

Excerpts from *Between the World and Me* (2015), Ta-Nehisi Coates

- #1 *New York Times* Bestseller
- National Book Award Winner
- This book of nonfiction is written as a letter from Coates to his son—an *epistolary* work—and takes much of its themes and form from Baldwin’s work in *The Fire Next Time* (1963).
- From the inside book flap: “Americans have built an empire on the idea of “race,” a falsehood that damages us all but falls most heavily on the bodies of black women and men—bodies exploited through slavery and segregation, and, today, threatened, locked up, and murdered out of all proportion. What is like to inhabit a black body and find a way to live within it? And how can we all honestly reckon with this fraught history and free ourselves from its burden?”

“I’ve been wondering who might fill the intellectual void
that plagued me after James Baldwin died.
Clearly it is Ta-Nehisi Coates. The language of
Between the World and Me, like Coates’s journey,
is visceral, eloquent, and beautifully redemptive.
And its examination of the hazards and hopes of black
male life is as profound as it is revelatory.
This is required reading.”
--Toni Morrison

Son, (page 5, the opening of the letter/book)

◆◆◆

I write to you in your fifteenth year. I am writing you because this is the year you saw Eric Garner choked to death for selling cigarettes; because you know now that Renisha McBride was shot for seeking help, that John Crawford was shot down for browsing in a department store. And you have seen men in uniform drive by and murder Tamir Rice, a twelve-year-old child whom they were oath-bound to protect. And you have seen men in the same uniforms pummel Marlene Pinnock, someone’s grandmother, on the side of the road. And you know now, if you did not before, that the police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body. (9)

◆◆◆

Americans believe in the reality of “race” as a defined, indubitable feature of the natural world. Racism—the need to ascribe bone-deep features to people and then humiliate, reduce, and destroy them—inevitably follows from this inalterable condition. In this way, racism is rendered as the innocent daughter of Mother Nature, and one is left to deplore the Middle Passage or Trail of Tears the way one deplores an earthquake, a tornado, or any other phenomenon that can be cast as beyond the handiwork of men.

But race is the child of racism, not the father. (7)

◆◆◆

Very few Americans will directly proclaim that they are in favor of black people being left to the streets. But a very large number of Americans will do all they can to preserve the Dream. No one directly proclaimed that schools were designed to sanctify failure and destruction. But a great number of educators spoke of ‘personal responsibility’ in a country authored and sustained by a criminal responsibility. The point of this language of ‘intention’ and ‘personal responsibility’ is broad exoneration. Mistakes were made. Bodies were broken. People were enslaved. We meant well. We tried our best. “Good intention” is a hall pass through history, a sleeping pill that ensures the Dream. (33)

◆◆◆

I began to feel that something more than a national trophy case was needed if I was to be truly free, and for that I have the history department of Howard University to thank. My history professors thought nothing of telling me that my search for myth was doomed, that the stories I wanted to tell myself could not be matched to truths. Indeed, they felt it their duty to disabuse me of my weaponized history. They had seen so many Malcomites before and were ready. Their method was rough and direct. Did black skin really convey nobility? Always? *Yes*. What about the blacks who’d practiced slavery for millennia and sold slaves across the Sahara and then across the sea? *Victims of a trick*. Would those be the same black kings who birthed all of civilization? Were they then both deposed masters of the galaxy and gullible puppets all at once? And what did I mean by ‘black’? *You know, black*. Did I think this a timeless category stretching into the deep past? *Yes*? Could it be supposed that simply because color was important to me, it had always been so? (53-54)

◆◆◆

The birth of a better world is not ultimately up to you, though I know, each day, there are grown men and women who tell you otherwise. The world needs saving precisely because of the actions of these same men and women. I am not a cynic. I love you, and I love the world, and I love it more with every 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. Indeed, you must be responsible for the bodies of the powerful—the policeman who cracks you with a nightstick and will quickly find his excuse in your furtive movements. And this is not reducible to just you—the women around you must be responsible for their bodies in a way that you never will know. 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)

◆◆◆

Shortly before you were born, I was pulled over by the PG [Prince George] County police, the same police that all the D.C. poets had warned me of. They approached on both sides of the car, shining their flashing lights through the windows. They took my identification and returned to the squad car. I sat there in terror. By then I had added to the warnings of my teachers what I'd learned about PG County through reporting and reading the papers. And so I knew that the PG County police had killed Elmer Clay Newman, then claimed he'd rammed his own head into the wall of a jail cell. And I knew that they'd shot Gary Hopkins and said he'd gone for an officer's gun. And I knew they had beaten Freddie McCollum half-blind and blamed it all on a collapsing floor. And I had read reports of these officers choking mechanics, shooting construction workers, slamming suspects through the glass doors of shopping malls. And I knew that they did this with great regularity, as though moved by some unseen cosmic clock. I knew that they shot at moving cars, shot at the unarmed, shot through the backs of men and claimed that it had been they who'd been under fire. These shooters were investigated, exonerated, and promptly returned to the streets, where, so emboldened, they shot again. At that point in American history, no police department fired its guns more than that of Prince George's County. The FBI opened multiple investigations—sometimes in the same week. The police chief was rewarded with a raise. I replayed all of this sitting in my car, in their clutches. Better to have been shot in Baltimore, where there was the justice of the streets and someone might call the killer to account. But these officers had my body, could do with my body whatever they pleased, and should I live to explain what they had done with it, this complaint would mean

nothing. The officer returned. He handed me back my license. He gave no explanation for the stop. (75-76)

The entire narrative of this country argues against the truth of who you are. (99)

I am sorry that I cannot make it okay. I am sorry that I cannot save you—but not that sorry. Part of me thinks that your very vulnerability brings you closer to the meaning of life, just as for others, the quest to believe oneself white divides them from it. The fact is that despite their dreams, their lives are also not inviolable. When their vulnerability becomes real—when the police decide that tactics intended for the ghetto should enjoy wider usage, when their armed society shoots down their children, when nature sends hurricanes against their cities—they are shocked in a way that those of us who were born and bred to understand cause and effect can never be. And I would not have you live like them. You have been cast into a race in which the wind is always at your face and the hounds are always at your heels. And to varying degrees this is true of all life. The difference is that you do not have the privilege of living in ignorance of this essential fact. (107)