



Reading & Discussion Guide

Common Reading Program 2017 Pacific Lutheran University

Featuring:

Between the World and Me
by Ta-Nehisi Coates

As you read *Between the World and Me*, we encourage you to use this reading guide to assist you in thinking deeply and critically about the book. This will help you prepare for the small group discussion you will have with a faculty member and your peers.

To be prepared and organized for the small group discussion you should **make notes** of items of particular interest to you, **including page numbers** so that you can easily locate information **to support your claim/opinion** during the discussion.

Theme: Constructions of race - the social, political, economic and cultural frameworks that lend to the understanding of race, including and especially whiteness.

Background: Race is a social, political, economic, and cultural phenomenon, not rooted in biology, but constructed and reconstructed through time and context. Who is labeled White and who is not is not static: In the United States, racial categories have changed over time and place and the group of people who immigrated and migrated, forced or voluntarily, to the United States. For instance, “in the first quarter of the twentieth century, there was broad agreement that eastern and southern Europeans were white, though arguments raged about the relative merits of various white “races” such as southern Italians, Greeks, and Poles (Roediger, 2005, p. 50). Racialized language is used and reused to put individuals into categories, such as “our temporary Negroes” and “not-yet white ethnics” (Barrett and Roediger, 2012, p. 41) perpetuating the notion that there was a vetting period, as new groups of immigrants were appraised as whether or not they had the “right” to be White.

Questions to consider:

- Coates describes race as “the child of racism, not the father” (p. 7). What does he mean by this statement?
- What does it mean to be colorblind? Using the text as source, would Coates support a colorblind ideology?
- Throughout the text, Coates refers to White individuals as “those who believe they are white” (p. 7). Why do you think he uses the word “believes?” Why does he only describe White individuals in this manner and not people of color? How might the construction of Whiteness differ from people of color?

Theme: Fear and Place in the World

Background: One can read *Between the World and Me* in multiple ways. For example, it can be read as a book about raising a child or being one. Fear is palpable in the book’s opening section and shapes much of Coates’ sense of himself and the world around him. Fear and love were conflated. Coates details a scene in which he disappeared from the sight of his parents at a local park. He experiences the fear of his father when “he did what any parent I know would have done--he reached for his belt”. This fear in no way lessens as **he** becomes a parent. “When I was your age,” Coates writes to his son, “the only people I knew were black, and all of them were powerfully, adamantly, dangerously afraid.”

Questions to consider:

- What is the fear that is so present in this text? What is Coates’ fear for himself, his friends, his son? What examples can you find throughout the book to support your interpretation?
- How did this fear inform and alter Coates’s life and worldview? How does it manifest in different stages of his life and how does he respond?
- Is this kind of fear inevitable? Why or why not?
- In what ways can you/do you relate to this kind of fear?

Theme: Place and belonging – particularly the transformative power of learning in a place of deep connection and community.

Background: Sense of belonging is an intentional, sustainable, and mutually beneficial connection to a community. Both the individual and the community have a shared investment in the other, valuing each other's identities, challenging assumptions the other takes for granted, and sharing in challenges and successes. One place that Coates feels a sense of belonging and community is at Howard University, where he met many of his loved ones. He also acknowledges that he walked in the footsteps of his “ancestors” such as novelist and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston and author Toni Morrison. The connection Coates has with Howard is of intellectual curiosity, personal investment, love, and respect.

Questions to consider:

- Coates often refers to Howard University as The Mecca. Mecca is the holy city of Islam, the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad. Why do you believe Coates used Mecca to describe Howard University? What might the word “Mecca” mean to Coates?
- What does Coates accomplish by using religious terminology to refer to Howard as The Mecca? Why might he have chosen the terminology of Islam as opposed to that of another religion (e.g., Christianity, Buddhism, Shinto, Hinduism)?
- Coates describes the many students on “The Yard” at Howard, as, “the scions of Nigerian aristocrats in their business suites diving dap to bald-headed Qs in purple windbreaker and tan Timbs” (p. 40). All these students had a “place” and belonged at Howard University. What type of environment is needed for all students at a university to feel a sense of belonging and community?

Theme: Narratives - the power of story to serve as a form of both enlightenment and non-violent resistance for social change.

Background: The telling of stories is one way in which individuals make meaning of the world. Sharing their personal narratives allows individuals to link together various parts of their lives in order to make meaning of their experiences, their realities, and the world around them. In Coates’ narrative, he shares the social, political, economic, and cultural constructions of his reality with the reader to offer a glimpse into his life as a Black scholar, writer, and father.

Questions to consider

- What is the “narrative” of The United States? What stories, values, traditions, do we know and how do we know them?
- Coates quotes Abraham Lincoln’s reference, “government of the people” (p. 6) and argues that “people” has never been an inclusive term. Coates’ argument can be seen as a counter narrative. A counter narrative presents an alternative perspective or challenges the dominant narrative. What are counter narratives about The United States?
- How do we interact with Coates’ narrative without ascribing his experience to all Black men?
- Where are the voices of Black women or women of color in the text? What is their narrative? Why might these voices not be as prominent as other voices?

Theme: Literary Style and Rhetorical Situation

Background: *Between the World and Me* is divided into three sections, each focused on a different era in Coates' life: his early life, before attending Howard University; his time at Howard; and his life after Howard. Coates' text follows the tradition of known classics like Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* and James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. *Between the World and Me*, drawing from an autobiographical account of the author's youth, is written in the form of a raw, emotional and at times poignant letter to his teenaged son depicting the feeling, symbolism and violent reality of being black in America.

Questions to consider:

- What is Coates' central claim throughout the book? What do you think is his primary reason for writing this book?
- Coates sees -" the craft of writing as the art of thinking" (pg. 51). As he narrates his experiences, what techniques (rhetorical, literary, etc.) does Coates use to make his ideas coherent and to organize his information?
- Why do you think Coates chose these literary devices? (I.e., how do they support, develop, or emphasize his points?)
- Did the intimacy of this kind of personal communication from a father to his son help you engage with this book? Did you feel a part of the story or kept at a distance?

Works Cited

Barrett, J. E. & Roediger, D. (2012). How white people became white. In P. S. Rothenberg (Ed.) *White privilege. Essential readings on the other side of racism* (pp. 39-44). New York, NY: Worth Publishers

Roediger, D. R. (2005). *Working toward whiteness. How America's immigrants became white. The strange journey from Ellis Island to the suburbs*. Cambridge, MA: Basic Books

Additional resources:

The Publisher's Reading Guide: <http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/220290/between-the-world-and-me-by-ta-nehisi-coates/9780812993547/readers-guide/>

Harvard University: <https://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/video/universities-and-slavery-1-5-keynote> (starts at 15:34)

University of OR: <http://ugs.uoregon.edu/coates>

Additional reading:

[I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings](#)

[Beloved](#) and [Kindred](#) (Octavia Butler)

[Invisible Man](#)

[Don't Play in The Sun](#) (Marita Golden)

[Crunk Feminist Collective](#)

[The Fire This Time](#)

[Coming of Age in Mississippi](#) (Anne Moody)

[Black Girl Dangerous](#)

[The Fire Next Time](#)