How Fresh and New is the Case Coates Makes?

Thabiti Lewis

So much has been said about *Between the World and Me* that I hesitated to join this discussion, fearing any critique of Ta-Nehisi Coates would be misconstrued as “hating on him.” The popularity of the book has surprised even Coates himself. I quite enjoy his essays in the *Atlantic Monthly* and I am especially fond of his first memoir, *The Beautiful Struggle*, where he labors to understand himself through the lens of his enigmatic father, publisher of Black Classic Press, Paul Coates.

Considering *Struggle* in a limited capacity will be useful for my discussion of *Between the World*. My goal is to offer some analysis of his aims, his technique, and why that technique may resonate well with some aspects of the public and less so with some others. Along the way, I find it useful to examine the scarcity of black intellectual space that guides the broader discussion of Coates’s book by billing it as being “monumental” and a must-read for every American. It is our duty as scholars, however, to explore an appeal that transcends that of many similar volumes that have existed for decades. I want to know if the embrace is due to a deep emotional connection the author is making with readers, or merely because it arrives at a moment dominated by the Black Lives Matter movement. What is new here—is it the tone, or is it the voice? The structure, style, and aesthetic of the prose, or is it the information? What is Coates doing differently from the large body of literature that raises these very same questions?

Soon after Coates’s book was published, the vice-principal at my daughter’s high school approached my card during morning drop-off to ask if I had read *Between the World*. “You really need to read Ta-Nehisi Coates’s new book,” he exhorted. “The author has an amazing letter to his son that is just very powerful.” I explained to him that I was familiar with the book but that I had not yet read it. I had known this vice-principal for a few years and found him to be pretty conservative in matters of school and community. He had never before recommended a book to me, so I thought his enthusiasm warranted taking a look. I would also later learn that the reason the book resonated with him was because it offered far more questions than it answered, which fit his conservatism. But I am getting ahead of myself.

In a pithy 152 pages that includes several photographs, Coates meditates on the permanence of racial injustice in America while instructing his fifteen-year-old son Samo about how one person can make a change. The American Dream, he warns, is dangerous; black bodies are sport, and “[i]n America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—*it is heritage*” (103; original emphasis). There is no harm in this. In fact, most black parents lament the day on which they must share these truths with their children. But Coates’s most impressive trick in *Between the World* is that he manages to place on full display the tradition of African American wisdom-teaching—the emotionally wrenching experience of telling our children about racism and injustice—but he manages to get away with generalizing what his son should do with this information. His goal seems to merely inform his son about “this past in all its nuance, error, and humanity” (70), and nothing else. But maybe there is more. If this book is in some ways an extension of *Struggle*, then perhaps Coates is forging his own genre. If his letter rejects the traditional Western epistolary form, then it should not be analyzed on those merits. It seems to be structured to mimic a writer’s inviting readers to embrace his personal musings. Such moves, however, are often absent a definitive solution, as was the case in *Struggle*; his second book treads close to his black nationalist roots even when he says he has separated himself from these. What Coates reveals of those
roots—approaches to being and to blackness—is capacious. This foundation, which Coates tracks in *Struggle*, frees him to offer to his son knowledge of self and of world history on his own terms in *Between the World*—even if that means the wisdom is absent direction. It has the faint echo of Polonius’ speech to his son Laertes. *Struggle* reveals Ta-Nehisi’s conflicted respect for his father Paul’s continuously telling him what he has to do or know. *Between the World* thus represents not just a letter to his son, but also a response to his father that various styles can also produce success. In his first memoir, Coates regularly questions or is displeased with his father’s philosophies, yet his fearlessness in forging his own genre stems from his father’s teachings.

I am convinced that a portion of *Between the World* is an extension of *Struggle*, one in which Ta-Nehisi details his struggles to reconcile his own childhood. There were times I was thinking he would have served his son more effectively if he had merely directed the reader to his first book rather than rehashing some of the same concepts. Where *Struggle* took pains to chart Ta-Nehisi’s understanding of himself through understanding his dad, this book is a philosophical exercise with his own son. This book expresses a desire to rear a son in a manner different from the author’s own upbringing. *Between the World* wants to tell the reader what happened while he was in college at Howard University. But when Coates tries to share a personal story about losing a friend to police violence, it falls flat, because unlike the first section that is filled with passion, the story of Prince Jones feels like a reporter’s telling of another lost black body.

The vice-principal approached me about the book because of emotional passages like this one: “Never forget that we were enslaved in this country longer than we have been free” (70), and “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” (71). This emotional tone in print is what he has shared with his own son; it is what I have shared with my own daughters, my parents with me, and Coates’s own father with him. This, and the familiar coming-of-age truth that every black child receives from sane parents: “You have to make your peace with the chaos, but you cannot lie. You cannot forget how much they took from us and how they transfigured our very bodies into sugar, tobacco, cotton, and gold” (71). While what Coates reveals is nothing new, his style has managed to touch the heart, emotions, and humanity of his readers. It is indeed not new information, but the truth and power and emotion he conjures stokes the passion, pain, and trauma of the current generation in need of healing words of love; of someone speaking directly to them telling them that they are human, that they matter.

While I believe Coates’s impetus is not completely clear, I agree with his assessment that there is dread in North America and elsewhere in the world. I especially like his instructions to his son to avoid the Dream of the “Dreamers” because it is an evil fiction that attempts to enslave people, and too often it succeeds. But given his rooted consciousness of black nationalism, Coates’s seeming betrayal of the tradition of resistance in African American art and letters is befuddling. I think Coates errs in thinking that our mere resistance to the Dreamers and to Dreaming are solution enough, and all the rest will right itself. This very stance is a radical and noteworthy position, but incomplete. While it troubles the problems we face, it does not offer pragmatic suggestions for dealing with blatant injustice, the destructive influence of racism, and the naked brutality against black bodies.

With all of this said, however, to suggest that Coates ultimately avoids a solution may be too harsh, and what finally remains is that he should be credited for advising against copying or mimicking white claims to civilization.

This would be promising advice, as is his decision to begin with Richard Wright’s poem to frame his book’s message. However, the poem promises more than Coates’s essay ultimately delivers. It begins:
And one morning while in the woods I stumbled suddenly upon the thing;
Stumbled upon it in a grassy clearing guarded by scaly oaks and elms.
And the sooty details of the scene rose, thrusting themselves between the world and me.…
(431; original ellipsis)

Both readers and his son deserve more than the “sooty details” of a hopeless situation. He should be obliged to point a way out. As I pondered the crumbling concrete structures that block horizons and aspirations for black residents in cities like my native St. Louis and his native Baltimore, I could not help but demand answers to the embers left behind in the bleak aftermath of upheaval.

I was thinking about Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*, the book that rocked me as a nineteen-year-old. Baldwin’s famous letter to his nephew James about encouragement and keeping the faith actually transgresses. While Coates’s beautiful prose moved me, I remained unclear about where the comparison between the two existed beyond similarly beautiful prose because Coates is urging reconciliation. Coates, writing in a time of strife, makes the ugly mistake of offering a history of racism but seeming also to settle on awkward neutrality. I was expecting a focused letter to his son, but instead received a long three-part note to his son. The letter or note or musing never seems to have an ending, and the matter in the middle is absorbed by a history of white obsession with and control over black bodies, all mixed in with a disjointed recounting of his experiences at Howard, which he calls “The Mecca” (a term he also used, repeatedly, in *Struggle*). Moreover, unlike Baldwin, who ends his letter to James with hope and the spirit of fight, I am not sure what Coates wants of his readers, nor exactly whom, beyond the fact of his son, the intended audience is. Nor am I certain, ultimately, of what he is doing aesthetically or stylistically in refusing a formal conclusion to the letter.

Still, I am bothered that perhaps my assessment of his work is unreasonable. Perhaps Coates’s point is to disavow the traditional epistolary genre. In an interesting essay in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Corey Robin in his discussion of the gifts and impetus of successful public intellectuals explains that “intellectuals create the public for which they write” and are “attuned to the sensitivities of [their] audience.” Robin calls Coates “a writer with an appetite and talent for readers” and calls his book “a major intervention in public life and letters … perhaps the signal text of today’s civic culture.” The popularity of the book suggests that Robin could have a point; perhaps Coates’s audience is indeed being created in Robin’s sense that “the individual’s preferences can be transformed, and that politics is the transformation of those preferences.”

But not all of the audience has arrived. Jerry W. Ward, Jr.’s reflection of the book is one of the earliest poignant examinations, informing us that Coates is saying nothing new, but does hedge at telling us what he really thinks:

Reading Ta-Nehisi Coates is not easy. The difficulty is constituted neither by his prose style nor his subject matter, because the subject matter is familiar and his sentences are music for the inner ear. Difficulty slams into you from a place he is not exploring, from the badlands where signs defy decoding. You feel that his having borrowed the title *Between the World and Me* from one of the stellar poems of twentieth-century American poetry transports you to a desert where the bones of David Walker, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, Alexander Crummell, Mark Twain, and Ralph Ellison are strewn helter-skelter and the air smells like Theodore Bilbo’s breath. … although ultra-orthodox literary criticism wants you to hear a sermon from James Baldwin that simply is not available.

The reason that Ward deems that a sermon in Coates is unavailable is because every sermon answers the questions it raises. While Ward’s collapsing of genres is a bit troubling, what resonates is his disdain for Coates’s concession. He seeks from Coates the challenge of moral responsibility. And while I doubt Ward is imposing a sermon, he seems to prefer one of the Baldwin variety. But perhaps this is not Coates’s intention. Sermons can be prescriptive or merely state the issues so powerfully that people realize the need for change. Ward and others are not so moved.
When I learned that Michelle Alexander also had to read the book twice, and that she too shared my disappointment that Coates hedges, I breathed a little easier knowing I was not alone. In her review of Coates in the *New York Times*, Alexander writes that she “imagined that Coates’s new book would make plain for young people what is truly at stake in the struggle and disabuse them of the prevailing myths that breed complacency, defeatism or inaction.”

I also take issue with Coates’s telling his son’s generation that we cannot win. It is unclear if he is encouraging his son to transgress, or merely to remember his history as an act of transgression. This is in stark contrast to Baldwin, who repeatedly emphasizes his nephew’s power and potential and urges him to believe that revolutionary change is possible. Does Coates want his son to use this information to make change? Does he believe change is possible? If he does not, why is this book resonating for this generation? Is his emotional pull so powerful that these omissions are disregarded?

Perhaps what young people love is the very thing so many critics dislike: that they are tasked with finding solutions to the unanswered questions. Coates makes clear in *Struggle* that as a young person, that task was his preference. As I polled readers on their reactions to the book, I found Meredith, a twenty-five-year-old African American female college graduate who explained to me why she felt the book appeals to her generation. For her, Coates’s book represents “the first time many in contemporary white America are seeing” the worst aspects of police brutality, poverty, and so forth. But Meredith broached a perspective that I had not considered. She explained that the book is not an argument per se, but rather assesses for black Americans how certain structures keep us segregated.

What also seems to endear Coates to many is that his message, unlike that of black leaders or intellectuals, does not give an argument or a fix, is not prescriptive, and focuses on constantly humanizing black bodies. It appears his appeal with youth like Meredith stems from their diminished desire for opinions or instructions for how to process information. The strength of the book for some, opines Meredith, is “Coates’s ability to contextualize the present moment [with writing that] allows people to process [his uses of irony and history] on their own.”

So while for Jerry Ward *Between the World* remains a “highly accomplished but incomplete representation of authentic anger,” it is that very containment of anger that seems to be the thing that attracts supporters like Corey Robin. Robin and others seem to adore Coates for being the opposite of Baldwin. Robin’s remark that for Coates, “it is the opposite: no more fire, the water next time” (added emphasis), expresses that many find it easier to wade in the water than to deal with the fire.

But again, I must admit I am puzzled that at a time when youth are rising up against oppression and are trying to make sense of blatantly racialized injustice—trying to come to grips with their place in a world that refuses to guarantee for them freedoms that so many others take for granted—that Coates would offer his son a history of brutalized black bodies with little direction away from such fates.

Although an older generation has shrugged at Coates’s offering of history and philosophical questions about fear and black bodies as something revelatory, many young readers feel otherwise. Even if his frightening array of critical questions without answers is not within the trajectory of the African American essay, one cannot ignore the terrible beauty of the prose. I recall reading *The Fire Next Time* as a teenager and also finding beauty in Baldwin’s prose, but I also found that my resolve to transgress was awakened and steadied. Many young people, such as Meredith, claim to find a similar resolve in Coates’s book. If this is true, I embrace it, as that is what is necessary.

Ultimately, if there is a problem, it does not lie with Coates. He is free to write what he feels in any manner he chooses. The problem is that Coates is among the few that have the stage at the present moment. We all know that there is a diverse
field of black thought and that those voices are muted. And one may be fearful to criticize for fear that a critique will dissuade any of us from having a voice in the mainstream. The waters are perilous. So with that in mind, it is important to understand that the problem is one of “black scarcity.” And this scarcity is not for lack of thought or critical thinking among black intellectuals that offer viable alternatives. The scarcity is not real. The issues broached in his book comprise the regular diet of black studies courses and scholarship. The problem is that while Coates’s style is fresh, his opinion is seen as the only opinion because black folk do not control the message, or the mechanisms by which it is delivered. So many of us, then, mistake it as something new.

The Remarkable Reception of Ta-Nehisi Coates

Howard Rambsy II

If we’re talking about contemporary African American book history, then of course we’re discussing Ta-Nehisi Coates’s Between the World and Me. Rarely has a book by a black author generated so much attention in the young twenty-first century. And why stop there? In the entire history of African American writing, relatively few writers have ever enjoyed the kind of extensive responses to their works over a three-year span that Coates received in 2014, when his article “The Case for Reparations” was published in The Atlantic; in 2015, when Between the World was published by Spiegel & Grau; and in 2016, when The Black Panther #1 was published by Marvel Comics. The production of Between the World and its astonishing reception signal the convergence of audiences, technology, African American cultural perspectives, editorial vision, major events, coordinated marketing campaigns, and lucky breaks.

Despite his popular acclaim, contemporary writers like Coates seldom become central focal points in African American literary studies. Articles on African American literature published in scholarly journals concentrate, by and large, on historically significant books and established authors. For instance, a review of the approximately 1,900 full-length articles published in African American Review between 1967 and 2014 reveals that focal authors born prior to 1960 appear as recurring subjects. That trend did not change over the course of the last twenty-five years, as the numbers of published authors born after 1960 greatly expanded. In fact, during this time period, nineteenth-century literature, not twenty-first-century literature, constituted the most notable growth field in African American literary studies. Coates’s status as a journalist and blogger make him an even less likely topic in our field, which typically covers the works of conventional literary artists like novelists and poets.

Nonetheless, the rise of Ta-Nehisi Coates as a major author presents a number of challenges and opportunities for scholars of black literature. How might we incorporate examinations of blogging, tweeting, and online commentary into African American literary studies? What difference does it make that African American literary scholars have been largely absent from the vast body of writing produced about Between the World in prominent online venues? In what ways do responses to Coates’s works illuminate and overshadow other African American writers? Where will a book history of a contemporary work like Between the World lead us? These questions represent just a few of the inquiries that we could address as we consider Coates and a range of other African American writers who first gained prominence in the twenty-first century.
Contributors

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