Between the world and Ta-Nehisi Coates

How did an Afro-pessimist who doesn't believe in hope become the darling of white liberals?

by Gary Dorrien in the April 11, 2018 issue

Ta-Nehisi Coates (photo courtesy of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation)

In 2007, eight years before his book *Between the World and Me* catapulted him to prominence, Ta-Nehisi Coates was unemployed, a college dropout, and a struggling writer. He had just lost his third job in seven years, and in nine years of marriage he had never contributed a significant income to his family.

Then Barack Obama launched his bid for the presidency, and Coates found something fascinating to write about. He disliked Obama’s comfort with white

people, cringed at Obama's idealistic rhetoric, and didn't believe the election of a black president was possible. He doubted that Obama was really black, judging by the hordes of whites that applauded him, but he acknowledged the contrary evidence: Obama affirmed his black identity, spoke the language of South Side Chicago, and was married to a strong black woman.

To Coates, Obama was a contradiction. Somehow, Obama affirmed his racial identity and expressed affection for white Americans without fawning over them. It seemed to Coates that Obama had created a new way of being and speaking. It worked for Obama, despite making no sense: "White people were enchanted by him—and those who worked in newsrooms seemed most enchanted of all. This fact changed my life. It was the wind shifting, without which my curiosity would've stayed my own."

The rise of Obama opened a new field for black writers, and Coates was the most prominent among them. *We Were Eight Years in Power* collects the essays Coates published in the *Atlantic* during the eight years of the Obama presidency—there's an article for each year—interspersed with Coates's candid reassessments of Obama's ambiguous success and of his own as a writer.

Bill Cosby served as Coates's bridge to the Obama era. Coates started tracking Cosby in 2004 after Cosby launched a crusade against low-hanging pants, hip-hop, "names like Shaniqua," and black homes lacking fathers. Cosby harkened nostalgically to a black America of the past when black men worked hard, black women were pillars of virtue, and black parents disciplined each other's kids without hesitation. Coates marveled that Cosby packed theaters and auditoriums with audiences eager to be accused and admonished. It seemed to Coates that Cosby was reviving race-based black conservatism, a tradition lacking any place in American left-right politics but deeply rooted in black American history.

Obama's presidential campaign and election caused the *Atlantic* to seek new voices on African American culture and history. Coates pitched an article on Cosby, which led to an invitation to write about Michelle Obama, which ended the struggling phase of Coates's writing career.

Coates is characteristically honest about what he owes to President Obama, repeatedly observing that Obama created a market for him: "It is important to say this, to say it in this ugly, inelegant way. It is important to remember the inconsequence of one's talent and hard work and the incredible and unmatched

sway of luck and fate. I knew it even as it was happening.” For years he had jiggled a key into the wrong lock. Then the lock changed and a door swung open.

Coates dared to wonder if Obama knew better than the skeptics and critics. Perhaps his election meant that America was evolving. Coates’s father, a former captain in the Black Panther Party, held a different view, cautioning: “Son, you know the country got to be messed up for them folks to give him the job.” Coates tried to believe otherwise.

He did not write about Obama’s economic and fiscal policies, or his foreign policy, or Obamacare; this book says almost nothing about those subjects. Year one of the Obama presidency—consumed by the financial crash, the economic stimulus bill, Obama’s deference to the megabanks, and the ascension of the Tea Party—is represented in this book by the essay on Cosby. Year two, the year of Obamacare, is represented by the article on Michelle Obama.

In that essay, “American Girl,” Coates argues that for Barack and Michelle Obama to transcend the racial divide, they had to be like the figure of Ann Nixon Cooper, the 106-year-old black woman whom Obama described on the night of his 2008 victory. As Obama presented Cooper, she lived through segregation, but also through the women’s suffrage movement, the coming of aviation and the automobile, the Depression, and Pearl Harbor. In Obama’s rendering, Cooper was not doubly conscious, like W. E. B. Du Bois, tortured with the contradictions of being black *and* American; she was simply conscious.

Coates, trying to believe that the Obamas might be heralds of a postracial America, said their strength was their secure sense of who they were and their keen appreciation of the “bourgeois ordinariness of our existence.” Michelle Obama told Coates that many Americans didn’t know anyone like her, even though “thousands and thousands” of people like her existed: “You just don’t live next door to them, or there isn’t a TV show about them.” Coates concluded by noting that the statement about TV shows was no longer true.

Coates is a Civil War buff, so there is a chapter—the third-year article—reflecting on the very white crowds that show up at Civil War battlefields: “Nowhere, as a black person, do I feel myself more of a problem than at these places, premised, to varying degrees, on talking around me.” He calls for more black scholars of the Civil War, while appreciating why black scholars favor other subjects.

A fourth-year piece on Obama and Malcolm X contains the book's most quoted sections. Coates declared that in our time only Obama merits the honorifics that Ossie Davis famously conferred on Malcolm: "our living, Black manhood" and "our own Black shining prince." Coates hung the comparison on two things. First, Malcolm and Obama were both wanderers who found themselves and re-created themselves within the politics of the black community. Second, both expounded a message of moral admonition to the black community.

Obama suggested the first point himself in his book *Dreams from My Father*, recalling how he thrilled at Malcolm's ability to re-create himself. Coates said that Obama took up the same work in the far gentler context of 1970s Hawaii, re-creating himself "out of a single-parent home and illicit drug use."

This desire for self-creation, Coates observes, is widely supported in contemporary American life, a development that would have shocked Malcolm. Coates stressed that his own self-creation benefited from this development, even though his upbringing in Baltimore was much closer to Malcolm's than Obama's. Coates grew up street tough and bruised, was twice kicked out of high school, dropped out of college, and sired a son out of wedlock, yet no one in his family ever denied or disparaged his right to self-creation.

Getting beaten up in the streets convinced Coates that there is no God. At the age of nine, he cried to his father after taking a street beating, only to be told to fight back or take a parental whipping. It struck him that this choice implied a godless worldview. When Coates was 12, a gang beat him viciously and left him for dead. What struck him was the stream of "godless, heathen adults" who walked by and did nothing. The world was brutal and nobody was going to save him, certainly not anybody's God.

Atheism is a central feature of Coates's work—a name for his disbelief in dreams, ethical ideals, moral appeals, religion, the language of hope, and any sort of God. In his telling, the first thing that atheism did for him was to free him from trying to believe that whites cared about him, or ever would. Then it strengthened his writing by enabling him to spurn all expectations and appeals to be appealing. A writer, he reasoned, must live in defiance of being fired, criticized, rejected, and ignored: "And so, in writing, I found that black atheism and defiance morphed into a general theory of the life."

No one cares, and no reward is coming—until suddenly he was richly rewarded. Becoming the *Atlantic*'s writer about black America yielded bewildering surprises for Coates, including the acquisition of white fans. "A voice inside me now began to hover over my work: Why do white people like what I write? How do you defy a power that insists on claiming you?"

Obama shot to the top by accepting that he had to be "twice as good" as his white peers and becoming so. By Obama's fifth year as president, Coates believed that this ethic was smothering the president. Obama almost never talked about race, he repeatedly admonished black audiences in Booker Washington and Bill Cosby fashion, and he evinced no anger toward racists. Being black, Coates reflected, racialized everything that Obama touched, no matter how assiduously he avoided all talk about race. Health-care reform, a notoriously wonky subject, got racialized like never before. Coates shuddered to imagine what would happen if Obama ever tackled drug policy, long a racially charged topic.

The political consequences of race extended far beyond domestic politics. Coates loathed Obama's escalation of drone warfare but recognized that the political calculus overwhelmingly favored being tough on terrorism. Racial politics, Coates judged, prevented Obama from speaking candidly about everything, not just race. Meanwhile, most Americans viewed everything that Obama did through the lens of race.

Coates felt conflicted about the president's political success. He assured *Atlantic* readers that he held Obama's success in "the highest esteem," like most black Americans. But he chafed at knowing that success was founded on Obama's extraordinary capacity to make white Americans feel good about themselves, soothing their racial consciousness. Coates allowed that every black professional "is well acquainted with this trick." But in taking the trick to a stratospheric height, Obama displayed its downside in higher-than-ever fashion: "This need to talk in dulcet tones, to never be angry regardless of the offense, bespeaks a strange and compromised integration indeed, revealing a country so infantile that it can countenance white acceptance of blacks only when they meet an Al Roker standard."

Coates dislikes the rhetoric of hope that resounds from black preachers.

Coates wrestled with a related imperative on the lecture circuit. He could not get through the question period without being asked if he could say something hopeful. This question galled and frustrated Coates. He did not, and does not, respect hope-peddling writers. His favorite writers—James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Toni Morrison, E. L. Doctorow—accepted no burden of claiming that a better day is coming. They did not indulge the American demand for a happy ending or say that human resilience and intelligence can solve any problem. Above all, they did not say anything hopeful about ending white supremacy.

After giving a speech, Coates would encounter white questioners who pleaded for deliverance from white guilt and black questioners who needed to believe that their grandchildren will not suffer the same racism as themselves. During the Obama years, Coates never knew what to say, despite wanting to believe that Obama changed America. Sometimes he said outright that he had no hope and that the situation is hopeless. Usually that evoked “a kind of polite and stunned disappointment.”

Coates insisted that he was a writer, not a public intellectual. Sometimes he said that he despised public intellectuals—a tag smacking of dilettantism and carrying the notion of being a problem-solver. Public intellectuals earn their speaking fees by providing the answers that audiences demand. Coates said the only public intellectuals that he respects, Adolph Reed and the late Derrick Bell, refused to provide solutions. The work of public intellectuals is a form of cultural insanity akin to asking doctors to diagnose only illnesses that are quickly curable. Writers ask questions they cannot answer, probing for insight; public intellectuals are “performance-prophets who live for the roar of the crowd.”

Yet the *Atlantic* article by Coates that attracted the most attention was written very much in the public intellectual mode. “The Case for Reparations,” published in 2014, Obama’s sixth year, drew on Edmund S. Morgan’s *American Slavery, American Freedom* and argued that white American democracy was founded on the plunder of black bodies, black families, and black labor. American democracy, at its deepest root, is about nothing else than racist plunder. He quantified the financial plunder using studies by historians Walter Johnson and David W. Blight, showing that slaves were by far the largest property asset in the entire American economy. He ranged over the ravages of Jim Crow segregation, prison slavery, real estate racism, and bank redlining, citing briefs for reparations authored by law professors Boris Bittker and Charles Ogletree. He tried to imagine an America that tried to atone for all of it:

“What I’m talking about is more than recompense for past injustices—more than a handout, a payoff, hush money, or a reluctant bribe. What I’m talking about is a national reckoning that would lead to a spiritual renewal.”

Reparations, Coates implored in un-Coatesian fashion, would move American society toward realizing its vaunted democratic ideals. A serious program of reparations would heal the American psyche, banish white guilt, and reconcile America’s democratic self-image with the facts of its history. Citing Tony Judt’s book *Postwar*, Coates noted that in 1952 only 5 percent of Germans said they felt guilty about the Holocaust and only 29 percent supported the proposal of Konrad Adenauer’s government to pay reparations to Israel. If Germany could build a culture of atonement for the Nazi era, surely America could face up to its racist crimes.

The article on reparations boosted Coates’s renown just before he published *Between the World and Me* in 2015. Then he adjusted to being stopped on the street and recognized in the subway. He reports that his adolescent self “loved the attention and admiration,” his aging self “loved the financial security that came from the fame,” and his deepest self was mortified. Coates had treasured the gap between his face and his work; now that distance shrank to nothing. He took a bit of civic pride in aiding the cause of reparations but doubted that he deserved much credit for it. Whatever boost he gave to reparations, he owed to the prestige of the *Atlantic*, not because he made a better argument than previous proponents. He had never been to Israel, yet there he was in the *Atlantic* article on reparations, holding forth about the case of Israel, “behaving like the very ‘public intellectuals’ whom I so despised.” He blanched at playing the endorsement game, yet did so anyway: “How bizarre and confusing it was to look up one day and see that I, who’d begun in failure, who held no degrees or credentials, had become such a person.”

Between the World and Me won an endorsement to die for from Toni Morrison: “I’ve been wondering who might fill the intellectual void that plagued me after James Baldwin died. Clearly it is Ta-Nehisi Coates.” Coates says this endorsement was “the only one I wanted.” Perhaps this statement is meant to register humility, or its opposite. In either case, Coates’s searing memoir is justly compared in certain respects to Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*, although Coates does not write with the luminous beauty of Baldwin, partly because he is not steeped as Baldwin was in the cadences of the King James Bible.

Between the World and Me and *We Were Eight Years in Power* both press hard on plunder, violence, and pessimism, explaining why schools and black churches hold nothing for him, and why the nationalist tradition sustained him only for a while. Coates urges readers never to forget that for 250 years black people were born into chains, “whole generations followed by more generations who knew nothing but chains.” He dislikes the kingdom-road imagery and the language of hope that resound in black church preaching, countering that “the enslaved were not bricks in your road, and their lives were not chapters in your redemptive history. They were people turned to fuel for the American machine.”

When Coates studied at Howard University—a school for “the children of the Jackie Robinson elite”—he was exhorted to admire the civil rights protesters of the 1960s. But Coates could not relate to their blank faces: “They betray almost no emotion. They look out past their tormenters, past us, and focus on something way beyond anything known to me. I think they are fastened to their god, a god whom I cannot know and in whom I do not believe.” Coates strains to imagine what the protesters got from God, and what they expected to get from integration.

The black nationalist tradition, to him, has far more to commend it—a politics of racial pride entirely removed from the opinions and rules of whites. But he concluded that the idea of a separate black nation within or outside North America was a “flight of fancy.” Moreover, the nationalist tradition turned out to be wrong about the impossibility of a black American president.

Obama read a galley of *Between the World and Me* before the book shot up the best-seller list and invited Coates for lunch. He was welcoming but pointed, engaging the book’s critique of his respectability politics. Coates held his ground, telling Obama it rankled him that Obama constantly admonished young black audiences to do their homework, turn off the PlayStation, and work harder. Obama gave a speech of that sort at Morehouse College’s graduation in 2013, never minding that Morehouse graduates knew all about finishing their homework. Coates urged Obama to be more sensitive to the inner turmoil of black youths who looked up to him. The discussion turned to politics, and they agreed that Donald Trump would surely lose the election.

To Obama, Coates reflected, America is a place of wonder; his hero is Lincoln. Coates did not completely lack this feeling; who was he to spurn the country that made him a celebrity? He preferred France to the United States but knew he was lucky not to be French because the French are obsessed with grades, test scores,

and class status. The chaos of America allowed him to prosper, something he shared with Obama.

The eighth-year piece, “My President Was Black,” is based on an interview with Obama. Coates is deeply admiring: “I came to regard Obama as a skilled politician, a deeply moral human being, and one of the greatest presidents in American history. He was phenomenal—the most agile interpreter and navigator of the color line I had ever seen.” For eight years, Coates writes, “Obama walked on ice and never fell.”

He searches for an explanation in Obama’s upbringing, stressing that Obama had a white mother and white grandparents who adored him. Then Obama became black with minimal trauma, never having to worry that white people were out to harm him. Coates reflects, “For most African Americans, white people exist either as a direct or an indirect force for bad in their lives. Biraciality is no shield against this; often it just intensifies the problem.”

The issue of race, Coates judged, prevented Obama from speaking candidly about everything.

Obama told him he had few experiences of racial discrimination and never carried the working assumption that whites would hurt him given the chance. Hardly any black American has this experience, Coates stresses; thus Obama was uniquely able to offer to white Americans the gift of trust without flattering white egos. Obama sees no reason why every American child should not receive an excellent education and believes that America has plenty of goodwill to make it happen. Education, Obama believes, is a policy problem. Coates emphatically disbelieves that education is a policy problem. Obama’s dream of a thriving nation of equality cannot happen in a nation that eagerly condemns millions of blacks to prison, denying that black people are human.

The election of 2016 shocked Coates, and then he was shocked at being shocked: “I had wanted Obama to be right.” Trump won *every* economic sector of the white votes. Coates says he still wants to fold himself into the dream, but “this will not be possible.” Coates is scathing about the solicitude for the white working class that pervaded the postelection political commentary. Did the contempt of the Democratic Party’s professional class really drive working-class whites to vote for Trump? Does this excuse what they did? Coates observes that blacks have been treated despicably for centuries without turning into fascists. Where is the solicitude for

them?

The Democrats' real liability, says Coates, is that they "aren't the party of white people—working or otherwise." Coates does not claim that every Trump voter is a white supremacist but says "every Trump voter felt it acceptable to hand the fate of the country over to one."

The pushback against Coates's focus on racism has been publicized so much that it threatens to obscure what Coates has achieved. It was already simmering in the academy when Cornel West blasted *Between the World and Me* as "fear-driven self-absorption" leading to "individual escape and flight to safety." The comparison of Coates to Baldwin alarmed West because Baldwin was "a great writer of profound courage who spoke truth to power," while Coates was "a clever wordsmith with journalistic talent who avoids any critique of the Black president in power." Many critics joined West in protesting that Coates failed to criticize Obama's capitulation to Wall Street Democrats and the logic of empire, while others, notably Michael Eric Dyson, defended Coates. Eventually West clarified that he recognized the brilliance of Coates's writing; the point was to contest Coates's fixation with one form of denigration and exclusion.

I got an early taste of this critique of Coates when the steering committee of an organization to which I belong proposed inviting Coates to be a keynote speaker. This was during the period when *Between the World and Me* climbed the best-seller list. The pushback was passionate, substantive, and led by black scholars. He ignores our work, the scholars complained; he ignores the work of the scholars that we assign and teach; his concept of antiracism is myopic; his concept of freedom is neoliberal; and white liberals made him famous. Why should we overlook all this to invite him? Since then, this debate has reached sizable Internet proportions. West charges that Coates purveys a tribal perception of white people, an individualistic idea of freedom, and a homogeneous concept of racial identity untouched by critical race theory and postcolonial criticism.

But Coates is an important voice in a conversation that took a stunning turn in November 2016. He made the case for Afro-pessimism even when he celebrated Obama's presidency and assumed that Trump would not be elected. Now the case for Afro-pessimism is overwhelming, and Coates's importance is heightened.

We Were Eight Years in Power illustrates that Coates is a work in progress. The book's epilogue is especially suggestive, gesturing obliquely toward the view that racism is part of a matrix of oppressions—a new theme for Coates, which may offer a new point of departure. He should have criticized Obama for what Obama did not do for justice, but Coates was amazed that Obama had the job. Coates can be lacerating about bearers of hope and holders of answers, but his work does not lack answers.

Even the hope business may not be a settled matter for him. The second time I heard him speak, Coates did not give the "there is no hope" reply. He was moved by those who pleaded to hear about a less racist future. If he stays on the lecture circuit, he will come up with an answer to the question of hope, because keeping hope alive is half the job of justice work, and because Coates will have to wonder what keeps him out there.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Ta-Nehisi Coates's journey through the Obama years."