

## FROM THE INSTRUCTOR

In the final essay for WR 100: “Reading Disaster: #FergusonSyllabus,” students were asked to use a problem or question from Ta-Nehisi Coates’s challenging new book, *Between the World and Me*, as their motivation for a conversation across multiple exhibit and argument sources. Here, Ria examines contemporary media depictions of black life (and death) alongside Coates’s difficult advice to his teenaged son to embrace the struggle that he sees as the lot of black Americans. She finds that these depictions often fail to acknowledge struggle, a narrative that might serve to humanize such victims of systemic racism as Trayvon Martin and Oscar Grant. This alone would be a worthwhile exercise, but Ria takes her argument further by considering how other texts we read or watched during the semester present a more honest view of “black experience that is free of selective historical amnesia.” While Bill O’Reilly might be an easy target in such a conversation, Ria displays a fundamental respect for all her sources. She is a complex thinker and a beautiful prose stylist, grappling with nuance, while remaining attentive to the sonic and rhythmic possibilities of syntax and diction.

Jessica Bozek  
WR 100: Reading Disaster

## FROM THE WRITER

This was a paper born of frustration. Written as my final essay for Professor Jessica Bozek's WR 100 section, "Reading Disaster," its contents were a culmination of all the injustice and racial politics that we had spent the semester dissecting. What most agitated me, I believe, was the concept of respectability politics—the idea that a black person's life must meet certain standards of behavior in order to be considered valuable. We'd picked at this topic throughout the semester, but for me, Ta-Nehisi Coates's dismissal of the American Dream in *Between the World and Me* was what truly brought it into focus. It was through his work that I addressed my frustration, tackling the notion of the Dream where I most often saw it: threaded across the American media.

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REETU VARADHAN  
*Prize Essay Award*

## AMERICAN MEDIA AND THE DREAM IN TA-NEHISI COATES'S *BETWEEN THE WORLD AND ME*

Ta-Nehisi Coates's essay *Between the World and Me* is at once a cautionary tale, a bildungsroman, and an analysis of contemporary American society. Written as a letter to his fifteen-year-old son, Coates uses his own adolescence and young adulthood as a means to communicate the reality of existing as a black man in America, thus creating what appears to be a how-to guide for the young black American. But this summation is surface level. Despite its epistolary form, *Between the World and Me* caters to an ambiguous audience; Coates himself claims that he "didn't set out to accumulate a mass of white fans" (León 1), but his surprisingly extensive white readership raises the question: What message would *Between the World and Me*, a letter from a black man to a black teenager, carry for a white reader? One answer is Coates's implicit suggestion that white people, and by extension the American media, should learn to discuss black life via black struggle instead of the inherently racist American Dream. This switch, however, is not offered as a solution to racism; rather, *Between the World and Me* serves as a call-out to the largely white media on their perpetuation of a quintessentially racist ideal, regardless of whether or not Coates explicitly intended for it to do so.

The keystone facet to Coates's description of the black American's reality is his separation of black Americans from so-called Dreamers—i.e., those who can and do follow the American Dream, which purports that the ultimate goal of life is a nuclear family, white and suburban with two-point-five children. Coates almost immediately dismisses the notion of a Dream that is accessible to black people; he cites that though "for so long [he] . . . wanted to escape into the Dream" he eventually realized that that had "never been an option," because the Dream "[rested] on [the] backs" of black people, on the "bedding made from [their] bodies" (11). With these statements, Coates orchestrates a two-part assertion; first, he establishes that there is a veritable chasm between the black populace and the Dream, and second, he casts the Dream as the begetter of this chasm, the systematic aggressor to the black American's victim. But Coates's condemnation is not exclusive to the Dream, an inanimate ideal. Coates also deliberately others the Dreamers, the individuals responsible for the Dream's continued existence. He laments "the burden of living among Dreamers," who "nullify [the] anger, [the] fear" of the black experience in order to preserve "their [own] innocence" (106); this concept of existing "among" but not *as* Dreamers draws a clear distinction between non-Dreamers and Dreamers, between black and white, between prosecuted and prosecutors. Furthermore, the claim that Dreamers intentionally delegitimize black pain in order to preserve the rosiness of the Dream suggests that Dreamers are willfully ignorant of black strife, and that the Dream is a tool with which Dreamers can justify their maintenance of the status quo.

Poised opposite the Dream, however, is Coates's cumulative advice to the young black American: struggle. Where the Dream is built on a Janus-like deceit, in which Dreamers can simultaneously "[pillage] Ferguson for municipal governance" and "[quote] Martin Luther King" (131), black struggle acknowledges the aftereffects of history, acknowledges the uneven ground upon which American citizens stand. In the final paragraphs of the book, Coates encourages his son, and more generally black youth, to "struggle for the memory of [his] ancestors" (151); here

“struggle” implies that like the Dream, Coates is urging black Americans to strive, but that unlike the Dream, this struggle would not erase the root source of the disadvantages that black people face, and would not blame black society for said disadvantages. Coates provides struggle as a foil to the Dream, an alternative method of viewing the black experience that is free of selective historical amnesia.

Throughout the book the Dreamers are an integral presence, the rightful focus of much of Coates’s frustration and pity, and yet they are never once outright addressed. Just as there is a clear distinction between non-Dreamers and Dreamers, there is also an established dichotomy between the direct and indirect audience. The direct audience is the black readership for which Coates intended this book, specifically his son and his son’s peers. The indirect audience is white, and a consequence of style. According to those like Matthew Shenoda from *The LA Review of Books*, Coates’s “[rhetorical] ‘ignoring’ [of] a white audience . . . can be seen as a way of writing *to* them” (“Reading ‘Between the World and Me’”). Although Coates never intended to reach a white audience, he did, and he managed to inform those white readers simply by excluding them. When he expounds that “ ‘White America’ is a syndicate arrayed to protect its exclusive power . . . and control our bodies” (42), he is telling the direct audience that there exists a system bent on their demise, and he is hinting to the indirect audience that they are part of a system bent on the demise of black people. While this unintentional education works to enlighten the white public in general, it also—in light of increased publicity surrounding anti-black violence—affects a very specific sect of the white populace: the American media.

As of 2012, a cringe-worthy three percent of American television was licensed by people of color; the remaining ninety-seven percent of television ownership fell under a white and mostly male domain (“Diversity in Media Ownership”). As such, if *white* is interchangeable with *Dreamer* and the American news media is overwhelmingly white, it can be said that Dreamers have a sizeable influence over what appears on-screen. Combined with increased media coverage of anti-black violence, the superimposition of the Dream on black lives by the Dreamer-controlled media is glaringly obvious. Black victims of violence are offered sympathy proportionately to how well they adhered to the Dream; in other words, the Dream becomes a measuring stick for the value of a black life. This standard is evidenced by frequent dialogues surrounding how a victim was college-bound, as in the case of eighteen-year-old Michael Brown (“Remembering Michael Brown”), or an honor student, as in the case of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin (LaCapria 1), with no room for error or misgiving. The implication here is that if a murdered black American did not aim for the Dream, if he did not veer from stereotype to his fullest capabilities, then he deserved his fate. The Dreamers’ case-by-case judgment of black worth keeps in line with their habit of avoidance; rather than analyze the white structures that feed into the stereotypical caricature of black Americans as lazy and insolent, the Dreamers use the media to applaud black victims who resisted the supposed vices of their race, and in doing so place the blame for the black community’s socioeconomic disadvantages on the black community itself.

It is arguable, of course, that the media’s impression of the Dream on black lives, and the willful ignorance that lurks beneath it, is better than nothing. News reports that don’t feature the Dream are stereotypical and almost damning; for example, in the murder of Trayvon Martin, Martin was deemed a “drug-addled ‘thug’” regardless of the invalidity of that statement (Williams 1), and prominent media figures like Fox News’s Bill O’Reilly were at liberty to proclaim that Martin looked “how ‘gangstas’ look,” and that though he “was innocent” he still “looked a certain way [and] lost his life” accordingly (Wemple 1). Later in the article O’Reilly does address issues of infrastructure in black communities, but his inability to acknowledge that Martin was murdered as a direct result of racial profiling, and that racial profiling is a product of white supremacy, allows anti-black stereotypes to flourish. With such blatant racism in mind, the Dream seems unproblematic. The

Dream humanizes black Americans where others typecast them. The Dream makes discrimination subtler, more palatable. Enter black struggle.

When used in lieu of the Dream, black struggle is the far more effective tool for the humanization of black Americans. If the Dream is a plastic, one-dimensional rendition of life, an impossible fantasy that acknowledges no errors in its all-white formation and tolerates no missteps from its nonwhite participants, then black struggle is a realistic portrait. There is no flash-judgment, no division of messiahs from pariahs; instead, black struggle in the media displays black Americans as human, with ups and downs, triumphs and failures, and it does not shy away from the echoes of slavery and systematic oppression. Two relatively recent examples of black struggle in forms of publicly accessible media are *Men We Reaped*, the 2013 memoir by Jesmyn Ward, and *Fruitvale Station*, a 2013 film based on the 2009 shooting of Oscar Grant.

*Men We Reaped* converges Ward's childhood as a lower-class black American in the Deep South with the premature deaths of several of her loved ones, all of which occurred over the span of five years. Much of the book is anecdotal, packed with starkly human incidents that capture Ward's loved ones' happiness and sorrow, their dreams and their struggles. Ward does not flinch from the truth; if her loved ones participated in stereotypically thuggish behavior, those behaviors were not omitted from the book. In one especially striking scene, Ward sits at the funeral of her friend Rog and laments on the funeral t-shirt, which features a picture of her brother Joshua, who died several years beforehand. In the photograph, Joshua is holding a gun and has a "bandana over the bottom half of his face, [with] his hair cut close to his head"; he looks, according to Ward, the very essence of a "young thug" (Ward 40). But this pigeonholed depiction is undercut by Ward's next proclamation: this image "reveal[s] nothing of what [Joshua] was, and represent[s] everything that he wasn't" (40). Later on in the book Ward attributes Joshua's problematic behaviors to "institutions that systematically undervalue him . . . as a human being" (211), cementing *Men We Reaped's* status as a beacon of black struggle. Through Ward's memoir, young black men are portrayed as whole beings beyond stereotype, with both strengths and flaws, and the source of their struggle is made explicit; they are victims of systemic oppression, of a long history of anti-black sentiment.

Along a similar vein, *Fruitvale Station* follows the final day of Oscar Grant, a black man murdered on New Year's Day by police officers at a BART station in Oakland, California. The film makes a point to emphasize the sheer compassion and love that fuel some of Grant's actions; within the timeframe of his last day of life, he is sweet and indulgent towards his young daughter, he rescues an injured pitbull from a hit-and-run, and he makes preparations for his mother's birthday party. Grant is not a flawless symbol of black virtuosity, however. He is an ex-convict and an ex-dealer who has cheated on his girlfriend in the past and who can be abrasive at times. The film is as clear about these dimensions to his personality as it is about his more endearing traits, and the truly remarkable aspect of *Fruitvale Station* is that Oscar Grant is afforded dimensionality at all. Grant is presented as a human who has made mistakes, who has struggled, and who tries to improve but is ultimately felled by a system of racism; his story follows the formula of black struggle to tragic precision.

At the time of their release, *Men We Reaped* and *Fruitvale Station* were both prime examples of black struggle being conveyed in the media, and they were rewarded for it. *Men We Reaped* was named a National Book Critics Circle Finalist, whereas *Fruitvale Station* won a whole host of accolades, including but not limited to an Independent Spirit Award and a NAACP Image Award. As Wesley Morris notes in his response to *Fruitvale Station*, the depiction of Oscar Grant's final moments, and in broader terms the depiction of black struggle, elicits an emotional response such that Americans are "reduced . . . to their most vulnerable selves" ("Strange Fruitvale"). These narratives surrounding black struggle were indisputably successful, and therein lies the proof that

black struggle is an equally, if not more, potent method of humanizing black Americans within a mainstream media culture of demonization.

But the recent success of black struggle does not signal an end to racism, nor is black struggle a solution to racism. The mere fact that humans must be humanized lest they be demonized speaks to a much larger prejudice in the general psyche; replacing the Dream with black struggle is akin to replacing Scotch tape with a Band-Aid on a wound that requires stitches. It is an improvement, but it doesn't solve the core problem. When Coates dismisses the chances of the Dreamers "coming into consciousness" and "[learning] to struggle" (146, 151), he implies to the indirect audience that in a better world, they would move past their need to categorize black people as either saints or stereotypes, but he does not pretend that white acceptance of black struggle instead of the Dream would forgive the horrors of the past. Using its indirect intimations at a white audience, *Between the World and Me* rightfully accuses Dreamers of ignoring their supremacist history and their supremacist present in favor of a "peppermint"-smelling, "strawberry shortcake"-tasting illusion (11), and it offers said Dreamers a less ignorant viewpoint, but it does not offer a solution to the deeply-embedded racism that sparks stereotype and violence. In a hypothetical future, however, where the seeds of racism have been properly acknowledged and subsequently stamped out, perhaps Roxane Gay's rally cry that "we should not have to prove [black victims] . . . are worthy of living . . . [or] suitably respectable" will come to fruition. Perhaps, in this future, black victims need not be humanized in the media because it is redundant to say that they are human, and perhaps books like *Between the World and Me* need not instruct black America on how to survive.

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