

Why do white people like what I write?

[Book review and essay by Pankaj Mishra, published in London Review of Books, print issue of Feb 22, 2018](#)

Reviewing: *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates, publisher Hamish Hamilton, Oct 2017, 367 pp, ISBN 978 0 241 32523 0

During the big antiwar protests in early 2003, Ta-Nehisi Coates was a deliveryman for a deli in Park Slope, Brooklyn. He, too, was ‘sceptical’, he wrote a decade later in a blog post for the *Atlantic*, ‘but if the US was going to take out a mad tyrant, who was I to object?’ After all, as Coates remembered, ‘every “sensible” and “serious” person you knew – left or right – was for the war.’ ‘I am not a radical,’ Coates said. Even so he found it ‘searing’ to watch ‘reasonable people assemble sober arguments for a disaster’.

In retrospect, the most remarkable of these reasonable people were not the neoconservatives but the liberals – some of them now Coates’s colleagues and supporters – who recommended war and condoned torture while advancing America’s mission to bring democracy to the world’s benighted. In *The Fight Is for Democracy* (2003), George Packer argued that a ‘vibrant, hardheaded liberalism’ could use the American military to promote its values. The subtitle of *The Good Fight* (2006) by Peter Beinart, the then editor of the *New Republic*, insisted ‘Why Liberals – and Only Liberals – Can Win the War on Terror and Make America Great Again’. ‘It’s time to think of torture,’ *Newsweek* declared a few weeks after 9/11. ‘Focused brutality’, *Time* recommended. *Vanity Fair* praised Rumsfeld for his ‘oddly reassuring ruthlessness’. As the invasion of Iraq got underway, the *Atlantic*, described as ‘prestigious’ by Coates in his new book, walked its readers through the advantages of ‘torture-lite’ in a cover story. In the *New York Times Magazine*, Michael Ignatieff, biographer of Isaiah Berlin and professor of human rights, exhorted Americans to embrace their imperial destiny and offered his own suggestions for ‘permissible duress’. Even the *New Yorker*, fastidiously aloof from Beltway schemers during the Cold War, published a report by Jeffrey Goldberg, the *Atlantic*’s current editor, detailing links between al-Qaida and Iraq – links later revealed to be non-existent.

Goldberg’s article was seized on by Bush and Cheney: the *New Yorker* had become, as an unusually bold writer in the *Nation* pointed out, ‘one more courtier straining to get the king’s ear’. But the Bush administration didn’t need eggheads to euphemise pre-emptive war, torture, rendition and indefinite offshore detention. Bush’s own demotic – ‘We’ll smoke them out,’ ‘wanted dead or alive’, ‘Pretty soon, we’ll have to start displaying scalps’ – repeatedly invoked wars of extirpation against what the Declaration of Independence had called ‘merciless Indian Savages’. ‘When this is all over,’ Cofer Black, Bush’s chief counterterrorist adviser, assured his boss, ‘the bad guys are going to have flies walking across their eyeballs.’ The mood was infectious among the personnel in charge of exterminating the brutes. The *Atlantic*’s Robert Kaplan cheerfully reported that ‘Welcome to Injun Country’ was the refrain among American soldiers worldwide. The primal blood-lusts of the war on terror survived Obama’s renaming of it. The Seal Team that in 2011 eventually scalped Osama bin Laden (code-named Geronimo)

carried 14-inch hatchets made by a North Carolina knife-maker known for his blades in the 1992 film *The Last of the Mohicans*. Obama administration officials volunteered details of the wildly popular slaying to the makers of the 2012 film *Zero Dark Thirty*, which depicted (falsely) swarthy villains revealing bin Laden's hideout under torture.

'A racist society can't but fight a racist war,' James Baldwin wrote in 1967, 'the assumptions acted on at home are also acted on abroad.' During the war on terror the traffic between the US and various shithole countries wasn't only in assumptions: there was also a wholesale exporting of equipment, technologies of torture and bad lieutenants. To take one instance, Richard Zuley, a specialist at Guantánamo, had become reassuringly ruthless while working for a Chicago police unit that for decades interrogated predominantly African-Americans at so-called black sites. It's only now, with a white supremacist ensconced in the White House, that those same hardheaded liberals – who did so much to create a climate of opinion and a legal regime in which black and brown bodies could be seized, broken and destroyed outside all norms and laws of war – are coming to grips with 'America's Original Sin: Slavery and the Legacy of White Supremacy' (an unlikely recent headline in *Foreign Affairs*). Back in the early 2000s the liberal universalists seemed unaware that their project might be fatally flawed, and that America's own democracy had been secured by mass bondage, colonial dispossession and wars of aggression; they still hadn't fully reckoned with the historical legacy of institutionalised racial cruelty, inequality and division – what Coates has come to describe.

'In America,' Coates writes, 'it is traditional to destroy the black body – it is heritage.' 'To be black' is to be perpetually 'naked before the elements of the world, before all the guns, fists, knives, crack, rape and disease'. The liberal freedoms of propertied men were always defined against omnipresent threats: mutinous natives, rebellious slaves. The white man, Tocqueville wrote as he observed race relations in America, 'is to the men of other races what man himself is to the animals', in the sense that he 'makes them serve his purposes, and when he cannot make them bend, he destroys them.' A social order built on systemic violence made the black man, Tocqueville recognised, an ever present menace in his white master's imagination. This proximity to a nemesis made a culture of fear central to American politics, entailing a continuous investment in the machinery of coercion, surveillance and control, along with pre-emptive brutality against internal and external enemies.

Coates, who was born in 1975, came of age just as a new Jim Crow was emerging domestically to accompany Bush Sr's new world order. 'By God, we've kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all!' So Bush Sr said in a euphoric victory statement at the end of the Gulf War. The kicking of the Vietnam Syndrome and 'Saddam Hussein's ass' signalled the removal of all restraints on American power imposed by dogged gooks and their traitorous allies on the American left. With America free to police the world, old legal and moral barriers were also dismantled at home. Just as Coates entered Howard University and began his harsh education in American history, the stage was set for a pitiless imposition of market discipline and evisceration of welfare-state protections. Such drastic socioeconomic re-engineering required a fresh public consensus, and a racialised view of crime and national security came in handy in separating the deserving from the undeserving. Under Reagan, the police had started to resemble the military with its special weapons and bellicose posturing. The prison-industrial complex burgeoned under Bill Clinton: an incarcerated population of 300,000 in 1970 expanded to 2.1 million in 2000 – the

majority black and brown, and poor. Liberals did not simply inherit Republican schemes of harsh policing and extreme punishment. They took the initiative. Clinton, hailed as the ‘first black president’ by Toni Morrison, ended what he called ‘welfare as we know it’ and deregulated financial markets. Amid a national panic about ‘street terrorists’, he signed the most draconian crime bill in US history in 1994, following it up two years later with an anti-terrorism bill that laid the foundation for the Patriot Act of 2001.

The intimate relationship between America’s internal and external wars, established by its original sin, has long been clear. The question was always how long mainstream intellectuals could continue to offer fig-leaf euphemisms for shock-and-awe racism, and suppress an entwined history of white supremacism and militarisation with fables about American exceptionalism, liberalism’s long battle with totalitarianism, and that sort of thing. Hurricane Katrina, coming after the non-discovery of WMDs in Iraq, undermined liberal faith in Bush’s heavily racialised war. American claims to global moral leadership since the 1960s had depended greatly on the apparent breakthrough of the civil rights movement, and the sidelining of the bigots who screamed: ‘segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation for ever’. In New Orleans, black bodies naked before the elements of the world – elements which included trigger-happy Blackwater mercenaries guarding the rich – made it clear that old-style racial separation had been replaced by sharply defined zones of prosperity and destitution: segregation for ever. But the apparent successes of social liberalism, culminating in Obama’s election, managed to obscure the new regimes of racial sequester for a while longer. Since the 1990s, the bonanzas of free trade and financial deregulation had helped breed greater tolerance for racial and sexual variety, primarily among the privileged – the CIA under Obama set up a recruiting office at the Miami Beach Gay Pride parade. Overt racism and homophobia had become taboo, even as imprisonment or premature death removed 1.5 million black men from public life. Diversification and multiculturalism among upwardly mobile, college-educated elites went together with mass incarceration at home and endless military interventions abroad.

*

In many ways, Coates’s career manifests these collateral trends of progress and regress in American society. He grew up in Baltimore at the height of the crack epidemic. One of his own friends at Howard University in the 1990s was murdered by the police. Coates didn’t finish college and had been working and writing for small magazines when in 2008 he was commissioned by the *Atlantic* to write a blog during Obama’s campaign for president. Three books and many blog posts and tweets later, Coates is, in Packer’s words, ‘the most influential writer in America today’ – an elevation that no writer of colour could previously have achieved. Toni Morrison claims he has filled ‘the intellectual void that plagued me after James Baldwin died’. Philip Roth has been led to histories of American racism by Coates’s books. David Brooks credits him for advancing an ‘education for white people’ that evidently began after ‘Ferguson, Baltimore, Charleston and the other killings’. Even *USA Today* thinks that ‘to have such a voice, in such a moment, is a ray of light.’ Coates seems genuinely embarrassed by his swift celebrity: by the fact that, as he writes in his latest book, *We Were Eight Years in Power*, a collection of essays published in the *Atlantic* between 2008 and 2016, ‘I, who’d begun in failure, who held no degrees or credentials, had become such a person.’ He also visibly struggles with the question ‘Why do white people like what I write?’ This is a fraught issue for the very few writers from

formerly colonised countries or historically disadvantaged minorities in the West who are embraced by ‘legacy’ periodicals, and then tasked with representing their people – or country, religion, race, and even continent (as in the *New York Times*’s praise for Salman Rushdie: ‘A continent finding its voice’). Relations between the anointed ‘representative’ writer and those who are denied this privilege by white gatekeepers are notoriously prickly. Coates, a self-made writer, is particularly vulnerable to the charge that he is popular among white liberals since he assuages their guilt about racism.

He doesn’t have a perch in academia, where most prominent African-American intellectuals have found a stable home. Nor is he affiliated to any political movement – he is sceptical of the possibilities of political change – and, unlike his bitter critic, Cornel West, he is an atheist. Identified solely with the *Atlantic*, a periodical better known for its oligarchic shindigs than its subversive content, Coates also seems distant from the tradition of black magazines like *Reconstruction*, *Transition* and *Emerge*, or left-wing journals like *n+1*, *Dissent* and *Jacobin*. He credits his large white fan club to Obama. Fascination with a black president, he thinks, ‘eventually expanded into curiosity about the community he had so consciously made his home and all the old, fitfully slumbering questions he’d awakened about American identity.’ This is true, but only in the way a banality is true. Most mainstream publications have indeed tried in recent years to accommodate more writers and journalists from racial and ethnic minorities. But the relevant point, perhaps impolitic for Coates to make, is that those who were assembling sensible arguments for war and torture in prestigious magazines only a few years ago have been forced to confront, along with their readers, the obdurate pathologies of American life that stem from America’s original sin.

Coates, followed by the ‘white working classes’, has surfaced into liberal consciousness during the pained if still very partial self-reckoning among American elites that began with Hurricane Katrina. Many journalists have been scrambling, more feverishly since Trump’s apotheosis, to account for the stunningly extensive experience of fear and humiliation across racial and gender divisions; some have tried to reinvent themselves in heroic resistance to Trump and authoritarian ‘populism’. David Frum, geometer under George W. Bush of an intercontinental ‘axis of evil’, now locates evil in the White House. Max Boot, self-declared ‘neo-imperialist’ and exponent of ‘savage wars’, recently claimed to have become aware of his ‘white privilege’. Ignatieff, advocate of empire-lite and torture-lite, is presently embattled on behalf of the open society in Mitteleuropa. Goldberg, previously known as stenographer to Netanyahu, is now Coates’s diligent promoter. Amid this hectic laundering of reputations, and a turnover of ‘woke’ white men, Coates has seized the opportunity to describe American power from the rare standpoint of its internal victims.

As a self-professed autodidact, Coates is primarily concerned to share with readers his most recent readings and discoveries. His essays are milestones in an accelerated self-education, with Coates constantly summoning himself to fresh modes of thinking. Very little in his book will be unfamiliar to readers of histories of American slavery and the mounting scholarship on the new Jim Crow. Coates, who claimed in 2013 to be ‘not a radical’, now says he has been ‘radicalised’, and as a black writer in an overwhelmingly white media, he has laid out the varied social practices of racial discrimination with estimable power and skill. But the essays in *We Were Eight Years in Power*, so recent and much discussed on their first publication, already feel like

artefacts of a moribund social liberalism. Reparations for slavery may have seemed ‘the indispensable tool against white supremacy’ when Obama was in power. It is hard to see how this tool can be deployed against Trump. The documentation in Coates’s essays is consistently impressive, especially in his writing about mass imprisonment and housing discrimination. But the chain of causality that can trace the complex process of exclusion in America to its grisly consequences – the election of a racist and serial groper – is missing from his book. Nor can we understand from his account of self-radicalisation why the words ‘socialism’ and ‘imperialism’ became meaningful to a young generation of Americans during what he calls ‘the most incredible of eras – the era of a black president’. There is a conspicuous analytical lacuna here, and it results from an overestimation, increasingly commonplace in the era of Trump, of the most incredible of eras, and an underestimation of its continuities with the past and present.

In the sentimental education of Coates, and of many liberal intellectuals mugged by American realities, Obama is the culmination of the civil rights movement, the figure who fulfils the legacies of Malcolm X as well as Martin Luther King. In Jay Z’s words, ‘Rosa sat so Martin could walk; Martin walked so Obama could run; Obama is running so we all can fly!’ John McCain, hapless Republican candidate in 2008, charged that his rival was a lightweight international ‘celebrity’, like Britney Spears. To many white liberals, however, Obama seemed to guarantee instant redemption from the crimes of a democracy built on slavery and genocide. There is no doubt that compared to the ‘first black president’, who played the dog whistle better than the saxophone, a hip-hop enthusiast and the son of a Kenyan Muslim represented a genuine diversification of America’s ruling class. Obama offered his own ascent as proof that America is an inclusive society, ceaselessly moving towards a ‘more perfect union’. But such apparent vindications of the American dream obscured the limited achievement of the civil rights movement, and the fragility of the social and political consensus behind it. The widespread belief that Obama had inaugurated a ‘postracial’ age helped conceal the ways in which the barefaced cruelties of segregation’s distant past had been softening since the 1960s into subtle exclusions and injustices.

A ruling class that had been forced to make partial concessions to the civil rights movement subsequently worked, as Nixon blurted out, to ‘devise a system’ to deal with the black ‘problem’ without appearing to do so. With the wars on crime, drugs and welfare queens, the repertoire of deception came to include coded appeals to a white constituency, the supposedly ‘silent majority’. But the cruellest trick used by both Republicans and Democrats was the myth that America had resolved the contradiction at the heart of its democracy. For the conviction that African-Americans were walking and running and would soon start flying, enabled by equal opportunity, paved the way for an insidious ideological force: colour-blind universalism. Its deceit was summed up best by the creepy Supreme Court justice Antonin Scalia: ‘In the eyes of the government, we are just one race here. It is American.’ The rules of colour-blind equality and the ‘level playing-field’, as they came to be outlined in the 1980s and 1990s, created a climate in which affirmative action came to look like reverse racism: unacceptably discriminatory against whites. With structural injustice presented as a thing of the past, what appeared to deform the lives of black people was their culture of single-parent households, scant work ethic, criminality and welfare dependency. This widespread attitude was summed up by a *New Republic* cover in 1996 urging Clinton to slash welfare: it showed a black woman, or ‘welfare mom’, bottle-feeding an infant while smoking. Blacks, in this politically bipartisan view, needed to get with the

American programme just as various immigrant communities had done. As the original exponent of centrist liberalism, Arthur Schlesinger Jr, charged, they had become too prone to ‘nourishing prejudice, magnifying difference and stirring up antagonism’ – in other words, blacks were guilty of identity politics.

The detractors of ‘identity liberalism’ are still prone to the fantasy that the end of de jure racial inequality ushered in a new era of opportunity and mobility for African-Americans. In reality, even the black people admitted into the networks of prosperity and privilege remained vulnerable compared to those who had enjoyed the inherited advantages of income and opportunity over several generations. This became gruesomely evident during the financial crisis of 2008, when African-American families, deceived into home-ownership by banks peddling subprime loans, found themselves in economic freefall, losing half their collective wealth. When Coates and Obama simultaneously emerged into public view in 2008 the political and ideological foundations of racial progress ought to have looked very shaky. But this structural weakness was obscured by the spectacular upward mobility of an Ivy League-educated black lawyer and constitutional scholar.

There were signs during Obama’s campaign, particularly his eagerness to claim the approbation of Henry Kissinger, that he would cruelly disappoint his left-leaning young supporters’ hopes of epochal transformation. His actions in office soon made it clear that some version of bait and switch had occurred. Obama had condemned the air war in South Asia as immoral because of its high civilian toll; but three days after his inauguration he ordered drone strikes in Pakistan, and in his first year oversaw more strikes with high civilian casualties than Bush had ordered in his entire presidency. His bellicose speech accepting the Nobel Peace Prize signalled that he would strengthen rather than dismantle the architecture of the open-ended war on terror, while discarding some of its fatuous rhetoric. During his eight years in office, he expanded covert operations and air strikes deep into Africa; girding the continent with American military bases, he exposed large parts of it to violence, anarchy and tyrannical rule. He not only expanded mass surveillance and government data-mining operations at home, and ruthlessly prosecuted whistleblowers, but invested his office with the lethal power to execute anyone, even American citizens, anywhere in the world.

Obama occasionally denounced the ‘fat cats’ of Wall Street, but Wall Street contributed heavily to his campaign, and he entrusted his economic policy to it early in his tenure, bailing out banks and the insurance mega-company AIG with no quid pro quo. African-Americans had turned out in record numbers in 2008, demonstrating their love of an ostensible compatriot, but Obama ensured that he would be immune to the charge of loving blacks too much. Colour-blind to the suffering caused by mortgage foreclosures, he scolded African-Americans, using the neoliberal idiom of individual responsibility, for their moral failings as fathers, husbands and competitors in the global marketplace. Nor did he wish to be seen as soft on immigration; he deported millions of immigrants – Trump is struggling to reach Obama’s 2012 peak of 34,000 deportations a month. In his memoir, *Dreams from My Father*, he had eloquently sympathised with the marginalised and the powerless. In power, however, he seemed in thrall to Larry Summers and other members of the East Coast establishment, resembling not so much the permanently alienated outsider as the mixed-race child of imperialism, who, as Ashis Nandy diagnosed in *The Intimate Enemy*, replaces his early feeling for the weak with ‘an unending search for masculinity

and status'. It isn't surprising that this harbinger of hope and change anointed a foreign-policy hawk and Wall Street-friendly dynast as his heir apparent. His post-presidency moves – kite-surfing with Richard Branson on a private island, extravagantly remunerated speeches to Wall Street and bromance with George Clooney – have confirmed Obama as a case of mistaken identity. As David Remnick, his disappointed biographer, said recently, 'I don't think Obama was immune to lures of the new class of wealth. I think he's very interested in Silicon Valley, stars and showbusiness, and sports, and the rest.'

Embodying neoliberal chic at its most seductive, Obama managed to restore the self-image of American elites in politics, business and the media that had been much battered during the last years of the Bush presidency. In the updated narrative of American exceptionalism, a black president was instructing the world in the ways of economic and social justice. Journalists in turn helped boost the fantastical promises and unexamined assumptions of universal improvement; some saw Coates himself as an icon of hope and change. A 2015 profile in *New York* magazine describes him at the Aspen Ideas Festival, along with Bill Kristol, Jeffrey Goldberg, assorted plutocrats and their private jets, during the 'late Obama era', when 'progress was in the air' and the 'great question' after the legalisation of gay marriage was: 'would the half-century-long era of increasing prosperity and expanding human freedom prove to be an aberration or a new, permanent state?' Coates is awkward among Aspen's panjandrums. But he thinks it is too easy for him to say he'd be happier in Harlem. 'Truthfully,' he confesses, 'I'm very happy to be here. It's very nice.' According to the profile-writer, 'there is a radical chic crowd assembling around Coates' – but then he is 'a writer who radicalises the Establishment'.

For a self-aware and independent-minded writer like Coates, the danger is not so much seduction by power as a distortion of perspective caused by proximity to it. In his account of a party for African-American celebrities at the White House in the late Obama era, his usually majestic syntax withers into *Vanity Fair* puffs: 'Women shivered in their cocktail dresses. Gentlemen chivalrously handed over their suit coats. Naomi Campbell strolled past the security pen in a sleeveless number.' Since Clinton, the reflexive distrust of high office once shared by writers as different as Robert Lowell and Dwight Macdonald has slackened into defensiveness, even adoration, among the American literati. Coates proprietorially notes the ethnic, religious and racial variety of Obama's staff. Everyone seems overwhelmed by a 'feeling', that 'this particular black family, the Obamas, represented the best of black people, the ultimate credit to the race, incomparable in elegance and bearing.' Not so incomparable if you remember Tina Brown's description of another power couple, the Clintons, in the *New Yorker* in 1998: 'Now see your president, tall and absurdly debonair, as he dances with a radiant blonde, his wife.' 'The man in a dinner jacket', Brown wrote, possessed 'more heat than any star in the room (or, for that matter, at the multiplex)'. After his visit, Joe Eszterhas, screenwriter of *Showgirls* and *Basic Instinct*, exulted over the Clinton White House's diverse workforce: 'full of young people, full of women, blacks, gays, Hispanics'. 'Good Lord,' he concluded in *American Rhapsody*, 'we had taken the White House! America was ours.'

A political culture where progress in the air was measured by the president's elegant bearing and penchant for diversity was ripe for demagoguery. The rising disaffection with a narcissistic and callous ruling class was signalled in different ways by the Tea Party, Occupy, Black Lives Matter and Bernie Sanders's insurgent candidacy. The final blow to the Washington (and New

York) consensus was delivered by Trump, who correctly read the growing resentment of elites – black or white, meritocratic or dynastic – who presumed to think the White House was theirs. Writing in *Wired* magazine a month before Trump's election, Obama hailed the 'quintessentially American compulsion to race for new frontiers and push the boundaries of what's possible'. Over lunch at the White House, he assured Coates that Trump's victory was impossible. Coates felt 'the same'. He now says that 'adherents and beneficiaries' of white supremacy loathed and feared the black man in the White House – enough to make Trump 'president, and thus put him in position to injure the world'. 'Every white Trump voter is most certainly not a white supremacist,' Coates writes in a bitter epilogue to *We Were Eight Years in Power*. 'But every Trump voter felt it acceptable to hand the fate of the country over to one.' This, again, is true in a banal way, but inadequate as an explanation: Trump also benefited from the disappointment of white voters who had voted, often twice, for Obama, and of black voters who failed to turn out for Hillary Clinton. Moreover, to blame a racist 'whitelash' for Trump is to exculpate the political, business and media luminaries Coates has lately found himself with, especially the journalists disgraced, if not dislodged, by their collaboration in a calamitous racist-imperialist venture to make America great again.

*

As early as 1935, W.E.B. Du Bois identified fear and loathing of minorities as a 'public and psychological wage' for many whites in American society. More brazenly than his predecessors, Trump linked the misfortunes of the 'white working class' to Chinese cheats, Mexican rapists and treacherous blacks. But racism, Du Bois knew, was not just an ugly or deep-rooted prejudice periodically mobilised by opportunistic politicians and defused by social liberalism: it was a widely legitimated way of ordering social and economic life, with skin colour only one way of creating degrading hierarchies. Convinced that the presumption of inequality and discrimination underpinned the making of the modern world, Du Bois placed his American experience of racial subjection in a broad international context. Remarkably, all the major black writers and activists of the Atlantic West, from C.L.R. James to Stuart Hall, followed him in this move from the local to the global. Transcending the parochial idioms of their national cultures, they analysed the way in which the processes of capital accumulation and racial domination had become inseparable early in the history of the modern world; the way race emerged as an ideologically flexible category for defining the dangerously lawless civilisational other – black Africans yesterday, Muslims and Hispanics today. The realisation that economic conditions and religion were as much markers of difference as skin colour made Nina Simone, Mohammed Ali and Malcolm X, among others, connect their own aspirations to decolonisation movements in India, Liberia, Ghana, Vietnam, South Africa and Palestine. Martin Luther King absorbed from Gandhi not only the tactic of non-violent protest but also a comprehensive critique of modern imperialism. 'The Black revolution,' he argued, much to the dismay of his white liberal supporters, 'is much more than a struggle for the rights of Negroes.'

Compared to these internationalist thinkers, partisans of the second black president, who happen to be the most influential writers and journalists in the US, have provincialised their aspiration for a just society. They have neatly separated it from opposition to an imperial dispensation that incarcerates and deports millions of people each year – disproportionately people of colour – and routinely exercises its right to assault and despoil other countries and murder and torture their

citizens. Perceptive about the structural violence of the new Jim Crow, Coates has little to say about its manifestation in the new world order. For all his searing corroboration of racial stigma in America, he has yet to make a connection as vital and powerful as the one that MLK detected in his disillusioned last days between the American devastation of Vietnam and ‘the evils that are rooted deeply in the whole structure of our society’. He has so far considered only one of what King identified as ‘the giant American triplets of racism, extreme materialism and militarism’ – the ‘inter-related flaws’ that turned American society into a ‘burning house’ for the blacks trying to integrate into it. And in Coates’s worldview even race, despite his formidable authority of personal witness, rarely transcends a rancorously polarised American politics of racial division, in which the world’s most powerful man appears to have been hounded for eight years by unreconstructed American racists. ‘My President Was Black’, a 17,000-word profile in the *Atlantic*, is remarkable for its missing interrogations of the black president for his killings by drones, despoilation of Libya, Yemen and Somalia, mass deportations, and cravenness before the titans of finance who ruined millions of black as well as white lives. Coates has been accused of mystifying race and of ‘essentialising’ whiteness. Nowhere, however, does his view of racial identity seem as static as in his critical tenderness for a black member of the 1 per cent.

As long as Coates is indifferent to the links between race and international political economy, he is more likely to induce relief than guilt among his white liberal fans. They may accept, even embrace, an explanation that blames inveterate bigots in the American heartland for Trump. They would certainly balk at the suggestion that the legate of the civil rights movement upheld a 19th-century racist-imperialist order by arrogating to the US presidency the right to kill anyone without due process; they would recoil from the idea that a black man in his eight years in power deepened the juridical legacy of white supremacy before passing it on to a reckless successor. The intractable continuities of institutional brute power should be plain to see. ‘The crimes of the American state,’ Coates writes in one of the introductions to *We Were Eight Years in Power*, ‘now had the imprimatur of a black man.’ Yet the essays themselves ultimately reveal their author to be safely within the limits of what even a radicalised black man can write in the *Atlantic* without dissolving the rainbow coalition of liberal imperialism or alienating its patrons. Coates’s pain and passion have committed him to a long intellectual journey. To move, however, from rage over the rampant destruction of black bodies in America to defensiveness about a purveyor of ‘kill lists’ in the White House is to cover a very short distance. There is surely more to come. Coates is bracingly aware of his unfinished tasks as a writer. ‘Remember that you and I,’ he writes to his son in *Between the World and Me*, ‘are the children of trans-Atlantic rape. Remember the broader consciousness that comes with that. Remember that this consciousness can never ultimately be racial; it must be cosmic.’ Nowhere in his published writings has Coates elaborated on what this cosmic consciousness ought to consist of. But his own reference to the slave trade places the black experience at the centre of the modern world: the beginning of a process of capitalism’s emergence and globalisation whereby a small minority in Europe and America acquired the awesome power to classify and control almost the entire human population.

The black slave, captured early in this history, presaged the historical ordeal of the millions yet to come: dispossession and brutalisation, the destruction of cultures and memories, and of many human possibilities. Today, the practices of kidnapping, predation, extraction, national aggression, mob violence, mass imprisonment, disenfranchisement and zoning pioneered in the

Atlantic have travelled everywhere, along with new modes of hierarchy and exclusion. They can be seen in India and Myanmar, where public sanction drives the violent persecution, including lynching, of various internal enemies of the nation. They can be seen in Africa and Latin America. They have returned home to Europe and America as renewed animus against migrants and refugees. All this reproduces to a sinister extent the devastating black experience of fear and danger – of being, as Coates wrote, ‘naked before the elements of the world’. Coates’s project of unflinching self-education and polemic has never seemed more urgent, and it has only just begun.