

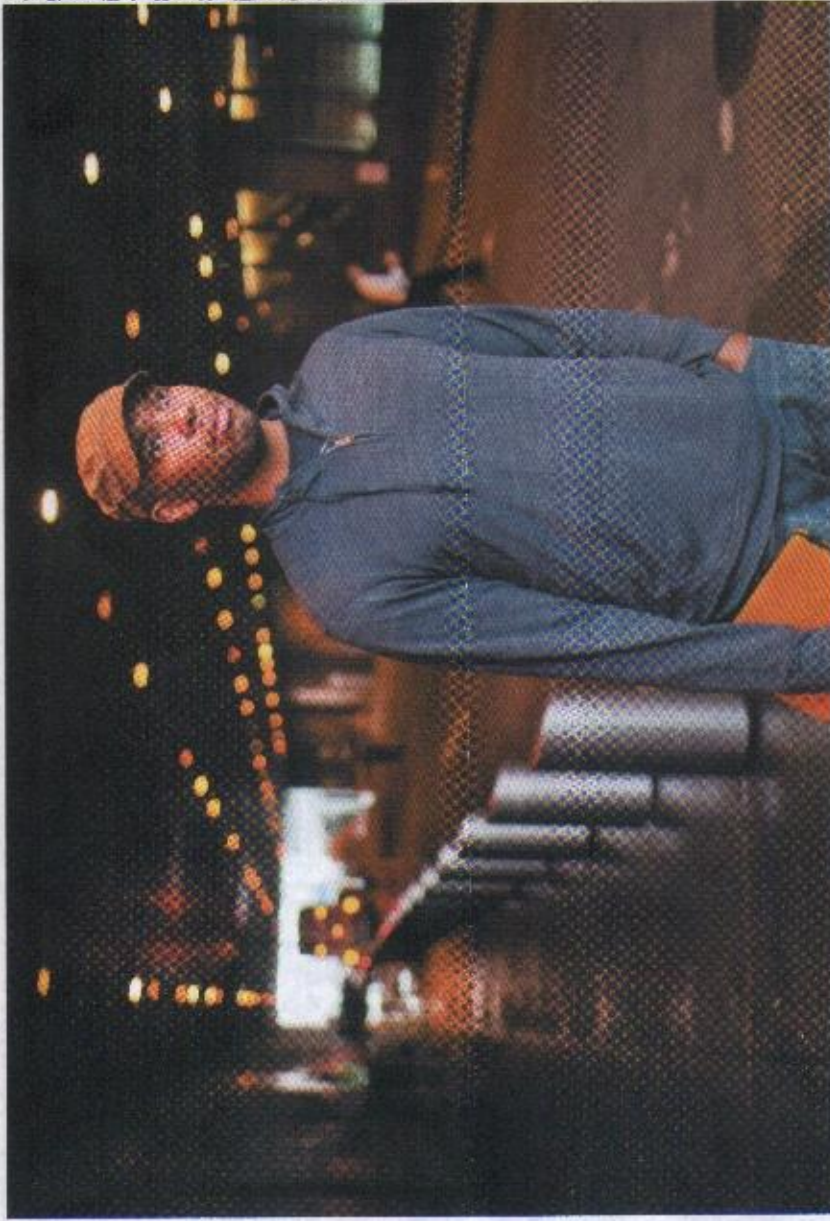
# The Anger of Ta-Nehisi Coates

Darryl Pinckney

**Between the World and Me** by Ta-Nehisi Coates. Spiegel and Grau, 152 pp., \$24.00

In Langston Hughes's "Let America Be America Again," a poem published in 1936, a narrator speaks for those who struggle—the poor white, the Negro bearing slavery's scars, the red man driven from the land, the immigrant clutching hope—and he offers the consolation, the defiance, of the young man, the farmer, the worker, united in demanding that America become "the dream the dreamers dreamed," "the land that never has been yet." Hughes addressed rallies of thousands in the Midwest and predicted that because the Depression had been so traumatic, mainstream America would go to the left politically. He got it wrong and spent the next two decades coping with the fallout, professionally, of having been sympathetic to communism.

Hughes was a panclist alongside Richard Wright at the National Negro Congress in Chicago in 1936, but two years later in "Blueprint for Negro Writing," Wright dismissed the Harlem Renaissance writers as part of the black literary tradition of prim ambassadors who "entered the Court of American Public Opinion dressed in the knee-pants of servility." Hughes was so identified with the Negro Awakening of the 1920s that he seemed to Wright to belong to an older generation, though there were only six years between them. Wright got his start publishing in leftist magazines and although he took the



Ta-Nehisi Coates, New York City, 2012

in 1935, Wright's narrator imagines the scene of a lynching:

*And one morning while in the woods I stumbled suddenly  
Stumbled upon it in a grassy clearing guarded by scaly oaks  
and elms.  
And the sooty details of the scene  
rose, thrusting themselves between the world and me....*

*There was a design of white bones  
slumbering forgotten upon a cushion of ashes.  
There was a charred stump of a sapling pointing a blunt finger accusingly at the sky.*

*fully, cooled by a baptism of gasoline.  
And in a blaze of red I leapt to the sky as pain rose like water, boiling my limbs.*

The poem's last line shifts to the present tense. The speaker is now dry bones, his face "a stony skull staring in yellow surprise at the sun."

Wright was not the first to treat the site of a lynching as a haunted place. Hughes himself wrote more than thirty poems about lynching, investigating the effects on families and communities. But "Between the World and Me" doesn't draw a moral from having contemplated the grisly scene. There is no promise of either redemption or

out, acceptance or repudiation. Do we stay in the US or go someplace else, blacks in the abolitionist societies of the 1830s debated. We spilled our blood here, so we're staying, most free blacks answered. Some people now say that maybe Booker T. Washington's urging black people to accommodate segregation saved black lives as he raised money to build black educational institutions. Marcus Garvey recast segregated life as the Back to Africa movement, a voluntary separatism, a black nationalism. W. E. B. Du Bois battled Garvey as he had Washington, but by 1933 Du Bois gave up on his militant integrationist strategies, resigned from the NAACP and *The Crisis* magazine, embraced black nationalism, and in 1935 published his landmark history, *Black Reconstruction in America*. Which is better: to believe that blacks will achieve full equality in American society or to realize that white racism is so deep that meaningful integration can never happen, so make other plans?

Wright was condescending about Hughes's gentle autobiography, *The Big Sea* (1940), as was Ralph Ellison, who, then in his Marxist phase, complained that the poet paid too much attention to the aesthetic side of experience. Ellison praised Wright's autobiography, *Black Boy* (1945), but the spectacular success of Wright's novel *Native Son* (1940) drove him to be as different from Wright as he could in *Invisible Man* (1952). They both broke with the Communist Party in the early 1940s but by themselves as opposites



and could envision in his early poetry black hands raised in fists together with those of white workers, the spirit of his revolt had very little of Hughes's Popular Front uplift. His feelings were much more violent.

In "Between the World and Me," a poem that appeared in *Partisan Review*

scene has woken up. "And a thousand faces swirled around me, clamoring that my life be burned." "They" had him; his wet body slipped and rolled in their hands as they bound him to the sapling and poured hot tar:

*Then my blood was cooled merci-*

the violence to the black man's body, on trying to get us to step into the experience of his "icy fear."

The black struggle in the US has a dualist tradition. It expresses opposing visions of the social destiny of black people. Up, down, all or nothing, in or

Wright moved to France in 1946 in the mood of an exile, the black intellectual alienated from US society, while Ellison remained at home, the artist sustained by what he saw as a black person's cultural ability to keep on keeping on.

In later years, Ellison remembered Wright, six years his senior, as a father



figure whom he had quickly outgrown. But Wright's example inspired the young James Baldwin to move to Paris in 1948. Wright was hurt when Baldwin declared his independence from the protest tradition by denouncing *Native Son*. Baldwin later defended his criticisms, arguing in part that Wright's concentration on defining his main character by the force of his circumstances sacrificed that character's humanity. Baldwin's turn would come in Leroy Jones's essay collection *Home* (1965), in which he sneered at Baldwin for being popular on the white liberal cocktail circuit. Worse was in store for Baldwin, the understanding queer in a time of narrow macho militancy.

Jones, on the verge of reinventing himself as Amiri Baraka, fumed about the "agomizing mediocrity" of the black literary tradition. For him, the Harlem Renaissance had been too white, and never mind that Hughes in his manifesto, "The Negro and the Racial Mountain," published in 1926, had proclaimed the determination of members of his generation of black writers to express their dark-skinned selves without apology. If black American history can be viewed as the troubled but irresistible progression of black people toward liberation, then it would appear that every generation of black writers redefines the black condition for itself, restates the matter in its own language. "There has always been an open season on Negroes.... You don't need a license to kill a Negro," Malcolm X said.

the great paradox that would haunt him to the end: Who among us would integrate into a burning house?

Coates's father was discharged from the military in 1967 when he was twenty-one and went to work as a baggage handler and cabin cleaner at the Baltimore airport. The early civil rights movement had taken place on television, southern and religious, remote from him. But his "new Knowledge" was his line drawn in the sand and to him Gandhi was "absurd" because "America was not a victim of great rot but the rot itself." Coates tells us that while reading newspapers left behind

James Baldwin



on planes from the West Coast, his father discovered the Black Panthers. "My father was overcome." In 1969, he offered himself to the Baltimore chapter, eventually becoming its head after

ship with and curiosity about words extended to his father's shelves. "That was how I found myself." He learned that his "name was a nation, not a target." "When I was done, I emerged taller, my voice was deeper, my arms were bigger, ancestors walked with me, and there in my hands, behold, Shango's glowing ax."

His father met his mother in what they saw as a revolution. They were the kind of parents who found summer programs to put the kids in, college prep classes to enroll them in, and decent high schools outside their school district, and they started practice sessions for the SAT. They not only showed up at PTA meetings, they sat on Coates's classes when they felt they had to. And it wasn't just them. His coming-of-age story includes teachers who also had been changed by the revolution in black consciousness. The school facilities were inadequate, but the teachers pushed students who didn't understand what they were talking about when they begged them not to waste their chances. All that mattered in Coates's high school world were girls, clothes, the mall, territory, styling, fights, gangs, homies, reputation, staying alive in West Baltimore, and the music. Black male adolescence had its soundtrack.

When Coates put his hand in his English teacher's face, Coates's father came to school and knocked his son down:

My father swung with the power of an army of slaves in revolt. He

## Mezz Mezzrow's remarkable memoir is back in print



Mezz Mezzrow was a boy from Chicago who learned to play the sax in reform school and pursued a life in music and a life of crime. He moved from Chicago to New Orleans to New York, working in brothels and bars, bootlegging, dealing drugs, getting hooked, doing time, producing records, and playing with the greats, among them Louis Armstrong, Bix Beiderbecke, and Fats Waller.

*Really the Blues*, the jive-talking memoir that Mezzrow wrote at the insistence of, and with the help of, the novelist Bernard Wolfe, is the story of an unusual and unusually American



ism and the wisdom of not believing America's promises form part of Tamehiti Coates's intellectual inheritance from his father. Not only is Coates's memoir *The Beautiful Struggle* (2008) a moving father-and-son story, it is an intense portrait of those whom the black revolution left behind, but who never broke faith with its tenets nonetheless:

Even then, in his army days, Dad was more aware than most. Back in training he'd scuffled with a Native American soldier, who tried to bet-ter his social standing by airing out the unit's only black. After they were pulled apart, Dad walked up to his room, calmed down, and then returned to the common area. On a small table, he saw a copy of *Black Boy*. He just knew someone was fucking with him. But he picked up the book....

In Richard Wright, Dad found a literature of himself. He'd read *Manchild in the Promised Land* and *Another Country*, but from Wright he learned that there was an entire shadow canon, a tradition of writers who grabbed the pen, not out of leisure but to break the chain....

Now he began to come to. When on leave, he stopped at book stands in search of anything referencing his own. He read Malcolm's memoir, and again saw some of his own struggle, and now began to feel things he'd, like us all, long repressed—the subtle, prodding sense that he was seen as less. He went back to Baldwin, who posed

moving guns.

Three years later the Panthers were falling apart, an organization wrecked by the FBI, paranoia, arrests, purges, factional disputes, murder. His father, Coates writes, was not the insurrectionary/suicidal type and his chapter had been more like a commute. "When he woke in the morning he thought not of guns but of oil, electricity, water, rent, and groceries." Local chapters had financed themselves through the sale of the Panther newspaper and after every Panther chapter except the one in Oakland had been shut, initiatives such as free breakfast for children or clothing distribution programs stopped. Foot soldiers were left to languish in prisons; damaged souls lost the refuge, the fantasy, of hanging out with the revolution. The remaining national leadership harassed Coates's father when he quit, but he "left the Panthers with a basic belief system, a religion that he would pass on to his kids."

Coates says that his father, a survivor, was more suited to the real world than he knew and he founded his own propaganda machine, including a bookstore, printer, and publisher, calling it the George Jackson Movement, after the Black Panther who was shot trying to escape from Soledad prison. His father's storefront was the church that Coates, born in 1975, grew up in, forced to study works of black history known only on the black side of town.

But it was music that set him on the path to consciousness, knowledge. Coates was twelve when he heard Eric B. & Rakim's "Lyrics of Fury." From trying to write his own rap, his relation-

the world was closing in and cornering him, like he was trying to save my life. I was upstairs crying myself to sleep, when they held a brief conference. The conference consisted of only one sentence that mattered—Cheryl, who would you rather do this: me or the police?"

Coates says that it took him a while to realize how different his family was. They boycotted Thanksgiving, and fasted instead. Most of his friends were fatherless, around him the young were getting locked up, dying of gunshots, and crack brought the end of the world. His father's Afrocentric publishing business succeeded somewhat, but he also did what he had to, including bookkeeping. He held on to jobs as a janitor at Morgan State, a black college, and as a research librarian at Howard University, some ways away in Washington, D.C., just so his children could have free tuition. "What did I know, what did I know/of love's austere and lonely offices?" Robert Hayden asks himself in his poem about his father, "Those Winter Sundays." But Coates dedicates *The Beautiful Struggle* to his mother. His father had a few children by other women. One year he became a father by two women at the same time.

In his writings, Baldwin stressed that the Negro Problem, like whiteness, existed mostly in white minds, and in *Between the World and Me*, Coates wants his son, to whom he addresses himself, to know this, that white people are a modern invention. "Race is the child of racism, not the father." He admits that he is haunted by his father's generation, by a sense

freely across racial boundaries when few could or did, "the odyssey of an individualist... the saga of a guy who wanted to make friends in a jungle where everyone was too busy making money."

← Really the Blues returns us... to the roots of rock, to the roots certainly of beat and hence to the beginnings of the sixties counterculture through an extended look into the life of a Jewish boy... who turned his back on the middle class and all it had to offer to blow jazz in 'more creep joints and speakeasies and dancehalls than the law allows."  
—Brooke Horvath, *Review of Contemporary Fiction*

→ "An autobiography such as was never seen before beneath the moon." —Ben Ray Redman, *The American Mercury*

## REALLY THE BLUES

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