

# Ta-Nehisi Coates

*Between the World and Me*  
Spiegel & Grau, 2015.

If the streets shackled my right leg, the schools shackled my left. Fail to comprehend the streets and you gave up your body now. But fail to comprehend the schools and you gave up your body later. I suffered at the hands of both, but I resent the schools more. There was nothing sanctified about the laws of the streets—the laws were amoral and practical. You rolled with a posse to the party as sure as you wore boots in the snow, or raised an umbrella in the rain. These were rules aimed at something obvious—the great danger that haunted every visit to Shake & Bake, every bus ride down town. But the laws of the schools were aimed at something distant and vague. What did it mean to, as our elders told us, "grow up and be somebody"? And what precisely did this have to do with an education rendered as rote discipline? To be educated in my Baltimore mostly meant always packing an extra number 2 pencil and working quietly. Educated children walked in single file on the right side of the hallway, raised their hands to use the lavatory, and carried the lavatory pass when en route. Educated children never offered excuses—certainly not childhood itself. The world had no time for the childhoods of black boys and girls. How could the schools? Algebra, Biology, and English were not subjects so much as opportunities to better discipline the body, to practice writing between the lines, copying the directions legibly, memorizing theorems extracted from the world they were created to represent. All of it felt so distant to me. I remember sitting in my seventh-grade French class and not having any idea why I was there. I did not know any French people, and nothing around me suggested I ever would. France was a rock rotating in another galaxy, around another sun, in another sky that I would never cross. Why, precisely, was I sitting in this classroom?

The question was never answered. I was a curious boy, but the schools were not concerned with curiosity. They were concerned with compliance. I loved a few of my teachers. But I cannot say that I truly believed any of them. Some years after I'd left school, after I'd dropped out of college, I heard a few lines from Nas that struck me:

*Ecstasy, coke, you say it's love, it is poison  
Schools where I learn they should be burned, it is poison*

[That was exactly how I felt back then. I sensed the schools were hiding something, drugging us with false morality so that we would not see, so that we did not ask: Why—for us and only us—is the other side of free will and free spirits an assault upon our bodies? This is not a hyperbolic concern. When our elders presented school to us, they did not present it as a place of high learning but as a means of escape from death and penal warehousing. Fully 60 percent of all young black men who drop out of high school will go to jail. This should disgrace the country. But it does

**Commented [EW1]:** Connection-I think many people, including myself, find this view relatable. Usually kids fail to see the bigger picture. When we ask why, we get hit with ambiguous answers.

**Commented [VG2R1]:** I agree, I feel like I can connect more to the school side of what the author is talking about and less about the life side.

**Commented [CK3]:** This takes a dive into the culture a stigma with children having to grow up, mature, get smart especially in the conditions these poorer communities are in. The idea of no excuses is also a bit saddening to have to realize there is no exception that kids cannot be kids.

**Commented [CK4R3]:** Can act like\*

**Commented [EW5R3]:** I agree. It's sad to realize that the world really doesn't have time for the childhoods of black children. This quote highlights how ignorant the educational system and outside world can be!

**Commented [VG6]:** Seems similar to how Yo-yo Ma argued that schools need to teach the arts because it gives a passion for learning. -Connecting

**Commented [EW7R6]:** That's a good connection. It's interesting that in this essay, though, Coates can't seem to see the value in that

**Commented [EW8]:** Understanding- So much of what seemed to be taught was impractical in the area. Denying the truth and teaching kids math won't benefit them more than learning about redlining, racism, etc, and why they live the way they live

**Commented [CK9R8]:** I agree and believe that the schools offered discipline and a way to "protect themselves" or "stay off the streets" without giving anything fundamental in the way they think

not, and while I couldn't crunch the numbers or plumb the history back then, I sensed that the fear that marked West Baltimore could not be explained by the schools. Schools did not reveal truths, they concealed them. Perhaps they must be burned away so that the heart of this thing might be known.

obscenely at some young girl because she would not smile. Some of them stood outside liquor stores waiting on a few dollars for a bottle. We would hand them a twenty and tell them to keep the change. They would dash inside and return with Red Bull, Mad Dog, or Cisco. Then we would walk to the house of someone whose mother worked nights, play "Fuck tha Police;" and drink to our youth. We could not get out. The ground we walked was trip-wired. The air we breathed was toxic. The water stunted our growth. We could not get out.

A year after I watched the boy with the small eyes pull out a gun, my father beat me for letting another boy steal from me. Two years later, he beat me for threatening my ninth-grade teacher. Not being violent enough could cost me my body. Being too violent could cost me my body. We could not get out. I was a capable boy, intelligent, well-liked, but powerfully afraid. And I felt, vaguely, wordlessly, that for a child to be marked off for such a life, to be forced to live in fear was a great injustice. And what was the source of this fear? What was hiding behind the smoke screen of streets and schools? And what did it mean that number 2 pencils, conjugations without context, Pythagorean theorems, handshakes, and head nods were the difference between life and death, were the curtains drawing down between the world and me?

I could not retreat, as did so many, into the church and its mysteries. My parents rejected all dogmas. We spurned the holidays marketed by the people who wanted to be white. We would not stand for their anthems. We would not kneel before their God. And so I had no sense that any just God was on my side. "The meek shall inherit the earth" meant nothing to me. The meek were battered in West Baltimore, stomped out at Walbrook Junction, bashed up on Park Heights, and raped in the showers of the city jail. My understanding of the universe was physical, and its moral arc bent toward chaos then concluded in a box. That was the message of the small-eyed boy, untucking the piece—a child bearing the power to body and banish other children to memory. Fear ruled everything around me, and I knew, as all black people do, that this fear was connected to the Dream out there, to the unworried boys, to pie and pot roast, to the white fences and green lawns nightly beamed into our television sets.

But how? Religion could not tell me. The schools could not tell me. The streets could not help me see beyond the scramble of each day. And I was such a curious boy. I was raised that way. Your grandmother taught me to read when I was only four. She also taught me to write, by which I mean not simply organizing a set of sentences into a series of paragraphs, but organizing them as a means of investigation. When I was in trouble at school (which was quite often) she would make me write about it. The writing had to answer a series of questions: Why did I feel the need to talk at the same time as my teacher? Why did I not believe that my teacher was entitled to respect? How would I want someone to behave while I was talking? What would I do the next time I felt the urge to talk to my friends during a lesson? I have given you these same assignments. I gave them to you not because I thought they would curb your behavior—they certainly did not curb mine—but because these were the earliest acts of interrogation, of drawing myself into consciousness. Your grandmother was not teaching me how to behave in class. She was teaching me how to ruthlessly interrogate the subject that elicited the most sympathy and rationalizing—myself. Here was the lesson: I was not an innocent. My impulses were not filled with unfailing virtue. And feeling that I was as human as anyone, this must be true for other humans. If I was not innocent, then they were not innocent. Could this mix of motivation also affect the stories they tell? The cities they built? The country they claimed as given to them by God?

**Commented [VG10]:** Good use of emotions to keep the reader engaged. -Analyzing

**Commented [LB11]:** Here the author is talking about privileges that other people have that he was not always exposed to, his family would try to be someone other than who they actually are. This part was a good use of emotion because it is something that happens all the time.

**Commented [CK12R11]:** I think what Coates was trying to say is that what he didn't learn at school he learned at home by his family. By them rejecting the ideals of everyone else trying to fit in, he learned from an early age.

**Commented [CK13]:** This is more about the fact that there was fear of not making it out of the situations that they are in and the feeling that they are stuck

**Commented [VG14R13]:** This is a very powerful quote. I definitely feel like there are a lot of connections and meanings that can be drawn from this.