



Bank Street Occasional Paper Series

Occasional
Paper
Series

Volume 2021
Number 46 *The Pandemic as a Portal: On
Transformative Ruptures and Possible Futures
for Education*

Article 13

October 2021

Raising a Coconspirator: A Letter to My Daughter

Abby C. Emerson
Teachers College, Columbia University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series>

 Part of the [Early Childhood Education Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), and the [Other Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Emerson, A. C. (2021). Raising a Coconspirator: A Letter to My Daughter. *Occasional Paper Series, 2021* (46). Retrieved from <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series/vol2021/iss46/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Educate. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Paper Series by an authorized editor of Educate. For more information, please contact kfreda@bankstreet.edu.

educate

Raising a Co-conspirator: A Letter to My Daughter

Abby Emerson

A letter for 10 years from now, when Melody turns 13.

July 18, 2020

Dear Melody,

You are turning 3 tomorrow. Just like the week you were born, there is a heat wave surging through New York City. This summer has brought about an immense increase in mainstream attention to racial justice. The movement for Black lives is seen on the nightly news and streaming through social media. There are reminders everywhere that, as much as we long for aspects of our pre-COVID lives, we cannot accept a return to them without change. As you start your next trip around the sun, this is the perfect moment to envision what parenting oriented towards racial justice can look like for you and for me.

Since you and I are white, we are in a privileged position where attending to race is seen as a choice. If I chose to, I could parent you from the shallow waters of race-evasiveness or let racial injustice lap at our ankles, but I seek to mother you with more intention and attention than that. Whether you call it critical race parenting (Delgado Bernal, 2018), ParentCrit (DePouw, 2018; Matias; 2016), or raising a co-conspirator (Love et al., unrecorded webinar, August 27, 2020), a central goal of my mothering is to disrupt racism.

Reading this letter, you are 13 now. As you transition from childhood into adolescence, I know that you will have a deeper awareness of race than I did at your age. As I envision what the next 10 years of your life will look like, I anticipate the important conversations we will have. While typically journey maps are for the past (Annamma, 2016), the one here is for the future. This is not to say that I am mapping your life before you have an opportunity to live it, but I am mapping some of the parenting decisions I will make so that you are better positioned in this world as a young, white anti-racist.

I am confident that you can look at this map and see that it rings true to your childhood experience. What will it mean for me to mother you in antiracist ways? How do I ensure that you are prepared to be a co-conspirator who seeks to make social change in whatever capacity you choose?

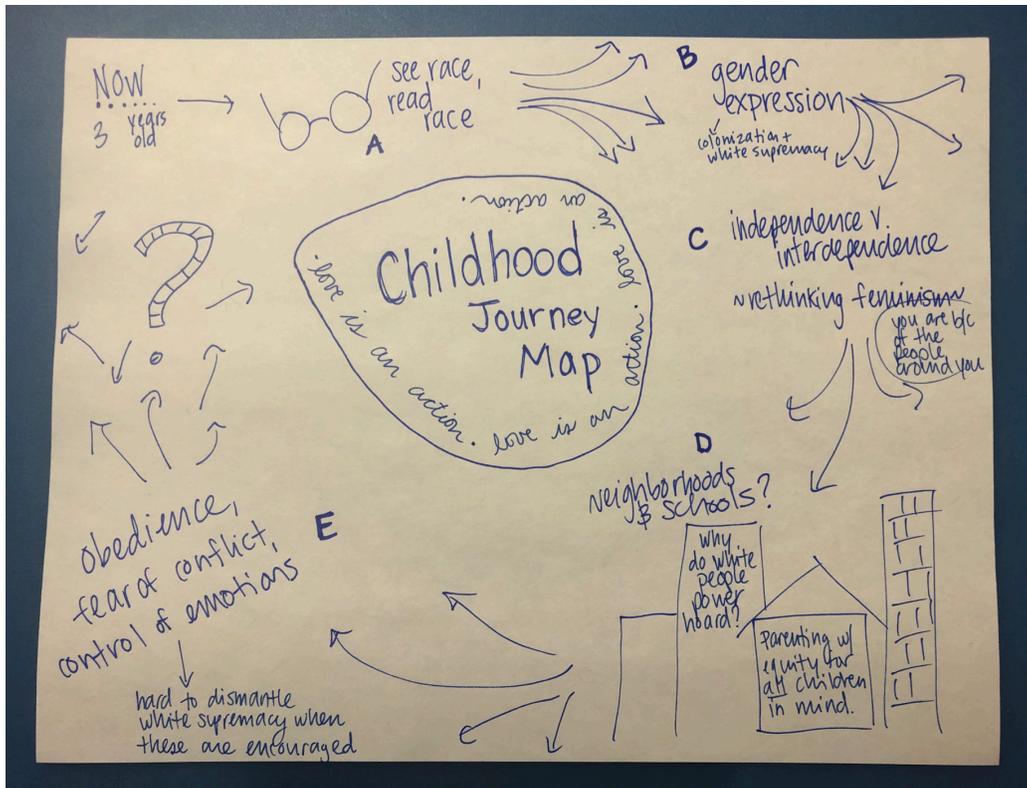


Figure 1. Childhood journey map

A) Seeing race, reading race. We have already started talking explicitly about race, and, as I'm sure you will discover, those conversations are only going to get more focused as you get older. There are no illusions of Colorblindness in our household (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). We use our racial literacy (Guinier, 2004) to read the world for the historical, legal, and social consequences of race. There is trepidation from some of my white parenting friends in bringing race up. Acknowledging whiteness and racialized power has become synonymous with being racist, but you will know better than that. How can you dismantle racist systems of oppression if you pretend not to see them? As I write this, you are just turning 3, but you are able to understand at a basic level that injustice often occurs along racial lines. There have been moments of misunderstanding, and, at times you overgeneralize in ways that are problematic, but those moments are only a problem when they are the only conversation being had. When it is one of many conversations, some of the pressure can come off.

Last week, we walked by a sidewalk vigil in Brooklyn. We talked about how someone had died, and the candles showed people's sadness and anger and other emotions people feel when they lose someone. You said, "white people will protest and make them feel better." Yikes. I am glad that you are familiar with protesting as a means of expression, but how troubling that even in that little voice of yours is such a large assertion of white saviorism. How striking that even at age 3, that is what you took away from our participation in protests for Black lives last month. There is so much more work to be done.

While race is a social construction, its entanglement with racism means that it deeply impacts people's lives—including ours (Fine & Weis, 1996). Over the next 10 years, we will not shy away from talking about race or the complicity of white people in racial domination (Leonardo, 2004). I'm sure at some points you

might get tired of these conversations, but I'll likely remind you how tiring it must be for people actually enduring racist discrimination. Most important, though, is that we do not just see and read race, but take action upon it. What moves will we take to dismantle white supremacy in your school? In our community? In our family? I look forward to your conspiratorship.

B) Rethinking obedience. Is 13-year-old you able to say “No!” as strongly as 3-year-old you? I hope so. These days, you are exerting yourself with defiance. My fear is that I will socialize that out of you. I fear I will mold you into someone who follows directions, does not make trouble, and is always self-contained. Dismantling white supremacy will be nearly impossible if you are concerned with keeping everyone around you happy. (I speak from experience on this.) Oftentimes, parents want children who are obedient, and I imagined my future children that way for much of my life. However, obedient children will avoid conflict at all costs, and working towards racial justice inherently engages in conflict (Leonardo & Porter, 2010). I hope that you and I have had a few conflicts over the years. Did we? Did we work through them, restoring our relationship and understandings of each other? Honestly, I cannot wait. Conflict is a natural part of being with other people, and, if that is not acknowledged, then we are not living truthfully or authentically (hooks, 2000).

C) Independence revisited. When I was 3, I told my parents that I was ready for them to move out. I would take my tricycle to preschool, of course. This story became family lore and a testament to how independent I was, am, and likely always will be. When you arrived three years ago, I was just on the cusp of rethinking independence. The version of feminism I had been familiar with was liberal, white, corporate feminism. It was a feminism that praised women for being brash bosses and celebrated fierce independence (Arruzza et al., 2019). However, I have spent the last three years evolving that weak version of feminism. The feminism I now gravitate towards, personally and as a parent, is that which emphasizes interdependence and community over independence. Black feminist conceptualizations are wider than simply of having access to men's opportunities, but, among other tenets, of understanding the power in mutual relationships (Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010; hooks, 2000; Lorde, 1984). I anticipate your childhood will be full of moments where we co-develop an even broader and deeper feminism. Of course, no matter what gender you ultimately identify as, I want you to be confident enough in yourself to be independent when you need to be. However, especially as a white person, independence should be understood as only one way to be, not the only way to be (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Independence should not be synonymous with trampling on others, perpetuating patriarchal ways of being.

This journey map is filled with arrows in many directions and ends with a question mark. I cannot predict what the next 10 years will hold for you, but I can commit to raising you as someone who is not only racially literate, but anti-racist. We will notice and problematize race. We will understand that conflict is natural and obedience must be thought of critically. We will build a richer version of feminism that emphasizes relationships and the humanity of others. Above all, we will take action. Our love for each other and the world will not simply be a feeling, but it will be the actions we take (hooks, 2000). Anti-racism, after all, is about taking actions against racism—systemic, institutional, and interpersonal (Kendi, 2019). The world right now in 2020 is in a huge state of transition. As many people in the world imagine a new way of living and being, I am imagining a more active, anti-racist way of educating and parenting you.

LOVE,

Mom

REFERENCES

- Annamma, S. (2016). Disrupting the carceral state through education journey mapping. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 29(9), 1210–1230.
- Arruzza, C., Bhattacharya, T., & Fraser, N. (2019). *Feminism for the 99%: A manifesto*. Verso.
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2006). *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in the United States* (2nd ed.). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Chilisa, B., & Ntseane, G. (2010). Resisting dominant discourses: Implications of indigenous, African feminist theory and methods for gender and education research. *Gender and Education* 22(6), 617–632.
- Delgado Bernal, D. (2018). A testimonio of critical race feminista parenting: snapshots from my childhood and my parenting. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 31(1), 25–35.
- DePouw, C. (2018). Intersectionality and critical race parenting. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 31(1), 55–69.
- Fine, M., & Weis, L. (1996). Writing the “wrongs” of fieldwork: Confronting our own research/writing dilemmas in urban ethnographies. *Qualitative Inquiry* 2(3), 251–274.
- Guinier, L. (2004). From racial liberalism to racial literacy: Brown v. Board of Education and the interest-convergence dilemma. *Journal of American History* 91(1), 92–118.
- hooks, b. (2000). *All about love: New visions*. Harper Perennial.
- Kendi, I. (2019). *How to be an antiracist*. Random House.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2000). Racialized discourses and ethnic epistemologies. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2nd ed., pp. 257–278). Sage.
- Leonardo, Z. (2004). The color of supremacy: Beyond the discourse of ‘white privilege.’ *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 36(2), 137–152.
- Leonardo, Z., & Porter, R. (2010). Pedagogy of fear: Toward a Fanonian theory of ‘safety’ in race dialogue. *Race Ethnicity and Education* 13(2), 139–157.
- Lorde, A. (1984). The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. In A. Lorde (Ed.), *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (pp. 110–114). Crossing Press
- Matias, C. (2016). “Mommy, is being brown bad?”: Critical race parenting in a post-race era. *Race and Pedagogy Journal: Teaching and Learning for Justice*, 1(3), Article 1, <https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/rpj/vol1/iss3/1>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Abby Emerson is a doctoral candidate researching antiracist teacher education. In addition to educating teachers, she also facilitates workshops with White parents on antiracist parenting. Her current research explores whiteness, White supremacy, and their manifestations in formal and informal spaces where children are educated. She is the mom to Melody, Felix, and Wallace. Previously, she was an elementary school teacher for 10 years in NYC public schools. During that time she was named the 2018 National Association for Multicultural Education's Critical Teacher of the Year.