field of black thought and that those voices are muted. And one may be fearful to critique 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.
What follows is a brief, pre-production history leading to the publication of *Between the World* as well as a cursory look at the book’s reception. The first section explains how Coates’s capabilities building a large, devoted following and the support he received from multiple publishing institutions facilitated his tremendous success. The second section describes the strategies and shifts of Spiegel & Grau in the marketing campaign for Coates’s book. Finally, the third section discusses the wide-ranging and remarkable reception of Coates and his work. Overall, this article makes a case for thinking about *Between the World* in relation to what we might call “contemporary black book history.”

**Building a Large Following prior to Publishing a Book**

With vital support from *The Atlantic* where he began working in 2008, Coates cultivated an expansive, supportive audience through his prolific blogging activity. The perspectives that he sharpened and audiences that he gained as a blogger served as the foundation for the prominent online presence that Coates established prior to the publication of *Between the World*. Historically, many of our most well-known African American writers developed their audiences and acclaim after the publication of noteworthy books. Richard Wright gained international recognition after publishing *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945). Ralph Ellison drew widespread attention after the publication of *Invisible Man* (1952). Many readers became interested in Toni Morrison after she published novels such as *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song Of Solomon* (1977), and *Beloved* (1987); scholarly interest in her work became especially pronounced after she earned the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993. By contrast, however, the digital age has created more opportunities for emergent writers to build readerships leading up to a book publication.

Technology, especially online publishing in major venues, made it possible for Coates to begin developing and nurturing a following years before he even conceived of *Between the World*. His debut book, the memoir *The Beautiful Struggle* (2008), received modest attention. At the time, Coates had not become a renowned blogger and popular cultural commentary on race. Although he had been publishing as journalist beginning in the late 1990s, his employment as a blogger at *The Atlantic* was when and where he began developing a large core and dedicated audience. The popularity of that magazine gave Coates a powerful and highly visible platform, and his willingness to produce approximately two to three blog entries nearly each weekday for the first few years allowed him to attract the attention of a sizable number of readers over time.

As a cultural commentator, Coates’s work paralleled the writings of black columnists such as Charles M. Blow of the *New York Times*, Leonard Pitts, Jr., writing for the *Miami Herald*, and the *Washington Post*’s Eugene Robinson. However, as a blogger, Coates was able to produce far more frequently and rapidly, and over any given amount of time, he was likely to cover a more diverse set of topics than conventional columnists. He was doing more than composing and then presenting his ideas; he also facilitated sweeping discussions about a variety of topics, including football, the Civil War, politics, rap music, father-son relationships, and trivial news items. Moreover, unlike many journalists and bloggers at high-profile publications who simply published articles and blog entries, Coates actively engaged his readers in the Comments section of his blog, responding to feedback from his readers. In subsequent posts, he regularly pointed out how his bloggers prompted him to strengthen or rethink his previous positions, which helped him acknowledge his mistakes. The goodwill he nurtured among habitual visitors to his site as well as...
his writings, driven by a range of curiosities, helped him maintain and continually expand his readership.

Coates's active blogging also created blueprints and testing grounds for forthcoming magazine articles, and his lively exchanges with his audience strengthened the pieces. For instance, from late 2008 through 2011, Coates produced approximately 350 entries related to the Civil War, receiving feedback and suggested additional readings from his readers, whom he affectionately referred to as “The Horde.” In a special issue on the Civil War in the December 2011 issue of The Atlantic, Coates published “Why Do So Few Blacks Study the Civil War?,” a piece that indeed benefited from all of his interactions on the subject on his blog. A week or so after the publication of the magazine article, Coates announced in a blog entry that he recently received a contract from publisher Spiegel & Grau to produce a nonfiction book on the Civil War. He expressed excitement that he was again going to work with editor Chris Jackson, who had served as the editor for The Beautiful Struggle. Coates also noted to his readers that “I’m happy, as always, to be working with you guys on the research. I could not have gotten here without the Horde.” Although Coates eventually abandoned his initial plan to produce the book on the Civil War, the contract he received paved the way for him to work with Jackson on Between the World.

Beyond his Civil War article, Coates also tested his ideas out with the Horde and drew on their support in preparation for other magazine articles that he produced on topics such as Manning Marable's biography Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention; African Americans who integrated an affluent neighborhood just outside Detroit; the processes and challenges of studying French as an adult; and his popular article “Fear of a Black President.” In mid-March 2012, Coates began blogging about the developing case of Trayvon Martin—the teen who was murdered in Sanford, Florida, by George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch coordinator who falsely assumed Martin was a criminal trespasser. Initially, Coates expressed reluctance about writing about the subject, in part because he had followed similar incidents before and found the outcomes less than adequate for African Americans. Nonetheless, he became particularly interested in analyzing and critiquing the so-called “Stand Your Ground” laws that empowered gun owners to take violent liberties in the name of self-defense. All in all, Coates produced more than sixty blog entries about Martin and the laws that had heightened his vulnerability. Similar to journalist Trymaine Lee, who also produced expansive coverage on the Martin case, Coates became one of the most prolific writers on Martin and Zimmerman at a major magazine or news outlet. Coates's blogging about the legal customs that systematically endangered black boys and African Americans in general represented yet another instance of online preparation for themes that would appear in Between the World.

On May 16, 2014, The Atlantic posted a video trailer on YouTube announcing that an article by Coates was “coming soon.” Much like movie trailers, The Atlantic video for Coates’s article included music, excerpts from interviews, and stirring images all designed to build anticipation. The very existence of the trailer—the first and only one the magazine ever released—suggested high expectations for the impending article. Days later, on May 21, the magazine published Coates’s “The Case for Reparations” to considerable fanfare. By the end of the week, the article had been covered by approximately fifty journalists and other commentators writing for the Washington Post, Vox, Clutch, NPR, The Root, The Huffington Post, and dozens of other online publications. By the end of June, more than 100 commentators had opined about the article, which was free of charge online. Accordingly, “The Case for Reparations” was frequently shared on Twitter and other social-media sites, and eventually officials announced that the article had set “a single-day traffic record” for a magazine article when it was published. The article had enlivened a national
conversation about reparations, and just as important, the article’s reception had elevated Coates to being one of the most respected and preferred commentators on race in America.

During the course of his initial years as a blogger, Coates steadily expanded his audience of online readers. A series of guest op-eds for the New York Times further broadened his audience. As Coates noted, “The megaphone of the Times’ edit page is rather ridiculous” and that “a shocking number, and range, of people read it.” In short, Coates had established a sizeable following leading up to the summer of 2014. However, the publication and reception of “The Case for Reparations” stimulated the exponential growth of his following. And by the way, we do well, in our digital age, to acknowledge the ways in which audiences and readers operate as “followers,” particularly in the context of serialized blogging. After all, Coates, like everyone else online, is in some ways competing for the attention of readers, hoping that those readers will follow or make return visits to his site.

“The Case for Reparations” had generated a substantial body of commentary at dozens of established publications, many of which would likely extend the conversation on whatever major writings that Coates would offer next. The strong interest in the writer was really good news for his publisher. In 2011, when Coates signed a book contract with Spiegel & Grau, he had already developed a large audience. By the summer of 2014, after “The Case for Reparations” was published, Coates’s audience had grown by leaps and bounds, and he had acquired significant national attention. Unknown to almost everyone who was witnessing “The Case for Reparations” become the most talked-about article of 2014, Coates and his editor Chris Jackson at Spiegel & Grau were hard at work completing a manuscript. The article for The Atlantic had been big, and if Spiegel & Grau could devise the right marketing plan, Coates’s book, which eventually took its title from a poem by Richard Wright, would be bigger.

Strategies and Shifts in the Rollout of Between the World and Me

With one of the most popular writers in America under contract to produce a book, Spiegel & Grau was in an enviable position. Before even announcing his next publication, their author possessed what the publishing world recognized as an incredibly valuable asset: buzz. The reception to “The Case for Reparations” bestowed upon Coates tremendous acclaim and popularity, thus greatly raising the possibility that his book would be a success, at least in terms of sales. To the extent that publishers are ultimately concerned with building economic and symbolic capital, executives at Spiegel & Grau were likely thrilled with all the earning potential for a writer as popular as Coates. Thus, there was little worry that the terms of his previous contract with the company had shifted.

At some point after receiving the book contract in late 2011, Coates had changed his mind about what he was composing. Instead of producing a book about the Civil War, he decided to write a letter to his son about the pervasive nature of white supremacy. And why not? As a journalist and politically conscious black man inclined to pay attention to the contemporary moment, Coates was no doubt well aware of the racialized violence being enacted on black people across the country. Renisha McBride killed in Detroit, Michigan. Eric Garner choked to death by a police officer on the streets of New York City. Mike Brown shot to death by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. Tamir Rice shot to death by a police officer in Cleveland, Ohio. Walter Scott shot and killed by a police officer in South Carolina. The list goes on and on. As a blogger, Coates had written about historical
topics such as the Civil War, but just as important, he was writing urgently about contemporary topics.

The epistolary format of Coates’s composition and the book’s title made it possible for Spiegel & Grau to link the writer’s work to two notable writers: James Baldwin and Richard Wright, respectively. The book’s epistolary nature resembled Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*, and its title was the same as Wright’s “Between the World and Me,” a poem about lynching. Baldwin and Wright were important artistic inspirations for Coates, and for Spiegel & Grau, they added considerable weight to Coates’s status as a writer. Scholars of African American literature have long concentrated on signifying, or the notion that black writers reference various other black texts in their works. But what about the ways that publishers signify, or, to what ends do they highlight the relationships between black writers and black writers? In the case of Spiegel & Grau, the publisher would alert reviewers who would then inform readers that Coates was in conversation with Baldwin and Wright. Over the decades, the marketing practice among publishers of evoking the presence of major, established authors in the work and presentation of an emergent writer had proven beneficial. If those great writers deserved substantial attention and engagement, so the thinking went, then certainly another writer like them was worthy of such recognition as well.

Highlighting the idea that Coates was routed to Wright and Baldwin was just one piece of a larger marketing strategy. What Spiegel & Grau did to really raise the prospects that Coates’s book would become a best-seller and that the publisher would reap significant returns on their investment was to first give away hundreds of copies. In the spring of 2015, Spiegel & Grau began distributing Advance Reader’s Editions, which are also known as Advance Reader Copies (ARCs), of *Between the World*, with the announcement that the book would go on sale on October 13th. Potential reviewers at major news outlets and magazines, bloggers, prominent figures on Twitter, leading activists associated with Black Lives Matter, well-known writers, and select celebrities received ARCs of Coates’s book. The idea was that these early readers would become early reviewers and endorsers, thus assisting in stimulating the interest in *Between the World*.

At some point shortly after the ARCs were released, and as the publisher began receiving strong positive feedback about Coates’s work, Spiegel & Grau decided to move the publication date from October 13th to September 8th. The shift in a release date reflected that the publisher wanted to take advantage of the growing interest in Coates. As a result of “The Case for Reparations,” he was becoming an even more sought-after headline speaker on college campuses and at other major gatherings. The sooner the book was published, the sooner his speaking engagements could double as book tours. Publishing *Between the World* in September as opposed to in October would also increase its chances of securing a nomination for the 2015 calendar-year literary awards, especially the National Book Award for Nonfiction.

The design of the ARC for *Between the World* also assisted in making the case for Coates as a major writer. The back cover of the ARC included a quotation from the *New York Observer* announcing that Coates was “the single best writer on the subject of race in the United States.” That blurb would never make it onto the final version of the book. In fact, Coates opposed declarations, particularly from white commentators, who sought to position him as the sole and “single-best” spokesperson on black people. Nonetheless, the blurb served the important purpose of prompting reviewers and influencers who received the ARCs; they would be inclined to view Coates as a significant if not leading writer on race. The ARC contained an introductory note from editor Chris Jackson, who noted the pleasure of watching Coates “rise from an alt-weekly wunderkind to one of the most important journalists, essayists, and intellectuals in the country today.” Jackson acknowledged that Coates was initially planning to produce a collection of essays about the Civil War,
but changed his mind after the “murders of young black people around the country” and his concerns about his own teenage son. Confirming for those early reader-reviewers that Coates “reread James Baldwin’s classic *The Fire Next Time*” as a guide for producing *Between the World*, Jackson closed by noting that “I’m honored to share this thrilling, illuminating, and devastating work.”

Those ARCs for the book were landing in all the right places. On May 26th, R&B singer John Legend posted an image of one of the ARCs on his Instagram page with the note “Words of wisdom on my flight today.” In June, David Remnick, editor of *The New Yorker*, mentioned *Between the World* as “an extraordinary forthcoming book by Ta-Nehisi Coates,” where the author counsels his son “on the history of American violence against the black body, the young African-American’s extreme vulnerability to wrongful arrest, police violence, and disproportionate incarceration.” Most important of all, however, was that one of the ARCs was delivered to Toni Morrison. Her publisher, Knopf, and Coates’s publisher, Spiegel & Grau, are each subsidiaries of Random House, which gave the editor Jackson an entry point to solicit a blurb from the revered novelist.

“I’ve been wondering,” read Morrison’s statement, “who might fill the intellectual void that plagued me after James Baldwin died. Clearly it is Ta-Nehisi Coates.” Morrison’s blurb went on to praise the language of Coates’s book and closed with the line “This is required reading.”

For Coates, Morrison’s words were humbling and flattering. For Spiegel & Grau, the Noble Laureate’s blurb was a golden endorsement that would greatly assist with the objectives to build intrigue in *Between the World* and expand Coates’s following. While the title and format of the book linked Coates to Wright and Baldwin, respectively, the book blurb now aligned Coates with our most beloved and critically acclaimed novelist. Not bad, not bad at all. The Morrison blurb became integral to the storyline and marketing campaign for Coates’s book, and further advanced the notion that Coates was an heir to Baldwin. The popular writer, the widely distributed ARCs, and the Morrison blurb were now all in place for a September 8th publication date. Still, a major, tragic event would take place to prompt yet another shift in the prehistory production of Coates’s book.

On Wednesday evening, June 17th, a twenty-one-year-old white male attended a Bible study at the Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Near the end of the session as participants prayed, Dylann Roof began shooting and murdering the African American parishioners. Roof later confessed to the murders and said that he was hoping his actions would have incited a race war. Coates, who had been an ardent student of the Civil War and who was at this point inclined to address the structural roots and operations of racism, did not need long to identify what he viewed as root causes of Roof’s actions. On June 18th, a day after the mass shooting, Coates published a blog entry entitled “Take Down the Confederate Flag—Now,” which included the lede, “The flag that Dylann Roof embraced, which many South Carolinians embrace, endorses the violence he committed.” According to Coates, “Roof’s crime cannot be divorced from the ideology of white supremacy which long animated his state nor from its potent symbol—the Confederate flag.” Eloquent and demanding, Coates urged citizens of South Carolina to “[d]rive out this cult of death and chains. Save your lovely souls. Move forward. Do it now.” Roof’s murderous actions further raised the sense that black people, even in sanctuaries of worship, were vulnerable to racist violence.

Executives at Spiegel & Grau, especially Chris Jackson, were well aware that Coates’s forthcoming book addressed those vulnerabilities. So once again, they decided to make a change concerning the publication date. A director of publicity and communications at Random House informed *Publishers Weekly* that the shift was based on a “combination of solid advance reviews and issues brought up by recent events.” The South Carolina shooting was clearly one of those recent events.
Rather than wait until September 8th, Spiegel & Grau chose yet another new release date: July 14. In other words, *Between the World* would appear less than a month after the mass murder of black people at Mother Emanuel AME Church.

**The Wide-Ranging Coverage of *Between the World and Me***

By July 21st, a week after the release of *Between the World*, more than 100 reviews had been published online in major venues, including the *New York Times*, the Washington Post, NPR, Salon, CBS News, The New Republic, and BuzzFeed. Some reviewers critiqued aspects of the book, but by and large, the overwhelming majority of reviewers praised it and commended Coates for advancing concerns among African Americans that demanded more attention. The publication of so many assessments of Coates’s book both before and right after its official release date revealed that the ARC had reached large numbers of reviewers. The appearance of so much commentary on the book drove public interest and increased sales, and on August 2nd, *Between the World* was #1 on the *New York Times* Best Sellers List for Nonfiction (the book remained on the best-seller list more than forty weeks later). During the fall, the storylines and positive results for *Between the World* and Coates only expanded.

On September 16th, the National Book Awards announced that Coates’s book had made the longlist among its nonfiction selections. On September 22nd, Coates became a trending topic when it was announced that he had been hired to write Marvel’s Black Panther comic book series. On September 28th, Coates was again in the news, this time as one of the recipients of the MacArthur Foundation “Genius Grant.” On October 14th, the National Book Foundation announced that *Between the World* had made the shortlist of finalists for nonfiction, and on November 18th, relatively few people were surprised that Coates was announced as the eventual winner. On November 20th, in an article in the *Los Angeles Times*, Meredith Blake noted that according to Nielsen BookScan, *Between the World* had sold more than 200,000 copies.

Coates’s book, similar to his hundreds of blog entries and his magazine article “The Case for Reparations,” had contributed to the tremendous growth of his reading audiences and overall following. Unlike his articles and blog entries, however, the publication of his writing in book form made his work available for book discussion groups. By April 2016, more than three dozen colleges, book clubs, libraries, and church groups, all across the country, had hosted reading groups concentrating on *Between the World*. The University of Kansas and the University of Oregon announced that they would facilitate “common reading” programs concentrating on Coates’s book for all incoming students, who would each receive copies of the book during the fall 2016 semester. Coates’s writing, Jackson’s editorial efforts, the marketing campaign coordinated by Random House/Spiegel & Grau, and the substantial coverage of and appraisals of *Between the World* had converged and yielded incredible returns.

Social scientists refer to a process known as “accumulative advantage” to explain how an initial small advantage or set of advantages accrue and lead to more and more benefits for a person or institution. Coates, in addition to his many talents, clearly benefited from accumulative advantage. His early years as a journalist begot him opportunities to become a blogger and journalist for The Atlantic, which in turn begot him a large following, which also begot him publishing opportunities with Spiegel & Grau and Marvel Comics, which, combined with various other factors, gave him more than 600,000 followers on Twitter. Along the way, in addition to
making gains based on talent and hard work, Coates has been the beneficiary of lucky breaks. At many different stages, he happened to be in the right time at the right place, and was afforded rare opportunities.

Thankfully, on more than one occasion, Coates has willingly admitted how moments of chance or personal connections to specific people with far-reaching resources nurtured him or advanced his career. “I had people—I always had people,” Coates informs his son at one point in Between the World as a way of acknowledging that he was not somehow a self-made success. Such acknowledgement matters. As Robert H. Frank and other scholars have explained, those who acknowledge the ways that luck contributed to their achievements are more likely to redistribute their good fortunes toward common goods. For that reason, the more that Coates, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Rita Dove, Colson Whitehead, and many other prominent authors acknowledge that luck and not solely their literally talents, contributed to their successes, then the more likely they are to assist with supporting and expanding opportunities for others. Luck, along with cultural perspectives, writing talents, technology, editorial assistance, publishers, and the size and nature of followers, constitute just some of the factors that converged and facilitated Coates’s accomplishments.

Finally, a contemporary black book history might also take into account the ways that the digital age reconfigures the activities of African American writers. Coates’s abilities to actively engage his readers, previously on his blog and now on Twitter, represent defining qualities of his identity as a writer. Further, the vast majority of the more than 500 articles published between 2014 and 2016 covering “The Case for Reparations,” Between the World and Me, and Black Panther #1 appear on the web. As a result, literary scholars are presented with a range of possibilities when studying an author who possesses such a massive online presence. Somewhere out there in that vast body of data, we might discover answers to the riddle of why so many black writers are met with indifference, while a select few enjoy receptions that are quite remarkable.


Nnoka, Meredith. Telephone interview. 9 May 2016.


Contributors

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Paul Lomax, one who more often than not opens with P-Q4, also believes simplicity is the greatest panacea for what ails the “self.” His poetry is published in *Anak Sastra*, *Pank Magazine*, *Poydras Review*, *Making/Connections—Interdisciplinary Approaches to Cultural Diversity*, *Dark Matter Journal*, and *Ars Medica: A Journal of Medicine, the Arts, and the Humanities*.

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Mai Sennaar’s transatlantic family saga *The Fall of Kings* recently completed a successful two-month run in New York City. Sennaar splits her time between Brooklyn and Baltimore. She is a member of the Dramatists Guild and a proud alumna of New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts.