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Questions for Psychoanalysis and Race

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Hortense Spillers

Vanderbilt University

Ta-Nehesi Coates's *Between the World and Me* poses as an extended epistle written to his son. Performed on an analogy with James Baldwin's *Fire Next Time*, whose first essay "My Dungeon Shook" is dedicated to Baldwin's nephew "on the Hundreth Anniversary of the Emancipation," Coates's work, whose title also reiterates that of a poem by Richard Wright, is published in the wake of a series of very public and very horrific police and vigilante crimes that riveted public attention in the United States between 2012 and 2016, beginning with the gunning down of Trayvon Martin in the state of Florida. Indeed this spectacle of depredations appears to match a profile of predictable executions and outcomes so definitively pursued that it makes perfect sense to think of the upshot as a nationally-aimed police conspiracy, directed at African-American citizens, mostly young males, who lost their lives for no good reason, and it is not entirely clear to me now that we stand today on the other side of this quite remarkable deluge. In any case, Coates, putting himself in a Baldwinian posture, more than fifty years after "My Dungeon Shook," takes up matters that are still alive and brewing on U.S soil so that the passage of time between Wright, Baldwin, and Coates might be demarcated according to radical transformations in the material culture and in representational features of the public sphere, but Coates, like Baldwin, is addressing the *subjective* aspects of time, and for him, not enough has changed that he does not feel the necessity to send up warning flares from his location—from father to son. If Baldwin in the nineteen-sixties believed that the U.S Republic was celebrating the One-Hundreth Anniversary of Emancipation an entire century "too soon," then how much farther removed from the sounds of grace might Richard Wright's narrator in his poem have felt in the awful nineteen-thirties? In this triumvirate of personalities and motives—from Wright and Baldwin to Coates—over seventy years of life, labor, and loss—we encounter in the abrupt collapse of time and space the essential elements of the "crisis" that configures black passage in the New

World. These lines of kinship, both consanguineous and ineffable, travelling from father to son, from uncle to nephew, from one generation to the next, lend us a figurative rhythm that grasps the notion of the *processional*—the traversal of time and space that remains fundamentally mysterious, just as we can put our finger directly on the problem—black life is still as endangered and precarious as it ever was.

If one regards such passage as a “crisis,” then it is precisely because it is riddled with turning points, sudden ruts and rifts in the road when the way seemed smooth and clear—those moments when decisions must be made—and from that perspective, African-American cultural apprenticeship offers, by definition, crisis not as a state of exception, but rather, as a *steady* state, given historical pressures that bear in on it and that become, as a result, *intramural* pressures. How one views black others. It is the latter—what happens when messages that originate elsewhere are assumed as a symptom of my own becoming—that commentators have been preoccupied with precisely from one generation to the next. Coates in that sense joins a long and distinguished line of thinkers and writers before him, of which Wright and Baldwin are only two of many. What I wish to do in these remarks is to attempt to clarify one of the questions engendered by this predicament, and that is to say, the riddle of identity and how it matters, but even more than an inquiry into the identitarian, I am searching for a protocol through intramural space. These remarks should be considered as notes toward a more comprehensive grasp of the problem at hand.

II

A little less than midway through *Between the World and Me*, Coates explains that one of the lessons of his parenting has been his attempt to raise his son, Samori Toure, “to respect every human being as singular.”¹ Relatedly, Coates believes that such respect “must extend...into the past.” In elaboration of the point, his next step seems to overwhelm the bounds of intimacy that frame the whole discourse and take hold instead of a far broader stage of reference, though the move is hardly irrelevant: “Slavery,” he begins, “is not an indefinable mass of flesh. It is a particular, specific enslaved woman, whose mind is active as your own, whose range of feeling is as vast as your own; who prefers the way the light falls in one particular spot in the woods, who enjoys fishing where the water eddies in a nearby stream, who loves her mother in her own complicated way, thinks her sister talks too loud, has a favorite cousin, a favorite season, who excels at dress-making and knows, inside herself, that she is as intelligent and capable as anyone. . . .”²

Coates concocts this hypothetical scene, with its nineteenth-century pastoral flavors, from a composite of historiographical sketches of black life under slavery’s regimen, but by invoking it, he is insisting, I believe, that we make every effort to understand the enslaved in the fullness of their humanity

rather than the empty ciphers of log books and accounting columns against which background the enslaved's humanity is evacuated, is checked at the door. The common historical thread that by implication weaves at least three generations of interlocutors together is Coates's evocation of the *black body*; a general schema, a heuristic device that operates across time, through time, unaltered by circumstance and particularity, Coates's "black body" is certainly recognizable, though I'd have much preferred a different metonymic collapse precisely because black humanity cannot be reduced to its body. But in articulating to his son and his son's generation what *paradigmatically* lies ahead, Coates takes recourse to body image because he wants to dissociate body from something else—*soul* comes to mind—and what soul *ontologically* guarantees; but it was the body that was stolen, alienated, tortured, starved, fractured, labored to death and streamlined for its sexual and reproductive function. *Between the World and Me* is addressing, then, this sustained ordeal and its aftermath, as Coates assures the reader that he was so hailed by his father and that father by his own. Coates asserts: "This is your country, this is your world, this is your body, and you must find some way to live within the all of it." Within the all of it. In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin makes powerful appeal to what he calls the few relatively conscious blacks and whites in the belief that the acquisition of a certain level or degree of consciousness would not only harmonize race relations in the U.S, but that in doing so, we would "achieve our country." As he puts it in the closing argument of the essay: "If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world." With this prophetic gesture, Baldwin could make his readers believe that indeed such a thing was possible!

In the instance of African-American culture, certainly from Baldwin's and Coates's points of view, as expressed in *The Fire Next Time* and its epigone, *Between the World and Me*, the crisis at hand is confronted at the level of the body—the markings and stigmata of skin color and pigmentation and the damaging regimes of public relations built up from the latter—but its resolution, long deferred, would take another route, paradoxically, the transliteration of the bodily into consciousness, or we might say, after Baldwin's peroration, the work of *soul-craft*: just as Du Bois limned parallel lines between black reconstruction and the revitalization of American democracy, Baldwin literally predicates the outcome of national destiny on the salvific stance of the few—the black few, chief among them. In short, Baldwin is calling on black America to *embody* the moral conscience of the nation as Du Bois had done long before. Even though Coates does not go that far, the potential to reach such heights is vaguely outlined by way of his insistence that his son assume the historical dimensions of memory in undertaking to understand the very predicament of the bonded. In a sense, the "predicament" reaches closure in Emancipation and constitutional

maneuver, but the long red record of violence attests that sermons and legislation, bodies surrendered in sacrifice, and careful attention to the duties of citizenship have not been sufficient. If that is so, then the crisis of enslavement, acquiring other ways and means, touches down on contemporary ground as the noise of Ferguson, Missouri, Flint, Michigan, Staten Island, New York, Sanford, Florida, Waller County, Texas and numerous other ports of call, both well-known and obscure, that riddle the landscape of our nightmarish half-awakening. Bothered, then, by what was, which remains what is, we bear on the pulse of the nerve, down to the present day, an historical antagonism that would transform itself into an *askesis*, or a discipline that would make room for a paradoxical possibility—to achieve both distance from the predicament, as we live it.

This “hermeneutic demand” to interpret the situation of blackness in the process of living it has yielded over time a varied conceptual and theoretical response, beginning systematically with the work of W.E.B. Du Bois. In fact, Du Bois encounters “soul” as the chief theoretical device that he mobilizes against his notion of America’s “dusty desert of dollars and smartness.” But further, Du Bois’s systematic deployment of “soul-craft,” or what we might call African-American subjecthood/subjectivity as it refracts and reflects on the surround, is poised on the contemporary scene as “the problem of the Negro as a problem for thought.”³ Du Boisian ontology might be brought alongside a psychoanalytic protocol, which has the advantage of positing an occasion for the recognition of a putative collective, as well as the predicament of the “one.” My own interest in a psychoanalytic problematic in relationship to this class of historical actors is predicated on two related premises, both translated from the Freudian-Lacanian synthesis; not by any mean suggesting the desirability of a *wholesale* application of any psychoanalytic regime to African-Diasporic life worlds, I am interested in the investigation of 1) discourse as the locus of a “situation-specificity.” If the unconscious is “structured like a language,” as the Lacanians contend, and if “linguistic structure gives its status to the unconscious,” then the investigator wishes to discover *where* a subject-subjectivity is located. There is significant critical resistance to this notion and to the repertoire of conceptual apparatuses to which it belongs precisely because there is no steady ontological ground or disposition that black personality inhabits. In Afro-pessimism, for example, Frank Wilderson, as one of its major theorists, starts from the premise that black culture and, therefore, black subjectivity, demarcates a highly uncertain proposition, or does not exist all, on the basis of what Orlando Patterson advances as “social death.”⁴ I start from an analogous configuration of historiographical and historical data and reach a different conclusion—2) because the subject of “social death” has been barred from language—in fact, the latter might be thought of as the founding proposition of blackness in the Western context—then all the more reason why such language in this subjective formation must be revealed.

This specific linguistic and discursive “retrieval” —we could call it—is possible, I believe, because the subject of “social death” becomes, in the words of Fred Moten, objects that “can and do resist.”⁵ The passage that I read earlier from Coates’s fictionalization of an enslaved person is noteworthy as regards the resisting object: instead of presenting the face of a passive unmoving foil to the human wishes and willing of another, Coates’s anonymous figure is imagined to be fully dimensional. I would name this dimensionality the “one who counts” from the Lacanian notion. As I have attempted to demonstrate elsewhere, the “one” stands in stark contrast to the “individual” with its accents and overtones that index property and ownership. The subject of discourse and the “one who counts” would allow an inquiry into personality, or one *in relation* to others. As *personality* assumes the forward position, stigmata, in my estimation, recedes to background. Another way to put this would be to say that the movement toward subject positioning is anti-racist in its impulses, inasmuch as a racialized perception of reality aims its weapons toward the undifferentiated—it swallows whole masses of humanity down the gullet so that empirically millions of subjects might be metonymically reduced to a repertory of traits—the individual stands for the “race,” the “race” for the individual in perfect synecdochic complementarity. The “one” intervenes on this ease of motion where it matters—on the ground of the local, “at home,” we might say, insofar as its opening gambit denotes what the subject speaks, what the subject is spoken. The “one” might well overlap the “individual,” sharing some of its traits—the proper name, for instance—but the former seems to exceed the latter in both priority and emphasis to the extent that individualism is predicated on the rights of property and what is permissible by law.

At a gathering of scholars from the trans-African world the past summer, one of the questions broached had to do with the after-life of the Middle Passage—what series of events transpired in the interior spaces of the enslaved that implicates and signifies on the African societies that incurred the massive losses over three centuries? Clearly, there are neither simple answers here, nor might they be provided, even approached, in short order; perhaps the first obligation would be a clarification of the question itself, which I would pose as a suppositional and hypothetical tissue of riddles that defy resolution: the transgenerational transfer of guilt and trauma that traverses Africanity across time and space. These questions, which we might sketch in sequence on some other occasion, would highlight the turning points of generational procession on one side of the Atlantic, where this talk began. But what about the other side where the unfathomable journey of radical transformation commences? On either side of the Atlantic, a question that might be transparently, at least straightforwardly, posed—what were the objective conditions seven centuries ago that led to the trans-Atlantic slave trade?—conduces to the problem of the African Oedipus.⁶ Frantz Fanon, the ever-skeptical psychoanalytic practitioner, half-jokingly contended once upon a time that there was no such thing among sub-Saharan African

societies: “It is too often forgotten that neurosis is not a basic element of human reality. Like it or not, the Oedipus complex is far from coming into being among Negroes.”⁷ Fanon goes on to argue in this text that black personality does not have time to develop a neurosis around such a complex because life bears in on him/her with such ferocity that their responses are always drawn to the moment of his/her black body in a white world—the crisis of Ferguson, Missouri, for example. But if Fanon is right, and I, for one, very much doubt that he is, then we have much explaining to do, i.e. the transfer of authority along vertical and horizontal axes, which trammelled passage engenders intramural violence at unfathomable levels of repetition and mindlessness. Even though Ferguson was generated from an “outside,” there is enough disharmony on the interior that we are worried to name its source, and my contention is that these homicidal impulses start up from first things that disappear into the obscure past of troubled relations between elders and the younger.⁸ There is no doubt that the abeyance of the speculative is encouraged to transpire in light of an immediate threat, but too much of life is spent under differentiated circumstances. We are interested in a more acute understanding of black personality’s *total* predicament and his/her passage through everyday life. In order to execute a deeper conceptualization of the totality, we look toward reports from the mental theatre of black lifeworlds. While Coates’s *Between the World and Me* does not engage this dimension of critical inquiry, he is at least headed in the right direction, and that is to say, words that travel between fathers and sons and mothers and daughters on the vertical axis of the transfer of power and authority—nothing less than a perception of time and crisis.

¹ Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York : Spiegel and Grau, 2015), 69.

² Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 69-70.

³ Nahum Chandler’s masterful *X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* takes up the question of ontology in relationship to the Du Boisian subject (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

⁴ Frank Wilderson, *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁵ Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1.

⁶ Marie-Cecile and Edmond Ortigues, *Oedipe Africain* (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 1984).

⁷ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 151-52.

⁸ See Claude Meillassoux, *Maidens, Meals, and Money: Capitalism and the Domestic Community* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 79. Meillassoux suggests that in the circumstance of certain local communities on the subsaharan scene of the African slave trade, “juniors »--or the young in general--were not only producers, but commodities as well and could be banished or sold « for real or imagined crimes.”