



Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* A Teaching Guide

By Sharon Kaplan, UO Common Reading Program Coordinator

The Division of Undergraduate Studies is grateful to Teaching Effectiveness Program's spring 2016 faculty and GTF reading group, which was a pilot community reflecting on reading and teaching Coates' book on our campus.

About the Book

Between the World and Me, Ta-Nehisi Coates' letter to his teenage son, is a moving personal account of what it's like to be black in America.

It's also about:

- Race as the child of racism, not the father
- Resilience in the face of racism
- The "American Dream," including its myths, privileges, and prejudices
- The power of education for growth and awareness
- The irreplaceable value of the body, individual lives, our collective resources

This is not an easy book, but it is a powerful and important one. As Coates says: ["I hope to haunt \[my readers\], to trouble their sense of how things actually are."](#)

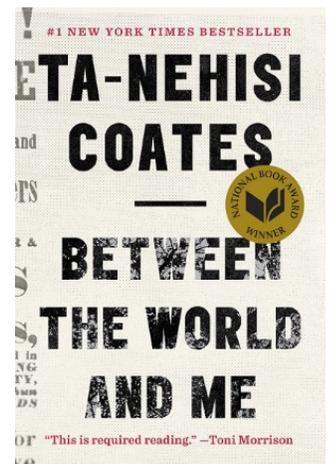
One thing Coates teaches is that it's okay not to have answers. He encourages us to face our discomfort—to sit with our questions. It's the asking and the seeking that matter most.

Let's begin the conversation!



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Ta-Nehisi Coates is a correspondent with *The Atlantic*. He is a 2015 winner of a MacArthur Fellowship and a National Book Award for his second book, *Between the World and Me*. He published his first book, a memoir, *The Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons, and an Unlikely Road to Manhood* in 2008. He is also the author of Marvel Comics' *Black Panther* series, the first issue of which was released in April 2016.



About the UO Common Reading Program

[Common Reading at UO](#) opens doors by providing a shared critical reading experience for first-year students, creating a sense of community, and exposing students to issues relevant to today's global society.

About this Guide

This guide offers educators jumping off points for exploring *Between the World and Me* deeply with their students through a variety of disciplines, source materials, and forms of response. The activities encourage students (and instructors) to reflect upon their own experiences and draw meaningful personal connections to the book.

Starting Off introduces some of the main questions posed by the book and provides resources for engaging in difficult conversations in the classroom.

The three units that follow explore the book through a variety of lenses. Altogether, they offer more than 20 specific teaching ideas, each including what we hope are compelling questions and companion texts to Coates work. The units are:

History Got it Wrong

This unit helps students rethink popular versions of “American history” and become aware of the myth, omissions, and privilege involved in them. It encourages students to seek truth through critical questioning and to grapple with historical complexity and responsibility.

Identity across the Cultural Divide

This unit considers questions of race and identity.

Education and Inquiry

This unit explores Coates' critiques of his formal education. It asks students to consider Coates' sense of the power of inquiry and coming into consciousness; it also invites them to analyze the learning environments that liberate or perpetuate oppression.

Instructors are welcome to adapt and use these ideas, and we hope that they serve as a springboard for new ideas. Additional teaching tools, including articles, interviews, and discussion questions are posted in the [online resources](#) on the Common Reading website. Have a resource to add to the list? [Please share it with us!](#) Are you using the book in your class? [Let us know!](#) We'd love to hear from you and continue to grow the teaching community around this year's Common Reading.

Starting Off

Setting the Stage in Your Classroom for Difficult Dialogues

by Avinnash Tiwari, UO Composition Program Instructor and TEP Peer Mentor Award Winner

Here at the University of Oregon, there can be a number of roadblocks towards recognizing, understanding, and feeling the impact of those historical, social, and institutional forces structured by American racism. Though it may seem counter-intuitive, deepening and complicating (rather than simplifying) an approach to discussing race may ultimately prove beneficial in the classroom. For example, knowledge of Critical Race Theory allows for an intersectional approach to discussing race. Attention to intersectional dynamics such as the law, class, gender, etc., creates an opportunity for students from diverse backgrounds to come together through the text and critical inquiry. One such case: Coates's focus on the vulnerability of particularly marked bodies certainly resonates for those bodies marked as black, but also resonates for many women in the classroom given the sexist culture too often found within a university setting. Another approach is an economic and historic analysis of slavery's legacy within a global, colonial context, an especially productive frame for students from our ever-growing international community. A now viral ad for a Chinese brand laundry detergent, the consequences of Bobby Jindal's conservative politics for Louisiana or Nikki Haley's white-identified voter registration card, the abuse of migrant workers from North Africa (East to West) in the Middle-East, South, and East Asia; these are only a few, recent examples for discussion starting points that allow for a nuanced interrogation about anti-black racism.

Opening up—and holding open—a classroom space where students truly hear the text can be difficult, especially in a place where whiteness dominates the landscape. Even with a strong knowledge of history, students' readiness to hear and, as Coates' text invites, *feel* that history may depend on the instructor's ability to cultivate openness in each particular classroom with its particular student population. A simple first week exercise such as a reading response assignment can give faculty a sense of what students are bringing to the class in terms of knowledge, experience, and reaction to Coates' text. While it is difficult to offer general strategies for such context-specific situations, another simple practice is to take things slow: begin discussions or activities with some quiet music and simple breathing exercises; focusing on diaphragmatic breathing by simply twisting from the waist in the chair and allowing the breath to fall deeply into the belly rather than the chest allows for the nervous system to take it easy, to rest. Coming into discussion with a clear, and somewhat relaxed thinking mind may allow for a more open and productive dialogue, rather than one marked by defensive reactions to difficult ideas. To put it simply, this is key for a predominantly white institution engaging a text critical of "people who believe they are white."

However, creating a space where openness and thoughtfulness, rather than defensiveness, structures the conversation, is not meant to hold down, or keep at bay, discomfort, confusion, anger, frustration, or other so-called "negative" reactions. Rather, we should all feel shame in discussing and thinking about America's history of racism and learn to live with it rather than deny it. Our goal should not be one of feeling sorry for anyone or any group. If conversations about racism in America are not uncomfortable, then they are not honest. At the same time, taking a dogmatic stance, even if seemingly morally sound, can also close down conversations. We don't want to tell students what they should think and believe, nor should we chastise them for what they do know and believe. Sitting with discomfort and confusion can be a productive means of critically interrogating what could be new and are always complicated ideas. After all, one of the clearest ideas in Coates' text is the need for continual questioning.

Here are [four of my ideas for approaching the text](#), which I hope are useful. For additional teaching strategies visit the [Teaching Effectiveness Program's \(TEP\) blog](#) and the resource "[Strategies for Engaging with Emotions in the Classroom](#)" by TEP's Jason Schreiner.

Themes and Questions

By Dr. Kimberly N. Parker from her [Between the World and Me Teacher's Guide](#)

The following are some major themes and questions to keep in mind as you read:

The Body: What does Coates say about the precarious nature of his specifically African American body? What dangers does he cite that threaten the safety of his body? Examine the specific instances in which Coates describes his body, the violence enacted upon it, and his attempts to preserve his body and the bodies of loved ones. What explicit ideas about the perceived value of black life do these examples support?

The Dream: What, exactly, is “the Dream” as Coates describes it? Who is able to experience the Dream? What prevents Coates and his loved ones from realizing that same Dream? How does Coates’ version of the Dream differ from other, idealized versions of the Dream favored by popular media, literature, and other outlets? Why might Coates’ aversion to the Dream as it is traditionally conceived be difficult for Americans to accept?

Education: Coates repeatedly finds himself at odds with the American system of formal education. “I was made for the library, not the classroom,” he writes (48). Despite his discomfort with traditional education, however, he expresses a nearly insatiable desire to learn. What complications and questions do his literacy experiences raise, particularly for a young black man? Note: For a deeper exploration of the issues surrounding race and education, consult the [ACLU’s School to Prison Pipeline website](#).

Prince Jones: Examine Coates’ description of Prince Jones as a “vessel that held his family’s hopes and dreams” (81–82). Evaluate how this description underscores the notion that “Black people love their children with a kind of obsession” (82).

History Got It Wrong: Myth, Truth, Responsibility

American Ideals

In the first four pages of the book, Coates introduces the following concepts, which are central tenets of discourse about America:

- Race
- The American Dream
- American exceptionalism
- Democracy
- Capitalism
- White privilege

What is meant by these concepts? How does Coates speak of them? Where do these concepts come from? Who is included and who is excluded in these definitions? Who benefits and who is harmed by these definitions? What has shaped your understanding of these concepts up to now?

History and Myth-Making

It may strike some students how much Coates' telling of American history diverges from the often celebratory accounts they've encountered in school. James W. Loewen's book [Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong](#) investigates the role of history textbooks themselves in our national miseducation. Loewen reveals that much of what passes as history has been crafted to tell a proud national story (a mythology with its heroes), and in doing so glosses over, or omits entirely, more difficult facts.

What do you know/think you know about slavery and its consequences to this day? Are these facts or opinions? This exercise can help you get a sense of where students are starting from, and what information, ideas, or misconceptions they may be carrying with them into the reading of the book.

Present students with a historical figure (Christopher Columbus, Rosa Parks, etc.) who is often mythologized or idealized and invite them to uncover and present a more factual historical portrait of this person and the context of his or her actions. Identify references to your historical figure in current news stories. How is this person represented? What aspects of his or her contribution are most discussed? Are there important stories that are omitted or stories that are distorted about this individual in the textbook and popular references? If so, why might that be? How does each student's fuller portrayal differ from the textbook or popular treatment of this individual? What implications does this have for our knowledge about our American history and our current national conversation about race?

Making of a Museum

The National Museum of African American History and Culture opens on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. in September 2016. The *New York Times* article "[How Do You Tell the Story of Black America in One Museum?](#)" shows the complexities of getting it right. Among the many questions to be debated are: What artifacts and whose stories should be included (and what must be excluded)? Where will the chronology and narrative end (does it continue into the future or end at a certain historical achievement)?

Read Smithsonian Magazine's [Q&A with the architect David Adjaye](#) to learn more this project and his work. What ideas does Adjaye seek to convey through his architecture? Compare Adjaye's winning design with the proposals by the other [finalists](#) for the project. Which design do you think sets the most appropriate tone for this project? Identify specific elements of the design which inform your response.

What is the role this museum (or others, like the National Museum of the American Indian) in validating preserving, and shaping the narratives of groups who face discrimination. What is its role a forum for continued conversation on these issues? How does the museum help you connect emotionally to individual lives affected? (Coates reminds us that slavery was about individual lives.) What does it mean to finally have a national museum dedicated to the African American experience? Is it significant in that it has taken until 2016 for this museum to be realized?

You've been commissioned to design a memorial or work of public art honoring one of the individuals whom Coates speaks of in *Between the World and Me*. What aspects of the individual's historical significance or personal story will you represent in it? Will you also want to tie it to a larger community or cause, or keep it as a commemoration of this one life? Where will it be located? What will the scale

be and what medium will you use? How will visitors experience it (i.e., will they be invited to sit and contemplate, will there be water or a reflective surface for literal reflection, will it be in a private space or in the city center, will it be large and intimate, etc.)? Identify a text that would be an appropriate epitaph for your memorial. Sketch at least 5 ideas.

You've been invited to curate a small exhibition in 5 objects related to ideas connected to *Between the World and Me*. Determine the thesis of your exhibition. (In other words, what is the main idea you want visitors to your exhibition to understand? You should be able to state your thesis in one sentence.) Give your exhibition a title. Write an essay presenting a guided tour you will lead through your exhibition. Introduce the thesis of your exhibition. Describe each work you view and explain how it supports your thesis, identifying the specific details visitors should learn about each piece. Also explain how the selected works relate to each other. Be sure to include a transition statement to connect between each work you discuss.

Front Page News

In her print series [Modern History](#), artist Sarah Charlesworth (1947-2013) took as her source material the front pages of newspapers, from which she typically removed all the text, leaving only the masthead and images. The resulting works invite us to compare the editorial decisions of multiple newspapers on the same day or as a story develops over time, and invite us to consider how these news sources visually communicate the perspectives they value.



Details from *Modern History*: [April 21, 1978](#) by Sarah Charlesworth

Study one set of works within this series. What differences do you notice in image choices, size, and placement? What do these editorial decisions communicate about the stories or perspectives that seem most important? What might account for these differences (local or regional priorities and history, political bent of editors, etc.)? What, if anything, do these decisions suggest about the politics of the particular publications?

Using *Modern History* as model, investigate different presentations of a single current news story related to a theme discussed in *Between the World and Me*. (An excellent source for comparative front pages is D.C.'s Newseum, which maintains a daily database of [today's front pages](#) from newspapers

around the world, as well as a [front page archive](#) for dates of historical significance.) Compare the visual layout (including image choice, size, and placement, use of color or black and white, and font treatment, as well as the differences in language (see Charlesworth's "verbs" and "nouns" in the Modern History series to see how she isolates the words being used to report the news). In what ways do editorial decisions in presenting these articles impact the message and the story being told?

Putting Personal Story into History

Through the intimate format of a letter, Coates reminds us again and again of the irreplaceable value of individual lives—and impresses upon us that the lives of which he speaks are of real people. He reminds us that “*Slavery is not an indefinable amount of flesh. It is a particular, specific enslaved woman, whose mind is active as your own, whose range of feelings is as vast as your own...*” (69). And when he speaks of recent instance of black citizens killed in police encounters, he makes us feel the individual loss of this specific person, into whom so much love had been invested—as we see especially with his treatment of Prince Jones.

Seek autobiographical slave narratives and other primary source materials (such as photographs) that give insight into the personal experiences of these people. Places to start include:

- [Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938](#)
- [Portraits of African American Ex-Slaves from the U.S. Works Progress Administration Federal Writers’ Project Slave Narratives Collection](#), Library of Congress

What was life like for these people? To what did they aspire? How did they struggle? What did they value? How did they work within or fight against the system which enslaved them? Use these first-person accounts to write (or illustrate) a response that counters the official historical narrative with a more personal one. One example to consider is poet Paul B. Janeczko’s poetry anthology [Worlds Afire](#), a work of historical fiction documenting, through the voices of witnesses, the 1944 Harford circus fire.

Researching Coates’ Names

Throughout *Between the World and Me*, Coates drops names of writers, artists, leaders, musicians, philosophers, and others. They include people whose books he’s read and whose names were mentioned in those pages, individuals with ties to Howard University or whose names now grace its buildings, and people whose names surfaced during discussions and whose work he didn’t know at the time but felt he need to know more about.

What was Coates’ experience of coming across these names? How is your experience of encountering them similar or different? Study the [People Index to Between the World and Me](#) compiled by Howard Ramsby II and Cynthia Campbell (Southern Illinois University Edwardsville).

How well do you know the names on this list? Have you listened to [Malcolm X’s](#) own words, delivered by him, for example?

Coates discusses the determination and method with which he set about to learn about all these people (p. 46). What did he expect to find when studying the history? Why do you think he was surprised to come across “a brawl of ancestors” (p. 48)?

Follow Coates' example of investigating what you don't know. Use [primary sources](#) and reputable secondary sources to learn about one of the people above (or other people, places, or events identified in the book). As you come across mentions of other names in your research, follow those leads, too.

- What did this person stand for or believe in?
- Whom did he/she admire, ally with, disagree with—and why?
- What contributions did he/she make?
- What is the relevance of this person to Coates' narrative?
- Why is it important that we know of this person now?

Some resources which may be helpful:

- [Between the World and Me research guide from UO Libraries](#)
- [African-American History](#) research guide from UO Libraries
- [Rosa Parks: A Primary Source Gallery](#) teaching and resource guide from the Library of Congress
- [Jim Crow and Segregation](#) teaching and resource guide from the Library of Congress
- [Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division](#), The New York Public Library

Acknowledgement & Reparations

As a nation, what is our responsibility for redressing violent and exploitative aspects of U.S. history? This exploration of moral and legal issues may be of particular interest to students studying economics, law, political science, history, sociology, psychology, philosophy, or public policy.

Start by reflecting on your own experience of identity and privilege. Read "[Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack](#)" and "[Explaining White Privilege to a Broke White Person](#)." What most spoke to you? What most surprised you? How have you benefited or been disenfranchised as a result of your identity? Have you been privileged in some ways and disadvantaged in others?

In Ta-Nehisi Coates' "[The Case for Reparations](#)," a cover story in *The Atlantic*, he lays out extensive documentation on slavery and the legacy of institutional racism, and argues for the payment of reparations. Do any of the facts he uncovers or connections he draws between slavery and its legacy surprise you?

How have other nations faced their national scars? In "[National Apologies: Mapping the Complexities of Validity: A Practical Paper](#)," Eneko Sanz (The Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, Phnom Penh, Cambodia) details the complex process of issuing national apologies, and offer examples of various approaches and a review of the research in this area.

One of the first steps, Sanz writes, is acknowledging that "something happened." In what ways does *Between the World and Me* seek to raise our consciousness of what happened and what continues to occur?

What has been done in the United States to acknowledge slavery and its legacy? (Have these efforts been appropriate, sufficient, productive?) Individual state legislatures (such as [Mississippi](#) and [Missouri](#)) have

issued apologies for slavery. These resolutions have not been without opposition, however. (Consider the case of the [Louisiana](#).) The U.S. Senate issued a [Concurrent Resolution Apologizing for the Enslavement and Racial Segregation of African-Americans](#) in 2009; it failed to pass the House of Representatives.

Consider Canada's legacy of [institutional racism against its First Nations peoples](#), and Canada's 1998 Statement of Reconciliation. In what ways is Canada's treatment of its native people similar and different to that of native peoples in the United States? At official functions in [British Columbia](#), the master of ceremonies acknowledges the First Peoples on whose land the function is taking place. How does this act of recognition and acknowledgment change the dialogue, or set a particular tone? Do you think such a practice would change the conversation about race, plunder, capitalism, and resources in the United States? If so, how? Imagine for example, if acknowledgment had to be paid prior to the first bell of the New York Stock Exchange.

And can we calculate our national indebtedness to slaves who helped build the country's wealth and power? Students may want to research, calculate, and debate how to operate a reparations board, how to compensate, and what would be an appropriate solution.

Attributing Success and Responsibility

Throughout *Between the World and Me*, Coates expresses that nothing—not the struggle for civil rights, nor his own trajectory (for which he credits his support network of family, friends, and mentors)—has ever been achieved alone. Similarly he attributes blame for violence, ghettos, and poor inner city schools not to individual actions, but to systems that have been established to maintain these injustices.

One of the iconic images in America is that of the self-made man. The African proverb “It takes a village” is a counter to that image. Consider these two countering world views through the lens of privilege and power. How do they explain success and blame?

In what ways do Coates' personal stories, and the story of Prince Jones in particular, serve to counter the usual narratives about who's to blame?

Analyzing Contemporary Rhetoric to Uncover Slavery's Enduring Legacy

Throughout *Between the World and Me*, as well as in his article “[The Case for Reparations](#),” Coates shows that systemic oppression and institutional racism—systems that have become so ingrained and invisible that they are accepted as inevitable—are legacies of slavery in the United States. Investigate one of the issues Coates identifies as an enduring scar of slavery (i.e., ghettoization, mass incarceration, police use of lethal force). What stories are usually told to explain this issue? What evidence does Coates present that reframes these problems as a direct result of purposeful institutions and policies?

Keep an open eye and ear for examples that related to your topic as you follow current news, the political debates, advertising, your coursework, and even conversation. Given your now-heightened awareness of the connections between past and present, what questions arise for you regarding the argument being made or the attribution of the problem? Who is the intended audience of the media you selected? What's the perspective or politics of the information's source? Does example encourage viewers to buy into

accepted understandings or challenge them to think about things in a new way? In what ways does this add to the current national conversation about race in a positive or negative way?

Identity across the Cultural Divide

Black-White Divide

Coates points to many instances where the societal rules and expectations—and the cost of making mistakes—differ for individuals who identify as black and those who identify as white.

In what ways does Coates describe the rules:

In school?

In the street?

If you're black
and female?
and male?

If you're white
and female?
and male?

If you're black in a black neighborhood?

If you're black in a white neighborhood? (pp. 93-96)

If you're white in a black neighborhood?

If you're white in a white neighborhood?

Are the rules different when within your culture versus outside of it? Reflect on a time when you acted differently or were aware of a different expectation of you for being an outsider. What was that experience like?

The 1967 film "[Guess Who's Coming to Dinner](#)" centers on two families' responses to the relationship of an interracial couple. Artist Christopher Metzger created an [updated movie poster](#) for the film based on his own relationship. How do these depict racial-based rules and expectations? What is the community's responses to the couple breaking the norms?

In what situations are you seen as a stereotype or do you see others as a stereotype? Reflect on an experience of meeting someone of an identity (sexual orientation, ability, nationality, language, etc.) you did not know before. What assumptions did you have prior to getting to know this person? In what ways did your perspective change as a result of this relationship?

Cultural Crossing, the Power of Representation, Visibility in Art

This section explores three American artists, George Catlin, Kehinde Wiley, and Ramiro Gomez, and issues of representation, identity, cultural crossing, and visibility.

George Catlin

George Catlin (1706-1872) was a [white] American painter, documentarian, and showman who painted Native American life as it was being threatened and destroyed as a result of westward expansion and the forced removal of the native peoples from their lands. Catlin made five trips to the Plains Indians territories in the 1830s, and the resulting paintings, which comprised his [Indian Gallery](#), document a way of life and the nobility of his subjects (such as the painting of the Blackfoot chief [Stu-mick-o-súcks](#)). But Catlin was also a man of his times and there is a clear Eurocentric view in his rhetoric about preserving the native people's "primitive looks and customs." Catlin was also an entertainer, who exploited his subjects through the performance of Indian shows—the first Wild West shows—in which Native American performed staged rituals and white men dressed in Indian costumes (such as Catlin's nephew [Theodore Burr](#)).



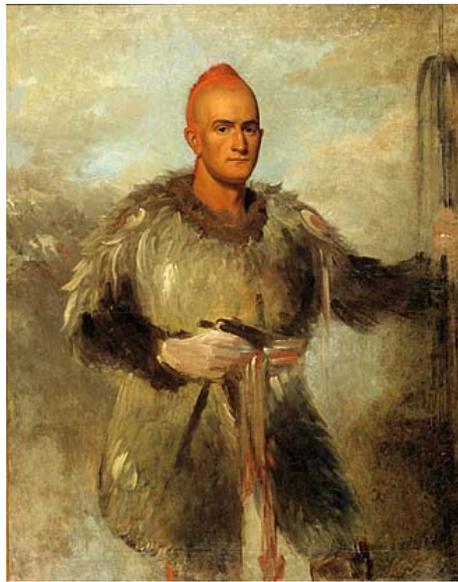
Self portrait of George Catlin, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Consider how Catlin has portrayed himself in his [self-portrait](#). What does his pose, costume, and the objects he chose to include in the image tell us about his identity? What clues suggest this reading?

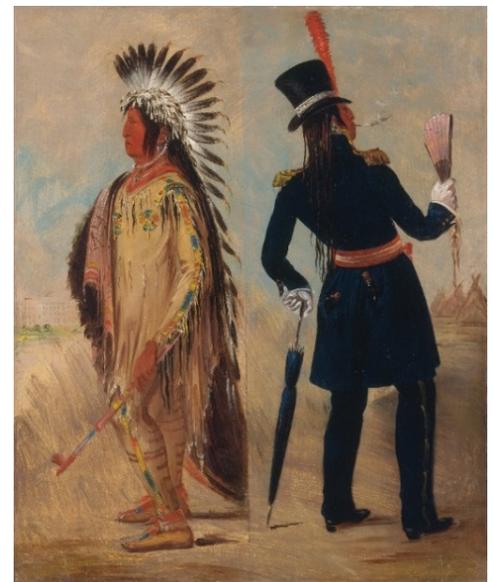
Compare Catlin's portrait of [Stu-mick-o-súcks](#) to that of [Wi-jún-jon, Pigeon's Egg Head \(The Light\)](#), [Going To and Returning From Washington](#). Consider the figures' postures and body language. How do the presentations of the two men differ?



Stu-mick-o-súcks, Buffalo Bull's Back Fat, Head Chief, Blood Tribe, 1832. Smithsonian American Art Museum



Theodore Burr Catlin in Indian Costume, 1838. Smithsonian American Art Museum



Wi-jún-jon, Pigeon's Egg Head (The Light), Going To and Returning From Washington, 1837-39, Smithsonian American Art Museum

Compare Pigeon's Egg Head's portrait with that of the self-portrait of George Catlin. Both represent a cultural crossing. How are the two portrayals different? What is being said about how Pigeon's Egg Head returns after contact with white men's cities? How is the cultural crossing of white men into the dress and culture of Native Americans presented differently from Native Americans being influenced by white culture? What does this suggest?

There's a long tradition of [white actors playing people of color](#). In her essay [An Open Letter to the Artist as a Young Woman or Man; Or, Why We Need to Talk about Race](#) Canadian theater director Marilo Nuñez writes her own letter to young people of color in her field, speaking honestly about issues of racism they will face. She writes, "...directors, producers, and casting directors regard "white" actors as colourless and cultureless, able to play any ethnicity." And she says, "In the words of August Wilson, 'Colorblind casting is an aberrant idea that has never had any validity other than as a tool of the Cultural Imperialists who view American culture, rooted in the icons of European culture, as beyond reproach in its perfection.'" How do these ideas play out in George Catlin's paintings?

Kehinde Wiley

[Kehinde Wiley](#) (b. 1977) is a Los Angeles-born, New York-based artist who paints brown bodies (young men, mostly, and more recently women) in the poses of (white) Old Master paintings of the art historical canon. He scouts his models from the streets and depicts them in their own dress, but has them assume “[the poses of colonial masters, the former bosses of the Old World.](#)” His subjects frequently choose the artwork which they will recreate.



Image credit: <http://moveablefest.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/KehindeWileyEconomyofGraceJeffDupre.jpg>

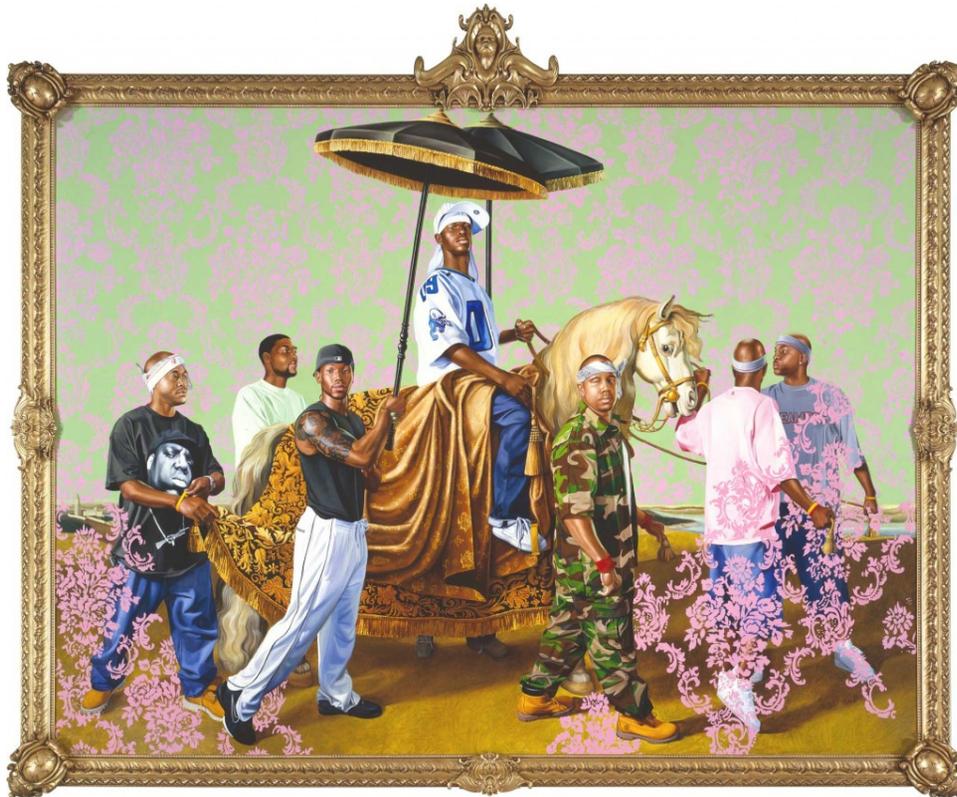


DOWN series, *Sleep*, 2008, Oil on canvas 132" x 300"

How do Wiley's works differ from Catlin's? What do they have in common?

As you read *Between the World and Me*, note Coates' references to the body and how the black body in particular is targeted for pillage. How do images like *Sleep* and *Chancellor Séguier on Horseback* alter the narrative? What is the significance of Wiley asserting the dignity, power, and beauty black bodies as they are? What commentary do you think Wiley's work is making about the original subjects of the pieces he is appropriating?

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kisa-lala/kehinde-wiley-on-the-world_b_1418058.html



Kehinde Wiley's *Chancellor Séguier on Horseback*



Chancellor Séguier and his Suite, Charles Le Brun, circa 1670, Musée du Louvre. Depicts the entry of Louis XIV into Paris in 1660.

Compare Wiley's *Chancellor Séguier on Horseback* to Charles Le Brun's *Chancellor Séguier and his Suite*.

Ramiro Gomez

Los Angeles-based artist [Ramiro Gomez](#) is son of Mexican immigrants. In his works, he seeks to raise viewers' consciousness about labor, racism, privilege, and who has the power to tell a community's story—and he [inserts “invisible” people squarely back into the scene](#). Often his works appropriate the perfectly-manicured Los Angeles scenes of artist David Hockney. But in Gomez's work the dark-skinned gardeners, groundskeepers, cleaners, janitors, and nannies are pictured doing their labor. It is as if he's saying to the workers, the subjects of his art, “This perfect world is all held together because of you.” In other works, Gomez inserts [cardboard cutout figures of laborers](#) into the cityscape, where the public will come across them, unexpectedly, and will be forced to see.

Gomez's work is both about being seen and not being seen. Gomez represents faceless figures. Why do you think he does this?

In what ways is Gomez's work similar to Kehinde Wiley's? How do they work to assert the dignity of the people they represent and challenge the typical narratives and treatment of people like themselves? What is similar and what is different about how they approach their appropriation?

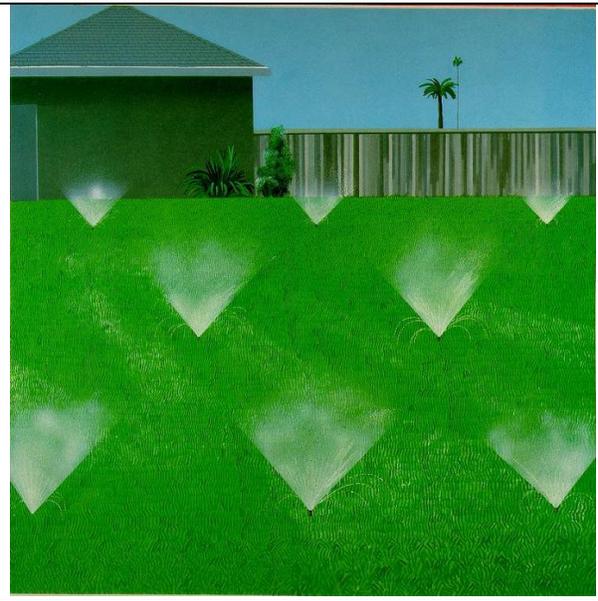
Coates speaks often about “The Dream.” What is this Dream? To whom is it available? Is it the same and open to all? What is the Dream of Gomez's subjects? What the Dream of Hockney's? In what way does Ramiro Gomez's art make us confront the realities of the inequities and the economic and racist forces that propel the myth of the American Dream?

Brian David Johnson, Professor of Practice in the School for the Future of Innovation in Society at Arizona State University, is leading a team of faculty and students conducting research on the future of the American Dream. You can participate in the study by responding on the project's website (through text and/or images) to the question, [What is the Future of the American Dream?](#)





Ramiro Gomez "A Lawn Being Mowed"



David Hockney, "A Lawn Being Sprinkled" (1967)



Ramiro Gomez "No Splash"



David Hockney "A Bigger Splash" (1967)

Reflecting on Identity & Being Part of the Conversation

A number of established projects exist that encourage reflection and conversations around identity and race. As you and your students read *Between the World and Me*, you may wish to join this wider community through these initiatives and craft your own responses (and perhaps even contribute) to these ongoing projects.

- French artist JR’s [Inside Out Project](#) is a global project in which members of a community share their stories and produce a shared philosophy statement which they submit, along with self-portraits, to be printed as posters and hung in the community as public art. [Christopher Metzger](#) and his art students at Morgan State University, in Baltimore, named Black Lives Matter as the identity statement for their [Black Lives Matter Inside Out Project](#).
- [This I Believe](#) is a national conversation around philosophy and the beliefs that guide us in our lives. The subject index has a category for race: <http://thisibelieve.org/theme/race/>
- Michele Norris’ [The Race Card Project](#) invites us to think about our *experiences, questions, hopes, dreams, laments* or *observations* about race and identity and to distill them into one sentence that has only six words.

Between

As you read, note the repetition of the word “between” throughout the book. Starting from the title, drawn from [Richard Wright’s poem](#) of the same name, the word “between,” and a sense of distance or separation, appears frequently in the book.

In what ways does Coates feel he is between cultures as an African-American? As a male? A child of Baltimore? A journalist? A father? An atheist? The product of a book-rich home? An American in Paris?

How does the sense of “distance” play into the memories recounted by Mable Jones? (p. 137)

Reflect upon your own experience of being “between” cultures. What was this experience like? How did you bridge the divide?

Parenting and Love

Throughout *Between the World and Me*, Coates speaks about love. In his childhood, the love he experienced had a “hardness” to it, he says, which included corporal punishment. He later comes to interpret these actions on the part of his father as violence “administered in fear and love”—grounded in the understanding of his father and other black parents that their kids were vulnerable in a white supremacist society and could be taken away at any time. Later he talks of learning to be soft with love with his own child, under the guidance of his wife, who’d had a different childhood experience than his own. This softness does not come naturally to him. In another point in his narrative, Coates tells us it’s,

in part, how deeply Prince Jones was loved (reflected through all the ways his family nurtured and invested in him) which makes his loss all the deeper (“Think of all the love poured into him” p. 81).

As you read, note how Coates recounts memories in which he personally experiences differences in how black and white parents teach their children to be in the world. Explore the idea that black parents teach their children fear while white parents teach their children mastery (p. 89).

Parents of black boys talk about having “The Conversation” with their children, the conversation in which they introduce the children they love and who are coming of age to the realities of racism and the dangers they will face as black men (i.e., you will be targeted and pulled over by police, do not argue....). Watch the short documentary “[A Conversation with My Black Son](#)” to hear parents talk about The Conversation. How might Coates’ letter to his son Samori be considered an example of “The Conversation”? Does Coates’ letter also contain within it a Conversation which “white” parents should be having with their children? What would this “Conversation with My White Son” say? What other conversations are standards (or should be standards) with parents and children of marginalized identities (such as Dan Savage’s [It Gets Better](#) project). You may wish to write this conversation telling a young person about what he or she should know or what you wish you’d known (see p. 19). What is your personal experience with these conversations?

Opening Worlds

At The Mecca (Howard University): *“I first witnessed this power out on the Yard, that communal green space in the center of campus where the students gathered and I saw everything I knew of my black self multiplied into seemingly endless variations.”* (p. 40)

Of Paris: *“It had never occurred to me that giant doors could exist, could be so common in one part of the world and totally absent in another* (p. 119)

Of New York: *“I had never seen so much life. And I had never imaged that such life could exist in so much variety. It was everyone’s particular Mecca, packed into one singular city”* (p. 93).

Coates speaks of the hardness he knew as a child growing up in inner city Baltimore—the failing schools, the violence of the streets, parental love expressed through corporal punishment, the fear (which continues in him still), a lack of imagination for his future, and little hope of making it out unscathed. He also speaks again and again of experiences that showed him other worlds—worlds that he discovered through his hunger for books, his transformational encounters with the richness of black culture at The Mecca, through love and parenthood and journalism, and living in his adopted cities, New York and Paris. Through these experiences, Coates’ world expands, he renegotiates his identity, and finds his voice.

Identify one of Coates’ “world-opening” experiences. What was his perspective or position before this event? What change did this experience mark in him? What was it about the experience that made it so fundamental and formative to him?

Reflect on your experience. Write or respond in a medium of your choice (video, drawing, etc.) about a transformative experience that opened you to a new world (perhaps meeting someone of an identity

different from your own, traveling, studying something new). What was your perspective prior to this experience? How did you grow as a result of this encounter?

Code Switching

Coates recounts being in the airport and accidentally bumping into a man. When he apologizes, the man replies “you straight.” In this small moment, Coates recognizes the comfort of being with people of his “tribe,” people who share his culture and language.

When traveling in Paris, Coates makes the realization about his life up to that point: “I was always translating” (p. 122). What does he mean by this? In what ways was he living between two worlds?

Writes Eric Deggins in [Learning How to Code-Switch: Humbling But Necessary](#) for NPR's race, ethnicity, and culture blog Code Switch, “I learned early on, thanks to that g-word [guys] nonsense, that expertly navigating another culture wasn't a rejection of where I'd come from or a signal that I was any less authentically black. And returning to my roots wasn't being phony or perpetrating a put-on. It was being fully who I am.”

Letter to a Young Person

“I did not want to raise you in fear or false memory. I did not want you forced to mask your joys and bind your eyes. What I wanted for you to grow into consciousness.” (p. 111)

Why and for whom do you think Coates wrote *Between the World and Me*? Though it is addressed to his son, do you think there are other intended audiences? If his son is the intended audience, why might he chosen to publish the letter, rather than just giving to his son directly?

Why do you think Coates wrote his book in the form of a letter? What does this format allow to be said that a more journalistic approach cannot? When might a journalistic approach be preferred? (In an [interview with Democracy Now!](#) Coates gives some insight into this stylistic choice.)

Read James Baldwin's (1962) [“Letter to my Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of Emancipation,”](#) addressed to Baldwin's 14 year-old nephew. Coates indicates in an [interview in The Guardian](#) that he was reading Baldwin's book *The Fire Next Time*, in which the essay appears, while thinking about writing *Between the World and Me*. Baldwin's letter was written 50 years earlier than Coates'. What has changed? What remains the same? In what ways are the authors' tones, world views, and purpose for writing similar or different? Is there a particular reason, in your opinion, that the letters are addressed to 14- and 15-year-olds?

Drawing inspiration from these two letters or other epistolary works, write a letter to a young person you know. (You might consider writing to someone around the same age of the recipients of Coates' and Baldwin's letters—or even a 14 or 15 year-old version of yourself). To whom will you address your letter? How is your life different than the life of the person to whom you are writing? What do you wish someone had told you at his or her age? What do you want to impart to this person from your

experience? What are your hopes for this individual and the world in which he or she lives? Reference aspects of the two other letters in the format of your letter.

Education and Inquiry

A central theme in Coates' book is learning, modeling through his own experience how he became conscious, learned to ask questions and search for his own answers.

Coates on Education

"If the streets shackled my right leg, the schools shackled my left....I was a curious boy but the schools were not concerned with curiosity. They were concerned with compliance." (p. 25-26)

"The pursuit of knowing was freedom to me, the right to declare your own curiosities and follow them through all manner of books. I was made for the library not the classroom." (p. 48)

How does Coates describe his formal educational experiences, and what are his critiques of them? Through what experiences outside of the classroom does Coates learn (at home, in the streets, in the library, at the Mecca, from the women he loved, as a father, as a journalist, in New York, in Paris)? What does he learn from these experiences, and why does he value them so highly?

Race, Privilege and Schooling

What is the role of race and privilege in schooling? Educator and author Jonathan Kozol has been a preeminent voice on race and education for the past fifty years. His work with children in inner city schools in Boston and New York show how children, families, and teachers are impacted by policies which allow separate and unequal to continue. See Kozol's article "[Still Separate, Still Unequal: America's Educational Apartheid](#)" and the [ACLU's School-to-Prison pipeline](#) for information on the continued barriers to racial equity in education.

Reflect on Your Own Learning

What has your formal education been like up to now? What kind of student were you? What drove you? What were the values of your school? Did they fit you? What have been your most formative informal learning experiences? In what way were they different from your formal education? Have you been encouraged to ask questions? Were there particular people who impacted you or methods that you used to learn about things you did not know? What do you expect your college education will be like (what do you want out of it)?

Writing and Revising as a Tool for Understanding

Professor [Howard Ramsby II](#) (Southern Illinois University Edwardsville) describes Coates as a rare public intellectual who doesn't merely speak his ideas in public, but *thinks publicly*. We can trace the development of Coates' ideas through his prolific writings. Read Coates' article [Black and Blue](#), which appeared in the *Washington Monthly* in 2001, less than a year after the killing of Prince Jones. This article lays the groundwork for the book that became *Between the World and Me*. In what ways does Coates' thinking about Jones' death and the culture which led to it become more developed and refined from the early version of his telling the story to the later version?

Envisioning Education

What is formal education for? What should it be about? What are examples of programs or initiatives that are working to combat the notion of education for compliance? How can we effect change?