

FROM THE INSTRUCTOR

Anh's essay was written at the end of the semester in WR 120, as the final academic paper in the course. It wasn't precisely a research paper, but it did involve juggling a number of different sources—the Coates memoir, which we had read together, as a primary exhibit source, and then several background and argument sources that Anh found in the course of developing the ideas for her paper. One way I might use this paper in the classroom would be as part of a discussion about how students come up with ideas for papers when the topic choice is entirely open. After talking extensively about Coates's book in class, students did a group multi-modal activity representing the book graphically. Through this group work, students raised a number of questions about the book; Anh wondered specifically why each chapter began with a line from a song, and what those lyrics were doing in—or for—the book. That was the beginning of her work on this paper, and I know there were points at which she worried that she was beginning “wrong,” in some way, but of course that kind of open-ended, genuine inquiry is precisely (one of) the “right” way(s) to begin an academic paper. Students could talk about their strategies for coming up with topics, beginning with questions rather than thesis statements/claims, and talking about what works well for them, what leads them down overly-constrained paths, and what may work, but may cause them to feel uneasy because the process is such a contrast from high school writing.

Christina Michaud

WR 120: First-Year Writing Seminar

FROM THE WRITER

Music has always been something that brings immense meaning to my life and reversely, has helped me express meaning through. I believe, especially with a genre like Rap and Hip-Hop that it is one of the most expressive forms of communication – constantly changing with time. It is also one of the most beautiful forms of art because it is common and can be well-liked by everyone. Which is why genres like Rap and Hip-Hop are so powerful because artists can utilize the music platform to communicate thoughtful messages. Ta-Nehisi Coates' sentiments about music and what it meant throughout his life resonated with me. Already being a fan of Ta-Nehisi Coates and having read his work before, I wanted to dive deeper into his relationship with music since it was a major theme in *The Beautiful Struggle* but never in the spotlight.

MINH ANH NGUYEN is an international student from Saigon, Vietnam. She is a rising Sophomore in the College of Arts and Sciences, pursuing a major in Sociology. She hopes to continue her interest in writing and photography through a double major in Photojournalism. She would like to thank Professor Christina Michaud and the WR152 class: Race, Gender, and Class in the U.S. Today for igniting her passion in writing about social issues and for seeing her potential.

MINH ANH NGUYEN

ANTHEMS OF THE STRUGGLE

“There lived a little boy who was misled” reads the title of the first chapter in Ta-Nehisi Coates’s memoir *The Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons, and an Unlikely Road to Manhood*. Extracted from a song by rapper Slick Rick titled “A Children’s Story,” the succeeding line in the song follows: “By another little boy and here’s what he said.” These lyrics are a prelude to the story of Coates’s life that proceeds in the memoir. On the decision of beginning with that specific line, Coates said: “it’s such an understated introduction to what ultimately plays out” (Garner). Every following chapter’s title is a line from a rap song, each having some significance in the corresponding formative time of Coates’s life. The period depicted in *The Beautiful Struggle*, following Coates’s transition from boyhood to manhood, coincides with the emergence of Rap/Hip-Hop in the late 80s and early 90s. The songs represented—a reflection of the evolution of Rap/Hip-Hop that is parallel to the growth of Coates—capture his experiences of moving through the “Knowledge” of the streets and becoming a “Conscious man.” Coates’s relationship with music, particularly Rap/Hip-Hop, and the ways it has influenced him, as a writer and as a black male in the U.S., ultimately reveals the importance of music to the black identity.

The beginning of Rap/Hip-Hop in New York in the 1970s saw a strong emphasis on beats and sounds, but overtime, it became much more than that. Born from block parties in New York City where DJs would alter the sounds of funk, soul, and disco songs, this underground movement led to the popularity of MCs. MCs, whose jobs were to introduce the DJs, were tasked with keeping the crowd energized by talking between songs and interacting with the audience. This talking eventually led to rhyming over and in sync with the music. These MCs would ultimately come to be known as “rappers.” Soon enough, artists like Slick Rick, Eric B. & Rakim, Public Enemy, and KRS-One were seen by young black boys like Ta-Nehisi Coates during this time as not only entertainers but also educators, mentors, life coaches. Coates chooses to title every chapter with a line from a rap song because these songs serve as guidance through “those young years trapped between the schools and the streets” (de León) and inform the decisions that will ultimately affect the destiny of every black male. The usage of Slick Rick’s “A Children’s Story” as the introduction to the memoir foretells Coates’s stories of encounters with gang members, resisting the temptation to be “misled,” and acquiring the “Knowledge” necessary to become a “Conscious man.”

Through the popularity of the genre, Rap/Hip-Hop artists found a bigger purpose than producing sounds—they became righteous and their music turned Conscious. Conscious, used by Coates, simply describes the state of mind in which one is politically aware and concerned with race. In *The Beautiful Struggle*, Coates ascribes the transition of Rap/Hip-Hop to Consciousness in the summer of 1988: “Before now, the music was escapist and fun—some beats and the dozens, fat chains and gilded belt buckles. But Chuck D pulled us back into the real” (Coates, “Beautiful Struggle” 104). Chuck D is the leader of rap group Public Enemy, and that summer, “Chuck D came

forward and revealed a new level of Knowledge” (105). This type of Knowledge is beyond what is taught in school, it encompasses the Knowledge of the streets, an understanding of one’s self, one’s identity and place in society. This Knowledge is power—a weapon against ignorance. What made Chuck D’s music successful is that it pushes a black nationalist political ideology, expressing ideas that have origins in the anger that black youths everywhere felt at that point. The conversion to Consciousness showed that Rap/Hip-Hop is not just mindless—it is a way of analyzing and disrupting the forces that are allied against black people.

Ta-Nehisi Coates’s father, Paul Coates, was always strict with his children about the value of education so that they didn’t end up fulfilling the daunting destiny that society has set out for young black boys. He believed in the power of words and spreading Knowledge through books, which is why “the music boosted the words of [Ta-Nehisi Coates’s] father, though he only partially understood” (Coates, “Beautiful Struggle” 109). As MCs became more Conscious, it influenced Ta-Nehisi Coates and pushed the lessons of his father, “the big one being that words are never politically neutral” (Garner). Rap/Hip-Hop is about more than just the sound—each word, each lyric serves a purpose. The way that MCs craft their words to represent “a chorus of . . . voices previously suppressed” make them worthy of being considered “literary artists: they are the poets, and rap is the poetry of Hip-Hop culture” (NPR). On the artistry of words, Coates claims that “no one better demonstrated the democracy of words than Rakim” (Garner) from the Hip-Hop duo Eric B. & Rakim. From Rakim, Coates learned to appreciate words and understood that they should be beautiful on two levels: “they should sound good, and when unpacked, they should also mean something beautiful too” (Garner). What Coates learned from this genre of music is valuable because of his experiences and the way he is able to understand the story behind the songs.

The music that influenced Coates captures the experiences of black males in the US, facing the dreadful fate society has led them to believe is inevitable. In describing the experiences of being black, Rap/Hip-Hop artists face the burden that writers like Coates also face “to describe things as precisely as [they] see them” (Vozick-Levinson). Their purpose isn’t to be hopeful, it is to be truthful, and that is perhaps more difficult considering the ugly reality of society. Rap/Hip-Hop, as a genre created by black people, predominantly for black people, is met with connotations of violence, gangs, crime, hostility—all the same implications black males in the US are met with. To be black and male is to always be conscious of one’s presence in any given space. Like Coates’s father had to teach him growing up, to be a black male “you need to be conscious especially around white people . . . you need to be careful about what you do and what you say” (Coates, “Beautiful Struggle” 173). In a country where “racial ‘others’ of dark complexion are always viewed as incapable of doing much” (Bonilla-Silva ix), Rap/Hip-Hop, associated with black identity, is seen by few as a testament to the wrongful stereotypes that black people are lazy, thuggish, and incapable. As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva talked about in his book *Racism without Racists*, black people are blamed for the lifestyle they live—especially with Rap/ Hip-Hop, believed to encourage immoral behaviors and way of life: “Most whites believe that if blacks and other minorities would just stop thinking about the past, work hard, and complain less (particularly about racial discrimination), then Americans of all hues could ‘all get along’” (1), but the issue isn’t that the music encourages the stereotypes, the problem lays in the fact that the music exists as a testament to the struggle against institutionalized racism that black people are forced to deal with in the US. While there are certainly hopeful songs, “hope is not a very important sentiment” (Vozick-Levinson) in Rap/Hip-Hop. To be hopeful and disregard the

struggle is against artists' nature because it is not truthful. As Coates said in an interview on his relationship with Rap/ Hip-Hop, "what great art would we describe as primarily hopeful?" (Vozick-Levinson).

The struggles that faced Coates as he moved through boyhood were concerned with the temptations of violence, of giving in to the institutions that purposefully worked to put black boys in the wrong places. Through Rap/Hip-Hop, however, Coates found comfort and strength. He began pulling from the literature of the music and slowly "came to understand why these boys needed to wear capes, masks, and muscle suits between bars. Slowly [he] came to feel that [he] was not the only one who was afraid" (Coates, "Beautiful Struggle" 102). Hip-Hop gave Coates a common language; it "saved [his] life" (147). But he also found strength in more than just Rap/Hip-Hop: "that August, on liberated land, I found that there were other ways of speaking a mother tongue that, no matter age, no matter interest, lived in us all" (147). Coates's experience with the djembe, a traditional African wooden drum, expanded his relationship with music. He found a way to connect to his roots. More importantly, Coates believed his fascination came at the right age because the djembe "has a special call to young boys looking for ways to express the change popping off inside" (147). The way the drum is held and played sounded like a gun to Coates, "if guns were made to be music" (148). At an age where black boys faced the decisions to either fall into temptations or define their own destinies, Coates felt ravaged by his community: "I lost so much of myself out there. My dreams shrank into survival and mere dignity and respect" (193). But in his djembe, he found his lost imagination, "and now from heavy hands to making a drum sing" (193). The bond he felt was more than just the music, it is the community that overwhelmingly supports and understands him. The music is only powerful because it serves to emphasize the shared identity. Whether it be the MCs that fed Coates's Consciousness and made him see the forces that work against black people in the US, or the djembe that helped Coates find his identity in his roots, music made Coates realize that he is not alone, that he is part of a community of many, who just like him are struggling to understand and be proud of their identities in a country where black people are seen as lesser.

It is evident through Coates's experiences that music has a particularly strong impact on the black community and is essential to its identity. Within a community that collectively faces such intense social and historical obstacles, it is important that they have ownership over certain experiences that are unique to them and have meaning only to them. Ta-Nehisi Coates explained once during a book tour in 2017 for his book *We Were Eight Years In Power*, answering an audience question about the power and ownership of words, that every word doesn't belong to everyone. Some music, just like some words, belong specifically to some communities and are understood differently by different people. While Rap/Hip-Hop, as a genre, is not intended for a specific audience—and now more than ever, the genre is being praised and enjoyed by everyone worldwide—the meaning it has for people who have experienced the struggles represented in the songs is beyond what someone from the outside can imagine. On the ownership of the N-word, Coates said that: "for white people, the experience of being a Hip-Hop fan and not being able to use the N-word is actually very insightful because it will give you just a little peek into the world of what it means to be black" (Coates, "Words That Don't Belong"). Music, especially in the black community, is important not only for entertainment but also as a way of uniting a group of people over a shared identity. Perhaps turning the hardships of the struggle into the creation of something beautiful like music—finding strength in the meaning of the struggle—is part of what Coates

describes as *The Beautiful Struggle*. In this ongoing fight against racism, music like Rap/Hip-Hop and traditional African instruments like the djembe have provided a beat for the black community to march to – they have become the anthems of the struggle.

WORKS CITED

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. *Racism Without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*. Lanham, Md., Rowman & Littlefield, 2003. Print.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *The Beautiful Struggle*. New York, Spiegel & Grau, 2008. Print.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. “Ta-Nehisi Coates on Words That Don't Belong to Everyone.” *We Were Eight Years In Power* Book Tour, 7 November 2017, Evanston Township High School, Evanston, IL. Lecture. www.youtube.com/watch?v=QO15S3WC9pg.

de León, Concepción. “Ta-Nehisi Coates and the Making of a Public Intellectual.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 29 Sept. 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/09/29/books/ta-nehisi-coates-we-were-eight-years-in-power.html.

Garner, Dwight. “Living With Music: A Playlist by Ta-Nehisi Coates.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 6 Aug. 2008, artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/08/06/living-with-music-a-playlist-by-ta-nehisi-coates/.

NPR. “The Anthology Of Rap': Lyrics As Poetry.” *NPR*, 6 Nov. 2010, www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=131125923.

Vozick-Levinson, Simon. “Ta-Nehisi Coates on Race, Hip-Hop and Toni Morrison's Praise.” *Rolling Stone*, Rolling Stone, 25 June 2018, www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/ta-nehisi-coates-on-race-hip-hop-and-being-praised-by-toni-morrison-103134/.