

Summer 2018

Your Life is Insignificant: Education and the "Dream"

Chinazom Enenwali

University of San Diego, cenenwali@sandiego.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digital.sandiego.edu/cee-justreadcontest>

Digital USD Citation

Enenwali, Chinazom, "Your Life is Insignificant: Education and the "Dream"" (2018). *USD Just Read! Student Essay Contest*. 1. <http://digital.sandiego.edu/cee-justreadcontest/1>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for Educational Excellence at Digital USD. It has been accepted for inclusion in USD Just Read! Student Essay Contest by an authorized administrator of Digital USD. For more information, please contact digital@sandiego.edu.

Chinazom Enenwali

Your Life is Insignificant: Education and the “Dream”

For many African Americans, a historically black college university (HBCU) provides a unparalleled opportunity to learn about black history in an environment that celebrates their culture. In his book, *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates narrates his experience of being black in America and highlights the relationship between American society and the destruction of black bodies. He illustrates how the racist structures in American society affect him and the concepts that keep black Americans oppressed; the most important being the “Dream”. According to Coates, the Dream is “perfect houses with nice lawns. It is Memorial Day cookouts, block associations, and driveways” (Coates 10/198). Unfortunately, this Dream does not pertain to him or any black body. Moreover, the education dictated to Coates in his youth only served to further subjugate him and remind him of his insignificance. Therefore, Coates sought out an all-black education at Howard University to try and create his unique Dream. However, soon Coates began to realize that enlightenment was synonymous with despair. He states, “It began to strike me that the point of my education was kind of discomfort, was the process that would not award me my own special Dream but would break all the dreams” (Coates 22/198). Coates’ reflection is especially astounding because he realized his HBCU education would shatter all dreams and expose him to the harsh reality that black Americans encountered since their transport to the Americans. This dilemma is one that many young African Americans face, myself included. In primary and secondary school, young African Americans do not have the luxury of learning of the great achievements of those before them. Instead, we are taught that our first introduction into American society was in chains, only

knowing captivity. While trying to learn about our ancestry and culture, we end up being exposed to a history of violence and oppression, therein breaking the promise of the Dream.

For Coates, Howard University was more than an institution; it was a place that facilitated black thought and success. Like young black Americans today, he was captivated by the vibrant community of young African Americans, referred to as “The Mecca”. Although he attended Howard, he was formed and shaped by The Mecca, distinguishing the two by describing The Mecca as “a machine, crafted to capture and concentrate the dark energy of all African peoples and inject it directly into the student body” (Coates 33/198). While on campus, Coates was excited to learn about the history of his people considering his primary and secondary education in Baltimore only served to “drug students with false morality so that they would not see” (Coates 25/198). This is an issue pertinent to many African American children that is dangerous if left unresolved. White children are taught that they can pursue any interest because the notion of the “Dream” actively works in their favor. Since young black children are taught a history of oppression, violence, and subservience, they relate that education to their life outside of the classroom. This begets violence in their own communities, leading to gang recruitment and withdrawal from their institution. However, Coates sought to escape that cycle, deeming it necessary to attend Howard. He hoped to achieve his own special Dream, replete with “his own Tolstoys who lived deep in the African past, where they authored operas, pioneered secret algebra, erected ornate walls, pyramids....,” separate from that of white Americans by thinking that “he must mirror the outside world, create a carbon copy of white claims to civilization” (33/198). However, instead of being awarded his own Dream of a “black race”, his education exposed him to the cruelty of African American history. By learning about the struggles that African Americans faced, he realized that “to be black and beautiful was not a matter for

gloating and did not immunize us from history's logic or the lure of the Dream" (36/198). This is an especially damaging idea to instill in young children because it stunts their ambition and forces them to be aware of the system working against them. Therefore, upon graduation from high school, most African American students apply to and enroll in a historically black college university. They seek to regain the history they were deprived of in their youth. Still, Coates leaves Howard with a sense of enlightenment that causes him to be wary of every Dream. Although he withdraws from school, Coates believes that education is an important privilege that should be utilized. He insists that true knowledge of the way the world operates helps to dispel the fallacies upon which racism is built.

Coates' experience with education relates to mine as a young, black woman today. Throughout my primary education, we learned of the horrors endured by African slaves, never really celebrating black achievement unless discussing pivotal figures such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or singers of the Harlem Renaissance. The instruction I received seemed to stress the insignificance of black bodies, illustrating only times of oppression and subjugation. As my high school professor showed the class a picture of a southern lynching, I remember asking myself: why? Why was I forced to look at these images of the constant degradation of black Americans? While my non-black classmates emerged from the lesson with notes of Jim Crow south, I only understood one thing: my life is insignificant.

Like Coates, I believed in the Dream until the year before I began high school. I remember the exact period I was awakened from the Dream: during the Trayvon Martin trial. During those months, I followed the case religiously, analyzing the events that transpired and the motives behind it. While watching endless news pundits argue about terms I had never heard of such as "profiling" and "race relations", I followed along and engaged in these conversations

with my classmates. I was not aware of how deeply racism was embedded in the American justice system until Trayvon's killer was acquitted. Like Coates, I began to search for answers to the injustice shown during the trial, and resultingly became exposed to the constant prejudices that African Americans must deal with. Merely twelve years old, I became aware of my skin for the first time in my life. I felt weighed down by everything I learned, wishing that I could revert to blissful ignorance. However, I was awakened from the Dream and could not return. Instead of enjoying the false "American Dream", I realized that Dream was not a possibility for black bodies. As stated by Coates, this is because "the Dream does not exist without racist injustice, as material prosperity in the US is inevitably tied to the exploitation of African Americans" (Coates 40/198). Therefore, in order for all bodies to enjoy the Dream, the racist system bolstering American society must be dismantled. However, systemic racism is so deeply embedded into our society that it will be almost impossible to extinguish its oppressive force. The driving point of Coates' book resonates within every African American: being black in America is ordeal that consumes your every move. Since learning of the various racist forces that keep African Americans subdued, I now understand the anger and fear that many other black bodies feel. Microaggressions that were once innocent to me, took on another meaning as I increased my knowledge of race relations. Now, I am fully aware of what it means to be black in America.

Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*, illustrates an America that thrives on the destruction of black bodies. Through his education at Howard University, Coates expands his knowledge of how history has systematically broken black bodies to uplift themselves, which results in Coates losing all faith in having his own Dream. Similarly, I lost hope in the Dream during my adolescence and experienced a similar awakening to Coates. However, we should not despair. A simple solution to the hopelessness that young African Americans experience is to

redesign how black history is taught. Instead of telling black children that their first real impact in society was that of bondage and slavery, instructors should highlight the beautiful aspects and movements that contribute to their culture. In restructuring classrooms this way, there will be an increase in black entrepreneurs, activists, and leaders. By telling young African Americans they can pursue their life interests, certainly they will seek to do so. To provide a meaningful education in accordance with positive encouragement, the violence in black communities will decrease and lead to a change in the way African Americans conceptualize the society around them. Yet, we should not remain blissfully shielded in the Dream. Like Coates, our experiences have transformed us into people that are wary of all Dreams and nations, an important truth that allows us to understand and address injustice in our society and lead to change.