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Remaking Relations: Reading Ta-Nehisi Coates Beyond James Baldwin

When I was in the tenth grade, almost everyone knew me as John's little brother. He was a senior; in the relative provinces of Parkview High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, he was a unique figure: a painter, a reader, a charmer. I was a lonely, anxious kid, but he received a rare and hard-to-describe response: admiration. He would reject this summary, and his experience was certainly more complicated. For this story, however, that's how I saw the world. So I imitated him: he'd grown out his curly hair; I grew out mine. He'd made a necklace of pennies flattened by trains; I made a necklace of the pull tabs from soda cans. He was an avowed atheist who read; I was an avowed atheist who read. My supposed friends reacted to this mimicry with violence. In junior high, at lunchtime, my friends surrounded me one day and ripped the necklace from my neck, scattering tabs in the courtyard grass. And in high school, out of nowhere one day, outside racist Mrs. Smith's American History classroom, someone stood chest-to-chest with me and declared I was trying too hard to be like my brother. They were right, a little bit, as teenagers can be, but it was an easy rightness: we were brothers, so comparing us was easy. They missed how I tried to be like other people—in some cases, like them, with their casual aggression. They missed, too, the ways *they* had tried to be like other people, or maybe they saw my imitation because they didn't want to see their own.

It's a human tendency to see one likeness between two people and to assume that likeness implies many more. That narrow identification arose after the publication of Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*, an epistle to his son that is a memoir and a personal intellectual history. *Between the World and Me* is formally modeled after James Baldwin's essay "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of Emancipation," the first of two essays in Baldwin's remarkable *The Fire Next Time*; that formal likeness, combined with Toni Morrison's lone dust-jacket blurb comparing Coates to Baldwin, led almost every reviewer to make the same comparison, usually positively. A qualitative comparison is, essentially, impossible; for us, Baldwin is a figure

with a life-long bibliography of stellar essays, stories, and novels. Coates's career is young, with two books, his writing for *The Atlantic*, and authorship of a *Black Panther* comic book series.

More interesting, and more telling, is the relationship between them as writers. One danger of comparing them so explicitly is the issue of tokenism: for many readers, Baldwin and Coates not only represent African American nonfiction, they *are* African American nonfiction. I find myself split: the links between Baldwin and Coates are revealing about the former and essential to understanding the latter, but the basic fact of a link between them has become, more commonly, a way of misunderstanding both and reinforcing that tokenism. Baldwin's presence permeates *Between the World and Me* much more implicitly than reviews suggest; given Coates's fulsome evocation of various writers and artists he learned from, one would expect more mention of Baldwin as well. Yet Baldwin's name arises only briefly in the text. I read the default link between the two as problematic: white critics have flattened Coates's ideas as imitation, homage, and tradition, and, while they are to some degree, his text implicitly argues against "My Dungeon Shook," the very essay that formally inspires *Between the World and Me*. Notably, the more critical reviews of the book have come from black writers, from Cornel West on his Facebook page to Michelle Alexander in *The New York Times*. Writing in *African American Review*, Dana A. Williams categorizes *Between the World and Me* as "epistolary memoir as protest," regarding it mainly as a failure in that category (179). These writers, too, review Coates in terms of Baldwin, primarily negatively, but they also fail to identify the particular relationship between Coates's text and Baldwin's. To best consider *Between the World and Me* on its terms, we must understand the complexity of its relationship to Baldwin's writing and to a larger African American tradition. Those of us who teach the book—I have taught it to first-year students alongside Baldwin's "My Dungeon Shook"—must recognize and delineate the specific lines of the relationship between the two texts. The book is both homage and dissent, inspired by Baldwin's writing but also altering his ideas, especially in response to white supremacy.

The problem likely originates in the presentation of *Between the World and Me* as an object: spare black text on an off-white dust jacket, with a blurb from no less than Morrison: "I've been wondering who might fill the intellectual void that plagued me after James Baldwin died. Clearly it's Ta-Nehisi Coates." Morrison's imprimatur isn't exactly the voice of God, but it *is* close. Book reviewers relied on that blurb to name Coates the new Baldwin, but I

think her words seem clearer than they are. She isn't claiming necessarily that Coates is the new Baldwin, nor that he writes like him; "the intellectual void that plagued me" suggests far more fully that Morrison felt the loss of a coherent voice that addressed race in America in way that resonated with her. Notably, Morrison was Baldwin's friend and eulogized him in the *New York Times*, writing, "Jimmy, there is too much to think about you, and too much to feel. The difficulty is your life refuses summation—it always did—and invites contemplation instead." For most of us, Baldwin is simply a literary figure; for Morrison, he is both figure and friend.

Of course, Morrison's analogies tend to stick. In 1998, she wrote a short essay for *The New Yorker* about the ongoing investigation into Bill Clinton's infidelities and noted, "Years ago, in the middle of the Whitewater investigation, one heard the first murmurs: white skin notwithstanding, this is our first black President." Though she attributed the phrase "the first black President" to anonymous murmurs, the phrase is now attributed to her. That figurative blackness had to do with how Clinton "displays almost every trope of blackness: single-parent household, born poor, working-class, saxophone-playing, McDonald's-and-junk-food-loving boy from Arkansas." Just as she wasn't claiming that Clinton was black, she isn't claiming that Coates is the second coming of Baldwin. Just as Coates's reviewers blurred the meaning of her blurb, Christopher Hitchens misread what Morrison wrote about Clinton. He writes that Morrison "described Clinton as 'black' on the basis of his promiscuity and dysfunction and uncertainty about his parentage"—Hitchens blurred "single-parent household" into "uncertainty about his parentage" and invented a reference to "promiscuity." We tend to reduce writers via synecdoche for the sake of clarity, but Hitchens' treatment of Morrison displays a racist view that infected his work. I would argue that, in the wake of Hitchens' death, writers have reduced Hitchens similarly, either ignoring the regular cruelty and childishness of his writing in favor of his rhetorical skill or highlighting only that cruelty.

Morrison was not wrong to link Coates to Baldwin, mainly because of how Coates adopts and grapples with Baldwin's ideas and style, but reviewers took her to mean that Coates is, in the words of one, "our Baldwin" (Clemmons). Yet such an adoption of Coates as "our," for any collective group, misreads Coates and essentializes both. He even argues against such an identification. Throughout the first section of *Between the World and Me*, Coates describes how, in college, he wrestled with Saul Bellow's question "Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus?" Coates ultimately concluded that Bellow's question is the wrong one to ask, citing writer Ralph Wiley: "Tolstoy is

the 'Tolstoy of the Zulus,' wrote Wiley. 'Unless you find a profit in fencing off universal properties of mankind into exclusive tribal ownership'" (55-6). Coates models his book on Baldwin's essay, but we should not see Coates as "our" Baldwin unless we believe in "exclusive tribal ownership." Generations, too, can be kinds of tribes. Rejecting those terms, Baldwin can be only Baldwin, Coates can be only Coates, and both are only individuals in a much larger tradition. Framing Coates as Baldwin's inheritor or replacement fails to understand how readers and groups of readers interact with individual writers. Coates cannot be the Baldwin or Tolstoy of Generation X. No culture or people "own" a writer; with an African American writer, that idea of ownership is particularly sinister.

Just as Hitchens infected Morrison's writing with a stereotype, reviewers have locked Coates into the role of Baldwin's inheritor because of how narrowly these reviewers consider black life and culture. In his essay "The Enduring Whiteness of the American Media," published in late 2015 in *The Guardian*, Howard W. French identifies the categorization of Coates as "a persistent problem of typecasting—a deeply embedded view that regards certain topics as 'black' and the rest as 'white.' Those black people who make their way into the business are heavily concentrated in stereotypical roles." For French, the praise heaped on Coates by largely white bodies was both a recognition of his great accomplishment and "the re-enactment of an old, insidious ritual of confinement, even though it was being carried out via fulsome praise. Coates was doing, after all, the one thing that black writers have long been permitted—if not always encouraged—to do: write about the experience of race and racism in the world and in their own lives."

French is right to observe a self-congratulatory tokenism in the praise of Coates and the repeated comparisons to Baldwin. (Indeed, though I admire and teach Coates's writing, I carry some suspicion that, as a white person, I perform the same tokenism, whether I intend to do so or not.) The unfortunate side effect, though, is an unending self-correction: we have to see Coates in terms of Baldwin, but we must be wary of seeing Coates in terms of Baldwin. We must acknowledge the persistent, ongoing tokenism that reduces African American writers, particularly Baldwin and Coates. We must be clear, too, about who *we* are. The acclaim heaped on *Between the World and Me* has made Coates a kind of status symbol for certain white readers, to the point that in a recent sketch *Saturday Night Live* parodied white people who lived in a bubble, with one white woman reading the book as a sign of her awareness. In a recent interview, Coates addressed what he sees as the oddity of white praise for his book:

You feel yourself trying to write from an African-American perspective that is not fully represented, and in your mind, to the extent there is any audience, you see yourself as writing for African-Americans who are like you, who are somewhat frustrated about things—the book is for them, in that sense, it’s for that feeling. It’s not that you don’t want other people to read it, but then the entire book becomes like that, about what white people think about it.

At the time of this writing, *Between the World and Me* has sold nearly one million copies and appeared on many college syllabi, including mine. Against Coates’s surprise at the book’s success with white audience, Dana A. Williams writes, “Even as the text is written as a letter to his son, the secondary audience is white people, consciously so or not” (182). Williams offers little support for that claim, but considering the fact that the more praising reviewers of Coates’s book, myself included, are white, we must consider the book in terms of its multiple readerships: Coates’s son, white readers, African American readers, and, for the purposes of this essay, the tradition to which Coates’s book responds.

In large part, Baldwin appears in *Between the World and Me* through subtext and brief mentions. The most obvious reference is the imitated form: just as “My Dungeon Shook” is written as a letter to Baldwin’s nephew, Coates’s book is written as a letter to his son, Samori. Baldwin’s essay begins with the common, affectionate salutation, “Dear James,” signaling a self-referential echo: the letter is to his nephew and, because the nephew is named after Baldwin, to Baldwin himself (3). Baldwin wrote so frequently in the tradition of the personal essay, so a self-reflexive address makes sense. Coates borrows the form of the letter, but even the terse salutation suggests essential differences: “Son,” Coates begins (5). The salutation, lacking “Dear,” could be read as a hard-edged realism or as a soft, intimate spoken address; the book’s tone suggests both might be in play simultaneously. Just as much as the borrowed form of the letter alludes to *The Fire Next Time*, a book Coates has cited as one of his favorites, it signals, even if subtly, a departure.

Even the events that triggered the writing of the letter mark both similarity and Coates’s departure. Baldwin writes on the anniversary of Emancipation, an event that might be read as signaling hope or progress, while Coates writes because of his son’s reaction to the acquittal of Darren Wilson for the shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Yet in the address from elder to younger, in both writers, in the reason for writing, we can see a

continuity. First, Baldwin's concern about the relationship between hard exterior and interior vulnerability: "I keep seeing your face, which is also the face of your father and my brother. Like him, you are tough, dark, vulnerable, moody—with a very definite tendency to sound truculent because you want no one to think you are soft" (3).

Coates sees in his son the interior vulnerability made exterior: "You stayed up till 11 P.M. that night, waiting for the announcement of an indictment, and when instead it was announced that there was none you said, 'I've got to go,' and you went into your room, and I heard you crying" (10). In running to his room, Samori attempts to keep his vulnerability hidden as well. Both Baldwin and Coates want to break the pattern of fear in the face of racist terror. Again, Baldwin: "You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a *nigger*. I tell you this because I love you, and please don't you ever forget it" (3). Love appears later as well, though inflected differently: "There is no reason for you to try to become like white people and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that *they* must accept *you*. The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that *you* must accept *them*. And I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope" (8). The emphasis on destruction, pleading, and love highlight Baldwin's own fear.

Coates echoes that fear and that hope of breaking the pattern of fear, yet with a palpable shift away from Baldwin's emphasis on love: "I am afraid. I feel the fear most acutely whenever you leave me. But I was afraid long before you, and in this I was unoriginal. When I was your age the only people I knew were black, and all of them were powerfully, adamantly, dangerously afraid. I had seen this fear all my young life, though I had not always recognized it as such" (14). In seeing his son's fear, Coates recognizes his own fear as "unoriginal." Also, Coates doesn't plead to his son to remember his love in terms of white racism. Here and elsewhere, Coates refuses to raise the potentiality of progress and even argues against it. The act of writing the book itself, though, does constitute, if not a passing on of hope, a passing on of knowledge. Coates writes later that "at your age my feeling was exactly the same [as his son's]. And I recall that even then I had not yet begun to imagine the perils that tangle us. . . . You have not yet grappled with your own myths and narratives and discovered the plunder everywhere around us" (20). That grappling he wants his son to do constitutes Coates's greatest and most central diversion from Baldwin's "My Dungeon Shook": Baldwin urges his nephew to love himself and to feel the love of his family, but Coates wants his son to understand the unoriginality and cyclical cruelty of American racism.

To be clear, Baldwin and Coates articulate a similar (and, to my mind, entirely accurate) view of American history against claims of American exceptionalism. In short, any greatness accomplished by or in the name of America exists alongside and because of the terrible crimes of American whiteness. For Baldwin, the crime is not just slavery and its ongoing aftermath; it is the attempt to deny or ignore that crime: “this is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it. . . .It is the innocence which constitutes the crime” (4-5). Coates identifies the same crime, though in different terms: “I propose to take our countrymen’s claims of American exceptionalism seriously, which is to say I propose subjecting our country to an exceptional moral standard. This is difficult because there exists, all around us, an apparatus urging us to accept American innocence at face value and not to inquire too much” (8). In short, Baldwin and Coates share an historical view of American whiteness and American innocence: linking those two erases the crime and continues its violence.

Yet even their understanding of American history differs. Notably, most of Coates’s response to Baldwin in *Between the World and Me* is implicit; Coates names Baldwin only twice: once in an off-handed reference to their shared travels in France (“I did not think much about Baldwin or Wright. I had not read Sartre or Camus” (122)), and once in the epigraph for the third and final section of the book (134). The off-handed reference to Baldwin distances Coates from him rather than links him: yes, both Baldwin and Coates traveled to France and found there a remarkable difference in black-white interactions than in the United States, but reading Coates’s travels in terms of Baldwin’s is to misread Coates, he suggests. And, in the larger context of the book, the epigraph distances Coates as well: it reads, “And have brought humanity to the edge of oblivion: because they think they are white.” That choice of epigraph can be read as an implicit approval of and alignment with Baldwin, but it is, in fact, the opposite. The quote comes from Baldwin’s essay “On Being White. . .and Other Lies,” originally published in *Essence* in 1984. Coates certainly agrees with Baldwin that race is, to borrow a phrase from essayist Eula Biss, “a social fiction” transformed into a “social fact.” However, whereas Baldwin sees white power as having “brought humanity to the edge of oblivion,” Coates contextualizes white history differently for his son:

There is nothing uniquely evil in these destroyers or even in this moment. The destroyers are merely men enforcing the whims of our country, correctly interpreting its heritage and legacy. It is hard to face this. But all our phrasing—race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth. (10)

Baldwin, writing during the Reagan era and the Cold War, as well as the continued quiet resegregation of America, highlights the feeling of apocalyptic fear many felt in the Cold War era, but Coates revises that: the brutality of white racism is “nothing uniquely evil.” Those who continue white supremacy are “merely men,” their actions “correctly interpreting” the American legacy. That suggests not the edge of oblivion but a foreseeable continuation. For Coates, understanding American racism comes down to the human body and the immediately “visceral.”

Even that return to the body counters Baldwin’s hope, as expressed to his nephew in “My Dungeon Shook”: “There is no reason for you to try to become like white people and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that *they* must accept *you*. The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that *you* must accept *them*. And I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope” (8). For Coates in *Between the World and Me*, hope and faith constitute a refusal to accept the present reality of racism: “some time ago I rejected magic in all its forms” (11). Later in the book, Coates writes:

We are captured, brother, surrounded by the majoritarian bandits of America. And this has happened here, in our only home, and the terrible truth is that we cannot will ourselves to an escape on our own. Perhaps that was, is, the hope of the movement: to awaken the Dreamers, to rouse them to the facts of what their need to be white, to talk like they are white, to think that they are white, which is to think that they are beyond the design flaws of humanity, has done to the world. (146)

For Coates and readers, “the hope of the movement” may not refer explicitly to the hope Baldwin offers his nephew, but given Coates’s familiarity with Baldwin, we might read “the hope of the movement” alongside Baldwin’s. Consider as well Coates’s more direct (if still general) advice to his son: “And still I urge you to struggle.

Struggle for the memory of your ancestors. Struggle for wisdom. Struggle for the warmth of The Mecca. Struggle for your grandmother and grandfather, for your name. But do not struggle for the Dreamers. Hope for them. Pray for them, if you are so moved. But do not pin your struggle on their conversion” (151). Baldwin’s hope suggests the possibility of white conversion; Coates’s “struggle” pushes explicitly against “their conversion.”

Coates also splits from Baldwin on the notions of dignity and progress. For Baldwin, the idea of progress based in individual dignity guides his advice to his nephew, while for Coates, any notion of progress or dignity is irrelevant. Baldwin tells his nephew:

For this is your home, my friend, do not be driven from it; great men have done great things here, and will again, and we can make America what America must become. It will be hard, James, but you come from sturdy, peasant stock, men who picked cotton and dammed rivers and built railroads, and, in the teeth of the most terrifying odds, achieved an unassailable and monumental dignity. (10)

The language of exceptionalism, underscored by Baldwin’s gift for and training in sermonizing oratory, suggests the power of an abstraction that arises from real human work. Baldwin’s nephew can help instantiate that progress into “what America must become.” That suggests a destiny. Yet Coates rejects such ideas of progress or destiny: “Enslavement was not destined to end, and it is wrong to claim our present circumstance—no matter how improved—as the redemption for the lives of people who never asked for the posthumous, untouchable glory of dying for their children. Our triumphs can never compensate for this” (70). More explicitly, Coates argues against the notion of progress needing to be built by black people: “The birth of a better world is not ultimately up to you, though I know, each day, there are grown men and women who tell you otherwise. The world needs saving precisely because of the actions of these same men and women” (70). The second sentence would exclude Baldwin—Coates’s respect for Baldwin’s writing and activism preclude seeing Baldwin as someone the world needs saving from—yet Baldwin’s “My Dungeon Shook” suggests a narrative of progress embedded in the future work of his nephew; Coates denies that progress.

I have devoted most of this essay to the relationship between Baldwin’s writing and Coates’s, but I think that relationship is only a starting point to understanding Coates. A key to contextualizing *Between the World and Me*

rests in the source for the title; as mentioned before, the title comes from the Richard Wright poem of the same title. If we have to think of Coates in terms of his relationship to other African American writers and thinkers, we have to understand that the title comes from Wright and the form from Baldwin: in short, Coates isn't drawing from one writer or one tradition, but from a broader tradition. In her critical review of the book, Dana A. Williams approvingly cites a blog post that sees *Between the World and Me* as merging Wright and Baldwin; in terms of form, there is an insight to that, but even that limits the tradition in which Coates seems to place the book. I'd like to recall part of the interview transcript quoted above: "You feel yourself trying to write from an African-American perspective that is not fully represented." In *Between the World and Me*, Coates writes to his son with uncertainty, acknowledging that he doesn't know how much their experiences and perspectives overlap. So he describes his own experience and intellectual heritage, including a long passage on his time at Howard University, his "Mecca," as he calls it. Part of that is an intellectual history of his own time as a student outside the classroom, visiting the library. He writes, "I did not find a coherent tradition marching lockstep but instead factions, and factions within factions. Hurston battled Hughes, Du Bois warred with Garvey, Harold Cruse fought everyone. I felt myself at the bridge of a great ship that I could not control because C. L. R. James was a great wave and Basil Davidson was a swirling eddy, tossing me about" (47). In that passage and others, Coates emphasizes how his views and alignments shifted from one week to the next; identifying Coates with Baldwin fails to see how he interacts with a broader tradition of relationships. Just as Coates can't be "our" Baldwin—none of us owns him, and we can't assume he is the same to each of us—he's not even Baldwin to himself. Nor does he represent anyone or anything beyond himself; he "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" (Williams 182).

The treatment of Coates as another generation's Baldwin fails, as suggested before, in the same way there is no Tolstoy of the Zulus; even if we think generationally, we have to understand each generation as producing or praising its own writers for its own particular needs. It also fails in the ways we—again, largely a "we" of white America—understand or categorize African American history, when we try to understand it at all. For many, the binary of the Civil Rights Movement is Malcolm X versus Martin Luther King. Malcolm is a token of violent resistance, and King is a token of nonviolence. I mention this binary because Coates engages with it as well. *Between*

the World and Me is suffused with Malcolm X: Sonia Sanchez's elegy for him provides the epigraph for Section I, and Coates writes a tribute to how the speeches and image of Malcolm X inspired his view of blackness while he was in high school. It was then that Coates understood "the sanctity of the black body" and, in the book, makes the first of two oblique references to King: "You do not give your precious body to the billy clubs of Birmingham sheriffs nor to the insidious gravity of the streets" (36). The other, more explicit, reference to King comes much later in the book, in a dismissal of those (the "Dreamers") who accept the racial dynamics of American life and resist facing America's racist history and present: "the Dreamers are quoting Martin Luther King and exulting nonviolence for the weak and the biggest guns for the strong" (135). By that point in the book, Coates has moved past Malcolm X as well, finding his "predictions of national doom" to be "too pat" to serve as an understanding of American racism. Just as Coates isn't simply another iteration of Baldwin, his view of America isn't simply one to categorize in the binary of Malcolm and Martin. Coates wrote with the view of "an African-American perspective that is not fully represented," and already reviewers—many white—have narrowed Coates into simple narratives that *Between the World and Me* explicitly rejects.

It's worth noting that Coates's brief mentions of King aren't simply rejections of his perspective. Just as Coates approaches Baldwin with nuance, he does so with King. In his 2014 essay "The Case for Reparations," published to fanfare in *The Atlantic*, Coates subtly alludes to King's "I Have a Dream" speech in a way that affirms King. Early in King's speech, he describes American history, and the March on Washington, in terms of finance: "the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration" were "a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. . . .It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note. . . .America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds.'" In "The Case for Reparations," Coates updates the metaphor for a more digital era: "But still we are haunted. It is as though we have run up a credit-card bill and, having pledged to charge no more, remain befuddled that the balance does not disappear. The effects of that balance, interest accruing daily, are all around us." Yet Coates also departs from King's optimism; King goes on to say that "we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this

check — a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.” In “The Case for Reparations” and *Between the World and Me*, Coates sounds no note of optimism that a check will be cashed.

I align myself with Coates’s resistance to and rejection of the belief in progress. In some ways, the belief in progress is self-affirming, allowing us to believe we are better, more evolved, than those who came before us. The counter-argument in support of progress might be that a belief in progress allows us to understand that, no matter how much we have progressed, we will fall short according to the even more progressed viewpoint of the future; however, I think the belief in progress blinds us to reactionary movements: those that brought about the end of Reconstruction and the beginning of the terror of Jim Crow; those that shifted American prisons to a for-profit industry building wealth on incarcerated bodies; those that elected Donald Trump to the presidency and a Republican party to an ascendancy that will allow them to erase the already spare social-safety net in the United States. I also think the belief in progress blinds each of us to our own shortcomings. Because I am white, I resist a progress that allows me to feel a moral superiority or a moral security. Reading and teaching Baldwin and Coates means articulating my own complicity in the comfort of my whiteness and, in turn, the pain of blackness.

We would best understand Coates and ourselves, only if we reorient our sense of *relation*. I was not simply imitating my brother (though I was, in part, doing that), and Coates isn’t simply a reissue of Baldwin. But my brother and I are related, obviously, in a way not unlike the way Coates puts himself into a relationship with Baldwin by adopting the form of “My Dungeon Shook.” Yet we have stilled and stalled the language of *relation*; as Coates observes, “all our phrasing—race *relations*, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience” (10; emphasis mine). *Relation* isn’t simply about likeness, or about distance, or about both: it is about fluidity and change. We must resist our own reiteration of the tokenizing reaction to Coates. My relationship with my brother has never been single; Coates’s relationship to Baldwin isn’t as simple as reviews would have it, and, in the future, if/when people study Coates and the racial history of the early twenty-first century, they will do well to assume the same fluidity and nuance they recognize in their own days. Coates himself has worked to do so in *Between the World and Me*; we should do so as well.

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Coates, a writer for The Atlantic, had been reading James Baldwin's 1963 *The Fire Next Time* and was determined to make his second meeting with the president less deferential than his first.[9] As he left for Washington, D.C., his wife encouraged him to think like Baldwin, and Coates recalled an unofficial, fiery meeting between Baldwin, Black activists, and Robert Kennedy. As Coates walked to the train station, he thought about how Baldwin would not have shared Obama's optimism, the same optimism that supported many Civil Rights Movement activists' belief that justice was inevitable. "Ta-Nehisi Coates and a Generation Waking Up". ISSN 0028-792X. Retrieved April 23, 2019.