

**The Enduring Significance of Blackness in Ta-Nehisi Coates's  
*Between the World and Me* (2015), Thomas Angie's *The Hate U Give*  
(2017).**

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**Abstract:** In the early 2000s, a growing body of literary assessment of the black and white relationships in America began to assert the country has entered a new era of post-blackness devoiding the concept of blackness from its earlier significance. Touré, more than any other critics, embodies this post-black narrative with his book *Who's Afraid of Post Blackness? What it Means to be Black Now?* This essay probes into Ta-Nehisi Coates's epistolary memoir *Between the World and Me* (2015) and Thomas Angie's debut novel *The Hate U Give* (2017) and dismisses the claims of an American post-black society. Using the critical lens of Deconstruction, this article has come to the conclusion that far from fading, blackness as a monolithic racial identity still characterizes the lives of African-Americans.

**Keywords:** Blackness, Post-blackness, Dismisses, Deconstruction, African-Americans.

**Résumé:** Au début des années 2000, un nombre croissant d'analyses littéraires des relations entre Noirs et Blancs aux États-Unis ont commencé à affirmer que le pays était entré dans une nouvelle ère de post-blackness, vidant ainsi le concept de blackness de sa signification antérieure. Touré, plus que tout autre critique, incarne ce récit du post-black avec son livre *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness? What It Means to Be Black Now?* Cet essai examine le mémoire épistolaire de Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (2015), ainsi que le premier roman de Angie Thomas, *The Hate U Give* (2017), et rejette les affirmations selon lesquelles la société Américaine serait devenue post- raciale ou post-black. En s'appuyant sur la perspective critique de la Deconstruction, cet article conclut que, loin de disparaître, le concept de blackness, en tant qu'identité raciale monolithique, continue de caractériser la vie des Afro-Américains.

**Mots-clés:** Blackness, Post-blackness, Rejet, Deconstruction, Afro-Américains.

## Introduction

Historically, the concept of blackness has been used to refer to the physical and social characteristics of people considered to be part of the black race. The scholar M. Hravrosky (2013, p.65), in *The Concept of Blackness in Theories of Races*, traces the concept of blackness back "from ancient times, through the Middle Ages to modern times, when it became a basis for emerging theories of race". In its early articulation, Hravrosky reveals that blackness was a socially constructed term which encompassed both internal and external characteristics of the black group or race. The internal trait is basically the skin color which serves as a group identifier and the external features are more connected with Europeans' intentions to colonize of black people on the basis of racial categorizations. Labeling the people of African descent as black, with the underlying assumption that they were inferior, served as a grounding to colonize and enslave Blacks.

In the context of the United-States, blackness is a term used to describe the racial identity of people of African descent based not only on the skin color but also on their common experience of oppression going from slavery era to modern-day. It has been used to denote both racial and cultural identity for people of African origin in America. This is primarily because African-Americans have shared common experiences and history. Going through the painful history of slavery and racial discrimination based on the skin color has brought black Americans to develop a sense of collective identity and solidarity. Throughout the period of slavery to the Civil Right struggle, till the modern era, blackness has served as a racial category that indiscriminately defined and united African-Americans. According to K. Giribaldi (2023, p. 37), being from African descent was associated with being from the oppressed racial group; a group labeled "inferior" and by the same way "overriding all other individual traits and characteristics, erasing all differences between people labeled Black." Hence the concept of blackness was used to designate African-Americans as a monolithic group based on their skin color and history.

In recent years, a new discourse of post-black America has emerged and spread. This narrative, mainly held by critics such as Touré and Eugene Robinson, highlights the point that blackness is an out-dated black racial identity concept. They devoid the term of its initial meaning suggesting it does not describe black Americans, as a group, and their shared

experience of racial prejudices. Using the theory of deconstruction as developed by Jacques Derrida, Peter Zima and J. M. Bakhtin, this article probes into Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World Me (BWM)*, a sort letter-essay to his son, and Thomas Angie's debut Novel *The Hate U Give (HUG)* to push back against the claims of post-blackness.

### **1.1 The Surge of the Post-black Discourse**

At the turn of the 2000s, with the advent of a presumed post-racial America, prominent literary voices and social critics have begun to argue that America has also entered a new era of post-black and blackness as a unifying group identity no longer exists. In his iconoclastic book, *Who's Afraid of Post Blackness? What it Means to be Black Now*, Touré for instance, argues that African-Americans are now living in a post-black society in which it is hard to have a clear definition of an authentic Black. Basically, Touré's claim is that with the evolution of American society, there are multiple ways to define Blacks in America. Hence, He shifts away from the traditional and monolithic ways of defining blacks as racial group created by a common struggle against oppression. For him, Blackness in contemporary America is a more complex concept that does not indicate a single Black identity but multiple experiences and perspectives. Touré (2011, p. 20) writes: "we are in a post-black era where the number of ways of being is infinite. The possibility of an authentic Black is boundless (...). If there are forty million Blacks, there are forty million ways of being Black". Touré's understanding of what it means to be Black in current America showcases that blackness has become broader and somehow lost its meaning of the years of the Civil Rights struggle because things have profoundly changed.

Touré also claims that as American society becomes freer, African-Americans are granted greater economic opportunities and that makes the former conception of blackness as racial group marginalized and economically disadvantaged fade in contemporary America. Supporting his beliefs with a handful of successful and famous black individuals such as, Barack Obama and Oprah Winfreh, Touré demonstrates that being black is no longer an impediment as used it to be. In his view, America is in a post- black era in which, much like the post-racial narrative, blackness no longer constitutes an oppressed group identity.

Touré's ideas on the concept of blackness do not stand alone. It has earned support from the intellectual milieu. Among those proclaim the end of blackness as racial group identity is the

scholar Eugene Robinson. In his well acclaimed book *Disintegration: the Splintering of Black America*, E. Robinson seems to seamlessly align with Touré on the claim that blackness has lost its early significance and has come to be something broader than it used to. He mainly argues that a great deal of progress been made in race relations in America and that blackness is no more a concept that defines Blacks as a monolithic group. Robinson shores up his claim by unveiling that there are four different groups of in the United-States. The first is the Abandoned which are those trapped in poverty with no hope nor opportunities. The second group are mainstream Blacks mostly composed of middle-class black Americans who have succeeded in integrating American society. The third group is the Emergent which are a group of black immigrants who came lately in America and are not concerned with racial identity. They are rather focused on economic opportunities that the country offers them. The last category is the Transcendent which encompasses a small number of black elites who are very successful and famous.

Touré and Robinson concur to defend the idea that with the evolution of American society blackness has lost its original significance and that it no longer represents the racial group identity of black Americans. Their analysis seems to insist on the individuality of black people with diverging perspectives and positions. For them, blackness has ceased to be a monolithic black racial identity rooted in the historical experience of slavery, oppression and prejudices. However, a close reading of Coates's *Between the World and Me* and Thomas Angie's *The Hate U Give* seems to suggest the opposite.

## **1.2 Countering the Post-black Narrative: Reaffirming Blackness as an Oppressed Group Identity**

The intertextual assessment of Coates's *Between the World and Me* and Thomas Angie's *The Hate U Give* suggests that it is too early or premature to herald the end of blackness as a monolithic black racial identity rooted in historical and present racial biases. For both African-American authors, the concept of blackness still holds its earlier significance. Going from various perspectives, T. N. Coates and T. Angie highlight the point that blackness still is a monolithic group categorization that characterizes the oppressed black Americans.

In his article "Deconstructive Practice and Legal Theory", J.M Balking (1987, p5) argues that deconstruction "in its simplest form, [...] involves the identification of hierarchical oppositions, followed by a temporary reversal of the hierarchy." In other words, deconstruction seeks to decenter what is centered or reverse dominant ideologies. In this work, post-blackness appears as the dominant ideology that T.N. Coates and T. Angie subvert through their books.

In *Between the World and Me*, Coates demonstrates that blackness is still associated to being oppressed by the white-dominated society. T.N. Coates (2015, p. 12) himself reveals that the question he has been grappling with in his entire life is framed as follows: "how one should live within a black body" in America? Framed this way, the question itself reveals of how being black is still an obstacle for those living with a black skin in contemporary America. It suggests that being black still constitutes a problem in America. In this regard, Coates parodies, in a more diluted form, what the very acclaimed African-American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois earlier termed "a problem." In *The Souls of the Black Folk*, Du Bois (1903, p.7) likened being black to being "a problem" person in the following terms:

They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; (...) To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word. And yet, being a problem is a strange experience.

Du Bois's shows in the passage above that being black in his era was being a problem person which was a weird experience. Hence, Du Bois's "strange experience" of being "a problem" in America is echoed by Coates when he wonders how to live while being black. A century After Du Bois, Coates claims that blackness is associated with problems. Black Americans, on the basis of their racial identity, still constitute a problem for the white and undergo oppression because of their skin color.

Coates describes the experience of being black in contemporary America as a group subjected to systemic racial oppression. According to him, being black in America still rhymes with living under constant fear, discrimination, dehumanization and police brutality which draw their roots in the African-American common history of slavery and racial oppression. T.N. Coates (2015, p. 9) writes: "The destruction is merely the superlative form of dominion whose

prerogatives include frisking, detainings, beatings and humiliations. All of this is so common to black people. All of this is so old to black people”. Coates highlights in this passage that the experience of being black is that of a collective group who endures physical and moral harm. Coates’s diction of “so common” and “so old” conjure up the belief that oppression is not an individual matter but rather a collective experience by the black people in America and that that collective experience takes its roots in the past. The collective experience of undergoing racial oppression is hence a distinguishing feature of blackness.

Moreover, Coates rejects Touré’s belief that economic success of some important black figures in America is the signal that blackness is no more synonym of undergoing racial discrimination. Coates reveals that being black and from the middle class does not immune from racism. He reveals that through the story of the murder of his friend Prince Jones. In fact, Prince Jones is portrayed as coming from a middle-class mother Mable Jones, a radiologist, who lives a comfortable and suburban life. Mable Jones is described as being part of the handful of black Americans who have had great success and live a normal suburban life. However, despite this positive economic and social condition, her son Prince Jones is killed by a police officer and Dr Mable Jones has to endure the painful experience of racism in America. Coates recollects Dr. Jones painful experience with racism when at the last service for Prince Jones, her mother called for activism. T.N. Coates (2015, p. 78) notes: “I remember Dr. Mable Jones, Prince’s mother, speaking of her son’s death as a call to move from her comfortable suburban life into activism.” What Coates shows here is that regardless of the social position, racism can happen to every black person.

Coates’s presentation of story of Mable Jones in the book is reminiscent of an incident that happened a few years ago to the well-known African-American Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates. In “The Myth of Post-Racialism: Hegemonic and Counterhegemonic Stories About Race and Racism in the United States,” Babacar M’Baye reveals that Gates was arrested by a Cambridge police officer for allegedly refusing to step outside when he was ordered to. Gates is later briefly jailed before being released. The event sparks controversy in the media and scholarly discussions. M’Baye himself regards Gates’s arrest as a sign that fame or a good social status does not exonerate from racism. B. M’Baye (2011, p. 16) writes: “Gates’ counterstory

reveals how even a renowned African American scholar whose work emphasizes racial tolerance and multiculturalism is vulnerable to racial bigotry.” Hence, the story of both Dr. Mable in Coates’s book and Gates suggests that blackness still holds significance in America. Despite being part the middle-class Americans with a good economic status, Gates and Mable Jones experience racism because of their blackness. Their story disrupts the class not race idea that underlies the claim of post-racialism or post-blackness. Simply put, you can be a black middle-class and famous black man and still be subject of racism; your black skin color makes you eligible to be discriminated-against regardless of your economic status.

In short, for Coates, America is not post-black. Blackness as the identity of a people marked by the common history of oppression still exists in America. Blacks continue to be the target of racism, and this, regardless of their economic status. Blacks are still discriminated-against because of their racial identity and not because of the economic conditions. Like Coates, Thomas Angie also provides a narrative that suggests that blackness still is significant in contemporary America.

In *The Hate U Give*, Thomas Angie highlights various perspectives on the concept on blackness. First she shows that blackness still represents the identity of the African-Americans. Through the experiences of her characters and particularly that of the protagonist Starr, Thomas Angie highlights how being black in America continues to be, as Du Bois explained earlier, divided by a double perception of the self in an oppressive society. In his seminal book *The Souls of the Black Folks*, Du Bois highlighted that one of the conditions of being black in America was to be torn between two warring identities: one as a black and the other as an American citizen. He termed the knowledge of this split identity as “double-consciousness”. W.E.B Du Bois (1903, p. 8) wrote:

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born (...) in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

Du Bois shows through the above quotation that the experience of being black in America was to navigate between two identities. These two identities, black and American, are conflictual. This duality of the black American leads him to constantly fight an inner struggle that was a defining feature of blackness. In other words, being black, according to Du Bois meant to be split between two different and contrasting worlds.

More than a century after Du Bois, African-American authors and more specifically Thomas Angie shows that identity duality or “double-consciousness” is still a defining characteristic of being black in America. Through the experience of Starr, the protagonist, Thomas Angie demonstrates that the black American is still characterized by his two-ness. Indeed, Starr is portrayed as a character who grapples with identity issues. She has to navigate between two conflicting worlds. Starr lives in Garden Heights, a predominantly black neighborhood, and attends Williamson school which is a white school. Her two worlds are very opposed and Starr has to find a balance between both of them. That implies that she has to be two different persons depending on the location she is. The Williamson’s Starr is different from the one in Garden Heights as the following passage from the novel illustrates it:

I just have to be normal Starr at normal Williamson and have a normal day. That means flipping the switch in my brain so I’m Williamson Starr. Williamson Starr doesn’t use slang—if a rapper would say it, she doesn’t say it, even if her white friends do. Slang makes them cool. Slang makes her “hood.” Williamson Starr holds her tongue when people piss her off so nobody will think she’s the “angry black girl.” Williamson Starr is approachable. No stank-eyes, side-eyes, none of that. Williamson Starr is nonconfrontational. Basically, Williamson Starr doesn’t give anyone a reason to call her ghetto (T. Angie, 2017, p. 50)

As the passage shows, Starr is split between her two worlds. When she is in Williamson, she has to change her identity to fit in this white-dominated world. That means adopting a set of behaviors which are different from her natural being. She has to change her ways of speaking, using correct English rather than the unconventional English she uses in her neighborhood; she has to avoid conflicts in order not to be labeled with ugly stereotypes. In this way, Starr perceives herself through what B. Gföllner (2020, p. 9) called “white gaze.” Her identity is influenced by the look of the dominant white society. Starr is not sufficiently herself when she is in her white world because she fears being judged by Whites. Her experience shows how Blacks continue to

be inhabited by two warring identities in an oppressive society that does not allow blackness to assert itself as a valuable identity.

Additionally, Thomas Angie, like Coates, highlights the point that being black in America still means being an oppressed group. She portrays blackness as a monolithic group that endures white racism. She shows that Blacks still undergo bodily and psychological harms because of their blackness. This idea is shown in the novel through the many killings of the black people and the fear that those killings have sparked in the African-American community. The central event of the novel itself is the killing of Khalil by a white police officer. But as the story unfolds, Starr reveals that oppression is not about only Khalil. It is rather a collective black experience. Starr voices: "This is bigger than me and Khalil though. This is about Us, with a capital U; everybody who looks like us, feels like us, and is experiencing this pain with us" (*HUG*, 114). In these lines, Starr suggests that the killing of Khalil has a broader implication than that of the single murder of Khalil. In other word, she insinuates that though it is Khalil who is killed in this specific case, his killing is not an individual matter; it is not circumscribed to the individual person of Khalil. It is instead an issue that collectively touches black Americans. The particular stress on the "Us" underlines the idea it is the entire black American community, as a collective, who is concerned by the systemic injustices from the white society. In this regards, Starr presents Blacks as a monolithic group united by their common experience of oppression and suffering.

### **1.3 Showcasing racial pride**

Racial pride is a concept that was used by earlier major African-American writers such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston to not only express their attachment to their blackness or cultural identity in an American society which sought to erase black culture and oppress African-Americans. Those writers used racial pride to resist oppression and assert their black identity without apology. Both T.N. Coates and T. Angie express their blackness through the exhibition of racial pride in a slightly different manner.

In *Between the World and Me*, shows his pride in black cultural and intellectual heritage. Coates discovered black literature at Howard University which he repeatedly called "The Mecca" throughout the book. At Howard Coates had the opportunity to meet with a wide diversity of people, especially immigrants, from Africa. This experience, he admits, allowed him to

understand blackness as very rich and diverging and global far from the often limited and stereotyped perceptions presented by the white dominant society. This exposure to black immigrants, reinforced Coates's own research through books on Africa at Howard, has led Coates to develop a profound fascination and love for the culture of black people. T.N. Coates (2015, p.46) wonders: "Had any people, anywhere, ever been as sprawling and beautiful as us?." As it can be seen, Coates is mesmerized by what he discovered at his university on black people to the point which he believes that no other race is as beautiful and extensive as the black. In doing so, Coates echoes the black beauty ideas used by Langston Hughes in the Harlem Renaissance to show pride in blackness. Such pride in blackness is also developed by Thomas Angie in a different perspective.

In *The Hate U Give*, Thomas Angie underscores that blackness is still significant in the black American community through racial pride. She unveils identity and cultural pride in two main ways. On one hand, throughout the novel, Starr and her family are said to be praying a "Black Jesus" (HUG, 12) whose picture hangs on their living room. The symbol of "Black Jesus" is repeatedly used throughout the story. This symbol shows that Starr and her family are proud of their blackness. They distance themselves from the white portrayal of the white Jesus preached in Christianity to connect their faith to their black identity.

On the other hand, racial pride is shown in the novel through the language employed to narrate the story. Thomas Angie echoes the vernacular language that earlier prominent black writers such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston used to symbolize their connection to their racial identity. The story is replete with daily and ordinary dictions used by the African-Americans. Examples of the vernacular language used in the novel are seen when the police officer pulled over Khalil and Starr and asked them where they were coming from. Khalil replies: "nunya" meaning "none of your business" (T. Angie, 2017, p. 19). Similarly, when Mr Lewis was interviewed by a reporter, he used a very broken English as the following passage shows it: "I sholl can. (...) Them boys pulled those officers out their car" (ibid, p. 125). By using this vernacular language in the novel, Thomas Angie shows her pride in her racial identity as Hughes and Hurston did earlier. She prides herself on her blackness; a racial pride which is also revealed

when at the end of the novel, Starr the protagonist decides to embrace her full black identity and speak out against racial injustices regardless of how her white world might look at her.

### **Conclusion**

All in all, for Coates and Thomas Angie, America is not yet in a post-black area. Going from various perspective, they highlight the idea that a sort of common identity still represents black Americans. For Coates and Thomas Angie, blackness is still monolithic group identity that defines black as oppressed group who has experienced, past and present, the same racial injustices and pain. They also exhibit, like Hughes and Hurston, cultural and racial pride as a defining feature of black Americans suggesting that blackness is still a unifying concept for this portion of the American population. Hence, in this context, it is misleading to claim that America is either post-black.

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