



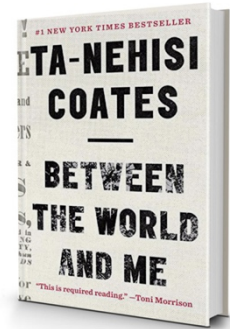
Under Review

Critical Readings of Texts that Matter for Collegiate Ministry

Between the World and Me

Ta-Nehisi Coates, 2015

Ta-Nehisi Coates takes the title of *Between the World and Me* from a phrase in a 1957 poem by Richard Wright, “White Man Listen!” wherein Wright finds the sooty evidence of a lynching as he makes his way through the woods. Something thrusts itself “between the world and me,” a blackened and abused black body. In her review, Toni Morrison advocates for the book to be “required reading,” that Coates’ writing fills the intellectual void left with the passing of James Baldwin in describing the predicament of living as a black male in America. With this book, Coates tries to make sense of how to live free despite every historical and contemporary efforts to deny black people “the right to secure and govern” their bodies and to have a sense of humanity.



Written as a letter to his fifteen-year-old son, Coates organizes his free-flowing prose in three sections, each introduced by excerpts from writers who were committed to expressing the condition of life in America for black people. Part I, the lengthiest, begins with a quote from Sonia Sanchez “Do not speak to me of martyrdom.” Coates illuminates the fear that is part of black life as fostered externally from “people who think they are white” and intra-racially from black people trying to gain some access to “the Dream.” Coates posits that systemic racism has accomplished its intention and created an environment “that makes your body breakable,” whether by parents, gangs, or governmental forces. His goal/his dream, as iterated by Malcolm X during the Civil Rights Movement, is: 1) to “preserve [his] life” and not martyr his black body for plunder and defilement and 2) to discern whether such a dream is actual myth for black people in America.

Coates journals from a family life of books and beatings to survival on the gang-controlled streets of his Baltimore neighborhood to his resistance of public school education to his personal discovery of Howard University in Washington, DC. Coates’ primary perspective of this premier academic institution is that “[t]he history, the location, the alumni combine to create The Mecca—the crossroads of the black diaspora” (40). In Part I, he begins the story of Howard University student Prince Jones, a born-again, private school-educated, beloved young man, who never veered from his golden path. This story becomes subplot leading to prove that the reality of structural racism between the world and him and his dream is so systemically entrenched as to be impermeable.

Part II begins with the words of Amiri Baraka: “We are beautiful people with African imaginations . . . we suffer and kill each other . . . and sprawl in grey chains” (73). The tracking and murder of Prince by a black police officer from Prince George’s County, MD—which borders Washington DC and a place where black people seemingly had access to the Dream—disrupts Coates’ quest to understand the world differently. Baldwin’s sad conclusive observation—that humanity has been brought “to the edge of oblivion” by those “who think they are white”—introduces Part III. In it, he focuses on what he learns from Prince’s mother, Dr. Mable Jones, whose hard work, social respectability, and Christian faith could not protect her son. He ends his journey, expressing the fear that he too lacks the ability to protect his own son (151-52).

Ta-Nehisi Coates is a national correspondent for *The Atlantic* and winner of several awards, including the 2015 National Book Award for *Between the World and Me*. Wishing that he had paid more attention in French class, he has moved with his wife and son to live in Paris, France, where he apparently believes that the black bodies of his family will find more protection. As his parents and grandparents did for him, he gifts his son with a “rejection of magic in all its forms” including “ideas of an afterlife” and of “preordained American glory” (12). As a child, experiencing the “great injustice of being forced to live in fear,” Coates could find no retreat in the church and its mysteries, no use for holiday celebrations, and no sense that a just God was on their side but rather understood that the universe was physical with a moral bent toward chaos (28).

Even the exhilarating search for a glorious black past in *The Mecca* confirmed this understanding. While learning about Chancellor Williams’ theory of the multi-millennial European plunder of Africa, Coates also learned about Queen Nzinga in Central Africa, who resisted the Portuguese for many years yet used one of her advisors as a chair when a Dutch ambassador refused her a seat. Coates found solidarity with her servant, whose black body, as all with whom he grew up, was plunder. He found confirmation that race is a construct but that power is power. In America, however, regardless of former ethnicity, white skin is power.

Depressing though his narrative may be, Coates’ ideology is not defeatist. Queen Nzinga’s action negated a wisdom he had learned from the struggle of the streets and of the ancestors’ acquisition of education, that you never willingly give up one of your own to the enemy. We struggle together. His son is named after Samori Toure, who for him embodied the African struggle against 19th century French colonization. Though Coates cannot offer his son any eternal reward, he believes “that the struggle, in and of itself, has meaning” (69), that while he cannot make it better “your very vulnerability brings you closer to the meaning of life” (107).

Between the World and Me was initially due for publication in the fall of 2015, but after the Charleston Massacre on June 17, 2015, its publication date was pushed to mid-July, the very same week of the Collegiate Summer Institute, held in Washington DC. Within two days, the book had sold out in stores there. In the wake of this event and others, including the police treatment of Freddie Gray in Baltimore and of a black teenaged girl in McKinney, Texas, the book partially explains how a twenty-one year old white male, Dylan Roof, felt duty-bound to enter the sacred space of an historical black church with the intent of murdering its people. Roof’s treatment in the aftermath, non-violent arrest, provision of a bulletproof vest, visit to Burger King, under the protection of police (none of which was afforded the innocent Prince Jones or any of the demographic of Coates’ own son) further demonstrated the solidarity and impermeability of structural racism.

The rush to publish may explain the brevity of Part III, wherein he interprets his visit with Prince’s mother, Dr. Mable Jones, an anesthesiologist. Never understanding her commitment to the church, yet yielding to the knowledge that Christian faith has somehow strengthened her (139), Coates agrees with her that Prince’s death was part of a “ritual violence” that allowed America to be built on the bodies of others (144). Coates, nevertheless, encourages his son to know, even as we cannot wait for others to come into consciousness, black bodies are precious, there is much to live for, and the world of black people, epitomized for him by *The Mecca*, is beautiful “no matter how brief and breakable” (146-7).

As a graduate of Coates' Mecca and working with students at Fisk University, this is the ultimate message and counter message—for young Blacks (like his son) to know that they are precious, body, *and* soul. They are fearfully and wonderfully made, created in the image of God who loves them. Their bodies are not meant for plunder but to be offered to the glory of God who struggles with us. Their black lives matter to a Savior who came for them to have abundant life with a hope for eternal life.

Additionally, as Toni Morrison has stipulated, *Between the World and Me* is required reading for any demographic, a literary piece that provides opportunity for those “who think they are white” to better understand the environment and intention of systemic, structural racism that was created to benefit them and has caused so many to cry out “White Man Listen!” and “Black Lives Matter!” It is a hard read, even done in bits and pieces, and should not to be done in collegiate ministry without the accompaniment of Scripture that can provide the hope so desperately needed. In reading and discussing this book, perhaps young people will come into consciousness and demonstrate that all lives do matter, taking actions to begin to resist and dismantle a structural system that seeks to destroy and kill those who live, move, and breathe in black bodies.

Reviewer Biography

Rev. Marilyn E. Thornton (Master of Divinity from Vanderbilt University, Master in Violin Peabody Conservatory of the Johns Hopkins University, Bachelor in Music History from Howard University) is the Campus Minister/Director of the Wesley Foundation at Fisk University in Nashville, TN. She has taught adjunct at Howard University (Washington, D.C.), Tennessee State, and Trevecca Nazarene Universities in Nashville. She served in pastoral appointments in the Tennessee Annual Conference. As the Lead Editor for African American Resources at The United Methodist Publishing House, Thornton provides leadership for the production of Bible studies and other resources that utilize African American history, culture, and experience as a springboard for development.

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