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**Anti-Black Racism in James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1963) and Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* (2015)**

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for a **Master's degree in Literature and Civilization**

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## Abstract

The present paper examines James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* and Ta- Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* in the contexts of the Civil Right Movement and Black Lives Matters to glean insight into how racial ideologies and racism in America shifted from a "traditional" to a "new" form that is more implicit. In fact, unlike the 60s, the post-civil right era witnesses a less tangible and a more covert form of racism sustained by ideologies of denial. Within this framework, this study looks into the racial context and the political, economic, and social conditions that followed the civil right movement by relying on Colour-blind Ideology. The analysis of Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* and Coates' *Between the World and Me* reveals that both essayists perceive that contemporary anti-black violence African Americans suffers from is structural and institutionalized in the service of perpetuating white power and privilege.

**Key words:** James Baldwin, Ta-Nehisi Coates, racism, Colour- blind ideology, Civil Rights Movement, Black lives Matters.

## **Dedication**

To our family and loved ones, who believed in us throughout our learning process.

## **Acknowledgments**

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## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>Dedication .....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Acknowledgments.....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Table of Contents .....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>General Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter one: Anti-Black Racism in the United States: Historical and Theoretical</b>	
<b>Background .....</b>	<b>8</b>
Introduction.....	8
I. History, Legacy and Persistence of Anti-Black Racism in Contemporary America .....	8
1. A Peculiar Institution of Slavery in a Newly Democratic Country .....	8
2. The Civil War and Jim Crow Laws.....	11
3. African Americans and New Deal .....	13
4. Civil Rights and Political Activism .....	14
5. Black Lives Matter Movement .....	17
II. Race and Racism in United States .....	20
1. Definition of Race .....	20
2. Definition of Racism.....	21
2.1.Biological Racism.....	22
2.2.Colour-Blind Ideology and the Persistence of Anti-Black Racism in the USA .....	23

Conclusion .....	28
<b>Chapter Two: Anti- Black Racism from the Civil Rights Movement to Black Lives Matter Movement: Analysis of <i>The Fire Next Time</i> and <i>Between the World and Me</i> .....</b>	<b>29</b>
Introduction.....	29
1. Biography of James Baldwin .....	29
2. Biography of Ta- Nehisi Coates .....	31
3. Contextualizing Baldwin’s <i>The Fire Next Time</i> and Coates’ <i>Between the World and Me</i> .....	33
3.1.America in the 1960s and the Civil Rights Movement: the Context of <i>The Fire Next Time</i> .....	33
3.2.America in the 2000s and Black Lives Matter Movement: the Context of <i>Between the World and Me</i> .....	35
4. Summary of <i>The Fire Next Time</i> .....	40
5. Summary of <i>Between the World and Me</i> .....	41
6. Analysis of <i>The Fire Next Time</i> and <i>Between the World and Me</i> .....	42
6.1.Race and Anti-Black Racism in the USA.....	43
6.2.Whiteness vs Blackness .....	44
6.3.Structural Oppression .....	49
6.4.James Baldwin and Ta-Nehisi Coates Visions of Democracy .....	56
Conclusion .....	60
<b>General Conclusion .....</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>Works Cited.....</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Abstract in French (Résumé) .....</b>	<b>72</b>

# **General Introduction**

## General Introduction

The history of African Americans is the history of a tremendous human tragedy. It is the story of a black body violently segregated and exploited to create the United States foundational wealth. Even after getting emancipation, African Americans were pushed to the margins. Segregation larded their daily life; and they are still rejected and regarded as inferior compared to white Americans. In fact, to be a black man, nowadays, is still precarious and represents a crucial problem in the United States. Though current racism differs and shifted, somehow, from the one experienced before the Civil Rights Movement, it continues, in a colour-blind disguise, to exhibit a significant power over the lives of many African Americans.

American Black writers, in their essays and fiction, expose racial segregation, speak out the injustices African Americans face, and claim the right to be treated as equal human beings as it has been stated in the Declaration of Independence. In fact, Black American literature opposes racism and oppression in all its ramifications. It strives to reconstruct African American identity which has been constructed according to whites' conventions, and to help readers to open up to different perspectives and to reconsider certain facts about the United States history. James Baldwin and Ta-Nehisi Coates are among the writers who exposed the unjust treatment of African Americans, and depict blacks' social conditions and the dilemmas they encounter within a world dominated by white values and ideologies.

Well known for his remarkable novels, essays, and poems, including *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1954), *Another Country* (1962), and *No Name in the Street* (1962), James Baldwin was one of the major African-American racial spokesmen of the 60s. His essays *Notes of Native Son* (1955), *Nobody knows my Name* (1961), and *The Fire Next Time* (1963) gained him a reputation as the most "incisive and passionate essayists ever produced by Black



America” (Andrews, Foster, and Harris 22). He is considered “the voice of the Civil Rights Movement” and “Black America’s interpreter of Black America to and for white America” (Timmer and Wamock 165).

On his part, Ta-Nehisi Coates is considered the spokesman of race and contemporary Black America. As Toni Morrison claims “I have been wondering who might fill the intellectual void that plagued me after James Baldwin died. Clearly it is Ta-Nehisi Coates” Coates followed Baldwin’s path, as in his essay *Between the World and Me* (2015), which is inspired by Baldwin’s *Fire Next Time*, puts into question the history of the American violence against the black body and advocates the reality of how it feels to exist as a black man in Modern America. Furthermore, Ta-Nehisi Coates in most of his works including *Between the World and Me* and *We Were Eight Years in Power: an American Tragedy* offers a new dimension for apprehending the current American political crisis with respect to history, more precisely with respect to the legacy of slavery, which according to him continues to constitute the fabric of most of America’s cultural, economic, and political institutions.

## **Review of Literature**

James Baldwin’s prolific works received significant attention in the research literature. A relevant work is Lawrie Balfour’s *The Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of American Democracy* (2001). Lawrie describes James Baldwin as a powerful political thinker. She employs the rich essays of James Baldwin to interrogate the politics of race in American democracy. In her view, Baldwin forecast the future by anticipating the limitations of American civil rights legislation, especially the ways in which the presumption of race blindness supports ongoing racial hierarchy. She argues that Baldwin’s social criticism gives significant insights into the racial issues of the post-civil rights era. According to her, Baldwin’s works remind the reader that today’s thinking about democratic politics implies a

thorough investigation of the silences that divulges the persisting power of race in a society where white supremacy and blackness is no longer an acceptable justification for the oppression of African Americans (10).

Another important work is Carol Polsgrove's *Divided Minds: Intellectuals and the Civil Rights Movement* (2001), which re-assesses Baldwin's importance to the Civil Rights movement. Polsgrove outlines the disinclination displayed by many prominent white and black American intellectuals to support the civil rights struggle in the early years of the movement, evoking Baldwin as an exception. In her account, even though Baldwin was not among the civil rights leaders and did not take direct actions in any of the civil rights organizations, his provocative voice outstretched its full force, and he became the leading intellectual spokesman for the movement for racial equality.

Courtney Ferriter, in her article "The Uses of Race and Religion: James Baldwin's Pragmatist Politics in *The Fire Next Time*" (2016) discusses how Baldwin's understanding of race and religion shape his thinking about democracy. According to her, Baldwin's essay provides a philosophical foundation in understanding the racial tensions prevailing in the United States, and offers hope and guidance for the future (129). Baldwin discusses democracy as an act that must be realized, and the way to do so is by understanding race as a construct that has positive political consequences for all the Americans (Ibid). For Courtney, Baldwin connects love with democracy and believes that "democracy must be open to growth and change rather be mired in old ways of thinking about ideas" (136).

David Leeming, James Baldwin's biographer, friend, and secretary, had been fortunate to frequent James Baldwin for the last twenty-five years of the writer's life. In his book *James Baldwin: a Biography* (2015), he puts pen to paper to analyse the most known works of James Baldwin, among them *The Fire Next Time*. Leeming holds that "The Letter to My Nephew"

represents a direct articulation of Baldwin's philosophy and it "is an impassioned cry to the African American youth represented specifically by Baldwin's nephew and more generally by the young people challenging the old guard in the rights movement" (292). All through the essay, Baldwin emphasises on the must of being integrated in the white society through acceptance and spreading love.

Likewise, Ta-Nehisi Coates' works, "The Case of reparations", *Between the World and Me*, and *We Were Eight Years in Power: an American Tragedy*, received critical and popular acclaim. In his article "Ta-Nehisi and the Insecurity of the Black Body" Gonçalo Cholangt explores questions of identity construction and the body in a context of insecurity, violence, and trauma as depicted by Coates in his memoir *Between the World and Me*. He argues that, by exploring the vulnerability and insecurity of being black and an American, Coates gives a vivid personal testimony on how it feels to carry a black body in a society that sees it as unwanted (3). In so doing, he addresses specifically those affected by police violence, mass incarceration, and entrenched poverty, as well as to a white audience that is interested in bringing racial equality and ending segregation. As matter of fact, Coates power lies in his ability to find appropriate words to speak out unconventional and radical truth (9).

Coates' blunt assessment of American racial history pushed various scholars to draw a connection between him and other black leaders. For instance, David Humphrey, in his article "Removing the VEIL: Coates, Neoliberalism, and the color line" studies Coates' *Between the World and Me* as an extension of Du Boisian tradition. According to Humphrey, Coates' text, like that of Du Bois impels a reconsideration of the oppression and mythologization of black experience. He states that Coates by mystifying whiteness as a norm and by defining the dreamer as a mere representation for white privilege; he abides himself with Du Bois philosophical formulation of whiteness as hyper-visible (20).

Coates' work *Between the World and Me*, drawing inspiration from Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, and Toni Morrison's claim that he filled the "intellectual void after James Baldwin died" prompted discussion on Coates engagement with Baldwin and the similarities and differences of their outlooks. Michelle Alexander; a legal scholar and activist, in her review of Ta-Nehisi Coates *Between the World and Me* for The New York Times (2015), observes that Coates like Baldwin is trying to make his son aware of the blatant racial injustice and confront the reality that he is born in a world that refuses to guarantee for him the freedoms that so many others take for granted.

On what distinguishes Coates from Baldwin, Alexander highlights that the major difference between Baldwin and Coates consists in their perception of the future, while Baldwin is optimistic for having a better future and believes that revolutionary change is possible against all odds, Coates on the other hand does not believe that change is possible. Instead, he warns against the dangers of believing in the American Dream and emphasizes the necessity of a national reckoning with racism to achieve permanent racial justice in America.

### **Significance of the Study**

From the above literature review, it is obvious that the themes of racism, oppression, and the experience of the Black Body are prevalent in the works of James Baldwin and Ta-Nehisi Coates and an abundant research has been carried out on them. The present study will focus on exploring Baldwin's and Coates's perceptions of the American racial history in their essays: *The Fire Next Time* (1963), and *Between the World and Me* (2015), blacks' structural oppression as well as the evolution of the African Americans' condition from the period of the Civil Right Movement to the contemporary one.

## **Aim of the Study**

Through the analysis of James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1963) and Ta- Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* (2015), the study aims to explore American's fraught racial history and its contemporary echoes. In this work we argue that James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* and Coates' *Between the World and Me* are grounded in their experiences of American anti-black racism. Both are written during periods of strife. The first was written during the period of the Civil Rights Movement. The second was published during the period of Obama presidency /colour-blind ideology, and intensified police violence against Blacks and this explains their similarities and also their differences.

Both James Baldwin and Coates are public intellectuals who have been committed to the political and social realities of the American society. They offer insightful commentary and sharp criticism on persisting white violence. The racial Justice and the police brutality the modern era notices made Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* and Coates' *Between the World and Me* extraordinary timeless.

## **Thesis Statement**

This study reads the essays "*The Fire Next Time*" (1963) and "*Between the World and Me*" (2015) in the context of the periods of the Civil Right Movement and the Black Lives Matter movement by relying on the concepts of race, racism and colour-blind ideology.

Accordingly, the study aims at answering the following questions:

1. What is it like to inhabit a Black body in America?
2. What are the means used by the US government to oppress African Americans identity and culture and discriminate against them?

3. How does James Baldwin and Ta-Nehisi conceive the problem of race in the United States?
4. Has the Black condition in the USA really changed since the Legislation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964?

### **Structure of the Research Paper**

The paper is divided into two chapters. The first chapter provides the historical and the theoretical background of anti-black racism in United States. It sheds light on how racism still permeates African American lives. The second chapter reviews James Baldwin's and Ta-Nehisi Coates' biographies and presents their works: *The Fire Next Time* (1963) and *Between the World and Me* (2015). Furthermore, it puts the texts into their contexts, and analyses the notion of race and black's structural oppression as presented by James Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time* and Coates in *Between the World and Me*.

## **Chapter one**

# **Anti-Black Racism in the United States: Historical and Theoretical Background**

## Chapter I

### Anti-Black Racism in the United States: Historical and Theoretical Background

#### Introduction

The present chapter provides the historical and theoretical background of the two texts under study: James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* and Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*. It looks into the major events shaping the history of African Americans, from the institution of slavery to the Black Lives Matter movement. Then, it provides an overview of race and racism in the United States. In fact, from issues surrounding slavery to the presumed status of the United States as a post-racial state, race, over centuries, still garners much attention in the public discussion. Finally, it explains how the Colour-blind ideology operates in denying the discussion of race in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### I. History, Legacy and Persistence of Anti-Black Racism in Contemporary America

In the United States, anti-black racism and racial violence are deeply rooted and embedded from its inception. Thus, an examination of the institution of slavery and certain historical events in the United States is necessary to understand how racism has become institutionalized in all spheres of America.

##### 1. A Peculiar Institution of Slavery in a Newly Democratic Country

The insidious Institution of Slavery and its enduring legacy plays a major role in shaping the American national narrative; it represents a stark reminder that the promise of equality stated in the American Declaration of Independence would long remain unfulfilled for African Americans.



In America, slavery first came into being with the European settlements. Seeking religious freedom and better living conditions, tens of thousands of Europeans moved to the New World to start a new life. The British colonization of the New World started in 1607 with the settlement of Virginia colony. Then, it was followed by the foundation of other colonies, forming today's United States. Black's enslavement started during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when black people were first brought from Africa to Virginia by Dutch ships.

Initially, when settlements were relatively small, Africans brought to the colonies as means of securing cheap labour, had the same status as indentured servants. But during the 1700s, with the growing of the colonies and to satisfy the colonists' labour needs, slavery was codified into law, which established a distinction between indentured servants and slaves (Tourse, Mason, and Wewioski 30). From then, slavery became a central part of American society and its economic system. Even after the United States came into being, black people continued to be enslaved and treated as inferiors.

In 1787, the Constitutional Convention, led by Thomas Jefferson, met in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to develop a new system of government for the United States of America. The Convention resulted in the creation of the US Constitution which is regarded as one of the most important events in American history and the democratic history of the modern world. Upon its ratification, it was exalted as a miracle that would instil peace, equality, and moral progress in the American society. Its main concern was "to form a more perfect union" and "to establish justice" However, the socio-political structure presented in this document aimed to preserve the racial separation and oppression at that time and for the future (Feagin 6). For blacks, the union could be neither "more perfect" nor "just." The Founding Fathers never intended for the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution to include

the Negro race. Black Americans were regarded as intellectually inferior, and unfit to be associated with the white race, either in social or political relations.

This juxtaposition between American slavery and American democracy pushed various thinkers and historians to question and subject the Constitution framers to a never-ending criticism. William Van Cleve persuasively argues that the Constitution was a “proslavery in its politics, its economics, and its law” (270). The Constitution’s proslavery character, according to him, was an unavoidable result of its drafters’ effort “to endow the national government with strong military, fiscal, and commerce powers” Its constitutional provisions protecting slavery were much more than simple “political” compromise, they were essential to the foundation of the new nation. And without the founders’ implicit protection of slavery, there will be probably no Union to create a new nation. (Ibid)

Though the Founding Fathers, while drafting the constitution, were aware that slavery was an unjust institution incompatible with their republican principles, they did nothing to end it. Emancipation wasn’t their primordial goal. Indeed, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, Andrew Johnson, in addition to many other American political leaders were themselves large slave-holders. In fact, by counting the slaves as 3/5 of a person, and passing the fugitive slave clause (1793), which prohibited Northern states from interfering with the recapture of fugitives, the Founders clearly legitimized slavery. Michael Higginbotham argues that while the Founders were the first to oppose British colonialism and oppression, it was them who signed a document that embraced a racial hierarchy leading the foundation for centuries of racial inequality (36). He, further, notes that the original American Constitution encompassed a paradox; while it attempted to set up justice and ensure tranquillity, it decried no rights for the black population, more than that it contributed in preserving oppression (35).

One can deduce that slavery, as a political institution, grew from the American Revolution stronger than it was under the British colonization. The global racist order embedded in the United States Constitution, although overridden by later constitutional amendments, remained the nation's legitimate, political, and to a significant degree, its moral foundation.

## **2. The Civil War and Jim Crow Laws**

American Civil War was one of the bloodiest wars in American history. It took place from 1861 to 1865 between the Northern and Southern states over the continued existence of slavery throughout the United States. At that time, the Northern States were characterized by a growing manufacturing industry with a strong antislavery sentiment. On the other hand, the Southern States were very much dependent on slavery as their only source of prosperity.

After the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860, many Southern states seceded from the Union and instead create a confederacy, consequently a war broke. On January 1, 1863, because the North was on the verge of a military defeat just after the Battle of Antietam and to gain the support of black slaves, Lincoln announced the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing over 4 million slaves. The Civil War, hence, shifted from a struggle to preserve the Union to a struggle to end slavery. All blacks, Southerners and Northerners, saw the Civil War as the ultimate opportunity to achieve freedom and improve their conditions.

Following the end of the Civil War and the abolition of the institution of slavery in 1865, African Americans found themselves not only free from slavery but declared citizens of the United States. The passage of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments, the 1866 Civil Rights Act, and the Reconstruction Act of 1867 guaranteed blacks' basic civil rights, and explicitly prohibited slavery and involuntary servitude except as punishment for crimes. The

15<sup>th</sup> Amendment declared that all persons, including Africans, born or naturalized in the United States are American citizens (Kalarman 10).

However, the abolition of slavery did not mean the end of anti-black racism as a new system of racial segregation quickly replaced slavery during the Reconstruction Era. Whites, mainly Southerners, were not willing to give up their privileged status. Immediately after the Civil War ended, most Southern states started imposing restrictions and enforcing laws that became known as Black Codes to keep the freed slaves under the control of white landowners and to preserve the pre-civil war dominant racial hierarchy. The Black Code laws were a set of racist laws designed to restrict African American liberties. Fremon holds that, under these codes, black people were denied the right to enter schools, theatres, hotels, and other public facilities.

Over time, those Black Codes, eventually, laid the ground for more segregated laws, collectively, called Jim Crow laws. Alexander Michele notes that while some of those codes were determined to set up systems of control similar to slavery, others by banning, among other things, interracial seating in public transportations and by discriminating schools augured Jim Crow laws (28).

Enacted between 1877 and 1965, Jim Crow Laws were designed to segregate and discriminate black people. They operated mostly in southern states, and were directly separatist and racist with an end goal of complete racial segregation. Jim Crow was not simply a series of strict anti-black laws; it was a way of life. Plessey V. Ferguson landmark was central in recasting hierarchical division between whites and blacks. In 1896, the US Supreme Court established the “separate, but equal” doctrine, and hence became the new form of white domination (Morris 518). It perpetuated anti-Black discrimination in most of the domains like education, economics, and politics. All of this was expressly premised on the

notion that Blacks were the innate intellectual, cultural and temperamental inferiors to Whites (519).

### **3. African Americans and the New Deal**

The Great Depression was the worst economic downturn the world has ever seen. The economic devastation it caused was so harming for Americans, especially African Americans. The latter were excessively affected by high rates of unemployment; they were the first to be fired and the last to be hired.

In an attempt to revive American economy, offer a relief to the unemployed, and make home ownership widely available to the American public, the federal government, under the leadership of Franklin D. Roosevelt, instituted a series of economic reforms and programs including the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC), the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), and the Veterans Administration, known as the New Deal.

Many have considered the New Deal as being beneficial for African Americans but in reality, it was not. The New Deal policies did not eliminate segregation, or the pernicious discrimination in employment, wages, and working conditions that plagued so many African Americans. Instead, they developed and implemented the practice of racial redlining. Richard Rothstein notes that "Race determined the program's design. The administration constructed separate projects for African Americans, segregated buildings by race, or excluded African Americans entirely from developments." This was specifically true within the South, where Southern Democrats held a lot of authority which rested upon racial segregation. Given that the president Roosevelt required Southern Democrat support, he couldn't risk himself by advocating black's civil rights. As such, racist policies found their ways into the New Deal.

Redlining is a practice that originated from housing policies of the 1930's developed by the to address the crippling effects of the Great Depression. In fact, in 1933 and 1934, to prevent foreclosures and make home ownership more affordable for Americans, Roosevelt passed the Home Owners' Loan Act and the National Housing Act into law. The HOLC created maps to estimate the risk of mortgage refinancing and lay new standards for federal underwriting. Eventually, the FHA used these maps to determine the areas in which it would guarantee mortgages. Given that HOLC maps designated non-white neighbourhoods as being predominately insecure and risky, by colouring these areas red, the FHA excluded African Americans from their program.

This policy, known as redlining, denied people of colour—especially Black people—access to mortgage refinancing and federal underwriting opportunities while perpetuating the notion that residents of colour were financially risky and a threat to local property values (Solomon, Maxwell, Castro). In this sense, the New Deal can be characterized, from an African American perspective, as one of increasing racial discrimination and deepening segregation.

#### **4. Civil Rights Movement and Political Activism**

During the 1920s up to the 1970s, many political organizations emerged against the widespread segregation and black injuries African Americans face. Most of them emerged during the New Negro Movement such as the Constitution League, the National Equal Rights League and The Niagara movement, but the most known at that time was The National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP).

The NAACP counteracted every negative assumption about blacks, and over the years, it succeeded to gain several court victories against segregation (Larry 13). The Brown V. Board of Education legislation (1954) was, probably, the most significant one; it outlawed

segregation and signaled a striking reversal of the ideas expressed in the Plessey V. Ferguson landmark. Though it was applied only to public schools, it succeeded in shaking the whole system of segregation and in encouraging African Americans to denounce other forms of discrimination.

Emerged in the late 1950s, the Civil Rights Movement is a long struggle and national effort made by African Americans and their supporters against the continuing racism and segregation. By the 1950s, America enjoyed a growing prosperity in all domains. Consequently, 60% of Americans enjoyed the middle-class standard of living, but most of the people who enjoyed those living conditions were only white Americans, which made African Americans question themselves whether they were truly Americans or not. At this point, the movement exploded to ask for equal rights. S. Jones-Eversley, Sharon, Robinson, and Michael, maintain that the CRM activists challenged white supremacies' contention that the exclusion of Blacks from Whites was not only legal, but naturally legitimate under the 14th Amendment clause (4).

Rosa Parks' refusal to obey the order to move to the back of a bus in Montgomery and to give her seat for a white man constitutes the watershed of the movement. Her arrest stirred African Americans' frustration sparking, therefore, the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott which served as turning ground to U.S race relations of the 60s. According to Aldon Morris, the Montgomery boycott showed that protests and nonviolent direct actions were effective and could be sustained indefinitely. It, further, demonstrated African Americans' power and ability to challenge and mobilize against racial segregation (524).

Nonetheless, it was until the mid 1960s that the modern civil rights movement turned into an organized force that would overthrow Jim Crow laws putting an end to legal segregation. The South as well as the North noticed highly public demonstrations, which fuelled a crisis in

the American social order, to the extent that white officials started using violence to defeat the movement (Morris 224-225).

One of the main strategies that constituted the core of the movement was led by Martin Luther King Jr., and was based on nonviolence. King was influenced by Ghandi's philosophy. His nonviolent strategies stemmed from his integrationist conviction that one day African Americans would "not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" (Ware 1093). W. E. B. Du Bois also saw the nonviolence strategy along protests as the best way that will cost the oppressor too much. To put it in his words: "Oppression costs the oppressor too much if the oppressed stands up and protests. The protest need not be merely physical-the throwing of stones and bullets-if it is mental, spiritual; if it expresses itself in silent, persistent dissatisfaction, the cost to the oppressor is terrific" (W. E. B. Du Bois Quotes).

The most impressive nonviolent action is the historic March on Washington on August 28, 1963, in which Luther King delivered his most famous speech "I Have a Dream". The march was the largest civil rights demonstration in American history and received international attention. Over 250,000 people gathered peacefully on the Mall in Washington.

A different and competing philosophy emerged with Malcolm X and other Black radicals who founded the Black Power Movement. Malcolm X went against the idea of nonviolence believing that African Americans should employ all the necessary means in their fight for racial justice.

Black women, also, were the backbone of the Civil Rights Movement; black females played a crucial role as strategists and advocates. They participated despite the dangers including violence, homelessness, unemployment, sexual assault, and death. One of these females was Dorothy Height. She was known as the "Godmother of the Civil Rights



Movement” because of her extensive involvement and her important role in the fight for the civil rights since the 1930s. Fannie Lou Hamer is another black woman, who fought for civil rights in rural Mississippi, as she challenged the racist status quo by fighting against segregation. She was one of the leaders of the 1964 Campaign, which fought against white supremacy and racial violence in Mississippi. She also was one of the founders of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party which was created for the sake of integrating African Americans into the state's Democratic Party (Houck and Dixon 220- 280).

African American mass mobilization and resistance, from bus boycotts, sit-ins, nonviolent demonstrations to national marches, as well as the televised racial violence pushed the President John F. Kennedy and Congress to enact the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that would put an end to racial injustice. In fact, in 1964, President Johnson signed The Civil Rights Act, prohibiting discrimination in public facilities based on race, color, religion, or national origin. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, strengthened by the Voting Rights Act of 1965, remains one of the most significant events in African American history.

## **5. Black Lives Matter Movement**

Over the past several years following the Civil Right Movement, African Americans’ communities have steadily started to denounce and voice out the violence and racism that continue to be wreaked against them, fuelling the formation of the Black Lives Matter movement and various demonstrations across the United States (Linn- Tynen 256).

In fact, the killings of unarmed Black boys like Trayvon Martin (2012), Michael Brown (2014), Tamir Rice (2014), Eric Garner (2014), Freidi Gray (2015), and many others by police officers have brought to the forefront the devastating reality of racist violence, structural racism, and the police brutality black people experience in contemporary America (Clark, Dantzler and Nickles 146).

As a response to those killings and more precisely to the acquittal of the killer of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed 17-year-old African American, three black women: Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi founded the Black Lives Matter movement, which they define as “an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise” (Black Lives Matter). The movement, first, emerged as a simple twitter hashtag #blacklivesmatter and then it developed to a well organised movement after the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner.

As a social movement, the Black Lives Matter optimizes active resistance to the dehumanization and disenfranchisement of the Black lives. Its main issue is to denounce racism, police brutality and systematic oppression of Black people in the United States and all around the world. It is considered by many as “the second wave” of the Civil Right Movement (Clarck, Dantzler and Nickles 145). In fact, the systemic racism that exists in America today has brought about the need for Black Lives Matter (BLM) to continue the struggle for Black liberation in America which the Civil Right Movement has started.

For Gonçalo Cholant, BLM is among the forces that resist and take a sharp stance against the racial progress the United States knows (178). In addition of being unique in its consumption, the movement is characterized by various forms of direct actions, street protests, and uprisings calling and fighting for systematic and fundamental reforms (Barbara 4). Therefore, what constitutes the kernel of Black Lives Matter Movement is not the struggle over whose lives matter the most, but, it is mainly the struggle to make an end to institutionalized premature death inflicted upon the Black community, which is caused by various racist acts of violence and institutional racism in housing, healthcare, jobs, education, and the criminal justice (Crass 10).

The recent, well-publicized tragic death of George Floyd, has spawned a public debate about race and policing, and brought the movement, once again, to the media mainstream. In fact, the “Black Lives Matter” statement becomes a multifaceted slogan in denouncing systemic racism and showing solidarity with black people worldwide. George Floyd, a 46-years- old African American, suspected of purchasing cigarettes with a fake 20\$ bill, was killed on 25 May 2020, by Derek Chauvin, a white Minneapolis police officer, after kneeling on his neck for several minutes. The whole incident was recorded in a video that went viral on social media. It shows George Floyd lying on the street, and Chauvin knee on his neck, he was seen urging him not to kill him and he couldn’t breathe. It is worth to mention that the horrific homicide of George Floyd comes on the back of two other high-profile killings of black Americans in recent weeks: Ahmud Arbery, 25 years old, and Breona Tylor, 26 years old and happened amidst the coronavirus pandemic where thousands African Americans have lost their lives.

Consequently, several protests broke down across every corner of the United States and worldwide calling for broad corrections to racial injustice and prompting the government to launch a serious urgent study of racial profiling in its police force. The outrage of these recent killings represents, for many, a visceral expression of accumulated frustration over the persisting racism and the socio-economic inequalities and discrimination.

Barack Obama used social media to express his bitterness over such incidents, saying that "this shouldn't be normal in 2020 America” and urging the activists to take profit from these events to make radical changes. On the other side, President Trump reacted to the protests by describing the protesters as looters, thugs, and anarchists, arguing that a strong economic plan would be the best antidote to make an end to racial inequalities, and neglecting any other forms of systemic racism.

## **II. Race and Racism in the United States**

Race and racism in the United States have been forged by centuries of long conflicts between white dominance and people of colour resistance. Robert Lieberman notes that “Race is important in American politics not simply as an ascriptive characteristic that divides the polity into discrete groups but also as a motive force in the construction of political life” (230). In order to understand the meaning of the term race and racism, and how they are intertwined into the very fabric of the American society, we provide their definitions.

### **1. Definition of Race**

Race, as most scholars suggest today, is socially constructed. Yet, for many decades, many social and biological scientists presented it as biologically determined. Du Bois, considered by many as the father of sociology, was the first to challenge the biological foundation of race. He asserted that race is not a biological construct, but a social construct, serving to justify slavery, exploitation, white supremacy, and legalized forms of segregation. He conceptualized the notion of race as follows:

What, then, is race? It is a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life. (80)

Similarly, Manning Marable refutes the idea that race is biologically determined and argues that race is first and foremost an unequal relationship between social masses. It is “characterized by dominant and subordinate forms of social interaction, and reinforced by the

intricate patterns of public discourse, power, ownership and privilege within the economic, social and political institutions of society.”

Howard Winant and Michael Omi’s *Racial Formation in the United States* (1986), represents a theoretical breakthrough in the analysis of race relations and racism. The authors afford a thorough critique of previous theoretical approaches and suggest a new approach for the study of racial phenomena. They highlight the ways race is socially constructed. In their view, race represents “a master category of oppression and resistance” and demonstrate that in the United States, it served as a template for both difference and inequality. In other words: “the establishment and reproduction of race has established supposedly fundamental distinctions among human beings (“othering”), ranking and hierarchizing them for purposes of domination and exploitation” (245). As such, the notion of race is never fixed; is dynamic and constantly changing; all according to the interests of the leading group. For instance, what is black in Africa and Asia is not the same in America.

## **2. Definition of Racism**

The concept of racism is of recent origin. Racism is defined by Merriam Webster, as any attitude, or belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race. In the same vein, political scientist, Rickey Hill, conceptualizes race as “a system of ideas and values, of advantages and disadvantages” and Racism as “the ideology that rationalizes racial domination and white supremacy” (134).

Racism, in essence, is a form of practice, and like all practices, is justified, by a theory, and a belief system. In fact, from biological racism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to ideological colour-blind racism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, racism has undergone numerous transformations, most of them in response and in adaptation to the circumstances of time and place. Given that the

notion of race is not fixed and constantly evolving, so are the ideological discourses that justify it.

### **2.1. Biological Racism before the Civil Rights Era**

Toward the end of the 19th century, to legitimize black people subordination and oppression, new theories, largely based on scientific and naturalistic arguments, emerged. With the development of the enlightenment ideas and human sciences of the nineteenth century, science was gaining momentum as the superior mode of reasoning. Racist ideas, thus, shifted from theological and religious assumptions, and began instead to turn to biology for ideological support. In fact, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, most white social scientists adopted social Darwinist views about the social divisions among races. Spencer and subsequent social Darwinists posed questions concerning the coexistence of, and organic struggle among, biologically conceived races (Feagin 24).

The new scientific racism, as Feagin writes, “determinedly asserted the notion of specific races with different physical characteristics, a belief that these characteristics were hereditary, and the notion of a natural hierarchy of inferior and superior races” (74). Under this perspective, blacks were deemed genetically and innately inferior more akin to chimpanzees than human beings. They were conceived uncivilized and intellectually incompatible, and thus deserve subordination.

Throughout American history, the exclusion of blacks was justified by a string of stereotypes and beliefs that made their conditions seem logical and natural. Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo show that in 1880s and 1890s, advocates of segregation and white supremacy based their anti-black ideology on notions of social Darwinism. The Plessey V. Ferguson ruling of 1896, which proclaimed “separate but equal” facilities to be constitutional, is the best illustration (8).

However, following WWII and the Civil Rights Era, more particularly, with the election of Barack Obama, the institutional climate of racial politics, within the United States, has shifted dramatically. The significant change in the US racial order lies in the form racism manifests itself, and the institutional and cultural practices through which whites contest to preserve their hegemonic position. The post-civil rights climate makes the blatant expression of racist ideas unacceptable. Thus, racial expressions, altered and evolved into a more hidden and devious form. Nevertheless, what is modern racism looks like is often debatable and controversial. Several terms have emerged to describe and explain this new form of racism, among them, we find laissez-faire racism, cultural racism, and colour-blind racism. Since our study deals with anti-black racism, we will focus on how colour-blind racism functions and operates.

## **2.2. Colour- Blind Ideology and the Persistence of Anti-Black Racism in the USA**

Omi and Winant assert that, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century United States, the concept of “colour-blindness” is “hegemonic and becomes the racial common sense and desideratum of our time” (256). Colour-blind ideology is a dominant racial ideology that emerged after the Civil Rights movement. It embodies the pervasive racial ideology through which people individually or collectively make use of racial frames to legitimate racial inequalities pervading the American society.

Gallagher states that, under the colour-blind logic, whites are freed from any responsibility regarding the social standing of people of colour. For them, segregation and discrimination are no longer an issue; being white, black, or brown has no influence on an individual’s or group’s place in the socio-economic hierarchy (131). Ultimately, contemporary racial inequalities are believed to be the outcome of non-racial factors, such as market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and non-whites’ alleged cultural limitations (Golash-Boza 5).

Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva refers to this pervading ideology as the “new racism” that characterizes the post-civil rights era and which amplified even more with the election of Barack Obama. Colour-blind racism, in his view, takes the form of “racism lite”, it “otherizes softly, without naming those who it subjects and those who it rewards” (12). In fact, Colour-blind racism functions in an insidious way. On one hand it claims that the skin colour is no longer significant, on the other hand, by dismissing the importance of race and racism in African Americans daily life, it helps to perpetuate inequality and violence.

According to Silva, unlike the Jim Crow era where racial inequalities were mainly maintained through overt means, today’s racial practices operate and are reproduced in a “Now you see it, now you don’t” that is, through practices and policies that are subtle, institutional, and seemingly non-racial (11). The entire logic of “colour-blindness” as Ibram Kendi points out, is analogous to the claim of being “not racist”. For him, “the colour-blind individual, by ostensibly failing to see race, fails to see racism and falls into racist passivity. The language of colour blindness—like the language of “not racist”—is a mask to hide racism” Therefore, as Jason Rodriguez puts it, colour-blindness “works as an ideology by obscuring the institutional arrangements reproducing structural inequalities and does so in a way that justifies and defends the racial status quo” (645).

To explain how colour-blind ideology works, Bonilla-Silva identifies four major frames: abstract liberalism, cultural racism, naturalization, and minimization of racism. These frames, according to him, function as means of explaining racial injustice and maintaining the racial hierarchy in modern society.

Abstract liberalism is the most important one among the four; it constitutes the basis on which this new racial ideology is built (39). According to Bonilla-Silva, abstract liberalism “involves using ideas associated with political liberalism (e.g., “equal opportunity,” the idea



that force should not be used to achieve social policy) and economic liberalism (e.g., choice, individualism) in an abstract manner to explain racial matters” (40). To explain the social standing of people of colour, abstract liberalism, relies on the language and the values of liberalism such as individualism, choice, and meritocracy. Such frame implies recognizing each person, regardless of social status, as a free individual with free choices and enables white people to show sympathy and concern for racial disparities, while, at the same time, rejecting any policies designed to directly address these inequalities.

Cultural racism is another significant frame which prompts racial inequalities. Moreover, it is one of several terms that scholars coined to describe and explain the new emerging racism. Along this frame, continued racial inequities are believed to be the result of cultural differences. In fact, one of the core ideas on which cultural racism rests is the idea that another’s culture is inferior to one’s own. Whereas racism used to be premised on the idea of race as biological heredity, in the post-civil rights era it tends to be grounded on cultural differences. Adjei and Gill assert that the language of racism is embedded within the language of culture (144). Thus, today's racism is cultural racism. For instance, African Americans misrepresentation in higher education, jobs ...etc, is explained to be the result of their own cultural lack of valuing education and laziness.

Minimization, on the other hand, emphasizes the idea of individualized discrimination, and excludes any existence of systemic oppression. Bonilla-Silva explains that this kind of frame suggests that “discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities’ life chances” (41). The fourth frame, naturalization as minimization is a frame that allows whites to negate racial disparities considering them as being natural occurrences (Bonilla-Silva 40).

Resultantly, in the era of colour-blind racism, no matter how hideous the racial crime, no matter how much evidence is found against them, racists are standing up before the judge and

claiming “not guilty” (Kendi 486). These ideological frames, through their normalization of everyday racial thoughts and practices, marginalize the relevance of racism in the American society. In this way, racism has shifted from “blaming the victim” practices based on biological deficiencies to blaming practices that focus on the victim’s cultural deficiencies. As Gallagher further observes, it exculpates from the personal thought and public discussions any evidence or taint of white supremacy or white guilt (133).

With the election of Barack Obama as the first black president in the United States history, America for a while, looked different. All the horrors and the injustices of the past seemed to have faded away, and to herald a new era, a “post-racial era” where the U.S dominant narrative maintains that the American society no longer sees colour, that all people are now judged by the content of their character, not by the colour of their skin, and that only a few hardcore racists and racist practices remain (Holling, Moon and Nevis 263). Indeed, Obama’s victory was conceived as a transformative and a breakthrough moment in American history. Many African Americans cheered and approved his victory, hoping that, now, as they have a Black president things would change for better and would cause an easing of the pain of the economic and political obstacles to collective black progress in America (Bertin and Reed 78).

The historian Peniel Joseph argues that the election of Obama helped to fulfil one of the great objectives of the civil rights struggle by demonstrating and proving the ability of black Americans to lead and excel in all facets of American life, and it even succeeded in reshaping the aesthetics of American democracy by transforming the Founding Father’s narrow vision of politics and citizenship into something more flexible. However, this idea of post-civil right, post racial era, and the colour-blind racism ideology, which embodies the view that the colour of the skin no longer matters (Neville, Gallardo, and Sue 5) has soon proven to be a myth. Today, the United States of America is considered as the sole global superpower

country on earth, a powerful nation that policies the rest of world for civil rights violation, yet a significant percentage of its population is still marginalized and even segregated.

Given that the United States was found and built on the genocidal attacks of indigenous people, on the enslavement and the suppression of African people, it is no surprise that racial discrimination continues to operate and economic inequalities associated with race have not yet disappeared. As Holling, Moon and Nevis note, this lived system made sure the racial inequalities between whites and blacks still pervade in the social, political, economic and cultural institutions of America today (262).

In this context, Paul Adjei and Jagjeet Gill assert that the election of Barack Obama did not usher a post- racial era. Instead, it impeded any discussion about race and racism, and it even ignored historical and contemporary evidence of racism in the United States (139). According to them, Obama's reaction to racial problems is of no difference compared to the last 43 Presidents of the United States. They, further, note that it is for this reason he won the election; he was exactly what many Whites expected him to be: "an individual black male that will not remind Whites of any racial guilt; who in fact will not be a threat to White hegemony when given power to become the president of the United States" (139).

With the election of Donald Trump as the 45th president, the poison of racism has started spreading further. In fact, as Carstarphen, et al observe, this election has raised the race game to a higher level not seen since the 1980s, and predicts a revival of racial privilege and power more daunting than that which has given rise of the de jure and de facto segregation of the twentieth-century (288). They, further, argue that Donald Trump claim of making America "great again" is actually synonymous with making it "white again": "The myriad images of billboards, political signs, graffiti, apparel and other paraphernalia that followed Trump's

victory offer undeniable evidence of the adaptive impulses that have been lurking below the surface of an ostensibly “post racial America” (289).

In the same line of argument, Michelle Alexander notes that racial caste in America has never been one of the past; it was only redesigned. She maintains that, “the more things change, the more they remain the same” (1). In her view, nothing has changed for black people, they are mistreated, neglected, and subject to legalized discrimination in employment, housing, education, public benefits, and jury service, just as they have been throughout most of the American history. The only thing which changed is the forms and means of discrimination. Alexander, further, asserts that “In each generation, new tactics have been used for achieving the same goals – goals shared by the Founding Fathers. Denying African American citizenship is deemed essential to the formation of the original union. Hundreds of years later, America is still not an egalitarian democracy” (Ibid). The fact that some African Americans have managed to be successful (Condoleezza Rice, Colin Powell, Oprah Winfrey, Barack Obama and other cases) is not evidence that racial caste system no longer exists; there have always been stories of free blacks and black successes even during slavery and Jim Crow eras.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter, we have explored the historical and the theoretical background that helps the reader to grasp both Baldwin and Coates perception of American racial history. Moreover, a connection between slavery, civil Rights Movement and the Black Lives Matter struggles has been discussed. We have, also, shown that the colour-blind ideology has become the vehicle through which the unequal racial status quo is preserved. Following this chapter, the second one examines the notion of race and racist, and black’s Structural oppression in *The Fire Next Time* and *Between the World and Me*.

## **Chapter Two**

**Anti- Black Racism from the Civil Rights  
Movement to Black Lives Matter Movement:  
Analysis of *The Fire Next Time* and *Between the  
World and Me***

## Chapter II

### Anti- Black Racism from the Civil Rights Movement to Black Lives

#### Matter Movement: Analysis of *The Fire Next Time* and *Between the World and Me*

##### Introduction

This chapter provides the biographies of the two authors to show the influence of Baldwin and Coates's personal experiences and ideological beliefs on their essays. Moreover, a summary of the two memoirs: *The Fire Next Time* and *Between the World and Me* is presented, and the context in which the two books were produced is reviewed. After that, it dives into James Baldwin and Ta-Nehisi Coates' conception of race and racism, structural oppression, and their democratic visions.

##### 1. Biography of James Baldwin

James Arthur Baldwin known as James Baldwin was born on August 2, 1924 in New York. He was an African American grandson of a slave who grew up in poverty and misery to become a great activist, novelist, essayist, and a playwright. Baldwin lived in Harlem, New York City and followed his stepfather's path to become a preacher.

James studied in public school in Harlem, where he was influenced by his young white teacher Orilla Miller. Bill, as Baldwin used to call her, encouraged him and sharpened his skill writing and discussed literature with him. James said that because of her, he did not manage to hate white people since people like Bill did exist.

After his High School graduation in 1942, Baldwin faced some obstacles as he had to take care of his seven brothers. Consequently, he worked hard no matter what job he had to help his family while putting his plans for college aside for a while (Biography.com). However, Baldwin did not stop at these ill paid jobs; he kept educating himself by having a literary

apprenticeship in New York, Greenwich Village. In 1948, he left the USA and moved to Paris where he spent eight years and returned to the USA to become a civil right activist (Britannica).

After he published his first book *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), James Baldwin won a fellowship and had enough money to travel to Paris. It was there that he managed to understand his culture, homeland as well as himself. Yet, Baldwin divided his time between Europe and his homeland. He remained active in events of American culture, and he had a great role in the Civil Right Movement. He met with many great and notable activists like Martin Luther King, Medgar Evers and Malcolm X.

During his travels, Baldwin wrote many great pieces like *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) and *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), which are a collection of essays. In addition to this, he wrote two novels, *Giovanni's Room* (1956), and *Another country* (1962). After the death of his friends, he went to France and published a book about the disillusionment of the times entitled *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974).

Baldwin explored many important themes in his works; every work has its own ideas and themes. His essay collections *Notes of a Native Son*, *The Fire Next Time*, and *Nobody Knows My Name* were mainly about race and oppression. In addition to *Sonny's Blues* which focused on life of poverty and misery of African Americans and religion. *Go Tell it on the Mountain* was also about religion and African American experiences.

When Baldwin came back to the USA, during the Civil Rights Movement, he joined the Congress of Racial Equality and met Martin Luther King Jr. and other important activists. Baldwin became really involved in the Civil Rights Movement which led him to travel all over the south teaching African Americans his ideology of racial inequality.

## **2. Biography of Ta-Nehisi Coates**

Ta-Nehisi Paul Coates is an American essayist, journalist, and novelist. He was born on September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1975 in Baltimore, Maryland, to William Paul Coates and Cheryl Lynn Water. His father was a Vietnam War Veteran and a former Black Panther, who founded the Black Classic Press where books from African decent were published, and his mother was a school teacher.

From an early age, Coates witnessed the police brutality as he grew up in a place where fear, crack, violence, and murder surrounded everything around him. He grew up with constant fear that he might lose his life at any given moment. Thus, growing up in West Baltimore taught him fear and survival as well. Following high school, Coates attended Howard University, a formerly African American University, which he left without completing his degree to start a journalism career. The author has never been in good terms with school as he believed it to be corrupt and it never managed to meet up with or answer his curiosity. For him, there was something hidden in school which drugged African Americans into a false morality, so that that they wouldn't neither see nor ask. However, Howard University, the "crossroads of the black diaspora" and "The Mecca," as Coates calls it, differed greatly from his previous experiences. It instilled in him a sense of self-recognition and made him more comfortable with his identity as a black man.

Coates' childhood, family, and community could be seen as the cornerstones that proffered and pursed his critical and racial awareness of the American racist history. In fact, his exposure to books of African American's history, and his mother, on the other hand, who whenever he misbehaved in school, used to punish him by asking him to write essays about what he did and why helped to raise in him a sense of awareness, wisdom and curiosity to learn and investigate more in his past.



Coates has worked as a national correspondent for the Atlantic Magazine for 10 years, a well reputed magazine that dedicated itself to the support of great writers and talented intellectuals. Among his important contributions to that magazine is his 2014 article, “The Case for Reparations” it earned him great attention and set a high standard for a fair and passionate understanding of cross-generational justice.

Alongside working in journalism, Coates published several acclaimed books of nonfiction, essays, and some comic books series, in which he deeply explores contemporary racism in America, the legacy of slavery, and the dark aspects of American history and policy. In fact, his works give a powerful explanation for understanding the current American political condition in respect to history. They are full of anger, desperation, and agony over the fact that black people are still considered as second-class citizens, and continue to be the victims of the American dream and White Supremacy.

In 2008, he published his first book, *The Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons, and an unlikely Road to Manhood*, a memoir, in which he gives an account of his early life in Baltimore during the 1980s and early 1990s. Seven years later, he produced his most acclaimed book, *Between the World and Me* and moulded upon James Baldwin’s provocative essay *The Fire Next Time, and Me*. It is a long essay written in the form of letter to his 15 years-old-son, Samori. Hailed as a "required reading" by Toni Morrison, it has become the standard reference point for anyone trying to understand the fundamental racial issues in contemporary America. This book vaulted Coates to the forefront of American political commentary and civil rights activism. Moreover, in 2017, he published a collection of essays, *We Were Eight Years in Power: an American Tragedy*. The book embraces Coates’s personal ongoing argument about the utility and place of “Good Negro Government”. In 2019, by publishing *The Water Dancer*, he made his debut as a novelist.

Coates prolific critical and literary writing have accorded him a worldwide recognition. Today, he is regarded as one of the outstanding American authors and journalists. He is even recognized as being the ultimate voice of his generation when it comes to speaking about the rampant racism in the United States. He received the National Magazine Award, the Hillman Prize for Opinion and Analysis Journalism, and the George Polk Award for his Atlantic cover story, and he is a Mac Arthur “Genius Grant” Fellow.

### **3. Contextualizing the Essays *The Fire Next Time* and *Between the World and Me***

#### **3.1. America in the 1960s and the Civil Rights Movement: the context of *The Fire Next Time***

Upon the celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation hundredth anniversary, coinciding with the momentum of the Civil Rights movement and the continued African Americans’ struggle for social and racial justice in the United States, James Baldwin published his influential essay *The Fire Next Time*. The latter bears witness to the unfolding circumstances of the 60s. A century had passed since African Americans were seemingly set free, yet they still faced segregation and were treated unequally. As Carol Polsgrove holds: the essay “flowed directly out of the political currents that swirled around Baldwin in the early 1960s: the demonstrations at the United Nations, the talk of Cuba, the heady faith that Western culture need not dominate the world, the rhetoric of Malcolm X and the Black Muslims” (158).

In fact, during the 60s, segregation was strongly enforced, throughout the United States, particularly in the South, where African Americans found themselves denied the right to lead a normal life, which all white people took for granted. Though in the North explicit segregation was not the law, blacks were not immune to Jim Crow-like laws. Such circumstances existed long time ago, even before the 1950s and 1960s, and African

Americans fought strongly against it. At the beginning of the 1880s, many areas in the South were not beholden to the Jim Crow Laws and African American people were somehow free there especially in big cities where black people moved. By the end of the decade white people demanded more laws to limit as many opportunities as possible for African Americans. Thus, Jim Crow laws invaded almost all the country with more force than that of the previous decades. For instance, public parks were also forbidden for African Americans, and theatres were segregated (History.com).

By 1950, almost 50% of Blacks were suffering from poverty; in the North as well as in the South, job opportunities did not expand to reach African American workers. Besides, homes were distinguished by signpost on the door “for coloured” and “for white”, not only houses but also hospitals, schools, and other facilities. Educational opportunities were severely limited by substandard segregated schools for coloured people and were refused to use public transportation for African Americans.

Segregation and racism did not only stop at that point. Some states required separate textbooks for black and white students. New Orleans mandated the segregation of prostitutes according to race. Moving to Atlanta, African Americans were given a different Bible from white people to swear on. Marriage between white people and African Americans was forbidden almost everywhere in the South. It was natural and familiar to see signs posted at town and city limits warning African Americans that they were not welcome there (history.com). Moreover, Lynching and other forms of racial violence and intimidation represented a daily routine for African Americans; over 3,750 people were lynched, most of them in the South.

However, African Americans did not surrender to those circumstances. After World War II, they came to realise their growing political power, and began to challenge segregation

through court cases and collective protests, which were translated, later, into the civil rights movement struggle. Moreover, the international political context the United States was going through helped to create the appropriate climate for the movement. In fact, the Cold War with the Soviet Union made the U.S. in need of international support. Hence, to gain the support of some countries, it had to show its democratic ideals and claim its moral superiority over the Soviet Union. Accordingly, some U.S. president like Harry S. Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower showed some sympathy for the Negroes condition because as Harry Truman put it, “the USA could not claim to lead the Free World while black people were not equal” (Polsgrove 150). In fact, racism and democracy are two opposing ideologies, and Black activists were totally conscious that America’s mistreatment of Blacks could stand as a tripping rock in America’s quest to become the world leading superpower. Black revolt and demonstrations, hence, stood as a good opportunity to expose the contradiction between racism and democracy.

### **3.2. America in the 2000s and Black Lives Matter Movement: the context of *Between the World and Me***

Coates’s book has been published at a time of searing account of the situation of African Americans in the United States, a period characterized by increasing police violence and incarceration towards black people. Moreover, this period witnessed the election of the first African American president, Barack Obama, and the First White president, as Coates calls it, Donald Trump.

As noted in the first chapter, in spite of decades of policies, programs, protests, and outstanding achievements of African Americans to attain equality in many aspects of life, race has remained a decisive factor in establishing their socioeconomic and political status in today’s United States. As a matter of fact, though many years have passed since the abolition

of the institution of slavery and the eradication of Jim Crow Laws, anti-black racism still looms large in 21<sup>st</sup> century America and racial discrimination remains a ubiquitous fact.

A survey on “Discrimination in America”, conducted in January 2017 by National Public Radio, found out that 92% of African Americans believe that discrimination against African Americans exists in America today: a majority of them reported that they had been subject to significant and extensive personal experiences of racial discrimination, either when interacting with police, when applying for jobs, when being paid equally or considered for promotions. Furthermore, they claimed that they or at least a family member had been treated unfairly by the court system because they were Black.

Black-white segregation remains conspicuously high and a burden on black people even when they have the same income or education level as whites (Kahlenberg and Quick). Structural racism is sustained by laws and public policy. The criminal justice system is the clearest example of structural racism in the United States. African Americans, in fact, have a high likelihood of being exposed and experiencing disproportionate contact with the criminal justice system and law enforcement. The United States comprises the largest criminal justice system in the world, and it is the world leader in the rate of incarcerations. Over 2.2 million of Americans are incarcerated either in federal, state, or local prisons, and it is systematically racialized in its implementation. Due to the prevailing prejudice that blacks are more violent, more likely to engage in drugs and in crimes than whites, African Americans are more likely to be arrested, to be convicted and even more likely to experience lengthy prison sentences.

David Cole notes that while the American criminal justice seems to be established on the premise and promise of equality before the law, the administration of the criminal law whether by the officer on the beat, the legislature, or the Supreme Court, it actually rests on inequality and requires double standards to operate (24). For Michele Alexander, the

American criminal justice system functions as a contemporary system of racial control and it is part of a much larger system of laws, rules, policies, and customs, referred to as mass incarceration (12). The latter aims to dominate African Americans leading to the New Jim Crow era. In fact, the end of legalized racial discrimination, according to Brewer and Heitzeg, was followed by the era of colour-blind racism where the criminal justice system “provides a convenient vehicle for physically maintaining the old legally enforced colour lines as African Americans are disproportionately policed, prosecuted, convicted, disenfranchised, and imprisoned” (633).

Housing segregation is also a matter of fact in the lives of many African Americans, who continue to face unequal treatments in securing houses. Housing segregation refers to the physical separation between Blacks and Whites. This racialization in housing is not something new; it stretches back to the institution of slavery and Jim Crow era which perpetuated explicit housing segregation. As Williams and Collins observe, it was “imposed by legislation, supported by major economic institutions, enshrined in the housing policies of the federal government, enforced by the judicial system, and legitimized by the ideology of white supremacy that was advocated by churches and other cultural institutions” (405).

In 1968, a Fair Housing Act was passed, it prohibited and condemned explicit housing discrimination as illegal, providing equal housing opportunity regardless of race, religion or national origin. Yet, multiple studies have shown that today housing in America is nearly as segregated as it was in the 60s, when the law was enacted. It is maintained either through individual actions, institutional practices and government policies (Williams and Mohammed 4).

Structured racial inequality still has a great influence in the economic life of African Americans. A research by the Economic Policy Institute has shown that discrepantly high

rates of underemployment and unemployment among African Americans are proof of a “Permanent Recession” or even a depression among Black households impacted by the economic devaluation. In fact, African Americans suffer from higher unemployment rates than any other American racial group, hence, pushing an excessive number of Black families into poverty (Morris 99). According to the U.S. Census, in comparison with 25% of Latinos and approximately 10% of White Americans, over 10.9 million African Americans i.e. 28%, live at or below the poverty line. Similarly, a research by Brookings Institution demonstrates that the majority of African American children born in middle-class households grow up to have less income than their parents (104 – 106).

Furthermore, Hanks et al. report that wealth, in the United States, is unequally distributed among the different U.S racial groups, more particularly between black and white households. Even if African Americans, now, are highly educated, they remain less wealthy than white Americans (Williams and Collins 406-407).

Today, it is true that the American education system is less racist than it was during the Jim Crow era, and many studies have reported that the educational quantity gap between Blacks and Whites has decreased after the Supreme Court legislated the Brown V. Board of Education decision in 1954 (Morris 25). Yet, racial disparities in school still exist and are sustained through public institutions (Higginbotham 147). Richard Rothstein states that today, over half of all black students go to schools with over 70% in high poverty districts (Strauss). Due to the fact that the United States schools are sponsored through local property taxes, and considering the poverty rates the black communities suffer from, the programs and the services black schools can offer are very limited (Higginbotham 150). Thus, we can assume that the Brown’s promise of equal education would only be accomplished when neighbourhoods become desegregated, because as Rothstein advances, “education policy is housing policy.”

In addition to this, Williams, Laurence, and Davis, hold that racism plays an inherent role in creating and sustaining racial/ ethnic inequalities in health (105). Accordingly, Monique shows that Black Americans access to health care is determined by their socioeconomic status, the affordability, transportation of insurance and trust in health care professionals and institutions. Around 20% of African Americans are without insurance compared to 15% of White Americans; consequently, they are more likely to experience serious outcomes from controllable disorders and rely on emergency care, which is more expensive (43). Though, in 2014 the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) by President Barack Obama, had a promising start in providing health insurance for all Americans, and white, black, and Hispanics adult uninsured rates dramatically decreased, it failed to completely undermine racial and ethnic inequalities in health insurance coverage (Austin 1). By 2016, the overall uninsured rate started to increase.

Indeed, the recent Covid-19 pandemic has exposed all the long-standing inequalities in the American system. Given their concentration in low income and segregated communities and their overrepresentation in the front-line occupations, black people found themselves at greater risks to contract the virus. In fact, a study from APM Research Lab has revealed that, compared to other racial groups, black Americans made up the highest overall mortality rates, around 65.8% of the overall of American death rates, and about 2.3 times as high as the rate for Whites and Asians. These disparate racial impacts of the virus on African Americans, as Gloud and Wilson reveal, are the outcomes of historical and ongoing social and economic injustices.

One can deduce that criminal justice system, housing segregation, economic, and healthcare disparities are interrelated and inseparable, each affects the other (Politi). These disparities are meant to maintain an order built on discrimination and oppression.



#### **4. Summary of *The Fire Next Time***

James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* is a non-fictional book which consists of two essays. The first essay "My Dungeon Shook letter to My Nephew on the One hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation" is a letter written to his nephew, whereas, in the second essay "Down at the Cross" he discusses race and religion and the relationship between them based on his own experiences.

In the first essay, Baldwin discusses the role of race and the miserable life of African Americans in the USA. Throughout the essay, Baldwin explains to his nephew the way white Americans and their injustices destroyed Africans and teaches the way he has to deal with the presuming innocence of White Americans; He tells James that he needs to shape his own identity and stay strong, not just for his own sake but also for the sake of the next generations.

In the second part of the essay, Baldwin tells his nephew that he needs to accept white Americans and they will have to accept him as well. However, white Americans are too afraid to accept African Americans and consider them not inferior. Nevertheless, the only way to reach this acceptance is through love.

In the essay "Down at the Cross", Baldwin narrates his days in the church. While in church, he managed to avoid crimes and police violence. However, he, soon, realized that the church, instead of opposing white oppression and preaching equality, it, further, promoted racial inequality. He, then, turned his criticism to the Nation of Islam and the leader Elijah Mohammed. Baldwin believed that religion institutions, Christianity or Islam, were another way of separatism and oppression.

In the end of the essay, James Baldwin gives a solution and affirms again that in order to end racial problems in the USA and the only way the country will manage to establish itself is through love, acceptance, and integration. According to him, whenever there is the notion

of superiority and inferiority, the problem of race cannot be solved; blacks and whites should accept the fact that they are brothers. For Baldwin, this is the only solution for America to become, one day, a unified country.

## **5. Summary of *Between the World and Me***

Written in the form of a letter to his 15-year-old son, Samori, *Between the World and Me* is a bold and thoughtful exploration of the ubiquity of race in contemporary America. The book traces Coates personal experience and intellectual thoughts on how to live as black man in America and elucidates the systemic problem of race.

In fact, written in the wake of the murders of young African American boys such as Michael Brown, Prince Jones, Trayvon Martin, and Eric Garner by police officers, Coates tries to explain to his son how to navigate and survive in a world where the destruction of the black body is a heritage and a tradition. Coates, throughout the letter, doesn't want to offer his son consolation. Instead, he tries to prepare him, both intellectually and spiritually, to understand that the world is not designed for the success of black men. For Coates, blacks are constantly confined to make calculations and carry burdens that others do not.

The whole book is divided into three parts. In the first part, Coates describes his own experience as a black man living in the poor ghettos of West Baltimore. The letter opens with Coates recalling his experience on a news show, when the host asked him "what it means to lose his body", and why he believes white American progress was built on "looting and violence". Upon hearing this, a feeling of sadness invaded Coates and he realized that he failed to transmit his message, and no machinery could close the gap between the white world and the black one. Then, he moves on to describe his journey at Howard University, where he became strongly influenced by the writings of Malcolm X. Coates identifies with Malcolm because Malcolm as Coates believe in the physical world rather than in the actions of spooks

and mystery Gods. Reading Malcolm X and listening to his speeches was fundamental for his intellectual development. Indeed, in Howard he came to realize that the world was more than a photonegative drawn by those who believed that they were white. He realized that the black world was beautiful and had its own history different from that depicted by white people.

In the second part, Coates writes about the effect and the outrage the death of his Howard University classmate Prince Carmen Jones, who was killed by an officer from Prince George's County police in 2000, had on him. Prince Jones killer was not held accountable and was acquitted. Prince Jones, as Coates describes him, was a charming, educated, and a respectful man. Coates, further explains, that if Prince Jones – good Christian, patron saint of the twice as good – had been the target of police, what about others. Moreover, in this part Coates chronicles his times in New York and France.

The final part reports Coates visit to Prince Jones's mother, Dr. Mable Jones. He shows that in spite of the fact that Dr. Jones accomplished professional success, and a high social status, she did not escape the misfortune and injury unavoidably related with being black in America. She lost her son for no reason. All in all, Coates book could be conceived as a talk that every black parent has to do with his children, a talk that teaches them how to behave, especially with policemen, to preserve their lives.

## **6. Analysis of *The Fire Next Time* and *Between the World and Me***

James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* is deemed as one of the most successful and powerful texts that managed to describe well the Negro problem and the racial relations in the USA in 1960s. Baldwin used his own experiences to reflect on how anti-black racism and white violence affected the lives of African Americans. Furthermore, he contributed significantly to African Americans' civil rights struggle. Mel Watkins emphasizes that Baldwin along with Martin Luther King Jr. framed the idealism upon which the civil-rights protest was constructed. In fact, Baldwin, with his honesty and eloquence, managed to set up

today's deciduous belief that non-black Americans could sympathize and identify with blacks and earnestly confront with the racial problem (178).

Writing on what it means to carry a black body in contemporary United States, Ta- Nehisi Coates makes a similar case and reflects on the same racial issues James Baldwin invoked half a century earlier. Like Baldwin, Coates's work bears plenty of testimony on the ways African Americans are dehumanized. In fact, the concept of race is a central feature of Coates's writings as race has, essentially, informed his relationship with his self and the world. Throughout most of his works, he challenges the reader to rethink the history of race and racism in the United States, and how each individual and institution participates in maintaining such oppressive social and political structures.

### **6.1.Race and Racism in the United States**

As already mentioned in the first chapter, race is generally understood as a social construct. As Robin DiAngelo puts it "race is an evolving social idea that was created to legitimate racial inequality and protect white advantage" (para 8). Under this thinking, James Baldwin and Ta-Nehisi Coates, offer in their narratives a unique perspective on race as a social construction. Baldwin understands race as a complete illusion, yet playing a great role in the lives of African Americans; for him "colour is not a human or a personal reality; it is a political reality" (110). On his part, Coates contends that race is born out of racism, not the other way around. And the way people are named is not a matter of physiognomy but rather of hierarchy and politics. He writes: "race is the child of racism, not the father. And the process of naming the people has never been a matter of genealogy and physiognomy so much as one of hierarchy" (7). Coates powerfully demonstrates that Whites, in order to justify their exploitation of Black people and their resources, created the ideology of unequal races and White Supremacy.

Coates asserts that racism and its progeny, white supremacy are mainly “concerned with dividing human beings, on the basis of ancestry (which is very real) and slotting them into a hierarchy (which is an invention)”. In this sense, race can be understood as a political construction aiming at giving White people the power and the legitimacy to dominate and control non- white people in the name of superiority. He further explains:

Difference in hue and hair is old. But the belief in the preeminence of hue and hair, the notion that these factors can correctly organize a society and that they signify deeper attributes, which are indelible-this is the new idea at the heart of these new people who have been brought up hopelessly, tragically, deceitfully, to believe that they are white. (7)

Black and white binary remains as an incisive feature of everyday life and it is essential to the common sense understanding of racism. Thus, to get a deeper understanding of Coates and Baldwin’s nuanced conception of race, we should explore their notions of whiteness and blackness.

## **6.2. Whiteness vs. Blackness**

Whiteness has always been the norm in defining who is and who is not American. Legal theorist Cheryl Harris describes whiteness as a property, which has taken more insidious forms, but still retains its core characteristic: “the legal legitimation of expectations of power and control that enshrine the status quo as natural baseline” (1715). Whiteness is rendered invisible and, thus, bound with normalcy; it never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations (Lipstiz 1).

James Baldwin and Ta- Nehisi Coates's primary concern in respect to whiteness has been to uncover the ways white America formed itself in opposition to blackness. As George Lipstiz puts it, "White settlers institutionalized a possessive investment in whiteness by making blackness synonymous with slavery and whiteness synonymous with freedom" (3). In fact, being black in America was to be exploited and white was to benefit from. In *Between the World and Me*, Coates makes a related point, as he argues that "For the men who needed to believe themselves white, the bodies was the key to a social club, and the right to break the bodies was the mark of civilization. (104). Echoing South Carolina senator John C Calhoun, he, further, asserts that "The two great divisions of society are not the rich and poor, but white and black" (Ibid).

James Baldwin conceives the notion of the "American Negro" as a unique creation of white Americans. In Baldwin's words, "The American Negro is a unique creation; he has no counterpart anywhere, and no predecessors" (92). For him, the problem of racism in the USA was not just a matter of political, economic or social inequalities but a problem of inferiority; whiteness has constructed itself in a way that rendered African Americans as their own subjects. African Americans, on the other hand, were required to accept this fact and live with it. Baldwin stated this idea and rejected it when he wrote:

The details and symbols of your life have been deliberately constructed to make you believe what white people say about you. 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. (19)

The two myths of both white Americans and African Americans were both wrong for Baldwin because both of them have no real providence. This doctrine of believing in myths deprived both African Americans and white Americans from their true identities:

The person who distrusts himself has no touchstone for reality- for this touchstone can be only oneself; such a person interposes between himself and reality nothing less than a labyrinth of attitudes. And the attitudes, furthermore, though the person is usually unaware of it (is unaware of so much), are historical and public attitudes. They do not relate to the present any more than they relate to the person. Therefore, whatever white people do not know about Negroes reveals, precisely and inexorably, what they do not know about themselves. (53–54)

Coates, in the same fashion, argues that blackness is a mere white invention imposed on African Americans. He writes, “We did not choose our fences. They were imposed on us by Virginia planters obsessed with enslaving as many Americans as possible. They are the ones who came up with a one-drop rule that separated the “white” from the “black,” (42). Hence, Similar to Baldwin, Whiteness and Blackness, for Coates, have no factual foundation and providence; they are just a mere invention, which emerged out of the destruction of black bodies, torture, and oppression i.e., through slave codes, Black codes, Jim Crow, Redlining, GI Bill, housing covenants, New Deals, and Mass Incarcerations. He writes:

These new people are, like us, a modern invention. But unlike us, their new name has no real meaning divorced from the machinery of criminal power ...the elevation of the belief in being white, was not achieved through wine tastings and ice

cream socials, 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. (7-8).

What Coates tries to convey is that he was made black mainly because “of history and heritage” (55). What is “black” in the United States is not the same elsewhere; being named black in the U.S., in Coates view, “was just someone's name for being at the bottom, a human turned to object, object turned to pariah” (55).

Throughout *Between the World and Me*, Coates challenges the reader to rethink the notion of blackness apart from that one assigned by white people, because, as he writes to his son, “the entire narrative of this country argues against the truth of who you are” (99). Thus, for blacks to have a real knowledge of themselves, they must rewrite their own history far from the one which they are trapped in. He posits that “The people who must believe they are white can never be your measuring stick. I would not have you descend into your own dream. I would have you be a conscious citizen of this terrible and beautiful world” (108).

In this sense, we assume that white identity was achieved by denying black people autonomy over their own bodies. For this reason, in *Between the World and Me*, Coates demonizes whiteness and portrays it as being inherently violent, and which uses this violence to maintain power. He states that:

“White America” is a syndicate arrayed to protect its exclusive power to dominate and control our bodies.



Sometimes this power is direct (lynching), and sometimes it is insidious (redlining). But however it appears, the power of domination and exclusion is central to the belief in being white, and without it, "white people" would cease to exist for want of reasons. (42)

While Coates associates Blackness with beauty and purity, he associates Whiteness with a dream that is illusionary and set on forgetting and denial. The American Dream, as Coates refers to it, rests on black bodies backs, "the bedding made from our bodies." (11). In fact, for every white's dream, there are thousands black nightmares; "to be black and beautiful was not a matter for gloating", Coates writes, "being black did not immunize us from history's logic or the lure of the Dream" (53). Coates, here, echoes Baldwin's conception of the American Dream:

Freedom is hard to bear. It can be objected that I am speaking of political freedom in spiritual terms, but the political institutions of any nation are always menaced and are ultimately controlled by the spiritual state of that nation. We are controlled here by our confusion, far more than we know, and the American dream has therefore become something much more closely resembling a nightmare, on the private, domestic, and international levels. (96-97)

One can understand from Baldwin and Coates conception of whiteness and blackness that whiteness and its invisibility lies at the heart of the problem of race in the United States. The whole point they make is that the whole notion of race, blackness, and whiteness cannot

be detached from the notion of power. In fact, white Americans by rendering whiteness invisible and by refusing to acknowledge its implicit implications will increase African Americans sufferings. Therefore, to end the racial injustices and violence perpetuated towards Blacks, as Coates and Baldwin imply, Americans, particularly white Americans should be conscious and awaken themselves from and face the lie they have grown up in, because as Du Bois once said “Either America will destroy ignorance or ignorance will destroy the United States”.

### **6.3. Structural Oppression**

In the light of persisting racial oppression and increasing racial violence African Americans suffer at the hands of police and criminal justice system, James Baldwin rhetoric still has a paramount relevance in documenting today’s white violence. With the murder of George Floyd and Breona Tylor, many scholars and internet users have turned to James Baldwin to express their rage and sadness. In fact, Baldwin’s words once again have proven to be true when he wrote:

This innocent country set you down in a ghetto, in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish. Let me spell out precisely what I mean by that, for the heart of the matter is here, and the root of my dispute with my country. You were born where you were born and faced the' future that you faced because you were black and for no other reason. The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set for ever. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. (18-19)

When Baldwin wrote this, he was reflecting on the disabling discrimination African Americans experienced in the 1960s. Though in contemporary guise, substantial aspects of white-on black oppression still persist to the present day. It is this point that Ta-Nehisi Coates tries to explain throughout most of his works, more particularly in his essay *Between the World and Me*. Against the racial colour-blind presumption that guides much of today's conversation assuming that racism no longer exists, Coates affirms that racism is a fact and real: "But all our phrasing-race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy-serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience (10). Indeed, he contends that today's structural racism is the result of institutional oppression of African Americans throughout the nation's history. He believes that America is built on a profound experiment, and what made it possible is the destruction of the American Natives populous. Therefore, in *Between the World and Me*, he puts into question the American exceptionalism and innocence, stressing on the necessity of subjecting it to an exceptional moral standard. He states:

America believes itself exceptional, the greatest and noblest nation ever to exist, a lone champion standing between the white city of democracy and the terrorists, despots, barbarians, and other enemies of civilization. One cannot, at once, claim to be superhuman and then plead mortal error. I propose to take our countrymen's claims of American exceptionalism seriously, which is to say I propose subjecting our country to an exceptional moral standard. (8)

However, according to Coates, this cannot be possible because there is, all around the world, an “apparatus urging us to accept American innocence at face value and not to inquire too much” (8). In fact, American exceptionalism did not only define America as a unique and special nation among others, it also promoted its people innocence and superiority over non-Americans. Embedded deeply within the logic of colour-blindness, is white Americans assertion that they are not racists and the degrading situation of African Americans is not their responsibility, but, their own fault. Fifty years earlier, such realization was made by James Baldwin. Nevertheless, for Baldwin, as for Coates, it is this innocence that denotes ignorance and unwillingness of acknowledging the reality, which “constitutes the crime”. He writes:

The crime of which I accuse my countrymen, and for which neither I nor history will ever forgive them, [is] that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it. One . . . must strive to become tough and philosophical concerning destruction and death ... But it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. (17)

According to Baldwin, the great white crime done to African Americans was due to their presumed innocence. He believed that they were innocent because they blinded themselves and their minds from seeing the catastrophic results of their destructive deeds, thereby contributing in the perpetuation of racism, discrimination, and violence. He also explained that this innocence did not just affect African Americans negatively but it also affected white Americans because it blurred them from their true identity.

Thus, for Coates, to get a real understanding of what America is; one should look at it and study it from the perspective of people who were systematically impoverished and left out, i.e.

from the black perspective. He asserts that: “America understands itself as God's handiwork, but the black body is the clearest evidence that America is the work of men” (12). For Coates, the enslaved black body was essential for the formation of the democratic American state and its “free” citizens.

The institution of slavery and its aftermath, according to Coates and Baldwin, was not marginal to the United States' formation, but fundamental to it. In his remarkable Atlantic article “The Case for Reparations”, Coates observes that “America begins in black plunder and white democracy, two features that are not contradictory but complementary». The American democracy and wealth was made possible only through the exploitation, the exclusion, and the destruction of black families.

He further explains that this enslavement was never intended to end; each time it is replaced by a new cast system:

As slaves we were this country's first windfall, the down payment on its freedom. After the ruin and liberation of the Civil War came Redemption for the unrepentant South and Reunion, and our bodies became this country's second mortgage. In the New Deal we were their guestroom, their finished basement. And today, with a sprawling prison system, which has turned the warehousing of black bodies into a jobs program for Dreamers and a lucrative investment for Dreamers; today, when 8 percent of the world's prisoners are black men, our bodies have refinanced the Dream of being white. Black life is cheap, but in America black bodies are a natural resource of incomparable value. (131)

In so doing, Coates rejects the myth of individualism embedded in nowadays liberal thinking, and emphasizes the role of structures and institutions in perpetuating racism. He triumphantly affirms that racism is legally and systematically applied in many different areas of American society limiting African Americans participation in civic and community life. Although, racial violence against African Americans manifests itself no longer in the traditional forms like lynching or overt terrorism, it continues to permeate African American life to the present day. In the twentieth century, this heritage expresses itself through more subtle means, mainly, in racially coded housing policies, law enforcement, and criminal justice system.

Religion, schools, media, prisons, police all contribute to the entrenchment of African Americans. Baldwin, throughout *The Fire Next Time*, describes his disappointment with the church. As a teenager, to avoid the temptations of drugs, alcohol and prison, Baldwin fled to the church. Nevertheless, while working in the church, he realized its hypocrisy. For him, the church did not preach love among African Americans and white Americans as it's supposed to do, specially, when hatred and evil spread all over the country.

In *Between the World and Me*, Coates echoed the same sentiment; religion, school, and the streets according to him are hypocritical. To Coates, school, as an institution, was designed in a way that protects the interests of whites; he depicts it as a prison: "If the streets shackled my right leg, the schools shackled my left. Fail to comprehend the streets and you gave up your body now. But fail to comprehend the schools and you gave up your body later. I suffered at the hands of both, but I resent the schools more" (25). Street and the school, as Coates conceives them, function "as arms of the same beast" (33), i.e. White supremacy. While the streets enjoy the official power of the state, the school enjoy its implicit sanction.

Nonetheless, the most striking form of injustice African Americans experience comes at the hands of the criminal justice system and law enforcement known as “police Brutality”. By “police brutality”, we mean the various human rights violations African American endure at the hand of police officers, including harassments, beatings, racial abuses, and unlawful killings. Within the United States, the repression of the Black body was seen essential to the preservation of order and peace, as Baldwin indicated, “the power of the white world is threatened whenever a black man refuses to accept the white world's definitions. So every attempt is made to cut that black man down not only was made yesterday but is made today” (78). Police shootings of Prince Jones, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, recently George Floyd, and Breona Tylor are all examples of ongoing police violence against African Americans.

To understand the structural oppression that is embedded in police forces of the United States, one must, as Ta-Nehisi asserts, look back at the history of U.S. racial order, i.e. slavery because as he says “The destroyers are merely men enforcing the whims of our country, correctly interpreting its heritage and legacy” (10). In Coates account, Prince Jones murder and many other black victims were “not killed by a single officer so much as he was murdered by his country and all the fears that have marked it from birth” (78).

Coates, whenever he describes the black body, reflects on how a black person has little control over his body, and how a black person has to struggle to keep his body safe and away from any danger. As matter of fact, the black body, within the white society, is seen as a site and a source of threat before any gesture:

And you know now, if you did not before, that the police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body. It does not matter if the destruction is the result of an unfortunate overreaction. It does

not matter if it originates in a misunderstanding. It does not matter if the destruction springs from a foolish policy. Sell cigarettes without the proper authority and your body can be destroyed. (Coates 9)

Unfortunately, to be black in racist America is to be armed and dangerous even when you are not. As Ibram Kendi points out, “WE WERE UNARMED, but we knew that Blackness armed us even though we had no guns”. Whiteness, on the other hand, “disarmed the cops and turned them into fearful potential victims”. To put it in Coates’s words:

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 you must be responsible for the bodies of the powerful—the policeman who cracks you with a nightstick will quickly find his excuse in your furtive movements. (71)

In fact, Coates displays a heightened awareness about the principles upon which the U.S. government rests. From the very beginning, he was fully aware that the political leaders who preach democracy, past or present, whenever they speak on human civil rights are usually referring only to white people. In this regard, policing in the U.S is not about implementing order; it’s mainly about maintaining white supremacy. The incidents of police brutality, violence, and many other injustices inflicted on the black body are not violations of American democratic values, but a mere reflection of the founding ideals upon which American democracy rests. Coates clearly stated this fact in the following:



The truth is that the police reflect America in all of its will and fear, and whatever we might make of this country's criminal justice policy, it cannot be said that it was imposed by a repressive minority. The abuses that have followed from these policies-the sprawling carceral state, the random detention of black people, the torture of suspects- are the product of democratic will. (78-79)

In the era of colour-blind racism and Black Lives Matter, history repeats itself. In fact, Baldwin and Coates' formulations resonate with the Black Lives Matter Movement struggles in denouncing the systemic racism African Americans endure at the hands of police officers and criminal justice system. The brutality with which Negroes were treated in pre-civil right movement America, though expressed in different ways, is still the same, Americans accepts violence against blacks as something natural.

#### **6.4. James Baldwin and Ta-Nehisi Coates Visions of Democracy**

Living in a country, where democracy is the chief ruler, it is the dream all African Americans have struggled for. On his part, Baldwin offers a much-needed moral courage and democratic hope for the improvement of African American's condition, by calling for radical transformations in the American political and social structure. In Baldwin account, white Americans live in an illusion and constant fear. The fear they are trapped in, nonetheless, is projected onto black people. Thus, for white to free themselves, they must free blacks from their tyranny, and everything they believe in must be re-examined. Baldwin eloquently stated this:

The white man's unadmitted-and apparently, to him, unspeakable-private fears and longings are projected onto the Negro. The only way he can be released from the Negro's tyrannical power over him is to consent, in effect, to become black himself, to become a part of that suffering and dancing country that he now watches wistfully from the heights of his lonely power and, armed with spiritual traveller's cheques, visits surreptitiously after dark. (103)

Baldwin puts stress on the fact that white's liberation depends on the total liberation of black folks, politically, socially, and economically. To put it in other words:

The price of this transformation is the unconditional freedom of the Negro; it is not too much to say that he, who has been so long rejected, must now be embraced, and at no matter what psychic or social risk. He is the key figure in his country, and the American future is precisely as bright or as dark as his. (101)

To a certain extent, Baldwin's vision of a better America in which democratic ideals will be achieved comes with acceptance of the past sufferance and finding beauty inside. Throughout the essay, Baldwin insists on bringing white and black's self-consciousness to understand that through understanding and loving each other real change will be achieved, eventually, the racial nightmare will end. In Baldwin's terms:

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, thankful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. (112)

In fact, Baldwin in his essay aimed to immensely urge black people to chase lasting change, arguing that the only way to achieve a real change is through spreading love, not hatred because as he argues “Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without” (102-103). He was an integrationist who espouses non-violence as his principle doctrine:

Those innocents who believe that your imprisonment made them safe are losing their grasp of reality. 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. (21)

However, Coates is not interested much in bringing white people consciousness. Instead, he focuses on bringing his son, ultimately, black community consciousness to the fact that the world they live in is cruel for them, as he says “I did not want to raise you in fear or false memory. I did not want you forced to mask your joys and bind your eyes. What I wanted for you was to grow into consciousness. I resolved to hide nothing from you.” In the context of ongoing racial violence, integration proves to be meaningless; Barack Obama’s presidency is the best illustration that real integration is possible. Hence, for Coates struggle is all what African Americans have to achieve racial justice and equality. He points out:

You must struggle to truly remember this past in all its nuance, error, and humanity. You must resist the common urge toward

the comforting narrative of divine law, toward fairy tales that imply some irrepressible justice. The enslaved were not bricks in your road, and their lives were not chapters in your redemptive history. They were people turned to fuel for the American machine. Enslavement was not destined to end, and it is wrong to claim our present circumstance - no matter how improved - as the redemption for the lives of people who never asked for the posthumous, untouchable glory of dying for their children. (70)

What Coates demands is a national reckoning with past injuries inflicted on black Americans who were enslaved and their descendants. The best way to do so, according to him is to enact reparations. In fact, Coates adherence and support for reparations movement was prompted by his growing conviction that until the United States confronts with the harms inflicted on enslaved African Americans and their descendants, genuine healing and racial injustice will remain impossible. To Coates, paying reparations is not simply giving people things because they are black; “it is injury apportionment, which is to say restoring things to people who have been plundered”

Yet, Coates is not optimist that one day this will happen. In his Atlantic article “The Radical Practicality of Reparations”, Ta-Nehisi emphasizes that “the problem of reparations has never been practicality. It has always been the awesome ghosts of history”. Given the exceptional ideal on which the United States’ history rests, it would be hard for Americans to accept reparations because “to enact reparations would mean not simply an outlay of money but also a deep reconsideration of America’s own autobiography. It would be acknowledging that their most cherished myth was not real.” Coming to terms with America’s past makes it

too hard to maintain a sense of innocence and pride. Nevertheless, For Coates with the national reckoning, and various Black Lives Matter protests noticed in the recent months, a ray of hope and a real change seems now possible.

Though both James Baldwin and Ta-Nehisi Coates believe that America should first accept and acknowledge the horrors of slavery and its aftermath, they expressed distinct thoughts on how true democracy must be achieved. While Baldwin made the case that the American creed of democracy, equality and justice are to be achieved through love and integration, Coates, drawing from past politics against racism, powerfully emphasizes struggle by all means. For him, it is not up to white Americans to give black people their own freedom and rights, it up to them to snatch it at all costs.

## **Conclusion**

Baldwin and Coates's biographies show how much the two writers are committed to explore the issue of race and racism in the United States. Throughout the chapter, we have demonstrated that the persistent racial inequalities in housing, the criminal injustice, employment, education, and healthcare are not only the result of individual discrimination, but also of past structural, systemic and social policies that continue to harm African American till this day. Moreover, we have examined both Baldwin and Coates' own perception of the racial problem in the United States and their democratic vision.

## **General Conclusion**

## General Conclusion

The present research, drawing on James Baldwin and Ta-Nehisi Coates personal experiences, has looked into the racial climate prevailing in modern United States. It has built a bridge between two important periods in the history of African Americans: the Civil Right Movement and Black Lives Matter Movement. The study showed that the gains of the civil rights movement were not sufficient to earn black Americans their full rights as American citizens, yet it still stands as the most salient and influential example of collective social action and resistance in America. Its legacy is embedded in today's Black Lives Matter struggles.

The purpose of the analysis of Coates and Baldwin's essays is not to suggest that Coates deliberately followed Baldwin's example or that the power of his writings should be judged by its affinities with Baldwin, but it is mainly to prove that racism still does exist and has a terrible impact on the lives of African Americans. Both authors document, in painful details, the life of African Americans under regimes of anti-Blackness. In fact, from the examination of Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* and Coates's *Between the World and Me* and their historical and socioeconomic context, we come to understand that no matter how long the lapse of time had passed since the legislation of the Civil Right Act (1964) and no matter the efforts done by African American activists to achieve social and political rights, in twenty-first century the struggle is still the same.

Throughout the study of the two essays, we have shown that Colour-blind ideology helps to uphold racism rather than rendering it powerless. The colour-blind ideal optimizes the idea that racism is no longer a significant problem in American society, hence enforcing systems of violence and oppression. From terrible poverty, mass incarceration to police brutality, the effects of anti-Black racism are deeply vicious and devastating.

Claiming to be not racist is not enough, the race problem would not be solved until Americans, white or black, join hand in hand and take a firm stand to end racism. As Baldwin and Coates suggest, our world is physical, what matters are the actions taken to guarantee people of colour their civil liberties and constitutional rights not intentions.



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## Résumé

Ce travail de recherche examine *The Fire Next Time* de James Baldwin et *Between the World and Me* de Ta-Nehisi Coates dans les contextes du « Mouvement Américain des Droits Civiques » et « Black Lives Matters » afin de tracer comment les idéologies raciales et le racisme en Amérique sont évoluées de leurs formes traditionnelles à de nouvelle forme plus implicite. En fait, contrairement aux années 60, l'ère post-droite civile remarque une forme moins tangible et plus secrète de racisme soutenu par des idéologies de déni. Dans ce cadre, cette étude se penche sur le contexte racial et les conditions politiques, économiques et sociales qui ont suivi le mouvement des droits civiques en s'appuyant sur l'idéologie daltonienne. Notre lecture de *The Fire Next Time* de Baldwin et *Between the World and Me* de Coates révèle que la violence anti-noire contemporaine dont souffrent les Afro-Américains est structurelle et institutionnalisée au service de la perpétuation du pouvoir et des privilèges blancs.

**Mots Clés:** James Baldwin, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Racisme, Idéologie Daltonienne, Le Mouvement Américain des Droits Civiques, La Vie des Noires Compte.