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Considering *Between the World and Me*; or, The Sins of Omission and Commission

Everybody's Protest Narrative: *Between the World and Me* and the Limits of Genre

Dana A. Williams

The question of genre in the African American literary tradition is as old as the tradition itself. The earliest known writing of a black person in North America remains Lucy Terry's "Bars Fight." As best we can tell, Terry was born in Africa and sold into slavery in Rhode Island some time around 1730. Not published until 1855, "Bars Fight" tells the story of the slaying of two white families by "Indians" on August 25, 1746. It is not clear whether the poem was designed to be sung or if it was indeed a successful attempt at poetry and traditional literature. Its rhymed tetrameter couplets suggest the latter. Nevertheless, "Bars Fight" was passed down orally, thereby muddying the waters of genre (at least in relation to the question of the oral in literature). Notably, the tradition's second conflicted genre also raises questions about the primacy of orality. In 1770, James Gronniosaw's *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince*, as the first published full-length autobiography by a black person, ushers in the tradition of what comes to be known as "the slave narrative" and one of its attending tropes, the talking book. Having seen his master read a book aloud, Gronniosaw claims to have believed that books could talk. Metaphorically, which is how we should assume he meant to invoke the trope, Gronniosaw was right. Books can talk—to and for you. Early African American authors modified the tradition of the autobiography to birth a new genre—the slave narrative—as a means of having books talk, of having them protest the inhumanity of enslavement. More temporarily, Gayl Jones highlights the tendency of the African American novel to transcend the limits of long fiction as genre in its more traditional iterations. In "Re-Imagining the African-American Novel: An Essay on Third World Aesthetics," the text, which "presumes to be written by the novel itself," writes:

I am a novel of the Third World, and so you would expect me to be different from those other novels [or "novels of the Other"], to have a different aesthetics, to revise (or rewrite) genre, characterization, style, theme, structure, viewpoint, values, and so I do. Paradox and ambivalence may be seen in the margins of this marginal text, and may be read in and between these lines. . . . depending on who you are, I may be full of contradictions. . . . I may contain every sort of implication: political, economic, sociological, anthropological, historical. (508; original brackets)

In important ways, Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* enters this conversation of the limits of genre—in this case the epistolary memoir as protest—for writers attempting to explore the political, economic, sociological, anthropological, and historical honestly, as Jones's self-reflexive novel suggests. In a conscious nod to James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, which contains two essays, "My Dungeon Shook—Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of Emancipation" and "Down at the Cross—Letter from a Region of My Mind," *Between the World* is structured as Coates's letter to his son in the wake of a series

of state-sanctioned violent assaults against black people, from Marlene Pinnock to Tamir Rice to Eric Garner. The book was met with near unprecedented success. It was easily among the most talked-about and widely reviewed books of 2015; it won the National Book Award for nonfiction; and Coates received a MacArthur Fellowship not long after its publication. But as much as *Between the World and Me* and Coates were celebrated, segments of the black intellectual community also expressed well-placed critical concern about the book and Coates's corresponding meteoric rise. Cornel West, for example, in a Facebook post, lamented Coates's silence about the resistance movements that emerged in wake of the violence that informs the book's ascent, among other things.

Coates's fear-driven self-absorption leads to individual escape and flight to safety. . . . Coates can grow and mature, but without an analysis of capitalist wealth incongruity, gender domination, homophobic degradation, Imperial occupation (all concrete forms of plunder) and collective fightback [sic] (not just personal struggle) Coates will remain a mere darling of White and Black Neo-liberals, paralyzed by their Obama worship and hence a distraction from the necessary courage and vision we need in our catastrophic times.

Undeniably, West's critique is biting.

While West's Facebook post is titled "In Defense of Baldwin," what followed West's comments was a "defense" of Coates. None dealt with the crux of West's argument, however—that Coates's decision to situate his critique of racism in America as a personal conversation with his son is also a decision to deal with racism on an individual basis, not a collective one; that even as *Between the World and Me* claims on its dust jacket to offer "a powerful new framework for understanding our nation's history and current crisis," it makes no attempt to move beyond the abstract and deal concretely with the critical elements that frame the nation's history and the current crisis; and that the failure to do so enacts those elements of neoliberalism that see democracy as about personal choice and seek to unravel democracy's interest in the public, especially any efforts toward the public's solidarity.

In "The Enduring Whiteness of the American Media," Howard W. French invokes Coates as an example of the problematic tokenism that informs the ongoing reality of racial disparities in American media. He notes that the disparities are foremost a result of a failure to integrate news organizations sufficiently and to transcend typecasting journalists and topics as black or white. But they are also made possible by the predictable ascendancy of a small number of black journalists whom the mainstream (read: *white*) media can cite as proof of diversity and, by extension, of a feigned or imagined postracial moment. Most recently, French writes, this role

has been thrust most of all upon Ta-Nehisi Coates. . . . An extraordinary deluge of plaudits began raining down on Coates with the publication of [*Between the World and Me*]. . . . This, to be sure, was great work being celebrated, and yet at the same time it was hard to avoid the feeling that we were witnessing the re-enactment of an old, insidious ritual of confinement, even though it was being carried out via fulsome praise.

What French implies when he observes the "process of assigning discrete bandwidth to a singular black figure for a limited if indeterminate period of time" is that this process acts in the service of that element a neoliberal agenda that presumes that social relations, too, can be manipulated for the purposes of the market. In this reality, diversity in media is necessary only as a means of profit. If it allows white people to feel good about their progressivism and provides evidence of their forbearance of black anger, then all the better.

Michelle Alexander's review of *Between the World and Me* for the *New York Times* struggles to come to terms with its critique of the book. "I had to read *Between the World and Me* twice before I was able to decide whether Coates actually did what I expected and hoped he would. He did not. Maybe that's a good thing," she writes. The first reading

of the book, she claims, left her disappointed. A second, however, diminished her frustrations:

I came to believe that the problem, to the extent that there is one, is that Coates's book is unfinished. He raises numerous critically important questions that are left unanswered. Perhaps Coates hasn't yet discovered for himself the answers to the questions he poses in *Between the World and Me*. But I suspect that he is holding out on us. Everything he has ever written leads me to believe he has more to say.

I am inclined to agree with Alexander on both points—that Coates has yet to discover answers to the critical questions that the book (and black life in America, for that matter) raises—with *where do we go from here?* being high among them—and that he likely has more to say. Perhaps, too, he is simply holding out on us. But it is more likely that the registers he employs in service of the epistolary memoir as a genre of protest handicap him beyond repair. And it's not just the registers; it's the genre itself.

As Howard Ramsby suggests in a lengthy blog post on the critical reception of the book, *Between the World and Me* “merges the spirits of Richard Wright and James Baldwin in a single work. That's no small feat, especially given the tendency of commentators to regularly pit Wright and Baldwin against each other.” While Baldwin's use of the epistle informs the book's structure, it is Wright's poem that serves as the book's epigraph and from which *Between the World and Me* takes its title. The intersection that undergirds the Baldwin/Wright conflict to which Ramsby alludes and of which most students of African American literature are well aware is the essay “Everybody's Protest Novel,” where Baldwin articulates what he sees as the signal limits and failures of the protest novel as a form designated “to bring greater freedom to the oppressed” (1702). In Baldwin's estimation, two realities inform these limits and failures. The first is a problem of genre or form. Baldwin writes that in her effort to show that slavery was wrong, Harriet Beecher Stowe mistook her role as pamphleteer for that of novelist, and suggests that the contemporary artist need not make this error. Doing so both undermines the genre's aim, and essentially neuters it. “Our passion for categorization, life fit neatly into categories,” Baldwin argues, “has led to an unforeseen paradoxical distress; confusion, a breakdown of meaning. Those categories which were meant to define and control the world for us have boomeranged us into chaos” (1702). Thus, even the strength of good intentions cannot save a form that has been normalized. Ironically, the protest novel,

so far from being disturbing is an accepted and comforting aspect of the American scene, ramifying that framework we believe to be so necessary. Whatever unsettling questions are raised are evanescent, titillating. . . . it is safely ensconced in the social arena . . . so that finally we receive a very definite thrill of virtue from the fact that we are reading such a book at all. . . . and “As long as such books are being published,” an American liberal once said . . . “everything will be all right.” (1702-03)

How much or how well, one has to wonder, does this explain the success of *Between the World and Me*? Is Baldwin's assertion that the protest novel cannot achieve the lofty purpose it claims for itself transferable to the protest tradition more broadly? And, if so, does this apply to *Between the World and Me* as a memoir of protest?

The second phenomenon that informs the failure of the protest novel, according to Baldwin, is that its dependence on “that cage of reality bequeathed us at our birth,” inevitably and endlessly betrays any effort to escape the trap of implacability. Bigger's tragedy, then, Baldwin asserts, is that he accepts a reality that denies him full life and that thereby constrains him, requiring him “to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria” he inherits by virtue of his blackness. To escape the trap of protest, Bigger would need to move beyond the primary categorization of his life as a black man constantly under threat and to find a way to transcend this categorization as his main reality. It is the latter impulse that seems to elude the

protest tradition, no matter the genre. In a defense of *Native Son*, John M. Reilly tangentially argues that Wright does transcend the limits of protest in the sense that *Native Son* offers a “direct challenge to the power of prevailing discourse,” which carries with it a “challenge into the mechanism of discourse itself” (37). For Reilly, the protest tradition challenges authority, its monopoly of discourse, and its corresponding monopoly of social power (41). Does the tradition have the power, as Reilly suggests, to challenge prevailing discourses in ways that enabled the desired transcendence for all? Or is it the case, as Baldwin argues, that beneath the dazzle of language and the intent to bring more freedom, “one may still discern, as the controlling force” of protest, a binary impulse that pits good against evil and denies the complexity of humanity in ways necessary to escape the dreaded birth-bequeathed cage?

This was, of course, a critical aim of the Black Arts Movement—to move beyond protest and its railing against the cage to achieve a new act of creation. As Hoyt Fuller reminds, “violence against the black minority is in-built in the established American society. . . . brutalization is inherent in all the customs and practices which bestow privileges on the whites. . . . These are old and well-worn truths which hardly need repeating” (151). What is needed now, he posits, is a viable reaction to them. As we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Black Arts Movement, that reaction, that form, sadly, has yet to emerge.

The similarities among Coates, Baldwin, and Wright abound. Like Baldwin, Coates has been celebrated among white liberals in spite of and because of his willingness to speak candidly about race in America. Like *The Fire Next Time*, *Between the World* emerges amid an uncertainty of times, amid assaults against black life, and amid renewed determination by activists to create new American ideals. Then, too, there was a crisis of intellectual thought, and Baldwin, as the white liberal establishment sweetheart, was met with distrust among leading black critics, J. Saunders Redding and Langston Hughes foremost among them. Like Wright, Coates narrates the horrors associated with the lynching that frames his text; and like Wright, whose *Native Son* became the first book by a black author selected for the Book-of-the-Month Club, and who, because of that book’s publication, became the first African American writer to earn a living entirely through his own writing, Coates achieves unparalleled success among white audiences with *Between the World*. Even as the text is written as a letter to his son, the secondary audience is white people, consciously so or not. As a memoir of protest, it says, “Here’s something awful you don’t know.” Black people know the horrors being narrated. Therefore, as a public text the default reader beyond young Samori is white people, who aren’t as privy to the well-known truths of the black experiences that constitute *Between the World*. Finally, a signal shortcoming critics consistently note of the book is its unwillingness to offer even the smallest meaningful insight into the interior lives of those Coates narrates as powerless and disembodied and who ultimately fall victim to the culture of poverty he constructs—a critique strikingly similar to that of Wright’s portrayal of Bigger’s world.

“Alas, Poor Ta-Nehisi,” to borrow from the title of Baldwin’s essay, cannot be expected to write a book that is all things to all people any more than “Poor Richard” or any other black writer could be expected to do such an impossible thing. Importantly, Coates makes no claims of speaking on behalf of the race. He opposes this adamantly, in fact, in an act of humility seldom seen by writers of his stature. And to be clear, he makes no claims of trying to imagine a better world for his son specifically or for his fellow man generally. Unapologetically, he has no expectations that the world will change to affirm the fullness of all people’s humanity. Still, you can’t help but want to hear from a writer, and soon, who takes up the mission of enhancing our senses of and abilities to make meaningful critique in ways that will expand our critical imaginations. For most, it seems perfectly reasonable to

expect this from Coates, a writer undeniably preoccupied with the unyielding color line, and from a book so brazenly consumed with race in America. The decision to move up the book's publication date, thereby suggesting the ways it would speak to an immediate crisis and to American culture more broadly, only heightened our expectations that it would be more.

Among other elements, *Between the World* makes clear, conclusively, that we need not sift through the absurdity of white supremacy in an attempt to locate useful elements of American society ever again. It also makes clear that we do need, still, to develop a faculty that reflects and considers the special imperatives of those distinctly black experiences in America that allow us to think and act otherwise. Finally, it reveals that the epistolary memoir as protest, because of its concern with identity politics and its attachment to individualism, cannot take us there. That form's limited and too-often thin critique of structural failures cannot agitate the critical fault lines that affect seismic shifts and lasting change. Even if we concede the permanence of racism, as *Between the World* seems to do in the tradition of Derrick Bell's *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, we must continue to believe that something better is possible if we but do our part as readers, writers, and thinkers to help usher it in. Finding a form capable of our strivings just may be our biggest challenge. Surely, if we meet that challenge, it will be among our finest achievements.

Ceding the Future

Derik Smith

Michelle Alexander rose to the status of public intellectual on the strength of her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010). Her treatise was not a trailblazing work of novel scholarship and innovative policy recommendations. Rather, it was an altered arrangement of ideas that had been circulating in activist circles, in the pages of left-leaning criminology journals, and in the lyrics of popular hip-hop artists for more than two decades. No less important because it was a reconception of existing arguments, it would seem that Alexander carried out the labor expected of the successful public intellectual: She helped shift the public discourse on policy regarding the criminal justice system, a keystone institution of American political economy. It is not likely that Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* will have a similar impact on public discourse. Although it has garnered its author notable accolades, such as the 2015 National Book Award and the MacArthur "Genius Grant," and has certified his status as a major public intellectual, few policy recommendations or reform initiatives will be developed from his memoir. In her ambivalent review of the book, Alexander responds to its apparent lack of actionable advice by concluding that Coates "hasn't yet discovered for himself the answers to the questions he poses." But close reading of the text actually suggests that Coates has answered the principal question he sets for himself, which is "How do I live free in this black body?" (12). His surprising and troubling answer is "With hopelessness and privatized black nationalism."

Coates's new answer to an old question is perhaps incomprehensible to Alexander because it represents a profound departure from the tradition of black intellectualism in which Alexander herself works. Described simply, in this tradition the intellectual educates, admonishes, and entreats her audience in hope of hastening the kinds of transformations of publics, policies, and society that have potential for ameliorating the conditions of black life in America. Cast in the form of a letter to his son, and ostensibly addressing both a black audience and secondary nonblack