TA-NEHISI COATES

BETWEEN THE WORLD AND ME

2016 Readers Guide
The KU community looks forward to reading Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me* with you. It is a challenging book that explores social justice, inequity, and oppression in American society.

Coates’ work is particularly timely for college students, as schools across the country work to become more inclusive and equitable institutions.

The book is an opportunity. An opportunity for you to participate in conversation and work that are refining who we are. An opportunity to intellectually engage with difficult topics that will help us build our capacities for empathy and understanding. An opportunity to help KU become a better place for all.

Above all else, *Between the World and Me* is an opportunity to do the most important and essential work required of any person who would call themselves educated: self-work, which is a process of not only learning new information but examining that which you learned before.

While you are ultimately responsible for the work that needs to be done, we are going to support you as you read this book. Resources, including this guide, will help you meet the challenges it presents, and you will find space and time to share with and hear from others reading the book.
We thank the students, faculty, and staff who have worked tirelessly to raise awareness and consciousness about social justice at KU. We honor your work and greater commitment to the university. You made this Common Book choice possible.
Ta-Nehisi Coates is a master of capturing empathy. He does this first in the form of the work — a letter to his son — and secondly (and strikingly) in his repetition of the word “body.”

This repetition is purposeful; it catches our attention because of what it stands for. No matter what color our bodies are, no matter what our bodies contain, we all have them: our sisters, our mothers, our fathers, our brothers. More than anything, this book is a call to respect every body, despite whatever prejudices or ideas we may hold.
Americans believe in the reality of ‘race’ as a defined, indubitable feature of the natural world. page 7

I think this quote perfectly captures Coates’ mindset, which is shared by many Americans: that America is a place where categorizing people is the norm.

In my everyday life, I interact with people from different countries. They naturally have much different vantage points. I often hear people say that they never thought of themselves as “white” or “black” before coming to America.
The boy with the small eyes reached into his ski jacket and pulled out a gun. I recall it in the slowest motion, as though in a dream. There the boy stood, with the gun brandished, which he slowly untucked, tucked, then untucked once more, and in his small eyes I saw a surging rage that could, in an instant, erase my body. That was 1986.
In my nearly 50 years of living here in Kansas, there have been a couple of occasions where I, as my mother would say, “ran into boys looking for trouble.”

Both times involved young adults with firearms. Both times, no one was injured.

For me, these incidents made me understand how precious life can be. For some, the thought of violence happens every day.

It's the idea that violence comes to a physical body like rain, unprepared and unexpected.

When your mind must work to protect its body from violence, where do your thoughts go from there?
This passage captures the challenges of young men who are developing their sense of manhood. The narrative that a man must be strong, independent, and stand his ground is clear here.

He also highlights the contradictions and the mixed messages young people receive on masculinity. Coates tells his story from an intersectional lens where his race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, and other identities factor in the way that he experiences masculinity.

His identities intersect and shape who he is. I found his narrative to be similar to the process I experienced as I developed my own sense of masculinity.

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was toxic. The water stunted our growth. We could not get out.

A year after I watched the boy with the small eyes pull out a gun, my father beat me for letting another boy steal it. Two years later, he beat me for threatening my mother. Being violent enough could cost me my body.
A year after I watched the boy with the small eyes pull out a gun, my father beat me for letting another boy steal from me. Two years later, he beat me for threatening my ninth-grade teacher. Not being violent enough could cost me my body. Being too violent could cost me my body. page 28
Malcolm was the first political pragmatist I knew, the first honest man I’d ever heard. He was unconcerned with making the people who believed they were white comfortable in their belief. If he was angry, he said so. If he hated, he hated because it was human for the enslaved to hate the enslaver, natural as Prometheus hating the birds. He would not turn the other cheek for you. He would not be a better man for you. He would not be your morality. Malcolm spoke like a man who was free, like a black man above the laws that proscribed our imagination.
The first thing that strikes me about this passage is the beauty of the language.

The phrase “natural as Prometheus hating the birds” is simple, beautiful, and devastating. It kept popping into my head even after I had finished the book.

I have been fortunate enough in my life to never have experienced a real physical attack, but this passage helps me to think about what that would be like, to have your physical self assaulted, and to have that happen repeatedly. It helps me to better understand the anger that Coates expresses throughout the book.

This passage also makes me think about what it means to be free. Coates talks about freedom as being able to speak and think as a full person, to express oneself honestly, rather than in response or deference to others.

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This book was very powerful and transformative for me. In reading this particular line, I had to pause and remember that, even as a woman of color, I too collude and participate in a system of privilege that may cause or has caused harm to others.

I know I’ve acted in ways that have been harming to people who are gay, trans, or have disabilities. As director of the Office of Multicultural Affairs, I am not perfect, but I make a conscious effort daily to recognize my privileges and to use them to uplift marginalized voices.
But perhaps I too had the capacity for plunder, maybe I would take another human’s body to confirm myself in a community.
The need to forgive the officer would not have moved me, because even then, in some inchoate form, I knew that Prince was not killed by a single officer so much as he was murdered by his country and all the fears that have marked it from birth.
In this passage, Coates is talking about the murder of one of his college friends by a police officer, reflecting on the system in place in the U.S. that allows police officers to kill black men with impunity.

Activists have been making this point for years, but members of the general public continue to dismiss their arguments, stating that such racism no longer exists, quoting cliché post-racial and color-blindness statements.

I chose this passage because Coates manages to express in very simple terms how institutional racism continues to oppress black men. While the police officer is the one who pulled the trigger, society and its leaders are the ones who murdered his friend.

I hope this passage will lead incoming students to question the status quo and think about how a system that they have been made to believe is fair reproduces a particular social order.
At times, the best we can muster is the immediate self-preservation of the body but never a long lasting solution.

Coates connects the casual cumulative energy expended in being Black to the eventual breakdown of our bodies — “breakdown of our bodies” meaning the lack of energy and resources to truly care for ourselves and sustain our lives.
This need to be always on guard was an unmeasured expenditure of energy, the slow siphoning of the essence. It contributed to the fast breakdown of our bodies. So I feared not just the violence of this world but the rules designed to protect you from it, the rules that would have you contort your body to address the block, and contort again to be taken seriously by colleagues, and contort again so as not to give the police a reason.
You were almost five years old. The theater was crowded, and when we came out we rode a set of escalators down to the ground floor. As we came off, you were moving at the dawdling speed of a small child. A white woman pushed you and said, “Come on!”
At one point in the book, Coates and Samori are in a crowd, and an older white woman puts her hands on Samori because he is in her way. Coates comes very close to pushing her away and then stops himself.

This vignette crystallized so many things for me. First, it brought home the freedom — the privilege — that the woman had to believe she possessed; to know that she could put her hands on Samori with near-impunity. Had it been me with my child, this likely would have been a very different experience: I probably would have gotten looks of sympathy from others, and the woman who pushed my child would have likely experienced some nonverbal recrimination.

Second, Coates’ reaction, followed by the reaction of the crowd and his subsequent decision not to fight back, probably took no more than a few seconds. Those seconds, though, encapsulate the history of the black experience, one in which the body is always at risk and that the best chance of survival lies in hyper vigilance and — if an aggressor is white — restraint. Because, if you physically confront a white person, your version of events will not prevail.
The Mecca is a machine, crafted to
capture and concentrate dark energy
of all African peoples and inject
directly into the student body.
The Mecca derives its power from
Howard University, which in Jim
Crow days enjoyed a near-monopoly
on black talent.

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I attended a predominately white institution, in many ways far removed from the “Black Mecca” that Coates experienced at Howard.

However, my time in college absolutely helped set the course for the rest of my life. In some ways, my thoughts about the world and my place in it were affirmed by my institution; in other ways, I was challenged to sort out my own reality. It wasn’t always comfortable and it certainly wasn’t easy. The pursuit of knowledge and the experiences anyone embraces during their tenure in school are a portal to greater discovery.
Coates develops his idea of “The Mecca” as the wildly exciting and nurturing center of his college career at Howard University.

Notice that the university, much as he admires it, is not itself The Mecca. Instead the relationships built by those there — supporting, loving, and challenging each other — engage his imagination and define how The Mecca works.

Howard University is, of course, a leading Historically Black College or University or HBCU. The University of Kansas is a leading state university and is what the great sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva calls an Historically White College or University (HWCU) attempting to become more meaningfully inclusive.

What are the challenges of building a mecca here without relying entirely on the university to do it for us?
#KUcommonbook

Join the conversation online. Use the hashtag to ask questions and share your response. We’ll be there all summer to offer support and resources as you read.

Join the conversation on campus. Common Book discussions will bring together students, faculty, and staff to discuss the book. Watch your email for announcements of locations.

📅 1–2:30 p.m. Sunday, Aug. 21.

If you are a person with a print-based disability, please register with the Academic Achievement and Access Center (AAAC), and they will provide you with an accessible version of *Between the World and Me*. The AAAC can be reached by emailing achieve@ku.edu or calling 785-864-4064.
Ta-Nehisi Coates is a national correspondent for The Atlantic and the author of the No. 1 New York Times bestseller *Between the World and Me*, a finalist for the National Book Award. A MacArthur “Genius Grant” fellow, Coates has received the National Magazine Award, the Hillman Prize for Opinion and Analysis Journalism, and the George Polk Award for his cover story “The Case for Reparations” in The Atlantic. He lives in New York with his wife and son.

(Material provided by Random House)
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