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## The Ability to Empathize in *Between the World and Me*, a Book by Ta-Nehisi Coates

A large part of reading and experiencing *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates revolves around the ability to empathize with Coates. Coates's purpose behind writing this book lies in the recent surge of police brutality on black people, such as with the murders of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown. This motivation of Coates's is furthered by his position as a father, which manifests itself as the book taking form as a letter to his teenage son. Throughout the book, Coates uses stories, both personal and impersonal, to get the reader to see the world through his own eyes, and educate the reader about what it means to be black in America in a push to change the state of the present. Coates spends a great deal of time writing about his time at Howard University, his childhood, his son, and his views on recent murders in order to achieve this goal.

In "Empathy is a Privilege?" by John Paul Rollert in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Rollert writes that the "sustained terror" described by Coates through his accounts of crimes on black people "prevents the imaginative escape of empathy by making the flesh unforgettable." This idea of making flesh unforgettable is used by Coates with his strategy of forcing the reader to come face-to-face with a very bleak and sad reality of unjustified murders portrayed in a haunting way not commonly seen on television or in newspapers. This technique used by Coates makes the reader struggle with not empathizing on at least some sort of level.

Ultimately, Coates's rhetoric of detailed stories, and the way he paints those in the stories as individuals, rather than headlines, makes his argument more effective, because he sets up the reader to empathize with not only him, but also those involved in his stories, such as Prince Jones or his own son. In a description of Prince Jones, Coates wrote "His face was lean, brown, and beautiful, and across that face, I saw the open, easy smile of Prince Carmen Jones" (77). If Coates had left out such touching and visceral accounts of many events, Coates's purpose of education would fall deaf on many ears, especially white readers.

However, something Coates either fails to realize or chooses to ignore is the fact that empathy needs to flow both ways in his writing. Coates's inability to detach from his own self and step away from his, although justified, anger potentially hurts his credibility. The amount of anger in his rhetoric and lack of personal empathizing may deter some readers from wanting to keep an open mind or adopt Coates's perspective. When writing the difference between black and white children, Coates stated "No one told those little white children, with their tricycles, to be twice as good. I imagined their parents telling them to take twice as much" (91). Coates's hostility towards children and his assumptions of how white parents raise their children can easily create offense, because of how serious parenthood is to most parents. Coates has a tendency to make generalizations about white people as a whole, all while asking for white people to stop making generalizations about black people as a whole. This sort of double standard can set Coates's rhetorical situation up for failure, because it gives Coates's reputation room to seem invalid and his argument overly biased.

When speaking about President Obama, Rollert mentions Obama's writing in *The Audacity of Hope*, specifically, "to think clearly about race, then, requires us to see the world on a split

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screen ... to acknowledge the sins of the past and the challenges of the present without becoming trapped in cynicism or despair.” Coates’s “trauma of fearfulness” hurts his ability to maintain a non-cynical perspective, and this is evident in his account of the events on 9/11 by saying “my heart was cold. I had disasters all my own.” Also, his slander of “the ridiculous pageantry of flags, the machismo of firemen, the overwrought slogan. Damn it all.” Although Coates may have every right to be angry, his anger should not mean trivializing such a large event in American history that so many people feel strongly about. His negativity towards 9/11, along with how often he criticizes the merits of the American Dream, may hinder the ability of some readers to empathize with Coates, because they themselves may begin to feel attacked. Coates’s whole purpose relies heavily on his readers’ ability to empathize. Coates wants all of his readers to empathize with him, because it is his best chance of convincing his readers of his argument. When Coates begins to toe the line of what is and is not offensive, this hurts his chances of all of his readers empathizing with him.

Conveniently, there is an example of how this cynical rhetoric used by Coates affects a reader’s perspective. In The New York Times article “Listen to Ta-Nehisi Coates While White”, author David Brooks writes “But the distributing challenge of your book is your rejection of the American Dream.” Brooks’s personal connection with the American Dream, specifically the immigration of his ancestors, led to his discontent with Coates’s view of the Dream. However, this leads back to the argument that Coates’s book is a book that requires empathy and a detached perspective. Brooks’s article’s title first hints at this mistake, because Coates did not want this to book to be read “while white”. In Rollert’s “Empathy is a Privilege?”, Rollert argues “A capacity for empathy relies not only on a willingness to step into the shoes of another person, but the ability to step away from yourself.” Brooks not only has an unwillingness to step into the shoes of Coates due to Coates’s cynicism, but also is unwilling or unable to detach from his own self. This inability leads to Brooks misinterpreting the whole point of Coates’s book, going so far as to be racist himself.

In order to avoid this issue, Coates’s storytelling attempts to dissuade the reader from maintaining a hostile perspective similar to Brooks. A key story in Coates’s book is the murder of Prince George, who Coates had somewhat of a relationship with. Coates specifically uses this story instead of the story of someone like Trayvon Martin or Michael Brown, because of his relationship to Prince George. This relationship allows Coates a better ability to draw more empathy from the reader. Coates spends a great deal of time on the details of Prince George’s murder, such as how he “had been driving home to see his fiancée. He was killed yards from her home.” A rhetorical technique that Coates is aggressively using is his appeal to emotion by mentioning key parts of the story, such as Prince George’s fiancée and his mother. Along with using storytelling to produce empathy, Coates focuses on the reader’s ability to feel shame and guilt. Coates claims that “Prince was not killed by a single officer so much as he was murdered by his country and all the fears that have marked it from birth” (78). Shortly after, Coates details how obviously unjustified the murder was, by explaining the contradictions in the police report. This claim and the obvious contradictions can make the reader feel a sense of shame, as if this murder was partially their fault. The shame furthers the empathy felt by the reader, which helps Coates’s purpose of trying to educate readers in such a way that makes them want to make a change.

Of course, there is also the rhetorical technique of the letter format of this book. The book is meant to be a letter to his son, and throughout the book, Coates speaks directly to his son. This one-sided dialogue opens a new way for readers to empathize, because the bond between a

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parent and child is so wildly understood. Two key points in the book are his son's reaction to Michael Brown's case, and how Prince George's death gave Coates a new perspective when it comes to his own son. Coates detailed how when Michael Brown's killer was not indicted that his son told him "I've got to go", simply to leave to his room to cry about the injustice. This makes Michael Brown's murder no longer a headline about a black man illegally selling cigarettes; instead, it is now about a fifteen-year old, black boy coming face to face with the reality of the racism and prejudices that exist around him. Over time, Coates leads the readers to see stories, such as Michael Brown, in a bigger picture rather than how headlines portray the story. This is how Coates's argument and purpose is becoming effective. This technique of using his own son is furthered when Coates writes of his own struggle of how these prejudices and incidents affect his relationship with his son. After detailing Jones's death, Coates explains how he realized that "you would not escape, that there were awful men who had laid plans for you, and I could not stop them." In this, Coates is appealing to the perspective of a parent, specifically what it must be like to feel unable to protect your child from a world that seems out to get them. This technique of using his son allows for Coates to expand his reach for empathy, because it plays on so many relatable parts of most people's lives. A larger reach means a better job done at persuading his readers to see the world through his eyes, which is a huge part of his strategy to make his argument as effective as possible.

Although Coates has some constraints working against him, such as the magnitude of his anger and how it warps his ability to appeal to some audiences at times, he does an amazing and effective job of persuading the reader and getting them to feel what he himself is feeling on a small scale. Coates's choices in his diction, framing, and stories are very purposeful, because he understands what it takes to get people to care. And by doing it enough, Coates makes it near impossible for his reader to ignore his palpable fear, anger, and sadness over race relations in America. There is a great deal more to stories than just providing evidence. And there is a great deal more involved when reading and experiencing this book than simply gliding your eyes across the pages; the reader must step out from their own world and into Coates's in order to fully grasp what Coates is trying to accomplish here.