Discussion Questions for *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates

The diversity you encounter as you become part of the Rhode Island College community is one of our strengths, and we are committed to developing a community that values and learns from the richness of our experiences, histories, dreams, and contributions. The Open Books – Open Minds experience provides a great opportunity for reflection, conversation, and learning about each other. As you read *Between the World and Me*, consider the following introductory questions. We encourage you to reflect on the questions and the issues raised, and prepare for conversations with others in the RIC community.

1. It often helps to consider how we see ourselves: how we understand our own identities, roles, responsibilities, and rights in relation to our society. What are some key ideas that you would use to describe your own identity?

2. How does race play into your own sense of identity? How do you define yourself racially, ethnically, or otherwise? What about intersections with other aspects of your identity?

3. Coates is careful to avoid assuming that whiteness is a given. Rather, he calls attention to the way that race is socially constructed when he describes families and individuals who “believe themselves to be white” or children who are “raised to be white” (10). At the same time, whiteness is a powerful social force, a descriptor for a community of those who have “maximum power and minimum responsibility,” those who have the power to take the lives of others without punishment (80). What role does race play in your self-understanding? How does your understanding of yourself and your identities connect to the social and historical consequences Coates discusses?

4. Coates writes that “race is the child of racism, not the father” (7). What does the author mean by this? How does this assertion compel us to think about the history of race and racism in the United States? How does this apparent reversal of common sense compel us to rethink the history of race and racism in the United States?

5. Coates writes about schools that “were not concerned with curiosity. They were concerned with compliance” (26). How does the author see the education system as complicit with a power that continues to divide America into separate worlds? Do you have personal experience with a school that was or was not concerned with curiosity?

6. What does Coates mean by “the Dream”? Why does he urge himself to be “wary of every Dream” (53)? What do you think Coates means when he writes that “the Dreamers... would rather live white than live free” (143)?
7. Considering “the Dream” and our relationships to it, what does it mean to be “conscious citizen[s] of the terrible world” (108)?

8. What is Coates’s definition of race on page 115? Do you agree? What other populations might this definition apply to globally, beyond those in the United States? If race is not a biological reality, then what is it?

9. In what ways do history, the media, or other social forces around us, tell us who or what matters? From these perspectives, who counts and who does not? Give examples. What is your role in society in shaping/affirming/complicating/confronting these messages?