Allegheny Listens a Common Reading Experience: A Guide

As you read Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me* this summer, here are some concepts you may want to keep in mind to frame your reading.

- What does Coates mean by “between” the world? Do you think his concept of between is inclusive or exclusive?
- What does it mean to be named? What name(s) are you bringing with you to college?
- Think about your name. Which names do you get to choose for yourself and which are chosen for you? How do your names affect your engagement/experience with the world?
- Which aspects of your life are similar to and different from Coates?
- How does Coates define the Dream? What might be your Dream?
- What is at the root of the fear described by Coates?
- Consider the fears in your own life. What impact did they have on you growing up and how do you process them today?
- Coates speaks of questioning several times in the text. Reflecting on your own unique journey, what role does questioning play? Why is it important?

**THEMES TO CONSIDER AS YOU READ THE BOOK**

**Education**

“To be educated in my Baltimore mostly meant always packing an extra number 2 pencil and working quietly. Educated children walked in single file on the right side of the hallway, raised their hands to use the lavatory, and carried the lavatory pass when en route. Educated children never offered excuses—certainly not childhood itself” (25).

“Fail to comprehend the streets and you gave up your body now. But fail to comprehend the schools and you gave up your body later. I suffered at the hands of both, but I resent the schools more” (25).

“I was a curious boy, but the schools were not concerned with curiosity. They were concerned with compliance.... 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” (26).

“Schools did not reveal truths, they concealed them” (27).

“I wanted to pursue things, to know things, but I could not match the means of knowing that came naturally to me with the expectations of professors” (48).

“It began to strike me that the point of my education was a kind of discomfort” (52).

“But even more, the changes have taught me how best to exploit that singular gift of study, to question what I see, then to question what I see after that, because the questions matter as much, perhaps more than, the answers” (116)
Fear

“I was a capable boy, intelligent, well-liked, but powerfully afraid” (28).

“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” (29).

“I almost never danced, as much as I wanted to. I was crippled by some childhood fear of my own body” (61).

“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” (126).

“[T]here is the burden of living among Dreamers, and there is the extra burden of your country telling you the Dream is just, noble, and real, and you are crazy for seeing the corruption and smelling the sulfur” (106).

“The forgetting is habit, is yet another necessary component of the Dream” (143).

“The Dream”

“The Dream thrives on generalizations, on limiting the number of possible questions, on privileging immediate answers. The Dream is the enemy of all art, courageous thinking, and honest writing…. It was beginning to occur to me to question the logic of the claim itself” (50).

“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” (98).

“The struggle is really all I have for you because it is the only portion of this world under your control” (107).

“You have seen in this conversation that the struggle has ruptured and remade me several times over - in Baltimore, at The Mecca, in fatherhood, in New York. The changes have awarded me a rapture that comes only when you can no longer be lied to, when you have rejected the Dream. But even more, the changes have taught me how to best exploit that singular gift of study, to question what I see, then to question what I see after that, because the questions matter as much, perhaps more, than the answers” (116).

“The Struggle”

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Naming and Identity

“America's problem is not its betrayal of ‘government of the people,’ but the means by which ‘the people’ acquired their names” (6).

“Hate gives identity…. We name the hated strangers and are thus confirmed in the tribe” (60).

“The Struggle is in your name, Samori--you were named for Samori Touré, who struggled against French colonizers for the right to his own black body… And that is the deeper meaning of your name--that the struggle, in and of itself, has meaning” (68-69).

“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” (120).