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## The Fire This Time: Ta-Nehisi Coates's "Between the World and Me"

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## The Fire This Time: Ta-Nehisi Coates's "Between the World and Me"

Posted By *Bill Youzman* On August 28, 2015 @ 1:53 am In articles 2015 | [Comments Disabled](#)

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In 1963, James Baldwin published his seminal *The Fire Next Time*. The first half of this foundational work was a letter to his nephew regarding America and race. In 2015 the journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates published a letter to his son, also about America and race. The literary device employed is no coincidence. Toni Morrison has anointed Coates as the successor to James Baldwin, and while that is a heavy burden for any 40 year old to bear, it is one that he just might manage to handle with grace.

Despite having authored a memoir in 2008 (*The Beautiful Struggle*), and having been a member of the elite media for several years, Ta-Nehisi Coates only really came to national attention with a controversial *Atlantic* magazine cover story in the summer of 2014 called "The Case for Reparations." Advocating for a systemic economic response to centuries of racist discrimination in the U.S, Coates didn't shy away from a full on indictment of white supremacy.

In his new book, *Between the World and Me*, Mr. Coates goes even further, confronting in direct yet poetic language what he calls The Dream of whiteness:

I have seen that dream all of my life. It is perfect houses with nice lawns. It is Memorial Day cookouts, block associations, and driveways. The Dream is treehouses and the Cub Scouts. The Dream smells like peppermint but tastes like strawberry shortcake.

You can just hear the cries emanating from the Fox News studios: "What's wrong with having a nice lawn? What's wrong with cookouts and Cub Scouts? I love strawberry shortcake and I refuse to apologize for that!"

But Coates won't play this game. He immediately explains that what is wrong is that "the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies." We are only on p. 11.

By the time we get to Part Two Coates makes it clear that no institutional force in the U.S. stands outside the machine of white supremacy that continues to grind down black bodies on a daily basis. The police, the schools, the churches, the media, the prisons, the banks, all play a role in shackling black Americans, and this is not accidental failure, this is by design, the result of a society that has "either failed at enforcing its good intentions or has succeeded at something much darker." Coates is clear about which of these two options he believes to be the correct answer. With full agreement he quotes Malcolm X: "If you're black, you were born in jail."

*Between the World and Me* is, simply stated, a small masterpiece. Beautiful in its language and the artfulness of its construction, severely ugly in the truths that it reveals. Coates' second book is brief,

readable in an afternoon, yet bursting with poignancy, hard facts, and a steely determination to confront white supremacy then and now. Coates refuses to let his son and his readers look away: "Here is what I would like for you to know: In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is *heritage*."

The question I found myself asking as I read both "The Case for Reparations" and *Between the World and Me*, is how Mr. Coates has managed to present such oppositional arguments through such mainstream media channels. Certainly other writers have put forward even more radical stances, but these are usually relegated to the pages of a few academic journals, some university presses, and small alternative outlets, all of which are read by a handful of mostly already devoted choir members.

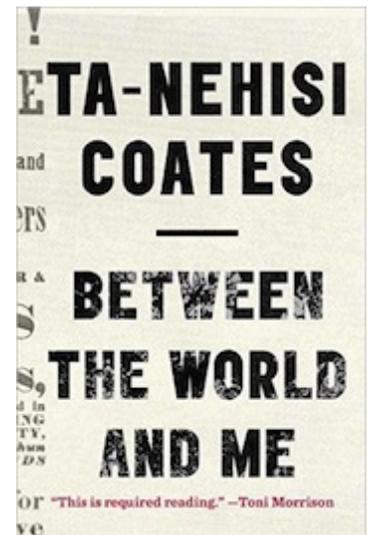
Coates, however, is a featured journalist in one of the nation's leading news magazines and his books are published by a major corporate publishing house. Mr. Coates has somehow managed to pull off one of the most difficult tricks in the concentrated, hypercommercial, corporate media theater we inhabit here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: the trick of sneaking a radical stance into a mainstream publication.

While other leftish journalists talk about the need to find forgiveness for the white supremacist terrorist Dylan Roof, Coates unflinchingly challenges liberal conceptions that with just a bit more communication and understanding we can work this whole thing out. "Good intention" he writes, "is a hall pass through history, a sleeping pill that ensures the Dream." Perhaps this is a mixed metaphor, but it is also a necessary corrective to the notion that violent repression can be challenge by reformist policies. And he does indeed focus throughout the book on the violence that is routinely done to black bodies while asking about the traditional narrative of the civil rights movement: "Why were our only heroes nonviolent? I speak not of the morality of nonviolence, but of the sense that blacks are in especial need of this morality."

Refusing to accept facile and scientifically incorrect mythologies of race, Coates pays direct homage to Baldwin when writing of "people who believe they are white." Yet, in the tradition of critical race theory he simultaneously focuses in on the real horrors enacted to support this mythology:

"White America" is a syndicate arrayed to protect its exclusive power to dominate and control our bodies. Sometimes this power is direct (lynching) and sometimes it is insidious (redlining). But however it appears, the power of domination and exclusion is central to the belief in being white and without it, "white people" would cease to exist for want of reasons.

This will be called an angry book and that will be meant as a criticism (as if black people in the U.S. have no right to be angry, as if anger is just bad manners, as if we can never understand "Why Black People Tend to Shout," as cultural critic Ralph Wiley called his 1992 collection of essays). But there are moments of beauty in this book as well— especially when Coates describes his time at



Howard University and how he fell in love with black history, black culture, and other black people in all of their physical and intellectual diversity.

And there is deep, deep sadness in this book as well, specifically when Mr. Coates writes about the police murder of his friend from Howard, Prince Jones. And he points out that every black person killed by the police is another indication not of a "few bad apples" or "lack of training" but a systematic policy supported by the majority:

The truth is that the police reflect America in all of its will and fear, and whatever we might make of this country's criminal justice policy, it cannot be said that it was imposed by a repressive minority. The abuses that have followed from these policies... are the product of democratic will.

Coates is also willing to slay his share of sacred American cows. As in this passage about his reaction to the terrorist attacks of 9/11:

"I was out of sync with the city. I kept thinking about how southern Manhattan had always been ground zero for us. They auctioned our bodies down there, in the same devastated, and rightly named financial district... Bin Laden was not the first man to bring terror to that section of the city."

And, finally, at the end of this unflinching book, in perhaps its most important brief passages, Coates laments that the white looting of black bodies and the imperial pillaging of the natural world are inseparable: both supreme practices of arrogant violence, both driven by rapacious greed, both ultimately doomed to unleash a devastating backlash when, as Malcolm X once said, "the chickens come home to roost."

This [technological] revolution has freed the Dreamers to plunder not just the bodies of humans but the body of the Earth itself. The Earth is not our creation. It has no respect for us. It has no use for us. And its vengeance is not the fire in the cities but the fire in the sky. Something more fierce than Marcus Garvey is riding on the whirlwind. Something more awful than all our African ancestors is rising with the sea.

And so here we find James Baldwin again. The "fire next time" is not just the fires raging through the hearts of black men and women tired of being killed by the police. It is not only the fires of cities like Ferguson, burning when endemic poverty and everyday indignities and routine violence become too onerous to bear. No, now the fire is the heat of the planet itself. A planet ruled by white empires that thought they could rampage through all limitations. Ta-Nehisi Coates knows that in the end we will all suffer for that horrible, horrible hubris.

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