

## Episode 8: BSD Reflections on *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates Transcript

**Speaker 1** [00:00:15] Hello and welcome to this episode of D&I Diaries, a podcast produced by the Office of Diversity and Inclusion in the Biological Sciences Division at the University of Chicago. My name is Camilla Frost Brewer, and I am one of the program managers for diversity and inclusion in the division, and I'll be one of your hosts for the show.

**Speaker 2** [00:00:32] And my name is Tobias Spears, and I will be your other host. And I serve as assistant dean of diversity and inclusion in the division. Through this podcast, Camilla and I hope to highlight and showcase the diverse voices of everyday BSDers. We want to create a space to authentically and candidly share our DIY stories where we get to know one another outside of our professional roles. And finally, we hope to engage a coalition of listeners who value TMI and increase interest in DEI work and conversations across the BSD. So without further ado, let's begin the show.

**Speaker 1** [00:01:12] Hello, listeners. Welcome to D&I Diaries. And this is one of your hosts, Camilla Frost Brewer. Are you she her pronouns. And today we have a special episode where we will be chatting with five different folks throughout the BSD about their experience reading *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates. We hosted small book clubs in the Cancer center as well as in the BBC, and we wanted to provide an opportunity for folks to listen about how BSDers feel about their experience reading the book, as well as participating in the one book read initiative. So without further ado, I will let them introduce themselves. We will start with Aspen.

**Speaker 3** [00:01:57] Hello, my name is Aspen Chouinard.

**Speaker 1** [00:01:59] I am the senior Education and Training program manager in the Clinical Trial Support Office of the Comprehensive Cancer Center.

**Speaker 4** [00:02:07] Hello, my name is Lisa Alcantara. I'm the assistant director to the Quality Unit within the cancer center.

**Speaker 3** [00:02:13] Hi, I'm Barrett Froemming. I am the section chief of Pediatric Hospital Medicine in the Department of Pediatrics and the co-lead of our I committee in the department.

**Speaker 5** [00:02:23] Hello, I'm Adam Hammond. He they. I'm a faculty member in the Bio physical sciences program and the co-chair of the of the BSD Diversity Committee. Hi, I'm Jordan Lane. He I'm his. And I'm a fifth year graduate student in immunology.

**Speaker 1** [00:02:40] Awesome. Thank you all so much for being here. We have some prepared questions that our guests will answer and just give us their take on how they engaged with this book, what they liked about it, what they're taking away, and why other people in the BSD should read this book. So to begin, Jordan and Barrett, if you just want to share with us a little bit about why you chose to read this book as part of the one book Read Initiative or not.

**Speaker 5** [00:03:08] So I actually read this book around 2018. So Thomas Coates, he authored a Black Panther story, Black Panther MCU story. I had a pretty good time with that, and it was just a just a superhero story. But I also was familiar that he wrote this a

couple of years before, and so it's a short read. So I was just like, Why not just go give it a try? So yeah.

**Speaker 3** [00:03:33] I'm now 100% all in on the superhero. I didn't know. The funny answer is because you told me to. But the real answer actually is. I read almost any book recommended to me and a lot of spaces and DIY is one of them. I knew of this author. I'll be honest, I don't watch a lot of news. I don't watch a lot of television. But I knew of this name and I had not read anything and somebody told me that it was a little bit different of a book. I read a lot of books cast under *The Warmth of Other Suns*, the some of us that have a lot of facts, and this title was more like poetry. And I thought that would be a really unique book to read, written from a different style and perspective than I'm used to reading.

**Speaker 1** [00:04:20] Thank you both so much for sharing that. I am unaware if other folks know of this book who might be listening to this podcast. So if you are unfamiliar *Between the World and Me* is written as a letter to Ta-Nehisi Coates as Son, and it covers topics such as Black People in America, *The Body*, *The Black Body* Violence talks about living in an urban center, growing up, what that might have been like being a black man and a black boy. And this concept of fear and medicine is tied in in education. It's a really rich text. And Barrett, thank you so much for bringing in the fact that it's kind of almost like poetry and it feels personal, but it also has this global aspect to it. And Jordan cannot agree more about MCU. Marvel Cinematic Universe. For those who are not aware and Black Panther being, I mean, I'm a little biased, but being one of the best series and having really great authors and illustrators participate in that. So I think that also speaks to Ta-Nehisi Coates ability to write across genre. So thank you both. Moving on, Adam and Lewis, can you talk to us a little bit about what you liked about reading this book? What stood out to you, maybe a phrase or a concept or a time period through Ta-Nehisi Coates as Life?

**Speaker 5** [00:05:50] Yeah, Thank you. It was great to read it. I and I appreciated the opportunity. It's not written to me, right? He wrote this to his son. And as a as a white guy, I'm sort of an observer of his observations, and I really appreciated getting to hear those, especially it's early in the book. It really resonated with me. His argument, he says. At the end of this argument, I proposed subjecting our country to an exceptional moral standard. And I found that very powerful because you often hear the argument about, you know, lots of places did slavery. It's ancient, like people who who love America and find America to be exceptional, trying to weasel out of responsibility for the negative parts of our history. That is a way to avoid responsibility for the current problems. And so I enjoyed that argument quite a bit.

**Speaker 4** [00:06:46] Yes, there were a number of important aspects of the book, the language, but for me, what really stood out was this idea of a testament to your son In this case. It gives us an insight into this relationship that I think most of us could relate between parents and children and the difficulties that this particular individual has. So we we are a participant of this testament to his son. And it gives us an impression for some of us who may not have been exposed directly to the different culture aspects that the author lived to to be inside that relationship. And so it's a very nice thing to about.

**Speaker 3** [00:07:29] I'd love other thoughts on this. Adam, you said it wasn't written for you. I think it might not have been written to you. It's written to his son, but as a white woman, I felt it very much was written for me in some ways the Dreamer element and that that is me. I was reading another book that mentions an author who talks about the hidden

wound of of white people that we have to face a little bit this and I feel like it is written for me in a way that like it's revelatory to hear a black man talking to his black son, which is not a conversation I sit and watch very often. I have a lot of conversation with my black friends, but I don't hear them talk to their sons. And to hear that conversation and then talk about the dreamers. And it is it's opening that hidden wound, as it should, to say we have to confront the reality. And and I have I'm still on the fence of if it ends pessimistically or optimistically. But I do think in some ways and maybe you guys can disagree, but I felt like it was written for me in some ways.

**Speaker 5** [00:08:41] Yeah, kind of touching on that ending, not, you know, knowing whether you can be pessimistic or optimistic. I think he kind of just leaves it up to the reader because, you know, it's as he kind of alludes to, the fate of race relations in America is not necessarily in the hands of who he labels as the body. It's more so in the hands of the Dreamers. And as you're saying, it's it's written for someone like you as a white woman to realize that you either are or we're in a dreaming state with the hopes that, you know, you take the steps as you are through your your self education and things like that, to wake up the people around you in your own communities. So I guess if you feel as though it's optimistic, I hope that that optimism is because people are doing the work to improve the community. I kind of view it as that. That's more so than the pessimistic side, but more so in like this is the reality that I've gone through in the 28 years that I've been here. I guess Carmelo's next question is, what am I taking away from the experience of the book? For me personally, I related to pretty much every single part of the story from him growing up in Baltimore. I practically grew up in Baltimore. I practically grew up outside of D.C. I know exactly everywhere he was talking about except the New York part. I mean, everyone knows we're about New York. But yeah, I went to school in Baltimore. Parents lived outside of D.C.. I was outside of D.C. I'm in Chicago where his his wife was from. So I can I can definitely not only relate location wise, but experience wise to a lot of the story. And I can't say that I can have like an optimistic view not only on the book, but more further out outside this book, unless other people who are once again the quote unquote, dreamers, not only, you know, take that take the work and relinquish some of their privilege, but start to understand like how things are really deeply entrenched in this country.

**Speaker 3** [00:10:58] Yeah. Thank you for saying that, because I think as I think of both of your comments, Adam and Jordan, I think is a letter to his son. But it makes me think of conversations with my kids. I have a son and a daughter who are 15 and 14. And I think the optimism has to root partly in my generation. But I also think part of what this enable me to do is have a conversation with very success depending on the child with my two kids about this. Right. Kids are different. So what is a letter to his son? Start a conversation with my kids, which I hope is the optimism that what? What can I do now at my age and where I am? But hopefully, you know, we can keep feeding it forward so that my kids grow up and become adults with a different perspective and not in a dream state. And I guess I'm hopeful for that.

**Speaker 5** [00:11:55] Yeah, I love the analogy of the dream state. I think that's really accurate to describe how most people and so not only race, I think we we learn from our culture, certainly patriarchy and sort of anti-feminist ideas are rife that we also in some sense have to wake up from. My problem with the analogy is that being asleep and awake is a binary state, and there's nothing binary about the work of coming out of this dream state. It it's a series of epiphanies, or at least it has been for me. You learn something new, you take another step that leads you to more learning. And at this point, my work in in sort of equity and justice is mostly about continuing to try to learn things. Myself. I hope it helps

other people, but ultimately it's shocking to discover how much of the world you accepted as you grew up and how much you really need to work to change that. And that starts with changing yourself. And so when people wonder what to do because they say they want to help, it's often just continue to learn more. The farther you get towards waking up, the better your interactions with everybody will be, the better your life will be. And so this book I remember was that kind of epiphany for many people when it first came out. The idea that of being racialized, that race was a social construct was not as widely understood then as I feel it is now. The book seems less shocking than I think it was when it first came out, but maybe that's my own journey and not the case for everybody. That's how I appeal to the listeners here. Like read this book and see what it does for you. The question of whether it's optimistic at the end is sort of strange. It's a, again, a binary choice. We're going to label this book as pessimistic or optimistic. It's just a description of the way the world is and a recognition that the world doesn't change easily. And so what are you going to do now? You know, it's almost denialist argument, like, okay, so right here's the world. What are you going to do? You have to live in it. It's so powerful hearing him talk to his son in that don't like here's the world. There's parts of it that suck. You have no choice but to live in the world. None of us do.

**Speaker 3** [00:14:42] Yeah.

**Speaker 1** [00:14:42] Wow. Thank you all for those brilliant reflections. And they've kind of meshed together some of the following question, So feel free to answer what applies to you and what doesn't. Coming up next. But as a black American, I would agree that it was kind of just descriptive of my experience and my dad's experience. He grew up on the west side of Chicago. I mean, he's older than Ta-Nehisi Coates, but dealt with some of the similar aspects of fear and violence and education, particularly around like, maybe the classroom wasn't for him or was for him. And what did it mean being around other black students in a place that really celebrated blackness? Before we move on to the next question, I want to touch on a little bit about this aspect of optimism and pessimistic and all of that. I agree that it's kind of like this personal view of this is how the world is. This is how I've approached it. This is how you could approach it. And I hope it gets better. And I think that is just the reality. And part of the optimism is hopefully that people will read this personal account and take that learning and share it with others, whatever that might look like. So, Barry, you said you had conversations with your children. The reason we actually chose this book was because it was on the book list for Dr. Iris Romero's child's like eighth grade English class. So we wanted to have a book that wasn't, you know, super high in theory, heavy on the facts, but really touched on empathy and describing the world around black Americans. So thank you all for that. And yes, Adam, I think personal edification is absolutely the continued journey for all of us, right? I, I have communities that I am an ally for, that it is always a learning journey, a learning opportunity. And that's part of the work. And to share that knowledge with the other people in our lives who might still be in that dream state. So I think our next question is going to be what are you taking away from this book or the experience of reading the book? And let's hear from Louis and Aspen and Jordan.

**Speaker 3** [00:17:01] Thank you.

**Speaker 1** [00:17:01] Thanks, Kamila, for inviting me to be on here. What I'm really taking away from this book is just how the powerful storytelling that is present here and this perfect, I would say, a really good example of a blend between a personal narrative and historical.

**Speaker 3** [00:17:18] References, personal.

**Speaker 1** [00:17:19] Stories and how storytelling has been passed down from generation to generation, I find is really compelling and elevates the arguments made in this book and also just getting a new perspective. It's so important. Again, like Adam was touching on to continued process of education, and I think this is a great stepping stone or another step on other people's education in this space.

**Speaker 4** [00:17:43] Yes, for me, I mean, one of the nice things, obviously, like I mentioned before, is this idea of being invited to into this intimate relationship between father and son. And so as we are invited to this relationship, it's an invitation and a challenge, I think, for all of us to to see how how do we make a better world for the son? How do we contribute to to be that society that that moves forward and we continue and we're start to see each other as we are, which is a family, a family of relationships. Right. So as we as we relate to this particular situation, we can enter into that relationship, into the intimacy, and really ask ourselves, how do we make society a more equal society of rights, of respect, and ultimately of love?

**Speaker 5** [00:18:36] So as I somewhat alluded to earlier, this was more so a reflection. This book was more sort of a reflection of my own experience as a black American, as a black man, kind of living through the past once again, past 28 years. And I find myself finding some several commonalities. I struggle with dyslexia, and so I had a very tough time and like mathematics going and growing up. And given that my family was a military family, I often went to a lot of majority white schools. And so I'm not really sure if you guys are familiar with dyslexia or any other learning disabilities, but a lot of times when kids have problems learning, those problems manifest and behavioral issues when they manifest as behavioral issues, you're kind of. Disregarded and discarded by the educational system. Which is incredibly unfortunate. On top of when you have black students, black kids going into these predominantly, predominantly white institutions or white schools. Also like communities and how communities speak. AVC also goes a lot into education in terms of like grammar and things like that. So all of that to say, while I was a good student, I did what I needed to do to get good grades. But it was it was definitely not easy. I don't really I don't have really many relations to his vignettes about the gangs in Baltimore. I grew up in the suburbs, so I don't I don't know what that's like, so I really can't speak on that. But I do have some family that can relate to that and I know some of that. But just all in all, just just to make this cut this short, I it's it's a real look at someone else's life, you know, someone who lives a completely different life than I do. Different personality. Everything is different. But it's the fact that the society will treat you similarly regardless of like who you are and what you're capable of. So, yeah, that was my experience.

**Speaker 1** [00:21:01] Yeah. Thank you all for sharing your experience. I think not that anybody asked me, but I'm going to share this is a good reminder for me as I do diversity, equity and inclusion work because we are constantly pushed to define our metrics, define outcomes, what is the data saying? What are what are the percentages? Do we do quotas? Do we not? What's comparisons between 20 years ago and now? Well, it's getting better, etc.. And this book really reminded me the power, like Aspen mentioned, of storytelling, the importance of storytelling, especially in black communities and the power of empathy, even if it's just one story. Sometimes I get so entrenched in the, you know, we have to do the data measurements. We we have to show that there was a change. And sometimes that changes just hearing someone else's story, and that can catapult you into a completely different trajectory of your learning, of your thinking around race in America,

which is very hard to wrap your head around. So that's what I'm taking away, just remembering to balance the data, the facts with the personal and the storytelling.

**Speaker 3** [00:22:12] I just want to piggyback on that because I was thinking about what I was taking from it. And normally I will say in books I read, I take a fact. And honestly, what I take from this is a feeling because he puts you there and he does so in a way that I think we have moments where we see video of George Floyd for me as a white woman, but this sticks with me from the empathy part, the emotion, the feeling. And I think, yes, I think we need the feeling more than we often do. And I think it's for a lot of non minoritized people, it's easier not to have the feeling and just to have the fact. And so I think this is an astounding book for delivering on that.

**Speaker 1** [00:22:56] Thank you. So to wrap us up. Why should others read this book? Aspen, I know you really want to share why, and then I'll kind of open it up to the rest. Yeah. Thanks. People should read this book as we keep speaking to again and again like it's emotionally powerful. Delivers on exactly what Barrett was just talking about in that the emotions stick with you, the arguments stick with you and it's in. And it's not overwhelming to like a new audience or someone who is like in the beginnings of on this work because the book itself is a pretty short read overall. But again, it packs a punch on the end. It drives home these amazing arguments. Also, again, like I said, touched on earlier, expand our perspective, specifically at the University of Chicago and the BSD. We are we serve the Southside community. We're integrated here and it's important to understand all the perspectives of not only the staff and the faculty currently here, but also the patients that we serve in the Southside, because we have to continually, at least in the medical field, there is this level of implicit bias that happens and there is value to have people recognize their biases. And I think this book is a great vessel. I guess to have that conversation and open those conversations not only between the staff but also patients. Yeah. Thank you, Aspen. I would agree that this book is a really approachable way to start this work. And it's also a great reminder for people who are deeply entrenched in this work and everyone in between. I would recommend people read this book because as I've said before, it is deeply personal and it does. As Louise has mentioned, it does highlight a father son relationship and a black father and son. And it's also so global and national that you can absolutely take key points, aspects, experiences, moments in time and apply them to your life and say, Oh, where was I when this happened? How did I react to it? So it's personal, but it's also so broad. So thank you all so much for being a part of this podcast, this special episode. I really appreciate your thoughts and perspectives. I love that we have folks kind of throughout the best year at varying levels of staff, faculty, student and different identities. So thank you all so much and I hope that other best ideas will engage with this novel. If you would like to have further conversations about it. Feel free to reach out to our Office of Diversity and Inclusion. Thank you.

**Speaker 2** [00:25:49] We want to thank our guests today and all our listeners for tuning in to this episode of DNA Diaries. We hope you learned a little bit more about our colleagues and practices at work. Remember to stay in contact with us through our website, our listserv, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter to receive updates about new episodes and how to engage with our podcast.

**Speaker 1** [00:26:12] You can find us on all platforms where you listen to podcasts and we drop a new episode the third Tuesday of every month. So join us next time for a conversation with another best colleague as they share their DIY journey and truths. Until then, be safe and have a great day.