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Between the World and Me, Michael Brown, and White Imagination

Abstract

"What can we do as Christians to support each other across racial lines?"

Posting about racial divide in America from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/between-the-world-and-me-michael-brown-and-white-imagination/>

Keywords

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

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 inallthings.org/between-the-world-and-me-michael-brown-and-white-imagination/

Howard Schaap

November 17,
2016

Recently, two references to sexual assault—one of them from the headlines of our unfortunate presidential race, the other a dark rumor from a local town—prompted my wife and me to talk to our fifteen-year-old daughter about protecting herself against would-be assailants. With No Doubt’s “I’m Just a Girl” also playing in my head, we had a frank talk about the soft spots of the male body to aim for should she—heaven forbid—find her own body attacked.

When you talk to fifteen-year-olds about “the world,” you have to talk in specific terms. Go for the groin, I told my daughter, for the eyeballs, the shins. Scream your head off. Use keys as a weapon. Use anything as a weapon. Bite. Scratch. Kick. Grab and twist.

While the analogy is by no means exact, Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me* is this kind of bold and direct conversation, the kind you have with a teenager about the harshness of the world. The book, which won a 2015 national book award, is a letter from Coates to his fifteen-year-old son, Samori, about being black and male in America, written in response to the shooting of Michael Brown and the non-indictment that followed. In a three-part letter covering 152 pages, Coates challenges the idea that real progress has been made in a society built on plundering the black body.

Between the World and Me is, on the one hand, a book of ideas, and two key ideas frame this father-son conversation. The first idea, ironically, is the physical reality of the black body. Coates argues that “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.” Rather than abstract ideas such as progress, the broken black body is ground zero for this conversation, and Coates insists to his son, “You must never look away from this.”¹

The second idea that frames the discussion is that “whiteness” is an invention and a powerful and dangerous abstraction. Race itself is a construct, Coates emphasizes, “the child of racism, not the father.”² Indeed, “those Americans who believe they are white” cobbled together “whiteness” from various ethnic groups for the purpose of power.³ “White” people, Coates tells his son, “are, like us, a modern invention,” proven by the fact that they were “something else before they were white—Catholic, Corsican, Welsh, Mennonite, Jewish.” To be “white” has no real meaning, he writes, “divorced from the machinery of criminal power.”⁴

But ideas aside, this book’s challenge is primarily a challenge of the imagination. Can we put ourselves in the shoes of this father after the spectacle of the black body of Michael Brown lying in the street for hours? After the powers that be decide it is acceptable to treat the black body this way?

“You stayed up till 11 P.M. that night,” Coates recounts to his son of the event, “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.”⁵ Coates follows his son into the room, but makes no effort to comfort him. Rather, he writes, “What I told you is what your grandparents tried to tell me: that this is your country, that this is your world, that this is your body, and you must find some way to live within all of it.”⁶

“This is your body.” Much of the book’s power is wrapped up in this declaration from father to son. It’s a statement with a Eucharistic echo. Coates, an avowed atheist, repeatedly uses religious terminology throughout the book, and the effect is powerful and convicting. For example, Coates calls the black body of his friend, Prince Jones, “that

vessel of flesh and bone” that, when broken, spills “all its holy contents.”⁷ Likewise, he denounces in religious terms those who break the black body. “And hell upon those who shatter the holy vessel,”⁸ he declares, and the phrase rings with prophecy.

This is all to say that Coates and his son identify deeply with Michael Brown. And Eric Garner. And Trayvon Martin. For white readers of Coates’ book, a lot is riding on the degree to which we can understand this deep identification.

Recently, during a class in which we read *Between the World and Me*, student presenters raised the following question about recent shootings of black men and women by police, framed in the following words: “Put yourself in another’s shoes. What if it was your loved one that was shot and killed?”

By and large, students had difficulty making that imaginative leap. They simply could not imagine the kind of situation in which something like the Michael Brown shooting would have happened to someone they loved.

Why not?

The simple answer, perhaps, is the chasm that continues to exist in America between black and white. Many white students—many white people—continue *not* to believe that a person would be stopped by the police simply for their being-in-the-world. This is the first challenge of imagination for white readers of *Between the World and Me*.

Unfortunately, for white Christian readers, the imaginative leap the book requires may be even farther, especially if ideals such as “the law,” and the values of self-improvement and upward mobility—as well as flawed theologies of sin and grace—come into the picture. Many of us Christians are so tied into a religio-economic system (think, for example, of Christian college students who are putting themselves tens-of-thousands of dollars in debt in order to join that system) that we literally can’t imagine any kind of behavior that might bring us into conflict with “the law” in this way.

In fact, many of us within the Christian community seem to have a subconscious view that if you do come into conflict with police, it’s your own fault and you probably get what you deserve. And, sure, this thinking continues, certain people seem more likely to run afoul of police. And yes, there are labels that fit these people – among them “black” or “deplorables” or “the undeserving poor.” Before the most recent election, I was ready to categorize these three terms as roughly equal. However, the election seems to have firmly reestablished a hierarchy for the three words, and “black” still wins the race to the bottom. Whatever term you choose, this line of thinking goes, they —“those people”—deserve it.

This kind of eye-for-eye view of justice has more in common with karma than it does grace and as such has no place in the Christian community.

But Coates’ puts his finger precisely on the dangers of this attitude in a section of the book that recounts the death of his friend, Prince Jones, at the hands of police about fifteen years prior to the Michael Brown shooting. Prince Jones was an upper-class Christian black man who was shot and killed by an undercover police officer. This officer was both well beyond his jurisdiction and had mistaken—badly mistaken, as it turned out—Jones for another suspect. Still, the officer went free, and even returned to his job.

The lesson, says Coates, is clear: American society considers crimes like this one to be inevitable, and thus we consider the perpetrators of these crimes—when they are police—to be carrying out natural law. Coates reflects that his own mother “knew that the galaxy itself could kill me...And no one would be brought to account for this destruction, because my death would not be the fault of any human but the fault of some unfortunate but immutable fact of ‘race,’ imposed upon an innocent country by the inscrutable judgment of invisible gods. The earthquake cannot be subpoenaed. The typhoon will not bend under indictment.”⁹

At this point in the book, at least this white reader wanted to say, “Oh, but—”, “Yeah, but—”, “Well, if only—”, and this

is where the imaginative leap of a white reader of *Between the World and Me* is so important. To *not* be able to imagine myself in Coates shoes with a fifteen-year-old son on the streets of the U.S.—and I’m not sure I can imagine it—is to fall silent before the book and just listen.

That’s where Coates’ book speaks most profoundly, to the failure of many of our imaginations, especially to the failure of white Christian imaginations. It’s not just a failure to say about Michael Brown, “There but for the grace of God go I” – or, more profoundly, “There goes my 18-year old son”— a statement that is paternalistic in its own way. Rather, it’s allowing something as simple and false as race to keep us from empathizing as one parent to another at the loss of a son. It’s a failure to see the degree to which sin is institutionalized—shame on us Christians especially, with our sense of the power and ubiquity of evil in the world. And it is blind loyalty to a religio-economic system—one that Coates identifies as running right through our schools—that has a list of commands to be followed: “Walk in single file. Work quietly. Pack an extra number 2 pencil. Make no mistakes.”¹⁰

Of course, it’s ironic for me to suggest that *Between the World and Me* requires white Christian readers to make imaginative leaps. *Between the World and Me* is not written to us or for us. *Between the World and Me* is a father explaining “the world” to his fifteen-year-old son, whom that world believes to be black. In some ways, it’s a harsh and even despairing portrayal of parental love, because Coates is a parent who cares and who fears. If you have a fifteen-year-old, perhaps you know something of that feeling.

Sure, *Between the World and Me* is in some ways dire. But in a world rife with sin and misery, why is that surprising? We should be asking questions about how we can imagine better, how we can empathize better. What can we do as Christians to support each other across racial lines? What can we do to identify deeply with human beings—like Michael Brown—who have been made in the image of God?

A year after Michael Brown, are we even asking these questions?

Footnotes

1. 10 ↩
2. 7 ↩
3. 6 ↩
4. 7 ↩
5. 11 ↩
6. 11-12 ↩
7. 82 ↩
8. 87 ↩
9. 83 ↩
10. 95 ↩