

Commentary

Reflections on Ta-Nehisi Coates' Between the World and Me

***By Christopher Z.
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Credit: Saint-Heron

It has taken me two years to write about Ta-Nehisi Coates' best-selling book essay *Between the World and Me*, an exploration of the endangerment of the Black body in the United States. I bought the book shortly after its July 2015 publication but didn't read it for a year, and it's taken another year to write about it. Part of the reason is that it is modeled partly on James Baldwin's famed *The Fire Next Time* (1963)—the short first section of *Fire* is written as a letter to Baldwin's nephew, Coates' book as a letter to his son, and Coates uses many signature Baldwin phrases ("my countrymen," "American innocence," both on 8). I was then working to finish a book on Baldwin, was aware right away of differences between Coates' ideas and Baldwin's, and didn't want to be distracted. Mainly, though, I now realize, the reason for delay was ambivalence—there is so much that is right, true, and beautiful about Coates' work, and so much also that is blind and wrong, that it's difficult to sort out both. I'll try to do so below.

Though addressed to his son, Coates' book is also aimed at a second audience, through the figure of a TV interviewer who, Coates felt, expected Coates to answer two questions, "what it meant to lose my body" and "why I felt that white America's progress, or rather the progress of those Americans who believe they are white, was built on looting and violence" (5-6). So,

implicitly, the book is aimed beyond Coates' son to answer those questions for white Americans, more exactly for those, white and Black, who are hip enough to recognize whiteness as a social construction—liberals and racial progressives. It is meant to state three basic points, each of which has its own strengths and problems.

Endangerment and Plunder of Black Bodies

The first and most fundamental is what Coates presents as the endangerment of Black bodies by police and others. Coates' discussion is phrased less as exposition than as expression of a basic life orientation for Black Americans. After referring to Eric Garner's and other killings, Coates tells his son, "[Y]ou know now, if you did not before, that the police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body" (5). Later, Coates puts the point in historical perspective: "The plunder of black life was drilled into this country in its infancy and reinforced across its history, so that plunder has become an heirloom, ... a default setting to which, likely to the end of our days, we must invariably return" (111). "Plunder," certainly, includes both slavery and superexploited labor and the uncontrolled killing that is Coates' main focus.

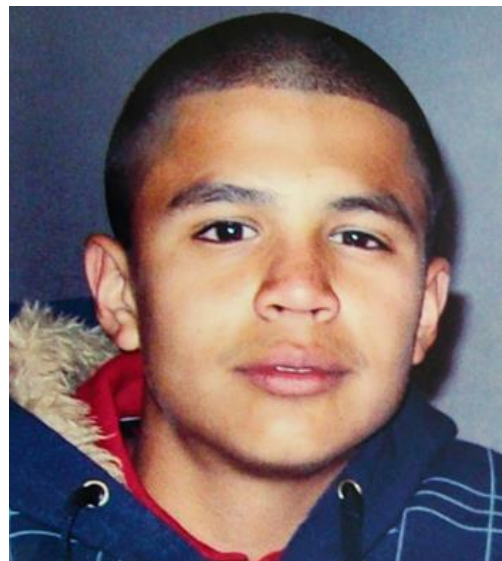
This, Coates' main point, is certainly an absolutely basic survival point for any Black person, especially young males, as partly expressed in Bryan Stevenson's "A Presumption of Guilt" (*New York Review of Books* July 13, 2017; online:

www.nybooks.com/articles/2017/07/13/presumption-of-guilt/).

Basically a discussion of lynching and unequal justice ever since the Civil War, the article starts with a personal anecdote. "[S]everal years ago"—not giving a date implies this could happen at any time—Stevenson got out of his car to explain, he says later, why his old Honda was parked in a swank neighborhood, and faced a man who threatened to "blow my head off." Suppressing the impulse to run, Stevenson raised his hands, begged the man not to shoot, and said over and over, "It's all right, it's okay." The man, Stevenson goes on, "was a uniformed police officer. As a criminal defense attorney, I knew that my survival required careful, strategic thinking" and absolute submissiveness. It's a foundational point

that I myself have emphasized to African American students BS'ing their bravado and that is the topic of "the conversation" held by millions of African American parents with their teenage or younger children. That is Coates' key point.

The point also has a basic weakness: As Coates presents things, only and solely Black people are targeted in this way and only and solely they went through the history of "plunder" already mentioned. Aside from one unexplained reference to Anthony Baez (died in 1994 after being placed in a chokehold by New York police), Coates never mentions the endangered Hispanic body, street people's bodies, homeless and disturbed people's and young white people's bodies; he never mentions the exploitation of others besides Black people; he explains what he calls "the killing fields" of (only) Black neighborhoods only and solely through the history of Africans in America—omissions that are related to his underlying, much-modified Black Nationalism, discussed later.



José Antonio Elena Rodríguez, shot by U.S. Border agents inside Mexico, 2012. Courtesy Araceli Rodríguez

Finally on this point, Coates can be irresponsible in matters of fact. His main story of police killing is of Prince Carmen Jones, a friend from his Howard University days who was later (2000) followed and shot by an undercover police officer (75-85, 135-51; see also *Washington Post* Jan. 19, 2006; online: search "Prince Jones"+"Washington Post"). As far as I can tell from limited checking, this story is factually correct and true, and it carries the main weight of Coates' presentation. But Coates also refers briefly, and inaccurately, to the nonpolice killing of Jordan Davis, the teenager shot in a Florida gas station parking area in 2012 by a white man, Michael Dunn, after an escalating argument over loud hiphop music. At Dunn's trial in February 2014, the jury deadlocked on first-degree murder but convicted Dunn on four lesser counts for shooting into the car Davis was riding in with three

friends. Coates' summary is: "Destroying the black body was permissible—but it would be better to do it efficiently" (112). But Coates never mentions that at retrial on the murder charge (Sept.-Oct. 2014), Dunn was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life without parole (plus 90 years on the previously-decided charges). All this happened nine months before Coates' book was published in July 2015. I don't think Coates suppressed facts intentionally; I do think that, satisfied by his own glib explanation and never expecting a conviction, he never followed up. But this is not serious journalism, on the part of a renowned journalist.

"The Dream" and "the Dreamers"

Coates' second major idea, shaping the whole book, is that of what he calls "the Dream" and "the Dreamers" (11, 20-21, 111, and later), obviously referring to the "American dream," which Coates sees as a white dream, or that of "those Americans who think they are white" (6), and a warning to Black Americans not to share it. "The Dream of acting white, of talking white, of being white," he warns his son, "murdered Prince Jones as sure as it murders black people in Chicago.... Do not drink from poison" (111). Coates' view of "the Dream" is an expansive, almost utopian version of American material prosperity: The Dream is "perfect houses with nice lawns. It is Memorial Day cookouts, block associations, and driveways," and much more along those lines, but for Black people, it "has never been an option because the Dream rests on our backs" (11). Coates repeats and varies this imagery of suburban prosperity many times later, while, as I'll discuss, he doesn't include anything about American ideals of freedom or the like.

This idea, like Coates' picture of the endangered Black body, has two sides. On one, it's clear that U.S. wealth has been built by African American labor (and that of other minorities and poor whites, though Coates never says so) and that the great majority of those who believe in American promises remain oblivious to this fact—unaware, aware but indifferent, or approving. This is what Baldwin, in terms Coates echoes (above) calls American "innocence" (*Fire Next Time* 6), always a term of criticism for him. On the other side, Coates never makes clear whether "the Dream," as a picture of how the rest of America really lives, is a childhood image from TV

(see 20) or an adult reality, as when he says that “the Dreamers are pillaging Ferguson for municipal governance” (131). He never distinguishes between white rulers and the rest of the group, saying of the Dreamers, “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” (143). Most probably he does mean all whites.

So, finally, Coates never refers anywhere to the white, Mexican, and other exploited labor that also built up the country or to the fact that millions of these people, today, do not live in “perfect houses with nice lawns” (11), but struggle in low-paying jobs, or on welfare, or disability—like the 2000 people, almost all white, mostly unemployed or disabled, who waited in line after line at a free outdoor medical clinic in Wise, Virginia, over a recent boiling summer weekend (*New York Times* July 24, 2017). Coates might say it’s these people’s fault for believing in “the Dream,” and one can certainly note the racism behind regarding Black crack addicts in the 1980s as monsters and white working class opioid addicts today as wayward Americans. Both true, but Coates never admits that these people exist, and so is oversimplifying in a way a serious writer should not.

More broadly, Coates’ picture of “the Dream,” as my quotations indicate, is only of a dream of material wealth, never one of rights, democracy, freedom, social transformation, inclusiveness, and, yes, anti-racism, ideals Coates would probably regard as empty rhetoric. And he never acknowledges the counter-trends to “the Dream” among whites and others, the threads of economic and moral radicalism that produced the Abolitionists (easy to criticize today, but universally seen by African Americans of their time as heroes and martyrs), the IWW and socialist and labor radicalism from the 1880s to 1940s (often racist, it is true), or the civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s. Coates refers to the civil rights workers several times (mistaking their willingness to suffer as a belief that suffering is ennobling, which he rejects), but omits or discounts the broad ideas of creating a new world that drove much of the culture of that time.

Black Identity in the United States

The last major point Coates raises is about Black Americans' rightful place in America, as well as in the world. In contrast to ideals of Black separatism or emigration in the past, Coates states this place as a fundamental fact: "What I told you," he says to Samori, his son, referring to a conversation about Eric Garner (2014), "is what your grandparents tried to tell me: that this is your country, that this is your world, that this is your body, and you must find some way to live within the all of it" (11-12). This is true and moving, and on this issue, Black people's places and hopes (or lack of them) in the U.S., Coates' discussion isn't marked by a pattern of truth and omission, as on the issues mentioned above, but by the real, and fundamental, questions his vision raises.

The advice to Samori is in part the result of an intellectual odyssey that Coates summarizes in a major section (21-71), which took him from a Black Nationalist household in West Baltimore to Howard University in the 1990s, a place he almost always calls, with capitals, "The Mecca" (14 and later) and then out into the world, and from a naïve Africanism to a broader humanism, while leaving his world-picture changed but consistent in basics. That picture moves from seeing Africa and its cultures as a lost ideal to seeing Black Americans as a group torn from Africa to become, here, a people self-created in and unique to the United States. "They made us into a race," Coates says of white Americans and the U.S. system in the book's conclusion. "We made ourselves into a people.... [We] have voyaged through death, to life upon these shores" (149).

The conclusions Coates draws from this vision—essentially, one of African Americans as a people in but not of the United States, a people despite the United States—are his own. He rejects as wishful thinking the redemptive vision that animated the Civil Rights movement and, in *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin, who said, in the conclusion to that work, "If we...do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world" (*Fire* 105). Coates, in contrast, as noted earlier, believes the country will return to the "default setting" of violence against Black people

“likely to the end of our days” (111). Referring to King’s words (paraphrasing Theodore Parker), “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice,” Coates counters by telling his son that in his experience, “its moral arc bent toward chaos then concluded in a box” (28), and he cautions, “You must resist the common urge toward the comforting narrative of divine law” (70), an indirect disagreement both with King and with Baldwin, who often used biblical and Gospel music promises in his works.

Coates differs not only from King and Baldwin, but from the traditional African American idea of community advancement over time, what might be called a traditional Black strategy for freedom; and yet, his ideas (it seems to me) dovetail with a lot of the thinking of younger African Americans today, such as those I teach. This is worth some discussion. In its political dimension, the “black strategy for freedom” just mentioned has only rarely been one of revolutionary change, but most often has been one of appropriating ideas from the U.S. Declaration of Independence and Constitution as tools of struggle, a strategy in use from Douglass in the 1850s to *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954, and beyond. In its more fundamental community sense, this “strategy for freedom” has been a struggle to leave each next generation a little freer, with more of an economic and political toehold in society, than the last, and, along with these efforts, a community *attitude* varying from a wary, embittered optimism to a determination to “keep on keeping on.”



Prince Jones. Credit: Sutori

Coates doesn’t believe in any such optimism about achieving rights—Prince Jones is his answer to that belief. If he believes in anything, it is the precarious survival of the embattled Black beauty he celebrates in his evocation of becoming a people. And, so far as I can tell from the limited sample of my own students, many of today’s Black youth also don’t share either

redemptive visions of full freedom—which they may find difficult even to grasp in 2017—or ideas of finding fuller rights over time. Rather, fifty years after the stalled and ultimately halted civil rights revolution, with jobs and betterment also stalled, and almost no justice in the long chain of police and other killings since Trayvon Martin, many seem to believe in a future that will not change in any basic way, in which they and their children will seek to live in dignity and perhaps gain an improved social position—but not real rights—and will remain prepared to fight discrimination, but will never be truly equal or free. So, if this sketch is at all accurate, many feel as Coates also does. It is this fact about the youth, in my eyes, that makes Coates' disenchantment about greater freedom truly significant.

I myself believe in a version of Baldwin's vision; that is, I believe in an anarchist vision that it is possible for ordinary people—if they too believe in the possibility—to join together across race, across gender and sexuality, and across borders, and to rebuild the world. But the challenge for the anarchist vision is to show that it is anything more than what most well-intentioned people see it as, an unrealizable ideal. I believe it is more, but my belief is a matter of moral hope, not evidence, and so Coates must be allowed his contrary vision, with all the problems and omissions in his presentation; especially as it corresponds so closely to that of at least some of today's African American youth.