

Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates: The dystopian vision of racial politics

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African-American journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*, written in the form of an extended letter to the author's adolescent son, was published in July 2015. It quickly earned Coates a reputation within the political and media establishment as one of the country's leading commentators on race.

Even before the book's official release, the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* hailed Coates's work as a landmark literary event. A.O. Scott of the *Times* called it "essential, like water or air." The praise and claims for the slim volume are wildly exaggerated.

Less than a month after the book's release, President Barack Obama, having met with Coates in the White House on two occasions, announced that *Between the World and Me* was on his summer reading list. The book won the National Book Award and Coates was given a \$625,000 MacArthur "genius grant." The book is now widely assigned on college campuses as one of the authoritative texts on race relations in America.

Prior to the publication of *Between the World and Me*, Coates was best known for a lengthy essay in the *Atlantic*, where he serves as national correspondent, titled "The Case for Reparations." The essay argues that African-Americans should receive some form of repayment for slavery, Jim Crow segregation and the confinement of a large proportion of blacks to urban ghettos in the 20th century.

The new book extends the approach of his earlier writings. It contends that "white America" continues to deny Coates and his son, and all black people, "the right to secure and govern our own bodies." Whether through the violence of the slavemaster or the policeman's truncheon, black Americans have always been in physical danger, and have often, quite reasonably therefore, been in fear for their lives. Moreover, the current oppressors "are merely men enforcing the whims of our country, correctly interpreting its heritage and legacy."

Coates spices his arguments with doses of postmodernism, referring throughout the book to violence against "the black body," which, he repeatedly warns, endangers his son and could entrap him in the "carceral state." The focus on "violence to the body" and prison punishment, and their presentation as independent of class oppression, reveals the unhappy influence of the French postmodernist philosopher Michel Foucault. Foucault rejected the Enlightenment, holding it responsible for developing new methods of "discipline" and control.

During the course of his extended letter, Coates recounts something of his childhood in Baltimore, his years at Howard University in Washington, DC, his eventual move to New York City and, briefly, his experiences in France.

Coates portrays himself at an early age as a naïve, adolescent admirer of Malcolm X, the militant black leader assassinated in 1965. Speaking of his own outlook at this time, Coates writes that his "working theory...held all black people as kings in exile, a nation of original men severed from our original names and our majestic Nubian culture."

At Howard University, however, various professors disabuse him of some of this crude mythologizing: "Did black skin really convey nobility?

Always? Yes. What about the blacks who'd practiced slavery for millennia and sold slaves across the Sahara and then across the sea? *Victims of a trick*," and so forth.

In the end, Coates discovers not a unified and coherent "black" tradition, "but instead factions, and factions within factions... I was left with a brawl of ancestors, a herd of dissenters." This points him toward the need to "break with all Dreams, all the comforting myths of Africa, of America, and everywhere," a break that "would leave me only with humanity in all its terribleness. And there was so much terrible out there, even among us."

Not surprisingly, this quasi-misanthropic, quasi-existentialist view does not lead him out of the quagmire of petty-bourgeois racial politics. At times, Coates hints that being "black" is not a racial question, that "perhaps being named 'black' was just someone's name for being at the bottom, a human turned to object, object turned to pariah." But this too takes him nowhere. After noting that his "great error" had been accepting "the fact of dreams, the need for escape, and the invention of racecraft," Coates immediately reverts to his ethno-nationalist outlook: "And still and all I knew that we were something, that we were a tribe—on one hand, invented, and on the other, no less real."

Once Coates has hit upon his peculiar brand of "tribalism," he sticks with it. Whether this category is biologically imposed, socially constructed, or invented, the author accepts it. He will not allow any social or historical realities to contradict his views. To make certain of that, he avoids as many of those realities as possible.

The worst aspect of Coates's book and outlook is its parochialism and narrowness, although he occasionally protests to the contrary. He has consciously determined to remain in the murky backwash of black cultural nationalism.

This is not merely an individual weakness or failing. Born in 1975, Coates reflects in his writings the erosion and virtual disappearance of whatever was radical, democratic and egalitarian in the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and prior to that, the African-American social and literary tradition represented by individuals such as W. E. B. Du Bois, E. Franklin Frazier, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin and others. Those writers expressed much confusion at times, and the role of the Stalinist Communist Party and the fate of the Soviet Union played a considerable part in that, but there was to their anger at its sharpest an antiestablishment quality.

Baldwin, speaking of both the "poet" and the "revolutionary," told an interviewer in 1973, "The point is to get your work done, and your work is to change the world." Moreover, these writers were generally honest with themselves.

Between the World and Me refuses to deal concretely with the facts of recent or contemporary American or global life. It is not a work of protest against the existing economic and social system. Coates works with a vague, mythicized and often misleading terminology that poorly reflects social reality.

White Americans are presented as a one-dimensional abstraction, the “Dreamers.” Of them, Coates writes, “They have forgotten the scale of theft that enriched them in slavery; the terror that allowed them, for a century, to pilfer the vote; the segregationist policy that gave them their suburbs... I am convinced that the Dreamers... would rather live white than live free. In the Dream they are Buck Rogers, Prince Aragorn, an entire race of Skywalkers.”

Coates invents an opposition between the “long war against the black body,” which is supposedly the central fact of American history, and the existence of these privileged, self-deluded white “Dreamers.” The Dream, he writes, “rests on our bodies, the bedding made from our bodies.”

If Coates were to write more plainly, and assert, for example, that the wealth of American capitalism has been built *solely* off the labor, paid and unpaid, of African-Americans, the absurdity of many of his musings would be evident.

He deals in ahistorical and often inaccurate abstractions in part because he is the product and *victim*, in that sense, of the social process referred to above, the intellectual decline and increasing social indifference and insularity of a layer of the African-American petty-bourgeoisie. However, at a certain point, a figure such as Coates, who claims to be a keen observer of social life, has to accept a certain responsibility for what he writes about and what he does not write about.

Let’s consider the words and phrases that—astonishingly—do not appear *once* in *Between the World and Me*: “capitalism” (or “capitalist”), “working class,” “unemployment,” “oppression,” “repression,” “demonstration,” “trade unions,” “factory,” “economy,” “socialism,” “inequality,” “polarization,” “elite” [in the sense of ruling elite], “ruling,” “bourgeois,” “masses,” “left-wing,” “right-wing,” “imperialism,” “colonialism,” “globalization,” “transnational,” “multinational,” “oligarchy,” “plutocracy,” “aristocracy,” “cutback,” “welfare reform,” “affirmative action.”

Coates expresses no interest in getting to the roots of the social devastation in cities such as Baltimore. “Rust Belt,” “deindustrialization,” “downsizing” and “layoff” do not appear in his book. The gutting of production at the sprawling Sparrows Point steel mill, once the employer of 30,000 workers, which devastated Baltimore’s residents, both black and white, is not mentioned.

Between the World and Me includes one reference to “black middle-class.” There is no use of the word “wages” except in one allusion to Coates’s own condition when he was “living on the impoverished wages of a freelance writer”—and the latter is the only sentence that contains “impoverished.” Nor is there a single use of the word “strike” in the sense of a working-class action.

Again, remarkably, there is not one reference to Obama, to Bill or Hillary Clinton, to Iraq, Iran or Afghanistan (in relation to war), to the “war on terror,” to the Patriot Act, Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo or waterboarding. Unsurprisingly then, Coates avoids referring to the Cold War and McCarthyism, or the Soviet Union. Of course, there is no mention of Marx or Marxism, Lenin, Trotsky, Bolshevism, the Russian Revolution, the Great Depression—or, for that matter, fascism, Hitler, etc.

How is it possible to conceive of writing seriously about social life in the 20th or 21st century without discussing—even referring to in passing!—any of these concepts, social processes or political figures? Almost inevitably, bourgeois academics, liberals, anti-Marxists of every ideological stripe find it necessary to refer in one context or another to the existing economic system, capitalism. Not so Coates. He has made a conscious decision not to refer to economic realities because they contradict his racialist outlook.

Above all, the existence of classes and class struggle confutes his views. Thus, not only the history of bloody class conflict in the US, but the present state of extreme social polarization is a taboo subject in *Between the World and Me*. Coates places himself, despite his affluence, among the

oppressed in America since he is black and subject to having his body broken and beaten. “It is truly horrible,” he writes, “to understand yourself as the essential below of your country.” Of course, by any objective standard, Coates belongs to the upper-middle class, probably among the wealthiest five percent of the population.

On the other hand, we learn that “white” existence revolves around “pot roasts, blueberry pies, fireworks, ice cream sundaes, immaculate bathrooms, and small toy trucks that were loosed in wooded backyards with streams and glens.”

You can write such absurd things only if you are ignorant of life or you have a political axe to grind, or both. Tens of millions of white and black workers in the US are living in poverty or hanging on by their fingernails, while a handful of people at the top enjoy unimaginable riches. The suicide rates for white workers are climbing steadily in the face of relentless economic attacks. Pensions, wages and benefits are under attack. Conditions of life are deteriorating for virtually every layer of the working population. America is seething with discontent.

Without providing any context, Coates inserts remarks by South Carolina Senator John C. Calhoun (1782-1850), who declared in the US Senate in June 1848, “With us [i.e., in the South] the two great divisions of society are not the rich and poor, but white and black; and all the former, the poor as well as the rich, belong to the upper class, and are respected and treated as equals.”

Coates cites Calhoun’s assertion in his book, and follows it with this comment: “And there it is—the right to break the black body as the meaning of their sacred equality. And that right has always given them meaning, has always meant that there was someone down in the valley because a mountain is not a mountain if there is nothing below.” This is nonsense.

Does Coates even know what Calhoun, an articulate, astute spokesman for the slave power, represented? Historian Richard Hofstadter described the South Carolina senator as “one of a few Americans of his age... who had a keen sense for social structure and class forces. Before Karl Marx published the *Communist Manifesto*, Calhoun laid down an analysis of American politics and the sectional struggle which foreshadowed some of the seminal ideas of Marx’s system.” Of course, he did so in “an inverted framework” [i.e., by asserting that slavery was a “positive good”], producing “an arresting defense of reaction, a sort of intellectual Black Mass.”

In his 1848 speech, Calhoun was favorably contrasting conditions in the slave states with those in the urban, commercial North. Coates, when he quotes the passage from Calhoun’s speech, misleadingly leaves out “With us,” implying that Calhoun was speaking about the entire country. In any event, Coates omits one fact: Some 13 years after Calhoun’s Senate speech, a conflict would erupt between conflicting economic systems—and philosophies—that would smash the slavocracy and lead to the transformation of the United States into a modern, industrial capitalist power.

One concrete social phenomenon does come in for discussion in *Between the World and Me*, police violence—but to what end?

A pivotal event in the book is the police murder of Prince Jones, a young, unarmed African-American man shot dead in suburban Washington, DC in 2000, whom Coates had known when both attended Howard. Empathizing with Jones’s mother, a doctor, Coates writes: “Think of the tuition for Montessori and music lessons. Think of the gasoline expended, the treads worn carting him to football games, basketball tournaments, and Little League... Think of the credit cards charged for vacations.” He observes that “Prince Jones, murdered by the men who should have been his security guards, is always with me.”

It was indeed a horrific killing, and yet it takes several pages before Coates reveals that the cop who killed Jones was black, as was the leadership of the police department and the local government of Prince

George's County. Coates acknowledges that the police force there, in the wealthiest African-American-majority county in the United States, is "as vicious as any in America."

A genuinely honest individual would engage with such facts. Prince Jones's mother told the press, "It's significant that the man who shot my son was black. It allows us to get to the police issue without it being a race issue." Indeed, the questions of class and the role of the state as the defender of the social interests of the wealthy logically arise. But not for Coates.

He absolves the police and politicians for killing and torture in favor of the "real culprits," the white majority of the population. "Whatever we might make of this country's criminal justice policy, it cannot be said that it was imposed by a repressive minority," he writes. "The sprawling carceral state, the random detention of black people, the torture of suspects—are the products of democratic will [of] the people who think they are white... The problem with the police is not that they are fascist pigs but that our country is ruled by majoritarian pigs."

Between the World and Me has received numerous plaudits as a literary work. Coates is capable at times of writing well, of putting one word usefully in front of another. He is able to describe certain scenes and emotions with accuracy, even intensity. One of the more effective and amusing (and self-deprecating) sequences concerns his first trip to Paris and his initial meal in that city.

However, for the most part, Coates's terrible outlook trips him up. A bad idea, especially perhaps a nationalist and racist idea that contradicts elementary realities, cannot in the end find elegant or profound expression. To cram history and contemporary society into such a false, dark box *requires* over-simplification, crudity, one-sidedness, cliché. Thus, the stupidities about the "Dreamers," all those contented white people living in the suburbs eating "pot roast" and playing with "small toy trucks," and all the rest.

A passage such as the following is typical and revealing: "Not long ago I was standing in an airport retrieving a bag from a conveyor belt. I bumped into a young black man and said, 'My bad.' Without even looking up he said, 'You straight.' And in that exchange there was so much of the private rapport that can only exist between two particular strangers of this tribe that we call black. In other words, I was part of a world... In that single exchange with that young man, I was speaking the personal language of my people. It was the briefest intimacy, but it captured much of the beauty of my black world."

It is appalling that a work with intellectual pretensions should contain sentences like these, which mistake one of the most accidental and secondary connections there can be between two human beings, a similarity in ethnic origin, for a profound, consciously determined relationship.

In another revealing passage in the final third of the short volume, Coates describes seeing his son being pushed by a white woman, who impatiently tells the small child, "Come on," as they step off an escalator after watching a movie on Manhattan's Upper West Side. This experience, commonplace for any parent with small children, Coates invests with the entire history of America's racist oppression.

He writes, "I turned and spoke to this woman, and my words were hot with...all of my history." Coates pushes a man, also white, who speaks up for the woman. Over the next several pages these two whites are compared to brutal police, slaveholders and racist politicians. It is a bit pathetic. For all their limitations, Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X opposed—and *exposed* themselves to—the American state, and paid the price. Coates shouts at some middle-class woman on an escalator.

With these comments, and others, Coates writes himself off as a figure who has anything truly insightful or compelling to say. He is not a "major new voice," as the American media has claimed. As things stand, he is a minor talent under the influence of a retrograde and unworthy ideology. In

his book, the smallness, backwardness and self-centeredness of the contemporary upper-middle class emerges. *Between the World and Me* is revealing, but not in a manner or for reasons that its author might like.



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