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# Black Fatherhood in America through the Lens of Contemporary Memoir

*Christian Allred*

"It would be wrong to comfort you," writes Ta-Nehisi Coates to his fifteen-year-old son, who learns that the killers of Michael Brown will escape punishment (Coates 11). The line comes from Coates's 2015 book *Between the World and Me*, written as a father's letter to his son, a form Coates admits is a literary device (Comedy Central). What to some might seem an unusual declaration coming from a father marks a larger question of how to raise a black child in America, where antiblack racism persists. The question weighs equally on mothers and fathers, but this essay explores particularly how black fathers approach parenting. The need to protect black children against racism appears in several contemporary African-American memoirs, allowing a rare glimpse into a unique struggle faced by black fathers in America.

Part of the challenge is inseparably connected to being a black male. A study of black masculinity reveals the challenges black males face in defending against threats to their body. Some perform a "cool pose, a set of hypermasculine behaviors . . . to cope with the barriers and pressures presented by social inequality" (Abdill 54). But the struggles black men

face are only compounded when becoming fathers. According to literary scholar Keith Clark, in many cases “black males cannot be fathers because they do not believe that American society will let them be men” (Clark 108). Evidently then, the threats faced by black fathers begin long before they even become fathers.

The challenges to black fatherhood in America extend back to slavery. Every stage of the slave trade, from slave ships to plantations, separated black families. Since slaves were not allowed to maintain the basic family unit, fathers were robbed of their role and position in their families. Dr. Wade Nobles explains that slavery instilled in black men a profound sense of shame that was then internalized. When it came to their children, enslaved fathers made a dehumanizing realization: “I cannot protect you from the horror” (Black Fatherhood Project). The negative impact of removing fathers from families cannot be understated, not to mention the effect over generations of fathers. Even after slavery, white Americans targeted black men through sharecropping and pressured them to leave their families. It became necessary to “separate to survive” (Black Fatherhood Project). Considering these facts, slavery is a foundational frame through which to understand black fatherhood in all its history.

However, history is limited by a macro view and allows us to study black fathers mostly from a distance. Literature offers a closer look into the lives of individual fathers, and the memoir provides an especially intimate picture. The memoir challenges pervading stereotypes of “absent black fathers” (Coles 3) by showing them standing between their children and racism before allowing the child to confront race on its own terms. *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Ordinary Light* by Tracy Smith, and *Negroland* by Margo Jefferson each demonstrate that black fatherhood is about recognizing there is no singular approach to teaching your children about race, and that allowing children to navigate race how they see fit, once they are old enough, is the truest expression of fatherly love.

## The Dilemma

First, memoirs reveal how the fatherly instinct to protect creates a unique dilemma for black fathers: protecting a victim when you yourself are a victim. Ta-Nehisi Coates bluntly describes the predicament he, and his own father before him, finds himself in as a black father:

Now I personally understood my father and the old mantra—"Either I can beat him or the police [can]." I understood it all—the cable wires, the extension cords, the ritual switch. Black people love their children with a kind of obsession. You are all we have, and you come to us endangered. I think we would like to kill you ourselves before seeing you killed by the streets that America made. (Coates 82)

Black fathers find themselves in a desperate situation, in which they must decide how best to protect their helpless child from racism when they, too, are subject to its threats. Thus, a father would almost rather kill his child than have the child killed by systemic American racism. Coates illustrates the dilemma by recounting an incident on an escalator, in which a white woman pushes his almost-five-year-old son Samori. He describes the surge of emotion with which he reacts to the assault and his words to the woman as "hot with all of the moment and all of my history" (94). When a bystanding white man approaches Coates in her defense, Coates pushes him back, to which the man threatens to have him arrested. In this moment, Coates realizes that in his attempt to protect his son, he has only jeopardized his son further. What sets black fathers apart, then, is a compounded struggle to defend one's child while defending one's self.

## Different Parenting Approaches

The charge to protect a vulnerable child as a vulnerable father leads to varying parenting approaches; because black fathers are not all the same, each chooses to struggle with the dilemma in his own way. In her memoir *Negroland*, Margo Jefferson also points out how "the question of the child's future is a serious dilemma for Negro parents" (Jefferson 83). On the one hand, a parent may choose to shield their child from racist affronts as long as possible until the child encounters them on its own. On the other hand, a parent may choose to educate their child on the reality of racism "from infancy on" (170). Whatever their approach, black fathers, either directly or subtly, teach their children their own way of fighting racism. The following sections illustrate how different fathers combat racism by embracing order, expecting excellence, educating bluntly, or sacrificing silently.

## Embrace Order

In *Ordinary Light*, Tracy Smith's father embraces order to combat the struggles of life, and encourages Smith to do the same. The first references to

her father, Mr. Smith, describe his fascination with the competing forces of “mystery and order,” forces “tied up in physical laws that could be located everywhere: in the animal kingdom, the human body, the endless darkness of space” (Smith 12). From his career as a scientist in the Air Force down to the way he leads his family, he tries to see the world through the laws that govern science. Only when life does not easily fit within the explanations of science does Mr. Smith acknowledge the rest as “mystery” (12). The worldview which Smith’s father adopts reflects an escape from his past oppression. Smith recalls her father’s upbringing, how he had “enlisted in the [military] service at eighteen and left the South,” and wonders whether he was “fleeing a mystery” and “seeking a new and better order” (13). Mr. Smith was victim to the racial injustices of the South, and perhaps the mystery surrounding race led him to enlist and to adopt the strict sense of structure that the military provides.

In some sense, enlisting in the military allowed Mr. Smith to create a new beginning. Smith comes to think of her father as someone “who had fled a humble past and made himself anew,” someone who then offers a new life to his children (13). After military deployments, he returned with souvenirs, and Tracy felt that “every faraway thing [she] knew of or possessed had been filtered to [her] through [her] father” (13). Smith’s father figuratively holds out the world to her so she can see it the way he does and cope with life the way he does—by adopting order.

## Expect Excellence

Other times, black parenting takes the form of strict behavioral expectations so as to leave no imaginable excuse for racism. In *Negroland*, Margo Jefferson’s father, Dr. Jefferson, teaches Jefferson to excel at everything. But the restricting space in which her father helps raise her is symptomatic of the oppression he fights. To maintain their privilege as an upper class African-American family, Jefferson falls victim to the confining expectations that she eradicate any flaws that could be “turned against the race” and not act too boldly which could “put [her], [her] parents, and [her] people at risk” (Jefferson 8). The stringent expectations placed on her left little room for error, creating a suffocating experience Jefferson criticizes. But Jefferson makes clear that her father’s strictness was much more a product of racism than of her own parents. She points out that her “enemies took too much” and her “loved ones asked too much,” but the “blame is not symmetrical: my

enemies forced my loved ones to ask too much of me" (174). In other words, the impossible expectations placed on Jefferson as a child result from racial oppression, and her father's insistence on her excellent behavior marks his desperate attempt to protect her. Ultimately, Jefferson's memoir does more to highlight the impossible choice black parents face than to comment directly on her father's parenting. His teaching her to excel reflects his "route to freedom" (190).

## Educate Bluntly

Coates educates his son on racism more bluntly to prepare him for the dangers ahead. When his son cries over the killers of Michael Brown escaping punishment, Coates gives him the only advice he can give, the only advice in the entire memoir, advice from his own parents: "this is your country, . . . this is your world, . . . this is your body, and you must find some way to live within all of it" (Coates 12). Thus, the advice passed from father to son over generations is not in the form of an answer to a question, but rather it is to know the right question to be asking. The lack of a concrete solution reflects both the impossibility of escaping racism and the father's willingness to allow his son to choose his own path for navigating the immense world that threatens him. Coates tells his son "the struggle is really all I have for you because it is the only portion of this world under your control" (107). For Coates then, to be a black father means to reveal to your child the struggle you share, which teaches solidarity without giving false hope.

He passes that awareness down to his son by naming him after Samori Touré, "who struggled against French colonizers for the right to his own black body" (68). In effect, he teaches Samori to remember those who struggled before him and in his behalf. And he repeats the imperative at the end of the memoir: "I urge you to struggle. Struggle for the memory of your ancestors. Struggle for wisdom . . . Struggle for your grandmother and grandfather, for your name" (151). Coates purposefully uses the word "struggle" instead of "overcome" or "defeat" because it implies a continuous effort. He does not promise a foreseeable end to the struggle because he does not believe there is one. More importantly, he counsels Samori not to "pin your struggle on [the Dreamer's] conversion. The Dreamers will have to learn to struggle themselves, to understand that the field for their Dream, the stage where they have painted themselves white, is the deathbed of us all" (151). In other words, the struggle cannot end until the oppressors cease to oppress, and

until then, the struggle is an end in itself. Coates is perfectly blunt in teaching his son what to expect from the world so that he is prepared. Though his approach is less optimistic than Mr. Smith's and even Dr. Jefferson's, he, too, wants his son to struggle on his own terms.

## Sacrifice Silently

Finally, some black fathers protect their children through their silent suffering on their children's behalf. Smith observes that "there must have been times when the task of keeping a family of our size afloat threatened to overwhelm [her father]. But he never showed it" (Smith 90). Smith's father tells her that her job is "to go to school," while his is to "take care of everything else" (90). He protected his family so well "and so invisibly that it never occurred to [her] he might have done so at any personal cost" (90). Interestingly, Smith only recognizes the grace with which he struggled in retrospect, suggesting the struggle went mostly unnoticed. Similarly, when a hotel refuses to respect Dr. Jefferson's reservation and doctor title, he does not verbally express his frustration but hides his anger from his children. He absorbs the racist attack silently so as to not involve his children in the situation and to sustain a certain space, a wedge between his children and racism. Though it often goes unnoticed, black fathers put themselves on the frontlines against racism to mitigate its effect on their children.

## Conclusion

Discerning the mindset of black fathers from memoirs is difficult. The embedded psychological costs of being a black father in America rarely surface, if at all. But what Dr. Jefferson and Mr. Smith conceal from their children comes out all too well in Ta-Nehisi Coates's open letter to his son. Honesty is brutal. Or more accurately, the honest truth is brutally violent. No matter how it is faced, the "sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body" (Coates 10). But some fathers absorb as much violence for their child as they can without showing it. They struggle by showing no sign of struggle. One cannot plainly see the internal suffering because not all black fathers provide the glimpse that Coates has provided. They find themselves in a catch-22: They must either choose to suppress any sign of frustration, or risk jeopardizing their child. As a result, a true understanding of black fathers is often inaccessible.

But with some effort, the memoir allows the reader a glimpse of what black fathers go through. Understanding what it means to be a black father in America requires more than simply acknowledging racism. It requires a figurative reading between the lines. Otherwise, one may only see distanced black fathers. Short of being told in a memoir what decisions a black father faces concerning his child, one must recognize the gaps in understanding as intentional, as a defense mechanism. Black memoir often replicates this intended barrier. The varying approaches to fathering are mirrored in how closely black fathers are revealed to the reader. Thus, memoir allows African American writers to be honest about both the facts and the methods of black fatherhood: either one sits in on Coates's explicit letter to his son or one mines for what the gaps in two daughters' accounts reveal about their fathers. In either case, the writer preserves the father's approach to fathering. The memoir's honesty, then, is twofold. And as Christopher Lebron declares, "unlike the American Memoir," or the false narratives about black fathers, "our stories must be honest. That is how we get free" (Lebron 45).

The responsibility to understand the personal challenges of black fatherhood, whether explicitly shown or obscured, ultimately lies with the reader. To see black fathers more genuinely, readers must work to adopt a new perspective. Furthermore, this new perspective demands an increased show of compassion and empathy, an empathy only accessible once the proper work is put forth. It demands looking beyond stereotypes of black men and seeing them "in a light to which we are simply not accustomed, as family men fathering from the margins" (Abdill 227).



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