

# FRESHMAN DIALOGUE 2016



**Dear Class of 2020,**

2020 seems a long way away. So much will happen in the time we will share, and I am so excited this summer, as I imagine you—indeed, all of us—waiting separately, and yet together, for the adventure we are about to share.

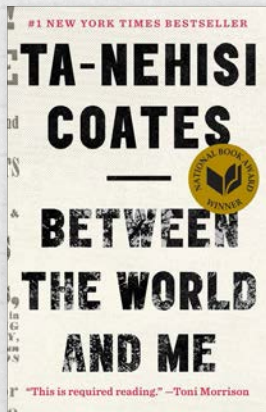
When you arrive for Welcome Week you will join a hand-picked set of brilliant scholars, passionate artists, budding entrepreneurs, scientists, doctors- and lawyers-to-be, humanists, and engineers from around the world. Of all the many hopes I have for each of you, four are key to the next steps you take. I expect each of you to bring intense intellectual curiosity, and deep, abiding respect for yourselves and each other to each precious moment you have as an undergraduate. I hope that you all are ready to help this world of ours be a better place. And I certainly expect you to do your homework, starting now (that part goes without saying, right?)!



*College begins when you open the book chosen for the Freshman Dialogue.*

College begins when you open the book chosen by

our faculty for the Freshman Dialogue. The Dialogue committee always picks something that opens a new perspective on what it means to live as an engaged human in a complex world. This year is no exception.



*Between the World and Me*, by MacArthur prizewinner Ta-Nehisi Coates, is powerful and compelling. In reading and discussing it with one another and with faculty this fall, you will find fertile opportunities to think about not just the past, but ways that the future can be different, and ways that we can make the present more equitable for all. While the book tackles the often disturbing reality

of prejudice and systematic discrimination felt by many African Americans, it is more than that. It is a passionate letter of a man to his son, a missive launched into a world that is fractured by senseless violence, and increasingly embracing isolation over engagement. We live in a place and time where too many are convinced that the answer to the lines that divide us and the wounds that we bear is to ignore our brokenness, to shut out and fear, or to be the ones who carry a bigger hammer, the ones who fight back harder and shout louder.



Ta-Nehisi Coates

Perhaps instead of ignoring our broken world we can try to mend it.

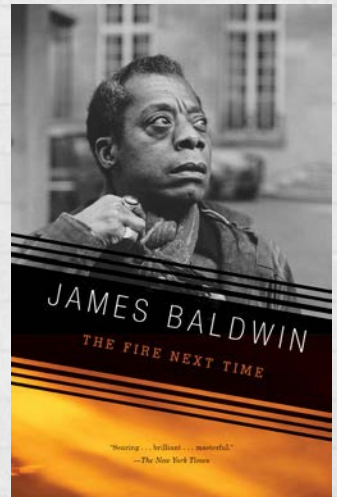
As you read *Between the World and Me*, I hope you ponder a few things. Note the style and genre of the text, especially its status as a letter.

“ *The letter as genre makes its message more powerful.* ”

There is a long history of this literary move, in which an open letter is offered not just

to the individual to whom it is inscribed, but to a broader audience, hoping that the intimacy of the letter as genre—it is a message from a “me” to a “you”—makes its message more powerful.

Take, for example, the New Testament of the Christian Bible, almost half of which is in the form of letters from the apostle Paul to new communities of believers scattered, in isolation, around the ancient world of the Mediterranean and the near east. In classical Rome, from the poets Horace and Ovid, to philosophers like Seneca, letters were used to describe love, life, or politics, and to argue for ethics and justice. Coates, more immediately, borrows the letter form from James Baldwin, whose *The Fire Next Time* was a brilliant, moving anthem



for justice during the American Civil Rights struggle of the 1960s (try it, if you get a chance!).

Why chose the letter form for a book that aims to raise a broad consciousness of how far we have yet to go to live in a world that values all people equally?

**Letters imply distance, need, and desire.** People write letters fundamentally because there are things they cannot always say face to face, but these things still desperately need to be said. Sometimes we cannot speak because we are separated by thousands of miles; sometimes it is emotional distance we have to overcome; sometimes it is shame, or fear of rejection; sometimes we need paper and pen before we can form our thoughts; sometimes we write because if we spoke, only tears would fall from eye and lip.

**Letters always imply loss.** The letter must stand as the enduring voice of someone who is absent. And a parent's letter to a child always carries the bittersweet taste of a love that will never die, but will one day be only present in memory—or if we are very lucky, if our children keep the notes of love we write, and take them out to read after we are gone.

**Letters have a definite audience.** But the audience of a public letter, such as *Between the World and Me*, is never meant to be only the stated addressee. The second person



form of address—the continued presence of a definitive “you”—may have a lot of consequences. Some readers might feel that this voice is speaking directly to their hearts and lives. Equally, others might feel alienated (“I’m nothing like this ‘you’ at all”; “This is not addressed to me!”). One might, as well, feel the tug of empathy, imagining more fully the experiences, and the feelings, of the “you” the letter creates.

More bracing: who among us wants always to take on the full burden of that “you”—of fear, or being seen as enemy or victim, not just son and beloved, and just...be me? This question haunts, I think, us all.

Yet, as we read, others amongst us might seek to embrace the pain and fear, for otherwise we may have failed those who have sacrificed all.

Not just this, but one might, equally well, learn the limits of one’s ability fully to imagine the lives of others. I even wager that at times, Coates’s son himself might feel that his dad is misreading him, addressing an “idea” of his son rather than who he really is (I bet, equally, that many of you have felt that the person your parents are talking to, sometimes, isn’t really the person you are). Letters ask us to confront our emotional truths and our lurking fears, and to say, is there another story I would write? A reply that should be given? We can find solace and comfort in each other.

Even with the best of intentions, letters can try to box “you” in. The history Coates describes is one that has had moments of resounding joy and unity; but many failures, many moments of brokenness, and lost hope, too. We don’t have to fully accept being the “you” of the letter, just as we don’t have to accept that there is an “us” and a “them.” Each of us has our own voice, our own view.

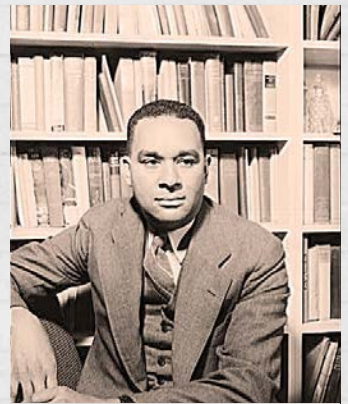
Ultimately letters are tangible; something important has passed from hand to hand, from those hands that wrote it, to those that carried it, to those who hold it close as we read. Letters imply dialogue. They need answers.

**Letters thus imply community, or the hope for it.** They imply civilization, the means to send words and receive answers all over the globe. Think of what that meant in the ancient world, when the letters of Paul traveled over a thousand miles from Asia Minor to the cities of Corinth in Greece and then all the way to Rome. Each letter moved by ship, by cart, from one hand to another, carefully carried, with each person trusting that the next would continue the journey, closing the circuit. Think of what that meant with the desperate letters sent all over Europe in the 1940s, searching for loved ones who had disappeared into ghettos, and from there to camps and graves. So many of them found no answer. Think, too, of missives sent, through whatever means available, by refugees right now across Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, as families seek to be

reunited after war has done its bloody work. Community doesn't need to be united by religion, or forged in desperation, of course. When Seneca wrote his letters to Lucillus, what brought people together was the desire to live a philosophical and ethical life, to share in a community that would help build a more just world. When Nobel Prize winning physicist Abdus Salaam left Cambridge University to return to Pakistan, letters became his primary tool to continue his life of discovery, to pursue his passion for understanding the fundamental particles that make up our world. Creativity can't live in isolation. Nor can justice come from it. Nor can truth be born when our eyes and ears are closed to each other.

So you can see, I hope, why Coates sends his letter. And perhaps as well why your new teachers want you to read it.

One final thing about the book: Coates does something curious. He borrows his title from a poem by the literary giant Richard Wright. Wright's "Between the World and Me" recounts a traumatic scene: walking through the woods and stumbling upon the body of a man who was lynched, brutally murdered as a form of terroristic social control used widely against black men in America after the Civil



**Richard Wright**

War and through the 1960s. By gesturing toward that poem, Coates begins to suggest that the past is still with us. But by gesturing to a poem (not, say, to a newspaper article or a photograph from an archive), he suggests that there is a role for art in shaping our vision of the world around us, no matter how traumatic what we see may be.

Let's read this text this summer and spend time thinking about our next steps together. I believe you all are change-makers. So, I ask: What words will you speak that change the world we live in? By what acts will you shape our community for the better? What knowledge will you seek, share, and use to build a future in which we can all join fully, together? What will you create that transforms life for even one person (that act is worth it!)? Not least, what words will you write whose power will be felt wherever they may travel? Make them count.



With hope, excitement, and anticipation,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "G. Starr". The signature is fluid and cursive.

**CAS Dean Gabi Starr**

P.S. If you want to know more about letters and their history, start with a great book by Janet Altman, called *Epistolarity*. It taught me a lot of what I write about above.