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### Baltimore: the Epicenter of the New Civil Rights Movement

The history of Baltimore as a center of political unrest can be traced as far back as June of 1812, when a group of zealous Republicans attacked a newspaper office in search of a Federalist editor, Alexander Contee Hanson (Taylor 22-24). In 1968, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. excited another series of riots in Baltimore, resulting in 6 deaths, and numerous arrests (Elfenbein 14). Despite the recurrent protests and long history of political unrest in Baltimore, the death of Freddie Gray came as a crash to both those with the ‘Knowledge’ and those with the ‘Unknowledge’. Thousands of people from different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds gathered in front of the City Hall to rally peacefully until the curfew. According to an article in the *New York Times*, however, “the police used pepper spray and made several arrests, [not long after the 10 p.m. curfew began]” (Stolberg). The once calm scene of peaceful rally had turned violent with destructive rioting and protest. Furthermore, in West Baltimore, murder rate ascended as a consequence of untimely and rather questionable reduction of police presence (Oppel). Baltimore has once again become the hub of violence and conflict. Nonetheless, in *The Beautiful Struggle*, Ta-Nehisi Coates raises the hope that Baltimore is not mired, but is rather experiencing a pubescent confusion. Through the growth of the protagonist in *The Beautiful Struggle*, Coates suggests that Baltimore, although seemingly beleaguered and troubled, is the epicenter of the new civil rights movement.

The geographical condition of Baltimore has thrown Baltimore into a state of confusion in various moments of history. For instance, during the Civil War, Maryland did not secede from

the Union. Despite the presence of Union troops in Baltimore, “many of its citizens had Southern sympathies” (“Baltimore”). In addition, its proximity to Chesapeake Bay and other waterways had allowed the city to grow not only as a harbor and a trade center, but also as the center of Maryland’s economy (“Baltimore”). In other words, Baltimore shared the industrial heritage that helped the citizens to closely identify with the Northern ethos. On the other hand, the social unrest and violent eruptions following the assassination of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. revealed the southern aspects of Baltimore. According to a series of interviews conducted by the University of Baltimore, “the events in Baltimore in April ‘68 were not centralized but instead diffuse in neighborhoods across the city” (Elfenbein 16). These interviews did not merely serve as a testimony to the sporadic nature of the Baltimore Riots in 1968; the interviews showed that the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. stirred a hostile sentiment against racism that permeated the city of Baltimore. The interviews furthermore proved the omnipresence of African-Americans and their sympathizers in a seemingly industrialized city. With such confusion deeply rooted within its identity, the history of Baltimore had been affected by incessant conflicts and disputes.

In *The Beautiful Struggle*, Ta-Nehisi Coates acknowledges such turbulent nature of Baltimore by depicting the crack epidemic, the hostility towards his race, and the violence that infected the streets of Baltimore in the 1980s. Coates magnifies the collapsing civilization of Baltimore by describing the city as “too primitive [even] for gangs” (Coates 34). In this moment, Coates suggests that the era of political unrest that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. had transitioned into an age of disintegration and violence in the wake of the Age of Crack. In the critical moment when Coates’ dad admonishes Big Bill, his dad emphasizes the importance of being civilized and conscious amid the social injustice in Baltimore, by using the

visual imagery of having “one foot in America, the other in a land of swords” (Coates 35). In his depiction of one foot being “in a land of swords,” Coates implies that violence and threat is inevitable in the city of Baltimore (Coates 35). Coates hints that having “one foot in America”, in other words, understanding the values and history of America will arm him against the violence. Through the use of auditory imagery incorporated within the lines “the subaudible beat” that “kept [him] ready, prepared for anyone to start swinging, to start shooting” on his way to school, Coates furthermore illustrated and highlighted the constant fear of violence he experienced as a black child in the neighborhoods of Baltimore (Coates 37).

Though challenged by the hostile ambience of Baltimore in the Age of Crack, Coates’ struggle for manhood is not thwarted. In fact, Coates successfully finds refuge amid the turbulence of Baltimore. The unusual juxtaposition of kids who “hailed from the projects, foster care, from homes without lighting, from parents who still shut down Odells while their children ran the streets” and the kids in the “six gifted classes on the Thurgood Marshall Team” (Coates 38) challenges young Coates to find his niche at Lemmel. In his effort to emulate Big Bill’s street manners, Coates becomes enlightened by his father’s publishing house where he “[begins] to pull something from the literature”, and “[comes] to feel that [he is] not the only one who [is] afraid” (Coates 102). Then, Coates finds refuge in djembe, and “[embraces] the reclaimed culture” of his heritage (Coates 161). Ultimately, Coates finds refuge in the Knowledge he acquired through his journey as a Black kid living in the troubled city of Baltimore. Baltimore had survived the crack epidemic, and Coates had reached manhood.

In retrospect, Baltimore has served as the home front of many different political battlegrounds. The recent death of Freddie Gray and the subsequent events that occurred in Baltimore showed that “we’d freed ourselves from slavery and Jim Crow but not the great

shackling of minds” (Coates 44). However, in his memoir, Coates suggests that Baltimore, through its unique history, has acquired the ability to embrace conflicting views, and become immune to calamitous illnesses of a society. Baltimore had not only survived the crack epidemic, but also fostered adolescent Coates into manhood. Through *The Beautiful Struggle*, Coates raises the hope that Baltimore can embrace the new civil rights movement, as it nurtured young Ta-Nehisi Coates. The 1960’s civil rights movement was the merely the penultimate chapter of our long history of struggle for civil rights, with our new beautiful struggle towards the complete “shackling of minds” being the last one (Coates 44).

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