

Bringing Up Race

How to Raise a Kind Child
in a Prejudiced World

Uju Asika



First published in Great Britain in 2020 by Yellow Kite
An imprint of Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 1 529 36872 7
eBook ISBN 978 1 529 37170 3
Audio Download ISBN 978 1 529 37319 6

Typeset in Baskerville by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Hodder & Stoughton policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Yellow Kite
Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.yellowkitebooks.co.uk

To my parents, who made me. And to Abiye, Ezra and Jed
who make me want to be a better human.

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Author's Note

The path to publication for a Black author in Britain is not always easy. In an industry that is nearly 90 per cent White, you wonder if there's space for someone who looks and sounds like you. On June 15, 2020, energised by global Black Lives Matter protests, the newly formed Black Writers' Guild put out an open letter to the publishing industry calling for sweeping changes. I was proud to add my signature to a list of incredible writers including Afua Hirsch, David Olusoga, Candice Carty-Williams, Malorie Blackman, Sir Lenny Henry, Benjamin Zephaniah and Bernadine Evaristo.

There is a lot to do but I'm hopeful that changes will happen. If you are a Black or Brown or marginalised writer who's never had the confidence to pitch your work before, I hope you will seize this moment. The world is waiting for your story.

I am so grateful to the many writers and mentors who have supported my journey to becoming a published author (see Acknowledgements p.307). However, I would like to credit my cousin here. She was aware of my blog and my experiences as a Black mother, and she insisted I should write a book on the

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subject. When initially I hesitated, my cousin sent an email to agents asking if they would like to read a book proposal from me. I am not sure I would have written this book without her persistence.

Preface

When I was pregnant with Ezra, like any first-time mother, my number-one concern was bringing him into this world alive and healthy. I remember the panic of a slow-kick day, when I'd move around vigorously just to shake my belly awake. Then there were the sleepless nights when Ezra wouldn't stop scoring 'top bins' in my womb.

From the minute I learned I was pregnant (several cocktails too late), I knew I was having a boy. I knew he would have fat cheeks, like his half-brother, Isaac, and soft hair, like mine. I imagined him running into his father's arms, squealing with delight. Curling up on my chest to fall asleep.

The one thing I didn't think too much about was how racism might affect him. I'm a Black Nigerian woman who grew up in Britain, so I'm no stranger to prejudice. But most of my mental space was taken up with browsing baby catalogues, dreaming about eating soft cheese or counting heartbeats on a monitor. All I wanted was a healthy, happy baby.

Just before Ezra was born, my husband, Abiye, and I moved back to London after two years living in Lagos. I had my first taste of being treated like the Other again. While Abiye and I

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were going through prenatal classes, the hospital demanded we provide ‘proof’ that we were staying in the country. That we weren’t planning to drop sprog and run. We knew that, in spite of our British passports, our Nigerian names had flagged us up as potential health tourists. The hospital threatened us with a large bill if we didn’t offer evidence right away.

There was some heated back and forth, culminating in my husband firing off a letter outlining his disgust at their treatment of us, and inviting them to look us up in a year’s time. But they never bothered. And we were here to stay.

Both my sons, now 9 and 13, have grown up in London since birth. They are the smart-mouthed, fun-loving stars of my blog, ‘Babes about Town’, all about raising cool kids in the capital. We find parent-friendly things to do around town, and I share with my audience around the world the cute conversations we have, as well as funny and insightful tales of family life.

One story I shared with my Facebook followers happened after an Arsenal match. The babes are keen footballers and we’d seen an image of striker Pierre Aubameyang standing tall and strong, over a banana skin that had been chucked at him from the stands.

‘What does that even mean?’ my boys wanted to know.

I sighed. I told them about the use of bananas as a racist symbol directed at Black people. Why some idiots call us monkeys, and how many footballers have had to endure bananas and worse over the years. They were outraged for a moment and then, as kids do, they moved on to something else. But it broke my heart a little.

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We are proud to live in London, one of the most diverse and integrated places on earth. However, even in London, you can't escape the many shades of racism.

Professor Beverly Tatum, an author and clinical psychologist, describes the effects of racism as 'smog in the air'.¹ You can't avoid it, because it's everywhere. In the looks my kids get in certain spaces. The manner in which some people speak to them. The stuff that goes over their heads. And the stuff that makes them cry, even when they don't know why.

How do you bring up your kids to be cool, kind and happy when there is so much out there trying to break them down?

This book is my attempt not necessarily to answer this question definitively, but to consider it with the weight and attention it deserves. For it's a question that affects us all.

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Happiness is the meaning and the purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence.

Aristotle, Greek philosopher

A little girl sat on a playing field, her bottom damp with early-morning dew. Behind her, a tall stone building, the entrance to one of England's top boarding schools. Beyond her, more grass and trees and farmland, as far as the eye could see. It struck her that no matter how long she walked, she would be the only Black girl for miles. The little girl hugged her knees to her chest. She had never felt so far away from home.

Then a voice inside her whispered: 'That's ok. You will never be one of the crowd. And that makes you special. You can choose who you want to be. That means you're free.'

Growing up Black

Growing up between Britain and Nigeria in the '80s, I had a shifting sense of identity. Nowadays, there's a term for it: 'third-culture kid'. It was disorienting at times, but also liberating. I realised early on that I didn't have to be one thing or the other. Straddling two cultures added a depth and richness to my life, and an openness to new experiences.

My early encounters with racism were minor compared to what my older sister went through. As the first Black girl at our boarding school, she was once tied to a chair by fellow pupils hurling racial insults at her. She was six years old.

By the time I joined the school, I was one of at least four other Black kids, including my two older siblings. Still, my difference marked me out for jokes like: 'Smile, otherwise we can't see you,' after the lights went out. Sometimes I wonder if my overtly smiley personality came as a response to comments like these. Toothy grin, lips stretched wide, just wishing to be seen.

Actually, I've always been a happy-go-lucky kind of girl. Old photographs, and scratchy video footage from early childhood, reveal my giggly nature, or what my sister fondly calls me to this day, a 'laughing jackass'.

My memories of growing up are overwhelmingly happy ones. Ours was a tight-knit school where I made many friends. We'd roll down hills, climb swing ropes, play Stuck-in-the-Mud and whisper secrets in the dark. I had my first long-term romance with an English boy. We 'dated' for two years, between the ages of 9 and 11.

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Holidays in Nigeria meant endless cousins for sleepovers, afternoons spent devouring the contents of my parents' bookshelves, or playing cowboys outside, climbing trees for fruit, watching *The Sound of Music* on repeat.

Yet, I also remember the helplessness of walking down a London street and someone shouting 'Nigger' from a car window. Being called a 'blot on the landscape' by a girl who would later call me her best friend. A toddler reaching out and trying to rub the brown off my skin. Cracks about Africa and monkeys and mud huts.

I remember my best friend at age nine pulling me in for a tight embrace and then looking at me with sorrow (or pity?) in her eyes.

'I wish you were White,' she said, before running off.

I can still feel the visceral shock of having the word 'Nigger' spat at me by a boy in my class. I didn't know what I'd done, if anything at all, to offend or provoke him. Several friends leaped to my defence, but I had no words, and that was part of my shame. Words were my allies, my armour, but they had let me down.

I smiled and I carried on.

I could imagine a future, though, when things would be different. I wanted my kids to grow up in a world where nobody could make them feel less than they were, just because of the tone of their skin or the tightness of their curls. I wanted a life in which insults like 'Nigger' would never have the power to leave me speechless.

I had it all planned out. I would be worldly, wealthy and magnanimous. I'd adopt a rainbow tribe of babies from every

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corner of the planet, like Josephine Baker (or Angelina Jolie, as it happened). Of course, by that time, grand-scale poverty, disease and famine, nuclear disarmament and peace in the Middle East would be sorted too. Yes, I too had a dream.

It's 2020 and I'm no longer dreaming. As a woman of colour in today's Brexit and Trump climate, you have to stay woke.

Things didn't turn out as I'd imagined, although we've certainly come a long way.

I live in one of the most cosmopolitan cities on earth. London is one of the few places where I get to feel like me. Not solely a Black woman or a Nigerian or an African, but just another mum going about her day. I've lived in America, where – even in New York – I 'felt Black' every time I stepped out of my front door. In Nigeria, my birth country, I can be singled out for the way I talk, how I dress, what my kids look like. In London, I feel free. I can choose who I want to be.

Yet it's hardly Utopia. People of colour in Britain overwhelmingly face social barriers. Class barriers. Stop-and-search barriers. Prison barriers. Employment barriers. Professional barriers. Media barriers. Economic barriers. School-exclusion barriers. Knife-crime barriers. Policing barriers.

'Babes About Town'

In 2010, I launched a popular blog about raising cool kids in one of the coolest cities in the world. By 2011, London was on

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fire. The riots turned neighbourhoods over and burned to ashes any notions of the UK as a ‘prim, proper and post-racial’ society.

We were watching news images of people looting and buildings set aflame, and my then five-year-old Ezra turned to me, solemnly.

‘Mummy,’ he said, ‘the youths are going crazy.’

I couldn’t help chuckling at his turn of phrase, but my heart felt heavy. How could I begin to explain to a small child what was happening? I could hardly understand it myself. But I knew there was a lot more to the picture than the misplaced anger of displaced youths. The riots were sparked by the death of Mark Duggan, a young Black man who was killed in a police shooting.

At what age would I have to have ‘the talk’ with my boys about how to keep yourself safe in a world that often sees young Black men as a threat?

I carried on blogging. I wanted to take back the city I call home. I wanted to showcase the best of what I love about London, and to encourage other families to seek more fun, wonder and adventure in the everyday.

When my cousin suggested I should write a book, inspired by my blog, on the experience of raising happy Black boys in a prejudiced world, I struggled at first. That’s not what my blog is about, I told her. I write often about my heritage, featuring photos of our family life and highlighting activities around town that are multicultural. But I’ve deliberately steered away from making our Blackness a ‘thing’.

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However, the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. A big part of my blog is giving my kids an immersive cultural education in London and beyond. I take my boys everywhere – not just to street parties and family festivals, but to traditionally ‘White’ venues like theatres, the opera, ballet, the National Gallery, classical concerts. I am fully aware that we are helping to change the narrative of how Black people engage, create and consume the culture at large. We flip the script, simply by being visible in those spaces.

My audience is mostly UK-based, but I have readers all over the world. By inviting them to be part of our journey, we are changing the way many of them see Black people too. And our presence encourages more people from Black/ethnic backgrounds to follow in our steps. It’s important to show that these spaces are not just for a certain ‘type’ of Londoner, but for every one of us.

A simple but powerful message.

On a deeper level, showing happy Black boys thriving in the face of negativity and low expectations is in many ways a radical act. We were living #Blackboyjoy before it became a trending hashtag.

‘Babes about Town’ is ostensibly a blog for parents in London (and beyond) who want to find fun things to do with their kids, recover their cool and rediscover their city through new eyes. But the true story is that of a modern Black multicultural family out there, living our best life, in spite of the haters.

It is a story I’ve been writing my whole life.

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So why this book? Because we have so much work to do, collectively. Parenting is hard, for sure. Racism and bigotry might be the last thing you want to think about when you're just trying to keep a tiny human alive.

But there's nothing more urgent than bringing up our kids to think globally, fairly and with empathy for their fellow human. We need to be responsible for raising a generation of people who are more open, more tolerant, less afraid. We need to challenge the Boogie Monster of the world and cut it down to size.

Happy Lives Matter

Sometimes it feels like we're living through an increasingly dark and disturbing period in global history. It's not always easy holding your head up and encouraging your children to keep theirs up too. But we can all be part of a quiet revolution. Choose joy over fear. Choose love over division. Choose education over discord. Every single day.

Mark Williamson, director of Action for Happiness, has interviewed hundreds of parents over the years. He says the number-one thing they say about their kids is, 'I really just want them to be happy'.

Happiness matters. And the wonderful thing about happiness is that it's contagious. An extensive study published in the *British Medical Journal* in 2008 identified that our individual happiness can affect others by 'three degrees of separation'.¹ In

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other words, our happiness makes our friends happier, and our friends' friends happier, in turn.

How do we raise happy kids? For a start, we raise them strong. Studies about Danish people, who regularly top global happiness scores, reveal an interesting factor. The Danes are masters at reframing – looking at things that happen from a broader point of view. Apparently, this is one of the keys to happiness. The ability to see any situation from a new angle, to focus on the more positive aspects and to bounce back, no matter what life throws at you.

I'm blessed with two exceptionally bouncy boys and, as they grow older, I am trying to empower them with a strong sense of self, rooted in that playful spirit. I tell them possessions aren't important, but they should keep their cool, their sense of humour and their sense of perspective. When faced with a challenge, I encourage them to think, take a step back and look at the bigger picture.

In this book, you'll hear from a range of professionals and influencers, friends, family and colleagues who have been directly touched by the issues raised. I'll share personal stories and conversations I've had with my kids too.

When my youngest, Jed, was around four years old, he took my face between his chubby little hands:

'Do you know why I love you so much, Mummy?' he asked. 'It's because you're brown.'

Such a sweet, innocent, surprisingly moving statement. An affirmation for my brownness, for seeing himself in me, for loving me as he sees me. Not wishing I was something

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entirely different. Not switching the lights out on my identity.

Fat, tall, wide, small, pink or brown . . . all any of us wants is to be seen and appreciated for exactly who we are. This is the essence of love. In my native Igbo language, when we say ‘I love you’, it translates as, ‘I see you with my eyes’.

To the blond woman being asked if her Brown child is her son/daughter when she is picking them up from school, I see you. For the little girl watching wide-eyed as her dad gets roughed up by police, I see you. For the couple trying to comfort their son after he’s called ‘Darkie’ in the playground, I see you. For the mixed-heritage Londoner holding back another sigh after that familiar question, ‘So, where are you actually from?’, I see you. This book is for you.

And this book is for that little girl inside me, still smiling her heart out. I see you too.

A caveat: I am not a parenting expert. In truth, I’m not sure such a person exists. I consider myself an expert in parenting my own kids, and even then, I’m learning as I go. In writing this book, my goal is not to have the last word, but to encourage you to have these conversations within your own homes and beyond, and to keep them going. Every voice matters.

Please note also, this is not a how-to manual in the typical sense. It will include insights and tips from experts and others. And each chapter will end with some talking points, based on discussions I’ve had with members of my community. But what you’ll hear most of all are stories. As a storyteller, I

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believe we don't need more 'strategies'; we need more stories. Not just stories of woe, but stories of joy, enlightenment and transformation. After all is said and done, it is our stories that save us.

CHAPTER 1

Whose Child Is That?

There is no such thing as other people's children.

Russian proverb

I was walking through Abuja airport, sweating under the weight of baggage and baby. Nine-month-old Ezra balanced precariously on a hip-seat buckled awkwardly around my waist. A nappy bag, crammed to bursting, was slung low across my body, knocking my right thigh repeatedly.

I'm an anxious flyer at the best of times, and this was my first experience travelling solo with an infant. The journey itself had been relatively smooth. Yet my nerves were jangling after trying to breastfeed discreetly on a flying vehicle packed with strangers, changing nappies in the pop-up cot and being on red alert for six hours and counting.

Despite the combo of exhaustion and discomfort, I was bubbly with anticipation. It was my first visit home since becoming a mother. The first time I would present my newborn to his

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grandmother, who was waiting with open arms and full table at her home in Maitama.

I was born in Nigeria, and although the greater portion of my life has been spent abroad, when I talk of ‘home’, it’s still the first place that springs to mind. I consider myself a Londoner through and through, and of course, that is home too. It’s where I live, how I express myself, the city where my kids were born. But nothing compares to the feeling of stepping on native soil, taking in the familiar clash of scents, my skin shocked by the heat. Shocked but happy. Yes, my heart whispers, welcome back.

As I walked through the airport, I was increasingly aware of stares. Eyes snapping wide at the sight of dark-skinned me, proudly lumbering along with what could be described as a chubby Samoan baby on my hip.

When Ezra was born, he had straight, jet-black hair, almond eyes and pale skin. As the weeks went on, his cheeks and frame filled out and he took on the appearance of a jolly Buddha. I would sometimes entertain his dad by dressing Ezra up in a skull cap and waving his arms along to the lyrics of Fat Joe. He looked a lot like the Latino rapper and it cracked us up.

So there I was, Fat Joe bouncing along on my hip, heading blithely towards passport control.

The Nigerian character is the antithesis of subtle. As a nation, we are loud and in your face. Back in England, even if passers-by wondered about us, few would dare to remark on our difference. Here, in my homeland, the staring was audible. An airport official marched over.

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‘Na your pikin be dis?’

From Pidgin English, this translates as ‘Is this your child?’

It was my turn to stare. What was this person asking me? How should I respond?

A part of me wanted to quip, ‘No, actually I picked him up at Heathrow’. But you don’t joke with Nigerian airport officials. Not unless you’re safely through customs or have several crisp notes to shake hands with if the laughter stops.

The stares and questions followed me not just through the airport but throughout our trip. People would ask how I got this *oyinbo* (White) baby, where his father was, if I was really his mum . . .

My responses veered from irritation to amusement. I got used to dishing out flat, forthright answers that rarely seemed to satisfy. Or making up stories. Like the one about Ezra’s father, the Sumo wrestler, who was stuck in Japan at a tournament.

Is That Kid Yours?

When your child is placed in your arms for the first time, the world comes sharply into focus. Nothing matters more.

I remember stepping out of the hospital, a brand-new Ezra in my arms, feeling like I’d been unplugged from the matrix. Every sense was tingling. I could hear, see and smell the city and all its dangers, but I was ready. Now I understood why I had been born – to be a warrior for my baby. I would slay dragons,

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tear whole armies apart with my teeth, if anybody tried to harm a hair on his head.

Yet with one question, a complete stranger could throw me off balance.

‘Is that kid yours?’

I didn’t know whether to laugh or scream. Yes, I carried that baby for nearly ten months. I cut out alcohol. I had sciatica and restless legs, crazy dreams and a belly that will never, ever spring back. Are you effing kidding me right now?

Maybe it’s not the question itself, but everything it implies: you don’t look like the mother, so you can’t possibly be the mother. Your child is approximately White, with that good hair and, well, look at you . . . How did you get to have such adorable kids – I mean you’re attractive and all, but still . . . Where’s the daddy? Is he White? Chinese? Why isn’t he around? Did he abandon you? Couldn’t you find any decent men of your own kind to procreate with? I wish I had cute kids like yours, I’d prefer them to be light-skinned, I’m thinking of getting a White man myself . . .

For most mums, being told you don’t belong with your child is like the ultimate slap in the face. My inner ‘Nigerian Big Madam’ swells up like, ‘Do you know who I am?’

My friend Nomita Vaish-Taylor, owner of the blog *Your DIYFamily.com*, feels my pain. She talks about going home to Mumbai with her daughter, Anya, whose father is White. ‘People literally follow us in the street, and you can see them wondering about us. Like, where did she get her from? As if I stole her. It’s only when Richard is with us that we make any kind of sense. I shrug it off, but it’s pretty annoying.’

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You don't have to be of a different ethnic background from your baby to be probed in this manner. Mothers I've spoken to have faced intrusive comments for appearing older (grandma?), having multiples (IVF?) or if one child stands out from the rest (milkman?). For White mums of dark-skinned children, strangers often assume they've fostered them or adopted from overseas.

On parenting forums, mums share snappy comebacks to the very rude query: 'Where did you get that baby from?'

'From my vagina,' is a personal favourite.

Who Does Baby Look Like?

One of the weird things about motherhood is how everybody and their mama (and she should definitely know better) has an opinion about you and your child.

From midwives to the man on the street, the first thing people will tell you is who your baby looks like. I've heard folks become adamant, almost rabid, about this.

'He's the spit of his father. He looks *nothing* like you.'

I spent 15 hours in induced labour with Ezra. From the first waves of pain, I was Bruce-Lee stoic on the outside, bawling on the inside. Doing my best to ignore my husband beside me, as he puffed on my gas and air for fun and asked helpful questions like, 'What's wrong? Are you in pain?'

Then came the emergency C-section in which I could feel the surgeon's first cuts, after I'd peaked on pain meds. All this

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and, within moments of Ezra's birth, nurses were tripping over themselves to tell me how 'he looks just like his father'.

I didn't mind at first. I thought he looked like Abiye too. But soon it started to get old. Sure, the resemblance was strong. But I did all the hard work – shouldn't I get some credit?

For parents, claiming whose genes 'won' can become a competitive hobby. Maria Jose Ovalle is a Chilean American blogger and actress who says her three kids look just like her.

'I personally love it,' she says. 'My husband gets a little jealous but admits they are my mini mes. Right down to their bossiness!'

Londoner and political activist Laura Vogel says she and her husband josh about who 'owns' whom, though her kids are a 'good hybrid'. What she loves is seeing the ancestors echoing down the lines. 'Just a glimpse of family resemblance makes you start thinking about how your kids connect the past and the future.'

I remember once lying on a bed beside my aunt, when she suddenly exclaimed, 'Look at that!', raising her foot up and inviting me to do the same. It was uncanny. Mine was pale, hers several tones darker, but otherwise they were almost identical. Right down to the shrivelled bulbs that were our baby toes. It set us off giggling. We get it from my grandmother, she told me.

There is a rare delight in seeing your ancestry passed down through you, to your offspring. So it's one thing being told your child looks like his father (the handsome man that you chose to

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procreate with) and another to be told your baby looks *nothing* like you. I'd shrug it off, but sometimes I felt like a kid with my hand up at the back of class, watching the teacher erase my family tree from the board.

There's a theory that all newborns look like their fathers, at least for the first six months. It's a sort of evolutionary paternity test – a way of making sure Papa sticks around. For some animal species, it stops Daddy from snacking on his own children.¹

However, the shuffling of up to 100,000 genes among 46 chromosomes – 23 from each parent – is complex, throwing up wild cards. People are often curious that my husband isn't fully White, since our kids are so fair. But the 'light' gene also runs in my family.

My Auntie Obii gave birth to a very light-skinned daughter with hazel eyes, and she remembers people shouting through the village: 'Come see wetin Pax wife don born o!' (Come and see what Pax's wife has given birth to.)

After she had two more children, similarly fair-skinned, tongues stopped wagging. Her third child was born in London. The maternity nurse who'd taken over duty from the night before came into the ward, carrying baby Daibi. Her cheeks flushed pink, as she held him forward.

'I think this is your baby,' she said, nervously.

'It's ok, he's mine,' my auntie said, laughing, as she claimed her White-skinned, blue-eyed boy.

Another of my mother's sisters, Auntie Ngozi, told me about being mistaken for a nanny as she pushed her 'White' baby around Baltimore in the early '70s. She said adults would bend

down and speak directly to her daughter, cooing at the child, while ignoring her mother as if she was just the help.

Not the Nanny

In a public library, I was flicking through *Grazia* magazine, while keeping an idle eye on Ezra roaming through the bookshelves. Jed was asleep in his pushchair. A voice piped up beside me.

‘These boys are so cute. Are you the nanny?’

Record scratch.

It wasn’t the first time someone had assumed I was the child-minder. I thought about the many hours I’d studied to get a postgraduate degree. I thought about the barriers I’d faced, as well as the choices I’d made, that had led to being a work-from-home mum. I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the library window, in jeans and headscarf, and wondered if I’d have assumed the same thing too in another person’s shoes.

In 2017, Professor Robert E. Kelly was caught being ‘video bombed’ by his kids during a Skype interview on BBC’s *Newsnight*.² The sight of Prof Kelly trying to maintain a straight face while his toddler and baby bopped into frame is pure gold. It hits peak hilarity when his wife, Jung-a Kim, slides in, grabs the kids and bolts. The world screeched with laughter, the video went viral and Prof Kelly and family became Insta-celebrities.

But the story took an ugly turn when some mainstream press and social-media commenters described Jung-a Kim as the

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nanny. While some people claimed it was an honest mistake ('look how she was dressed'), others said it played into racist stereotypes. Like the one about Asian women in subservient roles. Or the idea that an esteemed White professor couldn't possibly hook up for life with a Korean native. Some people went on to insist that she couldn't be the mother because she just didn't look like her kids.

In response, mothers from all over the world hit social media and shared their own stories of being mistaken for someone other than their child's parent. #NottheNanny became a trending hashtag. Some of the stories were funny, but many brimmed with indignation, anger or deep hurt.

'Being challenged over my connection to my children strikes me on such a personal level, I can't even explain it,' says Justine (name changed). 'It's almost like I'm not worthy to be their mum. Worse, I've imagined maybe I'll be separated from them in some way, by people who've decided we don't belong together.'

'Are you the nanny?'

The lady asking me this question in the library that day was a Black woman herself, who was nanny to the two White children in her charge. She was just trying to make conversation, as it turns out.

I smiled and explained who I was, and that was the end of it. But my first instinct was to look over at Ezra, to see whether he'd overheard. I'm not always bothered by intrusive, lazy, dumb or flat-out racist speculation. However, it bothers me when it happens in front of our kids. Because

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children absorb, they take notice and, frankly, they deserve better than our ignorance.

Since my kids have got older, the questions about their parentage are not so frequent. As often happens with Black babies, their skin got a little darker over time, their hair bloomed into glorious Afro locks. Their features are a happy combination of mine and their father's, and many people think they look just like me.

I still face curious glances at airports, but mostly because we use different surnames. I've learned not to attempt leaving the country without a letter of paternal consent. It's a safeguard to prevent children from being kidnapped or taken out of the country against another parent's wishes. Although for many mothers, it grates on a visceral level. Another slap in the face.

Belonging

I'm no longer fussed about whether people think I look like my boys. Instead, I worry about raising Black boys in a world that sees colour first. A world that has been putting a price on their skin tone since they were born.

'What am I?'

It's a question that raises my hackles, as innocent as it sounds. A question that is typically asked of people whose racial mixture isn't quite clear-cut. One that threatens to dehumanise. What even are you?

Ezra is waiting for my response. 'What am I, Mum? I mean, what race am I?'

Whose Child Is That?

His father answers sharply, ‘The human race’.

We all know the answer is much more layered, and political too. When I’m faced with the form requesting I check a box for my kids, I usually check Black African. That’s the bulk of their heritage (through me) and at first glance, that’s how they will move through the world. No matter if they’re seen as having fairer skin and ‘good hair’, for all intents and purposes they’re Black boys.

‘But am I mixed race?’ Ezra wants to know. Jed smirks and Ezra shoots him a look. ‘If I’m mixed race, that means you are too, by the way.’

Jed’s eyebrows go up.

Ezra is the lightest-skinned person in our family, and he’s told me that when he was younger, in primary school, some of his friends thought he was White. It amuses me, as there’s nothing about his features other than his complexion that would suggest it. Yet, his nana is White and so, by definition, he’s mixed heritage. It’s clouded by the fact that in this country, mixed heritage usually means one of your parents is White.

‘You’re Black and biracial,’ I tell him, which is as close as we can get to a straight answer. We talk more about the political implications of choosing ‘mixed’ over ‘Black’. The complexities of checking boxes or leaving them unchecked entirely. The fact that ultimately, you don’t have to clip your wings with someone else’s labels or string out your identity in a series of hyphens.

You are Nigerian, and so am I. You are British, and so am I. You are a Londoner, and so am I. You are Kalabari and Sierra Leonean, like your grandfather. You are Scottish and New

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Zealander, like your grandmother. You are Owerri and Onitsha, like your mother. You are Black and White, like your father. When we watch sports, we support Britain and Nigeria. We also support France, because your older brother is half-French, and your auntie has lived there most of her adult life. You are Arsenal through and through.

We are all a compendium of the genes we inherit, the places we visit, the people we move with, the ones we fall in love with and the ones we give birth to. There is no single story to the way we look, sound or interact.

There is no single story to how we make a family. If your child worries about people who are different or questions where they fit and how, reassure them with this simple truth. Belonging is more than skin deep.

Fifteen years ago, my mother adopted a baby girl in Nigeria who now could pass for my blood sister.

‘It’s weird,’ my older sister tells me. ‘She looks just like you.’

Whose child is that?

Na my pikin. Na your pikin. They belong to all of us. Let’s act accordingly.

• **Talking Points**

Q. What do I tell my child to say when someone asks where they’re from?

A. Teach them to state clearly and with confidence where they were born, or where they live, if that’s how they identify

Whose Child Is That?

culturally. Also, they should follow up with: ‘And where are you from?’ It doesn’t matter if the person they’re talking to is White, Black, Asian, Muslim, mixed ethnicity or of ambiguous origin. They can treat it like a conversation starter, rather than an interrogation. If the person pushes for more information (‘Where are your parents from?’ for example) they are welcome to answer if they choose or say, ‘Why do you want to know?’ Once again, encourage them to turn the question on the person asking. The point is that your child should not be made to feel like a stranger in their own country, simply because they look different or their parents were born overseas.

Q. How can I talk to my child about our lack of family resemblance?

A. It can be tough when your baby looks nothing like you. Especially if they appear to have different ethnic origins. This can be tricky as your child grows and wonders why they look so different from Mum or Dad. I find it’s helpful to track through your lineage, look at old family photos together; often you’ll find someone that resembles your child. A great-grandmother, a distant uncle. You can also look for stand-out features you and your child might have in common, such as size and stature, hair colouring, shape of ears/nose/fingers. If there’s no visible resemblance or your child is adopted, you can talk about shared personality traits, interests and passions. Look for other things that connect you. Also celebrate your child’s unique qualities, how each of us is as individual as our

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fingerprints. Don't forget children's faces change throughout their lives. All my childhood and early adulthood, I was told I was the spit of my father and my paternal grandmother. But as I grow older, I see more of my mother too. My smile, the shape of my mouth, how I tilt my head sometimes. I've always had her long fingers. These features comfort me now she's gone.

Q. If my child is curious about someone's family background, how can they ask without appearing rude or racist?

A. They could wait until they've got to know that person better, so that it's a natural conversation. As they become friendlier or more intimate with somebody, it's normal to share personal details such as family heritage. What's not ok is asking questions like 'What are you?' Encourage them to share their own family background, with the hope (but not the expectation) that the other person volunteers that information too. Depending on the relationship, approaching the topic with 'I hope you don't mind me asking/I hope I'm not being rude/please feel free to tell me to go away', etc. can also take the sting out of the feeling of being 'othered'. Try to manage their curiosity, and teach them this simple rule of thumb: always question yourself (and your intentions) before you question someone else.

CHAPTER 2

How Kids See Colour

It is time for parents to teach young people early on that in diversity there is beauty and there is strength.

Maya Angelou

In the kitchen getting lunch ready, I heard yelling from next door. I ran into the living room to find my four-year-old hurling himself around. A football match roared on TV.

‘What happened?’

‘The blacks just scored!’ Ezra said, still trying to fist bump the ceiling. ‘The whites are on top, but I want the blacks to win.’

‘Cool,’ I said. ‘Try not to break the sofa, ok?’

I went back to the kitchen.

Now, I can sense some eyebrows arching. Maybe a few eyeballs popping. Some of you are wondering if my child was being a little bit . . . you know . . . racist?

What if I told you he was talking about football shirts, not footballers? You see, when my boys were very little, they were far more likely to group people by the colour of their clothing

than the colour of their skin. It would be at least a year before Ezra understood people could be Black and White too. Probably another year before he claimed ‘Blackness’ as his identity.

Are Kids Colour Blind?

Every now and then, I come across a story about kids of different ethnicities who are closer than siblings. The adorable buddies who toddle into each other’s arms like brothers from another mother. Or the best mates who got the same haircut to fool their teacher, so she couldn’t tell them apart. The fact that one boy was White and the other African American didn’t seem to faze them.

These kids are super cute and readers can’t get enough. Their stories attract hundreds of comments on social media from people of all ethnicities, praising the children (and their parents) for being exemplary to us all.

‘Children are beautiful because they don’t know racism.’

‘Love doesn’t see colour.’

‘We are all one race; if only adults could remember this.’

These tales tug at our heartstrings because they hint at a different world. A post-racial Utopia in which it really doesn’t matter if your skin doesn’t match. If only we could all stay as innocent as the children . . .

But as any parent will tell you, kids aren’t always so innocent. Sure, they can be big-hearted and pure-minded, but they can also be little Shitlers. You only have to watch a mum trying to

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feed a fussy toddler to learn the meaning of picky, separatist and dictatorial.

A small child can abandon a plate because the food isn't all white. They can scream for hours because their hair clips don't match their dress. They can decide you're not their friend based on the colour of your shoes.

What's more, study after study shows children aren't colour blind when it comes to race.

Shanthi Annan, daughter-in-law to former UN Secretary General, the late Kofi Annan, was only five years old when she learned this first-hand. Now a mother of three and a busy entrepreneur, Shanthi describes herself as equal parts Ghanaian, Nigerian, English and Indian. With some amusement, she recalls an incident in kindergarten:

The first time I was conscious of my race was in conversation with another little girl at assembly. I had a flesh cut on my leg and she said, 'Ew, you're brown on the outside and white on the inside'. Realising she was entirely ignorant, I retorted, 'Well . . . it's better than being white on the outside and black on the inside.' I freaked her out, but I felt empowered.

Rachel Ezekwugo, a former journalist, lives with her husband and two daughters in a leafy suburb of south-west London. She says her girls are proudly Nigerian (with a Welsh great-grandma), although both were born and raised in the UK. When her eldest started in reception, some kids made mean comments about her skin colour: 'The teachers would tell me

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“somebody said her skin was the colour of poo”. Luckily, the school had a zero-tolerance approach to bullying and hopefully much of it went over her head.’

When I was seven, I had a bestie named Tamsin. Her mum was friends with my mum and had been in a relationship with my uncle. In our eyes, we were practically family.

Tamsin and I told kids at school we were related. At first, we said we were sisters. Then we called ourselves twins. We would walk around arm in arm and shout down anybody who told us we were making it up. That’s despite the obvious. I had deep brown skin, darkened by the Enugu sun; my hair had been cropped close to my skull and slicked into Jheri curls (don’t laugh, it was the ’80s). Tamsin was a Lincolnshire lass, pale-skinned with white-blond hair and light blue eyes. We looked like a walking Benetton ad.

I wasn’t colour blind and neither was she, but that was part of the fun. Soon enough, schoolmates stopped questioning us. Kids have short attention spans and our ‘sisters-of-another-skin’ story fizzled out in a matter of weeks. I made new buddies, some almost like siblings. Yet none of that protected me from feeling like a misfit or from some of the casual racism I endured as a young girl. Like being called Poo, an actual nickname from some of my closest friends.

But I Don't See Colour . . .

Maybe you're one of those people who pride themselves on not noticing ethnic heritage. After all, we're all human, we all bleed red – what does it matter if you or your ancestors came from somewhere else? You might even say things like: 'I treat everybody the same; it doesn't matter to me if you're black, white, yellow, purple, blue or orange with green spots.' You describe yourself as colour blind and you're raising your kids that way too.

The problem with a colour-blind approach is that it silences any meaningful conversation around race. It leaves some of us tongue-tied and the rest of us feeling invisible. When you teach your child that everyone is equal, you minimise the struggles of minorities and disadvantaged people all over the world. When you tell your child that we are all the same, regardless of skin or background or heritage, you erase an important part of my identity.

American-born Nigerian Ebele Okobi is raising three gorgeous kids, twins and an older sister, in south-west London. She is married to an African American and works at Facebook as Public Policy director for Africa, Middle East and Turkey. The family live in an area that she describes as:

. . . incredibly, incredibly White. It is so White that most of the children are blond. There are more redheads than Black people. The issue is that the children are noticing and feeling like the onlies. The school is an Ofsted Outstanding school,

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but there is extremely little teaching about cultures other than White European. The school refused to celebrate Black History Month, because ‘children don’t see race’.

Italian Londoner Monica Costa, editor and publisher of *London Mums* magazine, told me she never saw colour, only ‘people with their personalities’ and that’s how she brought up her son, who is now 12 years old. However, she’s starting to understand that this is a limited perspective:

I never made a point about race. But I was once criticised for this because I wasn’t aware of all the deep reasons behind Black History Month. Now I appreciate why celebrating racial differences is important, especially because we live in a society (not just Britain but everywhere in the world) in which we are all mixed up. Celebrating differences is important to keep the various traditions and identities alive.

Author Angie Thomas sums it up in her bestselling novel, *The Hate U Give*: ‘If you don’t see my Blackness, then you can’t see me.’

As a child, I could see colour every time the school photographs revealed me, the only patch of brown among a wash of pale faces. Every time the lights went off and someone would joke ‘Where did Uju go?’ or feel around for me in the dark. Every time a parent’s smile tightened at the sight of the friend their daughter wanted to bring home.

Yet I came across many adults who ‘didn’t see colour’. Like the ones who congratulated me on my British accent, saying

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you couldn't tell I was a foreigner if you spoke to me over the phone. Before I joined them at school in England, my sister and brother tried to give me voice coaching. They wanted me to shake off my strong Igbo accent. They thought I would embarrass them with how I pronounced words like three (te-ree) and first (fust). Who knew my accent would change flavour almost overnight, from beans and dodo to tea and crumpet?

I would always ease into my Nigerian accent at home and with other Nigerians. Our parents never spoke Igbo to us, so English was our first tongue. However, Nigerian (or Naija) English is a language on its own. It delights me when my kids, born and raised London boys, use pure Naija expressions. I also enjoy tracing Africa in people's voices, no matter whether the accent is from Trinidad or Cuba, Portugal or Pasadena. A certain rhythm, a timbre, a turn of phrase.

Africa flows through my veins, springs up from my scalp, coils itself tightly in my DNA. I am proudly and visibly Black. Yet I've had people tell me I wasn't 'really Black' – as in, not like 'Africa Black'. I've met adults so hesitant to acknowledge skin colour, they twist their tongues into knots to avoid mentioning it.

'Do you know that man over there, you know the one in the blue shirt?'

'Which man, exactly?'

'He has quite, um, funky hair?'

'Oh, you mean the Black guy.'

Blushes. 'Yeah, him.'

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It reminds me of a story Oprah Winfrey told on her show about a conversation she had with her White neighbour: ‘He said to me:

“Oh, you’re not Black, you’re just a neighbour”. I go, “I most certainly am Black”. But that was his way of saying – you’re not like what I think other Black people are.’

I guess it’s meant to be a badge of honour. The implication that you’re no longer Black, because you’re better than that. I can name celebrities like Oprah, Sidney Poitier, Trevor McDonald and Will Smith among this exclusive club. So successful, so beloved by the mainstream, they’re practically neutral. They are post-Black.

Aside from being the ultimate backhanded compliment, it’s nonsensical. For as I’m about to show you, even a three-month-old baby can tell the difference between Will Smith and Will Ferrell.

When We Start Seeing Race

Do you play peekaboo with babies? I do it all the time – on buses, in the supermarket, at the doctors’ office. It’s such a universal icebreaker. I love how making your face vanish and reappear can amuse and surprise infants from Alaska to Zanzibar.

What is it about peekaboo that tickles them so? Apparently, it’s all about their developing sense of how the world fits together. Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget called it object

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permanence. When they figure out that even if you can't see something, it still exists. Babies can take up to two years to understand this concept fully. (My kids still haven't worked this out, judging by the state of their laundry baskets.)

Another theory about peekaboo is that it tricks young kids into thinking they are invisible. Researchers at the University of Cambridge set up an exercise with three- and four-year-olds, giving them mirrored goggles that hid their eyes yet let them see.¹ The kids who believed nobody could see their eyes also imagined nobody could see them at all.

Think back and you might remember this from your own childhood. Hands over your eyes like an invisibility cloak. Isn't it sweet that babies can get this from a game of peekaboo? I've noticed with babies of another ethnicity sometimes I work harder to connect. It's as if the baby spends a little longer on my face, taking in all my features, before they're ready to offer up a smile. Peekaboo, I see you. Can you see me too?

This is not all in my head. A study from the Department of Psychology at the University of Sheffield tested babies at three months old to see if they could tell different ethnicities apart.² By showing the babies images of people from various racial groups, researchers found the babies were more drawn to faces that matched their own race. This was in contrast to an earlier test with newborns, who showed no preference for any ethnicity.

By nine months old (prime time for peekaboo), babies begin to react to ethnic differences. That's around the age when they start developing 'stranger anxiety' and their hearts actually beat

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faster when they come into contact with people they don't recognise. If that stranger has markedly different skin, hair and features from Mum or Dad, their little hearts might thump harder with apprehension.

Wait a minute. Does this mean we're born racist? Not at all. The research simply shows we have an instinct for familiarity. It's a primal impulse, feeling safer among your clan, that starts as soon as you form attachments to your first caregivers.

You see, up until a few months of age, babies don't realise they are separate beings from their mothers. After all, their limited existence so far has taught them: you breathe, therefore I breathe. You feed, therefore I feed. I suck, therefore we are. But as the weeks and months go by, babies start to form their own identities and that feeling of separation kicks in. It's an unsettling time, realising you don't actually control that person you thought was an extension of yourself.

Now let's say the face you see leaning down over your cot every morning has deep brown skin. That is all you know of the world around you. One day, here comes another living, breathing being with creamy pink skin. Why wouldn't you stare, maybe shrink back or even bawl for help?

Making Friends With Difference

Let me clarify again that nobody is born a bigot. Young babies don't react to racial difference when they first notice it. The 'Uh oh, who dis?' shift happens around nine months. A team at the

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University of Massachusetts Amherst studied 48 White babies who'd had little or zero contact with Black people. In a series of experiments monitoring brain activity, they found babies at five months were easily able to tell any face apart, irrespective of race.³

But by nine months, the babies were better at being able to differentiate between two White faces. Also, when gauging whether facial expressions were 'happy' or 'sad', the five-month-old babies processed information for all racial groups in the same area of their brain. But the nine-month-olds' brains switched the processing of this information from one brain region to another, and again were more accurate with their own race.

Psychology researcher Lisa Scott, who was part of the study group, compared the results to how children learn language. Babies in multilingual households can discriminate sounds in multiple languages, but babies who grow up in single-language environments do not have this ability. Similarly, she explained, infants exposed to a wide mix of people of different ethnicities will maintain the ability to distinguish those people, regardless of race.

In other words, diversity matters. Exposing your kids to other ethnic groups from an early age makes a difference. Babies aren't born to hate; they're born inquisitive. It's good to mix up a little more, so that our naturally curious infants get to explore, discover and learn and to familiarise themselves with all types of people. Think of curiosity as a muscle. Let it grow and we can raise children who are kinder, more open, more sensitive to

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other cultures. Everybody gets stronger. Let it wane, however, and it can shrink into apathy, fear, ignorance.

If you live in an area where everybody looks the same, maybe it's time to step out of your comfort zone. Diversify the media you consume, the shows you watch, the books you read. Be intentional about whom you hang with and whom your kids play with too. You have to be proactive because, whether you like it or not, kids are learning about race all the time from the world around them.

Numerous studies show that by age two, children have started sorting themselves into groups, showing a preference for people who are more like them. By age three, they show signs of unconscious bias against other ethnicities.

I'll say that again for the people in the back. Your child, at the tender age of three, is already conditioned to be biased against people of a different race.

It's shocking but there are ways to counter this. An international study at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto explored the impact of using a touch-screen app to help reduce implicit bias in young kids.⁴ They invited four-, five- and six-year-old children to play with this app for 20-minute sessions. The app's goal was to teach children to identify people using names and personal attributes, rather than blanket traits like 'the Black boy'.

They tested the app with 95 preschool kids in China who'd had zero interaction with people of African descent. They found the kids automatically associated Black people with negative emotions and Chinese people with positive ones. Yet just

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two sessions on the app for 20 minutes reduced racial bias against Black people significantly. And the effects lasted up to 60 days.

It saddens me a little to imagine young Chinese kids needing an app to help them think better of me as a Black person. On the other hand, isn't this a variation of the games we play with babies? Peekaboo, I see you. Can you see me too? I am helping you make a connection. I am teaching you about the world. I am showing you that I am fun, I am safe. I am just another human like you.

How We Interpret Colour

When speaking about skin colour, young kids take things quite literally. It's not often you'll hear a small child describe another human being in black or white. They go by what they see. And let's be real, nobody is actually white like alabaster or black like coal. So a child might talk about being 'creamy' or 'peachy', 'chocolate' or 'caramel'. Parents might encourage their little ones to use such sweet, easily digestible terms. However, this can cause some sticky situations.

Mercy Osei-Poku, a civil servant and Ghanaian mother of three, told me about an unpleasant experience one of her sons had in Turkey. 'While living in Istanbul, there was this time when a girl licked Jordan's arm on public transport because the Turkish call Black people "chocolata". I guess she took that literally. The kids refused to get on public transport after that incident.'

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Anti-racism educators say it's important for children to learn to name and frame Whiteness, Blackness and other ethnic identities without sugarcoating. It's kind of like teaching young kids to use the correct terms for their genitals. Cute pseudonyms like Miss NooNoo or Mr Pickle are funny but can put children at risk. It can dissociate them from their own bodies, making them feel these areas are unmentionable. This can leave them more vulnerable to sexual predators.

As early as possible, we need to help kids find the language to describe who they are and how they fit in the world. What's tricky is that racism is coded into language itself. Think of all the words in the English language that pit blackness against whiteness and leave the former coming up short. Why would a small child want to describe themselves as 'black' when it's associated with everything bad?

I used to love the story *Black Beauty*. I wasn't exactly mad about horses, but a small part of me relished hearing those words together. Black and beauty. It made a welcome change from black as dirty, black as murky, black as night, black as funereal, black as evil.

These ideas play on your subconscious, even when you're too young to really get what's happening. White is light, soft, clean, innocent, pure, aspirational. The good witch. The most beautiful girl in the land. In 2019, a cartoon uploaded on YouTube's My Pingu TV featured an angel who is cursed to lose her beauty and turns Black. When her dark skin and curls disappear, her beauty magically returns. Viewers freaked out and 400,000 views later, the video was taken down. But I can't help thinking

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about all the children who watched it and absorbed its message like a dirty secret.

It's the same message written into books and magazines and billboards and TV shows and our universal subconscious. Our kids are growing up in a world where almost everything we see, hear and say is filtered through a prism of 'Whiteness rules'. The spoken-word poet Guante famously described White supremacy as the water, not the shark. In other words, it's not just the skinhead with swastika tattoos or the men in hoods burning crosses on a front lawn. It's the environment that surrounds us, that we swim in, bathe in, drink and even pee in. It affects everybody in one way or another. Yet, like water, it can appear neutral, transparent. Almost as if it's not there.

Perhaps the concept of White supremacy is too complex for little people. So let's talk about something all kids, even the ones who can't speak yet, can get a grip on. Crayons.

The Colour of Skin

Some time in 2019, a box of crayons became a trending story. Grown folk were raving about Crayola's range of colours for diverse skin tones. 'These crayons have made this Black girl very happy,' wrote BuzzFeed blogger Ehis Osifo. 'Can't wait to use them in my adult colouring book.'

These ravers were a little late to the party. Crayola Multicultural crayons have been around since the '90s. The

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range was launched in 1992 in response to calls from parents and schools. Teachers said they were tired of kids drawing the Rev. Dr Martin Luther King Jr in black crayon. (Mind you, this was a whole 30 years after Crayola rebranded its original ‘flesh’-colour crayon as ‘peach’, under pressure from the Civil Rights movement.)

Crayola Multicultural’s eight colours are meant to represent skin tones from around the globe: apricot, burnt sienna, mahogany, peach, sepia, tan, black and white (the latter two are included for toning and shading). Cynics say Crayola is only making money off diversity. Fox News commentators called it ‘pandering to liberals’. However, a quick look at the online reviews shows how kids, parents and teachers have embraced this product.

‘All of the children use them, to draw pictures of themselves, friends, teachers, family or just folks they see on TV. No child should be without the colour of their skin or someone they know.’

‘This was a great collection of skin tones,’ another writes. ‘I am old enough to remember when my crayons only had the color FLESH. Bravo Crayola for adding these multicultural colors.’

A reviewer called Maya adds: ‘I remember when I got these as a kid and wanting to cry for joy. Gone were the days of pure white, yellow and orange people.’

If you are a person of colour raised in the West, you have grown up with the idea that White skin is ‘flesh’ coloured and the rest of us are something else. This message has been pushed

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by brands for decades. It has coloured our crayons, our make-up, even our underwear.

I remember being given ‘nude’ tights for ballet and gym class at school and feeling even more awkward about my legs, which already stood out for being stockier than my classmates’. It never occurred to me that pink ballet shoes were also meant to create the illusion of flesh. For years, Black ballerinas had to ‘pancake’ their shoes with make-up to match their skin tones. Finally, in 2016, in response to an Instagram rant by ballet dancer Eric Underwood that went viral, Bloch released the first ballet shoe for dancers of colour. Three years later, top ballet-shoe company Freed launched their own range for darker skin.

Afrozina Abaraonye, a 12-year-old student at Ballet Black in London, snapped hers up instantly. She told the *Guardian*: ‘Because I’ve been wearing pink since I was little, I’ve got used to it. But there was always that weird thing when I was standing next to my friends and the pink ballet tights and shoes always looked better on them.’⁵

This is more than a #firstworldproblem. In Japan, the word for skin colour, ‘*hada-iro*’, is seen as pale peach by up to 79 per cent of the population. In India, a second-year law student filed a suit against Hindustan Pencils for pushing a peach-coloured crayon as ‘skin’-toned. Chirayu Jain accused the company of promoting light skin as preferable, in a country where most citizens are darker shades of brown.

The Hate You Give

True story. A little Black girl goes to a predominantly White school in the Western Cape of South Africa. She is in Grade 3, around age seven, and she's asked to draw a picture of herself. When drawing her self-portrait, she colours herself White.

Neeske Alexander, the teacher sitting in on her class, is dismayed. Especially as she finds other brown-skinned children in the class – the Black kids, the Asian kids, the mixed-heritage kids, officially labelled as 'Coloureds' – are doing the same thing.

When she looks into it, the teacher discovers something that cuts to the core of a system built on a hierarchy of race. She learns that the kids are using a crayon called 'skin' or 'flesh' in English or *menskleur* in Afrikaans.

Menskleur. It means 'human colour'.

Now picture that little Black girl, sitting carefully in her chair, art supplies spread around her. She has taken time to draw the outline of her body, to give her face some personality. Round eyes, hair in bunches, big smile. Now she is shading herself in, brow furrowed with concentration, tongue sticking out slightly with effort. She colours herself *menskleur*. A girl sitting next to her leans across and pulls the crayon out of her hand.

'That one's not for you.' She tosses a brown crayon at her. 'Use this instead.'

The Black girl stares at the brown crayon, knowing that it's the closest colour to her skin. Knowing also that it is anything but 'human colour'.

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Human colour. The legacy of White supremacy, apartheid and colonialism captured in a single crayon. Is it any wonder the Black and Brown kids were colouring themselves *menskleur*? Who wants to be subhuman? You could view the darker children colouring themselves *menskleur* as an act of rebellion: if you insist on naming one colour as human, we will damn well colour ourselves that too.

In her 2016 thesis for Stellenbosch University, Alexander noted that, when given a range of paint tones to create their self-portraits, all the kids chose the lightest colours available.⁶ She records one Coloured child who was offended by another child suggesting they mix in some black paint:

‘Teacher, he thinks I’m black—’

‘No, teacher, she’s a person, *jis* I didn’t say she’s a black person—’

This is how racism takes hold in our children: one cartoon, one pair of ballet shoes, one crayon at a time.

What happens when a generation grows up to believe their skin is not ok, that it doesn’t fit in, that it is less than human? To paraphrase the rapper Tupac, the hate you give little infants colours everybody. It is a stain on all of us.

What We Teach Kids About Race

The irony about colour blindness is that it doesn’t mean seeing no colour. It simply means you are unable to distinguish between specific colours – usually reds and greens or blues and yellows.

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From what we understand about our eyesight, most of us are only seeing the world in part. What we think of as colour is how our brains interpret light hitting an object and being reflected back. When we look at the sky, we see blue only because molecules in the air scatter blue light from the sun more than they scatter red light. The sun itself is white, yet sunlight contains a rainbow spectrum of colours, and again, it's molecules in the atmosphere that make the sun appear yellow. The true spectrum of colours in a rainbow is so vast (up to 1 million) that we don't have the language to describe it. If we could see the world in all her radiance, it would leave us speechless.

Human skin is not black or white, much more than 'flesh' and 'other'. The Fitzpatrick scale, a recognised standard for dermatology, measures skin tones along a spectrum of six colours that are not based on race or ethnicity. The scale from Type I (very light, burns in direct sunlight and never tans) to Type VI (deep pigmented brown or black, never burns) is based on how skin reacts to ultraviolet light.

You can have different skin types along the scale within the same ethnic group, even within the same family. In fact, you can find pretty much every skin colour on the planet in Africa, where all human life began. From the light beige-skinned San of South Africa to the blue-black Dinka of South Sudan. As evolutionary geneticist Sarah Tishkoff, lead author of a groundbreaking study on gene variants in skin colour, told *Science* magazine: 'There is so much diversity in Africans that there is no such thing as an African race.'⁷

How Kids See Colour

There is no such thing as race, full stop. Ask any scientist worth their salt. The biological evidence for distinct human races doesn't exist. What we think of as race is made up – it's a social construct. What we think of as colour is a trick of the light.

However, we can't turn a blind eye to the world around us. Race is a fiction, but it is also a fact of life. It affects us from birth and even babies can tell ethnic groups apart. Colour is illusory, but that doesn't mean we don't see it. It is the wonder of a rainbow. It is the polar bear and the brown bear and the panda. It is the difference between you and me.

We teach children to distinguish between red and green, so they know when to stop and when to go. We need to talk to our children openly and positively about racial difference too. Encourage them to recognise and respect all skin tones. To look for the beauty in every kind of face. Most of all, give them space to ask questions and prepare yourself for some difficult but necessary conversations. Are you ready? Because what we teach kids about race can change everything.

• Talking Points

Q. I grew up in an era when people of African descent were called Coloured, and now the term is 'Black', but I still find it awkward when my kids use it. Are you sure it's not a problem?

A. The term 'Coloured' fell out of fashion in the US after the Civil Rights movement, and in the UK around the early '70s. It

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was a specific racial category under South Africa's apartheid laws and is still used there to describe people of mixed Black and White ethnicity. Once Black people in the US and UK had taken ownership of their Blackness, as a political and cultural statement, 'Coloured' became outdated and derogatory. As a child, I hated it because it sounds like you're supposed to be White but someone has coloured you in. Black is a catch-all that speaks to many people of African descent, whether they were born in Africa or in the diaspora. In more recent times, the phrase 'people of colour' is used generally to refer to anybody non-White – including Black, Asian, Latino and indigenous people. You can teach your child that the best thing to do is call someone what they like to be called, so if in doubt, ask.

Q. What should I do when my child argues with me about their skin colour – for example, 'I'm Brown' (when they're Black) or 'I'm Creamy' (when they're White)? Can't we just leave it at that?

A. Children don't understand the political implications of skin colour descriptions until they're a little older. Even then, it doesn't really make sense. Still, it's important to put things in the right context as early as possible. If your child is really small, you don't have to insist upon them calling their skin 'Black' or 'White'. However, you can start to explain the differences between ethnic groups and how society defines them. As they get older, you can continue to discuss these issues and teach them what these labels mean – culturally, politically and historically.

Q. If I don't raise my child to be colour blind, won't they focus too much on race and isn't that racist in itself?

A. As I've outlined in this chapter, kids who are taught the opposite of 'colour blindness' when it comes to race are usually less likely to display racist behaviour. Teaching your child 'not to see colour' creates cognitive dissonance, where your kid can visualise difference but feels unable to articulate it. It can also make other children feel unseen, and their struggles seem unimportant. When you celebrate people as individuals, including all their ethnic features, your child learns to appreciate diversity from an early age.