Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos, vol. 25, 2021. Seville, Spain, ISSN 1133-309-X, pp. 110-
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.12795/REN.2021.i25.06

BETWEEN HOPELESSNESS AND DESPAIR: AFROPESSIMISM AND BLACK NIHILISM IN TA-NEHISI COATES'S WORKS[1]

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Received 20 March 2021
Accepted 18 May 2021

KEYWORDS: AFROPESSIMISM, BLACK NIHILISM, HOPE, TA-NEHISI COATES, BETWEEN THE WORLD AND ME.
PALABRAS CLAVE: AFROPESIMISMO, NIHILISMO NEGRO, ESPERANZA, TA-NEHISI COATES, BETWEEN THE WORLD AND ME.

ABSTRACT
Most of the criticism that Ta-Nehisi Coates received in the aftermath of the publication of his work *Between the World and Me* orbits around its lack of hopefulness. Indeed, it is several times in the text that Coates tempers his son's expectations about foreseeing an end to racial conflicts as he tells him that "I do not believe that we can stop [racists], Samori, because they must ultimately stop themselves" (*Between the World* 151). Certainly, the previous contention has drawn critics into reading Coates's work as an attack against black agency (Chatterton Williams n.p.). It is our contention that, far from being read as a manifestation of cynicism, Coates's negativity also has a galvanizing dimension. In fact, by emphasizing the futility of hope, which for Coates traps black individuals in an "unending pursuit" of progress (Warren "Black Nihilism" 221), he provides readers with many alternatives to confront the rampant racism that still pervades U.S. society nowadays.

RESUMEN
Gran parte de las críticas que recibió Ta-Nehisi Coates después de publicar su obra *Between the World and Me* giran alrededor de su falta de optimismo. En el texto, Coates le explica a su hijo que es complicado ver soluciones a los problemas raciales que les acechan, ya que "no creo que podamos detener [a los racistas], Samori, porque son ellos mismos los que deben hacerlo" (*Between the World* 151).

[1] This article is the result of the research carried out under an FPU grant funded by the Spanish Government and European Union (FPU15/00741).

Ciertamente, el desalentador mensaje de Coates para su hijo ha sido interpretado como una clara negación a la capacidad de agencia de las personas afroamericanas (Chatterton Williams n.p.). En este artículo proponemos una relectura del cinismo de Ta-Nehisi Coates y explicamos que éste también esconde un potencial para promover un cambio social y político. Así, cuando enfatiza que para las personas afroamericanas la esperanza no es más que una falsa sensación de progreso creada por la supremacía blanca, Coates también está ofreciendo a sus lectores otras maneras de hacer frente al racismo que impera en la sociedad actual.

Hope is a luxury afforded to those who are given the space to dream far beyond the limitations of their conditions

Darnell L. Moore, "On Mourning and Manhood" (2020)

Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* (2015) has been described as a "searing indictment of America's legacy of violence, institutional and otherwise, against blacks" (Nance n.p.). Indeed, the memoir, which is framed as a letter addressed to Coates's fifteen-year-old son, seems to be a detailed register of the multifarious forms of violence black bodies are exposed to—from direct manifestations of physical brutality, including pull overs, beatings, arrests, and murders; to less conspicuous expressions of racism, such as legal disenfranchisement, or redlining. Immediately after its publication on July 14, 2015, the text became a breakthrough in racial studies and literary texts dealing with racial profiling and, by the end of that same year, Coates had already turned into an eminent writer of international renown and, for many, even into "the single best writer on the subject of race in the United States" (Smith n.p.). Nonetheless, the memoir was not met with universal approval, and as much as Coates was praised for providing a trenchant commentary on the precarious situation endured by black citizens in the U.S., he was also criticized for not offering any solutions to the problems he poses in the text. In fact, Coates's cynical rhetoric, together with his proclivity to tell his son that there is nothing black individuals can do to bring racist conflicts to an end, are certainly the two primary reasons why Coates has often been rebuked, as they do not only lead readers to wonder whether or not "freedom or equality will ever be a reality for black people in America" (Alexander n.p.), but also cast black agency into doubt (Chatterton Williams n.p.). In several of his texts, Coates

reads blackness as an imposed incapacity; as a product of slavery and, verging upon black pessimist ideals, as a form of violence in itself. Coates's understanding of blackness makes his hopelessness easier to understand—what consolation is he to offer, if he foresees none? In view of the devastating critiques brought about by Coates's negativity, this essay sets out to foreground the galvanizing dimension of Coates's memoir, and interprets his pessimism not as disabling, but rather as enabling and necessary.

"THE END OF OUR SUFFERING SIGNALS THE END OF THE WORLD:"[2] PESSIMISM IN THE BLACK LIVES MATTER ERA

Coates's belief that blackness and violence are inextricably bound opens up the possibility of considering him an adherent of a critical framework that focuses on approaching blackness as a form of suffering—Afropessimism. At risk of oversimplifying, Afropessimists posit that black lives are still subject to the principles of slavery, that is, that not only are black individuals today haunted by a ubiquitous threat of violence, but they are also considered people "who can be killed by anyone without that act of killing being considered either a homicide or a sacrilege" (JanMohamed 211). Although Jared Sexton notes that it is difficult to track the origin of the framework down to a particular moment in history ("Afro-Pessimism" n.p.), most pessimists agree that it was Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death* (1982) that fired the starting signal for its development as it is known nowadays. Indeed, Patterson considered slaves as absolutely "powerless in relation to another individual" (4) and as below the framework of human legibility—as objects, or as "social nonperson[s]" (5). For Patterson, the social death of slaves, a concept on which black pessimism was later based, was granted through the "constituent element[s] of slavery" (10), namely the subjection of slaves to experiencing all sorts of gratuitous violence, their natal alienation, and their dishonor, since they "had no power and no independent social existence, and hence no public worth" (10).

Although it was Patterson who defined social death, the key concept of black pessimism, he has insisted that he should not be considered its forerunner, which is, in his own view, somewhat of a misnomer. In an interview published by *The Harvard Gazette*,

[2] Wilderson, "Afro-Pessimism" n.p.

Patterson noted that "I find myself in an odd situation, because the Afropessimists draw heavily on one of my books, *Slavery and Social Death*, which is ironic, because I'm not a pessimist," since "I don't think we're in a situation of social death" (Mineo n.p.). Certainly, the major reason why Patterson's theorizations veer away from the ideas defended by black pessimists is his belief in the transitory character of the condition of blacks as slaves. For Patterson, slavery worked by way of "recruitment" (13)—a process whereby "free human beings" (22) were turned into objects of property. After manumission, however, slaves could regain at least part of such freedom; and so "the slave who was freed was no longer a slave" (3). Patterson's conviction that suffering is incidental to blackness testifies to why he cannot be considered a pessimist himself. In fact, he believes that although segregation still persists, black individuals have undeniably achieved real progress, since "we're very integrated in the military [as well as in the civic community and the public sphere], which is the quintessence of what defines who belongs" (Mineo).

This is, precisely, a significant tension that arises between Patterson and other towering figures in the field of black pessimism, such as Frank B. Wilderson or Jared Sexton, for whom there was no prior freedom for slaves to get back to. As R. L. puts it, "the violence of anti-blackness produces black existence; there is no prior positive blackness that could be potentially appropriated" ("Wanderings" n.p.). For Wilderson and Sexton, the concept of blackness did not exist before slavery, but it emerged with it—which means, in turn, that former black slaves had no past of freedom to covet; nor could they aspire to a future devoid of suffering, for that matter. Put another way, there was for slaves no previous state of equality to return to from their state of inequality. "Blackness is coterminous with slaveness", Wilderson writes, "blackness is social death, which is to say that there was never a prior meta-moment of plenitude, never a moment of equilibrium, never a moment of social life", and so "blackness, as a paradigmatic position […], cannot be disimbricated from slavery" ("The End of Redemption", n.p.). Wilderson's claims clearly verge upon a similar reading of blackness as suffering proposed by Achille Mbembe in *Critique of Black Reason* (2017), where the philosopher states that the concept of blackness "arrived with the organized despoliation of the Atlantic slave trade" (2), which ended up "dissolving human beings into things, objects, and merchandise" (11). As Patrice Douglass and Frank Wilderson put it, violence becomes, in this way, "a structural necessity to the constitution of blacks" (117); something that Coates

also staunchly defends in his work—that there can exist no black future bereft of violence because the very concept of blackness *is* violence.

Whilst black pessimists concur in all the aforementioned, most of them hold opposing views as to whether black individuals are, as Patterson said, below the framework of human legibility, and whilst many of them, such as Calvin Warren or Jared Sexton, contend that accepting that black lives are lived in social death does in no way mean that black lives do not exist, but rather that they are lived in a different dimension than white lives,[3] others, such as David Marriott, Adbul JanMohamed, or even Frank Wilderson, have suggested that black people are in fact human *non*-beings. For yet another group of pessimists, heavily influenced by Frantz Fanon's postcolonial thinking, black individuals are neither human beings nor human non-beings, but rather empty objects—a reading that draws upon a phenomenological perception of the black body that has also been widely explored by Claudia Rankine in her most recent work, *Just Us: An American Conversation* (2020), where she intimates that black bodies are "containers" destined to be void (7). Not surprisingly, Ta-Nehisi Coates himself constantly alludes to black individuals as being "objects" (*Between the World* 55) and "vessels" (58, 82, 87), too. The comparison between black bodies and vessels is also prevalent in the work of Saidiya Hartman, who, in *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), notes that it is the fungibility of slaves, that is, their characterization as chattel, that enables their being equated with vessels. "The fungibility of the commodity," she writes, "makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and values" (21). Hartman's contention that black bodies are but receptacles to be filled with the wills of others reverberates with the arguments deployed by Martin Heidegger in his essay "The Thing" (1971), where he draws upon the concept of the jug in a bid to establish a distinction between objects and things in which the latter are claimed to be self-sufficient in a way that the former are clearly not. He posits, "the jug is a thing. What is the jug? We say: a vessel, something of the kind that holds something else within it. The jug's holding is done by its base and sides. This container itself can again

[3] Fred Moten dubs this other dimension as "our commons or undercommons or underground or outskirts" of whiteness ("Black Optimism" 4).

be held by the handle. As a vessel the jug is something self-sustained, something that stands on its own" (164).

Besides underscoring the self-sustaining capacity of vessels, Heidegger also points out their artificiality; in fact, the thingness of the thing, to employ his own terminology, resides precisely in that which triggers its making. "Standing forth has the sense of stemming from somewhere," he contends, "whether this be a process of self-making or of being made by an other" (166). On the other hand, "standing forth [also] has the sense of the made thing's standing forth into the unconcealedness of what is already present" (166). By the aforementioned Heidegger is certainly denying that the thingness of vessels stems from their being objects of production. Instead, he notes, "the jug is not a vessel because it was made; rather the jug had to be made because it is this holding vessel" (166)—knowing what constitutes a vessel is a necessary precondition for anybody to make one. And, in fact, for Heidegger, the essential trait of the jug, its vacuity, cannot even be "brought about by its making" (166), but it precedes it. As Walter Biemel succinctly suggests, "that which makes a jug a jug" is precisely its emptiness and "its holding" (59). In a way that is reminiscent of Hartman's perception of black bodies as empty receptacles, Heidegger contends that "when we fill the jug, the pouring that fills it flows into the empty jug," and so it is "the emptiness, the void, […] [t]hat does the vessel's holding. This empty space, this nothing of the jug, is what the jug is as the holding vessel" (167).

That black pessimism also resorts to the analogy between black bodies as vessels is thus no accident—as David Marriott states, "the [black] person is a dead object filled, so to speak, by its own vertiginous absence, by its own force of disaggregation" ("Judging" n.p.).[4] In fact, the so-called nothingness that fills black bodies has been Frank Wilderson's object of study on several occasions (*Red, White, and Black*), but it is in his work *Incognegro* (2008) where it becomes most evident:

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

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

> again? It was earnest, not accusatory—I know. And nothing terrifies me more than such a question asked in earnest. It is a question that goes to the heart of desire, to the heart of our black capacity to desire. But if we take out the nouns that you used (nouns of habit that get us through the day), your question to me would sound like this: would nothing ever be with nothing again? (265)

If we take into consideration everything that we have mentioned so far—that blackness is coterminous with bondage; that black individuals cannot be conceived of as human and are, in this way, either non-human, non-beings, or even *no*thing—, it should not be surprising that black pessimism was met with backlash from a group of black people who considered it to be "so very negative" and who believed "that things are getting better" (Warren *Ontological Terror*, 4). In a bid to smooth things over, a small group of pessimists headed by Jared Sexton emphasized that the fact that black individuals are trapped in social death must not be mistaken for a sort of apostasy nor for a negation of black agency ("The Social Life of Social Death"), and denounced that black pessimism "has been misconstrued as a negation of the agency of black performance, even a denial of black social life" (Sexton, "Anti-Ante Blackness" n.p.). This notion is significantly expanded upon in his article "The Social Life of Social Death," where Sexton notes that black individuals must be considered human beings even if "black life is not lived in the world that the world lives in, but it is lived underground, in outer space" (28). In this way, he eschews a reading of blackness as non-being, suggesting that, instead, black individuals are indeed human beings who are forced to suffer from, in his own words, a social death:

> A living death is as much a death as it is a living. Nothing in afro-pessimism suggests that there is no black (social) life, only that black life is not social life in the universe formed by the codes of state and civil society, of citizen and subject, of nation and culture, of people and place, of history and heritage, of all the things that colonial society has in common with the colonized, of all that capital has in common with labor. (28)

Sexton is also concerned that restoring the humanity of black beings may open up the possibility of reading blackness as pathology—and it is perhaps this flawed argument that has led critics to rail against the hopelessness that permeates Ta-Nehisi Coates's

memoir. In a reading of Frantz Fanon's works, Lewis R. Gordon brings into the open the extent to which black individuals' being considered problematic led to blackness being associated with decay, and ultimately to its being pathologized. "[Blacks] more than symbolize or signify various social pathologies—they become them," Gordon maintains. "In our antiblack world, blacks are pathology" (87). Although black pessimists admit that blackness tends to be defined as pathology, they also posit that it is precisely the fact that blacks have been constructed as social dropouts that not only insists upon black life, but that it also exposes the real pathogen—not blackness itself, but the society that has endorsed such construction. In the words of Jared Sexton, "blackness is not the pathogen in Afropessimism, the world is" (Sexton, "The Social Life" 31).

IN THE NAME OF LOVE: ASTROBLACKNESS AND THE LIMITS OF HOPE

Afropessimism has gained momentum in particular during the last few decades, when the increasing visibility towards the brutal deaths of black youth in the streets, coupled with the acquittal of their murderers, has ruled out the possibility for blacks to hold good prospects for their futures. As Sexton has claimed, "what would one hope for in a scenario where one's murder is required for others' peace of mind?" ("Afro-Pessimism" n.p.). It is surprising, then, that the aforementioned despair has been met with the skepticism of those who claim that blackness and suffering are bound, but not inextricably so (Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness" n.p.). In fact, the antithesis of black pessimism, dubbed as black optimism, can be observed in works authored by black writers all along the twentieth century, from James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1963) and Cornel West's *Race Matters* (1993), all the way to Paul Gilroy's *Against Race* (2000) or Daphne Brooks's *Bodies in Dissent* (2006), texts that throw into relief a will "either to fold blacks into humanity and resolve the ontological problem or to move beyond race and embrace an optimistic future of universal humanism" (Warren, "Black Mysticism" 220). Black optimism may be best explained by way of West's politics of conversion, which are a means to counter the pervasiveness of nihilism in black communities. For West, the history of racial nihilism in the U.S. is long and deep-rooted—black bodies have been degraded and devalued to such an extent that even black individuals themselves have internalized their own worthlessness. West describes it as "the

lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and […] lovelessness" that results in "a numbing detachment from and a self-destructive disposition toward the world […] that destroys both the individual and others" (23). West urges black individuals to resist the nihilistic threat posed to blackness through a politics of conversion—"a last attempt at generating a sense of agency among downtrodden people. […] Self-love and love for others are both modes toward increasing self-valuation and encouraging political resistance on one's community" (29). In regarding blackness as prophetic and full of potential, black optimism is calling for a present restoration of black subjectivity—racism will keep existing, but it must not devalue the importance of black lives. "As long as hope remains and meaning is preserved, the possibility of overcoming oppression stays alive," West concludes. "Without hope there can be no future, [and] without meaning there can be no struggle" (23).

Afrofuturism is, in all likelihood, one of the most recent expressions of black optimism. Described as a "flourishing contemporary movement" (English n.p.) and a cultural aesthetic that figures blackness as hopeful, celebratory, and even pioneering in a technologically advanced counter-world (Capers 7), it was first introduced by Mark Dery in his essay "Black to the Future" (1994), where he linked it to "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future" (180). That Dery was the first to coin the concept does in no way mean that topics of the sort had not previously been broached by other black authors. In actual fact, according to several scholars (Anderson and Jones; Capers; Glass and Drumming; Steinskog), Afrofuturism finds its roots in the science fiction published by black authors by mid-1850, such as Martin R. Delany's *Blake; or, the Huts of America* (1857), a work that recounts a slave's getaway from a plantation and his arduous journey to bring together black communities from all around the world in a bid to create a thriving and independent all-black nation. Other outstanding examples of science fiction books that paved the way for black futurism to develop are certainly Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) or most of the works by Octavia E. Butler, in particular the Xenogenesis trilogy, published during the last two decades of the

twentieth century.[5] It was not until 1994, however, that Mark Dery claimed that the latest technological advances clearly required the original definition of the term to be revised, and so black futurism ceased to be a way to refer to science fiction narratives and turned instead into a cultural aesthetic on its own. This shift also brought about new possibilities of reading blackness as *beyond* slavery, as Andrew Rollins suggested when he coined the concept of Astroblackness—"an Afrofuturistic concept in which a person's black state of consciousness, released from the confining and crippling slave or colonial mentality, becomes aware of the multitude and varied possibilities and probabilities within the universe" (Anderson and Jones vii).

Although the differences between pessimism and black optimism are glaringly obvious, the fact that Ta-Nehisi Coates, who until now has been considered a major representative of the former, has been the writer of the *Black Panther* series of Marvel Comics (2016), a landmark work thanks to which the latter started to gain traction,[6] has contested the extent to which he can be considered a supporter of either one. In fact, the years following the publication of the memoir witnessed a clear transformation in Coates's public standing. First regarded as an author with "either a cynical or a woefully skewed way of looking at the world" (Chatterton Williams n.p.), Coates was now slowly becoming somebody who in fact believed that progress for the black community was finally being achieved (Klein, "Why Ta-Nehisi"). His transition, as he himself claims in a conversation with Ezra Klein, is owed to the ways in which black individuals are currently coming together, organizing, and fighting for

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[5] The Xenogenesis trilogy is made up of *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989).

[6] The character of Black Panther, the undercover identity of king T'Challa, was originally created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby and appeared for the first time in the 52nd instalment of the *Fantastic Four*, which dates back to 1966. T'Challa is the black leader of a prosperous and technologically advanced black community known as Wakanda, located in East Africa and undisclosed to everyone but its inhabitants. Although the character appeared several times in different publications between 1966 and 1976, in 1977 he earned his own series, and Ta-Nehisi Coates became its writer as of 2016. *Black Panther* gained visibility in particular after it was adapted into an eponymous blockbuster film starring Chadwick Boseman and Lupita Nyong'o in 2018. Nowadays, the movie has turned into one of the clearest examples of Afrofuturism (Capers; Glass and Drumming; Steinskog). Amongst other cultural products that portray black optimist ideas is also the 2019 HBO adaptation of the comic series *Watchmen*, in which two central characters, Angela Abar and Dr. Manhattan, who were originally white, are played by black actors.

their own rights. When asked about his feelings in light of the international mass protests staged in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder on May 25, 2020, Coates replied that "I can't believe I'm gonna say this, but I see hope" (Klein, "Why Ta-Nehisi" n.p.). Nonetheless, even if he "see[s] progress right now" (Klein, "Why Ta-Nehisi" n.p.), he did not do so right after the publication of *Between the World and Me*, when he told Klein, in a strikingly different conversation, that "there's not gonna be a happy ending to this story" (Klein, "A Big Believer" n.p.).

Coates's recent self-identification as an optimist has astounded critics, who until that moment had considered Coates skeptic, hopeless, or plainly defeatist. In fact, the flood of reviews about Coates published in particular after 2018 has addressed, to a greater or lesser extent, Coates's hopefulness rather than his lack of it. To mention but a few, Eric Levitz published a conversation with Coates entitled "Ta-Nehisi Coates Is an Optimist Now" (2019), which was soon followed by Ezra Klein's "Why Ta-Nehisi Coates Is Hopeful" (2020) and Nancy Letorneau's "Even Ta-Nehisi Coates Is Optimistic Now" (2020). Tobin Miller Searers and Joseph Winters explain the critics' obsession with Coates's perception of progress by way of the analysis of the public impact of his work. In fact, Coates's *Between the World and Me* has turned into, in Toni Morrison's terms, "a required reading" ("Between the World" n.p.) for many—not only has it been included in the syllabus of several university courses (Keaggy n.p.), but it has also been granted with a top position in *The Guardian*'s list of the best books of the 21st century. This suggests that the experiences narrated in the book may have turned into a model for black youth to follow, and that the messages that Coates conveys are far-reaching and may have an enormous bearing upon his readers; which is, precisely, the main reason why Coates's hopelessness has been regarded with contempt. Fully cognizant of this situation, Coates has also addressed it in two articles published in *The Atlantic*, "Hope and the Artist" (2015b) and "Hope and the Historian" (2015c), where he contends that the real value of art should not rest upon whether it transmits hopeful ideas or not, as an excess of hopefulness is but a distraction from the real problems that are being addressed (Searers 1972). "I've been thinking a lot about the implied notion that writing that does not offer hope is necessarily deficient or somehow useless," he notes. "To be less coy, I've been thinking a lot about the idea that my own writing is somehow cheating the reader because it seems so unconcerned with 'hope'. I admit to having a hard time with this notion" ("Hope and the Artist" n.p.). And he goes on,

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

Again, that Coates rejects hope as the only way to face the problems he poses in the memoir does not mean that he despairs. Tobin Miller Searers explains this by drawing upon Coates's atheism (2018). In his view, Coates does not find comfort in religion, but he does find it somewhere else—in something that he names "consciousness" (*The Beautiful Struggle*; *Between the World*). As Searers himself notes, "rather than religion, Coates draws on [black] epistemology" (1948), which he learns about from his father, and which is pivotal for him to develop a full awareness of blackness and to worship not only black thinkers, but also his own black community.

On a different note, Joseph Winters contends that it is the fact that Coates's writing was published in the heyday of Barack Obama's presidency that had misled his readers into expecting his work to be hopeful and reassuring. In his view, when critics contend that Coates is hopeless, they often mean that he is so in relation to the "kind of hope attached to triumphant narratives of achievement that subordinate dissonance to harmony, or instability to order" that ruled in the Obama administration (2452).[7] Calvin Warren approaches the subject of optimism by way of Lauren Berlant's "cruel optimism," noting that "it bundles certain promises about redress, equality, freedom, justice, and progress into a political object that always lies beyond reach" ("Black Nihilism" 221). In this way Coates would not be against optimism, but against the sort of optimism that flattens out the complexities of black strivings. In his interpretation of Tressie

[7] Peter Dula and David Evans establish a comparison between Obama's "creedal or liberal reading of U.S. history," which is evocative of "Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and the early King," and Coates's "radical alternative that descends from Du Bois, Malcolm X, the latter King, and Critical Race Theory" (161).

McMillan Cottom's last review of Coates's work ("Not Trying to Get Into Heaven"), Winters punctuates that it is Coates's withdrawal from Obama's hopefulness that makes his readers despair—"because Coates departs from Obama's 'audacity of hope' mantra as well as the rhetoric associated with sanitized versions of the Civil Rights Movement, his 'hope feels stark and brutal'" (2464). "What critics expect from Coates," he goes on to explain, "is some projected resolution, some kind of benediction that converts, for instance, the police killing of Prince Jones into something positive, upbeat, and encouraging" (2464). Coates may not be hopeful, but he is not a nihilist either—he feels the need to highlight the limitations of hope, and he seeks to offer his readers other narratives that allow black individuals to keep fighting without underestimating their plight.

Calvin Warren offers important commentary on the centrality that hope has had in anti-racist movements in his essay "Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope" (2015), where he calls attention to the fact that the slipperiness of the concept—its logic of linearity, in particular when coupled with "bio-political futurity, perfection, betterment, and redress"—not only sustains, but also reproduces, black suffering (218). For Warren, one of the main risks of hopefulness stems from it "posit[ing] itself as the only alternative to the problem of anti-blackness" (221) in a way that it rules out all the other possibilities to confront racism. Certainly, Warren's claims cast a new light on why Coates's pessimistic views in the memoir have often been discredited—because, for the hopeful, no forms of engagement other than hope itself are convenient, at least at first sight (223). "The politics of hope masks a particular cruelty under the auspices of 'happiness' and 'life'," he writes, "it terrifies with the dread of 'no alternative'" and "life itself needs the security of the alternative, and, through this logic, life becomes untenable without it" (222). Warren notes that hopefulness becomes particularly dangerous for black individuals, as the object they long for always remains an impossibility—they keep drawing closer to an end that ultimately does not exist. Warren exemplifies this by drawing upon Barack Obama's exhorting black people to keep fighting and to not give way to despair in the aftermath of Trayvon Martin's murder—a message that bears striking similarities to the one spread after Emmett Till's lynching almost sixty years earlier, and which did not hold down the alarming rates at which black people were being murdered (Brady n.p.). In this way, Warren notes, black individuals are trapped in "an unending pursuit" of progress (221)—they are told to be hopeful even though all

solutions ever devised to put an end to anti-blackness have only led to a dead end (Warren, *Ontological Terror* 3).[8]

The problem is exacerbated when hope is erroneously equated with action, which is precisely why Coates's point of view has been object of criticism—just as hopefulness is perceived as a direct exhortation to act, hopelessness is considered to be analogous to passivity and even defeatism, and in this way "the nihilist is labeled 'pathological', 'troubled', 'faithless', 'suicidal', 'fatalistic', and 'reckless'" (Warren, "Black Nihilism" 242). Nonetheless, as Warren concludes, being hopeful can be as problematic as being hopeless, as the former rests upon the violent structures that sustain discrimination; that is, it operates along the violent structures that catalyzed its development in the first place. "Black suffering is an essential part of the world," Warren writes, "and placing hope in the very structure that sustains metaphysical violence […] will never resolve anything" (244). In a similar vein, Coates also wonders why readers insist, or rather demand, that he must be hopeful when he clearly believes in the inherent character of black suffering. In "Hope and the Historian," Coates writes that "the point here isn't that white supremacy won't ever diminish, nor that it won't ever change form. The point is that it will always be with us in some form, and the best one can reasonably hope for is that it will shrink in impact". For him,

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

[8] In other words, hope "merely provides temporary reprieve from the fact that blacks are not safe in an anti-black world, a fact that can become overwhelming" (3); a view that Coates certainly endorses too.

> of humanity itself. I can't write that way—because I can't study that way. I have to be open to things falling apart. Indeed, much of our history is the story of things just not working out. ("Hope and the Historian" n.p.)

As we have been noting, Coates's repudiation of hope must not be confused with his denying black people a futurity. Instead, in refusing to believe blindly in hopefulness, Coates is in fact suggesting that the previous is not the only but one amongst several motivating forces for black people to get involved with the fight of racial equality. *Between the World and Me* sets out to offer ways other than, rather than in addition to, hope to confront the rampant racism that permeates U.S. society and, amongst them, it is love that Coates favors. Tobin Miller Searers has extensively worked on the centrality that love plays in Coates's oeuvre:

> Coates finds his ultimate imperative in love. As expected, however, his idea of love holds no space for saccharine nostalgia, fawning sentimentality, or rose-scented romance. Rather, Coates allows for "softness" but centers on love as "an act of heroism" given freely, often unexpectedly, and rooted in protection and care for the black body. That love stems from his grounding in "people," his people, the black community that has sustained, nurtured, and elicited the "broad love" that allows him to express a "specific love" for his son. The love shows up for Coates not only in relationships and family connections but also in poetry and art. (2052)

That love replaces hope in Coates's works ultimately hinders the possibility of regarding Coates's pessimism as a manifestation of violence. In *The Beautiful Struggle*, Coates's previous memoir, readers learn about the extent to which Coates treasures his family, as dysfunctional as it is; about the extent to which he loves his friends and his community; and, not less important, about the extent to which his father instils in him a great passion for black artists in general, and black thinkers and black writers in particular. On the other hand, in *Between the World and Me*, Coates succeeds in informing his readers that his rapport with the world as an adult is not only influenced but in fact radically shaped by the affection he received as a kid—he focuses on expressing a deep love for his parents, for his wife, for his son, for his deceased friend Prince Jones, and for all the other black individuals that accompanied him throughout his life, such as the girl with the dreadlocks he met at Howard University or

the man he visited Paris with when he was younger; similarly, he focuses on explaining the extent to which his devotion to blackness, as well as to black consciousness, has solidified over the years.[9]

CONCLUSIONS

Most of the criticism that Ta-Nehisi Coates received in the aftermath of the publication of his work *Between the World and Me* orbits around its lack of hopefulness. Indeed, it is several times in the text that Coates tempers his son's expectations about foreseeing an end to racial conflicts as he tells him that "I do not believe that we can stop them, Samori, because they must ultimately stop themselves" (151). Certainly, the previous contention has drawn critics into reading Coates's work as a clear manifestation of cynicism and defeatism (Archie n.p.), and so it is not surprising that they posit that Coates's representation of racism is stacked against itself—not only does it deny an actual reality exempt from racism, but it also rejects black agency (Chatterton Williams n.p.). Coates's negativity is not only manifest in *Between the World and Me*, and it can also be traced back to several of the op-eds he had published earlier on in *The Atlantic*, in particular "The Case for Reparations" and "The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration". Directing particular attention to the latter, Thabiti Anyabwile notes that most, if not all, of the works authored by Coates carry their "own heavy coat of despair" because "it's not that Coates simply leaves off hope; he in some respects *refuses* it" (n.p.; emphasis in the original). For the pastor, that Coates veers away from hopefulness is problematic insofar as he may be actively denying something that has been a fundamental constituent of racial progress.

For Coates, though, "hope is the fatalistic posture" (Sexton, "The Unclear Word" 57) since, in his view, believing in a society in

[9] Coates's take on love, however, can be considered very controversial. In *Between the World and Me* Coates vividly remembers that his father used to beat him under the pretext that "either I can beat him, or the police" (16); something that he also mentions in *The Beautiful Struggle* when, eavesdropping on a conversation between their parents, he hears his father say, "Cheryl, who would you rather do this: me or the police?" (141). Coates holds his father in high esteem regardless of all the aforementioned, and so he notes that, during his childhood "violence was administered in fear and *love*" (17; my emphasis). Although this topic is central to understanding Coates's experience as a black man, for the sake of space and purpose it cannot be further addressed in this article. For more information on the role that whupping plays on black families and on the interplay between love and abuse see Bradshaw, Herron, and Patton.

which racial struggles do not exist is but a sheer impossibility—blackness is violent by ontology; so how to imagine a world in which both concepts can be separated? Instead of emphasizing the ways in which Coates's viewpoint verges upon despair, our essay has sought to open up the possibility of interpreting Coates's negativity not as disabling, but as enabling. In fact, as Winters makes plain in his text "Between the Tragic and the Unhopeless" (2018), "a different kind of hope is made possible through melancholy, struggle, and anguished love" (2286) in the memoir. A similar point is raised by Jonathan Orbell, who notes that although he has "been gripped by this facet of Coates's writing," he believes that "Coates's hopelessness may function, somewhat paradoxically, as a source of tangible change in public policy" and so "it may well be necessary for progress to be made" (2015, n.p.). Orbell's final ruminations on the galvanizing dimension of Coates's pessimism is something that is addressed verbatim in the memoir, where Coates himself writes that "these are the preferences of the universe itself: verbs over nouns, actions over states, struggle over hope" (71). Certainly, Coates's work is not merely an inventory of the myriad ways in which black bodies can be destroyed, but also a eulogy of sorts; a way of memorializing all the lives lost to racism and of remembering "the black people in Harlem, in West Baltimore, in the South Side of Chicago, and in Washington, DC, who inspired that book, [and] who empowered that book" (in Klein, "A Big Believer" n.p.). For Coates, hopefulness is a futility, as hoping has never improved anything for black individuals, who are still told to keep wishing that things will get better as the number of black persons murdered in the streets keep increasing every day. As Darnell L. Moore writes, "black people hold on to hope despite the absence of hope's fulfillment" ("On Mourning" n.p.). Instead of longing for the better, Coates suggests, black people have to cling to the present; to the things that are already here—to the love for the people, which might in the end, paraphrasing Cornel West, give meaning to struggle (23).

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