The Delusion of the Dream in Ta-Nehisi Coates' *The Water Dancer*

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Abstract
The Lockless estate in Ta-Nehisi Coates' fantasy neo-slave narrative The Water Dancer *mirrors the United States in terms of their treatment of race. Both Coates's two autobiographical works introduce the concept of family, from his childhood and from his young fatherhood, which highlights the lack of healthy familial relationships in* The Water Dancer. *The Walkers bastardize fatherhood and brotherhood with the protagonist, Hiram, who constantly vies for their affection despite their unequal relationship. Looking at the novel through a CRT lens allows us to break down this relationship. The Dream of hope, of race relations and treatment getting better in every single way throughout history is often weaponized by the dominant culture in order to force forgiveness, as well as a gruesome idea of family, and drive out the memory of the past.*

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The Water Dancer, a 2019 novel by Ta-Nehisi Coates, is the story of Hiram told by his older self, in autobiographical style. Hiram is born a slave on the Lockless estate, owned by the Walkers; his father, and later his brother, are his masters. He begins his life with a warped idea of family with no blood ties to the other slaves, and so attempts to forge familial bonds with his father and brother, but this proves impossible. Coates' message of forming ties with people that we can proudly call family -- a bond formed by love, not blood or money -- comes through in his other two books as well. His ideals, though some would call them highly pessimistic, align with critical race theory, namely with the idea of material determinism, which comes through in the character of Maynard, Hiram's brother. The latter, who, in some people's eyes, should be more liberal-minded than his father by virtue of being young, instead marks a step backward in civil rights, paralleling the rolling-backward of the civil rights after the close of the 1960s. The United States of today's treatment of race is represented, on a micro level, in the Lockless estate in *The Water Dancer*; Hiram's father makes sorry attempts to fix his mistakes of the past in a way that is still beneficial to

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himself, something that Hiram must come to terms with rather than take it upon himself to fix.

In his autobiographical account, *The Beautiful Struggle* (2008), Coates describes his own father, whose definition of fatherhood may look unconventional to an outsider; nevertheless, he paints a picture of unwavering support. Coates' paternal grandfather was an intellectual with anger issues and a drinking problem, temporarily kicking his son out of the house when he was only nine (19-20). Coates' own father had seven children by four women, settling down with Ta-Nehisi's mother to raise him and his older brother Bill.

> This is all a mess on paper, but it was all love to me, and formed my earliest and still enduring definition of family... My father knew how to hurt people without knowing how he'd hurt them. And maybe in the end this is what saved him. He was shameless in his pursuit of women. He was perpetually broke. But he never shirked when his bill came due. He hustled for his baby's new shoes, while his frayed at the seams (16-19).

Ta-Nehisi and Bill's mother and father were strict and never allowed them to get away with anything, both full-time workers and full-time parents. This was necessary in their Baltimore community, overwhelmed by the recent influx of cocaine, which ramped up the potential violence of strange encounters and dug a rock-bottom lower than anyone could imagine. They did not know how close they were to the edge; all it could take was a stumble to fall, and amid the long yelling lectures from their father, the high-heeled shoes their mother threw at them, their parents were always there to catch them if they did.

Coates writes a very different story of fatherhood in *The Water Dancer*, with Hiram's father, Mr Walker, using him as a tool to elevate his brother, Maynard. Parenthood can look like one in a wide range of things, but generally, the parent's role is to create or illuminate opportunities for their child; as Mr Walker seems unwilling to do this for Hiram without keeping him as a slave, he is no parent to him. Repeatedly in the novel, Mr Walker believes himself a father to Hiram and yet fails in that role. Hiram does not want to fail in his role as his son, not realizing until late in the novel that failure is inevitable as his father will never allow him to be free, nor ever revere him in the way that he did his white drunkard son. He would neither revere Hiram's own mother in the way that he did Maynard's.

> *Maynard loved you*. This notion -- that Maynard loved anyone, that Maynard would give his life for anyone, much less me -- was astounding me...this glorified portrait somehow lived right along with the admonition my father had always communicated to me -- that Maynard must be watched, that he was not to be trusted with his own life...Oh, the curses my mind constructed for my fool of a father, for this country where men dress sin in pageantry and pomp, in cotillions and crinolines, where they hide its exercise, in the down there, in a basement of the mind, in these slave-stairs, which I now I descended, into the Warrens, into this secret city, which powered an empire so great that none dare speak its true name (69-70).

This marks the turning point for Hiram, the realization of the ridiculousness of his aspiration to make the Lockless house a home for himself. His own mother has been ripped away from him, and there is a constant threat of his other family members being sold, preventing him from the prospect of falling in love and creating a family. He draws the connection between the house and the state of Virginia, where an entire race is condemned to spend their lives empowering a society that will never accept them as one of their own, among claims that they dearly love them.

Even when Mr Walker guiltily admits the truth about having sold Hiram's mother, Hi still cannot recall her face; some wounds will never be healed, no matter how much either party wishes this to be so. Although Mr. Walker is a product of his environment, he is no victim or a reformed man, nor is he a father, as he claims: "I am a conflicted man; I cannot help it. Two mistakes I made in my life. First was letting go of your momma. Second was letting go of you. And it was all done in a horrible fit. No more. I am an old man, but I am, too, a new one" (324). At this point in the novel, we have only just met him again after Hiram's been on his own journey, and he quickly falls back into the same patterns of problematic behaviour he exhibited before. Immediately, he takes credit for Hiram being freed from Ryland's jail, claiming that the reason why Hi is back on the Lockless estate is his diligence in bringing him back (324). This is a parallel to him taking fatherly pride in Hiram's gift for memory and performance, despite it being a natural gift, inherited from the other Tasked, not from Mr Walker (20, 29). Later, he implores Hiram to tell him a story as he lays in bed; Hi, rather than see this as a favour for his old father, sees through the request. "...I suddenly

felt myself grow old right there, because I saw before me the room come alive with the specters of Caulleys, Mackleys, and Beachams, and all the families of Quality who'd once bid of me a story, a song. No, I thought. Not far enough" (338). He still indulges him and tells him a story. Mr Walker is a relic of the past, reformed as much as he ever will be. It is not enough, but it would be unrealistic to ask for more.

Both Hiram and his father are using coping mechanisms to blind themselves to the truth. The trauma of his father selling his mother and allowing him to be completely abandoned as a very young child causes Hiram to experience *denial*, in which phase we "[believe] that the problem does not exist, or the unpleasant incident never happened," resulting in him repressing the memory in his near-perfect recollection of his life (Tyson 2015: 15). For most of the novel, Hiram knows that his mother was sold, but this is always referred to in the passive voice; his first mention of this --"my mother was taken and sold" -- even suggests that his father had no control over it (11). In his own mind, he denies his involvement even though the facts are right in front of him. Mr Walker's admission on page 324, however, is exhibiting his own denial. His language ("letting go" rather than "selling" or "abandoning") is that of a man whose family wanted to leave the nest to live their own life, rather than people that he treats as his property. The trauma of the system itself, though, has affected him as well, and, along with denial, Mr Walker also experiences selective perception, "hearing and seeing only what [he feels he] can handle," not only in his behaviour towards Hiram but towards Thena (Tyson 2015: 15).

The "social construction" thesis of critical race theory argues that race is not based in any science or fact; "rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient" (Delgado, Stafancic, Harris 2017: 9). For all American history, most of those in power, and much of the working-class, obtain direct benefits from racism, and so there is a vested interest in keeping the status quo. Mr Walker sells Hiram's mother when it is inconvenient to have her, and failing to tell Hiram, then only a small child, is him avoiding yet another emotional inconvenience; he does not like putting himself into uncomfortable positions, believing this more important than the suffering of others, merely because he is white. The social construction thesis also states that any action taken by the groups in power is taken because they see a benefit to themselves, even if it appears to benefit those who are not in power. Mr Walker permits Thena to do other

people's laundry in exchange for money, which initially seems like an improvement, but is just a furthering of the status quo, an action he takes for his own emotional convenience.

> He never quite said this, but my father avoided saying too much to Thena, and if he was walking the property and saw her coming, he would turn the other way. I think now that this was his ambition for her laundry runs, to somehow assuage the guilt of selling a woman's children on the racetrack (346).

It is likely that Hiram's father tutoring and elevating him to the position of manservant was not out of any fatherly love -- although Walker himself may sincerely protest -- but out of guilt, believing that this would make up for his neglect, when, in fact, he is placing the responsibility of fathering Maynard on the son that he gave nothing to. Ta-Nehisi Coates' paternal grandfather attempted to educate Coates' father on life lessons by forcing him to recite Bible verses and giving lectures on random mornings. Coates' father, a Black Panther until 1972, educated Ta-Nehisi by using his weekends to drive him around, pointing out the lack of black-owned businesses and the inequities that led to it. When they got home, his father would assign him an African history book, a different one each time. Coates' *Between the World and Me* (2015) could be his own version of the education that the men in his family pass down.

Coates' *Between the World and Me* is a letter to his son, then an adolescent, where he elaborates on the tenets of critical race theory, what it means to him and them in this age. He details his experience during an interview by a white reporter, and his rapid realization that the interview was organized in a way to further the narrative of the "Dream."

> [The Dream] is Memorial Day cookouts, block associations, and driveways... for so long I have wanted to escape into the Dream, to fold my country over my head like a blanket. But this has never been an option because the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies (11).

Coates is asking his son to accept the same facts of the world that Hiram comes to accept in *The Water Dancer*. He tells his son that he must accept his black body and live in it, knowing that authorities such as the police could take control over it anytime, at their whim, which one

should assume as random, because the people themselves are not evil; they are just products of an evil system. He speaks mostly of material determinism, a tenet of critical race theory, according to which the American system was designed to demonize blacks for the specific purpose of exploiting them while also not feeling guilty about it; the upper-class whites perpetuate the system for material gain, the lower-class whites do so for psychological gain. There is no message of hope in *Between the World and Me*, just an acknowledgement of the Dream, however fragile it is, undone by one single violent act, an act that happens all over the country too frequently to believe in it.

Repeatedly throughout the novel, Mr Walker tries to forge a father-son relationship with Hiram while still maintaining the unequal and abusive difference in power between them. Because of the clear desire of both parties to have this relationship, it is easy to maintain it before Hiram comes to the realization that the Walker house will never be his home. However, the almost-tender moments between them are soured by Hiram's constant awareness that he must serve during every single interaction they have. The sibling relationship between Maynard and Hiram, though, is doomed from the start. Maynard's every whim has been catered to; as a result, he has even less respect for the lives of the Tasked than his father does, as his irresponsibility allows him to look at them as capital to pay off his gambling debts. His lack of class and refinement creates a dangerous combination: using the Tasked not just for material, but psychological gain. Hiram learns as a child that he is no exception to this.

> ...within half an hour or so I had them all out on the green, where it was announced by Maynard that the gathered Tasked--old and young, some freshly exhausted from the field, others in the overcoats and polished shoes of the house--would race each other for his amusement... I had not yet understood my place among things, for as I watched Maynard organize them into packs to run against each other, he called to me, 'What are you doing, Hi? Get down here'...I was to run too (138-139).

Maynard, who should be the beacon of hope and a symbol of a bright future as opposed to his aging father, is instead worse, enjoying the system that has elevated him and his reckless hobbies. As a young man barely out of adolescence, he is even less likely to change his ways than his father. If the Lockless estate is America, there is no progression

inherent in the passage of time. If Maynard had lived, he'd have sold every single Tasked to keep up his drinking and gambling habits, including his own brother. Mr. Walker, in promoting Hiram to May's manservant, delusionally believes in the Dream of his white and black sons partnering to bring Lockless back to its former greatness. The ties between the brothers may be legitimate in some way, but they are only important when they are useful to the one in power, just like race in America, the thing that divides us when those in power want us to be divided, want to exercise control over blacks. To them, races should separate us, but when Hiram's father asks him, "'Mind your brother, do you hear me?'", they are brothers, one and the same (43). Never mind that they are not brothers if Hiram were to ever need Maynard's help.

Like Mr Walker, Coates does not paint Maynard as independently evil even through Hiram's eyes. The night before they are to leave for the races, a day before Maynard's death in the river, Hiram is troubled by a dream he has.

> ...I was out in the tobacco fields again, out there with the Tasked, and we were, all of us, chained together and this chain was linked to one long chain and at the end of it was Maynard, idling lost in his own thoughts, almost unaware that he was holding all of us in the palm of his hand (43-44).

In the dream, he and all the other Tasked grow old, the other Tasked disappearing until it is just Hiram, chained by May who has turned into a baby. Old Hiram looks at the sky and to the North Star. Hiram is, of course, dreaming of the future, and his lack of a future if he stays on the Lockless estate and in service to his brother. The next morning, Hi thinks about the dream and ponders over the idea of love among the Tasked, how it has been violently shaped by their conditions -- it is then that he perhaps unconsciously resolves to change his own conditions. Maynard regressing into a baby while the Tasked grow old could hold a number of meanings, but to me, the interesting part about this is the inherent lovability babies have, and how this completely contrasts the revulsion that most feel towards May, mostly because he is seen as a child who wields too much power in an adult body; he uses and will always use his family assets -- including the Tasked -- to fund his aversion to growing up. However, the dream shows that, through the passage of time, he is aging *backwards*, not staying the same. Perhaps Hi is holding onto the same hope his father has: that May will grow up.

The dream is showing him that he will age and grow wiser and yet still be chained to a man so oblivious and destructive that he might as well be a baby through Hi's eyes. Also, with this dream, Maynard's liability is minimized; he is not an evil perpetuator of the system, or even a tool of it. He is innocent, complacent at worst, and yet Hiram has come to the realization that he cannot be reasoned with. They could be chained together for their entire lives; their bond will not grow any stronger and, in the end, Hiram would still think of escape, perhaps wishing that he had done it much, much earlier.

Hiram's dream and the Tasked idea of love that he ponders on are echoed in the present in *Between the World and Me*. Coates tells his son that with one slip-up, "[his] body can be destroyed...The destroyers are merely men enforcing the whims of our country, correctly interpreting its heritage and legacy" (9-10). He goes on to describe the reasoning behind the familial beatings he received as a child for seemingly minor offenses, that his parents received, how these were violent expressions of love and fear that a worse fate awaited them if they did not realize how quickly their bodies could be truly destroyed, their lives taken from them, if they slipped up around the wrong person. Just as we hear the echoes of the institution of slavery today, we see Coates' experiences echoed in *The Water Dancer* -- black bodies chained to Maynard, and as Hiram describes when he wakes,

> I remember how these young couples would hold one another, each morning before going to their separate tasks, how they would clasp hands at night, sitting on the steps of their quarters, how they would fight and draw knives, kill each other, before being without each other, kill each other, because Natchez-way was worse than death...how families formed in the shadow and quick, and then turned to dust with the white wave of a hand (45-46).

The severity is different, but the expressions of love and fear, the punishment, are the same.

As one traces Coates' family up to his own children through his autobiographical narratives, one can see a clear improvement in how they treat and educate each other; the world around them, though, appears to get worse in some ways. To those in positions of privilege, this appears counterintuitive, but such an event was what birthed critical race theory. "[CRT] sprang up in the 1970s, as a number of lawyers, activists, and legal scholars across the country realized, more

or less simultaneously, that the heady advances of the civil rights era of the 1960s had stalled and, in many respects, were being rolled back" (Delgado & Stefancic 2017: 4). One of the earliest theorists was Derrick Bell, a lawyer and civil rights activist who proposed that *Brown v. Board of Education* is not the triumph that we think it is; rather, an exhibition of material determinism by the elite whites, "[serving] to reinforce the fiction that, by the decision's rejection of racial barriers posed by segregation, the path of progress would be clear" (2004: 7). Like Hiram's father, who avoids being seen by Thena and allows her to earn small amounts of money from others, and who promotes Hiram to manservant while keeping both in slavery, the courts were not acting in goodwill, but cowardice and self-interest, in the hope that those they oppress will forget about the past and therefore how they are being trodden on in the present.

None of Coates' three books appears to offer a solution for the future; they all end abruptly, the future being an absolute unknown. However, they also end with being among family; Hiram's father is even present in the last page of *The Water Dancer*. "...I wanted him to know that I now knew all that he knew, that to forgive was irrelevant, but to forget was death" (403). Shortly after this interaction, his father passes away and Corrine and Hawkins turn Lockless into an Underground station. With the return of Hiram to the estate, and Mr Walker's "admission" of guilt involving Hi and his mother, his father appears to have been forgiven, which changes nothing except to console a man who will die within the year. With buying Lockless and waiting for him to pass, the Underground is establishing a completely new institution, rebuilding it with Hiram as its steward, although from the outside they must keep up appearances with Corrine as master, and the former Tasked beneath her. After speaking to his father, Hi walks down the street to Sophia and Carrie, both content as a family, the lack of clarity even extending to us asking the question, "Are they Tasked or free now?" Even when Hiram asks Sophia, "What are we now?", he seems to be asking about their relationship status, but he could be very well asking if they're free (403). However, whether free or not, they *are* home by their own definitions, creating a place for themselves where before, at the beginning of the novel, they could see none. Making a home in the same place they were exploited and enslaved may seem strange, an idea that Michael Awkward calls "the American racial uncanny" (2013: 216). In his book, Awkward describes walking through

the Constitution Center and his wife's tearful reaction to the exclusion of blacks in the Preamble: "'We weren't "the people" they had in mind,' she sobbed, the ideal so painfully at odds with [Washington's] illiberal use of black bodies…" (216). Still, the Center honored historically significant African Americans, whose presence created a strange juxtaposition and the question of whether these great people ever made the U.S. their home.

There is much uncertainty surrounding Coates' texts, and the attempt to find a message of hope in his writing is tempered by the fact that in *Between the World and Me*, he seems to resent such attempts. To search for hope is to believe in the Dream, resulting in us being as delusional as Mr. Walker, who naively looks at his two sons and honestly believes that they could ever be brothers. Critical race theory is the restructuring of thinking around progress, but its main theorists, such as Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, seem just as uncertain as Coates: the transition, if it happens, will either be peaceful or violent, depending on the severity of white resistance, and will need to include widespread participation, such as economic boycotts and the abolishing of old-fashioned, inequitable standardized tests. The discrimination is embedded in the system, so reassembling parts of the system is necessary in order to move forward.

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