

Reflection

The Case for Reparations is dense. I remember on my first time around reading it, I kept waiting for Coates to get to talking about the reparations part! But after thinking about it, I realized that reparations isn't as much the point as is reconciliation. In other words, putting together this idea of American history (glorified in most American teaching institutions/platforms) and the lesser explored experience and treatment of African Americans -- especially post-slavery. I think Coates is justified in arguing that white supremacy has been essential to the American experience. The American economy largely relied on slave labor, on using people as property, as assets. It seems simplistic but in reality, the (wealthy) white man had the power while everybody else only had fragments or nothing at all. Because white supremacy governed early American history -- and was not only profitable, but a cultural norm -- the idea of eradicating these power and economic structures seemed outrageous to many, especially those directly benefiting. So just because slavery was eradicated, it didn't end oppression. Lynchings, violence, voter suppression, sharecropping, the homebuying market, funding -- the list goes on. But I think one of Coates' objectives is to break down this list and make it real. When you can visualize something or hear someone's story, like Clyde Ross', you can no longer ignore it. When you can just tick off injustices like a grocery list, you become desensitized.

Coates used many sources to tie together his argument. One of the quotes pulled out of the book *Black Wealth/White Wealth* was particularly catching: "Locked out of the greatest mass-based opportunity for wealth accumulation in American history, African Americans who desired and were able to afford home ownership found themselves consigned to central-city communities where their investments were affected by the 'self-fulfilling prophecies' of the FHA appraisers: cut off from sources of new investment[,] their homes and communities deteriorated and lost value in comparison to those homes and communities that FHA appraisers deemed desirable." This idea of the American dream hits. A lot of American history is exclusive, based on race or financial means. The American dream didn't apply to all. Buying a home (legitimately), accumulating wealth, living in a safe and stable community didn't either. And the idea that governmental agencies played a role in this makes it even more difficult to comprehend. Who is the government looking out after? What biases did/does the government hold? And

where do you draw the line between “we the people” and the government we elect/trust/don’t stop? What about our own passivity? The blame game gets complicated. Another quote was earlier in the article, but important nonetheless: “It was in these early years that Ross began to understand himself as an American—he did not live under the blind decree of justice, but under the heel of a regime that elevated armed robbery to a governing principle. He thought about fighting. ‘Just be quiet,’ his father told him. ‘Because they’ll come and kill us all.’”

Understanding yourself as an American, now that’s a powerful idea. I remember when I was little I used to tell people when we traveled that I was not American, I was Californian, because that’s what I felt. This idea of being a citizen is deeper than status -- it’s feeling (or not) a pride or truth in American identity, of feeling assimilated, of feeling heard. This idea also ties back to what we’ve discussed in class about the Declaration of Independence. It’s more of a document outlining broad hopes for the nation’s future rather than mandating a reality for the present moment. But still, how do we put together this vision and a reality that sidesteps it?

Moving on. I think it’s possible to praise America while factoring the nation’s racist history. If we looked at everything through a right/wrong, yes/no lens we’d get nowhere. It’s understanding the systems in place, the experience of individuals, and where we were and where we are. It’s better to get caught up in discomfort and confusion than not try at all. As for the reparations part, Coates captures the complexity of the issue. I don’t think financial reparations make sense, but maybe that’s because I can’t imagine what that would look like. I do think that a national reckoning is important. But then again, that’s so abstract! You leave articles like this with more questions than answers. But that’s okay.