Rebecca Ramnauth
FYS 1-H 003, Professor Henkle
Coates Letter – Draft 2
13 December 2017

To Mia, my youngest sister:

Coates' novel *Between the World and Me* speaks not only of racism against African Americans. It speaks of "the Different" and their exclusion from society. Unlike racism, prejudice for something we cannot see, such as a mental disorder, often results in affront and exclusion from the people that know you best—this often means family. Autism has manifested as another type of *–ism*; the label has subjected individuals to a sort of prejudice as is sexism, racism, or ageism. Coates believed in racism because he had seen it with his own eyes. And I believe in autism because I have seen it with my own eyes. With the materials covered in class, it is logical that to better understand the novel and its meaning I must extend the issue of racism to other issues of prejudice. Why? I argue that the problem we do not see is worse than a problem that we can. Honestly, I feel more impacted by a disorder I have inherited by proximity than by society's concern for the color of my skin.

In the years immediately following your diagnosis, I was relentless in my search to understand and perhaps even cure your autism. The diagnosis lay comfortably within a religious setting, the certainty provided by the quest for a cure, and the hope for you empowered me with the moral authority and a hint of spiritual zeal to boldly engage with your foreign identity.

In three years, your mother had aged decades and I became the biggest hypocrite my "spiritual zeal" would allow me to be. Often I find that there is more incentive in writing about why things are good than about why things are bad, and more than often I believe that there is far less good than there is bad to begin writing about. I, inevitably, cannot neglect my duty to you as

much as I accept my psychological enslavement to an abnormality that I do not have. And, you remain, physically enslaved in a system graciously called *special*.

In the words of Coates, "The point of this language of 'intention' and 'personal responsibility' is broad exoneration. Mistakes were made." (that is, the clinical stamp on your life). "Bodies were broken. [You] were enslaved. [Mom and I] meant well. We tried our best. 'Good intention' is a hall pass through history, a sleeping pill that ensures the Dream." (33). What, I wondered, is your Dream?

In simplest terms, though knowing you for a lifetime, my definition of it will never be complete: autism is a brain *problem* that affects how a person fits in with the world. The University of California defines it more frankly: "Autism is a pervasive developmental disorder that involves *abnormal* development and function of the brain." They called you *abnormal*, and yes, I suppose that is our problem. Despite this, your Dream, I find, should never be to achieve normalcy.

You were ten years old when you first said my name and developed this awful habit of thinking that every day was my birthday. Dad used to say, "A candle a day, keeps the Mia away." Singing "Happy Birthday" was most irritating of the whole ordeal, though, I must admit, there's both pride and pleasure in telling my friends that I turned 134 this morning. Beyond this, there is a considerable difference between autism and normalcy, and the day I saw something as insignificant as a seagull made me wonder if the latter were the true disorder. When you first saw a seagull wandering the busy streets of New York, you stopped to admire its buttery drooping beak, the leaden saggy fold of skin at the ankle, the webbed feet pierced by the concrete, and the pitiable hop and unreserved nervousness its eyes gave as it vaulted into the traffic. When I saw that seagull, I had recognized it for what it truly was—just another dumb bird. And with that,

what makes you and me different beings, is not how we are classified, but rather how we see the world.

I had just started high school and you were in seventh grade when you first said your name. As Coates wrote, “You are growing into consciousness, and my wish for you is that you feel no need to constrict yourself to make other people comfortable.” (107). You’ll grow up wearing the orange shirt of the American special education, carrying a homemade id with your diagnosis and fingerprints, and preferring to sing your alphabet backward instead of forwards. You’re going to want all things human: to fall in love, go to college, get married, have kids, and enjoy life. You deserve that, regardless of what your aunt has said, what your grandmother scoffed, what your cousins snicker about, what strangers sneer.

If we are *this*, how can we be *that*? Meaning, if we are human, how can we be abnormal? And so, I find myself advocating for “and”—the chief conjunction that enforces inclusiveness—for this *and* that. With “and”, we, paradoxically, in requiring the embrace of “this” *and* “that”, are neglecting differentiation. As humans, we relish categorization and inevitability like that of labels and the meticulousness of a diagnosis. Perhaps it’s because categorization puts us in control of our own lives, and inevitability gives us the freedom to hammer the jagged edges so we’d seem normal enough when the time comes.

Your perspective has taught me that we can never fully comprehend what something is—only how something looks and feels in the moment because “inevitability” is only a construct of hopefulness. To see in your eyes, I must appreciate the singular context of *moment.* Without people like you, I don’t think we’d ever realize that the comfort of this *or* that is a ditch that foresees possibility. You never need to achieve this Dream of “normalcy”; your peculiarities and exceptionalities should change society, not the other way around.

Before I started to write my age with two numbers, I found that if something broke any moment I was around it, I was better off hiding it than risk being scorned. I don't think like that anymore, but I find that most people, especially the ones who have ages to find out they're wrong, do.