Ears Embiggening: A Roscoe Mitchell Preview

The first in a series of preview posts for Big Ears 2018. Share this widely if you please.

Last year, somebody that looks like me called Big Ears “the best festival pound-for-pound in the United States”. It was a lush feast, damn near too much for any human to absorb in a four-day stretch.<fn>In fact, it was well more than too much for one set of ears.</fn> I caught 27 full shows in 4 days, plus another three I sampled that were not for me. By the end of it, my knee was swollen, my feet were aching. My ears were full; I drove home in seven hours of road hum silence, and did not intentionally listen to music for at least 4 days beyond that. I was done.

It was heaven. I could not imagine anything better.

And now comes the 2018 version which is, probably, better. As always, there are big themes at play in the Big Ears lineup, and central characters from which a great deal of the action emanates. Perhaps it is a function of personal bias, but I’d call this the Year of Roscoe Mitchell.

I have been a fan of Roscoe Mitchell since a spring day in 1979 when I attended a concert by the Art Ensemble of Chicago in Athens, GA. Over the years, I found myself driving preposterous distances to see them perform.<fn>One such road trip, in 1980, found me in Knoxville at the Bijou Theater. The promoter that night, Ashley Capps, went on to found the Big

Ears Festival. Thus do a couple of circles come full.</fn> This year, Roscoe is performing several times, and a number of other musicians who owe him an artistic debt are appearing as well. I am building my schedule around these events, Roscoe as the hub and his comrades – Tyshawn Sorey, Craig Taborn, Even Parker, and so on – the spokes of the wheel.

Mitchell is recently enjoying something of a moment, with multiple album releases and large-scale commissions (he was wrapping up an orchestral recording when I spoke to him a few days before the Festival) and glowing notices in the NY Times and the Village Voice (among others). It might seem as if this is some sort of comeback, but the man has been composing, performing, and recording at a steady clip for a little more than 50 years now.

(His debut, *Sound*, came out in 1966 on the Delmark label, and featured future Art Ensemble partners Lester Bowie and Malachi Favors. It is a landmark in modern music. Listen.)

Last year, ECM released his *Bells for the South Side*, recorded live in 2015 at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art as part of an exhibition devoted to the 50th-anniversary of Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians.<fn>There is much to be said about this phenomenal organization. It was and is truly revolutionary.</fn> It is a miraculous recording that serves as both retrospective and clarion statement of current intent. It is a dizzying combination of composition and improvisation and at Big Ears, the same nine musicians will reassemble for the first time since that recording.

Mitchell's output far exceeds the capacity of any single label to release it all, but there seems no shortage of outlets for his work.<fn>This, too, is an indication of his commitment, as anyone who has ever tried to release an album, book, film, etc. can attest.</fn> His association with ECM records began

in the late 70s with the Art Ensemble. But he goes back even farther with the Nessa label.

Chuck Nessa worked for Delmark when *Sound* was released. Mitchell and Lester Bowie urged him to split away and form his own label. In 1967, the first Nessa release, *Numbers 1 & 2* under Lester's name, is another groundbreaker, and a clearer antecedent to the Art Ensemble with the addition of Joseph Jarman. In 2018, Nessa released *Ride the Wind* by Roscoe Mitchell and the Montreal – Toronto Art Orchestra. Mitchell plays on just one track here, a blistering sopranino sax solo on "They Rode for Them – Part 2". Click here folks. School's in.

(I love how, when he finished tearing the roof off, he steps back calmly and puts his hand in his pocket. So smooth.)

The rest of the album is an orchestral performance based on transcription of a Mitchell Trio performance from 2013. It is wondrous, and a fine example of the range of structures he is ready to deploy in an effort to keep his music from standing still.

The man will be 78 this year, yet the pace of his activity – not to mention the considerable level of fitness necessary for his performances – shows no indication of diminishing. Wherever he plays at Big Ears, I will be there, jaw hanging.

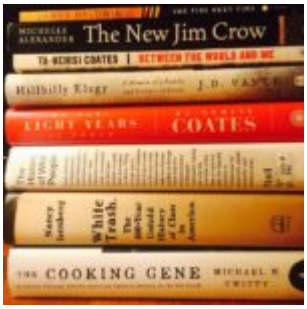
I have not always understood Mitchell's music, and to be honest, there have been times when I have been utterly befuddled and even put off. But I have never been sorry I listened to his work. Much like his fellow AACM pioneer Anthony Braxton, Roscoe's music so clearly demonstrates intelligence, passion, and commitment that – even when I can't figure out wtf is happening – my gut tells me to stop thinking and let the music do its work. Analysis can come later. Beyond that, it is utterly his own. He sounds like no one except Roscoe Mitchell. There are damn few artists in any

discipline who match that description.

In the moment, whether it is the monumental wash of sound he generates through his phenomenal technique<fn>There is no one more skilled in the art of circular breathing, for example.</fn> or through his deployment of *intensity structures* (a strategy for group improvisation that creates aural tsunami), or through his careful attention to space and silences, this is music that demands and rewards attentive listening. And it is important to keep in mind that many of the more chaotic segments may in fact be composed, while many of the seemingly arranged elements are in fact spontaneous compositions. Notions of freedom v. restriction and composition v. improvisation are ping pong balls scattered on crosswinds. Try to keep up. Or don't. It probably doesn't matter for the most part. If you think about it too much, the music has flown away from you.

The guiding light of the 2017 festival was the late Pauline Oliveros, and really, she might as well just wear that honor forever. She once held the Darius Milhaud Chair in Composition at Mills College that Mitchell now fills. Their music is similar in that it rewards *deep listening* in a way that defies description. Try it.

My Summer of Reading Dangerously



Summer of 2017 found me reading voraciously around considerations of race – whatever that might really be – and the legacy of America's original sin. I have been increasingly fascinated by the Civil War and both its pre- and after-maths over the past ten years or so. A few years back, an up and coming blogger at The Atlantic ran a series of posts documenting his immersion, as a Black American, into the history of that period. His name: Ta-Nehisi Coates. I became a big fan. The publication of his Between the World and Me sparked an interest in James Baldwin, and I was lucky enough to catch I Am Not Your Negro in Berkeley the week it was released. That led to a near-obsessive consumption of Baldwin.

Last spring, I noticed a young historian on Twitter plugging an upcoming book that fit into the larger themes and questions I'd been mulling. The theme struck a resonant chord. I was lucky enough to befriend Keri Leigh Merritt and meet her over drinks once in Atlanta. Her book – the one at the top of the pile in the photo – turned out to exceed high expectation, so I tried to place a review in at least a half-dozen publications. Alas, I failed. Fortunately, the book has done well without my help, appearing in paperback just last month.

Now I'm tired of sitting on this piece. It took me months to research and write. That pile of books at the top of this post is only part of the background material. In the end, I whittled the article down to focus on four of these, but the remainder loomed large. Not to mention all the material not pictured.

So without further ado…

The Racialization of the White Underclass

Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South, Keri Leigh Merritt, Cambridge University Press (2017)
White Trash: The 400 Year Untold History of Class in America, Nancy Isenberg, Viking (2016)
Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis, JD Vance, Harper, (2016)
The History of White People, Nell Irvin Painter, WW Norton & Co. (2010)

The ongoing how-could-it-be narrative of our unexpected President fixes on convenient stereotype: the typical Trump voter is white and economically anxious, the forgotten average man (sic) typified by a Norman Rockwell-ish shorthand that presents small-town America as more "real" than the rest of the nation. What was it, media chin pullers pondered, that made this group susceptible to such transparent charlatanism?

Never mind that voter data shows majorities of whites across classes/genders/regions voted Trump. The idea that the aggrieved white underclass was his true base allowed liberal White America to pin the blame on its lesser brethren/sistren. The crackers. The rubes. Convenient shorthand was convenient, and accuracy take the hindmost. The historic racialization of the White underclass was gaining momentum. Again.

What explains the angst of the white underclass? So many factors; so little time. The decline of the family farm? Offshored manufacturing? The war on coal? Coastal media/banker elites?

Maybe it's this old chestnut: the resentment of welfare state handouts to Those People™. Never mind that underclass whites benefit from these programs disproportionately more than any other population. Convenient answers are preferred.

In 2016, J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* appeared astride a substantial marketing juggernaut. A handsome Horatio Alger poster child of pure pluck and will rising Phoenix-like from Appalachian squalor. An impressive story.

His memoir, not so much. *Elegy* is narratively predictable and reliant on facile description and cliché that veers into poverty porn. Just look at those wretched people! He evinces scant warmth or humor, though one could perhaps accept his defiant use of the hillbilly insult as at least a tad ironic, the white guy's version of a rapper's n-word self-identification. He can say it. You can't.

But hey! Certainly this coal country escapee – a veteran of the Marine Corps, Yale Law School, and a stint at Peter Thiel's venture capital firm – has insight into root causes and possible solutions. What is his hopeful message?

Be more like J.D.! Try harder!

Stop taking drugs, having kids, being shiftless. Work harder, quit yer damn bellyaching about the boss. If you're down, it's your fault for not grabbing the American dream, even if you were born into a dying town filled with addictions and empty of prospects. Bill Cosby's 'hillbilly' equivalent, Vance offers tough love for the losers and lets the winners off the hook.

Vance ignores structural considerations like the role of monopoly capitalism in fostering social conditions that led Rust Belt laborers into psychological dependence, not on government handouts, but on the scant largesse of company town economics. That this might lie at the root of the near-religious devotion of coal miners to the coal economy does not merit Vance's consideration. Cradle to grave dependence on mine or factory? No worries. Dependence on government assistance to survive a dead and gone economic paradigm? Get off your ass and make something of yourself, moochers.

The comforting appeal of his fatalist message – "The poor will always be with us. Why worry?" – is undeniable: 73 consecutive weeks and counting on the NY Times bestseller list. Ron Howard has begun production on a movie adaptation; one can scarcely imagine the bathos to come.

Recall Ragged Dick: "Thank you for your kind advice. Is it gratooitous, or do you expect to be paid for it?"

Vance expects to be paid and he does what he must to cash the check. His views align nicely with those who might sign his checks. Reports have Vance in talks to join the Heritage Foundation or the Breitbart media empire. Far be it for me to question Vance's sincerity of belief. It has worked for him. He is indeed an exceptional hillbilly. We should all be so lucky.

Lucky for aging, Southern white guys like me (statistically, you would be forgiven for mistaking me as a Trump voter), there is plenty of literature available to help understand the racial dynamics of our society and how my tribe arrived at this historic moment of culpability and opportunity.

Nancy Isenberg, Professor of American History at Louisiana State University, offers a considered look at the mechanism and fallout of White underclass racialization from Colonial America to the present in *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold Story of Class in America*. Isenberg made the NYT list for a shorter time than Vance, though it recently re-appeared on the list in paperback. Let's hope this more affordable version gives it second wind.

Published in May, 2017, Keri Leigh Merritt's debut book lends detailed support to Isenberg's survey. *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South*, is a vivid and nuanced look at the impacts of slavery on the White underclass in the Deep South. Her approach is broadly interdisciplinary, with a keen eye for intersections of economics, labor,

education, and law enforcement policies that create conditions that define the underclass and limit its means of rising to prosperity.

First, let's consider an older book: *The History of White People*, published in 2010 by Nell Irvin Painter, Emeritus Professor of History at Princeton and one of our most cogent thinkers on the irreality of race and the realities of racism. It is impossible to read at any length about race theory without encountering Painter's work. Fortunately, she matches her scholarship with an exceptionally readable style; her books are hefty, but they read fast.

Painter reaches even farther back than Isenberg to look at the roots of racial conceptualizing in ancient Greece. Then as now, these categorizations were based in the need to rationalize domination and enslavement of one group of people over another. Racializing the conquered applied moral salve to the act of enslavement.

Until relatively recently, racial classification had little to do with skin tone and everything to do with geographic origin and the supposed ingrained traits created by certain climates, topographies, and humors of the blood. (Yes, it is as crazy as it sounds.) The people we think of as White Europeans were finely sliced into an almost innumerable set of categories.<fn>The Finns were an especially disdained people. Go figure.</fn> Even better, categorical definitions were malleable, subject to the whims of armchair racial "scientists" over the ensuing centuries.

As Enlightenment Europeans (men, naturally) began to dominate the field, they turned to more scientific metrics like the cephalic index; sizes and shapes of human skulls were thought to hold the key to understanding racial differences and the innate superiority/inferiority of the different races.

In the end, science was the undoing of racialist theory. The

human genome map puts paid to any assertion that race is biologically determined. Never mind the hopeful television commercials offering to pin down your ethnicity via genetic testing: the identicality of 99.9% of the human genome across skin colors, cultures, and ethnicities backs up Painter's contention that race is a purely social construct. In September, 2017, she offered this uncategorical refutation of racial categorization: "There is no such thing as the "white race" – or any other race."

Painter and Isenberg highlight that the first indentured cohort in America was largely White, albeit whites of lesser humanity: waste people, disposable and endlessly replaceable. Skin tone as the primary demarcation of racial identity came later, coincident with the Africanization of the slave trade. When slave identity became overwhelmingly melanin-based, expiation of the original sin demanded a melanin-based theoretical underpinning. Such science simplified enforcement as well.

Painter and Isenberg present mutually reinforcing histories. Where Painter tracks evolving justifications for racialization in general, Isenberg focuses on specific mechanisms that brought underclass whites to heel. Beginning with the forcible ejection of Europe's degenerate class to the "waste firm" of America, the colonies became the convenient dumping ground where "the surplus poor, the waste people of England, could be converted into economic assets."<fn>See also, Australia.</fn>

The vast majority of European settlers traveled to America under terms of indebted servitude. Once in America, their fortunes rarely improved. Convicts, offered the carrot of freedom in return for a set term of servitude, "would be employed at heavy labor". Few received wages. Many died. But that was fine; there were plenty more where those came from. This callous disdain for the humanity of the underclass – regardless of skin color – remains a fixture of American life 400 years along.

Significantly, white servants at least held out hope for eventual liberation where their enslaved counterparts knew they must either escape or die in slavery. It is one among many of the "hey, at least we're better off than those folks" ideas that persuaded a substantially oppressed and denigrated underclass to side with their overseers and against their logical allies. Keeping poor whites even a baby step above the lot of Black folks has been a hallmark of divisive manipulation in America from the beginning.

(Sadly, this kind of slicing stratification — Creole v. Black, Catholic v. Protestant, Hutus v. Tutsis, &c. — remains a global phenomenon.)

Isenberg's history traces the othering of "white trash" into the present, through the caricatures of Depression era cartoons like Lil Abner, the personae of Elvis Presley and Andy Griffith, and 60s sitcoms like *The Beverly Hillbillies* and its kissing cousins. These stereotypes find more recent form in the mockeries of shows like *Duck Dynasty* and the Honey Boo-boo clan. No matter that the purveyors of these tropes make fun of themselves; while they laugh all the way to the bank, their antics give the rest of America permission to scorn everyone who fits under their umbrella, evoking pride of heritage even as they make it ridiculous. Is the anxiety so surprising?

Racialization of poor whites was a continent-wide affair, with various waves of European immigrants (Irish, Italian, German, and especially Jews) bearing the brunt of the previous wave's frustration at being racialized. But it was especially acute in the Deep South.

In *Masterless Men*, Merritt explores the realities of White poverty in this culture. This group was generally illiterate, so primary sources are rare. Merritt overcomes this documentary gap through examination of official documents in small town and county courthouses. Civil and criminal court

proceedings/pleadings illustrate the tenuous lives of the underclass. Primarily non-propertied, this largest segment of Southern whites derived no benefit from slavery. Arguably, the massive source of free labor via slavery ruined the labor value of white workers. On top of that, the ability of landowners to leverage slave value – in the form of their labor and collateral property value – gave the aristocracy outsized power over less wealthy whites to enlarge their landholdings and dominate commerce in their constrained economic realm. Little surprise then that underclass support of secession and war was thin and riddled with resentment. Rich man's war, poor man's fight.

Interaction among poor whites and slaves, both economically and socially, fostered anxiety among the elite. Sexual liaisons created offspring that defied easy categorization – hence the fractional madness of quadroons, octoroons, one drop rules, &c. Owners of humans also feared the idea of slave/white commerce: stolen food and tools exchanged for liquor and other goods, maybe even escape. But the greatest fear of all – a broad class alliance that might portend revolt – haunted the landowners. Legalistic control mushroomed, including confiscatory taxation and limits on voting rights.

The greatest tool in the aristocracy's arsenal was the Olde English prohibition of vagrancy. Broadly defined, vagrancy statutes allowed landholder-dominated local governments to punish anyone outside the ownership economy. Ostensibly designed to discourage citizens from being lazy layabouts, those who labored least – e.g., landed slave holders – were exempt by virtue of property ownership.

Convicted vagrants were provided to property holders who would pay their fines in exchange for a period of servitude. Convicted servants received little to no pay, yet another suppression of the value of labor as measured by wages. On top of providing valuable labor at low cost, these legal instruments were about keeping people in their place. The word

vagrant was synonymous with epithets for poor whites: hobo, tramp, trash. The waste people.

Vagrancy statutes were also useful in controlling female sexuality. Women who traded their bodies for money – or even those who expressed themselves through drink and "lasciviousness" – were targets. This fear of loose morality – especially acute in light of Southern anxiety about the purity of its women – found further expression in miscegenation statutes. Taken together, the legal and economic restrictions on poor whites were as effective as the control conferred by slavery, albeit far less violent and at least offering the illusory hope of escaping the leash. But with the disruption of families, lack of work opportunities, and the all but absolute refusal of the landed elite to fund education for the masses, any meaningful escape was unlikely.

In cruel irony, Emancipation's aftermath found the Southern ruling elite shifting these same tools – vagrancy prosecutions chief among them – to facilitate the conversion of Black laborers into unpaid convicts and to deprive Blacks at large basic civil rights. Suspected miscegenation between Black men and white women was typically handled extra-judicially and horrifically, while sexual exploitation of Black women by white men was an assumed benefit of white manhood; punishment was deemed unnecessary. Finally, the South's persistent hostility to universal education and suffrage, especially for Blacks but extending to poor whites, built a social superstructure that still exerts downward pressure on the Black and White underclass.

Painter, Isenberg, and Merritt serve up scholarship that is diligently resourced for anyone inclined to dig deeper. But while their formal structures are built to endure peer contention, their accessible and clear prose invites us into the material. They connect their research with current dynamics, a practice strangely controversial among some traditionalists who suggest such engagement might undermine

academic impartiality. Naturally, this imaginary 'view from nowhere' posits a baseline worldview that has been dominant for centuries; ongoing upheavals in class/race/gender dynamics renders irrelevant this imaginary impartiality.

These scholars illuminate the exceptional precision with which the beneficiaries of division wield their pressures and propagandas. Historically, these efforts reach highest expression when economic and social conditions are at their most tenuous. We see this today in the rise and appeal of the alt-right, a movement largely steered by cossetted children of privilege – and various loyal climbers deemed worthy of ascent from the underclass – and filled out at the bottom by the undereducated, resentful, and easily manipulated targets of underclass racialization.

Critically, none of these writers equate white underclass sufferings to the depredations of slavery and Jim Crow. Rather, all three demonstrate that the parallel racializations of Blacks (as a whole) and underclass Whites (as a degenerate sub-population) constructed a hierarchy that places the White underclass fractionally above people of color, the better to encourage their counter-productive alliance with the predominantly-white upper class. White Americans of all social strata have proven enormously resilient in our adherence to the racially based hierarchy, economic self-interest be damned. The intentional racialization of underclass whites instills a dual sense of misplaced inferiority and aspirational identification toward a privileged class that is the natural enemy of the 'waste people'.

White America can no longer compartmentalize what was once called the "Negro problem" any more than we can interrogate the discontents of poor Whites in isolation from other racialized groups. The racial divide is an invention based on false science, but the social costs of this structural inequity and manipulative miseducation are all too real.

Farewell, My Lovely

Keep your distance
Keep your distance
When I feel you close to me
What can I do but fall
Keep your distance
Keep your distance
*With us it must be all or none at all**

First, I just need you to know. It’s not you. It’s me.

Through all this time, you never wavered. Your fine taste and ability to deliver potent delight only improved over time. From the first time I felt you on my tongue – me, a mere teenager with raging hormones and no experience in, well, anything – I was at your mercy, your slave in love. You were my constant companion, giver of comfort, shelter, delight. And perhaps most importantly: confidence.

Yes, with you at my side, my social insecurity and fears washed away on a sudsy wave. Emboldened by your strength, I was at last able to speak up, speak out, be seen. With you, I felt myself, at last, to be a man.

And you’ve always been there for me. Sure, I strayed away at times, occasionally tempted by a sassy Scottish lass or a robust Italian red. But it was you, always you and your yeasty

kiss, that I came back to.

But no more, dearest. No more.

Somewhere along the way, your vixenish power outmatched my sense of proportion. I would begin to think longingly of you at mid-day, so anxious for our first evening embrace on the patio, or on the lawn, or an illicit dalliance in the office before the work day was through. And once we were together, there was nothing else but to drown in your amber beauty.

Your succor has become a toxin, my dear, and so I say to you, in sorrow more than anger: away and no more.

Make no mistake. As I nurse a bubbly pint glass of tonic and lime, it will surely be you that I am longing for. The empty husks of LaCroix, opened and drained with nary a thought to their pure and sparkly essence, will litter my wake, sad echoes of our once mighty passion.

And worse: there will be times, dearest, when I see you across a crowded room, the plaything of another. Perhaps someone who handles you with the tenderness we once knew, perhaps a rogue of rough trade who treats you cheaply, perhaps even knocking you over with sloppy ineptitude. Either way, your beauty will arouse memories (those that I can remember) of happier times. For truly, what ex-lover fails to be more beautiful when seen with a replacement suitor?

But still: the time has come when we can no longer. The passion is obliterated by habitual compulsion and disregard for the subtler delights on offer in this crazy world of ours.

Please don’t try to call.

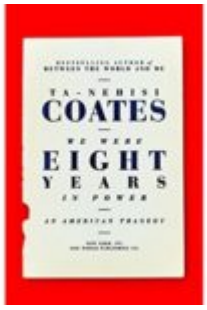
Je ne regrette rien. Je regrette tout.

If I cross your path again

Who knows where, who knows when
On some morning without number
On some highway without end
Don't grasp my hand and say
Fate has brought you here today
*Fate is only fooling with us, friend**

* *lyrics by Richard Thompson, 1991*

America's Virgil



At this point, just about everyone has at least heard of Ta-Nehisi Coates. His second book, *Between the World and Me,* won the 2015 National Book Award. Written as a letter to his teen-aged son, *BTWAM* has sold 1.5 million copies in 19 languages. He won a MacArthur "genius" award. His writing drew comparison to James Baldwin from no less a voice on high than Toni Morrison. He was anointed with dreadful millstone descriptions like "voice of a generation" or, even worse, "the conscience of his race".

Now comes the follow-up, and it's shaping up to be quite the media event. The reviews have been almost embrassingly laudatory and hagiographic profiles of Coates are popping up everywhere. The man himself has been making the rounds of all the high-profile venues. Just last night he sat down with Colbert.

So the burning question. Is *We Were Eight Years in Power* worthy of the fuss?

Yeah, you better believe it is.

It would have been easy to just package a bunch of his *Atlantic* essays, slap an introduction up front, and call it a day. It likely would have been every bit as commercially successful as the more considered volume that hits the store shelves today will be. *We Were Eight Years in Power* collects those essays – one from each of the past 8 years – but instead of one big retrospective introduction, Coates has written an introduction to each essay, a sort of mini-essay on where he stood professionally and philosophically at the time. Running in parallel to the uber-phenomenon of the first black presidency is the micro-story of a college dropout from Baltimore coming to grips with his voice, his thinking, his place in the world, and eventually, his blazing rocket ascension into his role "as one of the most influential black intellectuals of his generation", as the NY Times recently put it. And then, to cap it all off, Coates offers a new meditation on the rise of the inexcusable Trump, "The First White President", that kicks the hornet's nest anew.

Here's how I'd put it: Coates is shaping up to be America's Virgil, the man of letters who will serve as our guide through the circles of hell built on the foundation of white supremacy, theft, murder, rape, and lying.

Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate. So let's take a walk, shall we?

The essays alone, arranged chronologically and ranging from his look at the stern moralizing of a pre-disgrace Bill Cosby to the nightmare rise of a dim-witted game show host to the Oval Office, give the reader a tour through a young man's mind as he comes to better know himself, his craft, and the world around. But even better: the new essays give us a matured

writer in conversation with his younger self, chastising the flaws and failures and giving us a glimpse of struggles that should resonate with any writer.

One of the great pleasures in this volume lies in witnessing Coates' gradual, and then sudden, development.<fn>2015 alone saw the publication of BTWAM and his Polk award winning essay "The Black Family in the Age of Incarceration", included here. Talk about mic-dropping.</fn> It's as though he gains confidence both in his voice and his thinking in tandem. I wish he had included some examples of his early-years blogging at *The Atlantic* to paint an even fuller picture of how far he traveled in a ten year span. The blog is where I first stumbled to Coates, and I followed him regularly. He writes about that period, describing it as something of a finishing school, a place where he was able to try out ideas and voices, a place where the give and take of argumentation and citations of previously-unknown writers led him into modes of thought and investigation that were fresh and generative. It was clear that this was a guy with chops, and I remember wondering why he didn't have a two-a-week gig on the NYT op-ed. Even raw, he was that good.

Coates backs up his provocative positions with solid evidence, but nobody turns to Coates for a recitation of statistics. He is one of the finest prose stylists alive. Every page brings at least one passage – a phrase, a sentence, an entire paragraph – that demands multiple re-readings.

At one point early in his ascent, he describes attending a dinner party where someone mentioned the Continental Divide, something he had never heard of at the time.

> *I did not know what the Continental Divide was, and I did not ask. Later I felt bad about this. I knew, even then, that whenever I nodded along in ignorance, I lost an opportunity, betrayed the wonder in me by privileging the appearance of knowing over the work of finding out.*

Raise your hand if you ever pretended to know when you didn't.<fn>You there, in back, with your hand down. You're pretending. That's it. Raise that hand.</fn>

Coates writes at length about the influences that made him the writer he has become. He speaks frequently of his love of graphic novels<fn>Post-BTWAM, Coates became the writer for the Black Panther comic series, telling the NYT that it "satisfies the kid in me" and is "the place where I can go to do something that sort of feels private again."</fn> and how he spent hours playing and replaying certain hip-hop tracks so he could decipher the lyrics, certain that there was a structure and rhythm that he might be able to unlock.

> *That was how I wanted to write — with weight and clarity, without sanctimony and homily. I could not even articulate why. I guess if forced I would have mumbled something about "truth."*

It's easy to forget that just ten years ago, Coates was struggling to get his words out, struggling (and often failing) to provide for himself and his family. Struggling to find a voice. And grappling with the question of what, exactly, he needed to be writing about, when along comes a skinny guy mixed-race guy with a beautiful family and a very black name to upend the apple cart of assumptions about race. Coates was in the right place at the right time. And he had prepared for the moment, even if it would take a few years of hindsight to realize how fortune had smiled.

It's not fair to say that Coates would not have "made it" absent the phenomenon of Obama. He is simply too talented and curious not to have arrived in some fashion. But just as the fact of Obama created the ground that enabled the ascendancy of Trump, so too did it provide a framework for Coates to both blossom and achieve success beyond his wildest imaginings. In "Notes from the Second Year", which introduces his 2009

profile of Michelle Obama, he acknowledges this turn of fate.

> *Their very existence opened a market. It is important to say this, to say it in this ugly, inelegant way. It is important to remember the inconsequence of one's talent and hard work and the incredible and unmatched sway of luck and fate.*

Revisiting Coates' work over the *Eight Years* in this volume reminds me of how much his work influences my own approach, and how surprisingly<fn>Though it shouldn't be a surprise.</fn> similar we are to one another. Bookish nerds with a fierce love of music, backed by a certainty that these arts could change the world. Civil War geeks. Devoted family guys who, often, are tormented by a seeming inability to measure up to standards of toxic masculinity as regards our success as providers. And the tie that binds all of us who lash ourselves to pen and paper: the curiosity and fear and drive and futility of trying to transform thoughts into words that sing and dance off the page.

But even with the pleasures provided by Coates' writing, this collection is unlikely to make you feel especially chipper. Beginning with the audacious hope that the Obama era confers, the story closes with Coates pondering the specter of America's "first white president", a man who has achieved the highest office in the land based solely on his appeal to whiteness. In electing Trump, he suggests, "the white tribe united in demonstration to say, "If a black man can be president, then any white man – no matter how fallen – can be president."

> *The American tragedy now being wrought is larger than most imagine and will not end with Trump. In recent times, whiteness as an overt political tactic has been restrained by a kind of cordiality that held that its overt invocation would scare off "moderate" whites. This has proved to be only half-true at best. Trump's legacy will be exposing the patina*

> *of decency for what it is and revealing just how much a demagogue can get away with. It does not take much to imagine another politician, wise in the ways of Washington, schooled in the methodology of governance, now liberated from the pretense of anti-racist civility, doing a much more effective job than Trump.*

In recent interviews, Coates has taken something of an absolutist stance: the myth of race and the horrific reality of racism is the one key factor, "the only thing" that explains everything, as he said to Chris Hayes. I swing between believing this to be a rhetorical gambit – a means of framing the debate on his terms, almost like a negotiating stance – and believing him to be quite sincere in this belief.

I'm not much for grand theories of everything, but he has a point. He poses compelling arguments that the United States, and everything about its financial strength and global power, is predicated on the violent appropriation of black peoples' labor, under slavery and under both the original and new Jim Crow. He is at his most forceful when he challenges America to face its original sin, to acknowledge the "bloody heirloom". And he is at his most resigned when he avers that a snowball stands a better chance in hell.

It's not that Coates does not offer or hold out hope for our future. In essence, the hope lies in his demand that we acknowledge our true history, unadorned by myths of exceptionalism and bootstrappy pluck and all the other fairy tales the nation has told itself over the years.

Like Baldwin (and so many others before and since), he despairs that he will ever see such a turn of fate. Yet he manages a quiet note of hope. He quotes Baldwin:

> *White people in this country will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this – which will not be tomorrow*

> *and may very well be never – the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed.*

The "race problem" lies in America's enthusiastic embrace of the falsity and myths of exceptionalism and of "authentic" (read: White) American working men and women raising themselves through dint of their own merit and pluck. That this formulation rests on a false notion of Whiteness that can only exist in juxtaposition to a fabricated myth of Blackness is the unspoken dirty secret that keeps us all on blindly flailing on side-by-side treadmills, hurtling toward an illusory destination while making scant progress and never noticing that the rats in the cage next to us are really more like us than we have been led to believe.

For Coates, white supremacy is so foundational to the entire American enterprise that he sees little chance of White America writ large rejecting the premise. It's hard to argue with him, even as it leaves one in despair. In his sit-down with Colbert, he was asked to offer hope for a better tomorrow. Coates was having none of it.

> *COLBERT: I'm not asking you to make shit up. I'm asking if you personally see any evidence for change in America.*
>
> *COATES: But I would have to make shit up to actually answer that question in a satisfying way.*

So don't look to *We Were Eight Years in Power* for a pleasing bedtime tale. Coates offers analysis, not bromides. Or as he puts it in what his perhaps the most Baldwin-esque passage in the book:

> *Art was not an after-school special. Art was not motivational speaking. Art was not sentimental. It had no responsibility to be hopeful or optimistic or make anyone feel better about the world. It must reflect the world in all it brutality and*

beauty, not in hopes of changing it but in the mean and selfish desire to not be enrolled in its lies, to not be coopted by the television dreams, to not ignore the great crimes all around us.