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Book Reflection – Between the World and Me

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Between the World and Me was chosen to read for a few personal reasons and I had mixed reactions to the book. After reflecting on the book and Coates' experiences, I believe I will be better equipped as a school counselor to be more sensitive and empathetic for students, their families, and faculty/staff that I encounter. I have selected three separate passages from the book that struck me regarding Coates' experiences and possible preconceived notions about his culture that were challenged.

I selected this book because as a school counselor, being aware of, challenging, and seeking training or exposure opportunities relative to my biases is critical, which is supported by the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2016) B.3.j, "...School counselors respect the diversity of students and seek training and supervision when prejudice or biases interfere with providing comprehensive services to all students." As discussed during our last class together, perhaps the biggest indicator for working effectively with a diverse population is for me to have an open and willing attitude to acknowledge and challenge my own biases in an effort to be supportive and empathetic with the various diverse populations I will encounter. To this end, I chose the book. I want to continue to self-evaluate and challenge my biases. As I am aware of my biases, I choose to take opportunities to learn new perspectives that will heighten my awareness and understanding. My goal as a school counselor is to provide equitable services to all students and their families regardless of their possible diverse or marginalized background.

My reactions to the book were mixed in that to a degree I understand the disadvantages black people can face and that people choose to act or react to those situations differently. I seem to be more empathetic when people (regardless of diversity) choose to handle their struggles in a positive way to move forward rather than focus on the negative past. While Coates (2015) describes a seemingly impossible cycle to break, he seems to have done it. I appreciate his honesty in describing what life was like for him growing up in West Baltimore, having to be street savvy and feeling like the only purpose of school was to teach compliance. He then shared the experience in Manhattan when a white lady pushed his son out of the way, Coates raised his voice at her, and a white man threatened to call the police as a result. Perhaps the most scarring event occurred with the shooting of his college friend, Prince Jones. The experiences he describes are certainly difficult and lay the foundation to explain his thoughts and actions. I feel empathy for the difficult things he experienced. He then paints a different picture when he attends Howard University. The change in environment seems to have changed his outlook somewhat, reminiscent of the effect of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (2013), the changes in his micro- and mesosystems seemed to bring about a change within him, the individual, as well. His outlook of school changed, he no longer felt the only purpose was for conformity. He described how the library was an open source of information. I was happy to see this change for him. Knowledge is power. I was saddened when 911 happened and he did not see a difference between all of the first responders and the black officer who shot his friend Prince Jones. This type of overgeneralizing, in either direction is not usually helpful.

As a result of reading this book, I am reminded of the need to be patient and empathetic of the experiences and backgrounds of others. People are a culmination of their experiences and decisions. Coates revisits the long-lasting consequences of slavery in America as well as things such as redlining. According to Jan, T. (2018, March 28) the effects of redlining

are felt even fifty years after the practice was banned. Despite the hardships he encountered, I am reminded of a few examples of other individuals and how they chose to overcome their adversities. As a school counselor, I will choose to acknowledge and validate their past and present challenges as well as present an option to help them move forward. An anecdotal story comes to mind by M.O. Chamberlain (n.d.)

I once heard about two men, each raised by an alcoholic father. One had gone on to become an alcoholic himself and was in and out of prison, and the other was an upstanding citizen. When asked why they were the way they were, they both had the same answer: "With a father like mine, what else would you expect?"

In essence, two individuals grew up in the same environment; one chose to emulate his example and the other chose the opposite path because he did not want to emulate the poor example his father set. Perhaps I feel this way because this is something I was taught when I was young, that I always had the choice to choose my attitude, no one causes me to feel a certain way or to act in a certain way. Viktor Frankl believed that each person has the ability to choose one's attitude. A quote from Viktor Frankl (GoodReads, n.d.) who survived being tortured during the Holocaust said:

The last of the human freedoms: to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way. And there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; which determined whether or not you become the plaything to circumstance, renouncing freedom and dignity...

While his body was literally broken and tortured, deprived of basic necessities such as food and clothing, he realized the one thing that could not be taken from him was his choice regarding attitude. Frankl (Pursuit of Happiness, 2018), would go on to form and teach his own school of existential therapy called logotherapy, relative to the pursuit of happiness and discuss how individuals can discover happiness through discovering meaning in their life. He relates that when people do not have meaning in their life, the void is filled instead with hedonistic pleasures, power, materialism, hatred, boredom, or neurotic obsessions and compulsions. Conversely, he shares that what helped him survive his Holocaust experience was to find meaning in the experience and thus the will to live through it. I believe these examples of recognizing our ability to choose combined with grit or resiliency enable people to shape their own life, despite what challenges are experienced. As a school counselor, I will be understanding and empathetic. I will provide various avenues for the students to explore to help them move forward on their path to success.

Some of the passages struck me for various reasons. Coates pens a few experiences that I correlate with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model. Next, the book is replete with examples of his childhood experiences of violence whether they were witnessed in his home, the homes of his peers or the prevalent violence on the streets he traversed to and from school. The final passages I will share are the ones that left me questioning, wondering how he still feels so strongly about these experiences after all that he has learned and accomplished. The

first passages I would like to share are in relation to how Coates seemed to change as an individual when he moved away from home and attended Howard University, which resulted in his micro- and mesosystems shifting in accordance to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory. In the following passage, Coates is explaining that as he grew up, his parents and grandparents did not believe in or rely on religion and that America is essentially not a unique country but rather the work of white men designed to use and oppress those who are black (Coates, 2018):

But sometime ago I rejected magic in all its forms. This rejection was a gift from your grandparents, who never tried to console me with ideas of an afterlife and were skeptical of preordained American glory. In accepting both the chaos of history and the fact of my total end, I was freed to truly consider how I wished to live – specifically, how do I live free in this black body? It is a profound question because America understands itself as God's handiwork, but the black body is the clearest evidence that America is the work of men. (p. 12)

In other passages in the book, Coates recounts that his parents rejected all dogmas and spurned the holidays marketed by people who wanted to be white. This statement stands out to me because they did not want to join other black people in celebrating holidays because they perceived this as kneeling before the God of others who perceived themselves as being white. He says he had no sense of a just God being on his side. He also explains that going to school seemed pointless other than to learn conformity. He did not see a connection to what he was doing and how it might apply to potential life experiences in the future. For example, he said while in French class, he wondered why he was learning this language because he never envisioned that he would ever go to France. Little did he know that he and his wife and son would actually live in France. In these examples, his family, religious affiliation, and school experiences or his micro and macrosystems, shaped his thinking and outlook on life. The sense I felt while reading the book was almost of foreordained gloom, that he felt there was little else he could do to change his reality, that it would be forever different from the Dream and what the little white children were doing. However, as he went to Howard University and was in contact with fellow black students, he called it The Mecca. His micro and mesosystems changed. He went away to university, surrounded by black people as well as white people who were his teachers and employers. As he writes (Coates, 2018), his gloom and doom outlook shifted to an inquisitive positive outlook.

All I then wanted was to write as those black people danced, with control, power, joy, warmth. I was in and out of classes at Howard. I felt that it was time to go, to declare myself a graduate of The Mecca, if not the university. I was publishing music reviews, articles, and essays in the local alternative newspaper, and this meant contact with more human beings. I had editors – more teachers – and these were the first white people I'd ever really known on my personal level. They defied my presumptions – they were afraid neither for me nor of me. Instead they saw in my unruly curiosity and softness something that was to be treasured and harnessed. And they gave me the art of journalism, a powerful technology for seekers. I reported on local D.C., and I found that people would tell me things, that the same softness that once made me a target now compelled people to trust me with their stories. This was incredible. I was barely out of the fog of childhood, where questions simply died in my head. Now I could call and ask people why

a popular store closed, why a show had been canceled, why there were so many churches and so few supermarkets. Journalism gave me another tool of exploration, another way of unveiling the laws that bound my body. It was beginning to come together – even if I could not yet see what the “it” was. In Moorland I could explore the histories and traditions. Out on the Yard, I could see these traditions in effect. And with journalism, I could directly ask people about the two – or about anything else I might wonder. So much of my life was defined by not knowing. (p.62-63)

What impacted me about this passage was that Bronfenbrenner’s Model can be applied to every person and every situation. I was also pleased to see Coates have some positive experiences in his life with school, other black individuals, and even some white people, on a personal level. I was also surprised that he mentioned white people in a positive framework, albeit briefly. The teachers and journalism employer did not view him differently because of his being black, as he states they were neither afraid for him or of him. He seems to have thrived in this environment. Journalism ended up being his career. What I glean from this juxtaposition is that once his micro and mesosystems changed (people he was surrounded by and change in perception and experience of school) he noticed the power he had, through human connections and knowledge. In his words, he felt that he could ask people questions and satisfy his seeming unquenchable appetite for knowledge. The fact that his inquisitiveness could be satisfied, he felt fulfilled through knowledge, which also supports the previous thoughts regarding Chamberlain, Frankl, and resiliency. The cultural challenge seems to be that anything positive could be even remotely related to anyone white. In the book, he never directly credited a white person with anything positive in his life.

Other passages provide insight as to why Coates seems to have a dismal outlook for the future of any black person in America. He recounts several experiences growing up that tie in to fear whether that comes from his home or the streets. In the passage following, Coates tells of an experience he had crossing the street with his mom, who had never forgotten the story she had learned from her mother being beaten by her grandmother because a young man came to see her when no one else was home, and the grandmother wanted her daughter to remember how easily she could lose her body (Coates, 2018):

I remember her clutching my small hand tightly as we crossed the street. She would tell me that if I ever let go and were killed by an onrushing car, she would beat me back to life. When I was six, Ma and Dad took me to a local park. I slipped from their gaze and found a playground. Your grandparents spent anxious minutes looking for me. When they found me, Dad did what every parent I knew would have done – he reached for his belt. I remember watching him in a kind of daze, awed at the distance between punishment and offense. Later, I would hear it in Dad’s voice – “Either I can beat him, or the police.” Maybe that saved me. Maybe it didn’t. All I know is, the violence rose from the fear like smoke from a fire, and I cannot say whether that violence, even administered in fear and love, sounded the alarm or choked us at the exit. What I know is that fathers who slammed their teenage boys for sass would then release them to streets where their boys employed, and were subject to, the same justice. And I knew mothers who belted their girls, but the belt could not save their girls from drug dealers twice their age. We, the children, employed our darkest humor to cope. We stood in the alley where we shot

basketballs through hollowed crates and cracked jokes on the boy whose mother wore him out with a beating in front of his entire fifth-grade class. We sat on the number five bus, headed downtown, laughing at some girl whose mother was known to reach for anything – cable wires, extension cords, pots, pans. We were laughing, but I know that we were afraid of those who loved us most. (p. 17)

The impact of the previous and next passage is that wherever Coates turned, he was faced with violence whether he was at home or walking the streets to and from school. It is little wonder that Coates grew up thinking the little white children had such different lives because even while plenty of white children lived in similar circumstances, he did not know any personally, and the ones he did see were portrayed on television and television did not depict white people in this way. Rather, white people were shown to be happy and living the Dream on television. So, the disparity in his understanding continued to grow and multiply. In the passage below, he continues to talk with his son to explain what life was like on the streets and expresses a hope that his son will not have to experience similar things (Coates, 2018).

I am sure that you have had to deal with the occasional roughneck on the subway or in the park, but when I was about your age, each day, fully one-third of my brain was concerned with who I was walking to school with, our precise number, the manner of our walk, the number of times I smiled, who or what I smiled at, who offered a pound and who did not – all of which is to say that I practiced the culture of the streets, a culture concerned chiefly with securing the body...The streets were not my only problem. If the streets shackled my right leg, the schools shackled my left. 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. (p. 24)

To a degree, Coates' dismal outlook is not surprising when considering how he experienced his childhood and accompanying violence. The surprising aspect of this section is that Coates resented school more than he resented the violence from home or the streets. I find this especially surprising because when he went to Howard University, he realized the value of learning and the thrill of libraries. Coates (2015) writes, "The classroom was a jail of other people's interests. The library was open, unending, free. Slowly I was discovering myself." (p. 48) Unfortunately, he recounts, "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." I wonder what would have happened if his elders would have realized not only the importance of but the liberating power of education. How might this have impacted Coates early on? As Coates says in his own words, "And I too felt bound by my ignorance, by the questions that I had not yet understood to be more than just means, by my lack of understanding, and by Howard itself." (p. 48) These select passages seem to infer that at times marginalized populations operate in ignorance, as at times we all do. The common notion that needs to be challenged is ignorance, underestimating the power of education and knowledge.

The final passages are the ones that left me with questions, questions about Coates' perception of the Dream and life for others in America. While I recognize that Coates did not have a pleasant childhood and his family seem to have kept slavery very much alive in their memories, he still has such discontent for all white people or people he perceives as white.

He explains that he believed the white children did not have to fear as he did. He writes (Coates, 2018):

Somewhere out there beyond the firmament, past the asteroid belt, there were other worlds where children did not regularly fear for their bodies. I knew this because there was a large television resting in my living room. In the evenings I would sit before this television bearing witness to the dispatches from this other world. There were little white boys with complete collections of football cards, and their only want was a popular girlfriend and their only worry was poison oak. That other world was suburban and endless, organized around pot roasts, blueberry pies, fireworks, ice cream sundaes, immaculate bathrooms, and small toy trucks that were loosed in wooded backyards with streams and glens. Comparing these dispatches with the facts of my native world, I came to understand that my country was a galaxy, and this galaxy stretched from the pandemonium of West Baltimore to the happy hunting grounds of *Mr. Belvedere*. (p. 20)

Coates refers to several similar instances in the book. He frequently refers to the wonderful life lived by all the little white boys. I cannot help but wonder how he could not be aware of the plight of many disadvantaged white Americans. He states that in America, there is not rich and poor but white and black. I feel that as much as I must have biases about his circumstances or viewpoints, he too is biased or chooses not to see the poverty around him. He also writes as if white children are not abused or live in fear of their bodies. Clearly there are plenty of white children who also live in fear of violence in their home as well as on their way to and from school. White American children also have homes where their parents recount societal wrongs and undervalue education. In fact, first generation college students for white Americans is a marginalized group in schools still. What surprises me is that even after all of Coates' life experiences, he still so strongly emphasizes and if almost feels like perpetuates disparity between all whites and all blacks. I readily acknowledge and understand that there is a gap between blacks and whites. The difference for me is that I acknowledge that there are both successful and thriving black and white individuals in America as well as individuals that struggle who are also both black and white. All people in America live in situations where there is poverty, fear, violence, and lack of education which feeds the circle. I do not believe this was a challenge to Coates' beliefs. Rather, I believe the picture he painted was a clear portrayal of how he truly views the world, even still. The final passage I will share is how he describes his paradigm of the first responders to 911. Here is his account of what he witnessed and how he felt about it (Coates, 2018):

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...In the days after, I watched the ridiculous pageantry of flags, the machismo of firemen, the overwrought slogans. Damn it all...I could see no difference between the officer who killed Prince Jones and the police who died, or the firefighter who died. They were not human to me. Black, white, or whatever, they were the menaces of nature. (p. 86-87)

When I read this passage, I was astonished and began to recognize the deep pain that he experienced and holds on to still. He explains that he sees no difference in the heroic efforts of

the first responders to 911 because his friend was shot by a policeman. Not only does he overflow his hurt and anger to all policemen in general but to the firefighters as well. The even bigger surprise for me was the officer who shot his friend was also black. It seems that Coates ignores the officer's skin color because he was apparently working in the white world. Even decades later, Coates' paradigm has not seemed to have changed. He seems to still feel that the first responders who lost their lives in the pursuit of helping strangers regardless of their skin color are lumped into the same category as the officer who shot Prince James. As Coates expresses his feelings, I do not see that his individual culture was challenged here. His account seems to not only parallel his culture and the overgeneralization but serves to strengthen the strong running sentiments.

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