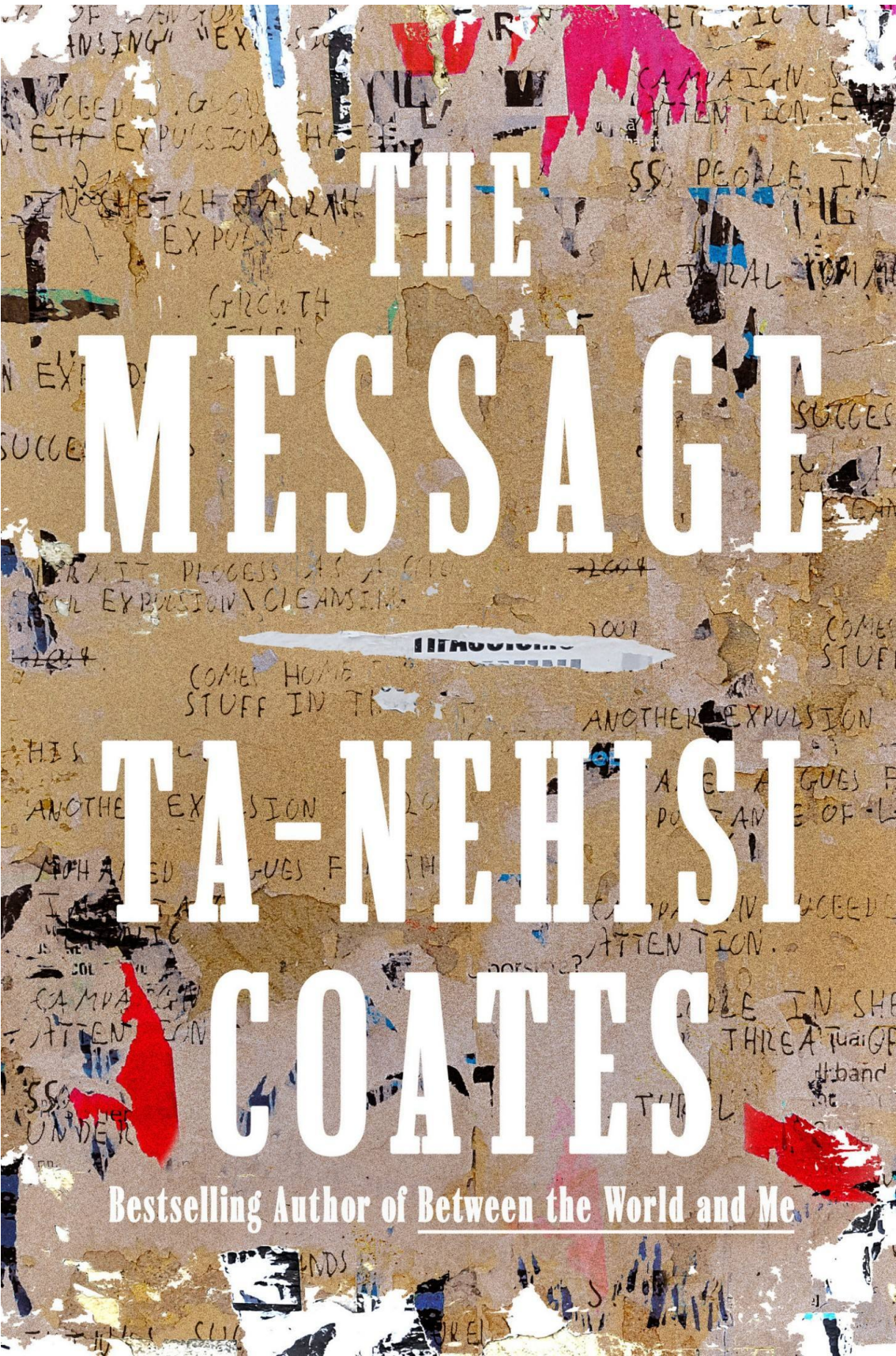


THE MESSAGE

TA-NEHISI COATES

Bestselling Author of Between the World and Me



THE MESSAGE

TA-NEHISI COATES

Bestselling Author of Between the World and Me

BY TA-NEHISI COATES

The Beautiful Struggle

Between the World and Me

We Were Eight Years in Power

The Water Dancer

The Message

THE MESSAGE



Ta-Nehisi Coates



ONE WORLD
NEW YORK

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For my sons, Samori and Chris

In a peaceful age I might have written ornate or merely descriptive books, and might have remained almost unaware of my political loyalties. As it is I have been forced into becoming a sort of pamphleteer.

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Journalism Is Not a Luxury

Though we do not wholly believe it yet, the interior life is a real life, and the intangible dreams of people have a tangible effect on the world.

—J

B

Comrades,

In the summer of 2022, I returned to Howard University to teach writing. Given my rather middling career as a university student, I couldn't help but feel somewhat sheepish about the honor. But it was an honor, because it was there that I met you. Our first class was in the woods—out in rural Virginia, where, with my friend the poet Eve Ewing, we spent two weeks reading, writing, and workshopping. I've been teaching writing in some form or capacity for almost as long as I've been a writer, and the only work I love more is writing itself. But with you I found the former rivaling the latter. I don't mean to slight any other cohort of students I've taught in other times and places—all were talented and hardworking. But the fact is, we were drawn together by something more profound.

I guess it begins with our institution, and the fact that it was founded to combat the long shadow of slavery—a shadow that we understood had not yet retreated. This meant that we could never practice writing solely for the craft itself, but must necessarily believe our practice to be in service of that larger emancipatory mandate. This was often alluded to, if not directly stated. All of our work dealt with the kind of small particulars of being human that literature generally deals with. But when you live as we have, among a people whose humanity is ever in doubt, even the small and particular—especially the small and particular—becomes political. For you there can be no real distance between writing and politics. And when I saw that in you, I saw myself.

A love of language, of course, is the root of this self. When I was barely six months old, I would crawl over to my father's speakers when he played the Last Poets. And when the record ended, I would cry until he played it again. At five I would lie on my bed, with the *Poems and Rhymes* volume of the Childcraft series splayed open to "The Duel," and all day I could not help but to murmur to myself, "The gingham dog and the calico cat / Side by side on the table sat." I did this for no other reason than the way the words felt in my mouth and fell on my ears. Later I discovered that there were MCs—

human beings seemingly born and reared for the sole purpose of matching the music of language to an MPC snare or 808 kick—and the ensuing alchemy felt as natural to me as a heartbeat:

I haunt if you want, the style I possess

I bless the child, the earth, the gods and bomb the rest Haunt. You've heard me say this word a lot. It is never enough for the reader of your words to be convinced. The goal is to *haunt*—to have them think about your words before bed, see them manifest in their dreams, tell their partner about them the next morning, to have them grab random people on the street, shake them and say, “Have you read this yet?” That was what I felt whenever I heard Rakim spit, or for that matter the Last Poets.

That was the thing that had me murmuring lines from *Childcraft*. This affliction was enchantment and desire. It was pleasure but also a deep need to understand the mechanics of that pleasure, the math and color behind words, and all the emotions they evoked. I imagine there are children who see a painting and cannot get the image out of their minds. I imagine they turn it over alone at night in the dark, haunted, considering and reconsidering, and a small secret ecstasy grows in them each time they do this, and, just behind this, a need to convey an ecstasy all their own. I was like that from the moment I could inscribe words into memory. And this instinct naturally linked to the world around me, because I lived in a house overflowing with language organized into books, most of them concerned

with “the community,” as my mother would put it. And so it was made clear to me that words could haunt not only in form, not only in their rhythm and roundness, but in their content.

When I was seven years old, my mother purchased a copy of *Sports Illustrated* for me. She taught me to read before I entered school, and

encouraged the practice however she could. And what more encouragement could there be than this issue of *Sports Illustrated*, which featured my hero, Tony Dorsett, running back for the Dallas Cowboys. This was 1983, an era of American football when running backs seemed as large as champions pulled out of Greek myth. How could a man of Earl Campbell's might move so fast, racing past one defender and then staving in the chest of another? How could Eric Dickerson run so high, against all convention, bounding through holes in the defense, an obvious target that was never caught? These days I will occasionally watch an old clip of Roger Craig, through will alone, breaking off a forty-six-yard run against the Rams, or Marcus Allen reversing field in the Super Bowl. But back then, in an unwired world, stories, words, histories—none of it could be gotten on demand. If you bore witness to such a feat—as I did with Allen—it lived in memory until the broadcast gods decided you could see it again. And so a magazine featuring the exploits of one of these heroes was not just, to me, an assembly of words and stories. It was a treasure.

Because I really did believe that Tony Dorsett was magic. He was five foot eight, built ordinary as one of my uncles. But when he slid the lone-starred helmet over his head, he transformed into something untouchable. I remember him darting through the defense, shifting direction at full speed, dancing, sprinting the length of the field, and outrunning an entire team. But whatever my affinity for Dorsett, this is not what I remember about that issue. In fact, until a few months ago, I'd forgotten that Dorsett was even on the cover at all, because deeper in the magazine, I found a story so unsettling, so horrific even, that it blotted out every adjacent detail.

The story was titled "Where Am I? It Has to Be a Bad Dream." Its subject was Darryl Stingley, who'd once been a wide receiver. I thought of

wide receivers as mythical too—contortionists like Wes Chandler, extending back to snag a ball bouncing off into the ether, or acrobats like Lynn Swann, dancing in the air. I absorbed these exploits on Sunday mornings through

highlights curated by the NFL itself. But a magazine like *Sports Illustrated* existed beyond the garden, out in the street where journalism and literature collided. And out there was neither magic nor myth—only the realest of monsters.

And so I read the true story of Stingley, who back in 1978 took a hit on a slant route and woke up in a hospital. The story began there, in the hospital

—with Stingley unable to move a single limb, unable to call to his mother or wipe the tears running down his face. In an instant, the contortionist had been rendered quadriplegic. Only a few paragraphs in, I wanted to put the magazine down forever, to escape the story, but I was held fast by forces I could not then understand. I knew that there was something different in the storytelling, something in its style, that pulled me toward it with the gravity of a star, until I was there, I was on the field, yelling, pleading with Stingley to watch out for the incoming hit, and then in the hospital, right next to him, helpless to relieve the horror blooming in his eyes as he realized his fate. And then the star became a black hole, and I crossed an event horizon where I was no longer imagining myself there with Stingley, but was Stingley himself, and it was my body pinned to the bed, and the spokes were drilled into my skull, and it was I crying out to a heedless god.

I haunt if you want, the style I possess. And I was haunted—by a style, by language. And, dimly, instinctually, I understood that the only exorcism lay in more words. I went to my father and bombarded him with questions, because that was the kind of child I was, always (to the annoyance of my siblings) asking *why*. My father's way of dealing with this was patented and that day he executed the maneuver to perfection. He led me to the back room, where he kept a large collection of books, and pulled one down from the shelf. The book was *They Call Me Assassin*. It was the memoir of Jack Tatum—the defensive back who'd laid the crushing hit on Stingley.

And so I delved deeper—hoping for some insight into the mindset of a man who had permanently crippled another. I'd like to tell you I found some great revelation here, but the book was mostly filled with stories of Tatum's only vaguely interesting football career. I recall Tatum writing that the hit on Stingley was unremarkable in its violence. If a reader came, as I did, looking for some profound meditation on a catastrophe, it was not to be found. And so I was left again to grapple on my own—no Google, no Wikipedia, no social network through which to commiserate with others. Just me and this terrible story of an acrobat entombed in his own body playing over and over in the back of my mind.

But something had happened to me in this process. As a reader, I changed. I was no longer merely turning words over in my head or on my tongue—I was now turning over entire stories. Even Tatum's story spoke volumes by not speaking much at all, for it nodded to the shame one might feel or the paradox of a game that valorizes violence and then is horrified by its consequences. I did not yet see all of that. But for years after, as I turned the stories over in my mind, I could feel the revelations spinning out of them. What I felt then was that the story of Darryl Stingley broke some profound invisible law of justice, one that reigned in all my cartoons. I knew football was violent—it was the violence that backlit Tony Dorsett's escape act. But violence was the antagonist in a story with a happy ending. It could never win, could it?

But all around me violence actually was winning. That was the year when I first remember a child being shot over a trendy article of clothing; stories like that would soon become the background of my adolescence. And now danger swirled all around me—tales of razors slipped into candy apples, four-year-olds impaled with lawn darts. Stingley's story pulled all this together and illuminated a new idea: Evil did win, sometimes—maybe most times. Bad things did happen, if only for the simple reason that they could.

Disturbing as this knowledge was, it made me stronger because it made me wiser. And the weight of this wisdom was intimately associated with the method of its delivery. Journalism. Personal narrative. Testimony. Stories.

I grew older. Bad things began to happen to me and the people around me: beatdowns, bankings, tool poppings, jewel runnings. I think the only way I ultimately survived was through stories. Because as much as stories could explain my world, they could also allow me to escape into others. And so whatever was outside, I could come back home to the *World Book Encyclopedia* and let words transport me to forests and jungles, taiga and tundra. Or I could pick up a copy of *Deadly Bugs and Killer Insects* and, through words, take pleasure in the lethal biology of black widows and fire ants. Or I could open up *African Glory* and cross the Sahara with Mansa Musa or see the realm of Songhai through Askia the Great. Or I could come back to my world, through LP or tape, through “Louder Than a Bomb,” “The Symphony,” or “My Philosophy.” None of these worlds were separate in my mind. I did not have then, and do not have now, a real sense of “high” or

“low” art. All I cared about was what haunted me and why—and slowly I began to see the thread running through each of them. In high school, I read *Macbeth* and found myself as far beyond the classroom as any Kool G Rap verse could take me:

I am one, my liege,

Whom the vile blows and buffets of the world

Hath so incens'd, that I am reckless what I do

To spite the world.

And I another,

So weary with disasters, tugg'd with fortune,

That I would set my life on any chance,

To mend it, or be rid on 't.

What I saw here was my city, which was connected to other cities whose mores and codes were then being rhapsodized in mixtapes and music

videos—Gods and Earths, Gangstas and Queens. But here was another dead star, with another gravity, pulling me across centuries, until I saw that even there the rules and mores, which I had taken to be ours alone, still held. And through words I understood that my Baltimore was not damned, that what I saw in the eyes of the boys there, what I heard in the music, was in fact something old, something ineffable, which marked all of humanity, stretching from Stratford upon Avon to the Streets.

And always at these moments I was taken back to the obsessions of my childhood: the organization of words, silences, and sound into stories. And to that I added the employment of particular verbs, the playful placement of punctuation, and the private ecstasy it all brought to me. And I saw, considering the phrase “I am one, my liege, / Whom the vile blows and buffets of the world,” that there was magic in Shakespeare’s repetition of a sound represented in the *b*, and that this was the same magic used by Rakim, only this time with the sound represented by the *r*: *I’m the arsenal, I got artillery, lyrics are ammo Rounds of rhythm, then I’m a give ’em piano*

I was about your age when I began to understand what I had first glimpsed in that copy of *Sports Illustrated*—that sound and rhythm are even more powerful when organized into narrative. That is to say, words are powerful, but more so when organized to tell stories. And stories, because of their power, demanded rigorous reading, interpretation, and investigation.

There I was, the *Sports Illustrated* spread in my lap, feeling launched on a voyage of discovery. I finished the article but needed to know more. So I sought to report, and thus turned my own father into my first source. That source then sent me to the library to research. And there, frustratingly, the journey ended. Books could take me only so far. If only I could have talked to Tatum or Stingley myself. If only I could be the one crafting the questions and organizing and interpreting the answers and then, with words, expressing the meaning I extracted from the quest.

As it happened, I could. At Howard, I found a sprawling library beyond the single room of my father. There were databases filled with articles from magazines and newspapers. And I was an adult now, and I could, as it turned out, call people and question them myself, so that the ranks of potential sources now increased. Armed with those raw sources and my own sense of how words might be organized— *a style I possessed*—maybe I could go from the haunted to the ghost, from reader to writer, and I too could have the stars, and their undeniable gravity, at my disposal.

It was clear that such power must serve something beyond my amusement—that it should do the work of illuminating, of confronting and undoing, the violence I saw around me, that beauty must be joined to politics, that style possessed must meet struggle demanded: The good to be sought and the evil to be shunned were flung in the balance and weighed against each other. On the one hand there stood slavery, a stern reality glaring frightfully upon us, with the blood of millions in its polluted skirts, terrible to behold, greedily devouring our hard earnings and feeding himself upon our flesh.

Here was the evil from which to escape.

On the other hand, far away, back in the hazy distance where all forms seemed but shadows under the flickering light of the north star, behind some

craggy hill or snow-capped mountain, stood a doubtful freedom, half frozen, and beckoning us to her icy domain.

This is Frederick Douglass breathing life into the abstract dyad of slavery and freedom—particularly the latter. Slavery is obviously evil. But to pursue the “good,” the enslaved must forsake the very real land of their birth for a dream and maybe a nightmare—an “icy domain” that looms “in the hazy distance” under “flickering light...half frozen.” Douglass’s freedom is not banners or anthems, but terror that he nonetheless embraced. The contrast—the bright good of freedom in principle, set against the dark

unknown reality—evokes the cliché “the devil you know.” But Douglass’s chiaroscuro of language illuminates the truth buried in the cliché so that we are drawn closer to a distant experience, and Douglass is thus not a stock character called “slave,” but a human like us. To write like this, to imagine the enslaved, the colonized, the conquered as human beings has always been a political act. For Black writers it has been so often employed that it amounts to a tradition—one that I returned to that summer in Virginia with you.

I think this tradition of writing, of drawing out a common humanity, is indispensable to our future, if only because what must be cultivated and cared for must first be seen. And what I see is this: a figure standing at the edge of a sprawling forest tasked with mapping that forest with such precision that anyone who sees the map will feel themselves transported into the territory. The figure can see the snowy peaks in the distance and might conjure some theories as to what lies between them and those peaks—pine trees, foothills, a ravine with a stream running through it. The figure is you, the writer, an idea in hand, notes scribbled on loose-leaf, maybe an early draft of an outline. But to write, to draw that map, to pull us into the wilderness, you cannot merely stand at the edge. You have to walk the land.

You have to see the elevation for yourself, the color of the soil. You have to discover that the ravine is really a valley and that the stream is in fact a river winding south from a glacier in the mountains. You can't know any of this beforehand. You can't "logic" your way through it or retreat to your innate genius. A belief in genius is a large part of what plagues us, and I have found that people widely praised for the power of their intellect are as likely to illuminate as they are to confound. "Genius" may or may not help a writer whose job is, above all else, to clarify.

A world made clear—that is what I felt at seven years old when the true face of football clarified before me. Freed from the biased curation of powerful parties, I now directly saw the sport's terrible price. I am writing in the wake of #MeToo, which was, among everything else, a movement birthed by words. For it is one thing to sketch a world where "sexual assault is a

problem in the workplace" and quite another to detail Manhattan offices with rape doors, or star anchors ambushing assistants on vacation, or actors who claim to be "male feminists" but leave a trail of abuse behind them.

What I remember in reading the investigative pieces on these cases is how all the activist and academic jargon—all the talk of "patriarchy" and "rape culture" and "male privilege"—became solid and embodied in a way that did not just leave me convinced but implicated me. It was not news to me that I was privileged, as a man, but I now felt that privilege with new horror. I thought about my own career and understood that whatever its challenges, a rape button did not rank among them. And that is the world made clear: The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized.

Audre Lorde was writing about poetry, but I think her words apply across all arenas of writing. You cannot act upon what you cannot see. And we are plagued by dead language and dead stories that serve people whose aim is nothing short of a dead world. And it is not enough to stand against these dissemblers. There has to be something in you, something that hungers for clarity. And you will need that hunger, because if you follow that path, soon enough you will find yourself confronting not just their myths, not just their stories, but your own. This is difficult, if only because so much of our myth-making was done in service of liberation, in doing whatever we could to dig our way out of the pit into which we were cast. And above us stand the very people who did the casting, jeering, tossing soil into our eyes and yelling down at us, “You’re doing it wrong.” But we are not them, and the standards of enslavers, colonizers, and villains simply will not do. We require another standard—one that sees the sharpening of our writing as the sharpening of our quality of light. And with that light we are charged with

examining the stories we have been told, and how they undergird the politics we have accepted, and then telling new stories ourselves.

The systems we oppose are systems of oppression, and thus inherently systems of cowardice. They work best in the dark, their essence tucked away and as unexamined as the great American pastime was once to me. But then a writer told me a story and I saw something essential and terrible about the world. All our conversations of technique, of rhythm and metaphor, ultimately come down to this—to the stories we tell, to the need to haunt, which is to say to make people feel all that is now at stake.

When we last spoke it was the Fall semester, almost two years ago.

During a light moment, I promised you that I would submit my own essay for the next workshop. You were giddy, in no small part, to turn my own lessons against me—to point out where I was vague, verbose, or just lazy. But when