

# The issue of fear in "between the world and me" by ta-nehisi coates

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At face value, Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* is the story of a black man's life and intellectual development in America. At a deeper level, it is an analysis of fear's role within the lives of the American people as well as in American society as a whole. Throughout the book, Coates discusses the disparity between the lives of people from different racial groups, socioeconomic statuses, and parts of cities, but in every situation he mentioned that in one way or another, all people were afraid. Some people are afraid of crime in their neighborhoods, some are afraid of being brutalized by the police, and some are afraid of acknowledging that their success was—at least partially—attained at the expense of others. All of these fears strip them of the control over themselves which they so strongly desire. The desire tends to be so strong that in order to give themselves the feeling of control, people will create illusions and fool themselves into believing them. Coates argues that this behavior is responsible for the ongoing reinforcement of the tradition of social inequality in America.

The beginning of *Between the World and Me* mainly focuses on Coates' childhood in the ghettos of West Baltimore. He discusses how he now knows that everyone who lived in his community were in constant fear, because any one of them could have their lives taken at a moment's notice, be it by criminals or the police. To cope with this, many members of the community would turn to crime to make themselves appear powerful when, in reality, they were the opposite. Coates describes a significant childhood experience with this, when a boy as young as him flashed a weapon toward him in a parking lot. He states: "The boy did not shoot. His friends pulled him back. He did not need to shoot. He had affirmed my place in the order of things".

The fear in this situation was not only the fear felt by Coates. The boy with the gun held a much deeper, concealed fear stemming from his past, and he turned to crime to make it seem as if he was in control of something, while he was actually struggling with the lack of control he had over himself. By telling this story, Coates reveals the power of fear in the ghetto, but also shows its role in maintaining the status quo. He shows how hiding from one's fears only creates more fear in others, strengthening the feeling of weakness causing so much suffering within American society.

As the book continues, Coates shifts from the fears of those at the bottom of the societal ladder to those at the top. The white suburban people, those in "the Dream" as Coates refers to it, created an image of achieving success through hard work, while ignoring that it has historically and sometimes is still attained at the expense of others. They fear the past, because it destroys the image they've manufactured, so they choose to ignore it instead. He notes that, "There is some passing acknowledgement of the bad old days, which, by the way, were not so bad as to have any effect on our present". Coates sarcastically adds the second part of that sentence as a means of showing how those in "the Dream" deny that the suffering faced by their countrymen throughout history continues today, allowing them to preserve the comfort of believing themselves to be successful without the help of past and current atrocities.

Through his analysis of fear and coping mechanisms in *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates exposes the true struggle the black community faces in the modern United States. He shows that through the creation of

false appearances to cope with fear, the people do more work to reinforce the status quo rather than change it.