# Between the World and Me Study Guide

## Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates

BOOKRAGS

# Contents

# Summary

Beginning with the words “Dear Son”, the author makes the work’s intention clear from the start: to introduce his son to the larger social, economic, and historical context of the fear within which black people in general, and young black men in particular, live in contemporary America. The introduction proper begins with the author’s response to the question of an interviewer about the relationship between violence and being black in America, and continues with analyses of the root causes of violence, the beliefs that America (as a culture) perpetuates about itself, and the need for black people to both ask a fundamental question about and of themselves and to find an answer.

As the author deepens and develops the various layers of his analysis, he introduces new elements. These include commentary and/or recollection of his own personal history (including relationships with his own father and mother), recollections of his own coming of age as a black man (including being influenced by the teachers of civil rights advocate Malcolm X), and references to America’s history of slavery – which, he says, made up (and continue to make up) the socio-cultural, economic, and political foundations of the treatment of black people in America. He draws parallels – or rather, potential parallels – between his own experiences, those of his son, and those of three young men (Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, and Jordan Davis) whose deaths in recent years have brought the dangers of being young, male, and black to public light in a way other deaths have, in the past, failed to do.

At the same time as he develops his central thesis, however, the author counterpoints it with narratives of joy – specifically, his own joy at discovering more ways of being black, more experiences and more perspectives, while attending Washington D.C.’s Howard University. In addition to narrating the more personal joys associated with meeting the educated, worldly black woman who eventually became his son’s mother, the author also describes the more racially-oriented joy associated with meeting, associating with, and learning from black people not only from across America but around the world. He describes how he learned many more ways of being black, and of feeling about being black, than he learned growing up on the streets of Baltimore. There, he comments, he learned his first lessons about the relationship between violence and being black - violence that, he clearly points out, manifested between blacks as well as between black and white.

Following the chronological line of his movement out of Baltimore, to Washington, and eventually to New York City (where he arrived shortly before the events of September 11, 2001), the author develops the emotional, psychological, and cultural movement he experienced as his understanding of being black in America evolved. A particularly important point in that movement, however, occurs when the author, at the urging of his wife, travels to Paris and discovers that the culture there is, in many ways, less intrinsically and less generally threatening towards black people than the culture in America. He clearly makes the point that Europe in general, and France in particular, is not without its own racial problems, citing the experience of the Roma (Gypsies), but is nevertheless clear on the freedom he experienced on Parisian streets.

The book concludes with the author's recollection / analysis of his conversation with the mother of one of the murdered young black men he knew personally who, in spite of how her son's life ended, remains proud of having taught him to feel strong, free, and independent. The author uses her as an illustration of what he believes he needs to teach his son, and then uses his experience of driving through black ghettos to illustrate to the reader the need for both him and his son to learn those lessons.

# Section 1, Part 1

## Summary

Pages 5 through 9 – As he begins his address to his son, the author describes how an interviewer (whose race is not identified) once asked him why white success in America was / is defined by violence. The author lists the various sorts of violence that non-whites have endured in America as the result of white culture and society striving to achieve dominance and control over non-white bodies. He goes on to suggest that this is partly because “America believes itself exceptional”; that America, as a society, is willfully blind to its race-defined shortcomings; and that America, again as a society, operates on the premise that issues of race are inherent and inevitable in human experience. He follows this contention with a list of various acts of violence perpetrated on black people throughout history; a reference to how police departments across America have been given the right to destroy black bodies, for whatever reason; and that “no-one is held responsible”. Narration then suggests the author’s son is fifteen years old.

Pages 10 through 17 – As he lists more incidents of violence faced by black people, the author refers to the “Dream” in American society, an ideal of safety and prosperity that he struggles to continue believing in even though he knows that for black people like him and his son, the Dream is simply not possible. He describes his sadness at the conclusion of the previously mentioned interview, a sadness resulting from the interviewer asking him about the possibility of hope for black people in America, and his frustration at hearing his son crying after he learned that a recent act of racist violence will not result in criminal charges against the perpetrator. The author explains his choice to not comfort his son by saying that he decided it was more important for his son to face, and learn, the truth about being black in America, and poses a key question related to that truth: “How do I live free in this black body?”

He sketches in the history of his own search for an answer to that question, and his realization that there is none: the freedom that that realization gives him, he says, is a weapon against fear, for himself and for those he loves. He describes that fear as being there for him throughout his entire life, in his community, and in his family – even in his father who, he says, gave him (the author) money to help raise his (the author’s) son, and who, when the author was a child, beat knowledge of fear and anxiety into him with a strap. After giving other examples of how black family elders beat their young, and referring back to gang violence in the community where he grew up, there is a sense that race-defined violence is not limited to white on black.

Pages 17 through 21 – The author offers another example of black-on-black violence: one he witnessed in his childhood, in which a lighter-skinned youth pulled a gun on a younger, darker-skinned child which, the author comments, made the younger child know exactly what his place was. This was the world, the author says, that he grew up in and through which he came to understand the rest of the world, even though

television and other media gave him messages of possibility and perfection to be aspired to. The author contrasts this world with the one in which his son is growing up where there are, among other things, a black president (i.e. Barack Obama) and social networking. He refers to his son's reaction to a race-defined shooting (later identified as that of Michael Brown). That reaction, the author says, included his son's statement that he had to "go", a statement that led the author to believe that his son hasn't yet come to a full understanding of either himself, of the race-defined system of justice and cultural relations in which he lives, or of the world.

## Analysis

In the first pages of this open letter to his son, the author introduces his argument that young black men in America are in danger in the same way, and for the same reasons, that black people in general have been in danger for years. He begins the book-long process of presenting both historical and personal contexts for his argument and analysis; introduces and develops his contention that America as a socio / political / economic entity has a substantial stake in keeping black people subservient; and develops his further contention that violence, particularly against young black men, is the primary means that that entity employs to realize that stake.

The key point to note about the author's overall approach is that it is essentially a personal appeal, made to his son for reasons that are ultimately defined primarily by emotion that the author strives, in many ways, to reinforce with research-based evidence. There is the clear sense that he is trying to support a subjectively lived, felt, and experienced contention with objectively researched, shaped, and reported `proof. The key benefit of this entwining of the personal and the researched, the subjective and the objective (which, it must be noted, fits in with the author's entwined backgrounds of memoir and journalism), is that the reader gets a sense of how incidents in the public eye (such as the Michael Brown incident referred to in this section) are, at least in the author's perspective, not just about the incident itself. Not only does his argument make even more clear that there are generations of families involved: there are also decades, even centuries of history involved, as well as an entire society's belief systems about itself. All are elements entwined in the complex web of what both triggers and results from race-defined conflict in America, a land where, in that country's popular self-perception, the dominant belief is that every human being who lives there has the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

This last, in turn, is the core statement at the heart of the "Dream" referred to by the author here and throughout the narrative, which can be taken to refer to the so-called "American Dream" which he portrays as hollow, corrupt, essentially destructive, and ultimately achievable not by everyone, as idealist Americans of many/most races would have it, but instead by the self-chosen, self-defined, almost exclusively white few. The success promised by that Dream, he further contends, is defined more on material terms than by any other, terms that he suggests the dominant white culture strives to keep from what it sees as lesser culture by any means possible, primarily by violence.

## Vocabulary

deify, defiance, heresy, aspirational, onset, suffrage, acquire, implicit, indubitable, ascribe, deplore, physiognomy, genealogy, hierarchy, indelible, disparate, elevation, dissident, exempt, banality, despot, prerogative, visceral, specious, inviolable, futile, gird, adamant, extravagant, flagellant, infirmity, concuss, brandish, firmament, immaculate, pandemonium, tenacious, inscrutable, velocity, omnipresent

# Section 1, Part 2

## Summary

Pages 21 through 29 – The author describes how growing up in West Baltimore taught him rules of behavior in relation to the life of the street - to gangs and to other individuals who were, like him, simply trying to defend their lives and their right to have them. He wonders what his son knows of those rules, even while acknowledging the very public, widely known incidents of race-defined violence "…you understand that there is no real distance between you and Trayvon Martin, and thus Trayvon Martin must terrify you in a way that he could never terrify me." He goes on to comment on how schools, like the street, left him without answers to the race questions and issues he was facing, commenting on how school felt pointless and irrelevant to the situation (the fear, the violence, the uncertainty) he was living in, in which both being violent and not being violent could result in his body being attacked, commenting on how religion (which his family rejected) was as useless in helping him understand and face the violence as life on the streets and school. "Fear ruled everything around me, and I knew, as all black people do, that this fear was connected to the Dream out there …"

Pages 29 through 39 – The author describes some of the many lessons about life he learned while growing up: from his mother (who taught him to think and to write through his thoughts), from his father (who, in addition to beating him as described above, also introduced him to the history and writings of black people both in America and elsewhere); and, again, from schools. He describes the lessons about white/black relations that the schools seemed to glorify, in their consistent repeated showings of films and other lecture materials, non-violent resistance even in the face of racial language that, the author suggests, was spoken in only the vocabulary of violence.

He comments that as he grew older and more aware of the hypocrisies and secrets around him, his parents increasingly steered him in the direction of his own answers, gleaned through life and through research. Among his early answers, he says, was a sense of a clear connection between the violence perpetrated on black people by whites, and by black people on each other. The author describes his efforts to come to an understanding of himself and his situation through studying the work of assassinated activist Malcolm X who, the author says, learned and spoke his truth honestly and clearly. He describes the time in which he began to come to his understandings as a time "charged with the call for a return, to old things, to something essential, some part of us that had been left behind in the mad dash out of the past and into America." Perhaps, he concludes, "we should return to Mecca."

Pages 39 through 47 – The author begins this section by describing how he found his Mecca within the seemingly infinite variety of black students and perspectives at the historically black school Howard University. The Mecca, he says, "is a machine, crafted to capture and concentrate the dark energy of all African peoples and inject it directly into the student body". After describing in vivid detail the range of students and

perspectives attending Howard at the time he was there, and after reflecting how “black” could include, and historically did include, people with just “one drop” of black blood, he realizes that the community of black people was, in fact, “the Western world itself”. He refers to the concept of “black beauty”, of finding black bodies and black culture and black values “beautiful”, and how that beauty and the discovery of it was “intimately connected to the destruction of black bodies.” At Howard he continues the process of reading and research initiated by his father; discovers stories of centuries-old black power; resolves to find and hold that power for himself; and develops the theory that “all black people [are] kings in exile.

## Analysis

The first point to note about this section is the direct connection that the author draws between the experience of his son and the experience of another young black man, Trayvon Martin. This marks the first point in the book in which he explicitly draws this connection, clearly and vividly implying that his son could very well be in the situation faced by Martin or any of the other young black men whose deaths are similarly referred to throughout the book. This is also the first point in the book in which one of three very publicly known cases (each occurring since 2012) of young black men being assaulted and killed is referred to in explicit, specific terms: the author names names, perhaps in the hope that both his son and his reader will look more deeply at these cases, not only seeing that they involve real people (as opposed to the iconic figureheads that they have in many ways become), but also seeing those figureheads within a larger social, cultural, and historical context.

Meanwhile, the author’s explorations of the nature and causes of violence against non-whites, as well as fear of that violence, develop key elements of that context, as do his references to the attitudes and actions of his parents. These references not only develop personal sides of that context: they also develop the book’s thematic interest in parent-child relationships. Meanwhile, his commentary on the influence of Malcolm X introduces an element of historically significant resistance to both the principles and practices associated with race-defined violence, again developing context for his overall argument.

Also in this section, the author introduces a recurring motif: the juxtaposition of dangerous race-defined attitudes and violence with more affirming, race-defined celebrations of black identity. This manifests in his analysis of the celebratory aspects of black life he found at Howard University. In particular, his reference to Mecca (in language that perhaps echoes that of Malcolm X, who was a convert to Islam) evokes a vivid, somewhat unexpected, revelatory experience of joy and homecoming, not just in terms of the physical community he discovered at Howard but also the sense of spiritual home that the physical community gave to him. This reference can be seen as referring to the author’s quest, and that of those like him, to return to basic truths about themselves and of black identity in the same way as Muslims view the geographical Mecca as a home, a source of truth about their religious identity.

## Vocabulary

transmute, atrocity, inviolability, anthology, complexity, prohibit, garner, sanctify, amoral, legible, theorem, compliance, hyperbolic, savvy, capable, conjugation, dogma, spurn, elicit, valorize, implicit, sanction, exoneration, flagrant, intangible, sanctity, insidious, prostrate, esoteric, pragmatist, proscribe

# Section 1, Part 3

## Summary

Pages 47 through 52 – The author describes how, as he continued and deepened his research into the history of violence against blacks in America, he discovered arguments between and about black historians, inconsistencies and uncertainties, agreements and dissents, sometimes within pages of each other. He comments on how his ideas and reading of Malcolm X were the yardstick by which he measured all his other reading; how he explored Washington (the city where Howard University is located) in search of other books, other insights, and other speakers; and how, on these searches, he found both more answers and more questions, all of which led, he says, to greater understanding of himself and his views and values – and to an even deeper understanding of the limitations of The Dream. “I didn’t realize,” he says, “that the boot on your neck is just as likely to make you delusional as it is to ennoble.” He describes how he broke through those delusions by both studying and writing poetry, particularly the work of other black poets around Washington, who inspired him with the discord and jagged uncertainty they both wrote about and triggered in him, and which reminded him of how much “terrible” there was “out there”. This, he says, is particularly important for his son to understand.

Pages 52 through 64– The author then describes how his perceptions, beliefs, and goals were gradually broken down by education, by teachers who communicated the centuries-old truths about the values and “truths” put forth by leaders like Malcolm X – teachers who led the author to think that “black” might be a name for anyone of any race “at the bottom, a human turned to object, object turned to pariah.” He was, it seems, learning there was nothing special about being “black”, the belief that there WAS something special seeming to come from a place of fear – that those who were not black were right, and that there was something wrong with being “black”. He also begins to discover, through loving and being loved by a variety of women, that there is really no one absolute way to do anything – to be black, to be male / female, or to love (which he describes as an act of heroism). He also describes discovering the freedom for the body associated with dancing, and comments that he wanted to write “as those black people danced”. He describes his early success at writing and publishing and his freeing entry into journalism, where he felt free to ask as many questions as he could find, questions not just about facts but also about reasons why and interpretations of those reasons – questions like why it was normal for his father “like all the parents I knew, to reach for his belt?” He describes how one of the women who opened his mind and body fell in love with a beautiful man (Prince Carmen Jones), how that man was killed, and how his death (even though he didn’t know the man well) left an absence in him.

Pages 64 through 71 – In the closing pages of this section, the author describes how he met and became involved with his son’s mother; how the discovery that she was pregnant gave him a new awareness of greater responsibility; and how the birth of his

son tied them together in a way that he believes a formal marriage ceremony never could. He describes the naming of his son after a man (Samori Toure) who died in a struggle against white French colonizers, and whose struggle has echoed, the author believes, in the struggle of every black man (including his son) to own his own body. He emphasizes the need for his son to remember that he is an individual (even though survival, on the streets and in life in general) depends on standing with community (large or small), and uses several vivid examples to communicate that slaves were individuals too. He talks further about slavery: “Never forget,” he says, “that we were enslaved in this country longer than we have been free…” and that his son “cannot forget … how they transfigured our very bodies into sugar, tobacco, cotton, and gold.”

## Analysis

In this section, the author continues to develop several previously introduced motifs and aspects of his appeal to his son (and perhaps, because of the fact that he has published this letter, to other young black men). These include the juxtaposition of experiences of joy, freedom, and happy discovery in being black with experiences of fear, restriction, and unhappy discovery ASSOCIATED with being black, and the sense of history associated with contemporary experiences of both black suffering and black joy (that history, here and throughout the narrative, associated with “middle” history - i.e. the Malcolm X era - and “early” history - i.e. the era of slavery and of the Civil War). He also implies that the fates of other young black men might be the same as that faced potentially by his son and by the murdered black men he (the author) cites as examples of how young black men are treated. In this section, however, the author takes a different tack on this last motif by invoking the identity of a young black man who did not become the nationally and internationally noted event that the other deaths he refers to became.

The death of Prince Carmen Jones (whose name echoes that of an important movie in the history of film’s portrayal of black characters) never achieved the wide notoriety that the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Jordan Davis did: it is portrayed here, however, as having a more profound personal effect on the author than those deaths, drawing the specter of violence towards young black men even closer to home, and arguably even closer to the life of the author’s son. Meanwhile, the references to Jones foreshadow further contemplation of his death by the author in forthcoming sections, and also the focus of his writing in Section 3, in which the author recounts a sometimes surprising, sometimes affirming, consistently enlightening conversation with Jones’ mother. A related piece of foreshadowing is the author’s urging of his son to remember that he is an individual, an urging that foreshadows similar comments made by the mother of Prince Carmen Jones in Section 3 and by the mother of another murdered young black man in Section 2.

The final moments of this section, and the words in Quote 9, use poetic language to reiterate one of the author’s key points: that America’s economic success, its sense of global importance and/or exceptionalism, was / is in many ways the result of the work and suffering of black people.

# Vocabulary

eclectic, nostalgia, proximity, diaspora, communal, scion, progeny, hijab, tabernacle, fanatic, cipher, insidious, erasure, ornate, colossi, verify, ethnography, coherent, amorphous, alliterative, paean, antiquity, discordant, vertigo, enclave, disabuse, ravenous, simian, pariah, nobility, inherent, bacchanal, galactic, lineage, ostensible, profligate, presumption, corrosive, monotony, dilapidated, expansive, acquiescence, impoverished, captivity, edict, posthumous, furtive, reducible

# Section 2, Part 1

## Summary

Pages 75 through 83– This section begins with narration of the author's terror as a result of being stopped by a white police officer in PG County, a suburb of Washington D.C. known for its very difficult race situation, including shootings and imprisonments of innocent black people. His situation ends with his release: shortly afterwards, however, another such situation ends in the death of Prince Carmen Jones. As the author reflects on Prince's death and funeral, he comments on how the race-defined tendency towards violence of the police is, in fact, a direct manifestation of race-based fear and prejudice in the American population – specifically, those who think of themselves as white. He also comments on how Christian faith and prayers for forgiveness for the officer who shot Prince mean nothing to him for those same reasons. The author describes how, as facts and details about Prince's death emerge (in particular, relating to the police officer's history of lies and corruption) and how nothing legal is done in response, he (the author) experienced increasing rage, pain, and frustration. He speaks at eloquent length of all the possibilities and hope of everyone, including Prince, that the author met at The Mecca; of all the love that got poured into Prince as a child, as a youth, and as a man; and of how Prince's daughter, like so many black people (including the mother, grandmother, and grandfather of his son), will be deprived of a black father. This, the author says, triggered a great and growing fear in him because the system in which he and his son live imposes such fear.

Pages 82 through 88 – The author describes how, in the aftermath of Prince Jones' death, he turned to investigative journalism to help himself understand what happened, in both its immediate personal context and its socio-cultural context. He learns more about the history of the officer involved, particularly that he (the officer) was black; he comments on how the higher-ups that covered up the officer's crime and the community members who voted in those higher-ups were all black as well, complicit in the manipulation of The Dream that resulted in Prince's death.

The author's narrative then takes a shift in focus as he describes how the mother of his son, who was hungry to see the world in the ways of so many in The Mecca, got a job in New York City; how he followed her there; and how they arrived two months before the events of September 11, 2001. He describes his cold anger at those events and at the outpouring of emotion they triggered, recalling how, on the same site as the Twin Towers once stood, there was a slave market where countless black lives came to an end. He the recalls his last personal encounter with Prince Jones – in a museum where the author says he wanted to give Prince some kind of warning, but that when he opened his mouth, Prince turned away.

## Analysis

At the beginning of this section, the author draws a clear and vivid parallel between his own personal experience and that of yet another murdered young black man, the previously referred to Prince Carmen Jones. As previously discussed, the author's connection to / knowledge of Jones seems to bring the fear associated with "driving while black" (to use a current catchphrase) very close to him, in a way he had never experienced himself and in a way he comes to realize could also affect his son. In short, in the juxtaposition of his own experience and the death of Jones, fear and the potential for violence become personal.

Meanwhile, the author raises a particularly interesting, and potentially controversial, point: that those who live by or for the so-called Dream, and who have bought into the white power structure (politically, economically, culturally) based on that Dream are not just white. He clearly suggests that some blacks have also bought into that power structure, and as such have as much of a stake in perpetrating violence on black people as white people do. The corruptive power of the Dream, the author implies, transcends racial lines.

The author's reference to the love "poured into" Jones again gives the latter's death a human face and context – and, by extension, does the same for the deaths of other young black men referenced throughout the work. Here again there is the implication that on some level, the author is commenting on the potential death of his son – or, at the very least, the fear faced (or to be faced) by his son for being a young black man. At the same time, it foreshadows the content of Section 3, in which the author discovers from Jones' mother just what kinds of love WERE "poured" into Jones' life, and comments on some of those types of love.

September 11, 2001 was the day on which terrorists hijacked four passenger aircraft; flew two of them into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, and flew another into the Pentagon in Washington D.C. The fourth was prevented from similarly being flown into a significant government target as the result of the passengers attacking the hijackers. Thousands of Americans and other world citizens died that day, in what has been described as the first terrorist attack on American soil. Its inclusion in this particular narrative is significant for several reasons: it serves as an example of how America's sense of exceptionalism was profoundly violated in that attack; and, in terms of the author's arguments and contentions, it serves as a powerful element of contrast in his argument about black bodies and black lives (i.e. numbers of lives lost due to outside attack, juxtaposed with numbers of lives lost due to internal attitudes and actions such as the slave trade). Perhaps most tellingly, the 9/11 reference serves as a trigger for a release of anger from the author, rare in this narrative. That anger, it seems, is directed both at those who glorify the WTC deaths over those of the thousands of slaves who, the author says, died on the same site; and at the American system, the Dream, that enabled those latter deaths in the first place.

BOOKRAGS

## Vocabulary

exonerate, embolden, atrocity, inchoate, immutable, inscrutable, indictment, travesty, coherent

# Section 2, Part 2

## Summary

Pages 88 through 92 – In this section, the author describes the contrasting circumstances of his young family's early life in New York City: the constant support and companionship of black family and friends, juxtaposed with the constant images and experiences of reckless freedom and selfish affluence evident in white people. He comments on the need for him and other black people, but particularly black men, to be on guard and ready to experience violence, and suggests that this aspect of black existence is, in a way, a stealing of time from black people. He describes his family's visit to a preschool; his son's immediate, unprejudiced, unconditional playfulness; his (the author's) impulse to tell him to calm down, an impulse he didn't act on; and his subsequent shame at having had the impulse at all.

Pages 92 through 99 – Here the author outlines another experience that he says he is ashamed of. In a predominantly white part of New York, he and his son were walking home from a movie when a white woman pushed aside his son. The author describes his angry reaction (which he defines initially as that of any father defending his child), the intervention of a white man on the side of the woman, his angry reaction to the man, and the man's threat to have him arrested. The author writes of being ashamed that his son was witness to an act of verbal violence on the part of his father; comments that his (the author's) history has been one of avoiding violence; suggests that neither the white woman nor the white man would call themselves racist; and theorizes that the experience of racist attitudes, of seeing black bodies as having less value, is so deeply embedded in the psyches of white people that it's unrecognizable. "… my experience in this world," he says, "has been that the people who believe themselves to be white are obsessed with the politics of personal exoneration…", and that they will lie to themselves to preserve The Dream. He concludes this section by saying it is his son's work to slowly and willfully turn the minds and eyes of such people into themselves.

Pages 99 through 108 – The author uses a memory of a trip taken with his son and a similarly young relative through several sites and monuments connected to The Civil War as a trigger for a deeper, even blunter and more direct exploration of what black bodies mean to whites. He describes the systematic destruction of those bodies, how the American economy was built on those bodies and the labor they provided, and how the War was fought to preserve the rights to both control and exploit those bodies. He likens that situation, and the believes and values in whites that gave rise to it, to those of the white woman who pushed his son, while at the same time urging him (his son) to remember history, and to be aware of history in today. "There is no them without you," the author says, "and without the right to break you they must necessarily fall from the mountain, lose their divinity, and tumble out of the Dream." He urges his son to respond to the mingling of then and now out of necessity but without violence.

## Analysis

In this portion of Section 2, the author continues to deepen the connection between the personal, cultural, and historical sides of his argument. He uses his narration of the encounter with the white man and woman as a springboard into his contemplations of the historical background of the attitudes behind their actions, implying that on some level, those attitudes are ultimately no different from, and are grounded in similar prejudices to, those who capitalized on the slave trade. As he draws this connection more vividly and clearly here than anywhere else in the book, he also takes the personalization of his argument one step further in this portion's final paragraphs, suggesting that his son faces the same attitudes as centuries of slaves did, but that it is up to him to change those attitudes in the ways slaves never could. Meanwhile, his self-humbling realizations about his reactions (i.e. that on some level they played into the "non-racist" beliefs and preconceptions of the white people involved in the incident) and his analysis of those seem to suggest, to both the author and the reader, that the author himself still has work to do in terms of dealing with both white and black fear.

All five of the book's main themes are developed in this section, with the encounter on the street illustrating (albeit in a relatively mild way, given other illustrations presented in the book) the dangers of being young, black, and male in America. Meanwhile, the author's reaction offer a variation on the book's thematic interest in parent/child relationships; and the author's exploration of the historical context of both the encounter and his reaction manifest the entwined themes about the relationship between past and present, the value of the black body, and the relationship between violence and racism. At the same time, he once again juxtaposes two seemingly contradictory sides of his experience of being black in America: the joys of discovering and growing within community, and the dangers that community faces from those who are outside it and regard it as both fully exploitable and a threat.

## Vocabulary

expenditure, siphon (v.), veneer, erudite, bravado, absolution, precipitate, emancipation, exoneration, sanction, jubilee, tantalize, benevolence, fortify, antiseptic, slovenly, pulverize, aspiration, lucrative, veranda, nullify, inveigh

# Section 2, Part 3

## Summary

Pages 108 through 114 – The author recounts an anecdote about seeing the home of a black family in Chicago be repossessed by white authorities and comments on how the legal system is not the only system that sees black bodies as disposable and exploitable. He comments on how city planning, the real estate business, and the banks all have investment in keeping black people and their bodies in places of feeling less. This, he adds, is a fundamental aspect of The Dream and urges his son to not become, or pursue, that Dream. The author then uses another anecdote to reinforce this urging, describing how he took his son with him while the author was reporting on the trial of a white man who killed a black boy (Jordan Davis) who, the man says, was armed. The author describes meeting with the mother of the murdered boy after the court verdict that virtually exonerated the man; how the woman was calm and rational as she wondered whether she did enough to encourage her son to be a proud individual; and how the woman turned to the author's son and told him what she had told her own son, that he had every right to be himself and to not be afraid. The author confesses that he has not said the same thing to his son enough times, and that he has not done so because he is afraid for his son's life. He uses the word "terrorism" to describe the practice of devaluing the body of non-whites – not just blacks but Muslims, Asians, and others.

Pages 115 through 129 – As he recalls the path he took while growing into adulthood – from Baltimore through Washington and Howard University into New York – the author comments on how much his eyes have suffered as a result of seeing what they have; how he struggled to find the right way to explore and/or survive the racial questions and situation and America; and how much focusing on that struggle blinded him to the appeal of other parts of the world. He describes how his son's mother was not blinded in that way, how she wanted to explore the world, and how she came back from a personal trip to Paris with countless pictures of doors. Eventually, the author says, he went there with his wife and son and a couple of other family members, describing his experiences of freedom, food, wine, and the release (at least to a degree) of the fear with which he walked through the streets of America. He then reminds his son (and the reader) that France, like America, has its own history of exploitation and/or destruction of bodies that didn't fit into ITS dream, that he and his son will never NOT be black, and that it will never be possible for either of them, or any black people, to escape what being black means in America. He illustrates this point by describing how, on a trip to celebrate his son's birthday at a French park, the family saw a young man carrying a placard that, in French, protested the acquittal of the man who killed Trayvon Martin.

Pages 129 through 132 – In the final few pages of this section, the author acknowledges that his son has a different sense of opportunity and possibility than he had; that his son also has a great deal more courage and sense of what is due him as a man; and finally, that he (the author) is proud of him for those things. He then again

reminds his son of the deaths of young, seemingly innocent black young men, and that The Dream is still continually financed, to one degree or another, by the exploitation and destruction of black bodies.

## Analysis

The author's comments on the how legal and other systems are founded on racism echoes comments earlier in the narrative, in which he describes how the legal freedom of the black, police officer killer of Prince Carmen Jones was ensured by Dream-defined systems of justice. Meanwhile, the author's narration of events following the death of Jordan Davis (another murdered young black man – see "Important People") once again illustrate how he (the author) works to bring the reality of being young and black in America home to his son – and, simultaneously, manifests the book's thematic interest in parent/child relationships. This, in turn, is further reiterated by the author's narration of the encounter with Davis' mother, which itself foreshadows the encounter in Section 3 between the author and another mother of a murdered boy – specifically, the mother of Prince Carmen Jones.

Another important element of this section is the way the author extends his argument to include the experience of other non-whites. There is the sense that what he says is particularly true of the experiences of Muslims in contemporary America, while similarly true of other races in the past (i.e. the experiences of the Japanese in and around World War II). He carries this parallel into his narration of his trip to France, and more specifically into his pointed comment that France, like the rest of Europe (he contends) has its own history / experience of ethnic and racial discrimination.

An important point to note about the author's trip is the revelation that he had never felt an inclination to leave America until led into it by his wife. This could be taken to suggest that, on some level, probably an unconscious one, the author has on some level bought into being part of the Dream, with its implications of American exceptionalism. As the author himself suggests, he has never thought of himself as needing to know, think about, or experience anything other than being American … arguably an essential, inevitable aspect of the Dream that the author, on so many other levels, seems to revile. This line of thinking, in turn, can be seen as leading to circumstance that actually supports the author's argument: the influence of the Dream is more pervasive, and more insidious, than perhaps even the author realizes.

## Vocabulary

demeanor, accolade, emblem, respite, jargon, covenant, extravagant, passivity, precipice, prominence, pinnacle, rapport, intrinsic, catastrophic, bistro, abeyance

# Section 3

## Summary

Pages 135 through 147 – The first part of this concluding section consists of a lengthy summary of the author's interview with Dr. Mable Jones, the mother of Prince Carmen Jones. He recounts her story of rising from poverty through school, university, and medical school to the head of radiology at a prestigious hospital; how her success made her ambitious and generous with her children (including Prince); how shattered she was when he was killed; and how optimistic she had been that the killer would be brought to justice. The author describes her powerful self-control, the care and focus with which she tells her story, and the pain and anger that always seem to be beneath the surface, likening how she looks to pictures of early equal rights protestors in their "armor" of determination. She also refers to how it can take only one act, one moment, one decision, one situation to turn a successful black person into someone like her son, someone whose body was destroyed simply for being black.

Pages 147 through 152 – The author describes how, after his conversation with Dr. Jones, he sat in his car and thought about everything she said. He is reminded of a trip he took with his family to the Howard University homecoming, where years of Howard students gathered on the football field and at a tailgate party, "the entire diaspora around me – hustlers, lawyers, Kappas, busters, doctors, barbers, Deltas, drunkards, geeks, and nerds … I felt myself disappearing into all of their bodies." He describes the intense feelings associated with this sense of community, the beauty and power of being black as dreamed by Malcolm X and beyond. He describes this Mecca experience as him and all the others there having made a home in the same way as black people do whenever they find home is possible, necessary, and safe. This was the power, he says, that drew Prince Jones to Howard, and that will make overcoming the power and threat of The Dream possible, even in the face of The Dreamers' determined exploitation of other people, of the earth, the earth's natural resources, and everything else that The Dreamers believe make The Dream possible and achievable. He concludes by urging his son to continue to struggle but not to pin hopes for full freedom from fear for the body on the transformation of The Dreamers and/or The Dream. The author then describes his journey back home from the home of Dr. Jones – a journey that takes him through "these ghettos – the abundance of beauty shops, churches, liquor stores, and crumbling housings" that, now as in his childhood and youth, trigger "the old fear."

## Analysis

The author brings his argument, analysis, and warning to a moving conclusion in this section. All of the book's themes emerge and entwine in the account of his conversation with Dr. Jones, most notably the sense of relationship between past and present: her strength and courage, the author implies, is that of every black mother, going all the way

back into the slavery era, of every black child who has suffered at the hands of whiteness and the increasingly corrupt, and corruptive, “Dream”. The description of the conversation with Dr. Jones is the book’s emotional, thematic, and intellectual climax, the point at which the author’s argument reaches those three points of peak intensity all at the same time, in terms of the author’s depth of feeling for his son, not to mention his longing for his son’s safety; in terms of the aforementioned themes; and in terms of the reason, evidence-based elements of his argument. The implication of the conversation, ultimately, is that all the dream-defined success of black people like Dr. Jones, and by extension her success-gifted son, could not save them from the corrupt, destructive power of The Dream and its enforcers.

The book’s final images evoke this dichotomy even further, a two-sided reality (hope vs. squalor) that has existed as an undercurrent throughout the book and which is brought to the surface here. The work’s final paragraphs are more contemplative in tone and attitude as the author once again juxtaposes joyful and painful experiences of being black, along with the simultaneous hope and fear he feels for himself, for his son, and for their community (hope evoked through his references to Mecca; fear evoked through his references to the ghettos through which he drives). Finally, there are his similarly simultaneous urgings of his son to be both courageous and careful. As the book draws to its close, it seems there is no one answer to the question that emerged as it began - “how do I live free in this black body?” (Section 1, Part 1).

## Vocabulary

affluent, ascertain, sharecropper, dearth, rectitude, recitation, sanctify, disposition, intrusive, caliber, composure, lineage, fallible, stoic, prostrate, imbibe

# Important People

## The Author (Ta-Nehisi Coates)

Ta-Nehisi Coates is an award-winning American journalist and memoirist. His writings tend to focus on different aspects of being black in America as he reports on both the experiences of others (through journalistic reporting and investigation) and explores / reflects upon his own (through the writing of memoir). He was born and raised in Baltimore, MD (a community that he describes as profoundly affected by long-simmering tensions between whites and blacks); attended university in Washington DC (a school populated mostly by blacks in a city with a substantial black population of its own); and eventually settled with his family in New York City. As the book relates, the events and circumstances associated with each of these phases of his life led to different, equally influential discoveries of what it means to be black in America.

Coates writes that for his entire life, he has struggled with that particular question: what DOES it mean to be black in America? More specifically, and as he writes in “Between the World …”, he questions, examines, discovers, and contemplates what it means to be born into a black body in a country and society where such bodies, male and female, young and old, educated and privileged or not, have been viewed for centuries (and continue to be viewed) by the dominant (white) culture as being disposable, as property, or as raw materials for the living of The Dream. Over the course of the book, he reflects on both the terror and the joy associated with living in such a body; reflects on how the historical experiences of countless others have influenced his experiences; and urges his son (for whom he is writing this book) to honor both his own experiences and those of the generations of black people that have gone before as he (his son) discovers what it means to HIM to be black in America.

Throughout his writing, Coates comes across as forthright, questing, questioning, angry and passionate. He portrays himself as beginning to emerge from fear into comprehension, bringing with him a multifaceted sense of blended knowledge, insight, and feeling. This complexity of elements simultaneously acknowledges the reality of and necessity for the fear that he and, as he argues, every black person in America faces; the necessity for calling upon history, courage, and self-worth to combat that fear; and the value of - and right to - joy, in both the very fact of existence and the various repercussions of that existence being primarily defined, for the self and for others, as blackness. All these elements define the book’s essential intention: to awaken the author’s son to all the painful, troubling, celebratory, transcendent complications of being black in America.

## The Author's Son (Samori)

Samori Coates is the focus of the book's writing, the person to whom the author's memoir is addressed. Samori's character and/or personality are not defined at any great

length or in any extensive detail, but a few vivid moments emerge: incidents of his playfulness and curiosity when a child, and incidents of emerging awareness and anger as he becomes a youth. One of these latter seems to have been a particular trigger for the author: the elder Coates never comes out and says so, but a couple of references to Samori's reaction to the killing of Michael Brown suggest that the book was written in response to that reaction. In other words, the presence of Samori in general, and in the case of a particular incident, comes across as catalytic and/or transformative in the author's life in general, and in relation to the creation of this book in particular.

## Samori's Mother

The mother of the author's son is never named, and is never identified (other than on the book jacket) as the author's wife: in fact, the author makes a point of saying that the birth of their son was more of a binding, a unifying, than any marriage ceremony could ever be. There is nevertheless the very strong sense that this woman was, and remains, a powerful influence on the author. He indicates that she taught him how to love; taught him how to expand his perceptions and experiences of himself and the world; and gave him the room he needed to pursue the career, life, and dreams that drives him.

## The Author's Mother

Coates gives his strong, tough-minded mother the credit for encouraging him to read, and therefore introducing him to the writings, thoughts, and perspectives of others. She also, he says, taught him the value of asking questions - of interrogating not only others to find out their truths and experiences, but also interrogating himself. This, he says, enabled him to undertake the process of finding out his own truths and what both his experiences and those of others mean to him and his understanding of himself and of the world.

## The Author's Father

Although his primary memories of his father have to do with the beatings the author received at his father's hands, the author defines their relationship as one of love; as one in which his father educated him in the harsh realities of being black in America; and, indirectly, as a rarity. This, the memoir suggests, is because in the author's perspective and commentary, so many young black people grew/grow up without strong father figures in their lives. Another aspect of the place of the author's father in the narrative is the sense of continuity between the generations: specifically, the continuity of suffering, fear, courage, and confrontation that passes through generations of black men.

## Malcolm X

Malcolm X was a black rights activist in America in the early 1960's. His influence on American culture in general, and on black American culture in particular, was both extensive and controversial, in that he advocated the use of violence as a tool to achieve the goals of respect and equality. He is portrayed in the narrative as a profound inspiration to the author and many of his fellow students, something of an ideological father figure whose teachings, if not strictly followed, at least triggered thought, contemplation, debate, and realization in both the author and in others.

## Michael Brown

Michael Brown is one of three young black men whose recent deaths (i.e. in the years between 2012 and 2015) at the hands of armed white men have sparked intensifying debate about race relations in America; triggered violent reactions on both sides of that debate; and awakened both whites and blacks to apparent inequalities in the justice system, inequalities that appear to favor whites over blacks.

In the particular case of Michael Brown, a confrontation with a white police officer resulted in Brown's being shot, with contradictory claims of his actions before the shooting leaving it unclear whether violent action on the part of the police officer was warranted. Whatever the facts of the case, Brown's death; the apparent lack of investigation; and the apparent racist basis of that lack of investigation triggered demonstrations and riots.

The story of Michael Brown, and those of the other young black men whose experiences are outlined below, are used by the author as examples of why he, his son, and all other black people in America have reason to be afraid; are the victims of a corrupt legal/justice system; and must fight to change the social, political, and legal circumstances in which they live.

## Trayvon Martin

The death of Trayvon Martin is the second of three incidents of white mistreatment of young black men that the author uses to support his contention that black people are right and wise to live in fear in America.

As was the case with Michael Brown, and as is the case with Jordan Davis, reports of what exactly led to Martin's death conflict; the white man who killed him was acquitted of; and there were/are suspicions about the motivation of the justice system that gave rise to the acquittal.

Martin was shot and killed in a confrontation with a white Neighborhood Watch officer that, according to the officer, Martin aggravated by his attitude and behavior. As was the case in the aftermath of the death of Michael Brown, rallies and demonstrations that

occasionally erupted into violence took place in the aftermath of Martin's death protesting what happened and the apparent lack of justice.

## Jordan Davis

Jordan Davis is the third young black man whose death is highlighted by the author as an example of how black men in particular, and black people in general, are viewed and treated in America.

As was the case with Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin, Davis was killed by a white man in circumstances that, both publicly and legally, were unclear: the man fired a weapon into the car in which Davis and three other young black men were driving, apparently in response to the man's dislike of the music they were playing. The man was acquitted of all charges in relation to Davis' death, but was convicted of other charges in relation to assaults on the others in the car, who were not injured.

Again, the author uses the example of the death of one young black man to caution another (his son) about the dangers surrounding him, growing up black in America.

## The Mother of Jordan Davis

The author uses his recollection of a brief encounter with the mother of Jordan Davis to inspire his son to the sort of courage that she inspired in her son. Even though she wonders whether what she taught her son contributed to his death, Davis' mother remains convinced that she did the right thing in encouraging him to be himself and live his truth. In recalling her saying the same things to his son, the author tacitly acknowledges both its value and its potential dangers.

## Prince Carmen Jones

Prince Jones (born: Rocky Jones) was a fellow student of the author's at Howard University. Jones was killed by a police officer for reasons and in circumstances that were, and remain, unclear. The primary difference between Jones' death and the other three deaths of young black males outlined in this book is that Jones was killed by a black police officer under circumstances in which both the death and the lack of consequences for the shooter's actions were enabled by other black people.

The author uses this incident as an illustration of his contention that even black people have been coerced into believing the corrupt, destructive white "Dream", and as such are essentially trying to "be white" themselves.

## Dr. Mable Jones

Dr. Jones is the mother of Prince Jones. The author's recollections of, and reflections on, his conversation with her make up the majority of Section 3. She is portrayed as strong willed and determined, embodying the courage and resolve that, the author suggests, motivated and drove many other black people, women and men, to fight The Dream and achieve success on their own terms - success that, Dr. Jones admits, can be taken away by just a single, racism-defined event.

# Objects/Places

## America

The United States of America, with its history of slavery, racial conflict and tension, and its American "Dream" is the primary broad strokes setting for the book. There is the sense throughout the work that America is as much a concept as it is an actual place, if not more so: its history, values, and actions in response to both history and values define it, for the author, more than its geography and/or physical place in the world.

## Baltimore

This city in the north-eastern American state of Maryland is the author's first home. The author portrays it as being a place of simmering, almost constant, race-defined tension: between white and black, but also between factions of its various black communities.

## Washington, D.C.

The national capital of America becomes the author's home when he moves there to attend Howard University. The center of American political activity, Washington is also home to a large and varied black community.

## Howard University

This is the post-secondary educational institution attended by the author after he graduates from high school. Primarily a school for black students, it becomes the setting for what is arguably the author's intellectual and socio-cultural coming of age, as he is exposed to, begins to explore, and begins to celebrate different ways of being black, and of thinking about being black.

## New York City

When the mother of his son gets a job in New York City (arguably the financial and cultural center of American life), the author and his son accompany her there. They arrive a few months before the September 11th terrorist attacks, an event that shapes the author's perspective on the city and the lives lived by black people there as much as his own personal experience, career options, and cultural perspectives.

## Race / Racism

The author draws a distinction between race (which he says is a state of being / identity embedded in the bedrock nature of America) and racism (which he suggests is an attitude that reflects, in action and thought and feeling) that state of being. Issues of race have to do with how black and white people each, and differently, view the experience of being in America: racism defines the qualities and values with which people of different races interact.

## The "Dream"

The "Dream" is the author's shorthand version of the catchphrase "The American Dream", itself a paraphrased version of sentiments first expressed in the American Declaration of Independence - specifically, the right of every individual to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness". Over time, and with the growth of what the author (and others) describe as American Exceptionalism (i.e. the belief that America and Americans are fundamentally different - read: superior - to other countries and societies), that phrase has come to be associated with success and high status - financial, military, and/or cultural. The author contends, throughout the narrative, that the "Dream" applies only, or is believed to apply only, to whites or those who believe themselves to be white in terms of being able to function within the parameters of the above definitions of success.

## The "Mecca"

This is the term used by the author to describe the culture that existed among the black students at Howard University outside of their academic pursuits. "Mecca" is the name of the community that is the focus of the Islamic faith, a term that denotes a sense of home, of shared values, experiences, and perspectives, and a sense of safety. The "Mecca" at Howard, in the author's perspective and recollection, functioned on all those levels for him and the other students that attended that particular university.

## The Black Body

Black bodies - how they're viewed, treated, and/or exploited by white society - form the primary focus for the author's questioning of black people's place in American society. His assertions, contemplations, and reasonings are expressed, more often than not, in terms of how black bodies, both individualized and as a community, are regarded and reacted to by whites. His primary assertion seems to be that simply having a black body of either gender or any age makes a person something to be feared, hated, used, and/or ultimately destroyed or discarded. This experience of having a black body, he also suggests, is the main reason that black people - particularly his son, to whom he addresses his writing - should be afraid of white people.

## Violence

Throughout the book, violence is portrayed as the primary force with which whites react to the black body. There is, in the author's perspective and contention, an unarguable correlation between race, racism, and violence. There is also the sense that this correlation is centuries old, and cannot be undone without clear and continuous action from blacks, conjoined with will to change and actual change from whites.

## The Police

Again throughout the narrative, the police (and by extension the entire legal system) is a primary means, if not THE primary means, for white society to utilize violence against the black body (individual or community) in order to sustain fear and maintain the Dream-defined status quo. The author not only suggests that this system has institutionalized and legalized such violence, but that it has also sustained both violence and racist attitudes / behaviors over the decades as fundamental aspects of American culture - and again, of the status-defined aspects of the "Dream".

# Themes

## The Danger of Being a Young Black Male in America

The book is, on a fundamental, foundational level, a warning from one black man to another – specifically, from someone who was once a young black man himself to one who is maturing into what the author suggests is the inevitably dangerous territory of being a member of one of the most suspected, the most arrested, the most incarcerated, and the most murdered demographics in America. Using carefully integrated references to four young black men, each of whom lost their lives as the result of what has been generally believed to be racially motivated violence, the author writes with the apparent primary purpose of urging his son to be watchful, to be careful, and to arm himself with knowledge.

To support his contention (that being black in general, and a young black male in particular, is a dangerous state of being), the author integrates historical research grounded in both the relatively recent and the more distant past. He also includes considerations of economic factors (again both past and present), and layers in contemplations of what it is about white society that finds it both necessary and inevitable to consider black people, and again most particularly young black men, as a threat to a status quo grounded in centuries-old racist attitudes.

Here it's important to note that the author's carefully crafted attention to the details and circumstances of the violence against young black men is heightened as a result of his juxtaposing examples of such violence with urgings for his son (and other young black men) to find and celebrate joy – in history, in identity, and diversity. In other words, the capacity for joy in both black individuals and in the black "community" as a whole comes across as a powerfully defining contrast: the danger of which the author writes, and of which he is warning his son, is made more vivid as a result of his placing it next to images of freedom, happiness, and unity.

## Parent-Child Relationships

The essential purpose of the book – to serve as a warning from the author to his son – is the primary manifestation of one of its secondary themes, an exploration of various types / manifestations of parent-child relationships. As he develops and deepens his explanation of the reasons for his warning, the author uses incidents from other parent-child relationships to explain the history and necessity of such warnings, and to again contrast a negative with a positive. In this case, it's the negative of the above-mentioned warnings juxtaposed against the positive, affirming, celebratory steps that parents take to encourage their children, and their sons in particular, to be proud of their racial / ethnic identities.

In terms of the former (that is, of explaining the history and necessity for warnings about the danger of being a young black man), the author cites the treatment he experienced at the hands of his father (treatment that frequently involved beatings with a leather strap) and the treatment of other young black men of his generation at the hands of both their fathers and their mothers. It could also be argued that the story the author tells in Section 2, Part 2 about his encounter with a white woman who interacted with his son (in which he – the author – attempted to defend his son) is also evidence in support of the author's argument for the necessity of such warnings. On the other side of the coin, the author pays a great deal of attention to positive examples of how being young, black, and male can be something to be celebrated. There are also several examples of mother figures offering encouragement to their maturing sons to celebrate both their own identities, intellects, and possibilities. Such mother figures include the author's mother, the mother of his son, and the mothers of two murdered young black men.

Ultimately, there is the sense that in both circumstances (the warnings and the encouragements), parents are struggling to both make life better for their children, and to urging their children to make their own lives better.

## The Relationship between Past and Present

One of the ways the author develops both the above themes is to draw and/or explore parallels between experiences of black people – and again, specifically young black men – in the present with experiences, and the attitudes that triggered them, in the past. As noted above, he draws upon both the recent past (since 2012), upon what might be described as the "middle" past (the civil rights movement in the 1960's, his own coming-of-age experiences at Howard University in the 1980's), and what might, in its turn, be described as the "historical" past. In this particular case, this term can be seen as referring to the time of the American Civil War (the mid-1860's) which, the author says, resulted from the same sorts of economically and socially defined attitudes towards "the black body" as define contemporary, racially-defined violence.

As he considers and evaluates the various types of suffering and exploitation undergone by black people over centuries of black life in America, the author again employs the technique of juxtaposition. To be specific, he juxtaposes how slaves were treated / viewed before, during, and after the Civil War with the more recent, exploitive, status-quo preserving deaths of young black men. He also juxtaposes how black people found inspiration towards freedom and celebration in the words and actions of Malcolm X, a black civil rights activist in America almost exactly a century after the Civil War, with more personal and intimate acts of parent-to-child inspiration in the present. Across time, over decades and even centuries (as well as throughout the narrative), violence and hope, a cultural capacity for exploitation and possibilities for positive transformation are juxtaposed with each other over decades, even centuries, providing both warning and inspiration in the present.

## The Value of the Black Body

The common element of all three of the above mentioned themes is the author's contemplation of the value of the black body – primarily, and most overtly, an individual black body, but secondarily and by implication, the black body of community, of racial grouping.

Here the author develops two areas of consideration. The most significant, and one of the most compelling aspects of his overall argument / warning, is his carefully analyzed and supported contention that for centuries, the black body has been something to be controlled, exploited, and eventually discarded by those, primarily whites, determined and/or committed to acquire and retain economic prosperity, political and social status, and control over their environments. This, he contends, was the reason for slavery; for the Civil War (which the South fought to preserve the right to have slaves); and, in contemporary society, for apparently "rebellious" young black men, who were perceived as challenging the authoritarian, primarily white way of things, being dominated and/or destroyed by America's economic, legal, and political systems.

At the same time, the author once again uses the power of contrast (i.e. the inclusion of an opposite) to support the point he is making. Specifically, he makes a particular effort to show how the black body, as an embodiment of black history, heritage, and culture, is something to be both celebrated and protected. He furthers this effort by including, as noted above, examples of black parents – particularly mothers – encouraging their children to be proud of the individuality they have simultaneously inherited and self-developed. By including this point in his argument, the author supports his overall contention that while there is undeniable danger, the element of identity that is IN danger (the body and the soul that animates it) is inherently and inevitably valuable, and ultimately worth protecting.

## The Relationship between Violence and Race

An additional component of the above themes is the author's vividly argued contention that the primary means for keeping "the black body" in its socially, economically, and politically engineered place is the systematic deployment of violence. He contends that for decades, even centuries, violence has been white culture's main tool of manipulation, suppression, and ultimately of attempted destruction of the black body – again, both the bodies of black individuals and the larger, more metaphorical "body" of the black community. Here again the author draws parallels between past and present – specifically, between the whippings and lynchings received by black bodies during the American age of slavery (i.e. the 1800's) and violent acts (including murder, assault, and rape) perpetrated by whites, and those that live white attitudes, and/or aspire to those attitudes, in contemporary society. It is this white-on-black violence, this sense of inevitable response by whites to a perceived (expected?) black threat, that the author suggests to his son, throughout the book, is the main reason for being afraid – for his warning about the dangers of being a black man.

The author ties this theme with his above referenced thematic interest in the value of the black body. He contends that institutionalized, centuries-old white on black violence has always been, and continues to be, grounded in the belief that black bodies are disposable – that if black bodies are not performing in the way that the white power structure demands / needs (i.e. as slaves during the slavery era, and/or as cultural, economic inferiors in contemporary society), there's nothing wrong with attacking those bodies, demeaning them, devaluing them, and ultimately destroying them. Such attacks, the author also contends, are in the minds of those engaging in them not only justified, but necessary. This is grounded in the belief, the further author contends, that that which is believed to be less needs to STAY less in order for that which believes itself to be more to STAY more – a belief, this particular theme suggests, was sustained and enforced in the far past by the whip and the noose, in the middle past by tear gas and riot police, and in the present by guns and "stand your ground" legislation.

# Styles

## Structure

This work has several noteworthy structural elements. The first is its overall structure – specifically, its having been broken down into three parts, two of relatively equal length and a third that on first glance looks like an epilogue, but in actual fact contains the work's climax. Each section is prologued with a quote from a noteworthy black American writer that metaphorically introduces the main ideas of the section that follows.

The second point to note is that the event-to-event structure of the work is roughly chronological. The author anchors his comments, analyses, and recollections in a time-defined narrative of his life, moving from his childhood and youth in Baltimore through his young adult experiences in Washington DC to his more mature, contemporary adulthood in New York City. Here it's important to note that the author layers this basic structure with flashes-back and flashes-forward in time. He draws connections between those chronologically-narrated events and events in history such as the Slavery Era / the American Civil War (the 1800's) and the Civil Rights Movement (the early-mid 1960's). He also draws further connections between all those elements and the experiences of more contemporary young black men who, like his son, encountered fear and violence simply as the direct result of their being young, male, and black.

The final point to note about the book's structure has as much to do with its use of language, its perspective and tone as it does with the order in which elements are included. As a whole, it functions as a skillful, engaging blending of several structural parts: as a letter, as a memoir, and as what might be described as an intellectually oriented academic presentation that, in its careful, balanced blending of research, anecdote, and recollection, creates an overall sense of seamlessness to its structure, a sense that all three of its apparent intentions are constructed with a careful eye to the integration of one with the other.

## Perspective

The primary aspect to note about this work's perspective is that it is written from the point of view of a relatively young black man (at the time of the book's publication, the author was in his late thirties) anxious that his son be simultaneously aware of the dangers associated with being young and black and proud of the potential joys of being black. As noted above in "Structure", however, the author's perspective is not simply that of a loving, worried father: as he himself notes, he has a background in journalism and in academia, as well as in black activism, which gives him a variety of perspectives from which to write, all of which are represented in the book as a whole.

The more objective perspectives associated with journalism (i.e. the reporting of facts) and academic research (i.e. the inclusion of historically verified information and

perspectives) add objectivity and informational weight to what otherwise might have become a plea for safety and understanding defined by emotion. The author's perspective is not only felt: it is considered, and supported by research that, on some level, has an agenda defined by emotion (i.e. to find instances of how black bodies have been exploited by whites) but is nevertheless ultimately grounded in unarguable realities: going back to the slavery era and coming up into the present, thousands upon thousands of black bodies WERE abused, in many ways and on many levels, by whites and by those (white and non-white alike) who felt / feel it necessary to preserve a white-dominated power structure.

If there is a tipping of the scale in the direction of one perspective over another (that is, emotional vs. intellectual, subjective vs. objective), it is unarguably in favor of the former. Ultimately, the book is a warning, and all warnings come from a place of fear, which is unarguably an emotion. But, and as noted above, what keeps the work from becoming overly emotional (and therefore perhaps potentially dismissible in the eyes of some readers) is the author's clear, evident, and probably conscious effort to soften the raw edges of his emotional argument with factual perspectives that, perhaps paradoxically, give the work an even more significant impact.

## Tone

In this book, aspects of tone are closely tied in with aspects of perspective which, as noted above, has many facets. In general, the author communicates the emotional aspects of his argument with language usage that steps back from the brink of overly intense feeling. Generally, he writes of fear in a way that suggests fear to the reader rather than awakens it in him / her; for the most part he writes of joy, anger, and anxiety in much the same way, tempering what must, for him, feel like an intensely raw emotional situation with a sense of distance, almost a sense of coolness in the tone of the language. This is not to say that the writing is not engaging, nor that it doesn't create an emotional impression: overall, what the reader is left with is a sense that the author has gone one step beyond pure journalism (i.e. the absolutely objective reporting of facts), past commentary (i.e. the presentation of analysis of those facts), and into a kind of memoir that relies on facts and commentary to illuminate the deeper truths behind his feelings, experiences, and warnings.

All that said, there are two places in the narrative where the tonal quality of the writing becomes notably (but not overwhelmingly) emotional. Both are places where the author allows expressions of anger to kick up a notch and become slightly less objective. The first is in his commentary on his experience of being in New York on September 11th, 2001 (Section 2, Part 1). There is a strong sense of simmering rage in his terse, taut comments about the lack of attention paid to the thousands of black slaves who died unremarked in exactly the same place as thousands of others died as what the author implies were martyrs to the American "Dream". The second place where the author lets his anger reveal itself is in his description of the interactions between himself, his son, and a pair of white people (Section 2, Part 2). Here the anger is clearly the result of fear, triggered by what the author implies was an unwanted intrusion on his son's body by the

white woman. The author’s emerging feelings about these two incidents add just a hint of what might be metaphorically described as emotional heat to a work that is, for most of its length, as objective as prose with many whiffs of poetry can possibly be.

# Quotes

Do not speak to me of martyrdom, / of men who die to be remembered / on some parish day. / I don't believe in dying / though, I too shall die. / And violets like castanets / will echo me.
-- Sonia Sanchez (Prologue)

**Importance**: This quote, from African-American poet Sonia Sanchez, serves as prologue to Part 1 of the book.

...the host wished to know why I felt that white America's progress, or rather the progress of those Americans who believe that they are white, was built on looting and violence. Hearing this, I felt an old and indistinct sadness well up in me. The answer to this question is in the record of the believers themselves. The answer is American history.
-- The Author (Section 1, Part 1)

**Importance**: In quoting an interviewer, the author establishes and defines the basic, fundamental question he is asking, and attempting to answer, in the writing of the book.

...it must be said that the process of washing the disparate tribes 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.
-- The Author (Section 1, Part 1)

**Importance**: In this quote, the author identifies and lists the various forms of violence that have, in his argument, been the foundation of denying those outside the boundaries of traditional white power, power of their own.

My father was so very afraid., I felt it in the sting of his black leather belt, which he applied with more anxiety than anger, my father who beat me as if someone might steal me away, because that is exactly what was happening all round us. Everyone had lost a child, somehow, to the streets, to jail, to drugs, to guns ... and now they were gone, and their legacy was a great fear.
-- The Author (Section 1, Part 1)

**Importance**: Here the author describes how black, race-defined fear permeated and affected his family's closest relationships.

We could not get out. The ground we walked was trip-wired. The air we breathed was toxic. The water stunted our growth. We could not get out ... not being violent enough could cost me my body. Being too violent could cost me my body.
-- The Author (Section 1, Part 2)

**Importance**: Here the author sums up what the combination of dangerous, threatening street life and irrelevant schooling left him with as a teenaged boy in a vulnerable black body.

Very few Americans will directly proclaim that they are in favor of black people being left to the streets. But a very large number of Americans will do all they can to preserve the Dream.
-- The Author (Section 1, Part 2)

**Importance**: Here the author sums up the experience of living in America with its implicit, constant, below-the-surface racism.

My work is to give you what I know of my own particular path while allowing you to walk your own. You can no more be black like I am black than I could be black like your grandfather was."
-- The Author (Section 1, Part 2)

**Importance**: The author comments here on how each generation of black men with which he's concerned - his own, his father's, and his son's - reacts, and will always react, differently to being black.

The Dream thrives on generalization, on limiting the number of possible questions, on privileging immediate answers. The dream is the enemy of all art, courageous thinking, and honest writing. And it became clear that this was not just for the dreams concocted by Americans to justify themselves but also for the dreams that I had conjured to replace them."
-- The Author (Section 1, Part 3)

**Importance**: Here the author dissects and examines the meaning of both The Dream (a shorthand term for the so-called "American Dream"), and summarizes his insight into what the dream has become for him personally.

There are people whom we do not fully know, and yet they live in a warm place within us, and when they are plundered, when they lose their bodies and the dark energy disperses, that place becomes a wound.
-- The Author (Section 1, Part 3)

**Importance**: In this quote, the author reflects on both the death of a particularly inspiring young man he met at Howard University, and what the deaths of the inspiring mean in general.

Before you, I had my questions but nothing beyond my own skin in the game, and that was really nothing at all because I was a young man, and not yet clear of my own human vulnerabilities. But I was grounded and domesticated by the plain fact that should I now go down, I would not go down alone. That is what I told myself, at least. It was comforting to believe that the fate of my body and the bodies of my family were

under my powers.
-- The Author (Section 1, Part 3)

**Importance**: Here the author describes the sense of responsibility that came over him when he had his son.

Our world is full of sound / Our world is more lovely than anyone's / tho we suffer, and kill each other / and sometimes fail to walk the air ... We are beautiful people / with african imaginations / full of masks and dances and swelling chants ... with african eyes, and noses, and arms, / though we sprawl in grey chains in a place / full of winters, when what we want is sun.
-- Prologue (Section 2 )

**Importance**: This quote, by African-American poet Amiri Baraka, sums up and/or describes the tension between the land from which his people came and the land in which they find themselves.

In the days after, I watched the ridiculous pageantry of flags, the machismo of firemen, the overwrought slogans. Damn it all. Prince Jones was dead. And hell upon those who tell us to be twice as good and shoot us no matter. Hell for ancestral fear that put black parents under terror. And hell upon those who shatter the holy vessel.
-- The Author (Section 2, Part 1)

**Importance**: In this quote, the author rebels against the reaction of New York City to the events of September 11, 2001 with a reference to all the lives lost and/or ruined by the slave market that existed on the same site as the Twin Towers, and how those individual lives were ultimately no different than that of Prince Jones.

It struck me that perhaps the defining feature of being drafted into the black race was the inescapable robbery of time, because the moments we spent readying the mask, or readying ourselves to accept half as much could not be recovered ... it is the raft of second chances for them, and twenty-three-hour days for us.
-- The Author (Section 2, Part 2)

**Importance**: In this quote, following several descriptions of specific ways the experiences of whites and blacks are different, the author sums up his feelings about raising his son in New York City.

Here is what I would like for you to know: In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body - it is heritage. Enslavement was not merely the antiseptic borrowing of labor - it is not so easy to get a human being to commit their body against its own elemental interest. And so enslavement must be casual wrath and random manglings, the gashing of heads and brains blown out over the river as the body seeks to escape. It must be rape so regular as to be industrial.
-- The Author (Section 2, Part 2)

**Importance**: With this quote, and in vividly blunt terms, the author sums up his essential

claim about how the black body was, and is, viewed by whites - by those who adhere to The Dream, of themselves as individuals and of America as a country.

The Dream of acting white, of talking white, of being white, murdered Prince Jones as sure as it murders black people in Chicago with frightening regularity. Do not accept the lie. Do not drink from poison. The same hands that drew red lines around the life of Prince Jones drew red lines around the ghetto.
-- The Author (Section 2, Part 3)

**Importance**: Here the author warns his son that for black people, or anyone, wanting to be white and live according to The Dream can be a denial of history, of individual truth, and of racial identity.

We are entering our last years together, and I wish I had been softer with you. Your mother had to teach me how to love you - how to kiss you and tell you I love you every night. Even now it does not feel a wholly natural act so much as it feels like ritual. And that is because I am wounded. That is because I am tied to old ways, which I learned in a hard house. It was a loving house even as it was besieged by its country, but it WAS hard. Even in Paris, I could not shake the old ways, the instinct to watch my back at every pass, and always be ready to go."
-- The Author (Section 2, Part 3)

**Importance**: In this quote, as he reflects upon his experiences of simultaneous freedom, racial anonymity, and loneliness while in Paris, the author also reflects on what growing up in America has done to him in terms of being able to express his affection for / to his son. He has protected him out of love, but not necessarily loved him out of love.

And have brought humanity to the edge of oblivion: because they think they are white.
-- Prologue (Section 3 )

**Importance**: With this quote from well-known black activist and author James Baldwin, the author introduces the final section of his book.

They were the children of the Jackie Robinson elite, whose parents rose up out of the ghettos, and the sharecropping fields, went out into the suburbs, only to find that they carried the mark with them and could not escape. Even when they succeeded, as so many of them did, they were singled out, made examples of, transfigured into parables of diversity. They were symbols and markers, never children or young adults. And so they come to Howard to be normal - and even more, to see how broad the black normal really is.
-- The Author (Section 3, Part 1)

**Importance**: Here the author describes the reasons that be believes students like Prince Jones attended Howard University rather than schools like Harvard or Yale, to which their ambitious, determined parents wanted them to apply.

Struggle for the memory of your ancestors. Struggle for wisdom. Struggle for the warmth of The Mecca. Struggle for your grandmother and grandfather, for your name. But do not struggle for the Dreamers. Hope for them. Pray for them, if you are so moved. But do not pin your struggle on their conversion. The dreamers will have to learn to struggle themselves ...
-- The Author (Section 3)

**Importance**: In the final paragraphs of his book, the author urges his son to keep up the struggle of the black people who have gone before and who continue to find their own dreams and hopes, independent of The Dream which, the author contends, has kept him and all other black people enslaved for centuries.

# Topics for Discussion

## What is your personal experience of race relations in America? What experiences have you had in / around your life that you would say relates, in one way or another, to the author’s contentions about being black and/or white in America?

This question offers the opportunity for readers to relate their personal experiences to those of the author. It's important to note that the question is important for both black and non-black students, in that the latter have a chance to relate experiences that they've seen and/or heard about, either personally or in the media. The point is to trigger thought and awareness in the readers.

## Have you had an experience equivalent to the author’s experience at Howard? What feels like “Mecca” to you? Where do you feel like you’re part of a community? What communities feel like home to you?

Here again, the student is given the opportunity to relate their personal experiences to those of the author - specifically, the experience of finding a spiritual / cultural "home" in a place other than the building and/or family environment in which s/he was raised.

## What are the implications of this quote from the author's writings about the Dream - “I didn’t realize,” he says, “that the boot on your neck is just as likely to make you delusional as it is to ennoble.” What is referred to by the term "boot"? Why is it both "delusional" and "ennobling"?

The quote is a metaphoric representation of what the Dream means for non-whites in America. The Dream becomes a pressure and a means of control, making one delusional because of the hope that it really is a universal possibility for everyone, and ennobling in the sense that the struggles to both realize the dream and against the negative pressures on black people struggling for that realization make a painful situation a noble experience.

## Why might loving someone be described as an act of "heroism"?

Heroism tends to involve a sense of self-sacrifice. The question here leads the student to consider the connection between the two ideas.

## In Section 1, Part 1, the author describes his relative lack of an emotional reaction to the incidents of September 11, 2001, and places his reaction within a historical / social context.What is your reaction to both his LACK of reaction and his reasons for it?

The events of 9/11 have formed a touchstone of sorts for American culture and society in general, and for a specific generation of Americans in particular. With his comments on those events, the author asks the reader to question and challenge perceptions of those events and the reactions to them, challenges echoed with this particular Topic for Discussion.

## Why do you think the author suggests that the black experience of having to be watchful is a "stealing of time"? What does it mean to have time stolen?

The implication here is that the freedom to enjoy a moment in time, a particular experience, is taken from black people because of the need to be watchful. A moment, any moment, can never be fully and only itself because it also has to include an experience, even a slight one, of fear.

## The term "terrorism" is a loaded, powerful term in contemporary society. Here the author uses it to describe what is done by white people to those with non-white bodies (i.e. blacks, Muslims, and Asians). In the context of his argument, do you agree or disagree with his argument? Why or why not?

The question opens the door to consideration of what exactly terrorism means, and how it can apply to the experiences of non-whites (as opposed to those of whites, who tend to have taken ownership of the word and all its implications).

## What is your experience of traveling to other, non-American countries? What is your experience of wanting/not wanting to make such a trip? If you've gone, what surprised you about the relationship between life in other places and life in America? What didn't surprise you? What frightened you? What reassured you?

The intent here is to provoke the reader into considering / analyzing personal experiences in relation to the author's experiences of traveling beyond his country's borders, both geographical and psychological.

## What do you beleive is "The American Dream"? What does the term mean to you? How do you respond to the author's contentions about what that "Dream" truly means, for both whites (and those who want to be white) nd non-whites?

Here again, the intent is to trigger questioning and critical thinking in the mind of the student / reader - to lead them beyond what they have been told to believe and into a personal, individual, considered understanding of what might have been, in the past, taken as read.

## Consider the quotes at the beginning of each section - specifically, Quotes 1, 11, and 17. Relate the images, ideas, feelings, and/or experiences they evoke to the contents of each section.

Because the prologue quotes (for lack of a better term) are written in poetic language, their connections to the sections of the book into which they lead are metaphoric and/or symbolic. Students are encouraged to look into the denotations of the poetic sections and draw relationships between the inferences they trigger and the actual words, writing, and content of the actual text.

## The term "African-American", which is arguably the term most contemporary black Americans would use to describe themselves, is rarely used in this book, if ever. The author instead uses the term "black", which some would argue is dated and no longer appropriate. Why do you think this is the case - why black, and not African-American?

There are several possible reasons for this, including the possibility that in avoiding African-America, the author is acknowledging that not all black people in America are of African descent; the possibility that in using "black" he is identifying himself with "black" activists such as Malcolm X; and the possibility that the term "black" is, for the author, a more vivid term for those who are different from "white".