

Between Pain and Despair: What Ta-Nehisi Coates Is Missing

[Melvin L. Rogers](#) ■ July 31, 2015



Ta-Nehisi Coates speaking in January (Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, Univ. of Michigan)

Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* often seems like a conversation not meant for us; the tone of the book implies privacy and intimacy. Written in an epistolary form, the book is presented as a letter to Coates's fifteen-year-old son, Samori. This has invited comparison to the prefatory essay—"My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation"—in James Baldwin's 1963 book, *The Fire Next Time*. There Baldwin speaks to his nephew about the horrors of being black in the United States. Similarly, *Between The World and Me* overflows with exquisite insights about the embodied existence of blackness and the warped logic of white supremacy. Combining historical analysis and social theory, and framed as a personal journey, *Between the World and Me* challenges our understanding of American life even as it captures our hearts.

The appearance of privacy is, of course, deceptive. The lessons Coates shares with his son are meant for us. This is a deeply troubling book—as well as one of great beauty and power. The wound of racism is too fresh; the sharpness of the pain captures his senses and arrests his imagination. The worry is that if we follow along, we, too, shall be captured by its fatalistic assumptions.

Consider two moments. The first moment comes after the non-indictment of Darren Wilson in the death of Michael Brown.

You stayed up till 11 pm that night, waiting for the announcement of an indictment, and when instead it was announced that there was none you said, "I've got to go," and you went into your room,



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and I heard you crying. I came in five minutes after, and I didn't hug you, and I didn't comfort you, because I thought it would be wrong to comfort you. I did not tell you that it would be okay, because I have never believed it would be okay. What I told you is what your grandparents tried to tell me: that this is your country that this is your world, that this is your body, and you must find some way to live within the all of it.

The second moment comes at the end of the first chapter, and serves as a summary of Coates's assessment of our predicament:

You must struggle to truly remember this past in all its nuance, error, and humanity. You must resist the common urge toward the comforting narrative of divine law, toward fairy tales that imply some irrepressible justice. The enslaved were not bricks in your road, and their lives were not chapters in your redemptive history. They were people turned to fuel for the American machine. . . . Our triumphs can never compensate for this. Perhaps our triumphs are not even the point. Perhaps struggle is all we have because the god of history is an atheist, and nothing about this world is meant to be. So you must wake up every morning knowing that no promise is unbreakable, least of all the promise of waking up at all. This is not despair. These are the preferences of the universe itself: verbs over nouns, actions over states, struggle over hope.

I would love to write like this; I'm sure you would too. But the beauty of these passages should not conceal their disquieting revelation. The reason Coates does not comfort his son is because there is no comfort to provide. Why is this the case?

Coates rejects the hubris of the idea that racial progress is a necessary feature of American life. As he writes, "one cannot, at once, claim to be superhuman and then plead mortal error." American exceptionalism does not allow for the confession of fallibility. That myth serves as a blinding light for those caught within it; Americans spin out "dreams" of their greatness, of their moral purity, or more modestly of their long journey to redeem the past.

One is reminded of William Bennett's response to CNN's Anderson Cooper during Obama's triumphant campaign in 2008. "Does anyone know," asked Anderson, "what this means in terms of change of race relations in the United States?" Bennett responded: "I will tell you one thing it means as the former Secretary of Education: You don't take any excuses anymore from anybody." His point was clear: Obama's rise to the presidency settled the problem of race relations and racial discrimination. Obama was the fulfillment of the American promise, effectively allowing one to deny the residue of racial discrimination that otherwise continues to determine the life chances of black folk.

The Dream seems to run so deep that it eludes those caught by it. *Between the World and Me* initially seems like a book that will reveal the illusion and, in that moment, might open up the possibility for imagining the United States anew. Remember: "Nothing about the world is meant to be."

But the book does not move in that direction. Coates rejects the myth of American exceptionalism and its logic of certain progress. Yet he embraces the certainty of



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white supremacy and its inescapable constraints. For him, white supremacy is not merely a historically emergent feature of the Western world generally, and the United States in particular. For Coates, white supremacy does not merely structure reality; it is reality.

There is a danger in this. After all, the meaning of action is tied fundamentally to what we imagine is possible for us. But when one views white supremacy as impregnable, there is little room for one's imagination to soar and one's sense of agency is inescapably constrained. "The missing thing," Coates writes, "was related to the plunder of our bodies, the fact that any claim to ourselves, to the hands that secured us, the spine that braced us, and the head that directed us, was contestable."

The black body is one of the unifying themes of the book. It resonates well in our American ears because the hallmark of freedom is sovereign control over one's body. This was the site on which slavery did its most destructive work: controlling the body to enslave the soul. We see the reconstitution of this logic in the unjust policing and imprisonment of black men and women. There can be no redemptive politics when race functions primarily as a wounded attachment—when our bodies are the visible reminders that we live at the arbitrary whim of another. But what of those young protestors in the streets of Ferguson, Chicago, New York, and Charleston?

Coates's implicit answer to this question appears in one of the pivotal and most tragic moments of the book—the murder of a college friend, Prince Jones, at the hands of the police. As Coates says: "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." With his soul on fire, all his senses are directed to the pain white supremacy produces, the wounds it creates. This murder should not be read as a function of the actions of a police officer or even the logic of policing blacks in the United States. His account of this strikes a darker chord. What he tells us about the meaning of the death of Prince Jones, what we ought to understand, reveals the operating logic of the "universe":

She [Coates's mother] knew that the galaxy itself could kill me, that all of me could be shattered and all of her legacy spilled upon the curb like bum wine. And 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 invisible gods. The earthquake cannot be subpoenaed. The typhoon will not bend under indictment. They sent the killer of Prince Jones back to his work, because he was not a killer at all. He was a force of nature, the helpless agent of our world's physical laws.

But if we are all just helpless agents of physical laws, the question again emerges: what should one do? Coates recommends interrogation and struggle—investigation of the myths by which we seemingly live and struggle against the tendency to be seduced by those myths. His love for books and his years at Howard University, "Mecca," as he calls it, allowed him to question the world around him. But interrogation and struggle to what end? His answer is contained in his preoccupation with using natural disasters as metaphors for discussing black life in the United States. In response, one might say, at one time we thought the Gods were angry with us or that they were moving furniture around, thus causing earthquakes. Now we

know earthquakes are the result of tectonic shifts. Okay, what do we do with that knowledge? Coates seems to say: construct an early warning system—don't waste energy trying to stop the earthquake itself.

There is a lesson in this: "Perhaps one person can make a change, but not the kind of change that would raise your body to equality with your countrymen. . . . And still you are called to struggle, not because it assures you victory, but because it assures you an honorable and sane life."

One might respect this judgment because it emerges from a clear-sightedness that leaves one standing upright in the face of the truth of the matter—namely, that white people will never enable black bodies to be treated the same as theirs. "It is truly horrible," Coates writes in one of the most disturbing sentences of the book, "to understand yourself as the essential below of your country." Coates's sentences are often pitched as frank speech; it is what it is.

Herein lies the danger. Forget telling his son it *will* be okay. Coates cannot even tell him that it *may* be okay. "The struggle is really all I have for you," he tells his son, "because it is the only portion of this world under your control." What a strange form of control. Black folks may control their place in the battle, but never with the possibility that they, and in turn the country to which they belong, may win.

Producing the book at this moment—as black lives are under public assault and black youths, in particular, are attempting to imagine the world anew—seems an odd thing to do. For all his channeling of James Baldwin, Coates seems to have forgotten that black folks "can't afford despair." As Baldwin went on to say: "I can't tell my nephew, my niece; you can't tell the children there is no hope." The reason why you can't say this is not because you are living in a dream or selling a fantasy, but because there can be no certain knowledge of the future. Humility, borne out of our lack of knowledge of the future, justifies hope.

Much has been made of Coates as Baldwin's worthy successor—because of how he structured this book and because of Toni Morrison's blurb ("I've been wondering who might fill the intellectual void that plagued me after James Baldwin died. Clearly it is Ta-Nehisi Coates.")—but there's a critical difference. In his 1955 non-fiction book, *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin reflected on the wounds white supremacy left on his father: "I had discovered the weight of white people in the world. I saw that this had been for my ancestors and now would be for me an awful thing to live with and that the bitterness which had helped to kill my father could also kill me." Yet Baldwin knew all too well that the wounded attachment, if not released, would destroy not the plunderers of black life but the ones who were plundered. "Hatred, which could destroy so much, never failed to destroy the man who hated and this was an immutable law."

Baldwin's father, as he understood him, was destroyed by hatred. Coates is less like Baldwin in this respect and, perhaps, more like Baldwin's father. "I am wounded," says Coates. "I am marked by old codes, which shielded me in one world and then chained me in the next." The chains reach out to imprison not only his son but every black American as well.

This leaves one with a profound sense of disappointment. Coates seems unable, or unwilling, to analyze how he has been able to occupy so prominent a space on the public stage. Coates's own engagement with the world has received social support—that is, his skill as a social critic has prepared the nation to think anew and it seems to be the case that segments of the American public are open to listening. Throughout

the book, he comments on the rich diversity of black beauty and on the power of love in black communities and families. His father, William Paul Coates, is the founder of Black Classic Press—whose focus is to reveal and glory in the richness of black life. His mother, Cheryl Waters, helped to support the family financially and provided young Coates with direction. Yet, he seems to stand at a distance from the possibilities for change that the example of his life and the life of his parents represent.

Black people can neither escape nor be reduced to the pain that America exacts on our bodies. This dual reality eludes Coates. His wounds are so intense he cannot direct his senses beyond the pain.

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