

---

## The Life of an African-American Youth in Baltimore in *Between the World and Me*, a Book by Ta-Nehisi Coates

Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* (2015) is an autobiographical account of his life as an African-American youth growing up in Baltimore. In the wake of the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, and other black youths, Coates wrote this book in the form of a letter to his teenage son Samori, offering him advice and insight into how he must be "twice as good" in a country where he has little control over what happens to his body (101). Coates also speaks of the advice his own parents gave him. One especially impactful learning moment for Coates was his mother making him interrogate his own actions (Coates, 30). In this paper, I will be showing how this lesson Coates learned from his mother could be useful to every scholar in improving their understanding of humanity and history, as it did for Coates. The US school system teaches a lot of things that students later find out were sugarcoated or complete lies and oftentimes students never have the opportunity to investigate those subjects and events. One of the subjects that is often taught inaccurately or very generally to the point of disrespect is slavery, especially slave resistance. I will apply the lesson from Coates' mother to my own education of slave resistance in order to provide evidence for how this process would impact the learning of students and how the act of interrogating what they learn can be beneficial.

In the first chapter of *Between the World and Me*, Coates describes the trouble he got into during his elementary school years, for offenses such as talking while his teacher taught or playing with his friends during a lesson. As a consequence of these actions his mother made him write about them and answer questions such as, "Why did I not believe that my teacher was entitled to respect?" (Coates, 29). The act of writing and exploring the reasons behind his actions did not change Coates' behavior, but he calls them "the earliest acts of...drawing myself into consciousness." (Coates, 30) His mother taught him a lesson that stayed with him throughout his academic career and led to his profession in journalism, the lesson that, "[He] was not an innocent. [His] impulses were not filled with unfailing virtue. And feeling that [he] was as human as anyone, this must be true for other humans. If [he] was not innocent, then they were not innocent." (Coates, 30). Realizing that no one was filled with "unfailing virtue," Coates began to question the world around him, starting with what he was taught in school. He came to the conclusion that the "mix of motivation," that he and everyone else must have felt, must affect the way their stories are told. Claims of who was a winner, and who a loser should be doubted; claims of who was in power, and who was subordinate should be interrogated. Coates states that "the questions began burning in [him]," leading to a life-long search for answers (Coates, 30).

As an African-American female, I believe that it was inevitable that I reached the same conclusion as Coates sometime in my academic career. As a sophomore in college, I am still finding out that things I learned in school were not completely true and that history is more than a dichotomy of heroes and villains. During my first year of college I took a course in African-American history in which I read Raymond and Alice Bauer's, "Day to Day Slave Resistance,"—an article in *The Journal of Negro History*—which touched on the topic of direct and indirect forms of slave resistance. This was an incredibly eye-opening read for me, as my previous knowledge of slave resistance during the 18th and 19th century was limited to a few radicals and generalizations of slaves running away in the middle of the night with the help of

---

white abolitionists. College presented me with information I hadn't even known to seek because my primary schooling placated me with a couple of stand out historical figures and ignored those who seemingly remained powerless. Coates is correct in saying that, "The Dream"—an unconsciousness of the flaws of humanity that many Americans are bound to—"thrives on generalization, on limiting the number of possible questions." (Coates, 50).

In a South Carolina, elementary school lesson plan the practice of slavery is defined as a "peculiar institution" that grew in response to "the industrialization of the North and the expansion of demand for cotton in the south" leading to the economy growing "increasingly reliant on cheap labor." (TAHSC). The source immediately attempts to introduce a silver-lining by stating that in spite of centuries of enslavement "cultures grow and thrive in all conditions." This source also claims that, "Though the stories about cruel overseers were certainly true in some cases...when slaves complained that they were being unfairly treated, slaveholders would often be very protective...and release the overseer." (TAHSC). By sugarcoating all of the cruelest aspects of slavery, educators are able to limit possible questions and objections by teaching students that slavery was not all bad. This makes it easier for supporters of The Dream to look away and "ignore the great evil done in all our names." (Coates, 9).

When the topic of slave resistance comes up, educators give students a few exemplary figures, like Harriet Tubman who "helped over 300 slaves reach freedom using the underground railroad," without dignifying those who had to be left behind or died on the journey, or Nat Turner who "organized 70 slaves who went from plantation to plantation and murdered about 75 men, women, and children." without a single mention of the two-hundred black people killed by white militias and mobs in retaliation (TAHSC). While these figures are significant to slave resistance in the South, it undermines the sacrifices made by slaves who used less extreme measures of counterattack, but still made a large impact on productivity. When emphasis is placed on the outliers, it is easy to forget that the rest of the slaves weren't content. An essay on the problem of race in America states that slaves were, "Readily obedient...more than most other social groups they [were] patiently tolerant under abuse and oppression and little inclined to struggle against difficulties." (Reuters, 7). Accounts such as this were used to justify the enslavement of blacks by convincing people that the "Negro disposition" was amenable to the condition of slavery. (Reuters, 7). If educators continue to make light of the reaction a large majority of blacks had to slavery, how will students grasp the reality of how detrimental the practice was and take action to reverse and prevent the past decisions of our country?

The investigation done by the Bauers shows that slaves developed effective forms of indirect retaliation to their enslavement. Slaves were keenly aware of their economic value and one form of this indirect resistance is slaves consciously saving their energy, and working as slow as they could without being punished for it. Reluctant labor was so widespread among plantations that it was classified as a disease called "Dysesthesia Aethiopica" which only affected blacks. Signs of this disorder included, "careless movements...insensibility of the nerves...cutting up corn, cotton, and tobacco when hoeing it...killing stock...destroying tools," and other forms of seemingly intentional mischief that they could not control. (Bauer and Bauer, 394). Proof of the slowing of labor to reduce productivity is evidenced in the amount of output obtained depending on whether or not slaves were forced to work all day, or given a specific task to finish and given free time for the rest of the day. When given free time after completion of a specific task, it was observed that some laborers would leave the field after three or four hours. It could take up to four times as long for slaves to produce the same output if they had no promise of free time. (Bauer, 400). Another well-documented phenomenon throughout slave states was malingering.

---

Slaves would feign illness to avoid work and analysis of records of sickness of multiple plantations showed that the highest rate of sickness occurred during the times of the year when the most work needed to be done. Some would even fake a disability to avoid being bought by undesirable masters or to lower their value and get revenge on their former master. (Bauer, 406).

Other demonstrations included resisting punishment. An example given by Bauer is of a slave too brawny for the overseer to whip, so the overseer orders three equally as large slaves to punish him. However, the overseer is also unable to prevail over the additional three, and has to give up on attempting to punish anyone. (Bauer, 396). Resistance to punishment also occurred when the driver—a slave whose task was to make other slaves work—doled out punishment. In a numerous amount of cases, it was noted that the driver “took pains not to treat his fellows with any more than the absolute minimum of violence.” (Bauer, 396) Years of experience allowed drivers to gain a high level of precision and control with whips and some could “throw the lash within a hair’s breadth of the back...without touching.” The slave receiving the punishment would then squirm and scream, though their skin had not even been grazed. (Bauer, 398). Like Coates is coaching his son to do, slaves with next to no control over their bodies, found ways to achieve some agency and free will.

In the case of children, slave mothers would pretend to be ignorant of how to raise a child, despite often being responsible for white children. This would result in the mistresses of plantation owners having to take care of sick slave children and making sure they were provided with the proper nutrients (Bauer, 415). Plantation owners off of the coast of South Carolina went as far as paying slave mothers if their children survived the first year of life (Bauer, 416). Additional patterns of resistance studied by the Bauers included feigning pregnancy, self-injury, suicide, and killing infants born into slavery (Bauer, 418). This evidence goes against the concept of slaves as content and cheerful laborers, but instead shows that they were frequently rebellious and clever. Yet students are not exposed to these forms of resistance and are raised in false memory.

Something Coates explores in *Between the World and Me* is why young scholars are taught in this way. As early as seventh grade he, “sensed that the schools were hiding something...so that we would not see, so that we did not ask.” (Coates, 26). Just as Coates was able to compare the heroes he read about in his father’s Black Panthers books to the heroes given to him by the schools--as he found the latter “ridiculous and contrary to everything [he] knew--” scholars today should be directed to resources that will allow them to compare and contrast heroes provided by the curriculum to those who are lesser known because they don’t exemplify American values. It was policy makers and school board members who decided that Frederick Douglass--who escaped from slavery when he was 21 and was a talented orator--was a better role model than Margaret Garner—a female slave that killed three of her children, and attempted to drown the fourth when they were caught on the run, in a last ditch effort to spare them from forced labor—who served as an example of the psychological trauma caused by slavery. Professor of African-American history, Susan O’Donovan, describes the history of slavery as “a story of profound oppression that is simultaneously a story of creativity, resilience, and above all, survival.” (O’Donovan, 7). She wonders why educators don’t teach about the stories of slaves as relatable beings, who “laughed, wept, and wondered” just like students do. (O’Donovan, 8). I believe that Coates would agree with O’Donovan who believes that by approaching slavery as a problem faced by ordinary human beings--not just “an indefinable mass of flesh” as he writes--students would be taught how to “think and read critically, how to

---

tease out meaning, identify assumptions, weigh evidence, and arrive at their own conclusions.” (O’Donovan, 10).

As a society, we place more value on the “privilege of immediate answers” and the “search for certainty” than we place on “questioning as exploration.” (Coates, 34). What are the benefits, if any, of this manner of educating the children? Nancy Ogden, a high school history teacher, states that slavery is such a difficult topic to teach because of the issues of racism and injustice it raises, which many teachers want to shelter students from. (Ogden, Perkins, and Donahue, 429) When looking at reasons cited for treating children as if they are not capable of taking in the reality of our country’s history, one must then ask who is being protected? Is it the African-American children who are being denied knowledge of crucial parts of their own ethnic history? Is it the white children who are given the option to remain ignorant to the extent of how much American and European markets benefitted from human bondage, and the impact whites’ attitude towards blacks during the antebellum era has on racial and socioeconomic disparities of the 21st century? Even as an African-American student who was raised in the deep south, I never felt as though I could relate to blacks enslaved what seemed like centuries ago, when in actuality, “we were enslaved in this country longer than we have been free.” (Coates, 70). When teaching her students, Ogden places value on making connections from the past to the present explicit, in order to “help students make empathetic historical judgements.” She states that “too often, students imagine persons in history living lives that have little to do with their own.” (Ogden, 480). The lack of connection is what leads to students not looking past the generalizations we are taught about events such as slavery from a young age. I believe that Coates would find Ogden’s lessons vital to black students, such as his son who he encouraged to not forget how black bodies were “transfigured...into sugar, tobacco, cotton, and gold.” (Coates, 71).

The purpose of the mother from Coates’ mother was not to provide him with a correct or final answer, but to teach him to investigate his actions and motivations, as well as the motivations of everyone else. Though he didn’t find any satisfactory answers, “the question [was] refined” every time he asked it (Coates, 34). The purpose of schooling should not be for students to come to some profound conclusion, or to have a clear idea of who the historical good guys and bad guys are, but to be able to interrogate and criticize the actions of those who changed history. Students are inquisitive, and there is information out there, all that is needed is the push into the realm of curiosity, which Coates’ mother provided for him and he is providing for his son.