***Between the World and Me* Ta-Nehisis Coates. New York, One World, c2015.**

**Thesis**: Everyone must find their own place in the world but the members of the black community have an additional obstacle—they must find their own way to be black and live within the black bodies that society is bent on destroying.

Coates wrote a letter to his son, Samori, instructing Samori to find his way to be black and live within his black body. This book is not about transcendence. It is a chronicle of Ta-Nehisi Coates’ search to find a place in the world and his instruction to his son on how he should do the same. Coates provides readers with a brief analysis of racism and his thoughts about what it is to be born a black man. He believes that racism is a construct of white society developed for keeping the white community in power. White society cannot maintain supremacy unless there are others to oppress. “But race is the child of racism, not the father. The process of naming *‘the people* ‘have never been a matter of genealogy and physiognomy so much as one of hierarchy.” (Coates, 7) Coates did not write a narrative on what to do about racism. He instructs his readers to seek the answer to the question of our humanity. Coates cannot provide that answer to us. We who desire change must respond to the problem of racism for ourselves. The antidote to racism is to ask and answer the question, *what* *does it mean to be human?*

**Early Years**

*Between the World and Me* presents the author’s answers. Ta-Nehisi Coates’s shared his search to solve this question in a letter to his adolescent son. Coates tells his son and his readers the story of his seeking of knowledge to explain his experience of the world. His search began within his Baltimore, Maryland home. His parents found their answers, and they sought to impart their remedies and guidance to him. Paul Coates, his father, was a Vietnam Veteran, former Black Panther, Howard University Research Librarian, and founder of African American Press Publishers. It was from his father that he absorbed the love of reading and books. His mother, Cheryl Lynn, was a teacher who taught him the craft and love of writing by providing him with the instruction and the discipline of writing essays. She also asked him to look into his misbehavior in school. She knew her son was curious, and the classroom could not feed or nurture his inquiring mind.

The author gained a healthy respect for his family, but felt an undercurrent of fear from the knowledge that somehow, he, his family, and his neighborhood were different from what he saw displayed on his living room television set. Coates felt a mixture of love and discipline from his father as well as the raw fear of the street mixed with the fear of police brutality*.*

To be black in the Baltimore of my youth was to be asked before the elements of the world, before all the guns, fists, knives, crack, rape, and disease. The nakedness is not an error, nor pathology. The nakedness is the correct and intended result of policy, the predictable upshot of people forced for centuries to live under fear. The law did not protect and now, in your time, the law has become an excuse for stopping and frisking you. which is to say to further the assault on your body. (Coates, 17)

Coates’ narrative goes on to explain the search for who he was. He was neither a youth of the street, nor a willing participant in the classroom. He found refuge in his father’s books and his mother’s instructions to use writing to examine who he was. Ingrained in him was a need for survival—a need to protect his body—a body that he learned to honor and appreciate. He knew that he was as good as anyone else and adhered to the philosophy and teachings of Malcom X.  Malcom X was a Black Muslim, but religion did not appeal to the author. Coates was reared as an atheist and has remained so, without apology. His Mecca was Howard University.

**Years at Howard and Beyond**

Many of the author’s family were graduates of Howard University, and in a sense, the author was also, although he did not graduate from Howard University, he was an alumnus of his Mecca. “I was admitted to Howard University but formed and shaped by the Mecca. The institutions are related but not the same. Howard University is an institution of higher education…. The Mecca is a machine crafted to capture and concentrate the dark energy of all African people and inject it directly into the student body.” (Coates, 40)

It was at Howard that Coates learned to appreciate the people and the talents of the Black world. His world began to expand, but it was not the classroom walls that broadened his views but the books and documents upon the shelves of the Mooreland-Springarn Research Center. The books and their authors caught his attention by their various and often conflicting theories and themes.

Howard University and its people pulled him into a broader world of literature and poetry. He visited the surrounding spaces of fellow seekers. He wrote poetry that described his surroundings and feelings. He was pulled out from Black Nationalism but not pushed into the world of people that he identified as “Dreamers. Dreamers believed that the American Dream is true for *all* people. Coates disagrees. The United States was built on the enslavement of black bodies and a belief in White supremacy. The position of White supremacy allows and encourages the destruction and oppression of people of color.”

The author does not deny that he and other Blacks have risen from and escaped the ghettos and now live a more fluent economic life.  What the author does say is that the idea of “Liberty and Justice for All”is a myth. That this country’s society never believed it, never allowed it, and continues to deny the so-called American Dream to many.

Within the pages *of Between the World* *and Me,*Coates recounts his dating days and his marriage to Kenyatta Matthews. He describes how she encouraged him to continue searching for a meaningful life and persuaded him to travel and work abroad. After the author visited Paris on his own, she and their son accompanied him on later trips to France. The author affirms that it was rearing his son that provided the compass for his continuing journey.

Part III: Last Lines

*Between the World and Me ends with the*lines, “Through the windshield, I saw the mark of these ghettos-the abundance of beauty shops, churches, liquor stores, and crumbling housing- and I felt that old fear. Through the windshield, I saw the rain coming down in sheets.’ Coates (p. 152) As one comes to the end of Coates’ narrative, one must sit quietly and reflect on his story. The discussion and description of the death and funeral of the author’s college friend and acquaintance, Prince Jones, is a symbol and example of how society viewed and continues to view Black people.

Coates pointed out that he continues to seek a way to live within a black body that society is bent on destroying. The author realizes that his son must come to the realization that Michael Brown’s killers are free just as Coates’ own dealing with the so-called accidental death of Prince Jones painted this same circle.

There is a Gospel Song, titled “Will the Circle go Unbroken.”  Gospel Music is a significant part of the Black Church, but the author points out that he was not raised within the church and has not found solace there. This book’s narrative shares the author’s experience of finding a place in the world and it shows his concern for that same journey that his son must make. (See Front Flap.)

**A Question of Racism**

Coates asked, what is it that society and individuals fear? Human beings have been enslaved, segregated, jailed, and killed without a second thought. American Citizens have been demonized and locked away in concentration camps.

The author advises readers to examine American History. Exactly what is racism? Is it being repulsed by facial features, skin color, or is it something more?  Coates shows that racism inflicts humiliation and devalues others. The concept of “other” is a label that society manufactures when it considers an individual or a group of individuals unacceptable and unsuitable.  Others are those who do not fit society’s strictures of what it means to be human and worthy. When a group or a member of a group is deemed unworthy or inhuman, a given community will not hesitate to destroy these “others.”

**An afterthought**

The book’s front flap refers to a poem titled “Black Man’s Burden.” That poem referred me to Rudyard Kipling’s “White Man’s Burden.” As I read the “White Man’s Burden,” I was reminded of the bitter irony the poem evokes now: that white oppression is all for the good of the non-whites. So, when Mr. Coates took his family to France. He notes that even though France might have served as a refuge for Black Americans at certain times, that fact does not erase the scourge of French Colonialism in Africa and Vietnam.