



# Bank Street Occasional Paper Series

Occasional  
Paper  
Series

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

Article 14

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October 2021

## Black Feminist Love: An Open Letter to My Children

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### Recommended Citation

Harlan Eller, K. (2021). Black Feminist Love: An Open Letter to My Children. *Occasional Paper Series, 2021* (46). Retrieved from <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series/vol2021/iss46/14>

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# Black Feminist Love: An Open Letter to My Children

*Katie Harlan Eller*

October 2020

Dear Sweet Ones,

It seems like yesterday I wrote another letter to you. It was the evening of November 9, 2016, and, like many in the United States, I was stunned and heavy hearted by the surprising results of the presidential election. One day, history books may describe the collective grief we awoke to after the winning candidate clinched the electoral vote despite open misogyny, racism, ableism, anti-immigrant rhetoric, and the promotion of policies fundamentally opposed to democracy. Such a public political paradigm felt wholly counter to the world I hope both of you know. In solidarity and grief, I shared a letter to you on Instagram, naming a continued commitment to working each day toward a more just world. I remember the one sense of relief I felt was not having to explain to you the implications of the election.

For you, it was just another Wednesday. I took you to preschool on my way to work. We drove our long commute home in time to have dinner with friends. Late that evening, you sang “Go, Tell It on the Mountain!” at the top of your lungs on the car ride home. As far as you knew, the world was full of music and joy and naptime and trail mix and friends. At that time, it was hard to imagine you, as 6-year-old twins, looking ahead to the next presidential election. Four fast years later, here we are. This letter is quite different. It is 2020, we live in a new state, you are first-graders, and you are fairly aware that it is election season. In the next couple of weeks, your dad and I will take you with us to the polls to cast our votes during a pandemic.

I’m writing this letter from upper Manhattan in a park near our home. Looking out at the Hudson River in autumn, I feel a breeze that welcomes long sleeves in sunshine. In this moment, I pause to notice the sight of succulents along a stone wall and brave oak trees in every direction. It is strikingly quiet for New York City, although I note the constant hum of cars nearby. It is a moment of beauty in a pandemic, a rare stillness while the weather welcomes me to relative safety outside.

Who would have predicted, in 2016, that we would become New Yorkers, moving to Manhattan just in time for COVID-19? Nearly as soon as we learned to navigate our new city, everything halted. In the last seven months, like millions of others, our family has known job and income loss, limited-space quarantines, kindergarten online, a summer without visits to family, school delays, and a positive COVID-19 diagnosis—all before first grade began. Add to our personal struggles the daily reminders of systemic injustice, education inequities, police brutality, protests, the murder of Breonna Taylor, the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and now a fraught presidential race. Every day, it seems, brings heartache, grief, and worry.

Still, like today’s view of the Hudson, there is so much beauty. You are reading. You’ve learned to ride your bikes without training wheels. You write books and hold dance parties and build Lego bakeries. You turn small moments into play with nothing more than your imaginations. You make us laugh and use new words and tell fantastic stories with earnestness and flair. You know we are in a pandemic, but you aren’t bound by it. While I face the uncertainty of days we didn’t imagine, you are teaching me, too. You are teaching me to love better.

About a year ago, I remember tucking you both into bed one night. You were in your new bunk bed, surrounded by your cozy lovies and stuffed toys. The sound machine soothed while the city sounds wafted in from Amsterdam Avenue. Gentle music from our beloved playlist flowed, like wind, throughout the room. As I started to back out of the room, one of you became inconsolably upset. I cannot remember what caused it, only that in that moment, you were unable to tell me what was wrong. You couldn't tell me what you needed, you didn't want me holding you, you were pushing me away, yet crying for help. I couldn't find the language that I thought I needed to build a bridge between us. Perhaps what you needed had nothing to do with words. I don't know, but I recall that you grew increasingly upset, while I grew increasingly frustrated at the helplessness we both were feeling.

Although I can't remember what caused your tears, I'm guessing that I was ready to move into the evening of a mom whose children are asleep: washing dishes, doing laundry, working, and preparing for a new day. So I left the room. What happened next remains utterly clear in my memory. I realized I had walked away from your pain. Looking back, moving away from you was a surrender. Maybe to you, maybe to the evening, maybe to our helplessness. Before I knew it, I succumbed to the aches of frustration and inadequacy. Then, a thought struck me:

*What am I teaching my child? Am I only willing to be present with you when you are comfortable, calm, or can convey your need with words? Am I only present when you are in a state I know how to respond to?*

By walking away, I was sending you a painful message.

When I think of this moment, it is loaded with shame, but I also know, now, how to name it. Perhaps, that night, I fell victim to a pervasive inadequacy: "enwhitened" love (Matias, 2016). Enwhitened conceptions of love, rooted in the idea that our emotions are structured in white supremacy, reflect feelings and affect over action. Caring and nurturing may be a "proxy" for love, but this is ultimately incomplete. hooks (2018), in *All About Love*, paints a portrait of Black feminist love in the womanist tradition, a conceptualization rooted in freedom, not control. When love is freedom, it is unafraid. It is honest. It is love without condition. It is not the casual platitude we call "unconditional love" that can be an empty promise: easily uttered, more difficult to enact. Instead, I'm learning to interrogate *what exactly* has become conditional.

I admit I didn't have to look far. Often, I have felt trapped by a sort of "if-then" approach to parenting: a defaulted, controlling approach that says: "if you'll do this, I will do this."

*"If you'll finish your meal, we will have more time to play."  
"If you'll use your words, I can help you."*

Some of these if-thens can appear to be logical. One might ask, "But isn't it true that if the kids eat, they will have more time to play?" Perhaps. But I ask: To whom is it logical and why so? When you hear "if," what is the message? It has occurred to me since that night in the living room that the message of "if-then" is the *essence of condition*, a constant request to conform to my normed "if." hooks challenges this unequivocally. Black feminist conceptions of love exist without the "if." Love refuses "if" because it refuses fear. Love refuses fear of losing control. Love refuses fear of discomfort. Love even refuses the fear of inadequacy. Love is a sustained commitment to choose a person's freedom and to honor their wholeness completely.

Love refuses fear of discomfort. I have learned that white supremacy culture wants me to choose my personal comfort, effectively positioning myself above others by upholding if-thens. It wants me to value a “right to comfort” and a “fear of open conflict” (Jones & Okun, 2001). Unchecked, relationships might look like this:

*“At all times, make yourself as comfortable as possible.”*

*“Walk away from confrontation. Require reasonableness.”*

In other words, name conditions in order to give love. While I painfully confess my defaulted response to fear of inadequacy and frustration, I recognize that this isn’t real love, and I want you to know I am trying to love in a new and better way.

I am also learning that love without fear is love that is honest. In *All About Love*, hooks (2018) reminds us that we have been conditioned, from an early age, to choose comfort over honesty. A young child is chastised for naming an uncomfortable truth:

*“That shirt is ugly.”*

*“I don’t like this food.”*

In the response, the child is told some version of:

*“Don’t say that. That truth is not acceptable.”*

The resulting implication is: Truth brings pain. We must lie to keep those around us comfortable, perhaps because we believe this will keep *us* comfortable. But, my dear ones, please hear me: this is not integrity. If your conscience is misaligned with your outward action, it is not an integration of your whole self. If I lie for someone else’s comfort, I sacrifice my integrity. Indeed, conflict may increase through telling your truth. Pain may follow. Hear this, though: Your integrity is your freedom. It is an acknowledgment of your whole self. If you ever wish to tell me an uncomfortable truth, dear ones, here is something you can say to me:

*“Love is truth.”*

*“Commitment to honesty is a commitment to loving and seeing each other as whole people.”*

As I move toward hooks’s Black feminist love, I have, for now, one small idea. It seems a tiny root to plant in a forest of unlearning, but it is what I am carrying with me through the portal (Roy, 2020). In order to love in ways that honor your whole selves, I am abolishing every “if.” Instead of “if,” perhaps it is:

*“Let’s make a plan for dinner and playtime. How shall we use our time today?”*

*“I’m here to help. I’ll sit close by as long as you need me.”*

This is my commitment to you.

In the pandemic, I’ve carried a lot of fears, including all of the lasting repercussions of this season. Will your memory be of my working, separating myself from you to complete a task? Will you be tired of each other, of me, of yourselves? Will our physical boundaries from others impact our social wellness for ages to come? Will our increased togetherness bond us or break us?

But then, my loves, I remember that fear—while valid—cannot displace love. And within this view, I hold on to the possibility of the pandemic: that I worked on loving in ways that are conditionless and truthful and honor your whole selves. You have become stellar readers and innovative creators and have played with your many identities, growing towards the people you will be tomorrow. If you can do that, perhaps I can, too. Instead of remaining fearful that the pandemic will suppress our liberation, I wonder if we might flourish in this crucible.

One day, you will read this. I hope that you see how we leaned toward a better love that honors freedom: myself from the confines of comfortability and yourselves from any boundary that limits your whole self. I hope we will look back at this time and find that we emerged from the portal with more love and freedom than we carried into it.

Because love cannot coexist with fear, *real love is unafraid.*  
Because love cannot withhold, *real love is generous.*  
Because love cannot fear discomfort in tension,  
*real love risks pain and isolation for truth.*  
Because love cannot fear a mistake and opt instead for silence,  
*real love stumbles through trying.*

In steadfast love and belief in you always,

Mommy

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