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Don't Hit Snooze: A Review of Coates' *Between the World and Me*

Editorial Note: I am writing this review as a member of the Rochelle Zell Jewish High School community in which I grew up. I found Ta Nehisi Coates' book to be a profound wakeup call, and I hope to inspire that same awareness in my former peers.

Hey, Rochelle Zell Jewish High School: Wake up.

Wake up not only because it's 8:00 a.m., and you're not going to have time for that Starbucks run before first period, but because you're trapped in a most detrimental dream.

Now, don't get me wrong—I'm trapped, too. So trapped, in fact, that I didn't even realize I was dreaming—until bestselling author Ta-Nehisi Coates sounded a blaring alarm. In *Between the World and Me*, Coates characterizes White America as the "Dreamers." Deluded by "perfect houses with nice lawns. ... Memorial Day cookouts, block associations, and driveways," the Dreamers conjure a blissfully ignorant reality, conveniently forgetting that their utopian lifestyle rests on the backs of oppressed black bodies (Coates, 11). I hate to say it, but we, as white, Jewish students with every resource at our fingertips, epitomize the Dreamers. We take our privilege for granted each day, inadvertently enabling the institutionalization of racism. I am posting this review of Coates' *Between The World And Me* because Coates' definition of the Dreamers was a call-to-consciousness for me, and as a member of the close-knit, intellectually curious community that we share, it would be a disservice not to impart to you all this paramount value of awareness.

Between The World And Me chronicles the experience of black people in America—the juxtaposition of the black community's richness and beauty with their subjugation, inequality, and heartbreaking hopelessness at the hands of tragically naive Dreamers. Coates composes the

book as a long-form letter of counsel to his son, weaving poignant anecdotes with historical evidence to answer the fundamental question of how to live free in a black body. Toni Morrison called Coates' work "required reading," and many critics make similar plaudits. Michelle Alexander of the *New York Times*, however, emphasizes not Coates' profound narrative or universal messages, but the fact that Coates does not offer any optimistic resolutions; he offers no answers, only more questions. Alexander maintains that while other black authors underscore the black community's perseverance through adversity, Coates underscores only the inevitability and permanence of discrimination. According to Alexander, Coates addresses only black individuals and does not filter himself for a white audience, curating a much more limited reader base. Still stronger criticism comes from Melvin Rogers, a professor of African American Studies and Political Science at U.C.L.A. In an essay for the *Atlantic*, Rogers asserts that Coates' account of racism is "profoundly troubling" and criticizes Coates' contention that black people in America, suffocating beneath the weight of ontological white supremacy, can never win. Both Rogers and Alexander take issue with Coates' raw, visceral, no-frills depiction of racism in America and the doomed fate for black Americans.

Personally, I agree with Alexander and Rogers' observations on the book, but rather than as marks of criticism for Coates, as praise. I appreciate Coates' unadulterated honesty in portraying his reality, because, as a Dreamer myself, I needed the jolt awake. For instance, I'd like to highlight the theme of despair in the opening scene in *Between The World and Me*, which portrays Coates' interview on a popular news show. "The host flashed a widely shared picture of an eleven-year-old black boy tearfully hugging a white police officer. Then she asked me about 'hope,'" Coates recounts. "And I knew then that I had failed. And I remembered that I had expected to fail" (Coates, 10). Coates communicates that the largely oblivious American public

enjoys “reveling in a specious hope”—a misconceived faith in equality’s heroic debut—extrapolating a future of racial equality from the mere image of a black child embracing a white official (Coates, 10). Crucially, the physical and emotional contact between race depicted in the photo does nothing, and can do nothing, to mend reality for the black community in America: the black child is the victim and the white officer is the oppressor. Black bodies, Coates indicates, are cheap gasoline in the economy of Dreamers too unconcious to “awaken ... from the most gorgeous Dream” (Coates, 10). By equating the role of black people in American society to “cheap gasoline,” Coates establishes that the Dreamers, the white people oblivious to racism, perceive black people as disposable—a mere resource to facilitate their white-washed bliss (Coates,10). The breach is eternal, and I believe that recognizing this uncomfortable, dismal truth is the first step for us, as Dreamers, towards informed, conscious, and intentional action.

Within the walls of RZJHS, we can begin implementing Coates’ call-to-action and call-to-consciousness. While reading Coates’ description of slavery, I percieved a concerning discrepancy between how Coates teaches the history to his son versus how we’re taught in school. Coates accentuates the distinctness of individual enslaved people rather than slavery in the collective, emphatically articulating, “Slavery is not an indefinable mass of flesh. It is a particular, specific enslaved woman, whose mind is active as your own; whose range of feeling is as vast as your own; who prefers the way the light falls in one particular spot in the woods” (Coates, 70). At RZJHS, we learn slavery as a notch on the timeline Ms. Kramer told us to memorize for AP US History—as a large-scale tragedy affecting an individual group, not a group of individuals. By contrast, we study the Holoaust in terms of honoring every single life and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in terms of individual narratives from members of both sides. Why, then, do we dehumanize slavery? Because Coates is right: we’re dreaming. As Dreamers,

we reap the benefits that accompany privilege—favorable job opportunities, safe neighborhoods, and carefree lifestyles—at the expense of systematic racism. We need to open our eyes, become cognizant that even our own education contributes to the widespread misperception of black people as inherently inferior. Coates provides an important and realistic model for explaining slavery: it’s our obligation to value his expertise and alter our education surrounding black history to match how we study our own past.

Further revealing the inequity for black people in the school setting, Coates recalls that while “all [his] life [he’d] heard people tell their blacks boys and black girls to ‘be twice as good,’ which is to say, ‘accept half as much,’” white children need only to satisfy the first layer of “good” (Coates, 91). White typical is the standard met by Dreamers; black typical is the consequential demand to exceed this standard or forever submit to subordination. For you, oh assiduous RZJHS students, the word *twice* evokes a different experience: our dual curriculum between secular and Judaic studies. We’re constantly told that we take twice the courses as our friends at public school, learn twice the languages, meet in classes twice as small. Despite our two-fold identities as Jews and Americans, though, we as Dreamers rarely have our notion of “twice” compromised by others outside our culture. We treasure and take pride in our intrinsic dichotomy between assimilation and preservation of tradition, enjoying the luxury to float between the white-washed world and the customs and practices unique to our heritage. Jews have undoubtedly endured our fair share of suffering, but in contemporary America, our critical advantage, the reason we largely elude subordination, is our capacity to blend in. Coates’ refrain exemplifying the burden of black children is valuable for our community because we understand “twice” in our own distinct context, and it’s time to comprehend contexts beyond our own.

Instead of allowing our black peers to consistently face their double-edged sword of “twice,” we must attain awareness and endeavor to enact change.

Culminating the contrast between the reality of black people and Dreamers in America, I will say to you regarding our white privilege what Coates said to his son regarding his subjugation: “it is not your fault, even if it is ultimately your responsibility” (Coates, 137). As RZJHS students, you are all smart, capable individuals, so please: take the long-awaited initiative. Challenge the cosmic breach between blacks and whites through the way you approach education on black history, through applying that extra effort to understand another version of “twice.” Although we were born generations into an institutionalized Dream, we are not free to desist from the work our ancestors expediently ignored. Let’s be the first respectable Dreamers, appreciating the poignant, painful, powerful black world. Let’s wake up from our Dream. Let’s be trailblazers of consciousness.