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Title

Love

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2398n08k>

Journal

TRANSIT, 0(0)

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Publication Date

2021

DOI

10.5070/T70055562

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Peer reviewed

Love

by Sharon Dodua Otoo

TRANSIT Your Homeland is Our Nightmare

Translated by Adrienne Merritt

*Love is...about what we
do not just what we feel.
It's a verb, not a noun.
- bell hooks*

Before I became a mother, I didn't have any thoughts about how exactly I would talk to my children about racism. I simply knew that I would. My parents had certainly also not given it much thought. Racism probably only became an issue for them when they moved from Ghana to England in the middle of the 1960s. I was five years old when I told my parents that I wished I were white. My father laughed and repeatedly teased me about it for the rest of the day. My mother became cross. While she scolded me, I decided never to bring up this topic at home ever again. It was clear to me early on that my children shouldn't grow up the way I did. They should never feel ashamed of their hair, think they're ugly, or in any way question their own humanity. I had thought I was unworthy of love. That should be different for my own children.

My second son, Tyrell, is nineteen years old and recently began training to become an actor. When asked, he usually answers that he is German. Often, he also says "German-British" or that his parents are from Munster and London. He identifies as Black with a capital "B" because he wants to highlight, not a perceived skin color, but rather the political identity. He usually brushes off people who try to get an explanation from him about why he "doesn't look *that* German." I recently told Tyrell a little about my own childhood and my inability to find my voice back then.

"It was clear to me," I said, "that you all would need a vocabulary to name the experiences that you would encounter in a predominantly white society."

Tyrell smiled softly, as if he were thinking about how he let me in on an uncomfortable truth. He is very patient with me.

"Did you ever consider," he asked, "how this knowledge might turn your kids into a kind of target?"

"Target?" I sputtered.

"Yeah. Precisely for that reason."

"No," I eventually admitted. "I never thought about that."

And how would I have? I was well-mannered, hardworking and had adjusted well in school. It was through Tyrell that I experienced for the very first time how a schoolchild could openly confront racist prejudices. In the fourth grade, a white girl had waved an eraser around near Tyrell's face. Tyrell asked her why. A white boy answered: "She's trying to erase your skin color. Black skin is from the devil."

I was very proud that Tyrell had not simply forced himself to endure the situation. However, the greatest difficulty for our family came from the complete denial of the humiliation that Tyrell had experienced. The teacher urged us to show understanding for the white boy because he didn't mean it that way. She stressed how important it would be for Tyrell to meet with the boy outside of school, so that Tyrell could experience how nice the boy actually was. It was even recommended to me that I not discuss the incident with Tyrell at home.

"I wanted to thank you for my political education," said Tyrell. "But it's also a dilemma for me because we never got to experience the bliss of ignorance."

Ignorance as bliss? Thinking about the eraser incident, it definitely makes sense. "Black skin is dirty" is something that many Black people are confronted with in everyday situations. Some of the "nicest" jokes that I've had the privilege of hearing include sentences such as "If I don't wash myself, I look like you!" Why are these ideas so popular with white people—and not just in Germany?

A Pears Soap advertisement from the end of the nineteenth century shows two pictures. In the first, a Black child is sitting in a full bathtub, nearby stands a white child with a bar of soap in its hand. In the second picture, the Black child is out of the bath and white from its neck down. The implication is that the soap is so effective you can even wash the dirty skin of Black people clean. The standardization of white skin is a form of cultural knowledge which is continually recirculated through culture and media. In the "The Story of the Inky Boys" from the popular children's story collection *Struwwelpeter*, white children become Black, for example, because they are dunked in an inkwell as punishment. A further example is the notorious UNICEF ad campaign from 2007. In each of the four pictures, a white child is shown pleading for solidarity with African children. The faces and necks of the white children are coarsely smeared with an unidentified brown, reminiscent of dirt or mud. The color also leaves behind traces on their white clothing. This ad works because the prejudices about Black people in predominantly white societies run deep. Had my children not thought critically about racism, Tyrell wouldn't have been in the situation to categorize the eraser incident structurally.

"I thought, if I had been ignorant in certain situations, I might have had it better because it wouldn't have been so painful for me. But, of course, I don't know if that's true. Perhaps it would have been even more painful because I wouldn't have had any kind of protection."

I thought about my own childhood. Even what might have seemed like the smallest reference to my appearance or my heritage had been like a message to me that I did not really belong, that something wasn't right about me. It's taken decades for me to realize how these messages were discriminatory and actually said much more about the people who uttered them than they did about me.

"Black people often say," Tyrell stated, "that it's important to raise children with a political consciousness, without really knowing what that means. You gave me intellectual weapons and sent me to school with them"

"Weapons?" I asked amazed.

Tyrell nodded. "When I call a white person racist, that is a verbal weapon. The things I can say to white people because of my political understanding are painful for them. In school, I had firepower—words that carried weight. Often, I was grateful for them, and I used them to my advantage. But at school I made a reputation for myself. I was often angry and got myself into a lot of unfortunate situations..."

“But Tyrell,” I interrupted him. “That sounds like perpetrator-victim reversal. You experienced a lot of emotional violence, and you decided to deal with it confrontationally. That’s completely legitimate! If some white boy takes a *real* weapon and goes to school...” I didn’t have to finish the sentence. Tyrell understood immediately what many Black people know. In the case of a white gunman, the media looks for possible motives for the crime: Was he bullied? Did he have a rough childhood? There is more understanding for white criminals and murderers than for Black teenagers who haven’t even broken any laws. How can that be?

“I know,” he answered, “at the time it was also clear to me that the lack of empathy I was confronted with was part of the racism. It was hard knowing that the image my teachers had of me was backwards. I couldn’t free myself from their stereotypes. Even though I knew exactly what was happening to me, I wasn’t in a position to stop it.”

Tyrell and his friends occasionally tell me about frustrating situations, ones I also frequently experience—like being stared at on the subway. But they also talk about scarier incidents. Experiences I have come to repress. One night recently, Tyrell was called a racial slur by a stranger on the street: “Just to piss me off,” he said, still visibly upset. The perpetrator was part of a group who were all white—older, stronger, and drunker than Tyrell and his friends. If Tyrell had said something in response, he would have probably ended up in the hospital.

Even people who are well-meaning regularly make life difficult for Tyrell. At home, we can laugh about questions like “Why didn’t you say right away that you came from Ghana?” and “Can you speak African?” But due to the question “Can I touch your hair?”—and even more so the accompanying and unauthorized action, Tyrell no longer has an afro.

Doctors become terse and impolite; bus drivers want to see the monthly transit passes *and* IDs; at first glance, customer service representatives suddenly begin to speak painfully slowly. And constantly being asked for drugs on the street just isn’t any fun anymore at some point. In such a society, it’s no surprise that Tyrell is pulled aside for “random” checks by the police more often than his white friends. It’s bad enough that this is all a part of everyday life. When educators don’t believe Black teenagers or consider them “too sensitive,” they violate their own mandate to protect.

“I had never really thought about it,” Tyrell continues, “that as a Black teenager I was scarier for my teachers than a white teenager.”

I had underestimated it too. During my own socialization, I hadn’t given much thought to Black masculinity. And even when I became a mother of sons, I failed to adequately address the subject. I listened to Tyrell:

“It is completely socially acceptable for certain men to be angry. They’re allowed and even encouraged to be aggressive because this behavior is considered particularly masculine and a sign of strength. The louder white cis-het men are, the more they’re in the right.”

I immediately had to think of Brett Kavanaugh. He’s been a Supreme Court justice in the United States since October 2018. His nomination was overshadowed by multiple accusations of sexual assault during his youth. I remembered his hearing, how emotional and furious Kavanaugh had been and how he was sworn in just a few weeks later.

“The saying ‘boys will be boys’ really means: ‘white boys will be boys,’” Tyrell said. “If my friends and I acted that way, it could be fatal.”

I could only silently agree with him. In 2005, Oury Jalloh, a Black man, burned to death in a Dessau police cell after he'd been arrested because he had allegedly harassed two white women under the influence of alcohol. I don't know any more, how many times I've been chatted up, hit on, or sexually harassed by drunk white men in public.

"But one thing is more important to me than all of that," Tyrell said. He paused for a moment. It's been three years since Tyrell dropped out of school. The scars are still fresh.

"I would like teachers to finally understand that every sixteen-year-old is pissed off. All the time. That's nothing they should take personally. That's just how it is. I was in puberty. I was angry. And the racism I experienced daily only made it harder.

I asked him what he would have needed.

"Understanding," his answer came right away. "I would have wished for my teachers to listen to me. There was no one who sat down with me and said, 'How you doing?' Instead, it was 'let me sit you down and explain why we are doing this super racist thing' And why I shouldn't get upset about it. And so, I started skipping school. There simply wasn't any kind of support there for Black teenagers."

Tyrell is an intelligent young man. In terms of his intellectual capabilities, he would be able to graduate university no problem. However, due to increasing conflicts between him and his teachers, he was only able to complete the tenth grade—on his second attempt, and at a new school. Staying in the education system for another two or three years in order to attain an Abitur isn't an option for him anymore.

This is tragic, and it shouldn't have been this way. During our conversation, I thought about what I could have done better. I purposely placed a lot of weight on the critical inspection of school material, and I would do it again every time. But apparently, I didn't spend enough time with Tyrell thinking about coping strategies.

"For one thing," I explained to him, "because I trusted that you would know the best thing to do in tricky situations. I am not always with you. It was important to me that you learn to assess situations and protect yourself. But it was also because I saw that your brothers sometimes reacted differently to similar situations. It fascinated me that you all assumed different attitudes, sometimes more confrontational, sometimes less."

I reminded Tyrell about an incident with Lewis, his younger brother. In the first grade, a schoolmate had told Lewis that she didn't want to stand so close to the oven because she didn't want to become as dark as him.

"EXCUSE ME?!" had been my reaction at the time. I thought I had long since gotten used to situations like these. Perhaps it's a good thing that I had not. "That is racist! What happened then?"

I was ready for anything. Lewis however shrugged his shoulders to the tune of: "Yeah well—white people." And that was that for him.

"What also could have helped me," Tyrell continued, "would have been, if you had told me that I simply have more knowledge on the subject than white people."

After the eraser incident, Tyrell had assumed that all adults understood that he was not concerned with the white boy's intention, but with the racist implications behind his actions. Tyrell soon realized he was wrong.

"I have to learn to look at a white person and say to myself: 'With regards to knowledge about racism, I'm further along,' and act accordingly. That doesn't mean that I should want to put them down, but that I will show mercy. Of course, it's unfair that this is always expected of Black people, but I'm learning to accept it. I look at it like babysitting. If a

child can't tie their own shoelaces, I'm not going to yell at them for that. I tie their shoelaces, and send them on their way. When I started to think of white people as children, I was able to accept that there are some things that they just don't know from personal experience."

And so, we came to talk about white parents of Black children. Initially, I had wanted to talk to Tyrell because I'd recently read about a white mother who shared a picture of her Black daughter's hair on Twitter in hope of receiving positive feedback.

This was meant as a defiant response to the bullying her daughter had experienced in kindergarten. I tried to explain why this strategy gave me a stomach ache and asked Tyrell what he thought about it.

"I think," he answered, "that the difficult thing for many white parents is that they try to teach their children some magic spell that's supposed to give them the key to solving all racist incidents. In this case, it was probably: 'Don't listen to those mean kids. Your hair is beautiful!'"

That's probably it. I know that there's no magic spell. Racism will not go away in my lifetime, or in the lifetimes of my children. And for that reason, it's important to me to identify racism where it is: in the structures, in the institutions, in the individuals who make use of it. Not in some arbitrary features of Black children.

Tyrell agreed with me. "I was always happy that my father never lied to me. He once said to me: 'I'm white. I *am* racist. What are you going to do about that?' He taught me that my white German family can learn, too. That they can make mistakes, but that they love me. Through him, I learned to better deal with white people."

I now have more and more understanding for why my parents didn't openly discuss racism with me. They were, for the most part, isolated in London and had to make up their own rules. Their strategy was: Work hard! My siblings and I needed to be better than everyone else and as such, leave no opening for attack. Eventually, I became the first person in the extended family to graduate from university—even though I couldn't speak a word of English when I started school. Their strategy hadn't protected me from injuries and setbacks. But I don't blame them for that. They did their best.

In a similar way, I can see that Tyrell chose the path of verbal self-defense. For him, the alternative would have been swallowing the humiliation and hurt again and again, as many Black people do. He feels lucky to have access to many Black communities, like the nationwide "Initiative Black People in Germany" or the Berlin-based project "Each One Teach One."

"I have an outlet for my aggression there," he said. "I can talk with other Black people about my experiences and be heard."

A few days after my conversation with Tyrell, my youngest son, Elijah, came home from school with a worksheet. He's in the first grade, and it was about math problems. On the paper was a picture of a child with a feather headdress. I took a deep breath and remembered Tyrell's last sentence:

"Home for me is very much a place I fought for. I fought so that I can feel comfortable calling Berlin my home... and proving that home is home has become part of home for me... these experiences, I've come to love them."