulfillment of caring masculinities (252). Coates's depiction of his role as a father, therefore, not only signifies his embodiment of a caring masculinity, but also his resistance to hegemonic notions of masculinity:

> *Caring masculinities* are, furthermore, a critical form of men's engagement in gender equality because doing care work requires men to *resist* hegemonic masculinity and to adopt values and characteristics of care that are antithetical to hegemonic masculinity. … Thus, the rejection of domination involved in caring masculinities and the inclusion of care means giving up the privileges

and power of hegemonic masculinity and risking social ostracism by not conforming to expected masculine roles. (Elliott 254, my italics)

Additionally, Coates's narrative challenges the stereotype of the absent black father. According to legal scholar Dorothy Roberts, "race influences the reasons people think fatherlessness is a problem and the solutions proposed to address it" (145). Roberts suggests in her article "The Absent Black Father" that African American men have become a symbol of fatherlessness and the creation of such stereotype "serves two specific functions": it is a "racial association [which] automatically brands fatherlessness as a depraved condition, and it offers a convenient explanation for Black people's problems" (146). The construction of the stereotype, what has been generally termed "the myth of the absent black father," emerged from Daniel Patrick Moynihan's report entitled *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action* (1965). The Moynihan Report originally aimed at investigating "the historical and contemporary causes of family breakdown" (Estes 111). As Steve Estes observes, one of the arguments that Moynihan's report put forward was "the 'matriarchal' family structure that resulted from unemployed or underpaid black family men" (112). The Moynihan Report perpetuated negative stereotypes about both black men and black women. In fact, one of the long-term consequences of Moynihan's report on the African American family was that instead of "helping black men in America's inner cities gain the economic means to become patriarchs or supporting black family stability with federal programs," it reinforced stereotypes such as "deadbeat dads" and "welfare queens" (Estes 129). Furthermore, the portrayal of black family that the report produced, Anthony J. Lemelle suggests, conceived of black males as unprepared "to play the role of men" (28). The Moynihan Report is therefore an

instance of how stereotypical designations, as illustrated in chapter two, have affected African American lives both at personal and institutional levels.

Coates, however, employs descriptions of fatherlessness as he elaborates a critique of the criminal justice system and the "pillage" of black male bodies in the United States. While he acknowledges a lack of responsibility on behalf of the missing fathers, he emphasizes the role that the criminal justice system has played. For instance, he tackles the absence of his wife's father: "She had never known her father, which put her in the company of the greater number of everyone I'd known. I felt then that these men— these 'fathers'—were the greatest of cowards. But I also felt that the galaxy was playing with loaded dice, which ensured an excess of cowards in our ranks" (65). Moreover, Coates explains to his son how the murder of Prince Jones at the hands of the police has now left his daughter without a father before even being born:

> 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)

In his letter to his son, Coates traces connections between fatherlessness and police brutality. Coates subverts the stereotypical image of the absent black father through his own father's strong presence in his life, through instances of fatherlessness in connection to police brutality, and through his own role as a father. Coates epitomizes the notion of the "new father" by being a present and involved father. Coates promotes a caring masculinity in that his emotional attachment as well as his

accountability to his son constitute the central features of his role as a father and as a man.

The advice that Coates gives to his son in *Between the World and Me* runs parallel to James Baldwin's advice to his nephew in *The Fire Next Time* (1963). Although James Baldwin is not a father like Coates, he also represents a parental caregiver to his nephew. Following an African American epistolary tradition, which traces back to the eighteenth century with authors such as Phillis Wheatley (Newkirk 91), Baldwin and Coates embrace the literary genre in their respective texts. Both authors use the form of a letter to younger males in their family to write about the construction of race in the United States: Baldwin writes to his fifteen-year-old nephew, Coates writes to his fifteen-year-old son. Most importantly, they both choose a specific moment in the history of the United States to write to them. On the one hand, Baldwin writes to his nephew in 1963, the year which marked the "One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation," and the moment of height of the Civil Rights Movement: the year in which the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom took place. On the other hand, Coates writes to his son in 2015, and chooses that moment because that is the year in which his son has witnessed more deaths of black people at the hands of police forces, and the moment when the protests in Ferguson, Missouri, for the murder of Michael Brown were still happening. Coates writes to his son at the emergence of the Black Lives Matter Movement, conceived as the twenty-first century Civil Rights movement campaigning against systematic racism and the destruction of black lives. More than fifty years apart, the advice that James Baldwin gives to his nephew resonates in myriad ways with the advice that Ta-Nehisi Coates gives to his son.

A central theme in both Baldwin and Coates's letters is the struggle for human rights and recognition of black bodies in the United States. The advice they give is shaped by the particular spatial environments in which the younger males in their family live; they both connect their advice with the specific conditions in American inner cities: Baldwin connects the condition of his nephew's experience with Harlem and Coates connects his son's experience with West Baltimore, both inner cities with a predominant African American population. Both Baldwin and Coates address the fear of losing the black body and the notion of innocence as an exoneration from the destruction of black bodies. As Baldwin states: "But it is not permissible that the authors of the devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime" (5-6). Indeed, Coates explains to his son the inability to secure himself in the American Dream, the epitome of American innocence; the ideal of freedom and equality, as the innocent world of the Dream was built on the bodies of black people (11). The segregationist policies created the "suburbs" of the innocent world of Dream (Coates 143) and consequently the "ghetto" for those outside of the Dream: "This innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish" (Baldwin 7).

Both Baldwin and Coates urge the younger males in their family to live. Baldwin encourages his nephew to "survive" in "the loveless world" because he is here to be loved and gain strength from the collective struggle (7): "Remember that: I know how black it looks today, for you. It looked bad that day, too, yes, we were trembling. We have not stopped trembling yet, but if we had not loved each other none of us would have survived. And *you must survive* because we love you, and for the sake of your children and your children's children" (7, my italics); "You, don't be

afraid" (9). Coates also encourages his son to survive and live his life to the fullest, despite the conditions of his country and despite the fear of "disembodiment" (113):

> Our moment is too brief. Our bodies are too precious. And you are here now, and *you must live*—and there is so much out there to live for, not just in someone else's country, but in your own home. The warmth of dark energies that drew me to The Mecca, that drew out Prince Jones, the warmth of our particular world, is beautiful, no matter how brief and breakable. (146-147)

Furthermore, Baldwin and Coates explain the ways in which the construction of race in the United States, and particularly of blackness, has enabled and provided meaning to the construction of whiteness. Baldwin explains to his nephew that racism and the illusion of white supremacy has its roots in the fear of losing their white "identity":

> Please try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority but to their inhumanity and fear. … They have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men. Many of them, indeed, know better, but, as you will discover, people find it very difficult to act on what they know. To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity. (8-9)

Coates explains to his son how "the elevation in the belief of being white" was achieved through "the pillaging" of black bodies (8):

> And there it is—the right to break the black body as the meaning of their sacred equality. And that right has always given them meaning, has always meant that there was someone down in the valley because the mountain is not

a mountain if there is nothing below. You and I, my son, are that "below."
That was true in 1776. It is true today. There is no them without you, and
without the right to break you they must necessarily fall from the mountain,
lose their divinity, and tumble out of the Dream. (104-105)

Moreover, both Baldwin and Coates refer to the dangers of believing in the imposed definitions by white people, in the imposed names. Baldwin warns his nephew: "You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a *nigger*. I tell you this because I love you, and please don't you ever forget it" (4). In a similar fashion, Coates tells his son how the act of naming created the breach between the world of the Dream and him: "I saw that what divided me from the world was not anything intrinsic to us but the actual injury done by people intent on naming us, intent on believing that what they have named us matters more than anything we could ever actually do" (120).

Nevertheless, they both assert conciliation as they find meaning and strength in their shared humanity with white people. Baldwin urges his nephew to "accept [white people] with love" as they are part of his ancestry, but "trapped in a history which they do not understand" (8): "But these men are your brothers–your lost, younger brothers. And if the word *integration* means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it" (9-10). Likewise, Coates reminds his son of his history in the world: "Remember your name. Remember that you and I are brothers, are children of the trans-Atlantic rape. Remember the broader consciousness that comes with that. Remember that this consciousness can never ultimately be racial; it must be *cosmic*" (128, my italics). Both also draw from canonical literary figures to illustrate universally shared values: while Baldwin employs the figure of

Homer as an example, Coates employs the figure of Tolstoy. Both embrace universalism as they encourage conciliation in their advices. They also end their letters by acknowledging the responsibility of white people in the achievement of universal freedom. Baldwin states: "You know, and I know, that the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too soon. We cannot be free until they are free" (10); while Coates asserts: "I do not believe that we can stop them, Samori, because they must ultimately stop themselves. And still I urge you to struggle. Struggle for the memory of your ancestors. Struggle for wisdom. … Struggle for your grandmother and grandfather, for your name." (128).

Baldwin's definition of masculinity, however, differs from Coates's definition since Baldwin's sexuality countered heteronormative views of masculinity. Although Baldwin refused to identify with the word "gay," he openly embraced his queer identity. For Baldwin, issues of racial equality preceded issues of sexuality. For instance, in a 1988 interview, he states: "the sexual question comes after the question of color; it's simply one more aspect of the danger in which all black people live" (Baldwin in Goldstein 180). Indeed, as Robert Corber points out, Baldwin refused to embrace "the struggle for gay rights" while, in turn, "anticipated" a critique of gayness from a black perspective (167). Baldwin resisted the hegemonic ideal of masculinity in that he theorized how the struggle for gay liberation was a means for white people who participated in the movement to maintain the racial privileges that they would otherwise have by subscribing to heteronormativity. Moreover, Baldwin's rejection of domination emphasized the intersectionality of oppression: "the sexual question and the racial question have always been entwined, you know. If Americans can mature on the level of racism, then they have to mature on the level of sexuality" (Baldwin in Goldstein 178). With his queer critique, Baldwin presented the

relationship between white supremacy and the construction of masculinity in the United States.

The marked similarities between Baldwin's advice to his nephew in 1963 and Coates's advice to his son in 2015 illustrate that the historical contexts in which they wrote the letters to the younger males in their family, the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Lives Matter Movement respectively, substantially inform the ways in which they conceptualize black masculinity and humanity. As a matter of fact, regardless of the fifty-year distance in the publication of their respective texts, the parallelisms in their texts reflect a continuation of the same underlying political and economic structures of society as they both struggle for the same aim, that is, for freedom and the recognition of black bodies in the United States. Both Baldwin and Coates represent parental caregivers who are nurturing, caring, and emotionally involved to the younger males in their family. They both promote "progressive black masculinities" (Mutua) in that they identify their individual interests with the interests of the larger group, that is, the interests of the African American communities. Athena D. Mutua defines "progressive black masculinities" in the following terms:

> [Progressive black masculinities] are decidedly not dependent and are not predicated on the subordination of others. They instead promote *human freedom* for all, both in the context of their personal lives and in the outward manifestations of those personal lives in social, cultural, economic, and political contexts. As such, combining both *progressive blackness* and *progressive masculine* practice, progressive black masculinities are men who take an active and ethical stance against all social systems of domination and who act personally and in concert with others in activities against racism, sexism, homophobia and heterosexism, class and economic exploitation,

imperialism, and other systems of oppression that limit the human potential of the *black masculine self and others*. (Mutua 7, my italics)

Coates's depiction of his role as a father epitomizes the progressive notion of "new fatherhood" as he deviates from the authoritative and traditional model of fatherhood represented by his father and, in turn, resists hegemonic notions of masculinity by embracing his human emotions, especially his vulnerabilities. Coates promotes a caring masculinity in that his fatherhood and masculinity trace back to the women in his family, specifically his mother and his wife, who both have a strong influence on his subjectivity and on his role as a father. He epitomizes the "new father" because emotional involvement, nurture, and accountability to his son are the central features of his fatherhood. Coates projects a caring masculinity because his portrayal of his role as a father signifies gender equity as he integrates "values of care and interdependence," which have been traditionally associated with women, into his own identity as a man and as a father (Elliott 243). Coates's promotion of a caring masculinity is not only based on his prioritizing of his son's wellbeing, but also on his rejection of domination and therefore on his resistance to hegemonic masculinity.

Moreover, Coates subverts the stereotypical image of the absent black father both through tracing connections between fatherlessness and the loss of black male lives by police brutality and through his own role as father. The themes embedded in the advice Coates gives to his son run parallel to the themes in James Baldwin's advice to his nephew. Both Baldwin and Coates represent parental caregivers to the younger males in their family and write to them at specific moments in the history of the United States. Although their letters take place in distant historical contexts, i.e. 1963 (the Civil Rights Movement) and 2015 (the Black Lives Matter Movement) respectively, the central theme in their texts is the struggle for recognition of black

bodies. Baldwin's definition of masculinity differs from Coates's in that he also presents resistance to heteronormative views of masculinity. Both Baldwin and Coates promote progressive black masculinities in that their masculine identities are based on the connection between their personal selves and struggle for human freedom. Thus, Coates's definition of fatherhood and masculinity are predicated upon his caring and emotional involvement to his son as well as on his commitment to the struggle for the recognition of black humanity.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* provides a rich and diverse representation of African American male life which is closely connected with contemporary United States society. The publication of *Between the World and Me* in 2015 is marked by the increasing visibility of police brutality against African Americans and by the emergence of the Black Lives Matter Movement. Indeed, it is his son's witnessing of the acquittal of police officer Darren Wilson, who fatally shot Michael Brown, that triggers Coates's letter to his son. His representations of black manhood project an identity which is excluded from United States society, but is central to the nation. Most importantly, Coates presents resistance to hegemonic notions of masculinity not only through the projection of his role as a man and as a father, but also by his complex and multifaceted representations of black manhood. The present study demonstrates the ways in which Coates asserts models for progressive masculinities through his portrayals of boyhood and fatherhood. Coates's depiction of his adolescence and of black youth in the streets of Baltimore as well as his descriptions of fatherhood, particularly of his own role as a father and the depiction of his parents, are key in assessing Coates's rendering of a caring masculinity.

Coates's portrayal of black masculinities evidences the impact of stereotypes on black male identities. As explored in chapter two, the notion of *black masculinities* is defined in relation to stereotypes about black men. In other words, the construction of stereotypes about African American men informs the construction of black masculinity in the United States. Generalizations and negative assumptions about

African American men and women originated during the colonial era in the United States, specifically during enslavement. Throughout the years, stereotypical designations, as a form of misrecognition of black male humanity, both at a personal and at an institutional level, continue to influence the ways in which United States society views African American men and, consequently, influence the ways African American men view themselves. Black male stereotypes as Coates presents them in *Between the World and Me*—stereotypes associated with gangsta culture representing black men as lazy, irresponsible, innately savage, aggressive and prone to criminality—find their origins in the stereotypical images of "Sambo" and "the Brute." On the one hand, the Sambo stereotype originated during slavery with caricatures of childlike, docile, happily enslaved people was later personified in Minstrel shows during the nineteenth century. Traits inherent in the Sambo stereotype are still prevalent today in representations of black men as lazy and irresponsible. On the other hand, the Brute stereotype emerged in the post-Emancipation era, particularly during the Reconstruction period, as a backlash against the enfranchisement of African Americans and presented black males as a threat to the white supremacist status quo who were innately savage, violent, and sexual predators. Contemporary images of black men as perpetrators of violence, rapists, and criminals represent a continuation of the Brute stereotype. Thus, Sambo and the Brute are the precursors of present-day stereotypes of black masculinity related to gangsta culture.

As seen in Coates's representations of black masculinities and specifically of black boys and young adults in chapter three, stereotypes about black men demonstrate the lack of recognition of black bodies. Through the depiction of his adolescence, Coates counteracts stereotypical images that subscribe to hegemonic notions of masculinity and, in turn, presents alternative and progressive ways of

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inhabiting black masculinity. His transition from boyhood to young adulthood is shaped by the specific environment in the streets of West Baltimore; the conditions of the inner city inform both Coates's and his son's adolescence. He defines his identity and his masculinity in terms of rejection of the United States system. Throughout his narrative, Coates actively stands against social structures and public policies used by the economic system to perpetuate the exploitation of black bodies. Coates therefore projects an identity that epitomizes Athena D. Mutua's coinage of a *progressive black masculinity* in that he defines his masculinity as being based on the struggle for recognition of black bodies: he rejects "social systems of domination" and, in turn, "values, validates, and empowers black humanity" (Mutua 7).

Furthermore, Coates's narrative presents a complex representation of black boyhood in that he explores the consequences that black males confront as a result of being subjected to stereotypes. Coates illustrates how Melissa Harris-Perry's notion of the "crooked room" (29) applies not only to black women's experiences, but also to black males' experiences in the United States. By drawing from the utopian deeply racial notion of the American Dream, Coates explores the misrecognition of black bodies and evidences how stereotypes compel also black males to adjust their behavior; to shrink and contort themselves in an effort to navigate a room made crooked by distorted images about their humanity. In Coates's portrayal of the black male experience, however, fear and shame are the dominant emotions that cause black boys to shift their outward attitudes in order to counter the vulnerability of their bodies and resist stereotypical designation. Coates presents the twofold impact of shame on the lives of black males: it causes them to conform to negative stereotypes and it serves as a means of their control and disempowerment. Therefore, chapter three illustrates how Coates represents black boys who deviate from the hegemonic

ideal of masculinity as they build their identities through resistance to forms of misrecognition. Moreover, Coates presents resistance to misrecognition as signifying resistance to hegemonic masculinity in that he empowers himself and his son to resist by embracing his vulnerabilities and by understanding the origins of the struggle for recognition.

Coates's caring and emotional involvement to his son, along with his commitment to the struggle for recognition of black bodies, form the basis from which he builds his identity as a man and as a father. As analyzed in chapter four, Coates's brief representation of his father, the relationship with the women in his family, his depictions of black fathers, and the significance of the advice he gives to his son are key parameters in examining Coates's definition of fatherhood. His definition epitomizes the progressive notion of "new fatherhood" since he promotes a fatherhood which differs from the traditional and authoritative model represented by his father and, in turn, presents resistance to received notions of masculinity by embracing his vulnerabilities. Coates promotes a caring masculinity in that his role as a father and his sense of manhood refer back to the women in his family, that is, his mother and his wife. His projection of a caring masculinity signifies gender equality as his fathering incorporates "values of care and interdependence" traditionally attributed to women into his own identity (Elliott 243). By describing a caring masculinity that is based both on the prioritizing of his son's life and on the rejection of forms of domination, Coates's role as a father represents resistance to hegemonic notions masculinity.

Additionally, Coates's narrative challenges the myth of the absent black father both through his critique of the criminal justice system and the loss of black male bodies by police brutality in the United States and through the projection of his role as

a father. Chapter four also places the significance of Coates's advice to his son in *Between the World and Me* in conversation with James Baldwin's advice to his nephew in *The Fire Next Time* (1963). The themes embedded in both of their letters run parallel despite the historical distance of their respective texts: both Baldwin and Coates write at specific moments in American history, i.e. 1963 (the Civil Rights Movement) and 2015 (the Black Lives Matter Movement) respectively, and the central theme in their texts is the struggle for recognition of black bodies. Both authors promote progressive black masculinities in that their identities are predicated upon the unity between their personal selves and the struggle from human freedom.

Although the present study focuses on Coates's re-presentation of black masculinities in *Between the World and Me*, this research could be further expanded with an in-depth analysis of Coates's first memoir *The Beautiful Struggle* (2008), in which he explores the figure of his father, Paul Coates, and their relationship in detail. Integrating an analysis of the *Beautiful Struggle* would therefore provide valuable and substantial information about the significance of his father, who represents some traits associated with the hegemonic ideal of masculinity, and of Coates's transition from boyhood to young adulthood. Establishing connections between Coates's oeuvre, namely, *The Beautiful Struggle* (2008)*, Between the World and Me* (2015), and the autobiographical notes in his latest collection of essays *We Were Eight Years In Power* (2017), would enable a study of Coates's definition black masculinity through the emerging and interdisciplinary subfield of Aging studies.

Also, this study would be greatly enriched with an examination that places James Baldwin's oeuvre in conversation with Ta-Nehisi Coates's oeuvre. Both authors, as public intellectuals of different historical contexts in the United States, promote progressive views of masculinity. Moreover, the fact that Baldwin and

Coates's father belong to the same generation would enhance this research through an approach of aging masculinities. A more complex study would be enabled through an analysis of the parallelisms and differences in their definitions of black masculinities and their own identities. Baldwin's historical context and his embodiment of an openly queer black masculinity not only emphasize an analysis of masculinities based on intersectionality, but are essential in order to assert inclusive and progressive models for masculinity. These are two directions in which the significance and relevance of Coates's work as a contemporary public intellectual can be explored.

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