

The Anger of Ta-Nehisi Coates

Darryl Pinckney

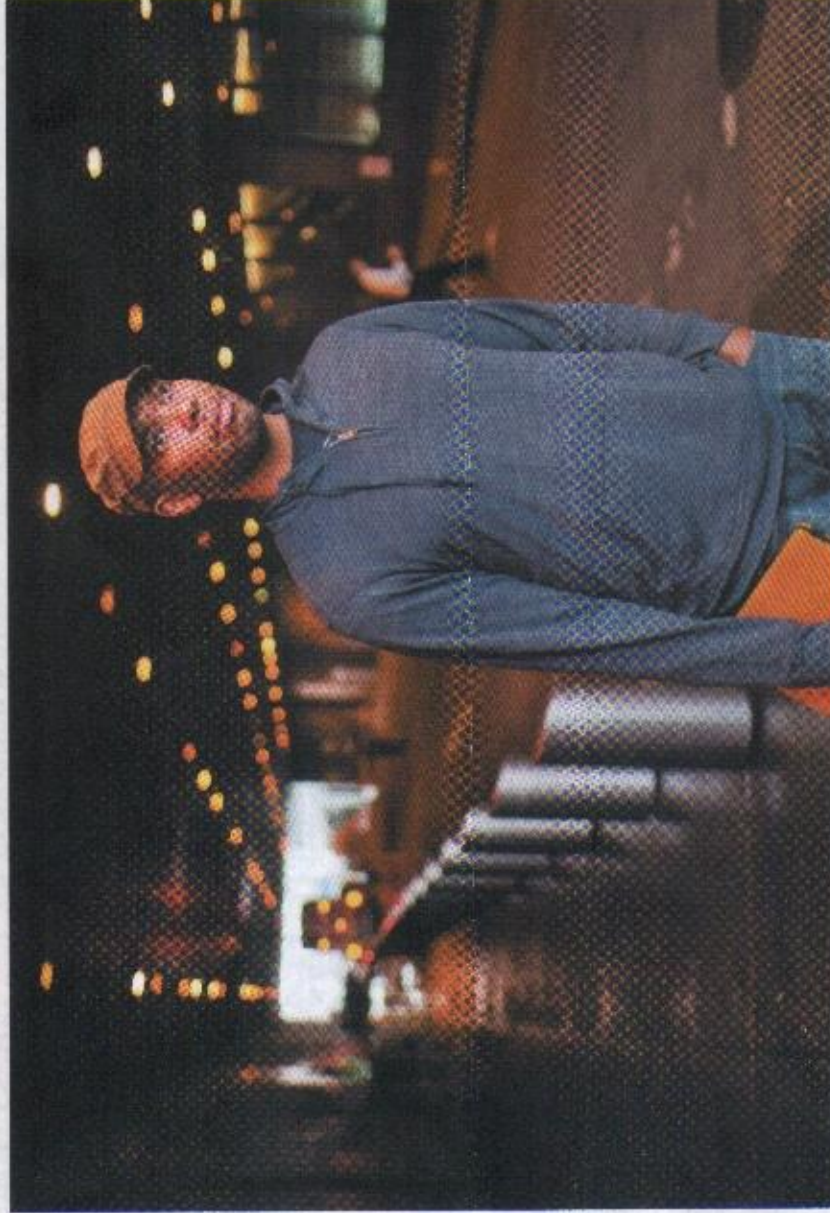
Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates. Spiegel and Grau, 152 pp., \$24.00

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

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



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

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

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



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

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

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

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 commune. "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-

ism and the wisdom of not believing America's promises form part of Tameki 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 on 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

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*

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if not of failure then of something left unfinished. He wants to go back. He named his son after Samori Touré, the nineteenth-century Islamic ruler who resisted French colonial rule in West Africa, writing, "The Struggle is in your name."

The struggle is what he has to bequeath to his son and although he tells him that he hasn't had to live with the fear that Coates himself did at age fifteen, he's sure his son understands that there is no difference between him and Trayvon Martin as a youth at risk because he is black in America. His body is not his own; it is not secure. He can be destroyed by American society and no one will be held responsible.

In American history Coates finds the answer to why he believes the progress of those who think themselves white was built on violence and looting, on stolen black bodies. People were Jewish or Welsh before they were white. The Irish used to be black socially, meaning at the bottom. The gift of being white helped to subdue class antagonism. Coates wants his son to know that government of the people had not included his family before, that American democracy is self-congratulatory and white people forgive the torture, theft, and enslavement on which the country was founded.

The way Coates himself grew up was the result of policy, of centuries of rule by fear. Death could come out of the afternoon, in the form of a boy who idly pulled a gun on him. Fear and violence were the weaponry of his schools as well as his streets:

I think back on those boys now and all I see is fear, and all I see is them girding themselves against the ghosts of the bad old days when the Mississippi mob gathered 'round their grandfathers so that the branches of the black body might be lorched then cut away.

one's eyes and forgetting the work of one's hands.

Coates is glad that his son is black. "The entire narrative of this country argues against the truth of who you are." The experience of being black gives a deeper understanding of life than that afforded to those stuck in the Dream. "They made us into a race. We made ourselves into a people." For Coates, black history is "our own Dream."

In *The Fire Next Time* (1963), Coates's literary model for *Between the World and Me*, Baldwin addresses his nephew and tells him early on that "you can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a nigger." Baldwin's polemic is unforgiving of America. He then goes on to describe the frustration of black people through a visit to the Chicago headquarters of the separatist Nation of Islam. In *The Fire This Time* (2007), a memoir of being black and gay in the South, Randall Kenan addresses his nephew, telling him that there is much discussion about what it means to be black and that as bad as things still are, a new class of "black folk" has emerged, the "bourgeois bohemian," "a black intelligentsia given new and larger wings by meritocracy." Coates, however, is confessing to his son that he, his father, cannot ultimately protect him.

He is aware of the anger in him and recalls that when his son was five they were leaving a movie theater on the Upper West Side and he nearly went off on a white woman

Coates's lack of belief in "agency," why he sees us at the mercy of historical forces, is explained by the case of a Howard classmate, Prince Jones, a Born Again Christian and the son of a physician, who in 1993 was killed by a police officer who had stopped his jeep in suburban Maryland. The policeman was the only witness to what happened, which was never fully explained. The Prince George's County cop who shot Jones and the prosecutor who declined to prosecute him were both black. The population in that county is overwhelmingly black. To move to this black suburb represented a step up for blacks in Baltimore.

tion of the Internet was the invention of space travel." Coates's wife fell in love with Paris and the French language and then so did he, he says, and without thinking of Wright or Baldwin. Or Sartre or Camus, he adds. For Coates, writing is his alternative country.

Coates is in a very recognizable tradition, but that tradition is not static. Wright warned the white men of the West not to be too proud of their easy conquest of Africa and Asia. Baldwin invoked retribution of biblical magnitude if America did not end its racial nightmare. For Coates, it's too late, given the larger picture. He speculates that now that the American Dreamers are plundering "not just the bodies of humans but the body of the Earth itself," "something more awful than all our African ancestors is rising with the seas."

He takes away America's uniqueness. Human history is full of people who oppressed other people. To be white now has no meaning divorced from "the machinery of criminal power." Is it a problem that Coates comes across as entirely reasonable in his refusal in this book to expect anything anymore, socially or politically? Harold Cruse's anger against the betrayal of black nationalism in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967) led him to tell off both the black activist and the white Communist in the strongest language possible. Coates is nearly as fed up as Cruse, but his disillusionment is a provocation: it's all your fault, Whitey.



Robert Ellison, Harlem, New York, 1947; photograph by Gordon Parks

The Gordon Parks Foundation

And maybe it is his understanding of this fear that lets Coates explain in an exculpatory fashion the severe beatings he regularly got from his father. Meanwhile, television sent him dispatches from another world of blueberry pies and immaculate bathrooms. He sensed that "the Dream out there," the endless suburbia of "unworried boys," was connected somehow to his fear.

Certain people will do anything to preserve the Dream. They want to believe that the past has little effect on the present. As Coates puts it:

"We would prefer to say such people cannot exist, that there aren't any," writes Solzhenitsyn. "To do evil a human being must first of all believe that what he's doing is good, or else that it's a well-considered act in conformity with natural law." This is the foundation of the Dream—its adherents must not just believe in it but believe that it is just, believe that their possession of the Dream is the natural result of grit, honor, and good works.... The mettle that it takes to look away from the horror of our prison system, from police forces transformed into armies, from the long war against the black body, is not forged overnight. This is the practiced habit of jabbing out

who shoved his son because he wasn't moving fast enough. He got into a shouting match with the white parents around him and then agonized over his uncool behavior. "I have never believed it would be okay." The future was in our hands, Baldwin warned.

Coates wants his son's life to be different from his, for him to escape the fear. He is pained by his son's disappointment when the announcement comes that no charges would be lodged against Michael Brown's killer in Ferguson. Coates urges his son to struggle, but not for the American Dreamers, their whiteness being "the deathbed of us all." Coates remembers how "out of sync" he felt with the city on September 11, 2001. Race may be a construct, but his resentment at its damage is deep. He also says that he has never felt comfortable with the rituals of grieving in the black community. His parents weren't just nonreligious, they were anti-Christian.

Some critics of *Between the World and Me* have noted that Coates offers no hope, or doesn't believe that black people can shape their future. "It is the responsibility of free men to trust and to celebrate what is constant—birth, struggle, and death are constant, and so is love," Baldwin said. Maybe

In the militant writing of the 1960s, on sale in his father's bookstore and what Coates read in the library he loved at Howard, the aim was to get black and to stay black, to be on your guard against the corruption of assimilation. Rejection of the American dream—middle-class life—was implicit. As a cultural inheritance, authentic blackness became a form of ownership and intellectual capital for Coates's hip-hop generation. You could get paid and still keep it real. Malcolm X was their hero. They didn't believe in nonviolence. Telling it like it is, Malcolm X style, was the way to stay sane. Social hope was for clowns. You must not fall for it. Protect yourself. This is more than skepticism. To be resigned means you are not in danger of being anyone's fool.

Coates writes in an intellectual landscape without the communism or Pan-Africanism that once figured in debate as alternatives to what white America seemed to offer. Hip-hop nationalism—of Coates's time, say, KRS-One, Public Enemy, or the Wu-Tang Clan—has none of the provincialism of 1960s black nationalism. Coates says that he understands both Frederick Douglass, who advised blacks to remain in the US, and Martin Delany, who led a group of blacks to Liberia. What it means to be black still changes from place to place. "For a young man like me, the inven-

but to address an audience beyond black people is to be still attempting to communicate and enlighten. No author of a book on this subject can be filled with as much hopelessness as the black writer who no longer sees the point in anyone offering a polemic against racist America.

Du Bois never knew his father. He lived from the year the freedmen were enfranchised to the day before the March on Washington, and died a Communist in African exile. Hughes hated his father, an engineer who lived in Mexico in order to get away from Jim Crow. Wright's sharecropper father abandoned the family. Ellison was two years old when his father died. Baldwin pitied the preacher who was really his stepfather. Baraka's father was a postal supervisor, middle-class and in New Jersey.

Baraka gave a eulogy for Baldwin after his death, in part because he had become unpopular with whites late in his career. Baldwin turned out to have had Wright's career, that of the engaged black writer. But he admired Ellison, who chose his art over being a spokesman, and never finished his second novel. Baldwin's biographer, James Campbell, remembered that after he ran into Ellison at the Newport Jazz Festival, Baldwin said, "Ralph Ellison is so angry he can't live." □