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Book Review: Between the World and Us

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Between the World and Us

Ellen Scheible

Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (Spiegel & Grau, 2015).

By the time this review goes to press, Ta-Nehisi Coates' New York Times Best Seller, *Between the World and Me*, will have been in print for almost a year. It has already found a significant audience among readers like us. So, why review a book that a good many of us already *know*? Here's why: because the choir to which that book preaches has embraced it without singing its praises loudly enough for the congregation to hear. We have been dumbstruck by the brilliance of the sermon.

As university faculty members who often teach classes with social justice themes, we know well the disappointment of referencing a moment in contemporary history that we find groundbreaking only to realize that our students are entirely unaware of it. Worse, there are times when we seek to galvanize students with the most inspirational of ideas, but come to the epiphany later that what galvanizes us might not do the same for them; or, at least, won't do it in the same way. We rarely give up, though. Instead, we retrace our steps, reteach the history, remind students why it matters, and introduce the material again.

It is hard for me to imagine how *Between the World and Me* would not be on the top of every college student's must-read list, especially if she is a student of color or comes from a disenfranchised social or economic background. Yet, I walked into my office hours at the Center for Multicultural Affairs one day early this semester, tossed the book on the table, asked a student to read aloud to all assembled the first page, and waited

for the revolution to begin. She read the second page. I still waited for the sound of fury and the rise of political protest. She stopped on page three and I left the silent, unimpressed room. I left a room full of people who weren't sure why they were hearing this book.

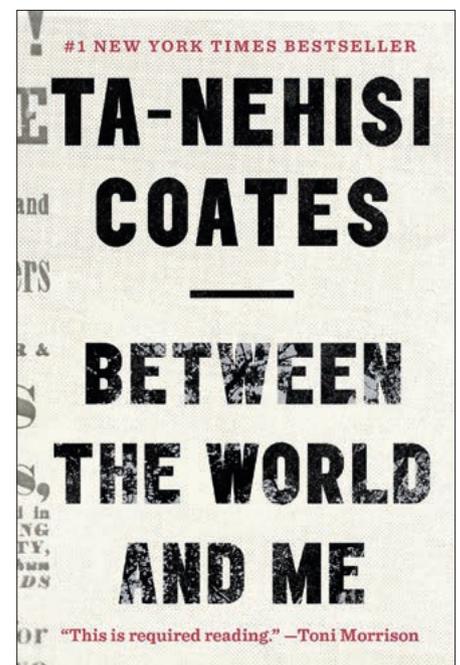
Coates' emphasis on black bodies and the corporeality of historical violence resonates deeply with my research on gender and sexuality and how I teach about female bodies as narrative canvases for social anxiety, economic deprivation, and reproductive fears. His memoir style, a letter from father to son connoting the powerful influence of inheritance, juxtaposed with his claim that whiteness is a social construct, not an inherited physical trait, leaves me nodding in agreement, ready to pen my own manifesto about inequality and the dangerous, misinformed discourse that perpetuates it.

However, I am not the person who needs to read this book. I understand it too well. I have it written in my bones and in the archives of every syllabus of mine from the past 10 years. It reassures

me that my feelings about race and class in America are not just correct; but they are gospel. I consumed this book as though it was Christmas dinner—a meal that I've eaten so many times before and will eat many times again, gratified by its reliability and consistency over the years. I think this book is masterful, pointedly critical in all the right ways and, above all, absolutely correct in its provocation that young black men are dehumanized and alienated from their own bodies by a system that lies to them.

Our students are the ones who need to read this book. More importantly, they need to read it with us. We need to teach this book. We need to adopt this book for first-year orientations and book clubs. We need to promote the book. Without a frequent and imperative call to expose social inequality, we lose sight of the physical reality created by systemic racism.

As an Irish Studies scholar who regularly teaches the history of British colonization in Ireland, I return often to a foundational premise of postcolonial criticism: Western subjectivity in the years after the Enlightenment was



formulated and birthed by the subjugation and exploitation of “others”—the marginalized, women, persons of color—who were categorized by Empire. Today, in the privileged world of the West, the everyday experience of our subjective selves owes its heritage to the barbarity and mass rape performed in the name of Western Imperialism on the bodies of others.

Coates’ definition of whiteness and the “Dream,” as he refers to it, depends on this same premise. He tirelessly points out that “the Dream of acting white, of talking white, of being white . . . murders black people . . . with frightening regularity” (111). Prince Jones, Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Coates’ relatives, friends and community, and, frighteningly, also potentially his son, become visceral examples of the destruction of the black body because it is the “essential below” of our country (106). The Dream is able to do this through “the reduction of the black body” to the broken, tortured, raped, and murdered version of the other on which the “foundation of the Dream” is built.

Because he exposes this brutal reality, Coates is often compared to James Baldwin. Yet, unlike Baldwin, who in his canonical 1953 essay “Stranger in the Village” argues that the “Negro in America” is “not a visitor to the West, but a citizen there, an American; as American as the Americans who despise him,” Coates points out how America is not separate from the Dream, and that the Dream is white. The Dream is the myth of whiteness and it defines itself through its power to erase the black body.

My second attempt to talk about *Between the World and Me* in the Center for Multicultural Affairs did not involve reading the book out loud or even opening its cover. I walked into an animated room where young students of color were standing around a table debating religion and politics and I heard one of my students say: “don’t you remember your father telling you that he’d rather beat you before the cops beat you? Don’t you understand why he said that? Don’t you see that him beating you was him teaching you?” I interrupted my student and asked him when he’d read Coates’ book—because that’s a line right out of it—and he said

that he hadn’t started. He knew where it was on the shelf, but he hadn’t opened it. The experiences of James Baldwin and Ta-Nehisi Coates are the experiences of many of our students. And we owe them the same history and hope that Coates gives his son, Samori: “you cannot arrange your life around . . . [or depend on] the small chance of the Dreamers coming into consciousness. Our moment is too brief. Our bodies are too precious. And you are here now, and you must live—and there is so much out there to live for, not just in someone else’s country, but in your own home” (146–47).



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