

## TA-NEHISI COATES

American journalist and author **Ta-Nehisi Coates** is a national correspondent for the *Atlantic*, focusing on the intersection of race, culture, and politics. He has served as Martin Luther King, Jr. Visiting Professor for Writing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, City University of New York's Journalist-in-Residence, and a Distinguished Writer in Residence at New York University's Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute. He is the author of several books, including *The Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons, and an Unlikely Road to Manhood*, a memoir published in 2008, and *Between the World and Me* (2015), from which this selection is taken. *We Were Eight Years in Power*, a collection of essays about the Obama era, was published in 2017. He is the recipient of a "Genius Grant" from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and his work has won a National Book Award for Nonfiction, the National Magazine Award, the Hillman Prize for Opinion and Analysis Journalism, and the George Polk Award. He is also the writer for the Black Panther series for Marvel Comics.

*Between the World and Me*, a finalist for the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction, is written as a letter from Coates to his teenaged son about his experiences being black in the United States, echoing the form of James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. He manages to interlace his autobiographical account of his youth in Baltimore with insights about education and the schools, police and justice, embodiment and disembodiment, and the discipline and danger of the streets.

In the excerpt offered here, Coates considers the complex connections between the streets, the schools, black bodies, prisons, and religion. Though he feels his schooling fostered compliance and resisted his constant curiosity around why things were the way they were, and while religion offers him no solace either, he does find within his grandmother the means to investigate and interrogate the system within which he is embedded: writing.

How does your experience of education differ from Coates's? Where can you identify with his story?

► **TAGS:** *adolescence and adulthood, civil rights, education, law and justice, race and ethnicity, religion*

► **CONNECTIONS:** *Appiah, Cohen, Das, Fukuyama, Gilbert, Gladwell, Holmes, Ma, Yang, Yoshino*

## From *Between the World and Me*

If the streets shackled my right leg, the schools shackled my left. Fail to comprehend the streets and you gave up your body now. But fail to comprehend the schools and you gave up your body later. I suffered at the hands of both, but I resent the schools more. There was nothing sanctified about the laws of the streets—the laws were amoral and practical. You rolled with a posse to the party as sure as you wore boots in the snow, or raised an umbrella in the rain. These were rules aimed at something obvious—the great danger that haunted every visit to Shake & Bake, every bus ride downtown. But the laws of the schools were aimed at something distant and vague. What did it



mean to, as our elders told us, "grow up and be somebody"? And what precisely did this have to do with an education rendered as rote discipline? To be educated in my Baltimore mostly meant always packing an extra number 2 pencil and working quietly. Educated children walked in single file on the right side of the hallway, raised their hands to use the lavatory, and carried the lavatory pass when en route. Educated children never offered excuses—certainly not childhood itself. The world had no time for the childhoods of black boys and girls. How could the schools? Algebra, Biology, and English were not subjects so much as opportunities to better discipline the body, to practice writing between the lines, copying the directions legibly, memorizing theorems extracted from the world they were created to represent. All of it felt so distant to me. I remember sitting in my seventh-grade French class and not having any idea why I was there. I did not know any French people, and nothing around me suggested I ever would. France was a rock rotating in another galaxy, around another sun, in another sky that I would never cross. Why, precisely, was I sitting in this classroom?

The question was never answered. I was a curious boy, but the schools were not concerned with curiosity. They were concerned with compliance. I loved a few of my teachers. But I cannot say that I truly believed any of them. Some years after I'd left school, after I'd dropped out of college, I heard a few lines from Nas that struck me:

Ecstasy, coke, you say it's love, it is poison

Schools where I learn they should be burned, it is poison

That was exactly how I felt back then. I sensed the schools were hiding something, drugging us with false morality so that we would not see, so that we did not ask: Why—for us and only us—is the other side of free will and free spirits an assault upon our bodies? This is not a hyperbolic concern. When our elders presented school to us, they did not present it as a place of high learning but as a means of escape from death and penal warehousing. Fully 60 percent of all young black men who drop out of high school will go to jail. This should disgrace the country. But it does not, and while I couldn't crunch the numbers or plumb the history back then, I sensed that the fear that marked West Baltimore could not be explained by the schools. Schools did not reveal truths, they concealed them. Perhaps they must be burned away so that the heart of this thing might be known.

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Unfit for the schools, and in good measure wanting to be unfit for them, and lacking the savvy I needed to master the streets, I felt there could be no escape for me or, honestly, anyone else. The fearless boys and girls who would knuckle up, call on cousins and crews, and, if it came to it, pull guns seemed to have mastered the streets. But their knowledge peaked at seventeen, when they ventured out of their parents' homes and discovered that America had guns and cousins, too. I saw their futures in the tired faces of mothers dragging themselves onto the 28 bus, swatting and cursing at three-year-olds; I saw their futures in the men out on the corner yelling obscenely at some young girl because she would not smile. Some of them stood outside liquor stores waiting on a few dollars for a bottle. We would hand them a twenty and tell them to keep the change. They would dash inside and return with



Red Bull, Mad Dog, or Cisco. Then we would walk to the house of someone whose mother worked nights, play "Fuck tha Police," and drink to our youth. We could not get out. The ground we walked was trip-wired. The air we breathed 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 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. We could not get out. I was a capable boy, intelligent, well-liked, but powerfully afraid. And I felt, vaguely, wordlessly, that for a child to be marked off for such a life, to be forced to live in fear was a great injustice. And what was the source of this fear? What was hiding behind the smoke screen of streets and schools? And what did it mean that number 2 pencils, conjugations without context, Pythagorean theorems, handshakes, and head nods were the difference between life and death, were the curtains drawing down between the world and me?

I could not retreat, as did so many, into the church and its mysteries. My parents rejected all dogmas. We spurned the holidays marketed by the people who wanted to be white. We would not stand for their anthems. We would not kneel before their God. And so I had no sense that any just God was on my side. "The meek shall inherit the earth" meant nothing to me. The meek were battered in West Baltimore, stomped out at Walbrook Junction, bashed up on Park Heights, and raped in the showers of the city jail. My understanding of the universe was physical, and its moral arc bent toward chaos then concluded in a box. That was the message of the small-eyed boy, untucking the piece—a child bearing the power to body and banish other children to memory. Fear ruled everything around me, and I knew, as all black people do, that this fear was connected to the Dream out there, to the unworried boys, to pie and pot roast, to the white fences and green lawns nightly beamed into our television sets.

But how? Religion could not tell me. The schools could not tell me. The streets could not help me see beyond the scramble of each day. And I was such a curious boy. I was raised that way. Your grandmother taught me to read when I was only four. She also taught me to write, by which I mean not simply organizing a set of sentences into a series of paragraphs, but organizing them as a means of investigation. When I was in trouble at school (which was quite often) she would make me write about it. The writing had to answer a series of questions: Why did I feel the need to talk at the same time as my teacher? Why did I not believe that my teacher was entitled to respect? How would I want someone to behave while I was talking? What would I do the next time I felt the urge to talk to my friends during a lesson? I have given you these same assignments. I gave them to you not because I thought they would curb your behavior—they certainly did not curb mine—but because these were the earliest acts of interrogation, of drawing myself into consciousness. Your grandmother was not teaching me how to behave in class. She was teaching me how to ruthlessly interrogate the subject that elicited the most sympathy and rationalizing—myself. Here was the lesson: I was not an innocent. My impulses were not filled with unfailing virtue. And feeling that I was as human as anyone, this must be true for other humans. If I was not innocent, then they were not innocent. Could this mix of motivation also affect the stories they tell? The cities they built? The country they claimed as given to them by God?



## Questions for Critical Reading

1. What is the relationship between education and success? As you reread Coates's essay, look for places where he talks about the goals of education and the consequences of failing (or even succeeding) in school. How are these inflected by race and class?
2. The whole of Coates's book, from which this excerpt is taken, is framed as a letter to his son. As you review the essay, consider the impact that form has on content. In what ways does this essay reflect the form of a letter? In what ways is it clear he has a larger audience in mind? How do form and audience interact?
3. What solution was Coates able to find for the problem of education? Consider the role that critical thinking played and locate passages that suggest his definition of critical thinking. In what ways is his solution related to the work you do in this class?

## Exploring Context

1. Dena Simmons has a TED talk titled "How Students of Color Confront Imposter Syndrome" that touches on many of the same issues as Coates's essay. View it at [ted.com](https://www.ted.com/talks/dena_simmons_how_students_of_color_confront_imposter_syndrome). How does her experience connect to Coates's? How are their paths to success similar? What accounts for their differences? Connect this to your work in Question 1 of Questions for Critical Reading.
2. Explore the website for Baltimore Public Schools at [baltimorecityschools.org](https://baltimorecityschools.org). How does the site's vision for education relate to Coates's experience of education? Have things changed since Coates went to school? Consider working with your response to Question 3 of Questions for Critical Reading.
3. Visit Coates's website at [ta-nehisicoates.com](https://ta-nehisicoates.com). How does this essay reflect his larger body of work? What consistent themes can you locate in his writing?

## Questions for Connecting

1. In "Variety Show" (p. 217), Anna Holmes looks at the challenge of promoting diversity in business and culture. Extend her argument using Coates's experiences. What additional challenges do we face in moving toward a more inclusive culture?
2. Wesley Yang describes a very different educational experience in "Paper Tigers" (p. 435). What makes the education of Asian Americans so different from the experience of Coates? What makes education successful in ethnically and racially diverse environments? What role does socioeconomic class play? Incorporate your work from Questions 1 and 3 of Questions for Critical Reading and Questions 1 and 2 of Exploring Context.
3. Yo-Yo Ma offers a very different vision of education in "Necessary Edges: Arts, Empathy, and Education" (p. 278). Synthesize his goals for education with Coates's lived experience. Does Ma make assumptions about race and class when thinking about education? Does Coates experience through his grandmother the kind of education Ma imagines?