

EMBODYING BLACKNESS: VOCABULARY OF RACE IN COATES' “LETTER TO MY SON”

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In his essay, “Letter to My Son,” Ta-Nehisi Coates reflects on the visceral, crippling nature of racism, arguing that the systemic abuse of black bodies is deeply entrenched in America’s history. In articulating this claim, Coates speaks of “white America’s progress,” but he immediately refines the phrase with the qualification “or rather the progress of those Americans who believe that they are white” (2). By doing so, Coates creates a subtle distinction, differentiating “white” as a racial category from “white” as an acquired ideology of distinct groups. He posits that race is not a natural, biological grouping, arguing instead that it is a political mechanism built upon the “pillaging of life, liberty, labor, and land” (3). The immediate self-correction serves as a rhetorical cue, drawing attention to Coates’s underlying project.

Careful scrutiny, however, reveals that Coates—although repeatedly invoking “the belief,” “the dream,” and “the religion” of being white—never once defines blackness as an abstract ideological concept. Instead, he does the opposite, making concrete the visceral violence that destructs “black bodies,” cataloging the ways in which racism “dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth” (5). Coates’s different treatment of being black and “the belief in being white,” therefore, creates an apparent inconsistency. Why is it, then, that Coates chooses to approach whiteness as an abstract construct but blackness as literal, embodied and thus inseparable from the physical realm?

Perhaps an entryway to this question is the very anecdote that sparks Coates’s critical inquiry, placed at the opening of his letter. As Coates recounts, a TV host questions him about “the subject of my body” though she did not “mention it specifically” (2). The implicit idea—that the host can reduce Coates’s experience of being black into a merely physical condition—represents, as Coates posits, an undercover rhetoric frequently employed by “intelligent people” to avoid the discomfort of verbalizing racism (2). The emphasis on “body” as the subject of her question is central to Coates’s analysis, because, in summoning Coates to speak on behalf of the physical experience of inhabiting a black body, the host strips him of any agency in deciding whether he believes in the ideological construct of race. In other words, he cannot choose to subscribe to “the belief” of being black, in the same way that his white counterparts may indulge in the assurance of being white, because, after all, in a country where even police departments have been “endowed with the authority to destroy [his] body,” whiteness promises power while blackness represents its very deprivation (4). The implicit invocation of “body,” therefore, reduces Coates’s

experience with race to a raw, unarmored state subjected to the violent consequences of simply embodying blackness. It is no wonder, then, that Coates makes a distinction between being black and “the belief in being white,” as it emphasizes that the former is robbed of agency as soon as their white counterparts indulge in the institutionalized belief system committed to the shackling of black bodies (3).

However, the very distinction that compels Coates to make his initial shift from “white America” to “those Americans who believe that they are white” has an arguably divisive effect (2). How does Coates’s selection of race-related vocabulary advance or undermine his project to respond to the “constant, generational, ongoing battery and assault” of systemic racism (5)? An attempt to answer this question demands a more nuanced reading of the crisp distinction Coates makes between “white” as a racial category and “white” as an acquired ideology. Perhaps it is not unintentional that Coates, in the sheer economy of one clause, uses a simple shift in definition to convey a drastically different idea. This tactic of reframing and redefining concepts through seemingly small shifts in word choices may, in fact, lie at the core of Coates’s rhetoric.

First manifesting itself in the distinction between being white and “the belief in being white,” this strategy is then repeatedly applied to Coates’s use of lists, a more extended form that likewise calls for the subtle refinement of ideas. Without drawing attention to itself, the list format—similar to that of a clause—allows Coates to invoke increasingly pointed language about racial discrimination. For example, as Coates traces the linguistic tradition that downplays the systemic abuse of black bodies, he argues: “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” (5). Under the umbrella category of “our phrasing,” Coates groups together four two-word combinations that begin with a form of the word “race” and two with the adjective “white.” The subtle shifts in word patterns create a powerful effect: whereas the first term “race relations” carries arguably neutral connotations, the list becomes increasingly critical with the use of “racial chasm” and “racial profiling,” escalating finally to the unambiguous reproof of “white privilege” and “white supremacy.” The heightened intensity of each term reveals a departure from the traditional rhetorical function of lists: whereas the typical usage allows for more concise, straightforward expressions of similar ideas, Coates again employs the distinct—if not cunning—move to refine and reframe entire concepts through a rapid progression of words. With the same ease and swiftness Coates exhibits in bouncing between being white and “the belief in being white,” he takes advantage of the quiet, unobtrusive quality of a list. By the time one reaches the end of the sentence, the neutral term “race relations” spirals into “white supremacy.” Just as the host mobilizes her vocabulary to downplay racism, Coates demonstrates here that language also has the capacity to do the reverse, allowing him to reclaim power by replacing ideas, acquiring momentum, and building to a crescendo.

Viewed through such a lens, Coates's rhetorical use of clauses and lists—both tactics of escalation—embodies his sustained struggle against racism: first positing that the subtlety of language is frequently mobilized to cement white supremacy, Coates then uses it to reclaim power. After all, how fitting is it that, in pursuing his project to unveil the pernicious ways in which language perpetrates racism, he similarly exploits its creative capacity to coalesce his readers and breathe life into the struggles of embodying blackness? For example, when he deconstructs the myth of the American Dream, he grieves for “the host,” “all those families,” “my country,” and “you,” increasing the number of recipients of that sadness from one individual to his entire nation and finally to the at-once specific (his son) and also universal second person pronoun, “you” (3). When Coates sought answers to explain his purpose “beyond meager survival,” he journeyed through “classrooms,” “streets,” and “continents,” using the sheer increase in geographic territory to convey the futility of his pursuit (5). When he examines the violent consequences of death, he humanizes the notion of loss, from “football games” to “private jokes” to “dreams” to the very “vessel of flesh and bone” (17-18). In all such cases, the tactic of escalation Coates mobilizes represents a larger, thematic mirroring of the content of his writing. By intensifying his ideas and building to a crescendo, Coates acquires the momentum to more forcefully persuade and evoke empathy—both potent ways of reclaiming power. In this light, although Coates's initial distinction between being white and “the belief in being white”—as well as his escalation from “race relations” to “white supremacy”—may seem to create a divisive effect, such replacement and intensification of ideas, in fact, belong to his overarching argumentative strategy to use language to acquire power.

After all, in a particularly self-aware moment of explaining the gradual nature of securing control, domination, and leverage, Coates even admits: “Sometimes this power is direct (lynching), and sometimes it is insidious (redlining)” (16-17). In a rhetorical context, the at times explicit and at times pernicious nature of power still applies; by reversing the logic of white people who exploit the subtlety of language to cement racism, Coates mobilizes the tactic of escalation to reveal that words also have the creative potential to destroy such a political engine. Circling back to the two interpretive questions that generated this inquiry into Coates's selection of race-related language, one begins to realize that they fundamentally point to the very thesis of his writing: that the struggle for black people is always embodied. To him, a vigorous, unapologetic execution of language represents a way to reclaim power and carve out a share of space that is otherwise invaded in the tangible realm.

WORKS CITED

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