



BlackEconomics.org

“Does Ta-Nehisi Coates Help Us Make Progress?”

When one of Black America’s most distinguished and successful literary personalities, Toni Morrison, says that a book is “must reading,” you automatically assume that our investment in acquiring and reading the book is guaranteed to help us make progress in some aspect of our lives. Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me*, which is his elongated letter at age 40 to his son of 15, is an elegant tale, graceful, even magical; but it is silent on too many important issues to facilitate real progress for Black America.

The book chronicles Coates’ formative years in crime-ridden neighborhoods of Baltimore; his coming of adulthood at The Mecca, Howard University; his struggle to become a recognized Black writer in New York as he begins to raise his family; and concludes with his living as an expatriate in Paris. All the while, he is conveying lessons to his son concerning how the world works for Black Americans—particularly young Black males who are victims of America’s prison industrial complex.

There is no question that Coates is an accomplished writer who can make the English language sing and even dance. In our view, he surpasses James Baldwin as a literary talent in this respect. However, at least in this work, he is much less direct than Baldwin in implicating solutions that Black Americans can operationalize to help resolve our sorrows of living in America. In fact, it is a curiosity that, for one who has questioned America for so long and so intensely, he does not have solutions to share. It could be that sharing those solutions overtly would not suit the fancies of his publishers and White audience, which he fears losing. Consequently, he misses a great opportunity to illuminate strategies that will propel the next generation of Black Americans—sons and daughters—to a better state of well-being.

Coates gives Whites too much credit, saying that they have always been part of history. We know this to be incorrect—genetically and anthropologically. Psychologically, he appears to reflect a color bias by referring to Blacks to which he is endeared as brown. He fails to fully acknowledge that our best chance for regeneration of mind, body, and spirit is in our own separate nation where we can have our work as entrepreneurs and not as 21st century slaves for a grand American enterprise. He sends the wrong signal to the generation of tomorrow by saying that what we have made down here is mainly comprised of our ability to display extraordinary musical talent. Does it really matter that the voice that Whites hear at death is Aretha’s voice.

Life is about living in a wonderful, yet horrific, world. That living implies the economic wherewithal to do so. And this is where Coates is peculiarly silent. Our world of today and tomorrow is increasingly scientific and technological. Those who have those skills will flourish, while those who do not will perish or just survive. Why does Coates only give passing reference

to mathematics and science? Is he suggesting that his son question and search the world in an effort to eclipse him as a literary genius? Why wouldn't his son, and other young Black males and females, be better off pursuing science, technology, engineering, mathematics, artificial intelligence, and robotization fields? Is not this the course that will guarantee our success in shaping an independent world in which we can minimize, if not eliminate, America's brutality?

As we know, Coates has authored other important literary contributions that shine bright lights on America's injustices to Black Americans. However, exposing a crime does not ensure that it will not be repeated in the same or some other form. Great social critics shine a beam up the road and illuminate a new path that leads to reversal of the wrongs and to reparations for those who have been victimized.

It is pleasant to know that we have identified another Black American male literary genius. But in the spirit of great readers stretching great writers, what we need is to identify that one who has the knowledge, wisdom, vision, and power to make a permanent change in the trajectory of Black American lives and ensure our future progress.

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