

Whatever's Happening to Interracial Love?

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Bridgeman Images Juan Rodríguez Juárez: *Spaniard and Indian Produce a Mestizo*, circa 1715

“There’s power in love,” said the Most Reverend Michael Bruce Curry, preaching at the wedding of one of the most famous interracial couples today, Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. Curry repeated the phrase at least five times during the sermon he delivered in May at Windsor’s St. George’s Chapel for the couple, as if he was invoking a kind of ritual: “There’s

power in love.” Perhaps a subliminal knowledge of the weight that comes with love, the promise that it embodies to transcend boundaries both political and popular, was why we kids chose not to invoke such a big word for our schoolyard crushes when I was growing up in the small town of Polokwane, in late 1990s post-Apartheid South Africa.

One of the first boys I “liked” was Rowan Gadd-Claxton, a white boy who was my grade-four deskmate. In my early years at my multiracial private school in small-town South Africa, I also “liked” Joshua Lister, a Jewish boy with whom I competed for first place in our grade-three class, and Craig Wynn-Adams, an Afrikaansclassmate who lived down the street in our formerly whites-only suburb and sometimes did homework with me after school. But by the time we were graduating from “liking” to the possibility of “loving,” it was no longer the Rowans, Joshuas, and Craigs, but the Tshepos, Thulasizwes, and Rapelos, who were the object of my affection. By then, we children of Nelson Mandela’s “born free” generation, kids who had moved from primary school to high school together and were witnessing many of our childhood friendships lose their color-blind innocence, understood the tacit rule that we didn’t date each other. Sure, we were now free to go to school with each other and live in the same suburbs, but interracial love still represented a kind of final frontier yet to be fully explored.

In the titular story of her 2016 collection *Whatever Happened to Interracial Love?*, the late filmmaker and author Kathleen Collins takes us to 1963 America, “the year of racial, religious, and ethnic mildew.” A young black woman jailed during civil rights protests in Georgia who is dating a white Freedom Rider, and a white woman community organizer in Harlem in love with a black poet, are roommates in an Upper West Side apartment. Both women, fresh out of Sarah Lawrence College, are delirious with, but ultimately disappointed by, interracial love’s promise to create a new world of colorless, unraced people liberated from “the old, segregated ways of doing things.” The passing of the summer of ’63, the height of the civil rights movement’s push for integration, into the summers of ’64 and ’65, by which time “interracial couples [are] no longer to be seen holding hands in public,” prompts the narrator to ask: “And what of love, instead of politics? ... What about the love of two ‘human beings,’ who mate in spite of or because of or instead of or after the fact of?”

“There’s power in love.” Certainly, power comes to mind when looking at Caribbean-American artist Lorraine O’Grady’s black-and-white 1991 photo-diptych *The Clearing: or, Cortés and La Malinche, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, N. and Me*, an exploration last shown in 2012 of her own interracial relationship through evocations of notorious pairings of black women and powerful conquistadors, “pioneers,” and governors in the founding histories of the new settler societies of the Atlantic World. In the left panel of the black-and-white photomontage, O’Grady presents us with a white man and black woman intertwined in an intimate, naked embrace floating deliriously above two children playing in the clearing below near the couple’s discarded clothing, carelessly piled on the ground beneath a gun. In the right panel, O’Grady offers a black woman’s stiff body stretched out on the ground under a white man with a skull for a face and a torso draped in a chain-mail vest; the woman wears a vacant expression as she faces the viewer, while the skull-headed figure looks down at her, while grasping her breast.

Looking at O’Grady’s conflicting scenes of what she calls an “under-theorized historic

relationship” today, we might be tempted to extend the subtitle so that it reads: *The Clearing: or, Cortés and La Malinche, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, N. and Me, Prince Harry and Meghan*. O’Grady forces us to ask: what are we to make of interracial love at the advent of Empire? What are we to make of that mixing of desires, identities, and cultures—both free and forced—since “first contact”? And in our own time, what are we to make of interracial love when we consider the hierarchical ladder in which, predominantly, white men still figure at the top, black women at the bottom, with black men and white women occupying the two middle rungs?

Almost a century and a half after La Malinche and Cortés’s complex entanglement unfolded in Mesoamerica, another settler colony on the other side of the Atlantic witnessed its first recorded interracial marriage. It was 1664, twelve years after the first European settlers established “a refreshment station” at what would become Cape Town, South Africa. Krotoa, a niece of the Khoi leader Autshumao who, at the age of twelve, was taken to work in the household of Jan van Riebeeck, the first governor of the Cape Colony, and became an interpreter for the Dutch, married Danish surgeon Pieter van Meerhoff, with whom she had three children. In their telling of their first interactions with the indigenous societies they would soon conquer, the Van Riebeecks, Cortéses, and John Smiths of the New World often wrote through the prism of encounters with the Krotoas, La Malinches, and Pochahontases, the helpful young native women who would also become the foremothers of the “whore-traitor” archetype.

As these settler countries evolved, Empire’s demand for the sexual purity of white women as it facilitated the sexual mobility of white men created a foundational asymmetry in interracial sexual politics. The early Rhodesian state, for example, wanted to avoid what had happened in South Africa’s Cape Colony, where the illicit unions of Dutch settlers and Khoisan people, as well as Malay slaves, created a large “Colored” community, and so passed the Immorality and Indecency Suppression Act of 1903. That law threatened up to five years’ hard labor for a “native” convicted of illicit sexual relations with a white woman, and two years’ for the white woman. As for the reverse—a white man found sleeping with a black woman—the law was silent. The Rhodesia Women’s League failed in fighting that permissive silence in the law, and instead tried to prevent such relationships by ensuring that servants were black men rather than women. Immediately after this law was passed, another was enacted that imposed the death penalty for attempted rape. Because of the white settler fear of the “Black Peril,” the threatened rape of white women by black men, at least twenty black men were executed, while another 200 were imprisoned and flogged—whereas white men were treated leniently, and no sentence of death or even imprisonment was ever imposed in their cases.

Unable to escape this asymmetry, the literary imagination of the late South African Nobel laureate Nadine Gordimer seemed in accord with the anti-colonial theorist Frantz Fanon’s assessment in *Black Skin, White Masks* that black women are always-already sexually available to white men and so cannot make a “gift of themselves,” whereas “relations between a white woman and a black man automatically become a romantic affair. It is a gift and not a rape.” In her four novels between 1981 and 1994, *July’s People*, *A Sport of Nature*, *My Son’s*

Story, and *None to Accompany Me*, Gordimer's great subject is the white female protagonist who finds political and personal survival in the arms of black revolutionaries. As the impending reality of black liberation shifts power among whites and blacks, white women and black men—who share a mutual victimhood under white patriarchal power—move closer to becoming equals, and so they can share mutual sexual attraction and intellectual companionship. Where Gordimer has imagined relationships between white men and black women, most pointedly in her short stories, “Country Lovers” (1975) and “City Lovers” (1975), it is through the prism of forbidden, and eventually failing, love between masters and servants. For Gordimer, the possibility of “real” interracial love seems to exist only between white women and black men, and by implication, the promise of a liberated future seems bounded within this union.

South Africa's other Nobel laureate, J.M. Coetzee, is similarly preoccupied with interracial unions in works that I would describe as his frontier novels, *Duskland* (1974), *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), and *Disgrace* (1999), in which older white patriarchs attempt to resolve their, to use that famous first line from *Disgrace*, “problem of sex” through coercive sexual relations with black women, which we would today understand as rape. Where the sexual contact is not coercive, it is because, in the case of his protagonist David Lurie of *Disgrace*, the white man has engaged the services of a black female sex worker. Where Coetzee's fictions do explore relations between black men and white women, they play out scenes of the “Black Peril” on frontier territory—white women are either raped by black men, or sleep with them in return for protection against black retribution.

Together, Fanon, Gordimer, and Coetzee suggest that the power imbalance between black women and white men is too great to overcome, that their relationships can never be the stuff of “authentic love,” and so are doomed to be transactional or coercive. Reclaiming black women's agency from these tropes is the contemporary Nigerian-American artist Njideka Akunyili Crosby, who offers intimate scenes of her relationship with her white American husband in many of her collaged paintings. Akunyili Crosby flips the historical script in which the black female nude is always available to the colonial gaze, by offering up her white husband's body for the female gaze, and, if we may, the black female gaze. In *Cradle Your Conquest* (2012), she is fully clothed and, except for a pair of briefs, he is naked. Akunyili Crosby leisurely reclines in his lap, her eyes squarely focused on her viewers, as he looks down tenderly on her, cradling her (possibly pregnant) belly. In *Re-branding My Love* (2011), both are naked: she lies on top of his body, cradling his head as she kisses his spine. Her skin, a dark-brown collage that she shares with the surface of the room in which they make love, rubs off on his white skin, transforming him into a new person.

Akunyili Crosby describes her wedding to her white American husband as her “contact zone,” invoking what the literary scholar Mary Louise Pratt outlines in her notion of “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today.” Akunyili Crosby has also described her family's anxiety that marrying outside her culture would mean the loss of her identity, “but there is a

space in my work where these things come together.” In *Re-branding My Love*, Akunyili Crosby’s family’s fears are allayed as she brings whole worlds to their contact zone so that her culture and identity is never subsumed by his.

But she is no ordinary black woman; she is, after all, the daughter of a powerful African woman, a former minister of information in the world’s most powerful black nation. Akunyili Crosby met her husband when they were both university students. In fact, the dynamic suggested in the paintings is not one of pure equality, but rather, it is almost as though Akunyili Crosby were, to use Fanon’s words, “negrifying” or “blackening” her white husband’s white body, which becomes a *terra nullius* for the world she is refashioning in her image. In these actions, there is something of Meghan Markle and her seeming control of the flurry of attention around her and Harry’s union, with some going so far as to suggest that she “mothers” Harry in the way that she offers him “reassurance.” To interracial love’s unfulfilled promise, Akunyili Crosby brings back a utopian vision of love’s power to “rebrand” the world. The “union of cultures,” which she celebrates, does not seem to bear the marks of the effects of historic conflict in that contact zone—as though choosing to elide the past, instead of confronting it.

To the question “Whatever happened to interracial love?”, O’Grady answers interracial love with neither denunciation nor celebration. She describes *The Clearing* as “both/and” (not “before and after”). She uses her own story, the product of longstanding mixed-race ancestry, to trouble ours. To the interracial pessimism of Fanon, Gordimer, and Coetzee, O’Grady poses unresolved and complex questions of agency and victimhood, so that black women, in her telling, are neither always-already whore-traitor, nor always-already victim. She stands firmly in both the past and the future so that, even in their innocent play, the seemingly mixed-race children of her diptych cannot be perpetually “born free,” but must eventually stumble upon the centuries-long history of unacknowledged and acknowledged, legal and illegal, interracial pairings, in which the forces of violence and tenderness, pain and pleasure, coercion and consent, exploitation and ecstasy combined to create the very New World that occasioned those children’s births.

Dominic Lipinski/WPA Pool/Getty Images Prince Harry and Meghan Markle during their wedding service, Windsor, England, May 19, 2018

Similarly, I—a “born free” of a country with a long history of interracial unions that has placed its hopes in a non-racial future of integration—regard the interracial wedding at the former center of Empire with suspended judgment, neither outright denunciation nor wholehearted celebration. In *Whatever Happened to Interracial Love?*, Kathleen Collins’s black female protagonist Cheryl is given to “standing in the pulpit with outstretched arms, tears rolling down her cheeks, offering herself to freedom and begging others to join her, join this great hand-holding, we-shall-overcome bandwagon of interraciality when black and white would, in fact, walk hand-in-hand to freedom.” In contrast, the Reverend Curry chose to use the St. George’s Chapel pulpit to provide a gentle, but firm rebuke to color-blind sentimentality and gauzy

interracial utopianism. The power of love, in the words of Bishop Curry inspired by Martin Luther King Jr., to “lift up and liberate when nothing else will... to show us the way to live” seems to lie not in our ability to erase the past but to face it squarely.

And so the reverend made sure that he invoked not only King, but the slave trade—in a room full of the chief beneficiaries and heirs of the architects of imperialism and slavery—to remind us that love without justice, without a reckoning with the history that has created our present realities, is not really love at all.