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CONTENTS

Introductions

Introduction to Issue Nineteen
By Laurie Moberg, Editor 4

Features

Reflections on Negotiating the Science-Society Relationship Together
By The Tropical Rivers Lab 7

Future Rivers of the Anthropocene
By Eleanor Hayman, Colleen James, and Mark Wedge 18

Geographies

A Place in Flux: Memory and Futurity in the Hackensack Meadowlands
By Evelyn Dsouza 35

In Review

On Water, Equity, and Justice
By Kathryn Nuernberger, Henry McCarthy, Tyler C. Seidel, Jabari Jones, Amanda Lyons,
and Verónica Cadavid González 41

Perspectives

Review of *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates
By Lark Weller 51

Primary Sources

Meeting the Atchafalaya
By Joanne Richardson 57

Teaching and Practice

Water? I've Got a Story About That
By Angie Hong 66

IN REVIEW

REVIEW OF *BETWEEN THE WORLD AND ME*, BY TA-NEHISI COATES

By Lark Weller

Note from the Editor

The views expressed herein are those of the author individually, not of the National Park Service.

First published in Open Rivers Issue 12: Watery Places & Archaeology, here we republish Lark Weller's reflections on *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates. In the article, Weller explains that reading Coates' book was spurred



*“Returning the River” by Molly Van Avery, Dameun Strange, and Michael Hoyt.
Image courtesy of Michael Hoyt.*

by a persistent question in her own work: how can water quality work also be anti-racism work? This is exactly the kind of perspective we need in environmental work (and beyond) if we are to, as Weller explains, “be accountable to, and held accountable by, others who share a commitment to a future with more equitable racial—and environmental—outcomes than the past.”

Anti-racism work is, of course, ongoing. While Weller wrote for Open Rivers in 2018 and Coates’ book was first published in 2015, the questions, challenges, and provocations of both texts are as poignant now as they were then. With that in mind, we invite you to read (or reread) Weller’s reflections as part of a practice to see ourselves, our work, and our relationships differently and to move toward being what Coates’ calls “a conscious citizen of this terrible and beautiful world” (p. 108).

—Laurie Moberg, Editor

As the water quality coordinator for the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area (MNRRA) for nine years, I organized and hosted the Mississippi River Forum. A monthly informational and networking series, the River Forum was one of my more visible tasks. A fundamental organizing principle of this ongoing series was to bring together a disciplinarily diverse group of water resource practitioners and decision-makers for conversations with people beyond their typical working relationships. In hosting conversations with these interdisciplinary groups, I sought to explore water issues holistically together: how water was related to agriculture, to the economy, and to the social and political realms. I tried to bring together demographically diverse groups, too, and, given the makeup of “the environmental field,” considered it a victory when as many series speakers were women as were men.

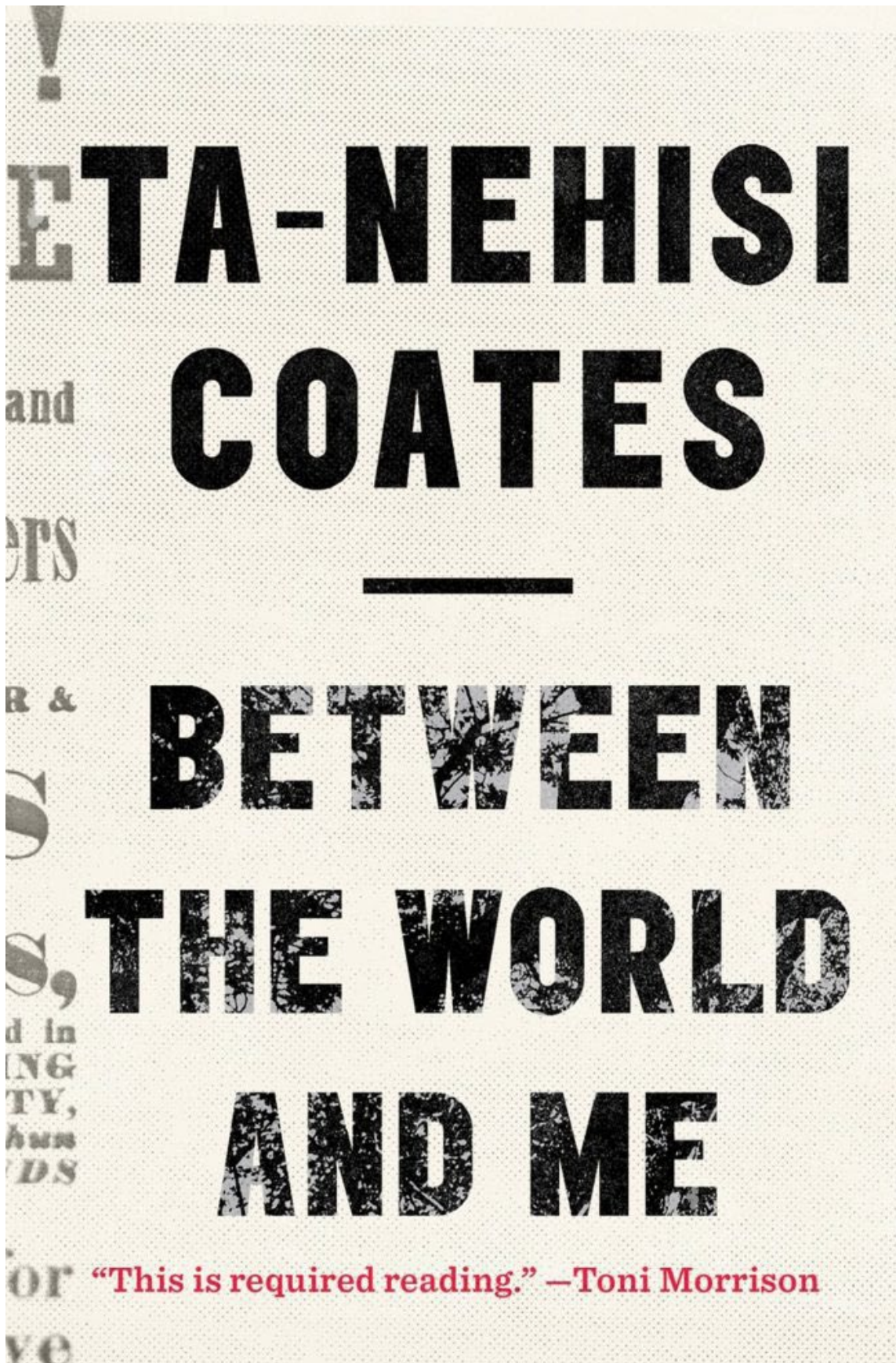
Most of us are aware of, and many have discussed, the lack of racial diversity within

environmental professions—often regarded simply as a problem of optics. I began to realize that the whiteness of the room was not just an optics issue, but reflected a deeper problem in our work: we didn’t seem to know how to have meaningful conversations with people who “don’t look like us,” or to recognize their experiences were often significantly different than ours. I wanted to move us toward more inclusive conversations, but didn’t know where to start, in the context of the River Forum series. I didn’t name it as such at the time, but I was no longer a water quality planner trying to apply an equity lens to the community conversations I’d been having all along. Instead, I was grappling with what it means to authentically make deeply inclusive principles central to what our community planning and water quality work, and conversations, should even be *about*. So, another way to put the question is: How (or can) water quality work be anti-racism work? Surely it can, but where to start?

I was learning that I, and most people in the United States, had been wildly mis-educated about race. I sought a **more accurate education** on this country’s history and its creation of racial identities and experiences. I also searched for **tools to integrate that knowledge** so I could better recognize how that history has had an impact on my life and the lives of others. Finally, I searched for **actions** better aligned with my values (including professionally).

One of the books I read for guidance was *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates. Much has been made about Coates by white readers.[1] As a woman who identifies as white, I found that this book has shifted my perspective on my work as a water quality and community planner.

Between the World and Me is Coates’ letter to his adolescent son, Samori—his attempt to communicate with Samori his own experiences in this country as a black man, as well to recognize the ways his son’s experiences differ from his. It is part personal narrative, part national history,



"Between the World and Me," by Ta-Nehisi Coates.

part analysis of current national racial dynamics. Putting all of that together, Coates asserts that he and his son will always have to explore the same ultimate question: “How one should live within a black body, within a country lost in the Dream,” in a nation built on separating black and Indigenous people from their bodies (p. 12).

This compact book is elegantly written. Coates clearly names racial practices that are designed to be nearly invisible, and consequences that are meant to feel natural, or so overwhelming that we convince ourselves they are insurmountable. He links these practices and consequences to the specific policies, decisions, and actions from which they stem, thereby illuminating a path to systemic racism that has been made difficult to see—especially for whites who benefit from the outcomes of these dynamics.

Coates details the role the streets of his upbringing played in defining his opportunities—and the difference between that and what white communities learned about *their* opportunities from the places in which *they* grew up. He walks his son through the realization that the city streets of his childhood—and the language of fear and power with which he learned to navigate them—were a galaxy away from the streets of “other worlds where children did not regularly fear for their bodies” (p. 20).

In the evenings I would sit before [the] television bearing witness to the dispatches from this other world....That other world was suburban and endless, organized around pot roasts, blueberry pies, fireworks, ice cream sundaes, immaculate bathrooms, and small toy trucks that were loosed in wooded backyards with streams and glens. Comparing these dispatches with the facts of my native world, I came to understand that my country was a galaxy, and this galaxy stretched from the pandemonium of West Baltimore to the happy hunting grounds of *Mr. Belvedere*.... I knew that my portion of the American

galaxy, where bodies were enslaved by a tenacious gravity, was black and that the other, liberated portion was not. (pp. 20–21)

Coates names educational infrastructure as another component of the equation keeping him and other blacks a safe distance from achieving the Dream.

If the streets shackled my right leg, the schools shackled my left. Fail to comprehend the streets and you gave up your body now. But fail to comprehend the schools and you gave up your body later. I suffered at the hands of both, but I resent the schools more. There was nothing sanctified about the laws of the streets—the laws were amoral and practical.... But the laws of the schools were aimed at something distant and vague. What did it mean to... “grow up and be somebody?” ... The world had no time for the childhoods of black boys and girls. How could the schools? (p. 25)

I came to see the streets and the schools as arms of the same beast. One enjoyed the official power of the state while the other enjoyed its implicit sanction.... Fear and violence were the weaponry of both. Fail in the streets and the crews would catch you slipping and take your body. Fail in the schools and you would be suspended and sent back to those same streets, where they would take your body. And I began to see these two arms in relation—those who failed in the schools justified their destruction in the streets. The society could say, “He should have stayed in school,” and then wash its hands of him. (p. 33)

For those looking for a more accurate telling of our nation’s racial history, *Between the World and Me* is a solid guide—and, importantly, one told from the perspective of one whose ancestors have suffered under that history. The society Coates points to is where our national racial

history plays out in my professional sphere. “What any institution, or its agents, ‘intend’ ... is secondary. Our world is physical....Very few Americans will directly proclaim that they are in favor of black people being left to the streets. But a very large number of Americans will do all they can to preserve the Dream.... ‘Good intention’ is a hall pass through history, a sleeping pill that ensures the Dream” (p. 33). Was my saying “I tried to invite diverse perspectives into (pre-defined) River Forum discussions” a “hall pass” through the reality that the discussions didn’t include the wisdom of diverse experiences as they were being created?

What would a different path mean for my professional life? The primary shift this book helped me make in my perspective on my work is that the problem of a lack of diversity in our environmental professions is a symptom, not an outcome. It is a symptom of the fact that the lack of meaningful personal and professional relationships outside of the Dream is both a result of and a way to maintain the country’s race-based inequities. Furthermore, I am struck by this realization: Unless—and *until*—white professionals like me allow ourselves to see, acknowledge, and *feel* the Dream’s toll on Indigenous people and people of color, conversations about equitable water and community planning will remain limited to focusing on optics.

Maintaining whites’ Dream has required that the mechanics of building it be difficult, if not impossible, to see—and certainly makes the human cost of the Dream unappealing and uncomfortable to acknowledge. It makes a perverted “sense” that those benefitting from this Dream have resorted to collective “unseeing” in order to psychically stomach their benefits. Coates calls this the “habit of jabbing out one’s eyes and forgetting the work of one’s hands” (p. 98). The ability of its beneficiaries to un-see the ways in which the Dream continues to break the terms of social contracts like “equal access to opportunity” has essentially enabled the survival of the Dream.

Coates elegantly ties white America’s refusal to see how it has plundered entire generations of human beings to how it has likewise looted the natural world in service to its insatiable appetite. The “Dreamers have improved themselves, and the damming of seas for voltage, the extraction of coal, the transmuting of oil into food, have enabled an expansion in plunder with no known precedent. And this revolution has freed the Dreamers to plunder not just the bodies of humans but the body of the Earth itself” (p. 150).

As Coates states, perhaps the hope is “to awaken the Dreamers, to rouse them to the facts of what their need to be white, to talk like they are white, to think that they are white, which is to think that they are beyond the design flaws of humanity, has done to the world” (p. 146). The call to “awaken the Dreamers” is the mandate I now seek to follow in my work, as I attempt to meaningfully align values of human inclusivity more fully with that work.

To Samori, Coates counsels, “Do not struggle for the Dreamers. Hope for them....But do not pin your struggle on their conversion. The Dreamers will have to learn to struggle for themselves, to understand that the field for their Dream, the stage where they have painted themselves white, is the deathbed of us all. The Dream is the same habit that endangers the planet, the same habit that sees our bodies stowed away in prisons and ghettos” (p. 151). What might this struggle for wisdom look like in the work of a white water quality coordinator?

Since “hitting the pause button” on the River Forum series, I have helped bring training on facilitating inclusion dialogue to colleagues so we can seek greater understanding of these issues together. I have co-led a project (with partners including River Life) to identify institutional barriers to equity in water-related organizations. I have expanded my efforts to build a more respectful and inclusive National Park Service

as a facilitator, Women’s Employee Resource Group leader, and by bringing employees’ voices to agency decision makers. I have started to open my mouth more with colleagues about our need to ask different questions of ourselves—to look at ourselves differently, with fresh, clear vision—and have tried to bring similar questions to my role as a community planner as the park conducts long-term planning.

I like to believe that I aspire to “be a conscious citizen of this terrible and beautiful world” (p. 108). This requires that I know my own personal history, and my society’s history, and requires me to swim upstream against the Dream’s powerful momentum. It’s a *swim* I have the accidental “fortune” of choosing whether or not to take. I can tread water (or get out of the water entirely)

anytime I want, and I catch myself doing both all the time. I need to be accountable to, and held accountable by, others who share a commitment to a future with more equitable racial—and environmental—outcomes than the past. This will enable me to keep principles of racial justice at the foundation of conversations about what my (and our) work should even be. Realizing a future with such different outcomes will require deeper ways of working with and relating to each other—and (perhaps as importantly) to ourselves as individuals. Coates has given me clarity and language to more honestly see my place in this society, how I have gotten here, and the enormous human and psychological costs associated with keeping me and others like me comfortable. Though I struggle to know what to do next, I will never see my place in the world the same again.

Footnote

[1] My privileges and related experiences have shaped my perspective and how I interact with everything, including this reading. I hope any “misses” in what I share about my reading of Coates will become openings that lead me toward greater, shared understanding.

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About the Author

Lark Weller is the Employee Engagement Coordinator for the National Park Service’s Office of Relevancy, Diversity, and Inclusion (RDI). There, she works to help NPS improve its institutional equity, inclusion, and employee engagement. She was an employee of the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area (a unit of the NPS) for 13 years. Lark has a B.S. degree in agriculture, sociology, and anthropology, and a master’s degree in urban and regional planning, both from the University of Minnesota.