New book shares raw lessons of being Black in America    

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DR. GLENN ALTSCHULER    
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Throughout his life, Ta-Nehisi Coates has asked this question: “How do I live free in this Black body?”

The context for addressing the question, he emphasizes, is an America in which “death could so easily rise up from the nothing of a boyish afternoon;” in which White boys live in homes with immaculate bathrooms, compile complete collections of baseball cards, and worry only about dating popular girls and avoiding poison oaks, while Black boys, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and Tamir Rice, are killed because they are Black.

In “Between the World and Me,” Coates, the author of the memoir, “Beautiful Struggle” and “The Case for Reparations,” a cover story in Atlantic Magazine, shares his struggle “to find a port in the American storm” with Samori Touré, his 14-year-old son. Coates maintains that he has had a happy life, enhanced by Black power, a power “more gorgeous than any voting rights bill,” that enabled him (and others) to take the myth of race and the one-drop rule, flip it, make a home and make a people.

‘Make no mistakes’

The dominant emotion in “Between the World and Me,” however, is anger. In the United States, he declares, Blacks “control nothing, least of all the fate of their bodies, which could be commandeered by the police; which could be erased by the guns, which were so profligate; which could be raped, beaten, and jailed.”

To avoid such a fate or increase their chances of doing so, Blacks must “Walk in single file. Work quietly. Pack an extra Number 2 pencil. Make no mistakes.” The defining feature “of being drafted into the Black race,” Coates writes, is the robbery of time: “It is the raft of second chances for them, and 23 hour days for us.”

Criticism of crimes committed by cops, moreover, allows Whites “to pretend there is real distance between their own attitudes and those of the ones appointed to protect them.” The prison state, “the random detention of black people, the torture of suspects,” Coates insists, “are the product of democratic will.”

Life at Ground Zero

Well before 9/11, he adds, Manhattan was Ground Zero for Blacks. Coates sees no difference between the police officer who shot his friend, Prince Jones, and the cops and firemen who died in the Twin Towers: “They were not human to me.”

Coates acknowledges his son’s life differs from his. Coates doesn’t know “what it means to grow up with a black president, social networks, omnipresent media, and black women everywhere in their natural hair.” That said, Coates appears to believe that for Blacks, except for the abolition of slavery, fundamental change has not occurred. Blacks still live “as the essential below” in their country; they carry the extra burden of being told that the American Dream is just, noble and real, and anyone who does not succeed deserves to fail. “That was true in 1776,” he writes. “It is true today.”

Lesson on wisdom

Certain that the American state, its values and traditions necessitate the destruction of bodies every year, “a wild and disproportionate” number of which will be black,” Coates counsels struggle, not because it assures victory – it does not – but because it assures “an honorable and sane life.”

Coates’ job, he tells his son, is to match his intelligence with his wisdom. And to make sure he understands that his “relatively privileged security” cannot protect him from assaults launched in the name of the Dream, which, “without its own justifications, would collapse upon itself.”

You have to wonder whether and how these messages will resonate with readers of “Between the World and Me.” And with Samori Touré.
Dr. Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University. He wrote this review for the Florida Courier.

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