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Children and racial imagery: a teacher and mother in conversation

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Introduction

In November 2014, the European Race and Imagery Foundation (ERIF) hosted its first *Returning the Gaze* conference. The event had a specific focus on “Blackface in Europe” and sought out contributions that would reflect both the varying forms of blackfacing as well as actions taken against such racist practices across the continent. While the conference had five panels in total, one around imagery targeted at children stood out in particular. One of the contributors – Kahya Engler, a mother, activist and solar energy professional based in Amsterdam – gave a presentation on racialized imagery in children’s books and her quest to find empowering books with characters of colour for her son’s school. Another of the contributors – Darren Chetty, a school teacher and philosopher based in London – discussed how ideas of identity and belonging are put across in childrens’ storybooks featuring animals, rather than explicit references to race.¹

Kahya and Darren’s own commentaries, as well as those in the ensuing discussions, revealed the widespread concern felt by parents and educators regarding the availability of learning materials for children featuring positive images and narratives of children of colour. Furthermore, it became clear through the testimonies given just how early in life people of colour are exposed to exclusionary discourses, which normalize white supremacist and hegemonic societies. It is therefore of paramount importance for anti-racist campaigners and scholars to not overlook the experiences of children and/or the materials designed for and aimed at them, in our ongoing analyses and interventions.

The dialogue below between ERIF, Darren and Kahya reflects a continuation of the conversation that began at the aforementioned conference, with the exploration of certain themes and issues as well as indications of the next steps that should be taken.

Parents beyond “saris, steel pans and samosas”

ERIF (Bel Parnell-Berry and Noémi Michel): Let’s start by reintroducing yourselves and the work you’ve been doing since the conference, whether directly related to your presentations or not.

Kahya: At my son’s school - I did a TedX Youth talk last autumn, organized by the 16 - 19 year olds, and I chose the topic of *Implementing Change in Imagery and Literature*.

It told my journey as a mother of a mixed-race child and trying to finding him reflected in children's books. I think it was an important thing to do.

[Kahya Engler's presentation *Implementing Change in Imagery and Literature for TedxYouth@AICS*.²](#)

You can't be as active anymore, becoming a parent, than before you were a parent because a lot of time goes towards your kid or kids. So that is just what I have to accept but I guess I find it so important to be an activist and I think it's also important for my son to learn about that and hopefully he will also become an activist. You learn the good and the bad things from your parents and hopefully he will learn the good impact activism has, the positive change you make through being active, rather than just moaning and complaining, but instead going out there and sometimes being successful, sometimes being semi-successful, but at least moving forward. Hoping for change.

ERIF: How do you assess the importance of parental engagement?

Kahya: For me, parental activism is also about creating communities - that there is a different narrative. It doesn't always have to be the mainstream narrative of consumption and doomsday. But instead to come together with different people, for children to see that there is conflict but to have a voice and that it's ok to have disagreements.

While we were active at my son's school with some other parents within the Zwarte Piet campaign of course it wasn't so easy. There was frustration! But that is also important, for children to see that their parents are actively engaged and the kids see that something is changing at school. But obviously, you talk at dinner time about it: "Oh, today we had a meeting again and we didn't get very far", or something like that. But with that they learn that it's not a quick fix answer - political engagement. So, I find it an important life lesson.

Darren: I think schools in the UK increasingly are - even the way that the governing body is set up, removing the requirement for a parent to be on the board of governors in state schools - actually reducing the input that parents can have on what goes on in the school. I think as Kahya said, conflict, but also that a lot of knowledge is contested is really important. So, bringing parents in that regard is really important.

I think one cautionary note is where schools then almost try to outsource the role of providing some sort of multi-cultural education to parents. So, they think, "Well we've

got some Muslim parents here. They can teach about that.” And I think these schools need to be in dialogue with parents but also need to accept their own responsibility for breaking a cycle of ignorance. Here I refer to Barry Troyna of the 3 S’s: saris, steel pans and samosas.³ So this idea of a little bit of clothing, a little bit of food and a little bit of music and we’ve done multiculturalism. I still see that going on in a lot of London schools right now.

Kahya: I would second that. At our school here in Amsterdam, the parent group is doing cultural events, mainly run by women, which then involves the saris, samosas and steel pans. It’s very much like that. The parent group celebrating whatever that national identity is, is very welcome as it ticks the diversity box. It’s very hard to break that kind of fixed notion of the “Other”, even in a setting of an international school because it’s safe. It keeps everyone in their boxes rather than letting in all the differences.

Darren: I think it’s also an idea that so-called other cultures can enrich the mainstream, the dominant, but it stops short of interrogating in any way the assumptions of the dominant, which is really what’s required.

ERIF: You have a diagnosis of the parents’ reduced role. What kind of alternatives would you recommend? What kind of resources do parents and teachers have? And what is existing that can change this kind of approach? What should be changed in order for parents and teachers to be able to help their children regarding issues of racism?

Darren: The ideal scenario is that we see institutional change, which would affect teacher education, it would affect curriculum. On a more societal level it would affect the arts and the books that are being produced. But how do we get to that? That’s the challenge when we know that there are many people with vested interests in not changing it. So, I think it has to start as a grass-roots movement and I think that’s what’s happening. I guess my critique is that that grass-roots movement also has to keep its eye on not just doing something that’s supplementary.

I think that’s one of the real challenges. Certainly, I don’t have an easy remedy for how that happens. I think it’s constantly engaging in the critical thinking and critical activities, which I guess I was trying to do with my paper on those picture books.⁴ But also engaging in the creative work of cultural production. I know there’s an author, Kandace Chimbiri, who’s come to some of the hip hop seminars, whose self-published books are on Black history that predates the Western colonial encounter and she’s

done that work just off her own bat.⁵ She's got published, she's then got invited into museums and to do talks and I think unfortunately, it takes that kind of dedication and that kind of work to slowly shift institutions to recognize what they're doing is insufficient and is often damaging.

Books and histories as battlefields of knowledge

ERIF: At the conference, you spoke about collecting all the existing children's books that are not Western with positive stories and images of Black characters. That's a very concrete resource, right?

Kahya: Yes, totally! And I'm still active in that but I also think it's so important to modernize older children's books (classics). If people don't want to talk about it - what the issue with a book is - I find that even more frustrating than the book itself.

I was engaged with the school library with a complaint, trying to remove some very inappropriate Asterix & Obelix from the young children's shelves. It turned out as a positive action, not successful in moving the strips, but giving the library a few suggestions in regards to alternative books. We're not a totally poor school so we do have a fairly decent school library. I've just found a really nice book written by a Nigerian woman who now lives in Britain, it's exactly the kind of age group my son is in. I also suggest it to the teacher, who then replied: "Oh yes, this is perfect reading level!" And then it just becomes another book that they're reading. But the fact that the whole story is set in Nigeria and the images and stories are of Black children is so revolutionary in a white mainstream society. It's actually a really cute book I have to say: *Number One Car Spotter* by Atinuke.⁶

That's what we really need - you go to the bookshop and instead of going through all the books and thinking - "Oh man! There really is nothing!" - and instead of going on specialist websites to find a book which is not about a white kid, you should be able to just go in the bookshop and read about everyone.

ERIF: You mentioned the fact that the teacher takes such books and sometimes not. So, as Darren says, it's also important not to outsource this job. It's an important responsibility for the teacher to help to diversify the storybooks and images. Do you think that they should have diversity training? What do you think of diversity training and institutional tools that try - at least in the UK - to change curriculums and/or let people be sensitive about dominant curriculums and institutional cultures?

Kahya: My issue with “diversity” is that if it is only ever an event or topic for the minority group and not considered as a societal problem. So, the Surinamese Dutch are celebrating no more slavery with Keti Koti and the white Dutch are celebrating of not being occupied [by the Nazis], but not understanding that both are global history and everyone’s history and therefore interconnected. I think that’s my problem with diversity training – it’s those 3 S’s.⁷ It’s very much: “Let’s celebrate each other’s culture but not how it interconnects!”

ERIF: Picking up on your point about global histories Kahya, when we talk about Keti Koti it is white Dutch people’s history as well, just as much as the liberation efforts that went on throughout Europe is Black European history too and we know well how those histories and stories and narratives are erased from these celebrations. What do you both feel, from a parental point of view and also a teacher’s point of view, about the best way to teach children about colonialism and racism and slavery and these histories? What is it like in the UK now? How do teachers go about it? How sanitized is it? Or are parents very unwilling to let their children learn these very ugly but honest histories?

Darren: I think it’s almost a general thing internationally that a country’s history curriculum – certainly where there’s governmental input – is to some extent designed to instill a pride in that country by talking up its achievements and downplaying any wrongdoing. So, for me it means a far more mature take on knowledge to recognize that in any country there have been good things done in the name of that country and bad things done. Particularly as society gets more globalized, it just doesn’t make sense to create these victory narratives.

In the UK under Michael Gove as Education Secretary, there was a move to put greater focus in the history curriculum on British history, and by British it meant things happening on the British Isles, which is already problematic because British history expands so much of the globe given the British Empire was so large. I don’t know whether it’s about the idea that children can’t make sense of complicated topics of any sort of moral ambiguity, but for me as Kahya said, it’s not about diversity and a little bit of inclusion, but the actual battlefield is knowledge.

Kahya: I don’t know if I spoke about it at the conference or sometime earlier: my grandparents’ generation was around during the Nazi time. So, my parents were just born at the end of the Second World War. Theirs was a generation of silence post-war and total guilt, and then the generation of my parents then were like, “Enough of this silence. It has to change!” And it was then my generation that had to deal with all the

guilt. We actually started quite early at primary school, learning about the Second World War. So, I think it is possible, having grown up in a country that had to deal with a lot of guilt and a horrendous history. It was done! From primary school-age, it wasn't just: "We're going to this cemetery." It was: "Why are the Jewish people no longer here?" That was really my approach as a parent.

My son has this history of his mum being German and his dad being Jamaican, so therefore his father's history is connected to slavery, so his ancestors were enslaved once upon a time. Therefore, we started really early to talk about these things. Of course, I'm not going to show a three-year-old a picture of a slave boat or even now a picture of Auschwitz. But you can talk about the power that people had over other people which is this unbelievable thing. I think that it is really important for kids to understand - the craziness of one group of people having power over another group of people.

ERIF: Darren, as you're teaching children, what is their vocabulary to make sense of these histories? How do they figure it out?

Darren: I think children are quite resilient. I guess I'm very sceptical of any sort of notion of children as these innocent creatures that somehow exist outside of society. I do think they encounter, through racist language, through recognising that certain words have great power, they have some kind of sense of certain things being very wrong. And I feel that it's our job to educate them so that they can put those things into context. So why is it then that certain words have so much of a power? That comes from how they've been used historically and the acts that have been associated with that, and I think it's important for them to get an understanding of that.

The classroom as an (un)safe space

ERIF: Darren - is hip hop education a safe space? Can you talk a bit about what it entails within the classroom as well as for teacher development and training?

Darren: In the classroom, it means allowing kids to bring in hip hop, to make it. For five years they made an album every year and they worked as a group to do that. Also, looking at hip hop videos, hip hop songs and having critical discussions about it. As a hip hop fan, critiquing hip hop with love. I think what happened in many schools is they set up this dichotomy that you can either value knowledge or you can value so-called street culture.

I guess the growing group of us wanted to show that actually you can love hip hop and you can want to get your degree and 'get on' in life because there's stuff that you're going to learn in hip hop as well and you might not actually like all of it, but just like you don't like all journalism, you don't suddenly say "Well we shouldn't have newspapers." And of course, it comes with a set of assumptions and for me it's important to then link it into African diasporic art-forms and cultural forms and the politics of that and how those art-forms have often been linked with resistance and counter narratives.

So, the seminars are set up as dialogues spaces where teachers can talk about their challenges, critique each other's work but no one is set up as the expert. Whereas most teacher development [professionals focus on] "These are the government standards. How are we going to meet them?" It's actually staying open to political and ethical questions in education.

ERIF: Is that formally included in the curriculum or is that an extra seminar?

Darren: On a national scale, it's extra. I moved into a job where on the basis on the work I've done as an extracurricular project, it was given curriculum time as well, but I think if it's going to be given curriculum time, hip hop educators need to make sure they really have their stuff sorted - their pedagogy. Because we were featured in the *Times Educational Supplement*⁸ and Twitter was awash with people just ridiculing and mocking the whole project. It comes back to this community engagement thing. It's not just a bunch of teachers in the room. There are youth workers, rappers who are interested in education or doing workshops and we've also had professors of education turn up as well as say these are some of the best conversations they've seen around education.

I think what I'm trying to offer is a space where discussions that have been removed from educational discourse can happen. I think that is when you just remove power from consideration in education that you're doing the most effective and the most dangerous ideological work.

Darren on Hip Hop education

In recent years, the topic of racism has all but disappeared from government documents on education policy. Terms like diversity and community cohesion have become more prominent and the PREVENT and Fundamental British Values agenda which has its origins in counter-terrorism, increasingly positions teachers

as part of a network of surveillance, where a perceived failure to sufficiently integrate is seen as the most pressing issue for multicultural Britain. My own experience of being the first man racialized as other than white to be voted onto the Executive Committee of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain (PESGB) and hearing reports of racist language being used about my election and being directly asked if I was there as a ‘token’ reminds me (as if I need reminding) that we have some way to go with regards to understanding and addressing racism in education. Within the established spaces for professional development there are very few places when teachers, parents, youth-workers, students and academics can get together for free and think together about education, and how racism continues to impact educational experiences. HipHopEd seminars have provided a space for educators to share experiences that don’t find articulation in many mainstream educational spaces.

Being involved with the UK #HipHopEd hub has been really useful for me and, I’m told, for many others, as a useful departure point for ‘starting from a different place’. In other words, a place created by Black and Latinx working class youth that, as Jeff Chang argues in “Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop”, is best appreciated by understanding the social and political context that helped shape it.

The UK seminars, which are all free to attend, started after a few of us connected through Twitter and blogging. Chris Emdin launched the Science Genius programme working with GZA of the Wu Tang Clan and involving schools in New York. He is seeking to address the belief that science is not for working class Black youth by highlighting the overlaps between hip-hop culture and science; for example, in how the commitment to studying the field, collaborating and communicating effectively are essential attributes.

Certainly, this approach has its critics. The usual things one hears are that it is a “dumbing down” of education, that it is patronising and that it is a bid to be “trendy”. But I think what gets missed by critics is that Emdin has incredibly high expectations of himself and his students. He himself comes from a background of being a professional scientist. What he is resisting, in my view, is the idea that in order to be educationally successful Black youth must reject hip-hop culture in all its forms. We’re seeing similar issues in UK schools – whether it’s the banning of certain slang words, or clothing or physical contact. Students are being presented with a choice: you either value educational success or hip-hop culture. The message seems to be that there is nothing of value in this African diasporic art-

form. There's an extreme kind of respectability politics at play here, far more extreme than saying, as we often do in #HipHopEd seminars, that Hip-Hop culture contains problematic elements which we should critique. And this leads us toward questions about the purpose of education. Is it a way out of your community or a means to improve your community? As KRS-One raps: "You can love your neighborhood without loving poverty". Many of the teachers who attend #HipHopEd seminars have close links with the communities in which they teach.

ERIF: In your talk Darren, you discuss how for people of colour – in this case children of colour – when we start to talk about race and racism, there isn't a safe space because the materials created that try and discuss discrimination are even then aimed at white audiences, unless of course people of colour create their own media. When you're handling these topics in your classes with kids, how do you ensure that the space remains safe for them so that they can voice their concerns and they can talk about how they feel or what they think or how they interpret certain images and messages?

Darren: That "safe space" thing – I was quoting Zeus Leonardo and Romal Porter who were saying that for people of colour, there is no such thing as safe space for public conversations around race.⁹ "Safe space" has been used in lots of different ways at the moment – I think for me that important thing in classrooms is recognising where the risks are and that you can't make a space safe just by declaring it safe. Deciding to speak about racism comes with a cost and I think we have to recognize that and it's perhaps inevitable – though unjust – that it's largely people of colour who will pay that cost, just as it is largely they who will decide to break silences.

With regards to children and what I do with the philosophy sessions, it is very much about me trying to improve my "teacher ear". We hear a lot about "pupil voice", but I think teacher ear is perhaps as, if not more, important and listening to what children are trying to articulate. Not trying to simply categorize that in adult language or adult understanding, but trying to and work with their emerging understandings. I remember having taught a Year 2 class where I thought I had incorporated lots of multicultural literature. I gave them some advice about writing a story where the protagonist had the name of someone in their family. And this was, in a very gentle way, encouraging them to have a protagonist that had the same racial or ethnic origin as them, because I'd noticed that even though most of the children in the class were children of colour, their characters, when they described them, were white. It was a child who was very new to the country, who'd just come from Nigeria, who was one of

the first children to read and actually took my advice and used a Nigerian name and as he said it, there was laughter in the class. He looked up slightly surprised and another child, who was also of African origin but had been in London far longer, said: “You can’t say that. Stories have to be about white people.” It was surprising to me because I thought I had clearly done enough, but for me it was about listening and then having a conversation and trying to find out what children thought about that, and why they thought what they thought.

Kahya: What I found really interesting about what you were saying about encouraging them to use a Nigerian name – when I did my TED talk with the teenagers at school, I ended with a question “Just have a think about the last 5 books you read. Were there characters in there who were non-white? What role did they have? Was it a leading role, or were they the villain? Were they the hero or were they a side character?”¹⁰ I just left it there because you’re not allowed to engage – they have so many rules – but what was brilliant is afterwards quite a few of the white young people came up to me and said, “Oh my god! You’re so right! I never thought about this.” I was just like – wow! This kid is going to an international school where 50 percent are non-white and there she is not thinking about that. And then later on I was talking with another kid who is mixed race – mother from Indonesia and white dad from the Netherlands – and she said “I’ve never seen myself in any of these books.” That was exactly the story, which starts at my son’s age – no one gets to read these books and if it’s not being talked about it will continue like this.

Comfortable racisms

Visit the web version of this article to view interactive content.

*Audio clip of Darren Chetty discussing allegories of race at the Returning the Gaze: Blackface in Europe conference, 2014.*¹¹

ERIF: Darren, one of the issues that you were talking about during the conference was your notion of allegories of Blackness and whiteness. Could you elaborate a little bit on that? Because one thing is to open the conversation about diversity in general and absence, inclusion or exclusion. Another thing is to open the conversation about the very complex, contemporary reproduction of racism today. Allegories of Blackness and whiteness in the children’s books you analysed are examples of this form of production of racism in children’s books that do not say their names because everybody thinks

that these books are very progressive, right? Could you elaborate a little bit on these issues and what would be the strategy to contest these kinds of allegories and stories?

Darren: I think one of the things is that there's this prevailing belief that children need to have allegories. So, if you go into children's bookshops, most of the picture books are going to have animals. There is this idea that we teach by allegory, it's a little bit less threatening, it gives a comfort of distance. But I think that when you look carefully, often you can still see racialization in progress.

Professor Rudine Sims-Bishop talks about it in terms of "mirrors and windows".¹² I think that's something that's taken for granted for white people, for white children. They tend to, without any thinking on their part, encounter literature which shows a reflection of themselves and thus gain some type of validation of their existence, which builds into a sense of the self-esteem of having a place in the world.

Children of colour will certainly encounter literature which acts as a window onto other worlds, and it's important that they do. But without literature that acts as a mirror and shows that literature is made about people who look like them, they can reasonably conclude (like the child in my class) that stories aren't meant to be about people like them. And, I wonder how they make sense of that sort of exclusion, that sort of absence - what does it imply about people who look like them? Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has spoken about this with relation to her childhood in Nigeria in her talk *The Danger of A Single Story*.¹³

It is so rare to see people of colour in a lot of children's literature. So, it's not that surprising then when kids decide if we've got to write stories they need to be stories with white people in it, because that's what stories are. That's what we've come to understand stories being.

But let me come back to your question about the allegory of Blackness and whiteness. I think one of the reasons *Tusk Tusk* has been so popular in this country is because it's supposedly about black and white elephants fighting and then they found a way to be peaceful, and lo and behold we've got grey elephants.¹⁴ It's all good. I think that's that kind of melting pot idea that was very familiar to me growing up as a mixed-race person, that any mixed-race person is immediately a symbol in the "United Colours of Benneton" way - a symbol of racism having been transcended. It is nonsense! Also, with *Tusk Tusk*, what is being shown is the classic "six of one, half a dozen of the other" conflict - which is ahistorical. That's not how modern racism developed. It was part of the European colonial project.

I don't think you should be creating alternative narratives as some sort of comfort because I don't think that ignorance is a useful way of dealing with things. The adults are also using them seemingly to think these are reasonable *allegories for racism* and that to me, exposes how deep what Charles Mills calls 'white ignorance' is.¹⁵ There's this kind of genuine belief that Black and white differences can be transcended by some miscegenation and there wasn't any oppressor-oppressed dynamic at work.

Parental antiracism as "craziness"

ERIF: Kahya, based on your experience, how would you say parents can find a balance so that it doesn't turn into a situation where they are singled out at school? If you're a very active parent? Darren, maybe you've observed this when you've got parents that are quite active and are critical and coming into the school saying, "What's up with the curriculum? Why are you using that textbook?" and so on. How do you prevent the child from being singled out by teachers as well as other children when that happens?

Kahya: Well our campaign on Zwarte Piet got quite bitter at one point because the door was closed. It was like, "We've done a discussion. We've changed things and this is where we're at." I think after that experience last year we've kind of been silenced. So, it's not simple, I have to say. You know you have to continue, but it's a fine balance of finding ways to continue to not be silenced but at the same time being aware it's your kid who's at that school every day, who might be at the receiving end of teachers who do not want to change.

ERIF: Darren, do you want to add something to that comment?

Darren: I'm aware of schools where there's all these racist tropes of whether it's the angry Black woman who comes in and doesn't want her son being taught in a certain way and schools very often just dismiss parents in those sorts of ways; namely this issue of childhood and how we sort of reflect on our childhood as this wonderful time and the role of nostalgia. So that's one of the big obstacles to removing Zwarte Piet - which I think is going to happen, but is still going to take time - is that we have this nostalgia for our own childhood, we see this as a wonderful time and to basically be told that our childhood involves something that was deeply oppressive... The conversations are often around: "These angry Black people are trying to take away children's wonderful childhood!" It's a centering of white people's interest and mobilising children and childhood as the thing, so that childhood is the thing you just can't mess with.

ERIF: That makes me ask Kahya - because you were saying you have been a little silenced and you felt a bit threatened. So, a question we had for you was to know a little bit about how the campaign is progressing around the removal of Zwarte Piet, but also Zwarte Piet or blackfacing from books. You say you had to stop or remain silent, but what specifically is the kind of threat? Can you qualify the kind of threat you have been receiving when you were campaigning? And is it related to this “affect” that Darren is talking about?

Kahya: Yeah - well you know, the “crazy parents”! We are a mixed group, Black parents and white parents, queer parents - but we were “the crazies”. Like when you write an email to the head it was like the eye-rolling, but not really the eye-rolling, but you know. Sometimes nothing has to be said, but just that kind of coldness and we were told in one meeting at one point, “The discussion is now finished. We have put enough effort into this, and you are just taking it too far, and we are no longer prepared to go any further. We are already going much further than most schools in the Netherlands, so I ask you now to stop contacting me.”

But I think it was quite a shock for all of us and we felt quite threatened, being such a minority because our school is all about diversity but diversity means your steel-pans, saris and samosas.¹⁶ That’s what diversity means, that you have cultural events!

Darren: I think that part of my role with kids is to help them to survive the system but also to change the system and at some points just surviving the system is sufficiently an act of resistance and when the time is right or when you’ve got enough solidarity then obviously, the emphasis moves to changing it. But if it’s always changing it - I know enough people who are working in anti-racism who struggle with mental health issues, because of the ridiculous amount of stress that they’re put under for doing the work and the barrage of abuse and backlash directed at them.

Kahya: I think it is very interesting. There is a festival happening next weekend called Queeristan and it’s queer people, activism, looking at intersectional topics, but one of the things is about self-healing - talking exactly about that. As an activist realising that you also have to look after yourself and, like you say, as a parent you also have to recognize that.

So, it’s about staying creative as an activist and accepting that’s the world we live in and change is slow sometimes.

Re-defining the parent and the teacher

ERIF: One final philosophical question for you both. What do all of your experiences and reflections on children's teaching, parenting and racism do to re-signify what it means to be a parent? Because we have not defined what it means to be a parent or very specifically what it means to be a teacher.

Kahya: What springs to mind for me is what parenthood means, is the daily life of course of going through the motions of getting up and going to school and doing the chores and I don't know what! How do you teach children this day-to-day placing of power and conflict and dominance? It's the little things. How to be creative in that?

One example for me is, how do you as a parent bring it into the everyday life? My son is crazy about football - that's just the society we live in. Boys are told to be crazy about football. So, how can I allow him to have that? Because obviously, he needs to find his way but still get my little activist thing in there. To talk about the power of money, to talk about the gender thing. To talk about when we get a football magazine, who is on the poster? Even though most football teams are almost 50/50 Black and white, most posters are white guys. Not all of them but mainly.

For me as a parent, it's not just the daily chores but also, he has to do his homework and his math. In all of these, to find these ways of making him aware of his strength, his multifaceted identity, but also that these notions of power are in almost everything.

ERIF: So it's expanding the horizons?!

Kahya: Yes! Totally! But also, accepting the limits and that it is a balancing act of finding which battles you fight.

Kahya on raising a mixed-race child

Raising a mixed-race kid in white dominant Europe is a daily conversation just as it is raising a boy in a patriarchal society. There are not so many diverse books to expose him to or so many films, but he is so aware - every film we watch he comments on the diversity of the people in the film. I feel it has really taken fruit and he is becoming more and more aware of his and everyone's multi-layered identity. Recently he even used the big "R" word at friends when one of the little girls asked, "So where are you from in Africa"? He said, "I am from Britain just as you are!" Then he leaned into me and said: "That is a really racist remark!" I felt proud!

He has his first non-white teacher at school now as well as his first male teacher! His half-yearly report mentioned that he is really aware of social justice and many kids learn by his examples in discussions. We all have to navigate with what society is right now and as a parent you hope you can give your kid the tools to love themselves and to have the strength to defend their right not to be hurt and not to hurt others. Just today I walked passed a poster of a short research piece a secondary student did on bullying at our school and the paper looked a bullying and if bullying related to racism, which it did in many cases. Talking about racism is the first step for kids to feel heard, slowly more visibility is coming to our school and generally I feel hopeful having taken the step to challenge management.

Darren: For me, I recognized quite early in my teaching career that I wanted to be a teacher and also acknowledge that I am a person of colour. And in order to be open about who I am in the world as a teacher, it also meant that I had to engage in activism of different kinds, whether it was in the staff meetings I ran, in the conversations with teachers, in work with the union – because I think that the role of the teacher is very much being defined in this country as someone who delivers government aims and objectives.

When those aims and objectives are - to my mind - often grounded in unjust assumptions, then they have to be challenged and that doesn't always mean to challenge them in the classroom with children. I think that it's really important that I don't make children foot-soldiers in my fight. As Kayha was saying, it's about keeping possibilities open for children to become who they want to become, but giving them as much knowledge as possible to make those choices, rather than telling them they have to sign up with my world-view.

One Black teacher I interviewed said to me: "I'm the most featured person on our school website." There's loads of photos of him - he's all over the website, but when he starts speaking about education, which is informed by his experience of being educated in this country, then people get a little bit nervous. So, it's the: "Black faces in the right spaces." Again, it's a diversity model rather than one that actually looks to be genuinely intergrationalist. I mean, integration is a word that's been sullied but genuine integration would require conversation and shifting on the part of the dominant as well.

ERIF: So, are you talking about a type of tokenism?

Darren: Yeah! Or the extreme respectability politics. The submission of, “Yes I might be a person of colour, but I’m one of the good ones. Look at how I speak, look at how I dress. Look at what I listen to. Look at what I value. Don’t worry, I’m not like the others.”

But we have to recognize if you engage in it, it’s going to hurt your career, it’s possibly going to hurt your friendships in all kinds of ways, and people have the right to make informed choices about how they manage that and that sort of self-care and self-preservation is something they’re entitled to.

Preview Image Credit: @Boluca

Kahya Engler has been an activist on environmental and community matters all of her life. She has given a TEDX youth talk at her son’s school on the matter of diversity and children’s books, which is available [here](#). Right now, she is active in her neighbourhood around all matters plastic and how to erase it out of our lives, as well as lobbying her son’s school to include lessons on [plastic](#) and [slavery](#).

Darren Chetty is a writer and Teaching Fellow at University College London. He has published academic work on philosophy, education, racism, children’s literature and hip-hop culture. He was awarded the 2014 Award for Excellence by the International Council for Philosophical Inquiry with Children (ICPIC) for his paper ‘The Elephant in the Room: Picturebooks, Philosophy for Children and Racism.’ He is a contributor to the bestselling book, *The Good Immigrant*, edited by Nikesh Shukla (Unbound). Darren is co-author, with Jeffrey Boakye, of *What Is Masculinity? Why Does It Matter? And Other Big Questions* (Wayland). He co-authored, with Adam Ferner, *How To Disagree: Negotiating Difference in a Divided World* (Quarto) and co-edited, with Judith Suissa, *Critical Philosophy of Race and Education* (Routledge). Darren writes, with Karen Sands O’Connor, a regular column for *Books for Keeps*, entitled *Beyond the Secret Garden?* He is a member of the Steering Committee for #ReflectingRealities, a project run by the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) examining ethnic representation in children’s fiction in the UK. He has advised on diversity and inclusion for The Carnegie / Kate Greenaway Award, and is a board member for Researchers Exploring Inclusive Youth Literature (REIYL). Darren tweets @rapclassroom

Dr. Bel Parnell-Berry is a community organiser and researcher originally from the UK and currently based in the Netherlands. She has a background in anthropology, political science and market research; her main area of interest is the normative construction of minority groups through (policy) discourses and audio-visual culture(s).

Furthermore, alongside her research she works within activist communities to assist with the creation and maintenance of campaign platforms, namely as the current chair of the [European Race and Imagery Foundation](#) (ERIF). For more about her work, visit her [website](#).

Dr. Noémi Michel is an activist, anti-racist and feminist scholar. She is a member of the [European Race and Imagery Foundation](#) (ERIF), as well as of the [Collectif Faites des Vagues](#) (based in Geneva). She is a senior lecturer in political theory at the Department of Political Science of the University of Geneva. Her research and teaching interests are in the areas of post-colonial and critical race theory, with a focus on diasporic Black feminist thought. Her recent work has been published in *Critical Horizons*, *Postcolonial studies* and *Social politics*. Her current research explores on the one hand conflicting grammars of anti-racism in European public debates and institutions, and on the other Black feminist theorization of political voice.

Footnotes

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