

**Reader's Guide to**  
**Between the World and Me**  
**by Ta-Nehisi Coates**

**Prepared by the**  
**United Church of Gainesville's**  
**Racial Justice Task Force**

**All-Church Read**  
**Spring 2016**



**UNITED**  
**CHURCH**  
**OF GAINESVILLE**



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## Introduction

Welcome to the UCG All-Church Read of Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between The World and Me*. This Reader's Guide was prepared by the UCG Racial Justice Task Force to support and challenge us as we read this profound work together. We (the Task Force) selected this book because we believe that each of us has a role to play in working against racism and for racial justice. That work can begin here—by reading this book, listening closely, educating ourselves and preparing our hearts and minds for change.

It can be easy to relegate racism to the past, or to “those people” who continue to loudly proclaim their prejudice. Similarly, it can be easy to believe that as a progressive spiritual community we have moved past racism. But the painful truth is that each of us carries racial biases, at a minimum due to societal exposure and conditioning. These biases affect our behavior in ways we may not even be aware of. It is our responsibility to look hard at our assumptions and the effects of both our words *and our silence* on topics of racism and inequality. This type of examination requires humility, deep listening, and a willingness to work through our own discomfort.

You may have already been doing this work in your heart and in your life. If so, then we invite you to go even deeper using Coates's book and this Reader's Guide. And we invite you to share your process with others, lifting up your concerns and insights in conversation with your UCG community.

Shelly preached the following in January:

*Racism is not just a social justice issue. It is the daily demoralizing dangerous living reality that eviscerates hope, limits opportunity, and quite literally demeans and destroys black and brown lives that matter. And if I say and believe, as I do that "Racism hurts all of us," it is imperative that I take in to my consciousness in a visceral way the ways that racism affects those lives and their livelihood every moment and very directly. And on this MLK Sunday, but not only on this day, but on any*

*given Tuesday or Friday in August or April, I want to awaken my dangerously asleep and oblivious soul. Now, in our global society today, is a liminal and pivotal time for many of us to examine our biases, to learn and unlearn, to change. An opportunity for us to turn and go a different way.*

And so we ask you, reader, to begin this journey with a deep breath and an open heart. The ongoing work of examining our own biases and awakening our souls is difficult, but it also offers great opportunity for spiritual growth and deeper connection with all people.

Reading Coates's words may raise a variety of feelings for you. Some readers report feelings of relief and recognition, believing that Coates is articulating deep truths about race, oppression and American society that many feel and live each day. Some report feeling angry and defensive, even offended at times. **We ask that you do the extra work of paying attention and listening deeply, both to Coates's narrative and to your reactions to his writing.** This Guide is written to encourage this type of focused personal reflection. We believe that now is the perfect time for us to "examine our biases, to learn and unlearn, to change" both as individuals and as a spiritual community. If not us, then who? If not now, when?

As Shelly concluded her MLK Day sermon:

*It is my conviction and that of many of you that in this time and in this place UCG can be a place where we may learn and teach active, intentional transformation of the mind through anti-racism education. That we may work... to open our compassionate hearts to listen to hear and to walk in solidarity with one another in helping to rectify disparities and relieve desperation. What if we choose to be a creatively maladjusted community that teaches and acts for transformation of our minds that results not in attempts at rescue or easy solutions, but rather in empowerment, true peace, and equal opportunity.*

We hope that this All-Church Read will offer each of us an opportunity to listen deeply, awaken our soul, and join with other UCGers in creative maladjustment to the racial disparities of our time.

### How to Use this Guide

This Reader's Guide is organized chronologically, providing specific quotes from the book and associated questions for consideration and discussion. It is intended as a flexible document with many uses. We suggest doing one or more of the following:

- Follow along with the Guide while you read Coates's text, using individual questions as a focus for meditation, prayer or journaling.
- Pair up with another reader and work through the questions together.
- Send the guide to a non-UCG friend or family member. Select questions to discuss in person, by phone, or in writing.

The Reader's Guide also provides material for small group discussions. The Racial Justice Task Force will be hosting All-Church Read Coffee Talks in the UCG Library between services on March 20<sup>th</sup> and April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup>. These Coffee Talks will be an opportunity to process Coates's book and selections from the Reader's Guide with other UCG members in an informal setting. Join us for one or more sessions (pre-registration is not required).

### Guidelines for Conversation

In all discussions at UCG, and especially those relating to race, we seek to follow the following guidelines (adapted from the Buddhist-based group White Awake, [www.whiteawake.org](http://www.whiteawake.org)):

- Create a non-judgmental space. When judgment arises in ourselves or others, simply notice it and move back to descriptive language.
- Practice discomfort as a spiritual discipline. Try to let go of the need to "get it right." If your words unintentionally offend someone, apologize and continue with the conversation.
- Share from personal experience.

- Respect time limitations and share “air time” among group members.
- Acknowledge that we are all learning and that no one has a monopoly on the truth.
- Acknowledge that our identities and experiences are complex, without denying the realities of racism or its effect on our lives.
- Resist the need to go out and “fix.” Begin with your own heart.



## Questions relating to Part I (p. 1-71)

1. (Page 7) *“But race is the child of racism, not the father...the belief in the preeminence of hue and hair, the notion that these factors can correctly organize a society and that they signify deeper attributes, which are indelible—this is the new idea at the heart of these new people who have been brought up hopelessly, tragically, deceitfully, to believe that they are white.”*

Q: What does Coates mean by people who “believe that they are white”? What do you believe about your racial identity? What have you been told about the meaning of your skin color? How has your racial identity “colored” your life?

2. (Page 8) *The “process of washing the disparate tribes white, the elevation of the belief in being white, was not achieved through wine tastings and ice cream socials, but rather through the pillaging of life, liberty, labor and land...and various other acts meant, first and foremost, to deny you and me the right to secure and govern our own bodies.”*

Q: What emotions does this passage raise for you? How do you experience these emotions in your body? Can you recall a time when you were denied the right to secure or govern your own body? Have you witnessed this happening to others? How did you respond? How does Coates’ version of American history square with your personal narrative about our country and society?

3. (Page 10) *“When the journalist asked me about my body, it was like she was asking me to awaken her from the most gorgeous dream.”*

Q: Here, and numerous times throughout the book, Coates challenges us with negative aspects of “the Dream.” He says that the Dream rests on the backs of black people, “the bedding made from our bodies” (p. 11). How do you react to this? Does it challenge you? Does it ring true for you?

4. (Page 8-9) Coates talks throughout the book about the violence and disrespect to “the black body” that he experiences in his life and witnesses in the wider community. He names an “apparatus urging us to accept American innocence at face value and not to inquire too much.” And he suggests that “it is so easy to look away, to live with the fruits of our history and to ignore the great evil done in all of our names.”

Q: What “great evil” is Coates referring to here? In what ways is this evil playing out today, in and around us?

Q: Where have you been guilty of looking away from the suffering and oppression of others? What is the cost, to you, of that ignorance? What is the cost to others?

Q: Witnessing, acknowledging and remembering the human costs of “the great evil,” and indeed of any human suffering, is painful. What might motivate us to seek out and validate these stories of suffering, to proactively move toward the pain and discomfort of others? What benefits might this education and witness provide—to us as individuals? To our church as a whole? To our wider community?

5. (Page 9) Coates names numerous people of color who have been killed or assaulted recently by “men in uniform,” including Eric Garner, Renisha McBride, John Crawford, Tamir Rice and Marlene Pinnock. He recounts his son’s grief when learning that Michael Brown’s killers would go free (page 11). Instead of offering comfort, Coates counsels his son as follows: “And you know now, if you did not before, that the police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body.... The destroyers will rarely be held accountable. Mostly they will receive pensions.”

Q: Have you ever felt physically threatened by a police officer? Do you generally think of police officers as someone to call for help, or someone to fear? Why do you think that our police force and criminal justice system are disproportionately consuming the lives and bodies of people of color? Does this seem like an urgent problem to you, or somewhat disconnected from your daily life? Do you agree with Coates that the “destroyers are merely men enforcing the whims of our country, correctly interpreting its heritage and legacy”?

6. (Page 12) Coates names the central question of his life: "how do I live free in this black body?"

Q: What is the central question of your life?

7. (Page 14) Fear is a strong theme throughout the book, beginning with the fear of the "extravagant boys of my neighborhood...their big puffy coats...which was their armor against the world." Coates talks about the fear that drove his parents to beat him, and now the fear that he has for the life of his own son.

Q: What is this fear that Coates describes as central to his black family, friends, and community? Is this fear a part of your daily life? What are you most afraid of?

8. (Page 20) Coates describes watching TV as a child, "bearing witness to the dispatches from this other world...suburban and endless...I obsessed over the distance between that other sector of space and my own. I knew that my portion of the American galaxy, where bodies were enslaved by a tenacious gravity, was black and that other, liberated portion was not... And I felt in this a cosmic injustice, a profound cruelty, which infused an abiding, irrepressible desire to unshackle my body and achieve the velocity of escape."

Q: Have you ever felt that your body was shackled, that you must escape a "tenacious gravity"? Can you imagine knowing that, while you felt shackled and afraid, that a majority of your country did not? What impact might this knowledge have on your view of the world, relationships, health?

9. (Page 22) "The streets transform every ordinary day into a series of trick questions, and every incorrect answer risks a beat-down, a shooting, or a pregnancy. No one survives unscathed."

Q: How does Coates's description of growing up on the streets of Baltimore relate to your own childhood?

10. (Page 24, 26-27) *“The world had no time for the childhoods of black boys and girls. How could the schools?... When our elders presented school to us, they did not present it as a place of high learning but as a means of escape from death and penal warehousing. Fully 60 percent of all young black men who drop out of high school will go to jail. This should disgrace the country. But it does not...”*

Q: How does Coates’s experience of school relate to yours? Does this statistic about black high school drop-outs surprise you? Do you agree that it is a disgrace to our country?

11. (Page 28) *“I could not retreat, as did so many, into the church and its mysteries. My parents rejected all dogmas... And so I had no sense that any just God was on my side... My understanding of the universe was physical, and its moral arc bent toward chaos then concluded in a box.”*

Q: How do you react to this passage, from the perspective of your own moral and/or spiritual beliefs? Do you believe that the universe has a moral arc—and if so, does it bend toward justice (as Martin Luther King famously said), or toward chaos, as Coates suggests? If you believe in God (however known), does your faith compel you to seek social justice? Is reading and talking about this book an act of social justice? How can you incorporate your faith or spirituality into the reading, pondering and discussing of this book?

12. (Page 29) *“Fear ruled everything around me, and I knew, as all black people do, that this fear was connected to the Dream out there, to the unworried boys, to pie and pot roast, to the white fences and green lawns nightly beamed into our television sets.”*

Q: Coates returns regularly to the theme of fear throughout the book. By this point he is overtly connecting the pervasive fear in his life to the Dream of “people who believe they are white.” How does this connection make you feel? Is the fear that Coates describes part of your daily life and experience? If not, can you imagine your life bounded by a fear for your own safety?

13. (page 32) Coates talks of annual school assemblies with their “ritual review of the Civil Rights Movement.” He asks: “**Why are they showing this to us?** Why were only our heroes nonviolent? I speak not of the morality of nonviolence, but of the sense that blacks are in especial need of this morality.”

Q: What is your experience of our country’s messaging on violence? Do you believe that our national narrative always glorifies nonviolence, or only in certain situations or for certain groups of people? How does this square (or not) with your own personal ethos? Do you think your feelings about violence, and whether it is ever appropriate and justified, could be related to your own racial identity?

14. (page 33) “I came to see the streets and the schools as arms of the same beast... 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 his hands of them.”

Q: Do you believe that our country is a meritocracy, where anyone regardless of skin color has an equal chance? Or do you agree with Coates that society has set some people up to fail, with convenient narratives in place for absolution? Whose fault is it when the lives of young people are destroyed in the streets?

15. (page 33) “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 that they can to preserve the Dream... ‘Good intention’ is a hall pass through history, a sleeping pill that ensures the Dream.”

Q: What feelings does this raise passage in you? Do you feel anger, recognition, defensiveness, relief, a desire to put the book down—either at this passage or others in the book? What draws you in to Coates’s narrative, and what pushes you away?

Q: How does Coates’s notion of “doing all we can to preserve the Dream” strike you? Do you feel challenged by it, or does it resonate with you?

16. (page 36) *"I loved Malcolm because Malcolm never lied, unlike the schools and their façade of morality, unlike the streets and their bravado, unlike the world of dreamers."*

Q: What do you associate with Malcolm X? How does it compare to your associations with Martin Luther King Jr? Do you think that your feelings on these two black leaders could be related to your own racial identity?

Q: Coates lifts Malcolm X up as a more honest public persona and is inspired by him to be a teller of truths. How is this book in line with Malcolm's truths, and does it have the same effect now as he did then?

17. (page 42) *"the power of domination and exclusion is central to the belief in being white, and without it, "white people" would cease to exist for want of reasons"*

Q: In what ways do you see the power of domination and exclusion at work in your life, in the life of your loved ones, your neighbors, or colleagues? If you have never experienced race-based domination or exclusion yourself, have you witnessed it happening to others? How did you respond?

18. (page 43) *"Everyone of any import, from Jesus to George Washington, was white...history books spoke of black people only as sentimental "firsts"—first black five-star general, first black congressman, first black mayor...Serious history was the West, and the West was white."*

Q: Were you taught that "serious history" is synonymous with people who believe that they are white? How do you think this influenced your perceptions of racial identity and your relationships?

19. (page 50) *"The Dream is the enemy of all art, courageous thinking, and honest writing. And it became clear that this was not just for the dreams concocted by Americans to justify themselves but also for the dreams that I once had conjured to replace them. I had thought I must mirror the outside world, create a carbon copy of white claims to civilization."*

Q: What dreams have you concocted or absorbed that stand in the way of your own art, courage and honesty? Where are you limited by your need to mirror the outside world? Are you inspired to seek and create beyond what you have been taught about civilization and your own “right” path?

*20. (page 55) “I’d seen portraits of the Irish drawn in the same ravenous, lustful, and simian way. Perhaps there had been other bodies, mocked, terrorized, and insecure. Perhaps the Irish too had once lost their bodies...perhaps being named “black” was just someone’s name for being at the bottom, a human turned to object, object turned to pariah.”*

Q: Have you seen portraits like these? When you read these words, whom do you identify with? How have you experienced judgments from others due to your race / religion / heritage / sexual orientation / handicap, etc.?

*21. (page 56) “My great error was not that I had accepted someone else’s dream but that I had accepted the fact of dreams, the need for escape, and the invention of racecraft.”*

Q: In what way have you accepted “racecraft” and its associated dreams? What purposes might these stories serve for you? What would it mean to let them go?

*22. (page 60) “I am black, and have been plundered and have lost my body. But perhaps I too had the capacity for plunder, maybe I would take another human’s body to confirm myself in a community. Perhaps I already have. Hate gives identity.”*

Q: Do you agree that hate gives identity? When have you seen the “capacity for plunder” in yourself? When have you seen it in others?

*23. (page 60-61) “She taught me to love in new ways. In my old house your grandparents ruled with the fearsome rod. I have tried to address you differently—an idea begun by seeing all the other ways of love on display at The Mecca....this girl with the long dreads revealed...that, soft or hard, love was an act of heroism.”*

Q: Do you believe that love is an act of heroism? When in your life have you learned to love in new ways? Who taught you this new way? How might you be called in your life, today, to learn other ways of love and loving?

24. (page 61) *"I could no longer predict where I would find my heroes."*

Q: Do you have heroes? Where did/do you find them? Where has been the most unexpected place you have found heroes?

25. (page 65) *"And she was the kind of black girl who'd been told as a child that she had better be smart because her looks wouldn't save her, and then told as a young woman that she was really pretty for a dark-skinned girl."*

Q: Did you receive messages like this? Do you still? If not, can you imagine what it would feel like, to be diminished in this way? How do you make sense of your knowledge of "cosmic injustices"?

26. (page 68) *"The Struggle is in your name, Samori—you were named for Samori Toure, who struggled against French colonizers for the right to his own black body"*

Q: What does your name mean, and why did your parents choose it for you? If you have children, why did you choose their name(s)? Did you seek to impart anything, in the act of their naming?

27. (page 69) *I have raised you to respect every human being as singular, and you must extend that same respect into the past. Slavery is not an indefinable mass of flesh. It is a particular, specific enslaved woman, whose mind is as active as your own, whose range of feeling is as vast as your own; who prefers the way the light falls in one particular spot in the woods..."*

Q: In this passage Coates gives particularity, identity and dignity to a specific enslaved woman. Does this technique help you feel connected to her story? In what ways can we practice granting specificity to people that seem "other" to us?



28. (page 70) *“Never forget that for 250 years black people were born into chains—whole generations followed by more generations who knew nothing but chains. You must struggle to truly remember this past in all its nuance, error, and humanity.”*

Q: Is the long and brutal history of American slavery something that you think about regularly? Why or why not? What might we gain from actively struggling to remember this fact in all its depth and specificity? What might we lose, in this remembering?

29. (page 70) *“You must resist the common urge toward the comforting narrative of divine law, toward fairy tales that imply some irrepressible justice.... They were people turned to fuel for the American machine.”*

Q: How do you react to this passage—does it draw you in or push you away (or both at the same time)? Do you agree with Coates’s assertion that, in the context of American slavery, ideas of irrepressible justice are “fairy tales”? Do you believe in some sort of divine law?

## Questions relating to Part II (p. 75-132)

30. (Page 75) *“Shortly before you were born, I was pulled over by the PG County police, the same police that all the D.C. poets had warned me of. They approached on both sides of the car, shining their flashing lights through the windows. They took my identification and returned to the squad car. I sat there in terror.”*

Q: Why did Coates react to this routine traffic stop with terror? If you have ever been pulled over by the police, what emotions did you experience? Are you afraid of the police?

Q: What do you make of the manner in which the police officers approached Coates, in his telling? How would you interpret it if multiple police officers approached your car from both sides, shining lights through the windows?

31. (Page 75) *“And so I knew that the PG County police had killed Elmer Clay Newman, then claimed he’d rammed his own head into the wall of a jail cell. And I knew that they’d shot Gary Hopkins and said he’d gone for an officer’s gun. And I knew they had beaten Freddie McCollum half-blind and blamed it all on a collapsing floor. And I had read reports of these officers choking mechanics, shooting construction workers, slamming suspects through the glass doors of shopping malls. And I knew that they did this with great regularity, as though moved by some unseen cosmic clock.”*

Q: How do you react to this list of police atrocities? Do you feel outraged by the injustice? Do you wonder if there is more to the story? How strongly do you identify with the victims and fear for yourself or your loved ones, as Coates did?

Q: In what ways are these reactions related to your racial identity?

32. (Page 76) *“Then that September I picked up The Washington Post and saw that the PG County police had killed again. I could not help but think that this could have been me, and holding you—a month old by then—I knew that such a loss would not be mine*

*alone. I skimmed the headline—their atrocities seemed so common back then.*

Q: When you read about police killings in the newspaper, what emotions do you experience? Anger? Sadness? Fear?

Q: Notice the juxtaposition in Coates's experience of mortal fear and the routine. Can you imagine living with such extreme but ordinary fear?

*33. (Page 78) "I heard several people ask for forgiveness for the officer who'd shot Prince Jones down. I only vaguely recall my impressions of all this. But I know that I have always felt great distance from the grieving rituals of my people, and I must have felt it powerfully then."*

Q: In 2015, after the massacre at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal church in Charleston, family members of the victims prayed for forgiveness for the shooter. Would you have done the same if a member of your own family had been killed in that way? Or would you have felt distant from that ritual, as Coates did?

Q: In the face of racist violence, how do we balance calls for forgiveness and for justice?

*34. (Page 78) "At this moment the phrase 'police reform' has come into vogue, and the actions of our publicly appointed guardians have attracted attention presidential and pedestrian. You may have heard the talk of diversity, sensitivity training, and body cameras. These are all fine and applicable, but they understate the task and allow the citizens of this country to pretend that there is a real distance between their own attitudes and those of the ones appointed to protect them."*

Q: What is the full scope of the task that Coates puts before us? How do you weigh the potential benefits of intermediate measures like sensitivity training or body cameras with the potential harm of distracting us from the full task of dismantling systemic racism?

Q: How much distance do you feel between your own attitudes and those of the ones appointed to protect you? What

responsibility, if any, do you take for police violence against black bodies? What actions could you take to reduce such violence?

35. (Page 79) *“And raised conscious, in rejection of a Christian God, I could see no higher purpose in Prince’s death. I believed, and still do, that our bodies are our selves, that my soul is the voltage conducted through neurons and nerves, and that my spirit is my flesh. ...For the crime of destroying the body of Prince Jones, I did not believe in forgiveness.”*”

Q: What does Coates mean by “conscious”? How does rejection of a Christian God related to his consciousness?

Q: How do your spiritual beliefs shape your reaction to acts of racist violence? How do they relate to your racial identity?

Q: What role do you think churches have played—or could play—in perpetuating or dismantling racism?

36. (Page 82) *“Now at night, I held you and a great fear, wide as all our American generations, took me. Now I personally understood my father and the old mantra—‘Either I can beat him or the police.’ ...Black people love their children with a kind of obsession. You are all we have, and you come to us endangered. I think we would like to kill you ourselves before seeing you killed by the streets that America made. That is a philosophy of the disembodied...”*

Q: What is the significance of the historical depth Coates gives to his fear—“wide as all our American generations”?

Q: What emotions does this passage evoke in you? Can you relate to it in your own life? Can you put yourself in Coates’s shoes and make sense of his fear?

Q: Coates understands—even shares—his father’s fear, but has not followed his example of physical violence with his own son. How did he manage that?

Q: What does Coates mean by “the disembodied”? Do you feel, or have you ever felt, disembodied in this way?

37. (Page 83) *“And no one would be brought to account for this destruction, because my death would not be the fault of any human but the fault of some unfortunate but immutable fact of ‘race,’ imposed upon an innocent country by the inscrutable judgment of invisible gods. The earthquake cannot be subpoenaed. The typhoon will not bend under indictment.”*

Q: Have you ever considered where the idea of “race” comes from? Do you think of race as a part of the natural world or as an American invention?

Q: What are the consequences of seeing “race” as a force of nature? By contrast, what are the consequences of seeing it as “the child of racism,” as Coates suggested earlier in the book (p. 7)?

Q: Coates is writing here about police brutality. But how might his ideas also apply to supposedly “natural” disasters like Hurricane Katrina?

38. (Page 84) *“I knew that there were theories, even in the mouths of black people, that justified the jails springing up around me, that argued for ghettos and projects, that viewed the destruction of the black body as incidental to the preservation of order. According to this theory ‘safety’ was a higher value than justice, perhaps the highest value.”*

Q: What is the relation between safety and justice in your own life? Have you felt them in opposition to one another? When has your sense of safety been threatened? And when your sense of justice?

39. (Page 85) *“And the lack of safety cannot help but constrain your sense of the galaxy. ...I always thought I was destined to go back home after college—but not simply because I loved home but because I could not imagine much else for myself. And that stunted imagination is something I owe to my chains.”*

Q: What did you imagine for yourself when you were young? How big was your galaxy? What factors constrained or enabled your imagination?

40. (Page 86) *About September 11, 2001, Coates writes: "But looking out upon the ruins of America, my heart was cold. I had disasters all my own. The officer who killed Prince Jones, like all the officers who regard us so warily, was the sword of the American citizenry. I would never consider any American citizen pure. I was out of sync with the city. I kept thinking about how southern Manhattan had always been Ground Zero for us. They auctioned our bodies down there, in that same devastated, and rightly named, financial district."*

Q: How does this passage relate to your own experience of 9/11? Can you put yourself in Coates's shoes here, or do you feel too great a distance from his reaction?

Q: What relation is Coates suggesting between the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the terror of American slavery?

41. (Page 89) *"They [white people] were utterly fearless. I did not understand it until I looked out on the street. That was where I saw white parents pushing double-wide strollers down gentrifying Harlem boulevards in T-shirts and jogging shorts. Or I saw them lost in conversation with each other, mother and father, while their sons commanded entire sidewalks with their tricycles. The galaxy belonged to them, and as terror was communicated to our children, I saw mastery communicated to theirs."*

Q: What, along the spectrum from terror to mastery, did your parents communicate to you?

Q: Have you witnessed the kinds of contrasts that Coates describes here? How did it make you feel?

Q: Coates is describing here the intersection of wealth and race. How much of the sense of mastery that Coates describes do you think is due to class and how much is due to race?

Q: What can white parents today communicate to their children about the place of fear in the American experience?

42. (Page 90) *"You would be a man one day, and I could not save you from the unbridgeable distance between you and your future peers and colleagues, who might try to convince you that everything*

*I know, all the things I'm sharing with you here, are an illusion, or a fact of a distant past that need not be discussed."*

Q: As you read the book, have you at any point felt skeptical of Coates's claims about the world? Does your racial identity make it easier or harder to accept everything Coates knows and is sharing with his son?

Q: Can you put yourself in the position of Coates's son? What effect would it have to read about your father's experience of living in a black body?

*43. (Page 90) "So I feared not just the violence of this world but the rules designed to protect you from it, the rules that would have you contort your body to address the block, and contort again to be taken seriously by colleagues, and contort again so as not to give the police a reason."*

Q: Here Coates moves from the threat of direct physical violence to the everyday violence of living in a black body. Can you relate to the amount of effort it takes to make constant contortions in day-to-day life? Do you often feel that you are on alert in the same way that Coates fears for his son?

Q: Does Coates's letter to his son change in any way your understanding of what it means to be a parent of children who are defined as black in the U.S.?

*44. (Page 91) "It struck me that perhaps the defining feature of being drafted into the black race was the inescapable robbery of time, because the moments we spent readying the mask, or readying ourselves to accept half as much, could not be recovered. The robbery of time is not measured in lifespans but in moments. ...It is the raft of second chances for them, and twenty-three-hour days for us."*

Q: What are the consequences of the robbery of time? Can you relate to this aspect of Coates experience?

Q: How, if at all, does this passage alter your understanding of how racism operates in post-Jim Crow America, and what toll contemporary racism takes on people who are defined as black?

Q: How often do you think about your race?

45. (Page 92) *“I watched you leap and laugh with these children you barely knew, and the wall rose in me and I felt I should grab you by the arm, pull you back and say, ‘We don’t know these folks! Be cool!’ I did not do this. I was growing, and if I could not name my anguish precisely I still knew that there was nothing noble in it. But now I understand the gravity of what I was proposing—that a four-year-old child be watchful, prudent, and shrewd, that I curtail your happiness, that you submit to a loss of time. And now when I measure this fear against the boldness that the masters of the galaxy imparted to their own children, I am ashamed.”*

Q: What emotions do you feel as you read about the particular anguish Coates describes here?

Q: Do you identify more strongly with the fear Coates expresses or with the boldness he attributes to others? How does your racial identity relate to the way you were raised or, if you have children, to the way you raised your own?

46. (Page 93) *“The theater was crowded, and when we came out we rode a set of escalators down to the ground floor. As we came off, you were moving at the dawdling speed of a small child. A white woman pushed you and said, ‘Come on!’ Many things now happened at once.”*

Q: What role did race play in this scene? How likely is it that the woman would have treated a white child the same way?

Q: Coates feels insecure in his ability to protect his son. Have you ever been in a similar situation? What was that like for you? If you haven’t had an experience like that, what do you imagine it would be like?

Q: Coates writes of his “sense that this woman was pulling rank”—that “someone had invoked their right over the body of my son.” How would you have felt if you were in his shoes? How conscious do you imagine the white woman was of her own racial identity or that of Coates and his son?

Q: When a white man spoke up in defense of the white woman, Coates pushed him away. The man said, “I could have you arrested!” Do you regard his action as racist? What would you have done if you had witnessed the confrontation?



Q: Do you think the man and woman were as aware of their white bodies as Coates was of his black body?

47. (Page 95) *“I had forgotten the rules, an error as dangerous on the Upper West Side of Manhattan as on the Westside of Baltimore. One must be without error out here. Walk in single file. Work quietly. Pack an extra number 2 pencil. Make no mistakes.”*

Q: Under what circumstances have you felt similar pressure to make no mistakes? How constant a force is such pressure in your life? Where does it come from? What is at stake if you do make mistakes?

48. (Page 96) *“But the price of error is higher for you than it is for your countrymen, and so that American might justify itself, the story of a black body’s destruction must always begin with his or her error, real or imagined...”*

Q: What are some examples of the “errors” that have been attributed to destroyed black bodies?

Q: If you believe you are white, can you think of any errors you have made that would have been more costly in a black body?

49. (Page 96) *“The fact of history is that black people have not—probably no people have ever—liberated themselves strictly through their own efforts.”*

Q: If this statement is true, what does it mean for people who believe they are white? What does it mean for people who are labeled as black? What concrete steps can people take to assist in the liberation process?

50. (Page 97) *“Had I informed this woman that when she pushed my son, she was acting according to a tradition that held black bodies as lesser, her response would likely have been, ‘I am not a racist.’ Or maybe not. But my experience in this world has been that the people who believe themselves to be white are obsessed with the politics of personal exoneration.”*

Q: Does it seem plausible to you that the woman who pushed Coates's son would have reacted defensively, as Coates imagined? Have you witnessed similar reactions?

Q: If you believe yourself to be white, do you ever find yourself reacting to this book by thinking, "But I'm not racist"?

Q: What effect does it have on the pursuit of social justice if people who believe they are white prioritize "the politics of personal exoneration"? Is it possible to be anti-racist while denying that you are racist?

*51. (Page 97) "And the word racist, to them, conjures, if not a tobacco-spitting oaf, then something just as fantastic—an orc, troll, or gorgon. 'I'm not a racist,' an entertainer once insisted after being filmed repeatedly yelling at a heckler: 'He's a n-----! He's a n-----!' Considering Strom Thurmond, Richard Nixon concluded, "Strom is no racist.' There are no racists in America, or at least none that the people who need to be white know personally."*

Q: What is a racist? What are the political consequences of defining racists in such a way that they barely exist? Who benefits from denying the existence of racists?

Q: Does racism require racists?

Q: Why does Coates shift subtly from "people who believe they are white" to "people who need to be white" in this passage?

*52. (Page 98) "This is the foundation of the Dream—its adherents must not just believe in it but believe that it is just, believe that their possession of the Dream is the natural result of grit, honor, and good works. There is some passing acknowledgement of the bad old days, which, by the way, were not so bad as to have any ongoing effect on our present."*

Q: Coates is referring here to privilege without using that term. Why do you think he avoided the word? What baggage does it carry?

Q: How strongly do you identify your accomplishments as your own? How much do you see them as enabled or constrained by others—not only by other people but by institutions like the government?

Q: What policies do you think are necessary, if any, to compensate for the ongoing harm of “the bad old days”?

53. (Page 98) *“The mettle that it takes to look away from the horror of our prison system, from police forces transformed into armies, from the long war against the black body, is not forged overnight. This is the practiced habit of jabbing out one’s eyes and forgetting the work of one’s hands. To acknowledge these horrors means turning away from the brightly rendered version of your country as it has always declared itself and turning toward something murkier and unknown.”*

Q: How much does this passage challenge you? How accustomed are you to seeing the horrors that Coates has in mind? How often do you think about them? How does it affect your day-to-day life?

Q: What role do schools, mass media, churches, and other institutions play in diverting our gaze from the long war against the black body? What role could they play in acknowledging the horrors?

54. (Page 102) *“This lie of the Civil War is the lie of innocence, is the Dream. Historians conjured the Dream. Hollywood fortified the Dream. The Dream was gilded by novels and adventure stories. John Carter flees the broken Confederacy for Mars. We are not supposed to ask what, precisely, he was running from.”*

Q: How is the Dream in this passage related to the Dream in earlier parts of the book? What do narratives about the Civil War have to do with “perfect houses, nice lawns...Memorial Day cookouts, block associations, and driveways” (p. 11)?

Q: What did you learn about the Civil War in school? How does that learning compare to how Coates thinks we should remember the Civil War? What effect do narratives about American history have on the present?

55. (Page 103) *“Here is what I would like for you to know: In America it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is heritage. Enslavement was not merely the antiseptic borrowing of labor—it is not so easy to get a human being to commit their body against its*

*own elemental interest. And so enslavement must be casual wrath and random manglings, the gashing of heads and brains blown out over the river as the body seeks to escape. It must be rape to regular as to be industrial."*

Q: How willing are you to accept the idea that destruction of the black body is an American tradition? How consistent or contrary is this idea to prevailing images of America today?

Q: What does Coates intend to evoke by emphasizing the horror of slavery? What is he working against? Why does it matter today?

Q: If you are American, how does your racial identity relate to your national identity?

*56. (Page 104) Coates argues that the "right to break the black body" is the essence of whiteness, that it defines the boundaries and unity of people who are white. "And that right has always given them meaning, has always meant that there was someone down in the valley because a mountain is not a mountain if there is nothing below."*

Q: Is there any way to understand white racial identity apart from violence against the black body? Are all people who believe themselves to be white implicated in the perpetuation of such violence?

Q: Does being anti-racist mean that people who believe themselves to be white need to jettison that belief?

*57. (Page 106) "It is truly horrible to understand yourself as the essential below of your country. It breaks too much of what we would like to think about ourselves, our lives, the world, as we move through and the people who surround us. The struggle to understand is our only advantage over this madness."*

Q: Imagine how this passage might differ if Coates were writing to white people rather than to his son. What is it like to understand yourself as the "essential above" of your country?

Q: How does the struggle to understand help to cope with the madness of being oppressed? How could it help the madness of being the oppressor?

58. (Page 107) *"I am sorry that I cannot make it okay. I am sorry that I cannot save you—but not that sorry. Part of me thinks that your very vulnerability brings you closer to the meaning of life, just as for others, the question to believe oneself white divides them from it."*

Q: What is the meaning of life, as Coates understands it?

Q: How does the quest to believe oneself white divide one from the meaning of life?

59. (Page 110) *"And I knew that there were children born into these same caged neighborhoods on the Westside, these ghettos, each of which was as planned as any subdivision. They are an elegant act of racism, killing fields authored by federal policies..."*

Q: What does Coates understand racism to be here? What federal policies does he have in mind? What are the implications for understanding the scope of anti-racist practice?

60. (Page 111) *"The Dream of acting white, of talking white, of being white, murdered Prince Jones as sure as it murders black people in Chicago with frightening regularity. Do not accept the lie. Do not drink from poison."*

Q: What are the implications of this passage for your own racial identity—whether you believe yourself to be white or something else?

Q: How does the specific Dream of being white relate to components of the Dream Coates in other parts of the book?

Q: Coates has juxtaposed the Dream mentality against his own understanding of where hope lies for his young son. Why do you think he feels it so necessary to sway his son away from that idea? How do you feel about that?

61. (Page 115) *"I have spent much of my studies searching for the right question by which I might fully understand the breach between the world and me. I have not spent my time studying the problem of 'race'—'race' itself is just a restatement and retrenchment of the problem."*

Q: What does Coates mean by the breach between the world and himself? What is the world he is separated from, and what stands between them? What do you think the “right question” might be to understand the breach?

Q: What problem is “race” a restatement and retrenchment of?

62. (Page 119) *“I knew that I wasn’t so much bound to a biological ‘race’ as to a group of people, and these people were not black because of any uniform color or any uniform physical feature. They were bound because they suffered under the weight of the Dream...”*

Q: Do you think of yourself as belonging to a biological “race”? Is there any such thing? What assumptions do you have about race and biology? What do you think most people understand race to be?

63. (Page 120) *“I saw that what divided me from the world was not anything intrinsic to us but the actual injury done by people intent on naming us, intent on believing that what they have named us matters more than anything we could ever actually do. In America, the injury is not in being born with darker skin, with fuller lips, with a broader nose, but in everything that happens after.”*

Q: What is it, then, that stands “between the world and me”? Is it race? Is it racism? What are the consequences of that breach?

64. (Page 124) *“In America I was part of an equation—even if it wasn’t a part I relished. I was the one the police stopped on Twenty-third Street in the middle of a workday. I was the one driven to The Mecca. I was not just a father but the father of a black boy. I was not just a father but the father of a black boy. I was not just a spouse but the husband of a black woman, a freighted symbol of black love.”*

Q: What part do you play in America’s equation?

65. (Page 126) *In Paris: “And watching him walk away, I felt that I had missed part of the experience because of my eyes, because my*

*eyes were made in Baltimore, because my eyes were blindfolded by fear.”*

Q: In what ways is Coates blinded? What does he struggle to see? What is the source of his fear? Can you relate to that fear?

Q: In what ways was Coates made to see differently? What did he see?

Q: Where were your eyes made? How does your vision, in this sense, relate to your position in a system of racial hierarchy?

66. (Page 129) *“Your route will be different. It must be. You knew things at eleven that I did not know when I was twenty-five. When I was eleven my highest priority was the simple security of my body.”*

Q: What was your highest priority at age eleven?

Q: What lessons do you draw from the fact that Coates’s son knew things at eleven that Coates himself did not learn until adulthood?

67. (Page 131) *“The Dreamers accept this as the cost of doing business, accept our bodies as currency, because it is their tradition. As slaves we were this country’s first windfall, the down payment on its freedom. After the ruin and liberation of the Civil War came Redemption for the unrepentant South and Reunion, and our bodies became this country’s second mortgage. In the New Deal we were their guestroom, their finished basement. And today, with a sprawling prison system, which as turned the warehousing of black bodies into a jobs program for Dreamers and a lucrative investment for Dreamers; today, when 8 percent of the world’s prisoners are black men, our bodies have refinanced the Dream of being white. Black life is cheap, but in America black bodies are a natural resource of incomparable value.”*

Q: How do you react to the idea that Dreamers have always used black bodies as currency—as down payment, second mortgage, and investment? Does it require a conscious act of oppression to perpetuate this tradition? What would it take to undo it?

Q: Who does Coates see as the Dreamers? Are all people who believe they are white Dreamers? Are there any Dreamers who believe themselves not to be white?

Q: This passage is a restatement of Coates's earlier idea that "the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies" (p. 11). How does this idea alter or relate to your view of American history? What are the political consequences of this view?



## Questions relating to Part III (p. 135-152)

68. (Page 137) *“But I know that it has happened to you already, that you have deduced that you are privileged and yet still different from other privileged children, because you are the bearer of a body more fragile than any other in this country. What I want you to know is that this is not your fault, even if it is ultimately your responsibility.”*

Q: What is it that Coates means his son is responsible for here? His privilege or fragility? What would these responsibilities look like? What responsibilities do you have in this regard?

69. (Page 141) *“These Howard students were not like me. They were the children of the Jackie Robinson elite, whose parents rose up out of the ghettos, and the sharecropping fields, went out into the suburbs, only to find that they carried the mark with them and could not escape. Even when they succeeded, as so many of them did, they were singled out, made examples of, transfigured into parables of diversity. They were symbols and markers, never children or young adults.”*

Q: What does this passage reveal about the experience of racism for people who live in poverty, as compared to those who have entered the middle class or even accumulated some wealth? What is it like to achieve all apparent markers of success but still be defined by your black body?

Q: Have you ever been in a situation where you are seen as a representative of a group, rather than as an individual? How often does this happen to you? What does it feel like?

70. (Page 143) *“The forgetting is habit, is yet another necessary component of the Dream. They have forgotten the scale of theft that enriched them in slavery; the terror that allowed them, for a century, to pilfer the vote; the segregationist policy that gave them their suburbs. They have forgotten, because to remember would tumble them out of the beautiful Dream and force them to live down here with us, down here in the world. I am convinced that the*

*Dreams, at least the Dreamers of today, would rather live white than live free."*

Q: How often do you remember the theft, terror, pilfering, and segregationist policy that Coates writes about? What would it change to remember?

Q: Why does Coates see whiteness and freedom as alternatives? What does freedom without whiteness look like? Is it possible to live white *and* free?

71. (Page 146) *"We are captured, brother, surrounded by the majoritarian bandits of America. And this has happened here, in our only home, and the terrible truth is that we cannot will ourselves to an escape on our own. Perhaps that was, is, the hope of the movement: 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...has done to the world."*

Q: If you think you are white, how important is that identity to you? Do you need it? Do you value it? Can you imagine yourself without it? What would that mean for your life?

Q: What would it look like if the Dreamers woke up, in the way Coates intends? Is it possible to wake up and still retain elements of the Dream?

72. (Page 149) *"And black power births a kind of understanding that illuminates all the galaxies in their truest colors. Even the Dreamers—lost in their great reverie—feel it, for it is Billie they reach for in sadness, and Mobb Deep is what they holler in boldness, and Isley they hum in love, and Dre they yell in revelry, and Aretha is the last sound they hear before dying. We have made something down here. We have taken the one-drop rules of Dreamers and flipped them. They made us into a race. We made ourselves a people."*

Q: How does Coates play with the idea of black power here? What does that phrase normally evoke in you?

Q: Coates writes about people who believe they are white, but not about people who believe they are black. How does this passage help to explain that difference?

Q: In what other ways do Dreamers celebrate black cultural achievements even as they devalue—implicitly or explicitly—black bodies? What are the consequences of this double standard?

73. (Page 150) *"I left The Mecca knowing that this was all too pat, knowing that should the Dreamers reap what they had sown, we would reap it right with them. Plunder has matured into habit and addiction; the people who could author the mechanized death of our ghettos, the mass rape of private prisons, then engineer their own forgetting, must inevitably plunder much more. This is not a belief in prophecy but in the seductiveness of cheap gasoline."*

Q: What is the relationship between cheap gasoline and the plunder of black bodies, in Coates's view? What do slavery and climate change have to do with one another?

Q: Do you accept the inevitability of more plunder? What alternatives do we have? What would it take to reverse course?

74. (Page 151) *"I do not believe that we can stop them, Samori, because they must ultimately stop themselves. And still I urge you to struggle. Struggle for the memory of your ancestors. Struggle for wisdom. Struggle for the warmth of The Mecca. Struggle for your grandmother and grandfather, and your name. But do not struggle for the Dreamers. Hope for them. Pray for them, if you are so moved. But do not pin your struggle on their conversion. The Dreamers will have to learn to struggle themselves, to understand that the field for their Dream, the stage where they have painted themselves white, is the deathbed of us all."*

Q: How does this call touch you? What responsibility do you feel, what actions do you feel compelled to take? How does your racial identity shape your response to this passage?

Q: If Coates is right here, whose problem is racism? Who must solve it?





