SERIA MONOGRAFII NAUKOWYCH UNIWERSYTETU ZIELONOGÓRSKIEGO / 2020 / SCRIPTA HUMANA / Vol. 15
ISSN 2657-5906
Liminality and Beyond: Conceptions of In-betweenness in American Culture and Literature

Diane Zeeuw
Kendall College of Art and Design of Ferris State University (KCAD)

THE BROWN BODY AS THIRDSPACE: TA-NEHISI COATES *BETWEEN THE WORLD AND ME*

Beginning the search for justice: the historical, material, fantastical body

What is so important about Soja's notion of "thirdspace," and why choose to reread Coates' very personal rumination upon the vulnerable black or brown body through Soja's theory? Firstly, Soja asserts that space is a social production—a site for the reproduction of social relations (Soja, *Thirdspace*, 2). Thus Soja's work is widely viewed as seminal to understanding current ideas regarding "spatial justice." However, it also becomes readily apparent as one moves through Coates' text, that the very "space" or "site" for the reproduction of U.S. "race" relations has historically been, and continues to be, the imagined, fantastical or mythologized but always very material brown or black body—*irrespective of its environment or location in space*. Secondly, Soja serviceably compares *thirdspace* to a palimpsest thus providing a multi-layered model for understanding how a type of body has come to be treated as a site for the reproduction of relationships of privilege, power, and fear (Soja, *Thirdspace*, 18). As defined by Webster's a palimpsest is (1) writing material (as a parchment or tablet) used one or more times after earlier writing has been erased [thus a kind of subtle revisiting of ghost impressions leftover from prior inscriptions]; or (2) something having diverse layers or aspects apparent beneath the surface. Skin for Coates' serves as a kind of "parchment," recalling a brown or tan fragment scored and overwritten with the physical and psychological marks of history. However, Coates is not only referring to the material, social and economic residuals of slavery and "Jim Crow" era rules and regulations, but to a fully internalized code of violence. Hence, to survive one must learn the proper measure of violence. As Coates reports,

> […] my father beat me for letting another boy steal from me. Two years later, he beat me for threatening my ninth-grade teacher. Not being violent enough could cost me my body. Being too violent could [also] cost me my body. (28)

In seeking to draw parameters for the pursuit of spatial justice, Soja admits that the body itself might be treated as a geographical feature or site for the production of injustice (*Seeking Spatial Justice,* 31). However, he places the body at one end of a continuum

opposite the physical geography of the planet, referring to "these two extremes" as defining the "outer limits" of "[spatial] justice (31)." Soja rather seeks to explore "how consequential geographies are produced in the spaces in between, [….] from the 'little tactics of the habitat' (referencing Michel Foucault) to the regional, national, and global expressions of geographically uneven development" (31). Coates, conversely, begins with the corporeal body and a very intimate rumination on vulnerability, thus giving palpable form to issues and practices that might otherwise remain abstract and theoretical. While recognizing that "little tactics of the habitat" are produced within a network of power relations, for Coates (also echoing Foucault) they are always first and foremost performed upon a material body—from the implicit motivations driving corporal punishment for transgressing familial boundaries, to the explicit codes of the "street," to the disciplinary standards encouraged by teachers and community leaders. Coates, rather than viewing the body as a sort of "outer shores," or as perhaps too broad of a location for a "useful" assessment of the effects of racism, sees it rather as ground zero: a measurable multi-layered territory, claimed and defined by various sub-communities needing to be guarded, supervised, and managed. Coates goes on to make salient the fact that the material, mental, fantastical, and spatial site for the enactment of the worst kind of racist violence in the U.S. has always been, and indeed continues to be, the corporeal body. Even the title of Coates' book, *Between the World and Me* seeks to engage with what Soja has deemed the "extremes" of spatial justice. Thus, it is with the hope of at least recognizing such "extremes" of injustice that I have broken down this analysis into the following sections: (1) Persons "who believe they are white"; (2) the historical black body as a site for enforcing docility and compliance; (3) the material black body as a fundamental location for the ongoing performance of violence; and finally, (4) the affective body as propelling narratives seeking justice.

Persons "who believe they are white"

Early on Coates calls into question the notion of racial classification by repeatedly referring to persons "who believe they are white." He employs this phrase to denote anyone assuming the privileges accorded this thing called "whiteness." In introducing the phrase Coates writes, "Americans believe in the reality of 'race' as a defined, indubitable feature of the natural world. […] In this way, racism is rendered as the innocent daughter of Mother Nature […]" (Coates 7). Hence, those "who believe they are white" Coates infers, feel entitled to dismiss the matter with the same distance and disavowal as one might regard "an earthquake" or perhaps a "tornado," placating any sense of responsibility by regarding "race" as something beyond individual control—merely one of many factual features of the environment (Coates 7). By calling out presuppositions

surrounding racial cataloging, Coates not only prompts us to recognize the unsettled material topography of racial fantasies, but also their convenience as an excuse for inaction.

The black body as a site for enforcing docility and compliance

Coates' begins his personal memorandum to the future by first reminiscing about his conflicted relationship with school—noting both a love of learning, but also a deep awareness of the many implicit repressive lessons camouflaged as such. Coates writes,

> The world had no time for the childhoods of black boys and girls. How could the schools? Algebra, Biology, and English were not subjects so much as opportunities to better discipline the body, to practice writing between the lines, copying the directions legibly, memorizing theorems extracted from the world they were created to represent. (26)

Coates goes on to specifically characterize the didactic material taught under the guise of black history as a sanitized "ritual review of the Civil Rights Movement," decrying in particular the frequent replaying of documentary footage of "peaceful" freedom marches (32). Coates reflects upon this moralizing and one sided message of "peacefulness" as he simultaneously recalls sitting quietly within a darkened school assembly hall watching projected images of brown and black bodies blasted by high-pressure hoses, beaten, dragged, and gassed. However, the *official* historical lesson Coates suggests was always already marked by compliance and docility; the archival film footage serving ostensibly as an endorsement for the ideal political protest—the acceptable or appropriate model for expressing civil unrest. Even the term "unrest" now seems anemic and outdated in comparison to the more recent and now widely preferred term "woke." The first term suggesting one is not "sleeping well," implying a modicum of uneasiness, with the latter word signifying conversely, arousal or sudden alertness—inferring (bodily) readiness. In calling attention to the almost complete erasure from the classroom civics lesson of any and all counter narratives of confrontation, anger and outrage (the 1965 Los Angeles Watts rebellion, the 1967 Detroit 12th Street riots) Coates reflexively asks "Why were only our heroes nonviolent?" (32).

Interestingly, Soja also points towards the rising social tensions of the 1960s as shifting our way of thinking to include both material (first space) and mental (second space) (Soja. *Thirdspace*, 6). Soja goes on to describe first space as "focused on the real material world," whereas second space "interprets this reality through imagined representation of spatiality" (6). Coates, in relaying his adolescent experience with "African American history," intuitively focuses upon the material world (first space) as graphic evidence of the infliction of physical pain upon the flesh and blood bodies of the freedom marchers, only then to have his impression instructionally reinscribed as the imagined space of

order and virtue (or second space). But, what of Soja's notion of *thirdspace*? Soja defines *thirdspace* as "sites in which inextricably intertwined temporal, social, and spatial relations are […] constantly reinscribed, erased, and reinscribed again" (Soja 18). Here, I assert, the "material space of inscription" was literally the bodies of men, women, and children, although the mental (psychological and fantastical) educational space opened up by the replaying of such images was that of compliance disguised as a memorandum from the moral high ground. Thus, while "diplomacy" is officially framed as the only appropriate reaction to significant injustice, Coates responds to such tacit directives by calling them out, writing: "I speak not of the morality of nonviolence, but of the sense that blacks are in especial need of the morality," hence, reframing the pedagogical lesson yet again (32).

The body as the fundamental location for the ongoing performance of racism

A teenager pulls a gun from the waistband of his pants in front of the local convenience store, a father feels seething anger towards a stranger who impatiently pushes aside his young child, a young man is shot driving to see his girlfriend—the geographical locations shift, but the bodies involved remain equally both real and imagined, material and fantastical; reduced to a specific site for replaying and enforcing the borders, margins and limits delineating the *proper* racial contours of precincts, neighborhoods and communities. Coates, in intentionally deploying the word "body" rather than "person," signals to his readers his intimacy with historical and political modes of cancelling (or at least attempting to annul) evidence of the "individual." The historical brown or black body has not only been reduced to "property," but has also been summarily treated as an environmental element marking the contours of substandard localities or undesirable spaces. Likewise, majority African American urban neighborhoods have continued to be conceived as a space apart, as clearly delineated heterotopic sites. Soja, in confirming this view, writes, "Space is not an empty void. It is always filled with politics, ideology, and other forces shaping our lives and challenging us to engage in struggles over geography" (Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice*, 19). Although, here it's worth noting that the defining topographical feature, the thing that sets this space apart *is* the fact that it contains a sizeable proportion of black or brown bodies.

Reflecting on a more subjective level, Coates bemoans how "those who think they are white" have, after reading his book, often amusingly inquired as to the condition and health of Coates' own material body (Coates 5). Coates's directly challenges the discursive space opened up by such public displays of cleverness and disavowal while also recognizing in these exchanges clumsy efforts to diffuse the discomfort engendered by discussions of racially situated aggression and violence.

Moreover, by effectively probing what it means to live day to day with the pervasive anxiety occasioned and predicated upon having a black or brown body, Coates makes such feelings salient for all readers. In one section of the narrative he carefully contemplates a watershed moment in his own smaller history—the senseless shooting of a college friend (Prince Jones) by police in close proximity to a wealthy historically black county within the state of Virginia. As the legal story goes, the young man resisted arrest. However, Coates' broader narrative follows the specifics of the young man's short life—he was a graduate of Howard University, he came from a "good family," he had never been in any sort of legal trouble, he was simply driving his new Jeep (a recent gift from his mother) from Maryland to Virginia to visit his fiancé. Coates, while anticipating obfuscation from law enforcement also reacts with some surprise to the tepid response on the part of the wealthy majority African American suburban community where the "incident" occurred. Struggling to explain what he perceives as an almost complete lack of empathy, Coates now turns to challenge the fantasies produced and sustained via economic status. He openly laments what he views as a form of collective delusional thinking predicated upon a logic of fiscal uniqueness—a narrative of cultural prestige standing in sharp contrast to the nightmare of statistical reality. It is not just a media generated perception that brown and black individuals are killed at significantly higher rates than other racial groups. Statistics demonstrate African Americans are three times more likely to be killed in an encounter with police than whites, and a full 21% of African Americans shot by police between 2013 and 2018 were unarmed (*Mapping Police Violence*).

Soja, however, approaches this same reluctance to respond or engage from a different perspective, noting a growing phenomenon he refers to "security-obsession" (Soja 42). In his text *On the Production of Unjust Geographies* Soja discusses the recent uptick in the "defensive fortressing of urban life and urban space built on a pyschogeography […] of fear and aimed at protecting residents and property against real or imagined threats of invasion (42)." Soja points towards such geographical features as gated communities and other "microtechnologies of social and spatial control" now widely implemented to enclose or safeguard wealthy urban and suburban communities (43). What is ironic about the particular narrative of events as relayed by Coates however, is the complete disconnect on the part of this particular affluent community to an individual who by all educational and financial benchmarks belonged to the same social group. Prince Jones was from a professional family, albeit, via a negative encounter with law enforcement he has summarily been transformed into an undesirable body, a body that must be kept outside the community "safe zone." Thus, the young Prince Jones is treated as just another indistinguishable black man dying on the side of an interstate highway—reduced to a brief notice in the hometown newspaper and a short-lived item on the

local evening news. Coates writes, "I was told that the citizens [of this specific community] were more likely to ask for police support than to complain about brutality" (84). He goes on to say that he has heard such explanations before, most law-abiding citizens, even those with black or brown bodies "had 'a certain impatience' with crime" (84). However, Coates responds "I knew that these were theories, even in the mouths of black people, that justified the jails springing up around me, that argued for ghettos and projects, that viewed the destruction of the black body as incidental to the preservation of order" (84).

Coates expresses both incredulity and disappointment towards this refusal to engage on the part of the very individuals he sees as best positioned to shift the conversation, to make salient the disparity in the way different bodies intersect with, and are traversed by, law enforcement. Voicing particular distain, Coates refers to this group as the "Dreamers." He goes on to lament "I am convinced that the Dreamers, at least the Dreamers of today, would rather live white than live free. In the Dream they are Buck Rogers, Prince Aragorn, an entire race of Skywalkers. To awaken them is to reveal that they are an empire of humans and, like all empires of humans, are built on the destruction of the body" (143). Hence, while we may shift our environment and adjust the organization of space, material goods, services, etc., Coates again laments that there appears (at least for the foreseeable future) to be no escaping the multifaceted mapping of the black body as the orthodox site for the inscription of violence.

In the aftermath of this horrible affair Coates eventually shifts from grappling with personal consequences (attending the funeral, consoling friends and family) to ponder a longstanding continuum of parental disciplinary ferocity. He recounts the harsh discipline enacted upon his own defenseless young body by his parents, and points out that corporeal punishment is still widely dispensed within African American families. Although, Coates also suggests that this might be understood as a serviceable "[…] philosophy of the disembodied, of a people who control nothing, who can protect nothing, who are made to fear not just the criminals among them, but the police who lord over them with all the moral authority of a protection racket" (82). As a preventative measure the regulating of black or brown bodies starts at home. Even the smallest brown or black body is inherently in danger, and this threat will only increase with time and maturity. So, as the logic goes, the body must be trained and hardened for long-term survival. Here the body itself is understood as a battleground where competing factions skirmish for turf, influence, and control.

Addressing his infant son Coates writes:

> Now at night, I held you and a great fear, wide as all our American generations, took me. Now I personally understood my father and the old mantra—'Either I can beat him or the police.' […] Black people loved 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. (82)

In ruminating upon the familial fears driving the dispensing of corporeal punishment Coates points again towards the implicit structural tendency to treat the flesh and blood black or brown body as a potential disaster site—an incontrovertible and providential geography ("killed by the streets that America made"). Hence, it is not a matter of "if," but "when" such cataclysm will strike (Coates 82). Citing the desperately "tight grip" of his mother's hand he goes on to suggest that this is perhaps the single most reasonable response to a world in which only the victim is held liable. Coates, giving voice to his mother's anxiety writes, "[…] no one would be brought to account for this destruction, because my death would not be the fault of any human but the fault of some unfortunate but immutable fact of 'race,' imposed upon an innocent country by the inscrutable judgment of gods" (82-83).

The vulnerable black or brown body as a site for propelling narratives of justice

Soja ponders a number of both legal and cultural conceptions of "justice." He first considers the use of the term to denote a specific department within the U.S. Federal government, and also the "public official authorized to decide questions brought before a court of law, such as a justice of the Supreme Court or, at a much lower level authority, a justice of the peace" (*Seeking Spatial Justice*, 20). But he also suggests that the term has taken on much "broader meaning" connoting "fairness" (20). So what does it mean to be "fair" or to treat someone "fairly," and how has this notion of fairness been connected to the original legal import of "justice"? We have indeed over time come to think of fairness as a sort of "evenhandedness." Hence, by extension, there can be no expectation to follow the law without, Soja believes, also recognizing fundamental "human rights" (20).

Given this more spacious notion of justice as "fairness," Soja then moves on to consider its relationship to other valued qualities of life including "freedom, liberty, equality, democracy [and] civil rights" (20). Justice, Soja avers, has ostensibly taken on a new urgency in contemporary life. In many ways it has come to replace prior deliberations regarding what would properly constitute "freedom" (a conversation he suggests that has come to feel "outdated"), and ongoing but compromised cultural battles over "equality" (a term that has itself become "embattled" and critically challenged as an impossible ideal) (21). To further demonstrate what Soja asserts is an increasing focus on social, material, and spatial notions of justice, he includes within his notes and references a list of the appellations of numerous activist organizations

prominently featuring the word itself including *United for Peace and Justice*, *Interfaith Community for Economic Justice*, and the *Environmental Justice Foundation* to name just a few (Soja 209). Interestingly, the term "justice" has also been recently deployed as a socially motivated counter narrative to one of its most authoritative denotations. Addressed to those who are officially known as "justices of the peace," many members of the African American community have repeatedly put local, regional and federal law enforcement on notice by emphatically asserting that without "justice" there will be no "peace." Thereby foregrounding within public consciousness radically contrasting race-based notions of what it means to dispense "justice."

However, Soja also submits that "Justice in the contemporary world has been developing a political meaning that transcends the defined categories of race, gender, class, nationality, sexual preference, and other forms of homogeneous and often exclusive group or community identity" (Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice*, 24). He goes on to assert that by "doing so, it helps to bring together the diverse movements built around each of these specific axes of unequal power relations in a common project (24). He further suggests that utilizing an "explicitly spatialized form of social and economic justice," may provide a more useful avenue for bonding often-competing social groups into more "pluralistic" alliances for change (24). While Soja is very concerned with the impact of global economic and political restructuring on gender, class, race and ethnicity, he also believes it is better dealt with as a condition of the environment rather than as a characteristic inhering within the individual (31). To demonstrate the effectiveness of this shift in strategy, Soja points towards the impact of grassroots activism on such things as mass transit policy and clean water mandates. The implicit idea here being that if we effect structural and environmental change, shifting attitudes and beliefs will eventually follow. And even if such cultural attitude shifts fail to broadly manifest, at the very least some modicum of *justice* has been served. Thus the world has become (even if only by a small measure) better.

Soja writes, "As intrinsically spatial beings from birth we are at all times engaged and enmeshed in shaping our socialized spatialities and, simultaneously, being shaped by them. In other words, we make our geographies just as it has been said that we make our histories, not under conditions of our own choosing but in the material and imagined world we collectively have already created—or that have been created for us" (Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice,* 18). In the face of daunting social, material, and historical obstacles, Soja advocates "thirdspace" writing as a purposive mode of working towards what he refers to as "emancipatory praxis"—a consciously spatial effort to improve the world in some significant manner (Soja 22).

While Coates undoubtedly believes such spatial modes of resistance to the status quo are necessary, he also asserts that nobody, that is, no "black" body can resolutely

escape geography, but rather conversely has continued to function as the location, occasion, and rationale for violence.

Coates' own work moreover, can also be understood as a mode of "thirdspace" writing or emancipatory praxis. By effectively weaving together journalism, prose, political commentary and personal narratives, Coates presents the reader with a poignant description of what it's like to navigate through life within the U.S. with a black or brown body. Moreover, he makes the experience intimate by recounting his own family history from his father's involvement in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s to his very positive experiences as a student at Howard University, to the birth of his own son. By integrating prose-like passages within his hybrid text Coates does more than verify historical or autobiographical events—he gives the reader a "feel" for what it's like to experience these things; bringing us face-to-face with our own uncertainties. For example, in response to the violent death of his college friend, Prince Jones, he reports "This entire episode took me from fear to a rage that burned in me then, animates me now, and will likely leave me on fire for the rest of my days. I still had my journalism. My response was, in this moment, to write" (Coates 83). However, Coates wants this specific work, *Between the World and Me*, to function beyond the reach of journalism—as more than a factual accounting of events. In weaving together a variety of approaches, his hope is that we can see ourselves reflected within his narrative irrespective of whether we ourselves have a black or brown body, or conversely, are one of those who as Coates' put it "believe they are white." Albeit, it is this last group as identified within *Between the World and Me* that is seemingly most emphatically called out—those most likely to think this account is not about them, should not concern them, and consequently may be disregarded.

A note to the future

Coates recognizes that while he may be considered successful by most cultural measures, he is still very much a wounded man. In so reflecting, he also recognizes his own role in the continuum of violence. Addressing his son he writes, "I am now ashamed of the thought, ashamed of my fear, of the generational chains I tried to clasp onto your wrists. Your mother had to teach me how to love you […]." However, Coates does not end his narrative in despair but rather expresses the hopes and dreams of a father. Again, speaking directly to his son he writes "The birth of a better world is not ultimately up to you, though I know, each day there are grown men and women who will tell you otherwise"—going on to declare, "I love you, and I love the world, and I love it more with every new inch I discover. But you are a black boy, and you must be responsible for your body in a way that other boys cannot know" (Coates 71). Once again prompt-

ing us to see that a "black" body continues to function as a sort of inescapable feature that contextualizes every landscape, site or location.

In reading this book, it should be obvious that Coates is not merely speaking as a father to his son, but rather challenging widespread attempts at disavowal. He calls us all to account for the historically multi-layered but always-embodied continuum of violence. Albeit, in doing so, he effectively sends his memorandum of care into the future. A missive we may all do well to heed, keeping in mind that Michael Brown (14 years-old), Tamir Rice (12), and more recently, Antwon Rose Jr. (17) were also America's children (Quah).

Works Cited

Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. The New Press, 2010.

Browne, Simone. *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*. Duke University Press, 2015.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. Spiegel and Grau, Penguin Random House LLC, 2015.

Combs, Barbara Harris. "Everyday Racism Is Still Racism: The Role of Place in Theorizing Continuing Racism in Modern US Society." *Phylon* 55, nos. 1 & 2, 2018, pp. 38-59. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/26545018. Accessed 20 February 2020.

Covington, Jeanette. "Racial Classification in Criminology: The Reproduction of Racialized Crime." *Sociological Forum*, vol. 10, no. 4, 1995, pp. 547-68. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/684771. Accessed January, 2020.

de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Rendall. University of California Press, 1988.

DiAngelo, Robin. *White Fragility*: *Why it's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*. Beacon Press, 2018.

Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias." Translated from *Architecture, Movement, Continuité* no. 5, 1984, pp. 46-49.

Feagin, Joe R. *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing*. Routledge, 2013.

Gates, Henry Louis. *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man*. Vintage, 2011.

Hattery, Angela J. *Policing Black Bodies: How Black Lives Are Surveilled, and How to Work for Change*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2017.

History.com. https://www.history.com/topics/watts-riots. New York, 2017. Accessed 2 June 2018.

hooks, bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Routledge, 2014.

---. *Belonging: A Culture of Place*. Routledge, 2008.

Jackson, Ronald L. *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media*. SUNY Press, 2006.

Kendi, Ibram X. *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. Bold Type Books, 2016.

Lefebvre, Henri. *The Critique of Everyday Life*, Translated by John Moore (volume I and II); Gregory Elliott (volume III), Verso, 2014.

---. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Blackwell Publishing, 1991.

---. *The Urban Revolution*. Translated by Robert Bononno. University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

---. "Mapping Police Violence." Accessed January 20, 2020, mappingpoliceviolence.org.
Quah, Nicholas. "Here's a Timeline of Unarmed Black People Killed By Police Over the Past Year," BuzzFeed News, buzzfeed.com/nicholasquah. Accessed August 15, 2018,
Sherman, Gary D., and Gerald L. Clore. "The Color of Sin: White and Black Are Perceptual Symbols of Moral Purity and Pollution." *Psychological Science* 20, no. 8, 2009, pp. 1019-025. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40575134. Accessed April 4, 2020.
Soja, Edward W. *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory.* Verso Press, 1989.
---. *Seeking Spatial Justice*. University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
---. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Blackwell Publishing, 1996.
Walker, Anders. *The Burning House: Jim Crow and the Making of Modern America*. Yale University Press, 2018.
Yancy, George. *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.
---. *Reframing the Practice of Philosophy: Bodies of Color, Bodies of Knowledge*. Suny Press, 2012.

Abstract: Edward Soja's work regarding spatial understanding has become key to discerning a radical shift in the way we frame and then reason about otherness, and more specifically, exclusion. But rather than viewing otherness and exclusion as merely the result of relationships reproduced within our *environment*, author and political analyst Ta-Nehisi Coates suggests that it is the vulnerable black or brown body that has historically been the site for the violent performance of racism. Thus, this paper filters Coates' recently released book *Between the World and Me* through Soja's work to demonstrate how the body itself can function as "thirdspace." Coates' text, I argue, traces a complex multilayered geography of fantasy, myth, beauty, and horror as it has been visited upon the corporeal body. Hence, what appears on the surface to be a personal reflection on vulnerability and survival also exposes the material body as a palimpsest of violence inscribed from person-to-person, community-to-community, (and even as Coates himself points out), father to son. In doing so, he offers us a raw and often very sincere rumination upon his father's and his own often-unwitting collusion with an ongoing cycle of violence. However, Coates also sees a way to move beyond the limitations of the present. By stylistically adopting the format of an extended confessional note addressed to his young son, Coates not only queries his own past, but also sends a very personal message of love and hope into the future.
Key words: racism, thirdspace, the body, justice