

## ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation:                   SHIFTING WHITENESS: A LIFE HISTORY APPROACH TO  
U.S. WHITE PARENTS OF "BIRACIAL" OR "BLACK"  
CHILDREN

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This research examines how the experiences of parenting "biracial" or "black" children have affected the beliefs of white parents who have published books and essays regarding their situations. The participating parents claim that because of their relationship with their children of African descent their self-understandings, including their own sense of their racial identity, are altered. They now speak of themselves as "not quite white," "black by proxy," or as a "bridge" (between the races). My dissertation, "Shifting Whiteness: A Life History Approach to U.S. White Parents of 'Biracial' or 'Black' Children," explores how such parents talk about and conceptualize their experiences, including the implications of these parents' claims of racial identity transformation.

This dissertation posits that the white parents' shift in attitudes and beliefs reflects their vivid engagement with the racism and racial experiences that their children endure. The discord between the parents' claim of racial transformation and their continued benefiting from white privilege is also examined. Consideration of the parents' shifts provides a better understanding of racial beliefs and transformations at the individual, micro-level, which contributes to society's general knowledge about the conception of race.

Understanding white parents' decisions to write about their identity transformations as—to use Michael Omi and Howard Winant's (1994) phrase—a “racial project,” I investigate its aims and limits, exploring which racial projects are presented by this group of U.S. white parents of biracial and black children. John L. Caughey's (1994) approach to how individuals operate with “cultural traditions” and ideas of “border crossing” also provide theoretical frameworks. Tools of analysis include ethnographic life history methods, textual analysis, critical race theory, and intersectional analysis. My research method involves complementing a close reading of the writings of these authors that are white and parents with qualitative ethnographic life history interviews that gather detailed information from each of these individuals. I treat their publications together with my transcribed interviews as case studies through which I compare and contrast the similarities and differences in the belief changes and shifting that these informants have undergone, as well as their current constructions of race.

SHIFTING WHITENESS: A LIFE HISTORY APPROACH TO U.S. WHITE PARENTS OF  
"BIRACIAL" OR "BLACK" CHILDREN

by

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## **DEDICATION**

To my Grandmothers

Patricia Ann Rotman and Suewilla Irene Woodfork

for their wisdom and affection

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Independent scholarly work including reading, research, and writing, in many ways makes graduate school a lonely process. Fortunately, I have been blessed with the support of many people assisting my progress. I appreciate the constant encouragement of my parents, Ann and Nelson Woodfork, the prodding of my siblings, Peter and Rebecca, and the love of the women to whom this work is dedicated, my Grandmothers.

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The excellent mentoring of my committee members was supplemented by the continued support of my past professors, including Drs. Alfred A. Moss, Jr., Wilma King, Jan Arminio, Priscilla R. Ramsey, and Darlene Clark Hine. The support of friends proved invaluable to my progress. I am grateful to each of them for their support. Navigating my way through the Ph.D. program was made easier and more enjoyable through my friendship with my colleague Dr. Cheryl Janifer LaRoche.

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## INTRODUCTION

Luckily, there are individual non-black people who have divested of their racism in ways that enable them to establish bonds of intimacy based on their ability to love blackness without assuming the role of cultural tourists. We have yet to have a significant body of writing from these individuals that gives expression to how they have shifted attitudes and daily vigilantly resist becoming reinvested in white supremacy.

bell hooks, *Killing Rage*<sup>1</sup>

From 1850 to 1920 the U.S. Census used “Mulatto” as one of its racial categories.

Otherwise, in terms of U.S. racial identity classifications, an individual was expected to be identified monoracially as either black or white, Asian American or Native American, etc. Individuals that identify as biracial or multiracial pose a challenge to U.S. racial classifications; their experiences provide an important opportunity to further our understanding of race in America. The experiences of parents of biracial children provide another significant, though much less explored, opening. What happens to a monoracially-identified individual’s sense of identity and understanding of race when he or she parents a child that can or will identify differently from the parent? Specifically, what happens for white persons who parent children of color?

In the epigraph of this “Introduction,” bell hooks describes non-black people whom she considers antiracist without being voyeurs of black culture. I would argue that the parents featured in this research are people who may be characterized by hooks’ description. As hooks suggests, we do not have a “significant body of writing from these individuals.” This dissertation aims to fill such a void. By examining and focusing on the parenting experiences of white individuals who have raised biracial—in this instance black and white—or black children, this dissertation also seeks to explore questions related to the transformation of racial identity and understanding.

The individuals chosen for this study have not only parented biracial or black children, they have also reflected carefully on these experiences by writing about them in books and

essays. For this dissertation research, I have studied the experiences of these individuals through close examination of these texts and through life history interviews. As I will show, each of these individuals speaks in detail about how their parenting experiences led them to feel important changes in their sense of identity and in their understandings of race. In this dissertation, I examine these accounts of transformation and show how they add important dimensions to understanding race and identity in U.S. society.

Qualitative studies using ethnographic methods, particularly studies of race, need to attend to the researcher's social location. As the investigator in this dissertation research, I locate here my own subject position in relation to that of my informants. Like them, I locate myself through contemporary identity terms, as a person who identifies as "black," who is "biracial," specifically "black and white." My identifiers similarly locate me to the identities of some of my informants' children. This social location proved helpful to the research process. I shared both an "insider" and "outsider" status as one who was perceived to understand the issues involved with multiracial families. While, at times, I questioned whether I was too close to the topic and therefore too sympathetic or whether I had a particular agenda, I believe my own identity was useful in gaining access to my informants, having them participate in the study, to facilitating our conversations, and to interpreting the results.

These author/parents push for recognition of the realities of race and racism, which they discuss in relation to their own personal and professional lives. Personal and professional represent intersecting private and public spheres. In searching to understand these people's lives, I particularly considered their identity claims. Identity, after all, is a negotiation of both public and private realities. As I reflect on the writings of these white parents, I am comforted with the realization that the professional is personal. Openly examining others' lives is best done in conjunction with understanding one's own life. The reflexivity shown by these parents stood

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<sup>1</sup> bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Co., 1995): 157-158.

as a model for me to do some additional thinking regarding my own subject position and social location.

Because of my own heritage and my intellectual fields of study, I was first drawn to this topic during my masters thesis, “(Dis)Claiming Whiteness: Homer Plessy, Tiger Woods, and Racially-Transformed Parents,” completed at Michigan State University in 1999. In chapter three of my M.A. thesis, “‘White No More’: White Parents of Black/Biracial Children,” I discussed five white authors who have written about their experiences as white parents of biracial or black children. My intrigue and excitement about my initial findings lead me to pursue this as a dissertation topic.<sup>2</sup>

This dissertation contains an Introduction and a Conclusion and is divided into five chapters. “Chapter One: Historical Grounding” sets the stage by reviewing a few legal cases that regulated race and sex in U.S. history, providing a few social examples of the taboos of interracial relations, considering the historical background of interracial coupling, race and racial distinctions, and contextualizing the history of white parents of biracial or black children. “Chapter Two: Contemporary Location,” begins with contemporary examples that relate to my study. Here, I locate my work within two primary academic fields of study, review the author/parents’ position in society and the contribution they have made through their writing, explain my research methodology, consider my own social location, and review the relevant literature written on my topic.

“Chapter Three: Reddy and Lazarre,” “Chapter Four: Rush, Wolff, and Thompson,” and “Chapter Five: Harrington and Wardle,” focus on my informants’ lives. Space and time are the real factors involved with my informants’ groupings. Otherwise, the participating parents are grouped for the following reasons: Maureen T. Reddy and Jane Lazarre are matched because they are the pioneer memoirists on this topic. Sharon Rush, Jana Wolff, and Becky Thompson present the adoption experience in their parenting. Finally, Walt Harrington and Francis Wardle are my

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<sup>2</sup> Joshua C. Woodfork, “(Dis)Claiming Whiteness: Homer Plessy, Tiger Woods, and Racially-Transformed Parents,” (Master’s thesis, Michigan State University, May 1999).

two male participants. Utilizing comparative analysis, I discuss biographical information, key incidents, and viewpoints, in the chapters on my informants. I include long block quotations to provide voice to my informants' experiences and understandings. I am grateful to my informants for sharing their lives with me.

Racial terminology may be considered political; therefore, I am including some notes on my usage of specific terms with my thoughts. In interviewing and reading the written works of my informants' it became clear that their children's names had often been changed in their books to respect their children's privacy. I honored this trend and use the names found in their books. Since many of my informants discuss their children's "biracial" and "multiracial" heritages, I use the terms multiracial and biracial interchangeably. At times, my informants explain that either their children identify or they identify their children monoracially as "black." The subtitle to my dissertation includes "biracial or black children" with "biracial" and "black" in quotation marks. Although I do not follow this trend throughout my text, I use these quotation marks in my title to signify the slippery nature of these racial terms and to note that they too shift. Biracial in my text almost always represents a black and white mixture; however, I am aware that biracial may also represent other racial mixtures.

I regularly use "black" and "African American" interchangeably. In prior work, I have capitalized "Black" and "White" and have not capitalized "whiteness." Here, I do not capitalize any of these three terms because I wish to separate race from ethnicity and to continue to question racial terminology. I do, however, honor the usage of my informants and follow their trends when quoting them. Although the term miscegenation is dubious, I use it, especially within historical context.

In my master's thesis, I selected the chapter title dealing with these white parents as "White No More: White Parents of Black/Biracial Children," signifying off John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me* (1960). Sometime in 2000, I decided that I would continue working on this topic. At that point, I considered naming it, for a moment, "Wobbling Whiteness." I did not like the imagery that this title evoked. Soon after, I settled on the title "Shifting Whiteness" because I

believe it captures the shift in behavior and actions and the shift in understanding and belief systems exhibited by the white parent participants. Since deciding on this title, I have discovered two references that underscore its significance. First, in a chapter of an edited collection on multiracial issues, Heather M. Dalmage notes,

Of central concern to many multiracial family members I have interacted with and interviewed is of the disharmony between their physical appearance and societal expectations in a way that highlights the persistence of essentialist thinking in society. For instance, Whites in multiracial families talk about shifting racial locations and feeling like they are 'passing for White' (Lazarre, 1996; Reddy, 1994).

Dalmage alludes to two of my subjects' work. Although I do not read the authors as using the term "shifting" specifically, I agree with Dalmage's interpretation of their discussion.<sup>3</sup>

The second reference to shifting is found in the work of Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden in their book *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America* (2003). The authors claim that black women in the U.S. "have had to perfect what we call 'shifting,' a sort of subterfuge that African Americans have long practiced to ensure their survival in our society."

They contend,

Black women are relentlessly pushed to serve and satisfy others and made to hide their true selves to placate White colleagues, Black men, and other segments of the community. They shift to accommodate differences in class as well as gender and ethnicity. From one moment to the next, they change their outward behavior, attitude, or tone, shifting "White," then shifting "Black" again, shifting "corporate," shifting "cool." And shifting has become such an integral part of Black women's behavior that some adopt an alternate pose or voice as easily as they blink their eyes or draw a breath—without thinking, and without realizing that the emptiness they feel and the roles they must play may be directly related.

I am concerned with the agency involved with Jones and Shorter-Gooden's definition of "shifting." They appear to slight the power involved with "code switching" that enables the person to negotiate multiple cultural situations. Darlene Clark Hine's scholarly contribution of the "culture of dissemblance," which she argues that black women utilized to mask their true selves, might prove helpful to critically understanding the power involved with "chameleon-

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<sup>3</sup> Woodfork, "White No More: White Parents of Black/Biracial Children," "(Dis)Claiming Whiteness"; John Howard Griffin, *Black Like Me* (New York, NY: New American Library, 2003 [1960]); and Heather M. Dalmage, "'Mama, Are You Brown?': Multiracial Families and the Color

like” identity shifts. Having said that, I think that the essence of transformation in Jones and Shorter-Gooden’s definition highlights the change in the participants in this dissertation. Understanding shifting requires people to acknowledge and appreciate the fluidity of identity and racial categories.<sup>4</sup>

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Line,” in *Skin Deep: How Race and Complexion Matter in the “Color-Blind” Era*, ed. Cedric Herring, Verna M. Keith, and Derrick Hayward Horton (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 83.

<sup>4</sup> Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden, *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2003), 6; *Ibid.*, 7; and Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14. 4 (Summer, 1989): 912-920. Hine argues, “I suggest that rape and the threat of rape influenced the development of a culture of dissemblance among Black women. By dissemblance I mean the behavior and attitudes of Black women that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors.” If this “culture of dissemblance” exists, scholars must contend with its meaning and impact in their understanding of sources.

## CHAPTER ONE: HISTORICAL GROUNDING

Any investigation of sex and love across racial boundaries in North America yields a record of violent encounters, devoted relationships, legal battles, political struggles, commercial exchanges, class antipathy, radical conservative activism, and intellectual ferment. The actors are innocent people castigated or criminals never accused. They are poor, middling, and elite; their worlds extend from the South and Southwest to the North and West, and span from the earliest invasions and settlements to the modern day.

Martha Hodes, *Sex, Love, Race*<sup>5</sup>

Differences in physical appearance have been noted in North America since the initial contact between Native American inhabitants and European explorers. Beginning in the 1600s, European Colonial settlers enacted statutes demarcating people through racial classification. Within the geographic space eventually colonized by Northern Europeans to become the United States, that process of racial categorization has continued into the present. That said, people have been crossing racial boundaries and defying racial classification at least since North America's Colonial period. Life experiences of people transcending racial boundaries continue to capture society's collective imagination, to challenge racial classifications, and to present an important opportunity to research race, gender, class, and identity. One significant example of racial border crossing is exhibited in a particular group of U.S. whites who parent biracial (black and white) and black children and who have written books and essays about their experiences. These people are the subject of this dissertation, "Shifting Whiteness: A Life History Approach to U.S. White Parents of 'Biracial' or 'Black' Children."

In their writings, these white parents claim that because of their parenting of biracial or black children their own racial identity is altered. The notion of changing race through one's offspring marks the fluidity, and arguably the absurdity, of U.S. notions of race. I desire to understand the meanings exhibited in the ways in which the parents are suggesting that they are

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<sup>5</sup> Martha Hodes, "Introduction: Interconnecting and Diverging Narratives," in *Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History*, ed. Martha Hodes (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 1.

no longer white. In locating the historical underpinnings of my study, I explore the history of racial boundaries involving sex, parenting, and the law.<sup>6</sup>

When exploring the regulation of race and sex in the Colonies, many historians begin with two or three examples in Colonial Virginia. Usually, they start with the case of Hugh Davis (1630) who was punished by the court for “defiling his body” by “lying” with a “negro.” The court report reads: “Sept. 17. 1630 *Hugh Davis* to be soundly whipt before an assembly of negroes & others for abusing himself to the dishon[o]r of God and shame of Christianity by defiling his body in lying with a negro. w[h]ich fault he is to actk Next *Sabbath* day.”<sup>7</sup>

Historians typically claim Davis was a white man who had sex with a black person. Yet, issues involved with the case have puzzled historians. Winthrop Jordan suggests that the court’s response may have been so severe because “it is possible that the ‘negro’ may not have been female.” A. Leon Higginbotham argues, “The very statement that Davis ‘abused himself,’ and that he ‘defiled his body by lying with a negro,’ means that he engaged in sexual relations with someone inferior, someone less than human. In short, Davis’s crime was not fornication, but bestiality.” Kathleen Brown argues, “The main difference between the treatment of Davis’s case and that of other fornication cases was the description of his sin as defiling, a term justices would not have used to describe the sexual interaction of two English people.”<sup>8</sup>

Contrary to Jordan, Kevin Mumford suggests that Hugh was black, insisting that “it is not possible to prove that Hugh was a white man; no extant sources list his racial background or color.” Mumford takes issue with Brown and Higginbotham’s interpretations, arguing, “Though Brown and Higginbotham rightly identified the significance of the assembly’s choice of terms,

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<sup>6</sup> Without undermining the historical experiences of racism or sexism, I attempt to follow the “challenges” Peggy Pascoe maps out in her essay, “Race, Gender, and Intercultural Relations: The Case of Interracial Marriage,” *Frontiers* 12.1 (1991): 6, particularly the second one: “the challenge of learning to see race, as well as gender, as a social construction.”

<sup>7</sup> A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., *Shades of Freedom: Racial Politics and Presumptions of the American Legal Process* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 20-21.

<sup>8</sup> Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1968): 78; Higginbotham, *Shades of Freedom*,



‘defiling’ does not refer to bestiality or signify miscegenation; it signifies a religious context.”

Although citing Jordan and Brown, Anthony S. Parent, Jr. ignores Higginbotham and Mumford in his analysis of the Davis case in his 2003 book, writing, “As early as 1630, the court sentenced Hugh Davis, a white man, to be ‘soundly whipt before an assembly of negroes and others’ for ‘abusing himself’ and ‘defiling’ his body by copulating with a Negro.” Thus, without conclusive data regarding Davis’s racial identity or the exact crime he committed, the debate over whether Davis is the first case of racism or recognition of racial variances continues.<sup>9</sup>

The second case historians mention involves Robert Sweatt (1640) who was punished for impregnating a Negro woman who served another white man. The court report reads: “[T]he said Negro woman shall be whipt at the whipping post and the said *Sweat* shall tomorrow in the forenoon do public penance for his offence at James city church in the time of devine service according to the laws of England in that case p[r]ovided.” A third example historians mention is that of Elizabeth Key (1656) who was the daughter of an enslaved woman and a white man. After her father’s death in 1636, Key was sold into service and served two people until 1655. That year, Key sued for her freedom, claiming that her father was a free man, she had been baptized, and that her term of service had expired. Key later married her white attorney.<sup>10</sup>

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21; and Kathleen Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 195.

<sup>9</sup> Kevin Mumford, “After Hugh: Statutory Race Segregation in Colonial America, 1630-1725,” *American Journal of Legal History* 43 (1999): 281; *Ibid.*, 283; and Anthony S. Parent, Jr., *Foul Means: The Formation of a Slave Society in Virginia, 1660-1740* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 108; Historians grapple with Davis’s race, see e.g., Kevin Mumford’s piece for discussion of this aspect of the Davis case.

<sup>10</sup> Higginbotham, *Shades of Freedom*, 22; Sweatt’s name is sometimes spelled Sweet, or Sweat in historians’ accounts of his case [“Sweatt” by Mumford; “Sweet” by Jordan, *White Over Black*, 79, Charles F. Robinson II, *Dangerous Liaisons: Sex and Love in the Segregated South* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2003), 3, and Karen A. Getman, “Sexual Control in the Slaveholding South: The Implementation and Maintenance of a Racial Caste System,” *Harvard Women’s Law Journal* 7.1 (Spring 1984): 115-152; “Sweat” by Higginbotham, *Shades of Freedom*, 22, and Arthur P. Scott, *Criminal Law in Colonial Virginia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1930): 281.] An example of a historian who uses all three cases is found in Parent, Jr., *Foul Means*. For the Key case see, Warren M. Billings, “The Cases of Fernando and Elizabeth Key: A Note on the Status of Blacks in Seventeenth-Century Virginia,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 30.3 (July 1973): 467-474. For more on Key, see Warren M. Billings, ed. *The Old Dominion in the Seventeenth Century: A Documentary History of Virginia, 1606-1689* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina

Analysis of these three cases allows historians to trace the beginnings of legal segregation of the races. The question of the status of biracial children demonstrated in the Key case was answered by the General Assembly in December 1662 when the body passed an act entitled, "Negro womens children to serve according to the condition of the mother." The statute read:

WHEREAS some doubts have arrisen whether children got by any Englishman upon a negro woman should be slave or ffree, *Be it therefore enacted and declared by this present grand assembly*, that all children borne in this country shalbe held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother, *And* that if any christian shall committ ffornication with a negro man or woman, hee or shee soe offending shall pay double the ffines imposed by the former act.

The statute came from civil law and made clear that children would inherit the status of their mother under the principle *partus sequitur ventrem*. Thomas D. Morris explains that this principle, "Crudely translated, it means that the status of the child derives from its mother." This contrasted with English common law where children inherited their status from their father following *partus sequitur partem*.<sup>11</sup>

In his book, *A Completely New Look at Interracial Sexuality* (1990), Lawrence R. Tenzer argues, "This was a very important law because it established the legal precedence of *partus sequitur ventrem*, that is, the child follows the social status of the mother." A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr. and Barbara Kopytoff maintain that *partus sequitur ventrem* was contrary to English tradition, as children normally inherited the status of their fathers. Obviously, then, this statute was constructed in part to allow white slaveowners to increase and condense their property rather than to forfeit or divide it in dowries and inheritance. Such a law also implicitly acknowledged the commonality of rape by masters of their slaves and followed gendered patterns of power.<sup>12</sup>

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Press, 1975), 165-169; and Warren M. Billings, "The Law of Servants and Slaves in Seventeenth-Century Virginia," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 99.1 (January 1991): 45-62.

<sup>11</sup> William Waller Hening, *Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of all the Laws of Virginia II* (New York: R. & W. & G Bartow, 1823), 170; and Thomas D. Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law, 1619-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 43.

<sup>12</sup> Lawrence R. Tenzer, *A Completely New Look at Interracial Sexuality: Public Opinion and Select Commentaries* (Manahawkin, NJ: Scholars' Publishing House, 1990), 58; and A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr. and Barbara K. Kopytoff, "Racial Purity and Interracial Sex in the Law of Colonial and Antebellum Virginia," *Georgetown Law Journal* 77.6 (August 1989): 1971, note 20. The statute also controlled white women's sexuality.

Werner Sollors describes the larger impact of the law, stating that "Whiteness was thus symbolically identified as the color of all possible origins (and freedom), blackness (into which interracial identity was often folded) as the source of only black origins (and slavery)." Therefore, in 1662, Blackness already had the stigma of pollution, while whiteness was considered pure. Sollors also reviews the strain that *partus sequitur ventrem* had on familial relationships. People attempting to live as interracial families, for instance, often faced devastating obstacles since members of the same family were treated differently under the law.<sup>13</sup>

Exploring the implementation of the 1662 statute, Morris suggests that evaluating Elizabeth Key's case is important to understanding the reasoning behind lawmakers passage of this statute, arguing

Heavy fines and the liability for raising a child could have been a deterrent to fornication between white men and slave woman just as well as adopting the rule that status derived from the mother, if that was what the burgesses were concerned about. But the record in Elizabeth Key's case just six years before the rule was adopted ought to make us pause. She was unquestionably mulatto, and yet not only was she declared free, but also she married her white attorney without any apparent sanctions. Still, there is no doubt that white Virginian lawmakers were concerned about race mixing.

Morris' analysis suggests that the lawmakers were interested in preventing interracial sex, producing more slaves, and delineating boundaries between slavery and freedom.<sup>14</sup>

Morris argues that "property" was a factor in play with "race" when the law was constructed,

If the burgesses were thinking of the mulatto as a person, the law of bastardy would hold that the child followed the mother, which is what the statute provided. If they were thinking of the mulatto in terms of property rights, chattel property law required that the increase go to the owner of the mother, and, in essence, that is also what the law stated.

Property rights were significant, particularly when they involved slave labor or as Morris suggests slaves as property. Still, as Kathleen Brown states, "in the absence of precise legal definitions of 'negro,' the offspring of African and English people threatened to disturb the racial categories emerging in legal discourse and muddle their use in everyday life." Eventually, states

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<sup>13</sup> Werner Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 43.

quantified who would be considered black through the use of elaborate systems of categorization. The “one-drop rule,” defining anyone with any known African ancestry as black, became a way of defining who was non-white.<sup>15</sup>

Similar to *partus sequitur ventrem*, F. James Davis traces the one-drop rule back to slavery but argues, “The one-drop rule did not become uniformly accepted until during the 1920s.” Thus, which parent was black and which was white and where a person was born determined the race and the status (slave or free) of a mixed-race child. After the acceptance of the one-drop rule, one’s birthplace and which parent was black became irrelevant, as mixed-race children were declared black.<sup>16</sup>

Beginning in Maryland in 1661, many colonies and then states passed acts prohibiting interracial marriage. People continued to have interracial relations, and people “passed” between races for economic and social reasons. Mary Frances Berry provides an example of one of the people who chose to cross the color line,

The willingness of some white women to consort with black men was shocking to white sensibilities—but not unknown. A Virginia woman in 1815 refused to apologize for giving birth to a mulatto, saying that “she had not been the first nor would she be the last guilty of such conduct, and that she saw no harm in a white woman’s having been the mother of a black child than in a white man’s having one, though the latter was more frequent.

As the mother here exemplifies, some white people engaged in relations across the color line openly and unapologetically.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law*, 44-45.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*; Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs*, 133. For the “one-drop rule,” see F. James Davis, *Who is Black?: One Nation’s Definition* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991); and Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995 [1980]).

<sup>16</sup> Davis, *What Color is Black?*, 31; note that different states had different customs and laws regarding race and status.

<sup>17</sup> Werner Sollors provides a useful list of “Prohibitions of Interracial Marriage and Cohabitation” in his book *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both*, see Appendix B. Mary Frances Berry, *The Pig Farmer’s Daughter and Other Tales of American Justice: Episodes of Racism and Sexism in the Courts from 1865 to the Present* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 25.

In her book *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, Patricia J. Williams observes the dissonance in the public imagination of a white mother and her black child in the United States of America.

Williams asks rhetorically,

Is there not something unseemly, in our society, about the spectacle of a white woman mothering a black child? A white woman giving totally to a black child; a black child totally demandingly dependent for everything, sustenance itself, from a white woman. The image of a white woman suckling a black child; the image of a black child suckling for its life from the bosom of a white woman. The utter interdependence of such an image; the merging it implies; the giving up of boundary; the encompassing of other within self; the unbounded generosity and interconnectedness of such an image. Such a picture says there is no difference; it places the hope of continuous generation, of immortality of the white self, in a little black face.

Williams identifies the root of the discomfort felt by many regarding interracial relationships to be the disregard for racial categories in a country weaned on them.<sup>18</sup>

As she keenly suggests, the connection between white mother and black child presents a crossed boundary. The bond Williams acknowledges symbolizes the “hybridity” of American culture between two bodies that are not supposed to be interdependent. According to prior U.S. racial categorization, white people can give birth to black children while black people cannot give birth to white children. For more than 200 years, however, women of African descent were frequently wet nurses to white children. The reverse was not the case. The dissonance Williams observes, therefore, has little to do with the Census and much to do with social expectation that discouraged interracial relationships between white women and black men and conceived of racial whiteness as pure by definition.

Harkening back to the Key case and the doubts over the status of biracial children in 1662, children from interracial relationships were seen as threatening the racial *status quo* by some people. Legal and social segregation from slavery to Jim Crow was rationalized by the need for the maintenance of the “purity” of the white race. Mulatto (half-black and half-white) children under slavery blurred slavery’s dependence on “pure blacks” by “pure whites” and challenged the black equals slave and white equals master dichotomy. The phenotype of the children

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<sup>18</sup> Patricia J. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 226-7.

undermined slavery's reliance on the color and physical divide between people of European and African descent. Familial connections between slave and master threatened the legal and social hierarchy. At the time, questions of freedom and inheritance highlighted the tangled web of power, resistance, and the color line. In instances where biracial children were legally permitted, science and societal condemnation discouraged interracial coupling and reproduction because offspring would be "tragic mulattoes"—those children caught between separate cultural worlds because of their dual racial heritage and subsequently "doomed." The threat would later take a different form signified in the "what about the children?" question used to discourage interracial relations during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>19</sup>

The voices and actions of people involved in interracial families provide windows into the dynamics of race, class, and gender in personal and institutional levels for historians to look through and interpret. Here are three examples. First, in her essay, "On the Lowest Rung: Court Control over Poor White and Free Black Women," Victoria Bynum takes the reader back to April 8, 1861 and presents the legal activities of Susan Williford, a poor, white, mother of six illegitimate children, four of them fathered by a free black man. Williford sued for the return of her two young daughters who had been taken by two planters and placed in apprenticeships. Bynum describes Williford's status and fate,

Although Susan Williford, a white woman, might truthfully argue that she loved and took good care of her children, the fact that they were also the illegitimate offspring of a racially mixed union labeled her a social deviant incapable of raising her children properly. For committing the crime of miscegenation she was reduced, in a legal sense, to the lowest rung in the Southern social hierarchy outside of slavery—a position usually reserved for the free black woman.

Bynum utilizes Williford's case to explain the role of gender, class, race, and sex in the South. Bynum states, "From childhood to middle age, Susan Williford's life presents a microcosm of the response of Southern courts to women who contradicted the sexual and racial constructs of a slave-based white patriarchy." In her analysis, Bynum presents legal data to prove that women

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<sup>19</sup> For discussion of the "tragic mulatto" see Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both*; and Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in*

who operated outside the norms of acceptable gender constricted, class appropriate behavior were punished.<sup>20</sup>

The “crime of miscegenation” that Bynum reports continued to cause white women to lose their children as reported by Renee Romano in her essay, “‘Immoral Conduct’: White Women, Racial Transgressions, and Custody Disputes.” Romano focuses on twenty-five child custody disputes where white mothers lost custody of their white children after marrying black men between 1945 and 1985. Romano argues that courts weighed the preference for maternal custody versus the women’s racial transgressions. Romano suggests that the cases demonstrate: the willingness of courts to remove white children from their interracial married white mothers, the construction of gender and racial identities, and the use of custody as punishment of white women.<sup>21</sup>

Romano’s analysis reveals the racist ideology portrayed in the courts’ rulings. Under the guise of “protecting the children,” the courts removed these children to keep their whiteness intact. I would argue they did this to punish white women who did not honor racial custom. While racial purity was clearly at stake, so was patriarchy. Under this logic, one cannot allow white women to choose anyone but white men. In the same vein as women who had transgressed racial boundaries earlier, Romano expresses the court’s thinking: “Since subjection to an interracial home so endangered white children, women who intermarried were viewed as selfish and self-centered experiences.” After the 1967 Supreme Court *Loving v. Virginia* ruling which struck down anti-miscegenation laws, the tone of the reasoning of the courts shifted from racial reasoning to one of gender rationale: “These women lost custody, not because they married

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*American Films* (New York: Continuum, 1994). Note that Louisiana with its French and Spanish influence stands as a cultural exception to the rigidity of racial distinctions.

<sup>20</sup> Victoria Bynum, “On the Lowest Rung: Court Control over Poor White and Free Black Women,” *Southern Exposure* 12 (November-December 1984): 40; and *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Renee Romano, “‘Immoral Conduct’: White Women, Racial Transgressions, and Custody Disputes,” in *“Bad” Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America*, ed. Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky (New York: New York University Press, 1998): 230-251.

black men, but because they were 'bad' mothers." The defense of maintenance of the power of whiteness is exhibited in the courts' reasoning.<sup>22</sup>

Notably, there is a shift between the women who Bynum examines and those examined by Romano. Romano explains, "While associating with blacks could call a white woman's fitness as a mother of white children into question, courts have consistently upheld the right of white mothers to raise their own biracial children." Thus, at least during the period under review by Romano, 1945-1985, the threat of losing their children for having biracial babies was not imposed by the courts. Nonetheless, white women who had biracial children still faced stigmatization and the loss of white privilege.<sup>23</sup>

A more recent example comes from Lisa Page. Page writes of the experiences she and her parents had as an interracial family in an essay entitled "High Yellow White Trash." In her essay, Page recalls her parents' beliefs on race. She comments that her white mother did not speak as freely as her black father about race. Yet, she contends that her mother "knew that she had given up something by marrying my father." Page narrates her mother's recollection of the day Lisa was born in Chicago in the 1950s:

The day I was born, in 1956, she was wheeled into the colored maternity section of what is now the University of Chicago Hospital. Because she was white, the hospital staff hadn't put her there initially, when she went into labor. After my arrival, they relegated her accordingly. My mother lost a piece of her identity that day: her status as a white woman, something she'd taken for granted throughout her life. Now she had given birth to a biracial baby. She was guilty by association; she was stained, privileged no more.

Through her vivid description, Lisa Page chronicles her mother's loss of status in a concrete fashion. Rather than Lisa being declared white by the hospital, in the spirit of *partus sequitur ventrem*, Page's mother's status shifts, as she is wheeled into a different place.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Romano, "'Immoral Conduct': White Women, Racial Transgressions, and Custody Disputes," 245; *Loving v. Virginia*, 388 U.S. 1 (1967); and Romano, "Immoral Conduct," 245.

<sup>23</sup> Romano, "Immoral Conduct," 243.

<sup>24</sup> Lisa Page, "High Yellow White Trash," in *Skin Deep: Black Women and White Women Write About Race*, ed. Marita Golden and Susan Richards Shreve (New York: Doubleday, 1995): 14.



Page's mother does not recognize her white privilege until it is lost. Even though more whites are becoming aware of white privilege, it is difficult for many whites to imagine the psychological pain of such an abrupt loss of standing that Page's mother underwent. Of her mother Page says, "To her credit [she] . . . never let on how much this disturbed her while I was a child. It was only later, during my adolescence, that she revealed how much this had hurt her." Page's parents divorced in 1963 and Page continued to live with her mother, now dealing with her mother's resentment of her daughter's mixed heritage.<sup>25</sup>

Post-*Loving*, the legal barriers preventing interracial marriage were lifted but the social resistance remained. In his book, *The Color of Water* (1996), James McBride chronicles the experiences of his white Jewish mother, Ruth, whose family treated her as dead when she married his black father. Similarly, in her memoir *How I Became Hettie Jones* (1990), Hettie Jones chronicles her transformation from a single Jewish woman, Hettie Cohen, to interracial-married, Hettie Jones, the wife of poet LeRoi Jones (later known as Amiri Baraka). Hettie Jones recalls that after a visit home, her mother sent her a letter predicting that Jones "would suffer and pay every minute of [her] life—those [were] her exact words—for the kind of life [I] had chosen." Because of their interracial partnerships their families condemned McBride and Jones.<sup>26</sup>

Familial condemnation and societal condemnation reveal a thread of connection in the books and interviews with the white parents of biracial and black children that are reviewed in this dissertation. The "what about the children?" concern expressed by some relatives and members of society is addressed through these white parents' stories, but not in the way opponents of interracial marriage suspected. Although some of the individuals do have black partners and discuss how these partnerships influenced their viewpoints and experiences, it is

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. Two important essays on whiteness that discuss white privilege in a historical context are: Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106.8 (June 1993): 1710-1791; and Ariela J. Gross, "Litigating Whiteness: Trials of Racial Determination in the Nineteenth-Century South," *Yale Law Journal* 108.1 (October 1998): 109-188.

<sup>26</sup> James McBride, *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996); and Hettie Jones, *How I Became Hettie Jones* (New York: Grove Press, 1990), 190.

the parenting experience that shifts their beliefs, worldview, and even their sense of racial identity. Historically, a parent's race has legally influenced the status of their biological child, as seen with Virginia's 1662 statute. In this dissertation, I show how a child's race has also impacted his or her parents, whether they are biologically related or not. For instance, the fines or periods of service white women faced as punishment for giving birth to "mulatto" children during slavery. They were punished as women for being race traitors. Although their social status may have changed, the legal racial classification of these white women was not altered.<sup>27</sup>

Recently, there has been a resurgence of the idea of reexamining the racial identity of multiracial children so that the racial backgrounds of birthparents are recognized within the child's status. The most recent U.S. Census's encouragement to "mark all that apply" next to racial categorization reveals the first cultural shifts in the post-*Loving* American landscape. Newly recognized multiracial persons have also lobbied for changes on school forms, job and school applications, and any other forms that inquire about one's race.<sup>28</sup>

Midge Wilson and Kathy Russell provide some statistics on black/white biracial children in their book *Divided Sisters: Bridging the Gap Between Black Women and White Women* (1996):

Statistics derived from the 1990 census indicated that approximately four out of every thousand couples, or 211,000 marriages in the United States that year, were racially mixed, Black and White. Just twenty years earlier, only 1.5 thousand marriages were mixed this way. The number of biracial offspring has similarly risen, from an estimated 8700 births in 1969 to nearly 45,000 in 1989.

The authors contend that the figures are probably not accurate because "biracial babies born to unwed mothers are classified as monoracial." It should be noted that interracial marriage was prohibited in many states until anti-miscegenation statutes were declared unconstitutional by the

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<sup>27</sup> Jane Lazarre, *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness: Memoir of a White Mother of Black Sons* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996): 129-130; see e.g., Kenneth James Lay, "Sexual Racism: A Legacy of Slavery," *National Black Law Journal* 13, no. 1&2 (Spring 1993): 165-83; and Getman, "Sexual Control in the Slaveholding South." Please note that some white parents are adoptive parents and do not necessarily have black partners.

<sup>28</sup> For the "multiracial movement" see e.g., Maria P.P. Root, ed., *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996); Naomi Zack, ed., *American Mixed Race: The Culture of Microdiversity* (Lanham, MD: Rowman &

Supreme Court in *Loving v. Virginia* in 1967. At the time, sixteen states still had anti-miscegenation laws. Wilson and Russell concede that the statistics may be inaccurate but they suggest that the inaccuracy may be undercounting the number of interracial relationships and the number of biracial children. The point is that the numbers of both interracial unions and biracial children is growing. Interestingly, black and white interracial marriages remain one of the smallest groupings of interracial coupling. It is important to note that biracial children include children of various racial heritages from different generations. Quantifying who is multiracial is part of the political debate that surrounds race. Rather than fixating on the numbers, focusing on the lives, experiences, and beliefs of individual white parents of biracial or black children is one important way of exploring race and racial identity.<sup>29</sup>

In the introduction to her edited collection of essays *Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History*, Martha Hodes brings together a diverse collection of historical essays on multiracial happenings. Part of Hodes's introduction serves as the epigraph to this chapter. Here, Hodes recounts the varied lived experiences of people who attempted to negotiate racial spheres. Similarly, Peggy Pascoe argues:

For scholars interested in the social construction of race, gender, and culture, few subjects are as potentially revealing as the history of interracial marriage. Clearly, the phenomenon of interracial marriage involves the making and remaking of notions of race, gender, and culture in individual lives, as well as at the level of social and political policy. Yet, the potential of the subject has barely been tapped.

As Hodes and Pascoe indicate, unmasking the subtleties of interracial relations provides more accurate information to the historical record. Locating the identities, choices, and forced situations of the people involved in interracial unions acts to clarify the historical record of

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Littlefield, 1995); and Rainier Spencer, *Spurious Issues: Race and Multiracial Identity Politics in the United States* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999).

<sup>29</sup> Midge Wilson and Kathy Russell, *Divided Sisters: Bridging the Gap Between Black Women and White Women* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996), 232-3; and *Loving v. Virginia*. For a discussion of mixed heritage, see Kendra R. Wallace, *Relative/Outsider: The Art and Politics of Identity Among Mixed Heritage Students* (Westport, CT: Ablex Publishing, 2001).

interracial rape (that most rapes are intraracial), the notion of “color-blind” love, and the myth of dysfunctional children.<sup>30</sup>

In reviewing historical and legal scholarship on “miscegenation,” scholars pair the “mulatto” as its twin subject in U.S. historiography. Thus, when it comes to locating sources these subjects must be researched in tandem. Until recently, little synthesis work had been done on the topics of miscegenation or mulattoes. In 1918, Carter G. Woodson published an article in the *Journal of Negro History* entitled, “The Beginnings of the Miscegenation of the Whites and Blacks,” where he offers a comparative worldwide look at the mixing of blacks with various white ethnic groups. That same year, Edward Byron Reuter was the first to publish a book-length study on mulattoes, his University of Chicago sociology department dissertation entitled, *The Mulatto in the United States: Including a Study of the Role of Mixed-Blood Races Throughout the World*. In this racial project, Reuter embraces the notion of the “tragic mulatto” and argues for white purity. Reuter followed-up his first-book with another entitled, *Race Mixture; Studies in Inter-marriage and Miscegenation* (193). Reuter’s extensive, pioneering work on mixed-race people and miscegenation was quite influential in the field of sociology and therefore should not be ignored.<sup>31</sup>

Joel Williamson contributed the next major work to the area of study with the 1980 publication of his book *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States*. Examining the upper and lower Souths, the North, and using Census data, Williamson charts the chronological rise of miscegenation from the colonial period onward. He argues that mulattoes

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<sup>30</sup> Peggy Pascoe, “Race, Gender, and Intercultural Relations: The Case of Interracial Marriage,” *Frontiers* 12.1 (1991), 5; Martha Hodes, “Introduction: Interconnecting and Diverging Narratives,” in *Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History*, ed. Martha Hodes (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 1.

<sup>31</sup> Carter G. Woodson, “The Beginnings of the Miscegenation of the Whites and Blacks,” *Journal of Negro History* 3.4 (October 1918), 335-353; Edward Byron Reuter, Reuter, *The Mulatto in the United States: Including a Study of the Role of Mixed-Blood Races Throughout the World* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969 [1918]); and Edward Reuter, *Race Mixture; Studies in Inter-marriage and Miscegenation* (1931; reprinted in New York, NY: Negro Universities Press, 1969).

became a “new people” in the lower South before 1850, holding a middle ground between slaves and whites.<sup>32</sup>

History is one the discipline that still lacks in addressing multiracial issues. In a 1996 *Historical Journal* review of historian Joel Williamson’s book, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (1995), reviewer Timothy J. Lockley notes that Williamson’s work is a reprint from 1980 and mentions:

At that time Williamson was the first scholar to address seriously the issues facing mixed race mulattoes in the United States. It is a testimony to the weakness of this field of historical study, that sixteen years later, Williamson’s book remains the only one to discuss mulattoes as a specific social group. Williamson’s central concept is that, by the nineteenth century, mulattoes had become a ‘new people’ in the South, neither black nor white, and consequently forged their own culture. In this sense mulattoes verified the prejudices of white southerners, who believed that the prime determinant of an individual’s character was colour. However, the mulatto divorce from both white and black society weakened and eventually crumbled during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Since Lockley’s 1996 review, no historical text has appeared. A considerable amount of academic work on the multiracial experience has appeared recently, yet a twenty-five year gap remains when looking at the historical experiences of biracial and multiracial people. This dissertation, largely exploratory in nature, takes a life history approach. History is used to contextualize and frame the experiences and beliefs of the informants.<sup>33</sup>

From the “mulatto” as a Census category to the “one-drop rule” to “octoroons” to “multiracial,” racial distinctions have shifted over time. Indeed, the fixed nature of racial groups is a dubious notion. Accordingly, scholars lack the language to fully capture the experiences that have occurred. They have approached contemporary studies of race through whiteness studies and multiracial studies, two areas that I explore in the next chapter.

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<sup>32</sup> Williamson, *New People*.

<sup>33</sup> Timothy J. Lockley, “The Changing South?: From Slavery to Sunbelt,” *The Historical Journal* 39.4 (December 1996): 1109.

## CHAPTER TWO: CONTEMPORARY LOCATION

That my son, Luke, age four, goes to Chinese-culture school seems inevitable to most people, even though his father is of Irish descent. For certain ethnicities trump others; Chinese, for example, trumps Irish. This has something to do with the relative distance of certain cultures from mainstream American culture, but it also has to do with race. For as we all know, it is not only certain ethnicities that trump others but certain colors: black trumps white, for example, always and forever; a mulatto is not a kind of white person, but a kind of black person.

Gish Jen, "An Ethnic Trump"<sup>34</sup>

During the spring of 2002, I was at a social gathering and observed Brian, a senior in college, answer that "what next?" question that burns the ears of graduating seniors. Brian was a pre-medicine major and was waiting to hear about the status of his admission to medical school. He spoke of his recent shadowing of a doctor at a local hospital. Brian explained that one night in the emergency room he watched as a doctor told the parents of a twenty-year-old that their son had died because of a drug overdose. Before the doctor could get the words out, the shaken and teary-eyed mother said, "Please don't tell me he's gone. We lost our daughter this summer in a car accident and I cannot take losing both my children." The experience of informing the parents of their life-altering loss was both sad and powerful to Brian.

Besides the tragedy involved, the story intrigues me because of the huge transformation that occurred. Within a year, these two adults who had considered themselves parents as a primary marker of their identities had lost both of their children. Surely, they had planned to be grandparents and expected a future that involved their children's lives. Yet after twenty-two years of parenting this aspect of their lives had changed. Hearing this story encouraged me to think about other life-altering transformations that people experience. Identity transformations that are chosen and not chosen, welcomed or tragic capture the public's imagination from Pygmalion to ABC's *Extreme Makeover*.

Several in-depth reports of identity change have also appeared lately. Consider four examples that relate to the people studied in this dissertation. The first example comes from

Wayne Joseph, a 51-year-old high school principal in Chino, CA. Joseph saw a profile on television regarding a company that could measure one's ethnic ancestry by DNA. Joseph's family is of Creole background and Joseph was raised and has lived his life as a black man in America. He faced race discrimination, experienced black power complete with an afro hairdo, wrote about blackness in such publications as *Newsweek* magazine, and raised his two children to be proud of their black identity. Because of his mixed Creole ancestry and light skin complexion Joseph was intrigued to find out how much of his background was African so he participated in the DNA test.<sup>35</sup>

Joseph's results came back reporting that he was "zero" percent African. On an ABC *Nightline* profile of his experience, Joseph states that when you "Define yourself one way then at 50 there are results that say you are something else it does rock your world." Joseph's children were surprised and the experiences prompted him to inquire about his background with his relatives. According to media reports, Joseph is writing a book on his experience. In an interview, Joseph reflects, "The question ultimately is, are you who you say you are, or are you who you are genetically?"<sup>36</sup>

The second example comes from Gregory Howard Williams, dean of the Ohio State University College of Law. In 1995, 51-year-old Williams published his memoir, *Life on the Color Line: The True Story of a White Boy Who Discovered He Was Black*. For the reader, Williams recounts his experiences growing up in the early 1950s in Virginia with a white mother and a black father who was "passing" for white. Williams' father ran both a tavern that catered to soldiers at Fort Belvoir, Virginia and a septic tank business, providing a middle-class lifestyle for his family. The

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<sup>34</sup> Gish Jen, "An Ethnic Trump," in *Half and Half: Writers on Growing Up Biracial and Bicultural*, ed. Claudine Chiawei O'Hearn (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 265.

<sup>35</sup> Erin Aubry Kaplan, "Black Like I Thought I Was," *LA Weekly*, 7 October 2003. 19 October 2003 <<http://www.alternet.org>>.

<sup>36</sup> "American in Black and White: A Question of Identity," *Nightline*, 21 November 2003; Kaplan, "Black Like I Thought I Was," 3.

businesses eventually failed, as did the marriage of Williams' parents. Williams' mother fled with her two youngest children, leaving Williams and his brother with their alcoholic father.<sup>37</sup>

At age ten, the three Williams men boarded a Greyhound bus from Virginia to Muncie, Indiana to live with Gregory's paternal grandmother. During the bus ride, Williams' father explained that this black woman who had previously visited was really his mother and "that makes you part colored, too" and that "Life is going to be different from now on. In Virginia you were white boys. In Indiana you're going to be colored boys. I want you to remember that you're the same today that you were yesterday. But people in Indiana will treat you differently." In a chapter entitled "Learning How to Be Niggers" Williams writes of his transformation from enjoying the social and educational privileges of whiteness to living as a poor black child.<sup>38</sup>

The 2003 film *The Human Stain* and 2000 novel by the same name were written by Philip Roth and serve as a third, fictional, example. In this story, the protagonist, Coleman Silk, is a professor of classics and former dean of a small New England college in 1998. As dean, Silk raised the academic stature of the college. Kathleen Pfeiffer succinctly explains that after transforming the college, the character of

Silk returns to teaching classics prior to what he expects will be a well-deserved, honorable retirement. But his sense of honor is altered one day when, in expressing his frustration about the absence of two students who have never once been to class, he asks the class as a whole, 'Does anyone know these people? Do they exist or are they spooks?' That Silk had no way of knowing the two absentees were African American students who would be deeply offended by what they would consider a racial insult proved an insufficient defense. The college community turned against him, shunned him utterly, and Silk became a scapegoat in the cause of racial sensitivity.

Pfeiffer sums up the main plot of the story.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Gregory Howard Williams, *Life on the Color Line: The True Story of a White Boy Who Discovered He Was Black* (New York: Dutton, 1995). "Passing" here refers to a person who knowingly allows others to assume or who presents himself or herself to belong to a different racial group than the one to which he or she believes that they belong. Since questions of race are murky, particularly around questions of agency and authenticity, it is a problematic concept. It also assumes that race exists, as people are moving between existing racial groups.

<sup>38</sup> Williams, *Life on the Color Line*, 33.

<sup>39</sup> Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (New York: Vintage International, 2001 [2000]); and Kathleen Pfeiffer, *Race Passing and American Individualism* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 148.



Silk has a secret he has kept for fifty years. He has lived as a white Jewish man while he was “really” black. Silk does not disclose his identity to his wife or their children and severs all contact with his black family. Rather than reveal his identity in his defense against the racism charges, Silk departs from the school and the plot thickens. His wife dies from the shock of hearing of the racism accusation and Silk’s resignation. And at age 71, Silk has a Viagra-assisted affair with a 34-year-old cleaning lady. Roth plays off the political correctness (p.c.) of the 1990s, the backlash to the p.c., the affair between U.S. President William Jefferson Clinton and Monica Lewinsky, as well as Clinton’s subsequent impeachment trial.

In many respects, Roth’s novel is a poor remake of the passing novels of the Harlem Renaissance period in African American literature. Roth sensationalizes the power of race. He correctly suggests that even the implication of racism can alter one’s standing, yet he does not provide context for understanding this phenomenon. He fails to convincingly present the rationale for racial passing. In other words, Roth shows the privileges of living as a white academic, but he does not show the racism faced by the black community that his protagonist leaves. Accordingly, his portrayal of his protagonist’s racial identity as a “secret” is problematic for its political and social implications.

A brief comment in the “Weddings/Celebrations” section of *The New York Times* stands as the final example. In announcing the wedding of Tarnisha Antoinette “Téa” Graves and Matthew Phineas Previn, son of actress Mia Farrow and her second husband conductor André Previn, *Times* writer Shannon Donnelly explains that Ms. Graves, who is black, was reluctant to become involved with Mr. Previn, who is white, quoting her as saying, “I had my doubts about a biracial relationship.” Graves visits with Previn’s “multicultural family,” who Donnelly describes as Asian, black, white, and some members with serious handicaps, and decides, “That weekend, I saw that his family was so diverse that race would not really become an issue.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Shannon Donnelly, “Téa Graves and Matthew Previn,” *The New York Times*, 3 August 2003: Section 9: 9.

At one point, she and Ms. Farrow were speaking about the racial composition of Bridgewater, Ms. Graves recalled, "She said to me, 'We're one of only two black families in Bridgewater.' And I looked at this woman with her blond hair and blue eyes and I laughed, and then suddenly she realized what she had said, and she started laughing, too." Mia Farrow's remark about her family being a black family suggests that the racial status of her black children takes precedence over her own racial status as a white woman. In other words, the fact that some of Farrow's children are black prompts Farrow to consider her family as black.<sup>41</sup>

As noted above, Gish Jen argues that in U.S. culture race "trumps" ethnicity, and black "trumps" yellow, brown, and red as most problematic in the complex ideology of white supremacy. Although she is Chinese and her husband is Irish, their son, Luke, is seen as Chinese rather than Irish or as a mixture of both. Similarly, Farrow's whiteness is trumped—that is to say her familial status is recoded and perhaps her adopted black children diminish her white privilege.

Farrow and her soon to be daughter-in-law laugh at Farrow's remark. Farrow's "slip" may be read as an embrace of her black daughter-in-law and a denial of their differences. Her "slip" also points to the larger issue of the lack of language to discuss the complexity of race, particularly as we become an increasingly racially and culturally mixed society. Jen's usage of "trump" alludes to the idea of "hypodescent," where people who are multiracial are classified in the subordinate group of the racial hierarchy. Related to hypodescent is the notion of the "one-drop rule." F. James Davis defines the "one-drop rule" as "[t]he nation's answer to the question 'Who is black?' has long been that a black is any person with *any* known African black ancestry." The tradition of classifying individuals according to the "one-drop" rule emerged from slavery so that slaveholders could increase their number of slaves and maintain a racially segregated society.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> See for an anthropological discussion of "hypodescent" Marvin Harris, *Patterns of Race in the Americas* (New York: Walker and Company, 1964), 37, 56. For the "one-drop rule," see F.

## RACE

We are obsessed with race in the United States of America. From discoveries of politicians' secret biracial children to public figures' racist comments, from the hybridity of culture represented in popular culture, food, clothing, and sports to the continuation of segregation in schools, region, and housing to shifts in racial categorization embodied in Census 2000's shift, from a "check one" to a "mark all that apply" race question, we continue to grapple with understanding, deconstructing, and learning about and from race. Inequity in the U.S.A. is often linked with race in the form of racism. "Trumping," "hypodescent," "the one-drop rule," and "passing" showcase the absurdity and illogic of race.

Three scholars provide commentary on race, stating:

Anyone who continues to believe in race as a physical attribute of individuals, despite the now commonplace disclaimers of biologists and geneticists, might as well also believe that Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and the tooth fairy are real, and that the earth stands still while the sun moves.

Barbara Jeanne Fields<sup>43</sup>

"Race" does indeed exist and should be viewed not as something biologically tangible and existing in the outside world that has to be discovered, described, and defined but as a cultural creation, a product of human invention like fairies, leprechauns, banshees, ghosts, and werewolves.

Audrey Smedley<sup>44</sup>

To argue that race is a myth and that is an ideological rather than a biological fact does not deny that ideology has real effects on people's lives.

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham<sup>45</sup>

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James Davis, *Who is Black?: One Nation's Definition* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991). For a creative interpretation of the importance of the "one-drop rule," see Walter Benn Michaels, "The No Drop Rule," in *Identities*, ed. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., 401-12, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>43</sup> Barbara Jeanne Fields, "Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States of America," *New Left Review* 181 (May/June 1990): 96.

<sup>44</sup> Audrey Smedley, *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 6.

<sup>45</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 17.2 (Winter 1992): 255.

In the first quotation above, Barbara Jeanne Fields explains that in the United States of America the fiction of race as a "physical attribute" is recognized. In the second quotation, Audrey Smedley suggests that race is culturally "created." Although the concept of race may be fiction, race continues to have real consequences in the form of racism and discrimination, as suggested by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, in the third quotation. Often, people cannot define what "race" is or how it works; rather, they operate on stereotypes of racial groups to determine the race of others. Ian F. Haney López contends, "Walking down the street, our minds consistently rely on pervasive social mythologies to assign races to other pedestrians." As a result of this lack of an ability to define race, observers utilize "social mythologies" to categorize each other. In other words, which race a person belongs to is generally determined by how he or she looks. I argue that other markers of identity are also assigned using social mythologies when people are first seen. Simply stated, often when people enter a room they are assigned to value-laden identity boxes based on stereotypes of such markers as sexual orientation, class, gender, race, ability, and age. Despite President William Jefferson Clinton's race dialogue and Census 2000's switch in the recording of racial designation, laypersons continue to categorize each other by physical attributes. Thus, as Fields suggests, "racial ideology" lives on.<sup>46</sup>

Although scholars continue to debate the biological and social constructions of race, the general public has not yet begun to critically question racial categories. Those who do not fit easily within the established racial categories because of such aspects as physical attributes, exemplified by some multiracial Americans, threaten the historically simplistic understanding of race. In this dissertation, I am borrowing Haney López's definition of "race." He contends, "I

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<sup>46</sup> Fields, "Slavery, Race, and Ideology," 96; Fields states, "If race lives on today, it does not live on because we have inherited it from our forebears of the seventeenth century or the eighteenth or nineteenth, but because we continue to create it today," 117; Ian F. Haney López, "The Social Construction of Race: Some Observations on Illusion, Fabrication, and Choice," *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* 29, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 61.

define 'race' as a vast group of people loosely bound together by historically contingent, socially significant elements of their morphology and/or ancestry."<sup>47</sup>

In her important article, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," Higginbotham offers insight into U.S. society's obsession with race, explaining that "race serves as a 'global sign,' a 'metalanguage,' since it speaks about and lends meaning to a host of terms and expressions, to myriad aspects of life that would otherwise fall outside the referential domain of race." Higginbotham explains that race is utilized as a default, often when people are discussing difference. She holds that the converse is true as well, that people are frequently discussing race while using coded-language. This multiple usage provides race with its "metalanguage" status.<sup>48</sup>

Listen to some of these voices regarding race in the U.S.A:

I don't think a white person can really *assimilate*; the color line doesn't work that way. I'm still white. I think I stand on the color line itself, not on one side of it. Or maybe I'm like a bridge, stretching across the line, touching both sides, but mostly in the middle somewhere.<sup>49</sup>

This kind of understanding changes everything. Only when I *became* black by proxy—through my son, through my daughter—could I see the racism I had been willing to tolerate. Becoming black, even for a fraction of an instant, created an urgency for justice that I couldn't feel as only a white man, no matter how good-hearted.<sup>50</sup>

When I'm not with my son, people think I'm white. Not a cross-burning skinhead, just a run-of-the-mill white person: enlightened enough to appreciate positive portrayals of blacks on TV and in books, happy to have black neighbors and friends, and unknowingly supremacist, as most whites are.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Haney López, "The Social Construction of Race," 7. The scholarly debate on race as a social versus biological construction is highlighted in two opposing articles, see Haney López's "The Social Construction of Race," and Walter Benn Michaels's, "Autobiography of an Ex-White Man: Why Race is Not a Social Construction," *Transition: An International Review* 73, vol. 7, no. 1.; The White Issue (1998): 122-43.

<sup>48</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. 17.2 (Winter 1992): 255.

<sup>49</sup> Maureen T. Reddy, *Crossing the Color Line: Race, Parenting, and Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press 1994), 5.

<sup>50</sup> Walt Harrington, *Crossings: A White Man's Journey into Black America* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), 447.

<sup>51</sup> Jana Wolff, *Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother* (Honolulu, HI: Vista Communications, 2000 [1997], Rev. Ed.), 142.

The assumption of my whiteness bothers me, because I can no longer look at the world with the presumption that things are 'right.' What I see is the false, white premise upon which standards of goodness and normalcy are based. For me, now, the world is forever askew; something is missing. It has always been missing, but I previously lacked the personal stake that is prerequisite to racial enlightenment. You don't have to search far—from the Candy Land game board, to the roster of teachers at school, or the greeting card section at PayLess—to see that blacks are either missing, misrepresented, or included as if for extra credit.<sup>52</sup>

I don't feel safe when I'm in a big group of white people . . . If it's a whole group of white people, the only thing that people should be doing in that setting is an anti-racist training. I still don't feel—I didn't feel safe in a group of white people before I had Adrian. I certainly didn't feel safe in a whole group of white people when I had Adrian either, but I, myself, even when I'm not with someone of color, I don't feel safe in it. I don't want to be in white settings, all-white settings. I find them boring and truncated and there's so many lies that I feel on a psychic-level that it's not a good place for me to be.<sup>53</sup>

As the White mother of a Black child, and because I live the day-to-day effects of racism with her as much as I can, I am at times neither White nor Black. Naturally, then, both Blacks and Whites question my credibility. Before my talks begin, my skin color aligns me with other liberal Whites. Once I am into the stories, it is clear that I am speaking from across the color line, a place where most Whites never go. Even from across the color line, however, I continue to be White among Black folks who wonder how I got here and what I'm doing. Let me say, it is a journey and I also am trying to figure it out.<sup>54</sup>

These are all people who write about and are interested in race in this country. They are also all white people who are the parents of biracial or black children and who have published books on their parenting experiences. Through close textual analysis of their writings and an ethnographic study, this dissertation seeks to understand how parenting experiences affects beliefs within this group of parents.

#### WHITENESS STUDIES

The past decade has witnessed the birth of a new literary genre: the memoir by a white mother of black children. Although most of its practitioners are academics schooled in sophisticated critiques of race and racism, their books are intended for a nonscholarly audience. Maureen Reddy's *Crossing the Color Line* and Jane Lazarre's *Beyond the*

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 142-143.

<sup>53</sup> Becky Thompson, interview by author, 21 October 2003, Boston, MA, tape recording.

<sup>54</sup> Sharon E. Rush, *Loving across the Color Line: A White Adoptive Mother Learns about Race* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 112.

*Whiteness of Whiteness: Memoir of a White Mother of Black Sons* are exemplary instances of this new mode of popular autobiography.

France Winndance Twine, "The White Mother"<sup>55</sup>

"Hue and Cry on 'Whiteness Studies': An Academic Field's Take on Race Stirs Interest and Anger" and "World Without 'White'" read the headlines in *The Washington Post* and *Newsweek* magazine, respectively, during the summer of 2003. Whiteness studies' rise caught the attention of the popular media. With a flood of publications across the disciplines whiteness studies became particularly popular during the 1990s. Whiteness studies crossed many academic fields and disciplines but my specific focus is the American Studies/cultural studies angle. Accordingly, I find two pieces most compelling in understanding whiteness studies.<sup>56</sup>

The first piece is Mason Stokes's "Epilogue: The Queer Face of Whiteness" from his book *The Color of Sex: Whiteness, Heterosexuality, and the Fictions of White Supremacy* (2001). In his epilogue, Stokes claims "The 1990s have witnessed an explosion of whiteness study, as evidenced in both popular and academic forums." Stokes explicates the academic journals that have devoted entire issues to whiteness, the many popular publications that have covered whiteness, the many disciplines that have embraced whiteness studies, and finally lists the thirty-six academic book titles that contain "white" or "whiteness" between 1993 and 2001. Stokes traces the historical whiteness studies to its African American roots, particularly to scholars W.E.B Du Bois and James Baldwin. He suggests that feminism and queer theory have connections to whiteness studies.<sup>57</sup>

Stokes critiques whiteness studies, especially the "anxiety" exhibited in the field, commenting,

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<sup>55</sup> France Winndance Twine, "The White Mother: Blackness, Whiteness, and Interracial Families," *Transition: An International Review* 73, vol. 7, no. 1: The White Issue (1998): 144.

<sup>56</sup> Darryl Fears, "Hue and Cry on 'Whiteness Studies': An Academic Field's Take on Race Stirs Interest and Anger. *The Washington Post*. 20 June 2003: A1, A12, Col. 1; "World Without 'White.'" *Newsweek*. 14 July 2003: 7.

<sup>57</sup> Mason Stokes, *The Color of Sex: Whiteness, Heterosexuality, and the Fictions of White Supremacy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001): 179.

Despite our desire to believe otherwise, we need to accept a realistic vision of what's to be gained from this renewed attention to whiteness. If we stop pretending that whiteness studies will lead us to the promised land of a new racial justice, we can pay attention to more prosaic claims, to more realistic payoffs. We can say, at the very least, that the study of whiteness adds to our knowledge about race and ethnicity in American culture. We can say that it gives us a new and richer way of thinking about class, gender, and sexuality. Humble claims? Perhaps not. To claim this much is actually to claim a great deal. And so we go forward, poking and prodding whiteness until it ends up where it never meant to go—until it divulges secrets it didn't even know it was keeping.

Stokes insightfully argues that whiteness studies is not a panacea for racial conflict. His remark about whiteness studies' potential to add to our knowledge about race and ethnicity in American culture is correct and precisely where this dissertation locates itself.<sup>58</sup>

After publishing her book *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices* (1993), Shelley Fisher Fishkin set out to see if her work was part of a larger trend. The result of her quest, is the second piece I find compelling, a 1995 *American Quarterly* essay entitled, "Interrogating 'Whiteness,' Complicating 'Blackness': Remapping American Culture." In her essay, Fishkin promises to

provide a brief overview of over a hundred books and articles from fields including literary criticism, history, cultural studies, anthropology, popular culture, communication studies, music history, art history, dance history, humor studies, philosophy, linguistics, and folklore, all published between 1990 and 1995 or forthcoming shortly. Taken together, I believe, they mark the early 1990s as a defining moment in the study of American culture. For in the early 1990s, our ideas of 'whiteness' were interrogated, our ideas of 'blackness' were complicated, and the terrain we call 'American culture' began to be remapped.

By providing a literature review of whiteness articles, Fishkin shows the connection between blackness and whiteness and their larger relation to U.S. culture.<sup>59</sup>

#### MULTIRACIAL STUDIES

Building from the work of Fishkin and Stokes, I offer some new groupings, as a trajectory to outline my own study. A group of books that focus on "interracial friendships" between blacks and whites currently exists, exemplified by the chronicling of a kidney donation between black and white *Washington Post* writers Martha McNeil Hamilton and Warren Brown, written

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<sup>58</sup> Stokes, *The Color of Sex*, 192.



about in their *Black and White and Red All Over* (2002). The list of other books includes: Patricia Raybon's *My First White Friend* (1996), Melba Pattillo Beal's *White is a State of Mind* (1999), Mary W. McCullough's *Black and White Women as Friends: Building Cross-Race Friendships* (1998), Kathleen Odell Korgen's *Crossing the Racial Divide: Close Friendships Between Black and White Americans* (2002), Martha Manning's *A Place to Land: Lost and Found in an Unlikely Friendship* (2003), and Jennifer Fleischner's *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly: The Remarkable Story of the Friendship Between a First Lady and a Former Slave* (2003).<sup>60</sup>

The other group centers on whites who confront racism. Each of these books studies "groups" of white people who are antiracist. This group includes: Eileen O'Brien's *Whites Confront Racism: Antiracists and Their Paths to Action* (2001), Becky W. Thompson's *A Promise and a Way of Life: White Antiracist Activism* (2001), Cooper Thompson, Emmett Schaefer, and Harry Brod's *White Men Challenging Racism: 35 Personal Stories* (2003), and Joe R. Feagin and Eileen O'Brien's *White Men on Race: Power, Privilege, and the Shaping of Cultural Consciousness* (2003).<sup>61</sup>

In the "Complicating Blackness" part of her essay, Fishkin aptly observes, "If white literary and spiritual foremothers and forefathers of black writers received more attention from scholars, actual white ancestors and the often complicated responses they evoked from offspring defined as "black" by the pervasive "one-drop rule" received more attention as well." Fishkin

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<sup>59</sup> Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "Interrogating 'Whiteness,' Complicating 'Blackness': Remapping American Culture." *American Quarterly* 47.3 (September 1995): 428-429.

<sup>60</sup> Martha McNeil Hamilton and Warren Brown, *Black and White and Red All Over* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2002); Patricia Raybon, *My First White Friend: Confessions on Race, Love, and Forgiveness* (New York, NY: Viking, 1996); Melba Pattillo Beal, *White is a State of Mind* (New York, NY: Berkley Books, 2000); Mary W. McCullough, *Black and White Women as Friends: Building Cross-Race Friendships* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc., 1998); Kathleen Odell Korgen, *Crossing the Racial Divide: Close Friendships Between Black and White Americans* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002); Martha Manning, *A Place to Land: Lost and Found in an Unlikely Friendship* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 2003); and Jennifer Fleischner, *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly: The Remarkable Story of the Friendship Between a First Lady and a Former Slave* (New York, NY: Broadway Books, 2003).

<sup>61</sup> Eileen O'Brien, *Whites Confront Racism: Antiracists and Their Paths to Action* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001); Becky W. Thompson, *A Promise and a Way of Life: White Antiracist Activism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Cooper Thompson, Emmett Schaefer, and Harry Brod's *White Men Challenging Racism: 35 Personal Stories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); and Joe R. Feagin and Eileen O'Brien, *White Men on Race: Power, Privilege, and the Shaping of Cultural Consciousness* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2003).

goes on to list works from the early 1990s that deal “owning a dual heritage.” Fishkin’s grouping is awkward, as she lists familial memoirs with theoretical works and throws in an unrelated edited collection of essays that focuses on Du Bois’s “double consciousness.” Fishkin incorrectly states that “many of the contributors” own a dual heritage. Although Fishkin’s grouping is flawed, there is merit in theorizing a multiracial literature.<sup>62</sup>

Kevin R. Johnson’s edited reader, *Mixed Race America and the Law* (2003), excerpts a law article entitled “Multiracialism: A Bibliographic Essay and Critique,” written by Jean Stefancic. Stefancic’s piece outlines the topic of multiraciality. The editor of the text states:

The author reviews the major themes in the existing literature, including interracial relationships and marriage, racial identity, racial formation, Census categories and other categorizations, essentialism and intersectionality, transracial adoption and child custody, and the emergence of a multiracial society.

I would add a few major themes to this list, including “memoirs/family histories,” “parenting,” and “skin color.” The literature within these three groups has grown tremendously in the last fifteen years and is quite vast at this point. Here are two examples of each theme addition:

“memoirs/family histories”: James McBride’s *The Color of Water: A Black Man’s Tribute to His White Mother* (1996) and Neil Henry’s *Pearl’s Secret: A Black Man’s Search for His White Family* (2001); “parenting”: Marguerite A. Wright’s, *I’m Chocolate, You’re Vanilla: Raising Healthy Black and Biracial Children in a Race-Conscious World* (1998) and Donna Jackson Nakazawa’s *Does Anybody Else Look Like Me?: A Parent’s Guide to Raising Multiracial Children* (2003); “skin color”: Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall’s *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* (1992) and Itabari Njeri’s *The Last Plantation: Color, Conflict, and Identity: Reflections of a New World Black* (1997).<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Shelley Fisher Fishkin, “Interrogating ‘Whiteness,’ Complicating ‘Blackness’”: 451.

<sup>63</sup> Jean Stefancic, “Multiracialism: A Bibliographic Essay and Critique,” in *Mixed Race America and the Law*, ed. Kevin R. Johnson (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2003), 493; James McBride, *The Color of Water: A Black Man’s Tribute to His White Mother* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 1996); Neil Henry, *Pearl’s Secret: A Black Man’s Search for His White Family* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001); Marguerite A. Wright, *I’m Chocolate, You’re Vanilla: Raising Healthy Black and Biracial Children in a Race-Conscious World* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bas Publishers, 1998); Donna Jackson Nakazawa, *Does Anybody Else Look Like Me?: A*

I agree with Stefancic and argue that multiracial studies/mixed race studies is emerging as its own field/area of study. Many philosophy, literary, education, psychology works that focus on single studies have recently been published. There are too many of these texts to list all of them. One of the markers of a new field of study is viewed in the literature when groups of scholars are conducting similar work and publish their findings in edited collections. Likewise, the appearance of “readers” signals a depth to the literature. Over the past fifteen years many edited collections and readers have appeared, including: Maria Root’s *Racially Mixed People in America* (1992), Carol Camper’s *Miscegenation Blues: Voices of Mixed Race Women* (1994), Naomi Zack’s *American Mixed Race: The Culture of Microdiversity* (1995), Jessie Carroll Grearson and Lauren B. Smith’s *Swaying: Essays on Intercultural Love* (1995), Maria Root’s *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier* (1996), William S. Penn’s *As We are Now: Mixblood Essays on Race and Identity* (1997), Claudine Chiawei O’Hearn’s *Half and Half: Writers on Growing Up Biracial and Bicultural* (1998), Martha Hodes’ *Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History* (1999), Paul Spickard and W. Jeffrey Burroughs’ *We Are a People: Narrative and Multiplicity in Constructing Ethnic Identity* (2000), Werner Sollors’ *Interracialism: Black-White Inter-marriage in American History, Literature, and Law* (2000), David Parker and Miri Song’s *Rethinking ‘Mixed Race’* (2001), Loretta I. Winters and Herman L. DeBose’s *New Faces in a Changing America: Multiracial Identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2003), Kevin R. Johnson’s *Mixed Race America and the Law: A Reader* (2003), Maria P.P. Root and Matt Kelley’s *Multiracial Child Resource Book: Living Complex Identities* (2003), Heather M. Dalmage’s *The Politics of Multiracialism: Challenging Racial Thinking* (2004), Cedric Herring, Verna M. Keith, and Hayward Derrick Horton’s *Skin Deep: How Race and Complexion Matter in the “Color-Blind” Era* (2004), Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe’s *‘Mixed Race’*

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*Parent’s Guide to Raising Multiracial Children* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 2003); Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall, *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1992); and Itabari Njeri, *The Last Plantation: Color, Conflict, and Identity: Reflections of a New World Black* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

*Studies: A Reader* (2004), and Werner Sollors' *An Anthology of Interracial Literature: Black-White Contacts in the Old World and the New* (2004).<sup>64</sup>

As France Winddance Twine notes, a new pattern has emerged in books that have been published in the last decade. Twine characterizes this "new literary genre" as "the memoir by a white mother of black children." I would expand this grouping to include white fathers of black children and rename it "the white parents of biracial (black and white) or black children." These parents are crossing society's established boundaries.<sup>65</sup>

#### BORDER CROSSERS

Like Twine, I view these parents as border crossers and see the ones who have written about their experiences as a particular group of U.S. white people. Through close textual analysis and ethnographic life history interviews of the white parents that are also authors, this dissertation examines how parenting biracial or black children affects beliefs among whites.

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<sup>64</sup> Maria Root, ed., *Racially Mixed People in America* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1992); Carol Camper, ed., *Miscegenation Blues: Voices of Mixed Race Women* (Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Sister Vision, 1994), Naomi Zack, ed., *American Mixed Race: The Culture of Microdiversity* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995); Jessie Carroll Grearson and Lauren B. Smith, ed., *Swaying: Essays on Intercultural Love* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1995); Maria Root, ed., *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996); William S. Penn, ed., *As We are Now: Mixblood Essays on Race and Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997); Claudine Chiawei O'Hearn, ed., *Half and Half: Writers on Growing Up Biracial and Bicultural* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1998); Martha Hodes, ed., *Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1999); Paul Spickard and W. Jeffrey Burroughs, ed., *We Are a People: Narrative and Multiplicity in Constructing Ethnic Identity* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2000); Werner Sollors, ed., *Interracialism: Black-White Intermarriage in American History, Literature, and Law* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000); David Parker and Miri Song, ed., *Rethinking 'Mixed Race'* (Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2001); Loretta I. Winters and Herman L. DeBose, ed., *New Faces in a Changing America: Multiracial Identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003); Kevin R. Johnson, ed., *Mixed Race America and the Law: A Reader* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2003); Maria P.P. Root and Matt Kelley, ed., *Multiracial Child Resource Book: Living Complex Identities* (Seattle, WA: The Mavin Foundation, 2003); Heather M. Dalmage, ed., *The Politics of Multiracialism: Challenging Racial Thinking* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004); Cedric Herring, Verna M. Keith, and Hayward Derrick Horton, ed., *Skin Deep: How Race and Complexion Matter in the "Color-Blind" Era* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe, ed., *'Mixed Race' Studies: A Reader* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004); and Werner Sollors, ed., *An Anthology of Interracial Literature: Black-White Contacts in the Old World and the New* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2004).

<sup>65</sup> France Winddance Twine, "The White Mother," 144.

White writers participants claim that because of their parenting their own racial identity is altered. The notion of changing race through one's offspring marks the fluidity of race and demands expanded exploration.

In this dissertation, I explore what these border crossers have to say about their experience. I desire to understand the meanings exhibited in the ways in which the parents are suggesting that they are "no longer white." Interpreting these commentaries on race allows further understanding of racial identity development and agency. Unpacking parents' changing beliefs and negotiations of their racial identity offers further insight into the complex ways race, identity, and agency intersect in U.S. culture.

Donald Weber reminds American Studies scholars that before "borderlands" in American Studies scholarship, stood Victor Turner and his "models of rite of passage and processual analysis," particularly Turner's "limen." Weber meditates on the "displacement" of Turner and his ideas with the work of such figures as Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga. In 1987, Anzaldúa published *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, which has become a central American Studies text. Anzaldúa locates the physical borderland in the

Texas-U.S. Southwest/Mexican border. The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.

Anzaldúa's ideas of the borderlands encompass many people and are potentially far-reaching.<sup>66</sup>

In the introduction to her second edited collection on multiracial issues, *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier* (1996), Maria P.P. Root explores the relevance of the borderlands to multiracial people. She discusses multiracial families as "border crossings." Citing Anzaldúa's work, Root contends, "There are different ways of experiencing, negotiating, and reconstructing the borders between races." Root suggests there are four ways: 1) bridging

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<sup>66</sup> Donald Weber, "From Limen to Border: A Meditation on the Legacy of Victor Turner for American Cultural Studies," *American Quarterly* 47.3 (September 1995): 525; and Gloria

the border by having feet in both groups; 2) crossing between race and ethnicity; 3) sitting on the border; or 4) creating a home in one “camp.” The borderlands and border crossings potentially present a context to understand racial transformation.<sup>67</sup>

Susan Gubar provides another concept related to racial transformation in her book, *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (1997). Gubar defines a term she coins: “racechange.” She writes,

Racechange: The term is meant to suggest the traversing of race boundaries, racial imitation or impersonation, cross-racial mimicry or mutability, white posing as black or black passing as white, pan-racial mutuality. Over the past several decades, Americans have been repeatedly informed by psychologists and sociologists that the classification of people into Asians, blacks, Hispanics, and whites has no basis in science or biology, but such “folk taxonomies” persist, indicating how many individuals have not really been able to internalize such a proposition. Racechange provides artists in diverse media a way of thinking about racial parameters.

Gubar’s term is a way of looking at the racial transformation or shifting that I discuss with my informants.<sup>68</sup>

The idea of white parents “wobbling” in their whiteness because of parenting black and biracial children raises many important questions about race and agency: what happens to white privilege after the parents’ racial shifts? Many have argued that white people have more control in determining their racial status. Is this true for whites in multiracial families or is it more complicated? How do claims for racial transformation impact the pursuit of racial justice? These questions address the connections of social construction and its material/historical firmly established aspects of power and privilege.

One tool that I use in understanding the parents’ claims is Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s concept of a “racial project.” Omi and Winant explain that “*A racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines.*” Recent scholarship on white racial

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Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), “Preface”: 1.

<sup>67</sup> Root, ed., *The Multiracial Experience*, xxi-xxii.

identity clearly includes many racial projects ranging from Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey's call for whites to be "race traitors" and Becky Thompson's exploration of white antiracists to Carol Swain's review of white nationalism. I explore racial identity transformation and the decision to write about it as a particular racial project aimed at validating the continuing presence of racism, expanding contemporary notions of whiteness, and interrupting the "interracial-family-as-pathological" model.<sup>69</sup>

Ethnographic methods contribute tools for exploring the cultural traditions prevalent in these people's lives. For example, these methods allowed me to explore how informants see themselves as racial beings. Attention to class, geography, gender, community, and sexual orientation was considered in analysis of the authors' life stories. Questions raised by these elements of social location include: Whether these authors' racial transformations are predicated on socioeconomic status; in other words, how does class status impact people's ability to racially transform? How does the racial composition of the communities where these people reside influence their lives and identities? Does gender impact racial transformation in cross-racial families? How does sexual orientation intersect with race? Although these identity markers are important in gaining an understanding of the people I am interviewing, this study is a qualitative one that attempts to develop in-depth cultural portraits as a contribution to better understanding race and identity in the U.S.

#### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

My research methods involved a review of the literature of works by white adults who parented biracial or black children. Although small in number, the accessible published writings by U.S. white parents of biracial and black children range from book-length memoirs to magazine articles. These authors were selected for several reasons. First, because they were the only white

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<sup>68</sup> Susan Gubar, *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5.

<sup>69</sup> Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 56; Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey, ed., *Race Traitor* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Becky Thompson, *A Promise and a Way of Life*; and Carol M. Swain,

parents that I initially found who had written published books or articles about this experience with racial transformation. Second, I chose people to focus on who I could interview (an exception is made for Jane Lazarre who declined to be interviewed. She remains in my dissertation because of the prominence of her work). And, third, participants who have written substantively about their parenting experience. In the final writing of this dissertation, I discovered a few additional authors and scholars who briefly noted the parenting of biracial or black children; however, these were sentences in unrelated works. I am not claiming that these parents are representative of all white parents of biracial or black children, but they are representative of the public dialogue surrounding these issues. I will reflect on the ways in which they may be considered both typical and unique. Their ruminations do provide an important window on this parenting experience.

After selecting informants, my second task was to complete close-readings of the writings of the selected white authors. Third, in January 2003, after obtaining permission from the University of Maryland Human Subjects Review Committee, I began interviewing my informants. I traveled to my informants' homes or places of work and conducted focused-life history, tape-recorded interviews with them, where I elicited biographical information (including familial data, racial composition of communities of origin, education levels). I sought to identify the circumstances, if any, that led to "transracial" parenting (such as interracial relations or adoption) and I explored in detail the key incidents that led to belief changes. The parents' current views on contemporary issues such as the Census shift, affirmative action, transracial adoption, and rising demographics of people of color were also surveyed.<sup>70</sup>

Initially, I had worried about my own identity and how it would impact my interaction with my informants and writing my dissertation. As someone who identifies as "black" or

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*The New White Nationalism in America: Its Challenges to Integration* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>70</sup> Note that I am utilizing the adoption language of whites parenting children of color as "transracial" parenting. I do not believe the language exists to mark the experience of whites who parent biological children of color, at times I use interracial or multiracial. Note also that I am not claiming a difference in the parenting experience of birth or adopted children.



“biracial” (black and white), this identity proved helpful to the research process. My informants connected me with their own children. Two of them noted I looked like/“could be” their son. At other times, informants spoke of me “knowing this” or asked what I thought about issues we were discussing. This signaled both a perceived connection to the relevant multiracial issues and a belief that as a graduate student writing on the topic I had done sufficient research to know information that they would appreciate. This shared “insider” status granted me access to my informants. One, in fact, initially hesitated to participate, telling me to read the book they had written, until they were aware of my own familial experience.

Fourth, I transcribed some of the tape-recorded interviews myself and hired someone to transcribe the rest of the tapes. After reviewing the transcriptions, I followed up the interviews asking for clarification or more information from my informants via email and/or telephone conversations.

Fifth, I reviewed the transcriptions for patterns of analysis. The textual analysis and the transcribed interviews provided case studies with which I compared and contrasted how belief changes relate to particular themes such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, and community. I used these texts to assess how these parents’ belief systems regarding identity operated in their lives prior to parenting black and biracial children and afterwards. The belief systems include ideas of race; for example, what does it mean to be “white” or “black” to these parents? How does this change through their parenting? And considering their racial transformations and belief shifts, what do they see as the larger implications for race relations?

Life stories garnered through the published voices and the ethnographic study are used to investigate these issues and to suggest avenues for further research. In this dissertation, there are many particular aspects of their stories—and the similarities and differences among them—that may lend new insights into whiteness and the social construction of race. The participants claim that they underwent important changes in their sense of identity and beliefs about race. I explore the changes they specify and the ways they conceptualize these changes. I also explore the key experiences that they feel led to these changes, including especially, but not exclusively,

parenting experiences, the actions they took because of the changes they went through, and the ways they, as transformed persons, view issues of race in contemporary U.S. society and what they believe needs and can be done to improve race related issues.

#### FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS

Seeing the topic as an example of Omi and Winant's concept of "racial projects" was exciting. Other scholars and their ideas influenced my thinking, including John L. Caughey's life history-oriented approach that provides tools to assess how individuals negotiate multiple "cultural traditions." Caughey suggests that people function with certain "cultural traditions" expressed through beliefs and actions. While discussing "person centered ethnography," Caughey states,

We see that we need to attend to the fact that it is not only modern communities but modern individuals that are multicultural. That is, contemporary Americans are likely to think about themselves and their worlds in terms of several different cultural models and also to play multiple social roles which are associated with and require operating with diverse and often contradictory systems of meaning.

Caughey argues that people operate simultaneously with many different cultures and traditions. He thinks that people can be fluent with different customs and knowledge of appropriate social cues and relevant behavior to various cultural traditions. Caughey contends that people's fluency may range to many traditions despite status shifts such as class or belief changes such as religion. Caughey's discussion proved useful to considerations of hybridity and multiraciality. As noted, Gubar's idea of "racechange," where people cross racial boundaries, was explored for its connection with transformation and shifting.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*; John L. Caughey, *Negotiating Cultures and Identities: A Life History Approach* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, in press); John L. Caughey, "Gina as Steven," *Visual Anthropology Review* 10.1 (Spring 1994), 129; Gubar, *Racechanges*; Nina Boyd Krebs' work on "edgewalkers" is also notable when thinking about racechanges and fluency with multiple cultural traditions. For her book, *Edgewalkers: Defusing Cultural Boundaries on the New Global Frontier* (Far Hills, NJ: New Horizons Press, 1999), Krebs conducted interviews with forty people she believes are positive unifiers, "edgewalkers," who "were people of assorted ethnic, spiritual or cultural backgrounds who had 1) comfort, if not identification, with a particular ethnic, spiritual or cultural group, 2) competence thriving in mainstream culture, 3) the capacity to move between cultures in a way the individual can discuss

Critical race theory (CRT) uses legal, historical, sociological, and philosophical approaches to argue the social, rather than biological, construction of race. Critical race theorists employ cultural analysis to deconstruct contemporary notions of race, while recognizing continued racism. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic define “CRT” explaining,

The critical race theory (CRT) movement is a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power. . . Unlike some academic disciplines, critical race theory contains an activist dimension. It not only tries to understand our social situation, but to change it; it sets out not only to ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies, but to transform it for the better.

I use ideas generated by CRT to evaluate the parents’ transformations.

The scholarship of David Roediger, Noel Ignatiev, Ruth Frankenberg, and Matthew Frye Jacobson informs my research. Each of these authors examines the construction of whiteness and shows how distinct ethnic Europeans have transcended economic and social barriers to assimilate into acceptable places among “whites” in the United States. As earlier noted, Whiteness Studies provides a place to interpret white racial identity and offers another theoretical base for my study.<sup>72</sup>

Finally, “intersectional analysis,” also known as “intersectionality,” rounds out my theoretical base. Lynn Weber observes that “The meanings of race, class, gender, *and* sexuality are not fixed, immutable, or universal but arise instead out of historically and geographically specific group struggles over socially valued resources, self-determination, and self-valuation.” The relationship between components of identity to one another and to larger spheres informs my intellectual work. Here, I use the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw, Bonnie Thornton Dill, and Lynn Weber. These scholars argue that race, class, gender, and sexual orientation operate

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with some clarity, and 4) the ability to generalize from personal experience to that of people from other groups without being trapped in the uniqueness of a particular culture”: 1.

<sup>72</sup> Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 2-3.

simultaneously on both macro and micro-levels and in multiple ways that affect the representation of identity.<sup>73</sup>

As noted throughout these first two chapters, my research and dissertation contribute to the literature across academic fields of inquiry, including American studies, cultural studies, ethnography, African-American studies, whiteness studies, sociology, history, and multiracial studies. Whiteness studies, cultural studies, intersectional analysis, and multiracial studies are important areas of inquiry within contemporary American Studies scholarship. Most research involving whiteness studies centers on historical analysis. Although I historically locate the construction of race with the “one-drop rule” and the phenomenon of African Americans “passing,” my focus on contemporary people provides a new dimension to this scholarship.

#### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In a section of her book *Black Feminist Thought* entitled “Black Women Alone” sociologist Patricia Hill Collins points to interracial relations as one of the factors keeping black women single. Collins suggests that although white women are having children with black men, black women are asked to help raise biracial children borne from these interracial relationships. Collins claims, “Currently, much more is known about how White women negotiate these new relationships with their biracial children than we do about either Black men’s participation in being a parent to these children or the Black women who are so often called upon to help White mothers raise them.” What do we know about these white mothers? Collins does not explain what we know about the negotiations nor does she acknowledge the black women who are mothers to biracial children. It is unclear what sources Collins uses to make her claim.<sup>74</sup>

In her article, “Transgressive Women and Transracial Mothers White Women and Critical Race Theory” France Winndance Twine presents a contrasting viewpoint to Collins’s, stating,

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<sup>73</sup> Lynn Weber, *Understanding Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: A Conceptual Framework* (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2001): 18.

While the maternal struggles of white birth mothers of African-descent children have rarely been considered by feminist and antiracist theorists, Black feminist theorists, such as [Patricia Hill] Collins, [Kimberlé] Crenshaw, and [Dorothy] Roberts, offer a number of theoretical insights that can be useful when considering the maternal struggles of transracial mothers parenting Black children.

In the footnote to this statement, Twine explains,

White feminist birth mothers have published a number of compelling memoirs including Maureen Reddy's *Crossing the Color Line: Race, Parenting, and Culture* (Rutgers University Press, 1995); Jane Lazarre's *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness: Memoir of a White Mother of Black Sons* (Duke University Press, 1996); and Becky Thompson's *Mothering Without a Compass: A White Mother's Love, A Black Son's Courage* (University of Minnesota Press, 2000). While these memoirs offer important theoretical insights there remain few, if any, feminist ethnographies or social science analyses that consider transracial mothers' collective experiences in England or the U.S.A.

Twine correctly asserts that little research on white mothers of biracial or black children exists.

Theory on these experiences is marginal and only recently do we find many primary sources.<sup>75</sup>

Currently, there are no major sources that focus solely on contemporary white partners of interracial marriages. Quantitative data exists on interracial marriage, including some historical work, census data, and divorce rates, yet the type of material that speaks directly to racial consciousness has not been collected.<sup>76</sup>

As mentioned in the first chapter, in 1991 Pascoe stated, when discussing interracial marriage, "the potential of the subject has barely been tapped," while subsequently scholars have looked at interracial sex, including: Martha Hodes', *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (1997), Kevin J. Mumford's *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York* (1997), Rachel F. Moran's *Interracial Intimacy: The Regulation of Race and Romance* (2001), Peter Wallenstein's *Tell the Court I Love My Wife: Race, Marriage, and Law: An American History* (2002), Randall Kennedy's *Interracial Intimacies: Sex, Marriage, Identity, and Adoption* (2003), Charles F. Robinson II's, *Dangerous Liaisons: Sex and Love in the Segregated South* (2003), Renee C.

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<sup>74</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.), 165.

<sup>75</sup> France Winndance Twine, "Transgressive Women and Transracial Mothers White Women and Critical Race Theory," *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 1.2 (2001): 134; and *Ibid.*, 151.

Romano's *Race Mixing: Black-White Marriage in Postwar America* (2003), and Joshua D. Rothman's *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787-1861* (2003).<sup>77</sup>

The existing related relevant literature includes a handful of sources. The first source is Ruth Frankenberg's *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (1993). Frankenberg's book is an ethnographic study based on life history interviews with thirty U.S. white women. She spends little time examining parenting in her book. Frankenberg entitles her fifth chapter, "Race, Sex, and Intimacy II: Interracial Couples and Interracial Parenting." She uses ten pages to discuss parenting in a section named "What about the Children?" and focuses on various mixes of interracial relationships. Frankenberg's "Conclusion" to this section is worth noting. While she does not pursue these issues, she mentions, the important observation that

primary relationships with people of color are a context in which white women become more conscious of the racial ordering of society. As the parents or partners of people of color, the women I talked with witnessed and experienced the effects of racism much more directly than most other white people.

She also states, "White women in interracial primary relationships found themselves in changed positions in the racial order, albeit on contingent and provisional terms."<sup>78</sup>

There is one relevant dissertation that relates to my study, Nora Rose Moosnick's *Challenged Mothers: Women Who Adopt Transracially and/or Transnationally* (2000). In the abstract to her dissertation, Moosnick explains, "Modern adoptive families are increasingly rainbow

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<sup>76</sup>See, for an example of a recent work, Rose Marie Kreider, "Interracial Marriage and Marital Instability," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Maryland, 1999).

<sup>77</sup> Williamson, *New People*; Peggy Pascoe, "Race, Gender, and Intercultural Relations": 5; Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997); Kevin J. Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1997); Rachel F. Moran, *Interracial Intimacy: The Regulation of Race and Romance* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Peter Wallenstein, *Tell the Court I Love My Wife: Race, Marriage, and Law: An American History* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Randall Kennedy, *Interracial Intimacies: Sex, Marriage, Identity, and Adoption* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 2003); Charles F. Robinson II, *Dangerous Liaisons: Sex and Love in the Segregated South* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2003); Renee C. Romano, *Race Mixing: Black-White Marriage in Postwar America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); and Joshua D. Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787-1861* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

families. Rainbow families are composed of White parents raising children of a different race and ethnicity than themselves.” She continues,

Little attention, however, has been paid to the experiences of adoptive mothers. To address this shortcoming, I conducted in-depth interviews with White mothers who have adopted either Asian or African American children. The main goals of the project are to gather the thoughts of mothers who adopt transracially and/or transnationally and to explore the similarities and differences among their narratives vis-à-vis the race of their child.

Moosnick uses feminist analysis in her study and finds that “Most of the women, for example, chose to think of themselves as “parent” rather than as “mothers.” This might display a feminist choice by these women.<sup>79</sup>

Moosnick interviewed twenty-two white adoptive mothers in Kentucky for her study. The white adoptive mothers were equally split between adopting white, Asian, and black and biracial children. I think the goals of Moosnick’s study have merit and find some of her conclusions interesting. Moosnick names her informants “rainbow families.” Although the language typically utilized (interracial, transracial, multiracial, or adoptive) to refer to the type of families Moosnick studies does not capture the essence of the experience or may indeed be inaccurate, the descriptor “rainbow families” rings hollow, as it comes off a bit sappy. Moosnick’s study contains some assumptions. For example, in explaining that her work seeks to fill the void in critical transracial adoption literature, Moosnick states,

In particular, I examine how crossing racial lines to mother a child darker than oneself influences a White mother’s understanding of herself as a mother. Visual differences between the White mother and her child serve as a constant and public reminder that the child has a “birth mother.”

Moosnick assumes that the child will always have darker skin than the mother. This is not always the case, as white people may have “dark skin” and people of color may have “light skin”

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<sup>78</sup> Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press, 1993), 135; and *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Nora Rose Moosnick, “Challenged Mothers: Women Who Adopt Transracially and/or Transnationally,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kentucky, 2000).

or even appear phenotypically-white. Another assumption is exhibited in Moosnick's presumption that all adoptive mothers are infertile.<sup>80</sup>

While coding her research data, Moosnick runs into a problem. She explains,

Some mothers resided in multiracial families marked by White parents raising children of two different races. The research design did not account for mothers with Latin and Indian, as well as Asian and Black children. The mothers with Black and Biracial children, in particular, defied clean racial categorization.

Moosnick did not conceive of people having more than one racial heritage. Like the Census, at times, researchers are not sure how to account for multiracial people.<sup>81</sup>

France Winndance Twine's work looks at the experiences of white mothers of black children, however, her focus is not on the U.S. Newly published articles by Terri Karis and Heather Dalmage appear promising at first glance. With all of the new work on multiracial studies, it is my hope that in addition to survey works that the individual life histories/stories of the people participating will be examined. In the following chapters, I look at these participating parents. I focus exclusively on the white parents of biracial or black children. My study would have differed if I looked at entire families, black parents, multiracial parents, or specifically at the

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 65.



children in these families. Space and time limited my scope but these approaches present fertile areas of study.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> See France Winndance Twine, "Bearing Blackness in Britain: The Meaning of Racial Difference for White Birth Mothers of African-Descent Children," in *Ideologies and Technologies of Motherhood: Race Class Sexuality Nationalism*, ed. Helena Ragona and France Winndance Twine (New York: Routledge, 2000): 76-110; France Winndance Twine, "Managing Everyday Racisms: The Anti-Racist Practices of White Mothers of African-Descent Children in Britain," in *Everyday Inequalities: Critical Inquiries*, ed. Jodi O'Brien and Judith A. Howard (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998): 237-252; France Winndance Twine, "Transracial Mothering and Antiracism: The Case of White Birth Mothers of 'Black' Children in Britain," *Feminist Studies* 25.3 (1999): 729-46; Terri A. Karis, "'I Prefer to Speak of Culture,': White Mothers of Multiracial Children," in *The Politics of Multiracialism: Challenging Racial Thinking*, ed. Heather M. Dalmage (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004): 161-174; and Heather M. Dalmage, "'Mama, Are You Brown?': Multiracial Families and the Color Line," in *Skin Deep: How Race and Complexion Matter in the "Color-Blind" Era*, ed. Cedric Herring, Verna M. Keith, and Derrick Hayward Horton (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 82-98.

### CHAPTER THREE: REDDY AND LAZARRE

It was only when I stopped being white, in some sense, that I began to understand what whiteness means in America.

Maureen T. Reddy, *Crossing the Color Line* <sup>83</sup>

I am no longer white. However, I may appear to others, I am a person of color now....  
Some color with no precise name.

Jane Lazarre, *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness*<sup>84</sup>

Two white parents of biracial children who primarily identify as black, Maureen T. Reddy and Jane Lazarre, have written books about their experiences. Reddy's *Crossing the Color Line: Race, Parenting, and Culture* (1994) and Lazarre's *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness: Memoir of a White Mother of Black Sons* (1996) provide detailed accounts of these women's parenting experiences of their mixed-race children. Within this new genre, Reddy and Lazarre's work came early and has been significant. These two parents have written book-length accounts and they stand as strong examples of parents who argue that they have undergone systematic belief changes culminating with racial identity transformation because of the experience parenting their children.<sup>85</sup>

Reddy and Lazarre are both college professors who teach African-American literature among other subjects and each identifies strongly with her ethnic background—Irish and Jewish, respectively. Both Reddy and Lazarre are married to African-American men (who coincidentally share the same first name: Doug). Reddy published her book in 1994 while Lazarre's followed in 1996. In her review of the two works, Boyd Zenner states, "In contrast to the mixture of theory and personal example found in *Crossing the Color Line*, Jane Lazarre's *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness* is written in an almost purely autobiographical mode." The contrasting styles offer insight into the author's personal feelings regarding race from different standpoints. Reddy

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<sup>83</sup> Maureen T. Reddy, *Crossing the Color Line: Race, Parenting, and Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press 1994), 21.

<sup>84</sup> Jane Lazarre, *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness: Memoir of a White Mother of Black Sons* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 135.

recounts anecdotes while drawing on theories of race and gender to analyze situations. In distinction, Lazarre sets various scenes and recalls communications within her family to question her own racialized position in the society.<sup>86</sup>

Describing herself as an English professor, mother, writer, first-generation American, feminist, Democrat, reluctantly white or consciously white, and definitely antiracist Maureen Teresa Reddy is a middle-class, middle-aged white woman. She is also the mother of black children (self and parental-identified), the partner of a black man, and the daughter of white Irish immigrants. Reddy is a professor of English and Women's Studies at Rhode Island College in Providence, Rhode Island. Publishing her book *Crossing the Color Line* over a decade ago, Reddy was born in Dorchester, MA and raised in Waltham, MA. Her mother was a homemaker and her father was a builder. Reddy met her husband while both were attending Boston College in 1976. Reddy earned her undergraduate and master's degrees at Boston College and earned her doctorate in English from the University of Minnesota in 1985.<sup>87</sup>

With support from both of their families, Reddy married her husband in 1979. The couple's son Sean was born the year Maureen started writing her dissertation in 1983 and their daughter Ailis was born in 1991. When asked if she faced any opposition to her marriage from either sets of parents because of race, Reddy suggests that her mother, as a devout Catholic, was more concerned with her future son-in-law's religious background, as Baptist, than his race. Reddy and her husband's siblings were supportive and became friends. Reddy writes, "Our two families became one extended family very quickly, with everyone going away for long weekends together, visiting each other, and so on, with a friendliness and closeness I now know to be unusual among in-laws, but which at first seemed quite ordinary to me." Reddy insists that her

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<sup>85</sup> Maureen T. Reddy, *Crossing the Color Line*; and Jane Lazarre, *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness*.

<sup>86</sup> Boyd Zenner, "Whiteness and Fairness," *Women's Review of Books* 14.4 (January 1997): 7. Thanks to Zenner for recognizing the similarities in Reddy and Lazarre's backgrounds.

<sup>87</sup> In respect of my informant's wishes, pseudonyms have sometimes been used for their children's names. I follow their lead in their written works and/or wishes relayed to me in our interviews.

father loved her husband. Confirming acceptance of his son-in-law Reddy recalls, "When my father knew he was dying, in 1992, he said good-bye to me like this, "You've always been a good daughter and I'm proud of you. I'm glad you have Doug and the children. I couldn't have picked a better husband for you or son-in-law for me if I'd done it myself."<sup>88</sup>

Reddy highlights the similarities between her family and her husband's, the Bests. Both her father and her father-in-law were private people and Reddy had to grapple with their privacy in writing her book. Reddy draws on the similarities between the two men,

Both of our fathers were born into poverty in 1921 (Doug's father in South Carolina, mine in Dublin), lied about their ages to join the army (the segregated U.S. army for Doug's father, the Irish army for mine), rose to the rank of sergeant at age seventeen, and moved to the northeastern United States as adults. Both were skilled tradesman, and both worked several jobs at a time in order to support their families. Both had similar prejudices—against the English of all classes and rich American whites—and similar hopes for their children.

Reddy explains personality differences between the two men but comments on their striking similarities. Reddy's mother and mother-in-law do not share similarities in their stories in the same way as their husbands, yet Reddy writes, "our mothers were both raised in materially and emotionally richer situations than were our fathers, both are extroverted but deeply lacking self-confidence, both have wide circles of friends, and both have always been the emotional centers of their families."<sup>89</sup>

Reddy explains the sameness between the two families, "And that is really key, I think: our families operate in similar ways, with parallel roles, and so Doug and I were raised with very similar expectations and attitudes." Reddy briefly dated one other black man in college. Besides the families' sameness, Reddy explains that similarities exist between her and Doug. Claiming her husband is a "kindred spirit," Reddy reflects, "Looking back, I recall that I was first attracted to Doug's calmness and gentleness, his intelligence, his dry sense of humor, his physical self-confidence, his whole way of being in the world, and of course his race was part of all that."<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Reddy, *Crossing the Color Line*, 27; and *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 27; and *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 28; and *Ibid.*, 24.

While dating, Reddy and her husband faced racism. Reddy recounts times in Connecticut and Boston where she and her husband faced racist incidents. Reddy responded with anger and had to learn to control her temper. Doug explained to her that he was the person who would be in trouble because of her response to these episodes. Reddy states, "He pointed out to me that I wasn't going to be the person that the cops shot when they showed up and that I really had to be a lot more careful about that kind of thing." So despite familial support, Reddy and her husband did face resistance to their union from the larger society.<sup>91</sup>

As the oldest child of four children, Reddy recalls her youth growing up with parents who wanted to assimilate into American culture. She fondly remembers her father suddenly announcing, "okay we are going to go camping because that's what Americans do." A "funny but terrible" camping trip ensued as the Reddy family struggled as "city people" who were attempting to explore nature. Reddy says her parents shaped her viewpoints and actions. Both of Reddy's parents were active in volunteer work. Reddy offers that her father was more racially aware than her mother. According to Reddy, he was active in various civil rights activities. In Reddy's hometown, the largest minority group was Puerto Ricans, who were not treated very well. Reddy's father founded an *ad-hoc* committee on low income housing for Puerto Ricans. Reddy states, "He ended up just organizing a group of people to fight for better housing and to end race discrimination. So he was much more aware of how things really worked I think than probably my mother was."<sup>92</sup>

Reddy's mother worried about her daughter marrying in general, because,

from her experience you know marriage is the end of all ambition, well you know, she is now eighty-two years old so for that generation that's what it was. Women didn't have their own careers, etc, or at least they subordinated them to family. You also have to bear in mind that my mother in particular is a very devout Catholic.

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<sup>91</sup> Maureen T. Reddy, interview by author, 20 October 2003, Providence, RI, tape recording.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

Reddy learned from her parents' experiences and activities, whether she continued with their actions or rebelled against them.<sup>93</sup>

Reddy considers herself a feminist,

I became a feminist in part because I loved my mother, and the feminist movement seemed to offer an arena for action in honor of that love. From the beginning, I perceived feminism as a movement for social change, not about life-styles but about politics, and specifically about collective political action to improve *all*women's lives.

Reddy traces the roots of her feminist work to her parent's volunteer work, particularly her mother's "Catholic-based volunteering" for various organizations. So the traits of feminism are inherited by Reddy, yet she chooses how and which parts to embrace.<sup>94</sup>

Leaving the Catholic Church and Catholic-based volunteering at age fourteen, Reddy moved into more wide-scale political volunteer work. She explains that out of this early volunteer work she began determining where her energies would be placed by asking, "Does this group/cause/person promote feminism?" Reddy recalls that "Feminism became the theme that unified my activities, a parallel to my mother's Catholicism." In November 1983, after her son, Sean, was born, Reddy's world changed.<sup>95</sup>

When Sean was less than a year old, Reddy and her husband took him to a birthday party for a little boy whose parents had been in their birthing class. The friends were connected to the local theater. A photographer at the party was quite interested in Sean. The man wanted to use Sean in a billboard. Initially Reddy and her husband were flattered, but the photographer went from commenting on how "good looking" Sean was to explaining that he wanted to use Sean because he was "recognizably black, but not too black." Incidents like this prompted Reddy to think about the racism she had not anticipated as the white mother of a black child. Reddy writes, "My new question was 'does this cause/group/person promote antiracism and

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Reddy, *Crossing the Color Line*, 155-156.

<sup>95</sup> Maureen T. Reddy, "Working on Redemption," in *Everyday Acts against Racism: Raising Children in a Multiracial World*, ed. Maureen T. Reddy (Seattle, WA: Seal Press, 1996): 241. and Ibid.

feminism?" Through raising her son, Reddy's sense of self and her commitment to social justice was expanded from feminism to include antiracism.<sup>96</sup>

At age two, Reddy's daughter, Ailis, made up elaborate stories with each family member playing a role. Reddy reflects that her daughter is close to the age when her son,

began to ask the questions that changed my life: why do white people have vaginas? what is older—dark skin or light skin? why do boys have curly hair and girls have straight hair? And later: what does "nigger" mean? why do some boys think they're better than girls? why were there slaves? why are so many white people racist?

Reddy admits, "I quickly came to know that my education in race and racism was far from complete, despite nine years as half of an interracial couple and a vast amount of reading and listening about race." Reddy's time within an interracial relationship nor her research prepared her for the experiential happenings of parenting and the racial occurrences that ensued. Reddy's son conflates race and gender in his understanding of identity, marking the intersections of identity.<sup>97</sup>

Besides making her aware of the work she needed to do to understand race and along with her husband be able to explain it to their son, Sean's questions also prompted Reddy to consider her own social location,

Like most white people from progressive families, I seldom thought of my race while growing up; race had no conscious role in my self-identification. As the daughter of immigrants who spoke always of Dublin as "home," and whose American-born children all did the same, I thought of myself as Irish, certainly, but never as white. Even as an adult involved in an interracial relationship, I did not fully confront what my whiteness might mean—socially, personally, politically, symbolically—until my son's questions pushed me to interrogate myself.

Sean's questions and early racial incidents moved Reddy from thinking about race in personal ways to melding her personal ideals with her professional work in academia.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Reddy, interview by author, 20 October 2003; and Reddy, "Working on Redemption," 242.

<sup>97</sup> Maureen T. Reddy, "Race-ing Love," in *Mother Journeys: Feminists Write about Mothering*, ed. Maureen T. Reddy, Martha Roth, and Amy Sheldon (Minneapolis, MN: Spinsters Ink, 1994): 85; *Ibid.*, 86; and Reddy, "Working on Redemption," 241.

<sup>98</sup> Reddy, "Race-ing Love," 87.

Reddy's 1985 dissertation, "Elizabeth Gaskell's Short Fiction," focused on Victorian fiction. From her graduate school days onward Reddy was interested in race and feminism. After Sean's questions, Reddy wanted to find literature on interracial families. Reddy explains, "And of course like every academic in the world, I went zipping out to read well what's been written. And in 1986 the answer was nothing! Or nothing useful." According to Reddy, the void in the literature on interracial families and the reality that the early research that existed pathologized mixed-race children spurred her to write her own corrective text, "So it was all bad news, more bad news, that that's what got me started thinking about well it would be interesting to maybe write about this someday." A short piece, "Race-ing Love," in her co-edited 1994 collection, *Mother Journeys: Feminists Write about Mothering*, persuaded an editor to invite her to write a whole book on the topic. The book invitation lead to *Crossing the Color Line: Race, Parenting, and Culture*, published in 1994.<sup>99</sup>

In between her dissertation and *Mother Journeys*, Reddy published two other books. In 1988, she explored women and crime novels in her book *Sisters in Crime: Feminism and the Crime Novel*. In 1991, Reddy co-edited another collection, *Narrating Mothers: Theorizing Maternal Subjectivities*. After *Crossing the Color Line*, Reddy published three more race related books: in 1996, an edited collection, *Everyday Acts Against Racism: Raising Children in a Multiracial World*; in 2002, a co-edited collection *Race in the College Classroom: Pedagogy and Politics*, co-edited with Bonnie TuSmith; and finally in 2003, Reddy published *Traces, Codes, and Clues: Reading Race in Crime Fiction*. Notably, Reddy's scholarly focus mirrored her personal agenda moving from feminism to antiracism to melding the two arenas.

When prompted by the idea she has published a lot, Reddy responds,

A fair amount. Yeah, I guess seven books. And I'm working on one right now on race and ethnicity and Irish popular culture, race and nation in Irish popular culture. Cause Ireland is really changing a lot, in interesting ways. The Irish over here have been white for a long time, but the Irish over there weren't white until, I'm not sure they are really

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<sup>99</sup> Maureen Teresa Reddy, "Elizabeth Gaskell's Short Fiction," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1985); Reddy, interview by author, 20 October 2003; and Reddy, "Race-ing Love."



white yet, but in terms of thinking of whiteness as sort of the sin quoin of Irishness didn't happen until the past few years. So, even now it's really being disputed. It's interesting.

*Crossing the Color Line* (1994) is the main book, however, that centers on her experiences as a white mother of black children.<sup>100</sup>

In *Crossing the Color Line*, Reddy utilizes six chapters to write about her experiences mothering black children, while drawing on theories of race, gender, and literature to analyze situations. The book's multi-genre approach is in sync with the multifaceted aspects of identity that she explores. Reddy sums up her book, explaining, "This book documents my own journey toward an internalized understanding of race—white and black—and racism as the white wife of a black husband and the white mother of black children, challenging along the way both white views of blacks and black views of whites." To the question of intended audience for which her book was written book, Reddy responds,

When I was writing it I really thought of myself of writing to other multiracial or interracial families. That's really who I had in mind. And actually for those families in the future too. In a way I was writing to fill a gap. Now Jane Lazarre's book [*Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness*] came out the same year that Lise Funderburg's book [*Black, White, Other*] came out, but before that there really weren't many, and most of the treatments of interracial families treated them as pathological, like we were symptoms of something. So it was important to me to talk about us in a non-pathological way. So that was really who I imagined writing to.

Reddy places her book as a corrective to the pathological literature and as groundbreaking, filling the void of materials on interracial families.<sup>101</sup>

At the outset of the book, Reddy recalls a conversation with a Black woman who tells her that she, the author, has "assimilate[d] into the black community." In response, Reddy states, "I'm still white. I think I stand on the color line itself, not on one side of it. Or maybe I'm like a bridge, stretching across the line, touching both sides, but mostly in the middle somewhere." Thus, at this point, Reddy believes she is still connected to her whiteness while asserting that as a "white woman married to a black man, a white mother of black children," she is a "bridge."

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<sup>100</sup> Reddy, *Crossing the Color Line*, xii; and Reddy, interview by author, 20 October 2003.

<sup>101</sup> Reddy, interview by author, 20 October 2003.

Reddy's positioning herself as a middle link—a "bridge"—between Blacks and Whites is fascinating, especially compared with the idea of the "tragic mulatto."<sup>102</sup>

As noted, the "tragic mulatto" in African-American and American literature and film is the mixed black and white figure who because of his or her racial identity is "trapped" between two worlds and therefore destined to misfortune. Reddy's assessment of her position as the "bridge" subsumes the role that society has marked for her children. The "what about the children?" question often raised to suppress interracial relationships is turned on its head by Reddy's assuming this role and the responsibility that ensues. Contrary to the tragic mulatto, many figures in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and still today, believe that biracial children are the key to ameliorating race relations. Reddy's commandeering of this role rather than her children signals a shift in the dynamics of racial politics. This shift is compounded with Reddy's courage to renounce her privilege.<sup>103</sup>

In *Crossing the Color Line*, Reddy contends, "It was only when I stopped being white, in some sense, that I began to understand what whiteness means in America." Reddy suggests that her racial identity has changed; therefore, enabling her to better understand white privilege. Reddy compares the U.S. with South African apartheid and declares, "I think: the white partner, in learning what being black in America entails, learns what whiteness means and loses or abandons at least some of that whiteness." Reddy is referring to white privilege and the recognition of whiteness as a racial category. Although Reddy does not claim to be non-white, she does suggest that her sense of herself and others sense of her as white has been altered by the

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<sup>102</sup> Reddy, *Crossing the Color Line*, 5.

<sup>103</sup> Many works in early African-American literature employ the "tragic mulatto." For a review of the concept see Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both*, 220-245. For an example of the role of biracial child ameliorating race relations, see Kathryn Talalay who points out that African-American writer George Schuyler and his White wife Josephine "believed that the solution to America's race problems lay in miscegenation," in *Composition in Black and White: The Life of Philippa Schuyler* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), viii.

birth of her children. Her new-found recognition of the black experience has caused her to reinterpret her own racial being.<sup>104</sup>

Notably, Reddy explains that it is not her interracial marriage to her husband, Doug Best, that causes Reddy to interrogate her whiteness, rather, it is the birth of her children, Sean and Ailis. In a *Boston Globe* article about Reddy and the book, writer Irene Sege argues,

In a society where, for all the barriers broken by the civil rights movement, race still divides, bearing [Sean] and [Ailis] catapulted Reddy across that border in a way that marrying Best did not. The innocents born to her transformed her into a racial fellow traveler in a way that exchanging wedding vows with the grown child of another mother did not.

Reddy's care as a parent causes her to critique and reject the way whiteness permeates society. Reddy wants what is best for her children and realizes that as non-whites they are not only excluded from some of the benefits her own racial status provides her, but that they are even targeted as racial criminals.<sup>105</sup>

Reddy's book provides insight into the role of gender in interracial parenting as well. Reddy details the differences she feels when parenting her son as compared with her daughter because of their shared femaleness. In addition, Reddy reveals her son's development as a pre-teenager to come to terms with his own race by fluctuating between a black and biracial identity. Reddy and her husband had assumed that their children would see themselves as black and were unprepared when their five-year-old son shared that he was both black and white. In assuming that Reddy's black husband would share the same racial identity with his children, the parents initially failed to recognize that their son possessed the right to understand his racial identity as unique from both of them.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Reddy, *Crossing the Color Line*, 21.

<sup>105</sup> Irene Sege, "Color Her World: A White Mother of Bi-racial Children Sees Society in a Different Light." *Boston Globe*. 18 January 1995, 23.

<sup>106</sup> Lawrence A. Hirschfeld provides insight on when and what children learn about race, explaining:

Children . . . do not believe race to be a superficial quality of the world. Multicultural curricula aside, few people believe that race is only skin deep. Certainly few 3-year-olds do. They believe that race is an intrinsic, immutable, and essential aspect of a person's

Reddy expresses disappointment, guilt, and shame when her son exclaimed that he is biracial. Reddy and her husband had taught their son he was racially black and ethnically African-American and Irish-American. Therefore, she is shocked when he alternately self-identifies. Reddy's clarity surrounding her children's racial identity stems from her identification with blacks, her political associations with blacks, and her status and acceptance among and by blacks. Some may argue for recognition between the inter-relationship between race and ethnicity. In distinction, Reddy is clear in her feelings for those white parents of biracial or black children who she thinks are "wanting privilege" for their children through attempting to identify them as other than black.<sup>107</sup>

Another example of Reddy feeling vulnerable comes when she hesitantly discloses,

As my kids get older, I have been horrified to discover in myself like a deep worry that they will get involved with white people. And they do of course. Become involved, I mean romantically, sexually, etc., cause part of it is a goofy, like superficial concern and that is oh darn I look like such a failure to my friends. You know, I raised this kid and then he goes of with some white woman. [Laughter] Forget that, but part of it is a fear that my kids will be treated badly by some racist white family. I try to tell myself why would they necessarily be racist? Well because the majority of white Americans are. That's why. That's the answer. That is a weird thing to think about and that's where my son and I have argued.

For many reasons, it is fascinating to realize that Reddy, who herself is married across the color line, has become worried that her children may follow her actions. It seems that this is partly because of her increased awareness of white racism that she gained from raising her children. It may also have to do with her knowledge of marriage, and perhaps with her experiences dealing with racism.<sup>108</sup>

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identity. Moreover, they seem to come to this conclusion on their own. They do not need to be taught that race is a deep property, they know it themselves already. Lawrence A. Hirschfeld, *Race in the Making: Cognition, Culture, and the Child's Construction of Human Kinds* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996), xi. Similarly, in her book, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?: And Other Conversations About Race* (New York, NY: BasicBooks, 1999 [1997], Rev. Ed.) Beverly Daniel Tatum explains, "Questions and confusion about racial issues begin early. Though adults often talk about the "colorblindness" of children, the fact is that children as young as three do notice physical differences such as skin color, hair texture, and the shape of one's facial features," 32.

<sup>107</sup> Reddy, *Crossing the Color Line*, 68; and Reddy, interview by author, 20 October 2003.

<sup>108</sup> Reddy, interview by author, 20 October 2003.

Reddy concludes her book stating that "White people cannot become black, but we can reject the privileges of whiteness, calling them what they are, and in that choice build a bridge across the color line." Reddy believes, "All of our lives depend on that bridge; without it we will surely drown." Since Reddy already calls herself a bridge, she suggests that whites are the key to race relations and to maintaining society's collective life. In the end, Reddy does not believe that she is black. Instead, she sees herself as a bridge because of her children. In turn, she appears to have made the decision to refuse to attempt to exploit her white privilege because her children are targets of its flipside: racial discrimination, not because her husband was a target.<sup>109</sup>

Reddy conceived of herself as having to do go-between work between the white larger society and her children. When asked if Reddy still sees herself as a "bridge," she responds:

Yeah, I don't think that anymore actually. Yeah, I guess when I felt like that was well before I wrote that book, was really when my son was about three I guess, two to three. Before I had really consciously thought a lot of these issues, when they were just starting to come up. He was asking all these tough questions about race and about gender and about this and about that. I think I was feeling really stressed out because I was supposed to be a bridge for my kids. And actually a friend of mine who was involved in that parent group here was the person who said that to me. She's a black woman. Sometimes people give you back versions of yourself that you don't recognize and they can be really be very helpful. And that was my experience over the course of about two years. People kept saying things that I don't think they thought were controversial anyway. They were just describing me to myself. "Well of course if I were ever going to marry a white man, he'd have to"—and I love this comment—"assimilate into the black community, the way you have." That was what really got me going. I never assimilated into that. What does that mean? It was such a shocking description to me that had no relationship to how I saw myself so that made me really think about how I did see myself which was as a bridge and that really made me think about how faulty that self-conception was. I would say that over the past two years I've really abandoned that. Part of it is that my kids are getting older or part of it is that I realize that is not a role that I am suited for or want. I guess I felt like I had to be the interpreter for my kids, between the white world and the black world or something and that was just wrong. I didn't have to do that.

Reddy provides insight for why she once saw herself as a bridge. She explains how her thinking has recently changed, especially since her children are older and she no longer has to "be the interpreter."<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Reddy, *Crossing the Color Line*, 173.

<sup>110</sup> Reddy, interview by author, 20 October 2003.

Currently, Reddy jokingly suggests she conceptualizes of herself in a “confused way.”

But elaborates,

God, in terms of race, I guess one thing hasn't changed and that is you often feel like a racial imposter. Because out in the world I'm just a middle-aged white woman when I'm not with my family. And I get treated very differently as a middle-aged white woman—middle-aged, middle-class—than I do when I'm with my family. And sometimes, less so now, than in the past, sometimes white people would share their little racist ideas with me. Standing in line at the grocery store the clerk would say something to me about a prior customer who had been black and everything felt like it was a battle. Cause then I would say I don't agree with you and get into that whole thing. Which I actually think was helpful sometimes. That happens to me less now. I don't know why. I don't know if people are more aware. Racism certainly hasn't diminished but I have noticed a lot less of that kind of thing than even ten years ago. I used to hear that a lot more. I don't know why I don't hear it as much. I do feel like an imposter sometimes because really my private experience has very little in common with most middle-aged white women.

Reddy has shifted from feeling like a “bridge” to a “racial imposter.” As a racial imposter, Reddy is privy to white prejudice in its raw form. Unlike others who might not object or notice these occurrences, Reddy is vigilant in her denouncing of these situations.<sup>111</sup>

Racially ambiguous people who identify as black or biracial but are “white skinned” also comment on this phenomenon of being a racial imposter or receiving insider knowledge. As a biracial woman who “looks white,” Lise Funderburg refers to her experiences as “being in this sort of racial spy mode.” Likewise, in her essay, “Passing for White, Passing for Black,” Adrian Piper explains the relationship that whites share when they believe they are alone, writing, “this kind of comraderie [sic] with white people—the relaxed, unguarded, but respectful comraderie [sic] that white people reserve for those whom they believe are like them—those who can be trusted, who are intrinsically worthy of value, respect, and attention.” The clerk views Reddy as sharing the status that Piper articulates. Because Reddy has this experience with blackness and with racism, Reddy contends her private experiences are very different than most of her white women peers. What does this inform us about race in U.S. society?<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Reddy, interview by Woodfork, 20 October 2003.

<sup>112</sup> Margo Jefferson, “A Spy in the House of Race: Interview with Lise Funderburg, author of *Black, White, Other: Biracial Americans Talk About Race*,” *Glamour Magazine* (May 1994): 76; and Adrian Piper, “Passing for White, Passing for Black,” *Transition: An International Review* 58 (1992): 26.

Despite seeing prejudice, Maureen Reddy remains hopeful. She writes,

I have always believed I could change the world. Not the whole world, of course, and certainly not on my own right this minute. My parents imbued me with this belief that people working together could, over a long period of time, accomplish something to change at least one little corner of the world. When my son was born, I realized how foundational this belief was in my family.

Although she feels some discouragement and confusion, she still feels people can change the world. And through her collaborative work, writing, teaching, volunteering, and mothering, Reddy has been doing just that: changing the world, as she puts it, one “everyday act” after another.<sup>113</sup>

As two of the first white people to explore their parenting of biracial or black children in book-length form, Maureen Reddy and Jane Lazarre share a professional relationship, reading each other’s work and writing pieces for each other’s books (forewords, chapters for edited collections, and jacket-blurbs). Jane Lazarre is a white, Jewish woman who is married to an African-American man named Douglas. In 1996, Lazarre published a slim, 141-page memoir *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness: Memoir of a White Mother of Black Sons*. In her book, she provides detailed accounts of teaching, family, parenting, and racial transformation. Lazarre sets various scenes and recalls communications within her extended family and community in an effort to question her own position in this racialized society. As a college professor, Lazarre teaches African-American autobiography and writing as a member of the faculty of Writing and Literature at Eugene Lang College at the New School for Social Research in New York City. Having published eight works, Lazarre is a novelist, memoirist, essayist, and non-fiction writer.<sup>114</sup>

While discussing her family of origin, Lazarre compares her experience growing up as the daughter of Jewish American radicals with that of her African American husband of twenty-seven years. In her “Prologue,” Lazarre states, “My life has been dramatically altered by being

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<sup>113</sup> Reddy, “Working on Redemption,” 239; See the “Introduction” of Reddy’s *Everyday Acts* for a discussion of her notion of “everyday acts.”

the mother of Black sons over the course of more than twenty-five years. I record this story, I hope, in the best tone of a mother's voice, both reasoned and emotional, but always full of intensity." As revealed in this quotation, mothering is an important aspect of Lazarre's identity.<sup>115</sup>

Lazarre's memoir details her struggle to understand the ways that race affects her family of choice, as its members interact with persons outside the family. She details the impact race has on her and what that means in relation to her sons, Adam and Khary. Having met her husband while they were both doing protest work in 1966 on a New York City picket-line for public assistance workers, Lazarre was naive to the difficulties interracial couples face. The year was 1966 when Lazarre met her future husband Douglas (prior to the 1967 Supreme Court case, *Loving v. Virginia*, which struck down anti-miscegenation statutes in the United States of America) and the popular rhetoric opposed to interracial marriages centered on the offspring of these mixed unions. The "what about the children?" question was being used in arguments against interracial coupling. This multi-layered question included levels of condemnation to interracial coupling, desire to maintain white supremacy through an imagined purity of whiteness, and false concerns over the negative impacts of "hybridity."<sup>116</sup>

Oblivious to this propaganda Lazarre states,

When I decided to marry Douglas I had no thoughts of children or their problems, and if I considered their racial identity at all it was with a combination of denial of its importance and a naive faith in imminent, radical social change. It was the sixties and I was twenty-two years old.

Lazarre admits she was not considering the "what about the children?" questions at all. If she had been, she believed the concerns it represented did not matter or that race relations would improve. Admitting she was "naïve" and young when she married, Lazarre alludes to the 1960s

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<sup>114</sup> Jane Lazarre, *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness: Memoir of a White Mother of Black Sons* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

<sup>115</sup> Lazarre, *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness*, xxi.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.



as a time of protest for a better future. Lazarre was active in protest, but it is unclear if she was involved specifically in the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>117</sup>

Lazarre's naiveté diminishes over time. She indicates that her racial identity goes through several transitions, as she gains an insider's knowledge of racism through raising her sons. Lazarre recalls that as soon as she became pregnant with her first son in 1969, she noticed a difference: "I realized that I—my body and self—was no longer exactly white." Regardless of this internal change, Lazarre and her husband raised their children as members of an interracial family. Lazarre writes,

For most of their growing up, Douglas and I defined our family as "biracial." But that is a term we now see as problematic—as if there were two neatly defined races; as if there were an indisputable entity called race; as if young men with brown skins can ever be considered "part white" in America.

Lazarre is critical of her own thinking and parenting. She also critiques the racial categories she attempts to navigate with her family. Lazarre lacks the language she desires to describe her circumstances. Lazarre argues that the categories she does have are imperfect, particularly as they relate to representing the experiences of her family, specifically her sons.<sup>118</sup>

While her sons were teenagers and defining themselves as "Black men," their mother, Lazarre, recounts her own shifting, writing,

Meanwhile, negotiating the complex maternal roads that paralleled their growth into manhood, overstepping boundaries between self and others as mothers often do, becoming most at home in the borderlands between conventionally distinguished identities, I would come to see myself as an 'interracial' person in a family of Black Americans.

Lazarre refers to the period when she was learning about racism through the experiences of her children and her extended family as "the years of transition" when she is "passing over," presumably from white to another category, yet more precisely from unknowing to knowing.

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 3; and Ibid., xvii.

Thus, Lazarre has shifted from naiveté to “no longer exactly white” to a member of a biracial family to herself as interracial to passing over.<sup>119</sup>

In her book, Lazarre critiques whiteness and its element of white privilege and offers candid accounts of her shame in benefiting from her racial status. She accepts the shame of whiteness and recounts her guilt throughout her book. She worries that her sons will see her as “white” before “mother” and wonders if they “regret” her.<sup>120</sup>

As her memoir progresses, Lazarre relays how her understanding of the meaning of blackness has “deepened and changed.” She argues that her (racial) identity is hidden and, with it, is also hidden the perspective she now holds. Lazarre’s new understanding of blackness and whiteness signals a shift in her development of racial understanding. She suggests that this makes her “no longer an ordinary white woman.” Implicit in her comment is the idea that ordinary white women do not understand the meaning of blackness and whiteness. This is revealing in the sense that it explains that it took her experiences as a member of an interracial family to shift Lazarre’s consciousness regarding race.<sup>121</sup>

Lazarre writes of politically aligning herself with black people, revealing the political aspects of her new identity. Ultimately, Jane Lazarre declares, “I am no longer white. However I may appear to others, I am a person of color now . . . Some color with no precise name.” Lazarre does not offer the critical interpretation needed to understand her declaration. Has Lazarre's transformation occurred only within her personal inventory or is it for the external gaze as well? In other words, how is the reader to understand Lazarre’s claim? Is it social, cultural, political, personal, religious, a combination of all five, or even another declaration? Lazarre suggests that “As with any other identity, how one experiences oneself in the everyday world must become internal as well, or the mind splits, even sanity may slip, imbalance threatens.” Following Lazarre’s logic, her phenotype should impact her sense of self. Is Lazarre implying that although

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 20; and Ibid., 66.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 10, 24-25.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 49.

her consciousness has shifted as well as the way she sees herself, her physicality has remained constant? The reader is left to ponder the full nature and depth of Lazarre's transformation. Still, Lazarre's recognition of the public and private personas needing to match sheds light on the way race operates.<sup>122</sup>

Through raising her sons, Lazarre identifies an often-overlooked aspect of the child-parent relationship: the reciprocity of development. As she comments, "There is a great false myth that while we create our children, they merely react to us, as if we were static creatures, finished and formed. The truth is more reciprocal. Like any passionate intimacy, they (re)create us at the same moment as we are creating and recreating them." Indeed, children and parents do affect each other in a number of ways. As mentioned, historically, a parent's race has influenced the status of a child. Conversely, a child's race has also impacted upon his or her parents. For example, whites who parent non-whites may lose their social standing.

Both Lazarre and Reddy provide important insight into the powerful ways that parenting biracial and black children (across the color line) can affect a white person's sense of identity and lead to significant changes in racial understanding. Lazarre and Reddy also struggle to fully capture the words needed to explain their sense of racial transformation and newly claimed identity. Reddy's comments of "crossing the color line" and "acting as a bridge" and Lazarre's remarks of "transitioning" and being home in the "borderlands" showcase the lack of adequate terminology and conceptualization involved with categories of race. Moreover, from the "one-drop rule" to "octoroons" to "multiracial," racial distinctions have shifted over time. Within their own children, identity markers change. The fixed identity of racial groupings is a spurious notion. If Reddy is crossing the color line this passage assumes movement from one static identity to another. Lazarre's living in the middle—"borderlands"—complicates the binary of static racial categories by creating an in-between space but still perpetuates it because this space exists between two fixed notions of identity.

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., xvii; 135.

The inability of the author/parents to name their transformation in language that identifies the transformation they are claiming does more than indict the lack of terminology. It also indicates that understandings of racial categories includes agency. For example, how one views herself may be different than how others comprehend her. Thus, who determines one's identity and what are the factors involved? Parental-identification is just one factor in the parents' notion of change in race. Further, beliefs system shifts are occurring. The parents' cultural discourses are impacted by their parenting experiences. Exploring the lives of women who are not the biological parents of biracial or black children provides contrast to the experiences of Reddy and Lazarre. The next chapter discusses the parenting experiences of three adoptive mothers.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RUSH, WOLFF, AND THOMPSON

As the White mother of a Black child, and because I live the day-to-day effects of racism with her as much as I can, I am at times neither White nor Black. Naturally, then, both Blacks and Whites question my credibility. Before my talks begin, my skin color aligns me with other liberal Whites. Once I am into the stories, it is clear that I am speaking from across the color line, a place where most Whites never go. Even from across the color line, however, I continue to be White among Black folks who wonder how I got here and what I'm doing. Let me say, it is a journey and I also am trying to figure it out.

Sharon E. Rush, *Loving Across the Color Line*<sup>123</sup>

In my son's absence, I could be any other white woman, unaware of her unearned privileges. In my absence, he could be any other black male, a source of purse-tightening anxiety that is reflexive in some. What we are together—a very happy, loving family—is not always what others choose to see.

Jana Wolff, *Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother*<sup>124</sup>

So, on a day when I am supposed to be at my desk, working with life history interviews for my book on antiracism, I am instead entirely distracted by a piercing noise emanating from under a pile of sheets in Adrian's closet. The noise from the Hulk machine forces me to look up, to take notice, and to make sense of the politics of my silences: what to say and what not to say to Adrian. What does it mean to be a white woman attempting to raise him respectful of African American culture and aware of the violence perpetrated against African American people by people of my race, violence that, I fear, Adrian is already facing?

Becky Thompson, *Mothering without a Compass*<sup>125</sup>

In her book, *Loving across the Color Line: A White Adoptive Mother Learns about Race* (2000), Sharon E. Rush writes about a time during her junior year at Cornell University when she went out to dinner to a fancy French restaurant with her roommates' Puerto Rican family. Rush explains in vivid detail her borrowing of appropriate clothing for the occasion, her lack of knowledge of the usage of formal eating utensils, her unfamiliarity with the cuisine, and her naïveté regarding alcohol consumption. In summing up her story of going out to dinner with her roommates' family, Rush concludes,

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<sup>123</sup> Sharon E. Rush, *Loving across the Color Line: A White Adoptive Mother Learns about Race* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 112.

<sup>124</sup> Jana Wolff, *Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother* (Honolulu: Vista Communications, 2000 [1997]), 143.

<sup>125</sup> Becky Thompson, *Mothering without a Compass: White Mother's Love, Black Son's Courage* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 54.

The lack of knowledge about something that others take for granted is not unusual and it is certainly not indicative of intelligence. It merely reflects experience. It is much more important, in my opinion, that we use our intelligence to learn new things about life and people that might not ever be tested on an exam. When I took my roommate home to meet my parents, she also learned things about modest southern culture that probably were just as eye-opening to her as my journey through her culture had been for me. Instead of eating fancy French dishes and drinking wine, we ate homemade vegetable soup with cornbread and drank iced tea. Remarkably, my college roommate's and my cross-cultural, interracial, and mixed-economic-class friendship has lasted all these years.

The story is revealing in many ways. First, it illustrates Rush's class status. Second, it highlights Rush's appreciation of learning and knowledge. Third, it reflects Rush's reflexivity. She is brave enough to try a new experience and she is thoughtful about appreciating it.<sup>126</sup>

Rush recalls her childhood and relays that her parents are from "the Deep South." Rush grew up as one of four girls. Her mother is from Tennessee and her father is from Alabama. She never felt any racism while visiting her mother's relatives in Tennessee, but going to Alabama was a different story. Rush states,

It wasn't so an issue with my Dad but it was definitely an issue with the extended family and the whole culture in this small rural town in Alabama. I mean even to the point where you had the classic railroad tracks and the white houses on one side and they weren't, my grandparents were not wealthy people by any means. They were kind of poor themselves, but across the railroad tracks you actually had shanties, unpainted houses and I could never go over there.

Rush pinpoints the nexus of race and class. Even within class groupings distinctions of race existed. Rush was not permitted to cross the line, exhibited in the form of the railroad tracks.<sup>127</sup>

Rush writes about the warnings from family members not to cross the racial lines,

Although the warnings were couched in the vernacular of the day. I do not remember whether it was the word itself or the disdain with which it was spoken that disgusted me more. I have no idea why I felt this way, but I wanted to dissociate from people when they started "being ugly," as I called it. I did not even know the word *racism*, let alone have any idea what it meant. But I think the real "moment of awareness" for me came when I witnessed some White children beating up some Black children. As a young girl, watching the Black children being hit overwhelmed me with sadness and I simply knew it was wrong.

Rush's parents were not racist. She recalls how they rented out a room to an Indian man. Rush grew up in a segregated elementary school. She went to integrated middle schools and high

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<sup>126</sup> Sharon E. Rush, *Loving across the Color Line*, 54-55; and *Ibid.*, 55.

schools, “But I don’t remember I wasn’t aware enough about race then to even evaluate that looking back. You know, I played a lot of sports and I know there were black girls on the teams, but I don’t remember it being an issue.” Rush played sports with non-white girls, but does not recall having any friends of color.<sup>128</sup>

When asked about the religious and class background in her family of origin, Rush responds,

My background basically is one of very modest southern Baptist kind of background. Just about all the men in my mother’s family, for example, were deacons in the Baptist church. My grandfather on my father’s side being Alabamans there literally was the small white church a half-mile down the highway and everybody in the vineyards were related. Literally that’s the same. So I grew up in a very strict religious education kind of environment.

Rush’s family followed the Southern Baptist Church. Later, Rush’s beliefs concerning religion change.<sup>129</sup>

Neither of Rush’s parents went to college. Rush’s mother was a librarian. Rush explains,

My dad retired. He was a drill sergeant at ROTC at Cornell. When he retired you know what he did? My mother worked in one of the graduate libraries. Cornell has a lot of libraries . . . And right across the walkway was the undergraduate library. My father counted people coming into and going out of the library and checked bags to make sure that your books were checked out. That’s what my father did. I’m not coming from a very privileged background. People think that if you go to these schools that we do and they can actually make very insensitive comments because they don’t have a clue that your parents are one of the idiots that they’re talking about, you know. It’s very interesting.

Rush was able to attend Cornell University because of free tuition based on her mother’s employment. Rush refers to this as a “divine gift.” Rush’s parents did not attend college and Rush explains that she herself “Didn’t know enough about higher education to know what anything was. I really didn’t.” Rush discusses specific examples of not having resources. She does not want to embarrass her family by including these examples in print. The point, however, is that Rush knows what it is like to lack resources. John L. Caughey’s life history-oriented

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<sup>127</sup> Sharon E. Rush, interview by author, 9 December 2003, Gainesville, FL, tape recording.

<sup>128</sup> Rush, *Loving across the Color Line*, 4; and Rush, interview by author, 9 December 2003, Gainesville, FL.

approach that discusses individuals' negotiation of multiple "cultural traditions" is helpful in understanding Rush's comments about negotiating her class background with her place at this Ivy League college. Caughey contends that people may be fluent with many ways of living, including knowing many class traditions.<sup>130</sup>

Rush explains that coming from her humble upbringing, she was not very comfortable attending Cornell University (for her B.A. or J.D.) because of its unfamiliarity. After attending Cornell and obtaining her law degree, Rush is now a different class status than the one in which she was raised. This class shifting may be true for many in the U.S. Yet, Rush remains cognizant of her background. She reflects,

Poverty, Joshua, is extremely hard for me to see; it's extremely hard for me to see and I can; like when I visited at Cornell and I went up on the auto train. And going up the East Coast on the train, we know what neighborhoods they went through. We can look out and we see a child and you say there is no help for this child. Get out of this yard where there's this piece of equipment that doesn't work, but they obviously had salvaged to hoping that it would give them something, the broken down washing machine in the yard. You do understand what I'm saying, right? Because they had savaged this from somewhere and brought it home because it was valuable and so that has profound affect on me and I don't know why. But given that race is tied very much to poverty it makes it even harder for me I think. It's very tragic in this country to have the wealth that we have and have the poverty level at the same time, so I feel very blessed, absolutely blessed.

Rush recognizes poverty. She relates this to her earlier experiences growing up without having necessary resources, which she refers to as "poverty."<sup>131</sup>

When asked about this transitioning of class levels to someone who now holds an endowed chair law professorship at a flagship state university and drives a luxury vehicle, Rush responds,

I cross a different kind of power line. It sounds like I'm putting up telephone poles, but "power lines" in the way that we empower the people in society. So I have crossed from a life of my parents for example who were eking out a living into a life that I could never imagine, never. I could never imagine. For example, making, when I first started practicing law, fresh out of law school I made thirty thousand dollars and it was overwhelming to me. The first thing I did with it was I bought my parents a trip to

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<sup>129</sup> Rush, interview by author, 9 December 2003.

<sup>130</sup> Rush, interview by author, 9 December 2003; *Ibid.*; and John L. Caughey, *Negotiating Cultures and Identities*.

<sup>131</sup> Rush, interview by author, 9 December 2003.



Hawaii on my new *American Express* card. My Dad was in Pearl Harbor and they wanted to go. That's the first thing I did. I thought I had so much money and I didn't realize I would be paying that off for a long time, you know what I mean? But that was the disjunction. It was like oh, thirty thousand dollars. That's a lot of money, you know when you're in your mid-twenties, late twenties. And I don't ever regret; don't get me wrong. It's just that I couldn't comprehend what that meant.

Rush further explicates her class level as, "Extremely privileged, extremely privileged. Now I'm not saying that I am the wealthiest person in the world, but I am able to help my family. I just feel very blessed. I don't know how to explain it. I'm not eking out a living." Rush distinguishes her status from that of her family of origin. There is a large gap between Rush and her relatives in Alabama. Similarly, Rush is the most educated person in her immediate family. As Caughey suggests, Rush remains fluid with both class-consciousnesses.<sup>132</sup>

Beyond class, Rush discusses gender. She talks about how her admiration for her parents, stating,

My father sailed around the world twice. My father was very, well obviously my parents were very bright. My mother was the youngest of six girls and she had a younger brother. All six of girls were valedictorian of their class. My mother had a scholarship to the University of Tennessee, but chose to go to Washington because of the War and that's where she met my dad. So it's not that my parents are not bright, you know when sometimes people associate poverty with not being that bright. But poor people can be very bright and some wealthy people can be not so bright.

Rush distinguishes her parents' intellect. She is careful to note that intelligence and education-levels are not synonymous. She highlights the gender roles and expectations in her experience,

I don't know, but I think certainly my sisters and I have said that one of the best things that our parents did for us was to locate in Ithaca to get us out of rural Alabama because also the culture that was there was that women did not go to college. Women did not go to college and my father got a lot of grief for sending his daughters and encouraging us to go to college. He got a lot of grief and I've had cousins who have had kids who are number one in their class or whatever, I had one cousin who had a daughter, so that's like my first cousin once you're older I guess. I had a first cousin who once we moved who had a scholarship to Vanderbilt who did not go because you just didn't do it. Now think about that. That was her ticket out; that was her ticket out and the support wasn't there. It would have been seen as a betrayal of the community. It's just amazing, and it's not just amazing but because we were away from that, even though it was kind of something you didn't do, okay my parents encouraged it. There is absolutely no doubt when I was growing up actually no doubt that we were going to college.

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid.; and Ibid.

Rush greatly admires her parental support in her education. She notes the communal repercussions for her parents' stand.<sup>133</sup>

Rush graduated from law school in 1980 and went to work for a "Wall Street" firm in Washington, DC. She was one of the few women in the firm. Two years later, she decided to become a law professor. In 1985, she went to teach at the University of Florida. Rush is now the senior woman at her law, as the Irving Cypen Professor of Law. When asked what drew Rush to become a civil rights lawyer,

I started out with civil procedures, which is not as bad as it sounds, so more about procedure than it is about substance. But seminar-wise I taught a seminar on children so I've always focused on kids and their status and all. I've always, I don't know. I do race discrimination when I do constitutional law. When did I start doing that? And I also have done federal courts, which is basically advance constitutional law and I started doing that fairly early and that's litigation in federal court and we all know what that a lot of it has to do with race discrimination. I started doing that fairly early on. And when I came here I know when I came here in '84 I was doing that. So I would say I started doing constitutional law and that was one of the attractions for coming here to teach a course that I wanted to teach and since then and critical race theory, critical legal studies all of that was fairly new. I mean I certainly did not get that in law school and I certainly did not get at Cornell. I think all of that started developing the late '70's or the '80's, so it's fairly new movement, and you may know more about than I do and not a popular one. When you start talking about a lot having unstated assumptions and preferences and everything, it doesn't go over too well. People who learn traditional legal analysis and think they're for something called objectivity. I mean really some people are calling for something called "objectivity."

Thus, Rush is not totally clear what lead her to civil rights law. Along with some mentoring that encouraged her to teach, she just started teaching courses that interested her. Yet, the same feelings that caused her to want to distance herself from those people when they started "being ugly" when she was a child prompted her to move beyond her early "'goodwill'—meaning that I did not think I had a prejudiced attitude" to a more comprehensive deconstruction of racism.

Accordingly, in the mid-1990s, Rush and a colleague started the Center for the Study of Race and Race Relations at their law school.<sup>134</sup>

Rush came to the University of Florida as a single person who had never been married. When asked if she wanted to be a mother, like some of my other informants, Rush replies,

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.; and Ibid.

Well, that's a good question. I don't know. I wanted to help. This is just going to sound totally numb. I wanted that relationship with a child and I also wanted to give a child the education that I had gotten. I wanted to give a child a break in life. I didn't even think about it being a child of color, if you want to know the truth. I mean, I really you can see that I was fairly naïve about a lot of things, and it may be hard to believe.

After teaching at the university, Rush decides that she wants to give a child the same opportunities she received and decides to adopt a child.<sup>135</sup>

In her book, *Loving across the Color Line*, Rush reflects upon her adoption process. She notes that the agency "presumed" that she wanted a white child. She writes,

The first thing I was told by agency officials was that "Any White child we would consider placing with you will have to be HIV positive." The agency's bias about same-race placements took priority over everything else, including my input and my ability to handle falling in love with a child only to have her die from HIV infection within a few years, which was what the medical prognosis was at the time.

Rush concedes that she would be unable to emotionally handle parenting an HIV-infected child.

Besides health status of the child, Rush explains,

I also told the adoption personnel that I preferred a girl over a boy. I grew up with three sisters and no brothers. I felt that raising a boy would be "too foreign" to me and I didn't think I could do a good job. I now realize how unconscious my own racism was at the time. I was aware of my limitations with respect to differences between the sexes. With respect to racial differences, however, not only was I not aware that huge obstacles lay ahead for me raising a Black child, but I was unrealistically confident to believe that I could mediate my way through difficult racial incidents involving my daughter.

Rush candidly admits that she recognizes gender differences, while ignoring racial ones.

Adopting a child of color, was not even in her realm of possibilities.<sup>136</sup>

Rush points out the irony in her adopting her daughter. Since her daughter is biracial, she was considered "special needs" in the state of Florida. Similarly, as a single parent, Rush was considered substandard. Rush relays, "From the state's perspective, we were a perfect match because the policy operated on the premise that neither a White couple nor a black couple would

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid; and Rush, *Loving across the Color Line*, 4-5.

<sup>135</sup> Rush, interview by author, 9 December 2003.

<sup>136</sup> Rush, *Loving across the Color Line*, 91; and Ibid.

want a biracial daughter, and I should consider myself lucky to be able to adopt at all as a single woman." Rush adopted her daughter, Mary, in 1989.<sup>137</sup>

Rush began keeping a journal when her daughter was six. Rush was hesitant to decide to turn her journals into a book. She grappled with her daughter's privacy. She writes, "The possible backlash in our lives that might happen as a result of publishing this book is a serious consideration. To move forward with it, I had to believe that the book would do more good than harm." Finally, Rush decided to publish the book in 2000.<sup>138</sup>

Rush explains her intent in writing the book, "I am writing to tell about my journey from being a person of goodwill to being a person who understands race and racism on a much deeper level because of my experiences as a White mother raising a Black daughter." She further explicates, "My journey also has enhanced my understanding of the relationship between White privilege and its conjoined ideologies of Black domination and subordination." Rush, therefore, distinguishes between her "White liberalism" of her "predaughter" days and her current position as the white mother of a black daughter who "understands race and racism on a much deeper level." Rush's book is filled with stories of experiences that she encounters as the white mother of an adopted black daughter. She combines the stories with discussion of race and racism and suggestions.<sup>139</sup>

Rush particularly focuses on a few school-related examples. Through an example of her daughter's involvement with a sports team, Rush begins the book discussing racism's slippery feeling when it is often hard to prove. She centers her analysis around her daughter's white track coach who literally holds her daughter back during a race so that a white girl would win, instead of Rush's daughter, Mary. Mary is obviously upset with the turn of events and Rush must decide what, if any, course of action to take. In thinking about the incident, Rush writes,

Six or seven years ago, I would have shared this sentiment, even though I was a White liberal who believed in racial equality. My commitment to the Black Civil Rights

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 7; and Ibid., 5.

movement came at a very young age. I share this bit of my background in an attempt to express how deep my feelings are about the “wrongness” of racism and to illustrate that notwithstanding this, it was not until my daughter came into my life that I truly began to understand how profound and persistent racism is in our society.

Rush learns about negotiating racism through this incident. She is rattled by it and struggles with the appropriate response.<sup>140</sup>

In an incident involving school, Rush struggles to have her daughter properly placed in the “gifted class,” despite qualifying test scores. Rush details her interactions with a black guidance counselor and a white principal, both women. At first, Rush is “relieved” to learn of the guidance counselor’s race, “As a Black guidance counselor, I just knew that she couldn’t, wouldn’t let my daughter be misplaced in the tracking system.” Rush quickly learns that the guidance counselor is powerless to change her daughter’s placement. Rush notes, “The source of power at the school was not the guidance counselor but the principal—a White woman.” Rush relates this powerless status to her own experience as a woman on law school faculties and firms. Rush points out that “While this was another new lesson in disappointment for me, I’m betting that the Black guidance counselor had learned this lesson many years before and experienced it a zillion times over.”<sup>141</sup>

This school-tracking example illustrates many issues. First, Rush is self-admittedly naïve when she assumes that just because she has encountered a black guidance counselor that the situation will be resolved. Rush ignores the fact that all black people do not operate under a racial allegiance ideology and other factors such as internalized oppression and tokenism. Second, Rush is able to relate her experiences with gender to race in her assessment of the situation and the oppression involved. Third, Rush highlights her learning curve in recognizing that this might be familiar to the guidance counselor but not to her. Finally, Rush’s class status is signified in the larger written example. In other words, Rush is able to use her social location and legal background to threaten lawsuits, repeatedly attend meetings, and threaten to contact

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 56; Ibid., 58; and Ibid 59.

superiors. She combines her class and race status to effectively agitate to have her daughter properly tracked.<sup>142</sup>

Once Mary is placed in the gifted class, she has a troubling experience. The school hosts a “Dinosaur Day,” where families and fellow students attend and ask the presenting students about their particular dinosaur. Rush’s parents are in town visiting and they attend their granddaughter’s exhibit. Rush paints a picture of the school scene when she and her parents arrive, writing,

As my parents and I entered my daughter’s classroom, I was utterly shocked and outraged at what I saw. All of the children except my daughter and one little White girl were situated at the tables in front of the lab-desk. The other little girl was along the same wall as my daughter, right inside the door as you entered the room. Down the wall, easily ten feet from her, next to the storage closet and behind the lab desk, was my daughter. It was as if my daughter were not supposed to be part of the class. The only Black child in the class was stuck off in the corner, behind a desk she could not see over and no one could see her behind it.

Rush worries for a moment about overreacting or being perceived as doing such, and then she confronts the teacher. After a heated conversation, Mary is moved.<sup>143</sup>

Rush further details the incident,

When my parents and I returned home, my father said, “Well, I guess they still have segregation here in the South. What was her teacher thinking about, treating her that way?” My father is from Alabama and knows all too well what Jim Crow was like. He is also very temperate and judicious, as is my mother. They vented their anger for days after this, calling my sisters and relating how awful it was.

Rush takes action in this example, confronting the teacher directly. Notably, Rush receives familial support. Her comment about her father’s disposition and her parents’ cautiousness highlights the need to feel validated in knowing that racism is wrong. In other words, Rush experiences the after-effects of racism, often including: doubt, denial, and rage. Moreover, as Rush remarks, “Although I do not wish for my parents or anyone to hurt, when White people *feel*

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<sup>142</sup> Note that people of color may also employ the strategies Rush uses; however, my point is that Rush is able to do so because of her employment and the privileges that come with it.

<sup>143</sup> Rush, *Loving across the Color Line*, 66.

some of the pain of racism, I believe they become stronger allies in the struggle for racial equality. I wish we had more allies.”<sup>144</sup>

Like almost all the other informants, Rush discusses school as a key place where she has to confront racism, concluding,

As the White mother of a Black child, I confront White adults more and more frequently as I try to protect my daughter. I have learned that the distance across the color line is too great for most White people. As long as this huge gap exists between White American and Black America, parents of Black children will be put in confrontational positions with their children’s White teachers. If there is any environment where the racial gap can and should be eliminated, it is in our public schools.

Indeed, Rush is correct that public schools should be free of a racial discrimination. Nonetheless, it makes sense that these white parent/authors suggest that school is a place where their children encounter racism and they, in turn, are called to action. School, after all, is a place where children interface with an institution that undoubtedly fosters racism.<sup>145</sup>

Rush chronicles other bouts with racism. She candidly remarks, “Finally, I admit that raising a Black child is more challenging than I imagined. Some days, I wish I could pull the covers over my head and sleep through the ‘what’s-going-to-happen-to-her-today incident.’” Rush not only describes these racist situations, but she meditates on their meaning and her responses. Rush recalls an incident at her parents’ dinner when a family friend uses racist epithets and Rush receives support from her sisters. Rush expresses her anger and contemplates the way she handled the situation. Rush also recounts a story when, at a younger age, her daughter is accused of stealing this white woman’s purse, while they are at the airport. Rush tells the story to explain the absurdity of racism, but also to note various audiences’ reactions to her stories.<sup>146</sup>

Rush sees a distinction between black and white people’s reaction to her stories. She writes,

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 68; and Ibid., 69.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 77; Ibid., 153-154; and Ibid., 111-112.

As a mother, professor, and writer who straddles the color line, I struggle with issues of credibility. I know my analysis of race in America makes many Whites uncomfortable because it takes most of them closer than they have ever been, perhaps too close, to the color line. Unmasking White racism is a painful process and one that each White individual must go through if America is to end institutional racism. Thus, when Blacks offer support for my comments, I am especially relieved and encouraged.

Rush values the response she receives from black people, yet she is uncritical of this support. In other words, Rush analyzes the responses she receives from white people differently than she does the responses she receives from black people. How would Rush receive responses from other non-white groups such as Latinos or Asian Americans? Rush's stance spotlights the diligence needed for work related to race. Those seeking justice must be careful to operate their efforts for equality so as not to recreate hierarchy based on race. People's attempts to deconstruct white privilege and racism must be cognizant not to essentialize groups or risk undermining their hard work.<sup>147</sup>

Rush reflects upon her reading of the responses by suggesting,

This is not to say that I feel completely secure in what I am saying when I give talks or write my articles. Quite the contrary. I am ever mindful that the journey across the color line is a complicated one and one that requires being open to learning about race and also being open to rejecting misconceptions one has about race.

Rush's desire to learn about and combat racism combined with her insecurity in not wanting to be an expert or authority on racial matters may act here in her not qualifying her statements. She desires to act in an empathetic manner towards those who experience racism. Accordingly, she values the opinion of people who have faced this experience.<sup>148</sup>

Still, other factors may be in play. One of the factors is Rush's intended audience. In deciding to write her book, Rush explains,

From what I have learned from loving my daughter, it is important to speak out about racial mistreatment. I want other White people of goodwill to share our stories so that they will be motivated to help end racism. My experiences as a White person of goodwill tell me that other Whites would appreciate these stories because they truly are good-hearted people and do not understand the depth of racism in America.

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 114-115.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 115.



Rush declares, “My goal in this book is to suggest to other Whites of goodwill that most of us have a tendency to deal with race largely on an academic or intellectual level—when we deal with it at all.” Rush, on the contrary, has both a personal and professional investment in the subject.<sup>149</sup>

In a follow-up discussion to her intended audience reference, Rush speaks even more explicitly,

I write to white people. White people are my primary audience. I have nothing to teach people of color. Like I said, I’m almost embarrassed to have people of color read my work even though it’s generally received with tremendous affirmation, but it makes me sad in a way because black folks can say exactly what I’m saying and it won’t be heard. I can say it and it will be heard a little bit.

Rush is clear about her audience and her intent. She is speaking to white people, specifically whites of “goodwill.” Accordingly, she is careful about her discussion of black people in her intraracial dialogue, careful in the sense that she does not want to speak for black people or to promote stereotypes. Still, Rush underestimates her contribution, specifically when she remarks that she has “nothing to teach people of color.” Through her professional and personal efforts with antiracism, Rush may teach and model for people of color. She may prove that white people who are willing to work against privilege exist, that some white people believe that it is their responsibility to work to eradicate racism, and moreover, as a civil rights law professor, Rush may teach people about rights and equity. Like her other remark about black support, context helps to understand Rush’s position.<sup>150</sup>

Besides writing her book, Rush frequently lectures across the country about antiracist efforts, publishes antiracist essays, and teaches antiracist classes. Nevertheless, Rush candidly questions her own subject position and the effectiveness of her antiracist efforts,

What does it take? What does it take for a white person to begin? And the thing that I might notice about, Joshua, is I don’t know how ignorant I still am. You know it’s sort of like I proceed with trepidation because I mean I think I’ve made tremendous strides and everything, but I noticed I could still look very ignorant and be very ignorant to people of color.

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 110; and Ibid., 148.

<sup>150</sup> Rush, interview by author, 9 December 2003.

Rush is clearly a genuine person. Rush attempts to be thoughtful when it comes to dealing with race but sees deep challenges for the country. She contends, “It was only within a year of completing this book that I realized that racism will outlive me and my daughter.

Notwithstanding this realization, I am optimistic that racism will and can end someday during somebody else’s lifetime.” Despite her bouts with depression over racism, Rush remains eternally optimistic. She characterizes herself as a “runner, reader, writer, and a parent.” She sees herself as happy and likes who she is.<sup>151</sup>

As the white mother of a black child, Rush’s narrative appears anchored by two themes. Perhaps these two themes ground Rush or assist her in grappling with some of this self-doubt or reflexivity. The first theme is her racial transformation. Rush’s thoughts about this transformation should be fully explored. Therefore, I am reprinting the paragraph that stands as the epigraph of this chapter,

As the White mother of a Black child, and because I live the day-to-day effects of racism with her as much as I can, I am at times neither White nor Black. Naturally, then, both Blacks and Whites question my credibility. Before my talks begin, my skin color aligns me with other liberal Whites. Once I am into the stories, it is clear that I am speaking from across the color line, a place where most Whites never go. Even from across the color line, however, I continue to be White among Black folks who wonder how I got here and what I’m doing. Let me say, it is a journey and I also am trying to figure it out.

Rush’s remarks raise many questions. What does this in-between space that Rush discusses look like? How does this space relate to notions of the borderlands? What does Rush mean when she claims to cross the color line? Does this go beyond skin color to racial consciousness? Can whites become black? Rush’s thoughts on her racial identity help to answer these questions.<sup>152</sup>

When Mary is young, Rush attempts to explain race and color to her daughter. Mary asks questions and turns to her mother wanting to know,

So, Mom. How come you care so much about Black people? Why does racial equality matter so much to you?” I reflected a moment, “It just does. You know that I’ve always been concerned about racial equality. Even when I was your age, I knew it wasn’t right

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid; Rush, interview notes by author, 9 December 2003; and Rush, *Loving across the Color Line*, 168.

<sup>152</sup> Rush, *Loving across the Color Line*, 112.

to mistreat Black people. I guess you could say I'm Black in my heart. That's it, I have a Black heart.

Rush sees herself connected to black culture and black people in a larger way. Though white people can be concerned about racial equality and know morality without claiming to have "black hearts," Rush appears to be claiming something deeper. She is arguing for the possession of a sense of humanity. As when she discussed the pain involving witnessing poverty, equality is vital to Rush's existence.<sup>153</sup>

When asked about her family, Rush talks about how race was not an issue when growing up in New York. She states,

Why do I feel this way? I really don't know. I think sometimes and you may think is silly or whatever. I think in a prior life I was black or I'm being prepared to be black in a future life. I don't know, I don't know, but I know it has always affected me. But really it's since my daughter that it's also been a learning curve about how systemic and pervasive the color line is.

Rush sees herself as crossing the color line, having a black heart, and perhaps as either preparing to be black or having been black in another life. She admits it might sound silly, yet she believes, thinks, and lives it.<sup>154</sup>

The second theme that grounds her narrative is "transformative love": "Transformative love, as I mean it differs from my empathetic feeling for Blacks or even my daughter. It is also different from the 'typical' motherly love I have for my daughter. Instead, transformative love combines my empathy for all Blacks with my motherly love for my daughter." Rush articulates that people who feel transformative love experience the pain of racism, arguing, "For example, my depression, stomachaches, anxiety, and many other negative feelings that accompany racism are involuntary physical responses I have because of that social disease." Rush distinguishes that she will never know how blacks feel with racism, but she claims this space for transformative

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>154</sup> Rush, interview by author, 9 December 2003.

love. Rush describes that this transformative love is a process, one that took her about nine years.<sup>155</sup>

Spirituality relates to Rush's theory of transformative love. She suggests,

I wouldn't say that I'm not religious, but I'm probably more spiritual than religious. I believe a lot of the principles of religion. So it's very different now. In my writing I think what I'm learning from this whole experience this interracial experience is it's actually giving me a different kind of spirituality because and I don't know if this is what black folks in particular experience because I don't how to transcend the daily pain really that goes on with the discrimination and the inequality. But one way I try to do that is through my spirituality.

Rush again links discrimination to race. One aspect that clouds her account is her lack of discussion about the positive aspects of black culture. Instead, she provides her perspective as a white person and includes discussion of discrimination, guilt, and responsibility associated with race and, in turn, with blackness.<sup>156</sup>

In the end, Rush remains hopeful. She is grateful for her daughter, explaining,

People say oh, how lucky Mary is and da, da, da, and they're so wrong; they're so wrong. And she said to me actually she said, I have something like, "Mom, you gave me my life." And I said, "No, Mary I didn't. You have a break that a lot of kids don't have, especially a lot of black kids, right, but you will make your own life. You will make your own life and I'm here to support you in that endeavor, but I didn't give you your life." The truth is she gave me something far more than I could ever give her. Maybe she goes to college and part of what I wanted to do is get a child through a college, right that might not otherwise have an opportunity to go to college. That's why this happens because we both know she'll be better off with college, okay. Fine, but what she's already given me is far more than I could ever give her.

Rush is thankful for the parenting experience and for the meaning that Mary gives to her life.<sup>157</sup>

Similar to Sharon E. Rush's decision to publish her journal on the transracial adoption of her daughter, Mary, another white woman, Jana Wolff, decided to publish her journal on her transracial adoption of her son, Ari. Wolff explains that her book, *Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother* (1997/2000), began as a journaling. She states that

This was not for public consumption you know, but I do remember and it wasn't all pretty. I do think there's this amnesia that comes over people. I do. And they fall in love

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<sup>155</sup> Rush, *Loving across the Color Line*, 169; and *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>156</sup> Rush, interview by author, 9 December 2003.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

with their kids and they rewrite history as if it started from the day they got their kid and I don't buy that at all.

In a 167-page book of twenty-six chapters that includes a prologue and an epilogue, Wolff candidly reveals her inner-thoughts on the adoption experience. Wolff shares many of her thoughts, anecdotes, and opinions, but in another sense she is private about details of her life, including her familial and biographical information.<sup>158</sup>

Jana Wolff was born in New Jersey in 1952 and raised as middle class in the middle class community of Radburn, NJ. Wolff was brought up in Reform Judaism and she attended Sunday School through Confirmation. Jana Wolff has three sisters. Their mother earned her J.D. Wolff herself earned a master's degree. Wolff describes herself as a "writer, wife, mother, daughter, friend, [and] athlete."<sup>159</sup>

When asked if her parents spoke about race or civil rights, Wolff responds,

My mother spoke about civil rights. She had marched with the Congress of Racial Equality and remembers being encircled by antagonistic police. We were the first Jewish family in our neighborhood; the only kids to take off school on the High Holidays, and my mother made the connection for me and my sisters about Blacks and Jews in terms of discrimination towards both groups.

Early on, Wolff received messages regarding racial equality. As a religious and cultural minority, Wolff's mother connected discrimination for her daughters. Wolff explains that her mother most influenced her ideas about identity and about race and ethnicity. She states,

Once again, my mother had an influence. Through the Quakers, we had foreign students visiting our family from time to time. My clearest ethnic memory of those times was a barbeque in our backyard with Ted Dougherty, from Nigeria, who became a family friend and who my mother stayed in touch with for years.

From an early age, Wolff saw integration.<sup>160</sup>

When asked while growing up, during her schooling, how she would characterize her interracial experiences—friends, dating, colleagues, and neighbors, Wolff responds,

My first serious boyfriend was Black. I was a freshman in college and was resented by Black women in my dorm for "taking one of the good ones." The message I got was to

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<sup>158</sup> Jana Wolff, interview by author, 5 March 2004, Gaithersburg, MD, tape recording.

<sup>159</sup> Jana Wolff, "Re: questions & phone interview," Email to the author, 2 February 2004.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.; and Ibid.

stick with my own kind. Our relationship lasted two years and ended badly. Other relationships with people of color were more distant, even though I always considered myself a non-racist.

Prior to adopting her son, Wolff had at least one experience loving someone from a different race.

Importantly, Wolff believed she was a non-racist person.<sup>161</sup>

Wolff provides a background to her adoption story. She states, "I moved to Washington, DC and we got married late and thought we'd play around for a few years and then when we tried to get pregnant, we couldn't." She backs-up in the telling of her story and explains that

Howard is from the East Coast as well, not from Washington, but, and so you go through all kinds of, you write this script for yourself in your mind that is usually unwritten as to how your life you expect your life to unfold. And then little by little you realize that oh, it doesn't always happen that way and there are, I think that by the time you get to even the possibility for adoption, there have been a number of turns in your life that you didn't expect. In a way, I think that makes you a much more realistic person. It's like, okay I'm not in charge here. I get it. We thought we'd have kids, couldn't get pregnant, never identified the source of infertility, decided to look into adoption as a way of taking a break from that infertility testing stuff and ending up pursuing adoption. And we moved to Hawaii in answer to your question because my best friend, who's my husband, got a job opportunity and it was a very alien place for us. We hadn't been there, hadn't thought of visiting, didn't have any idealized versions of it, but that was fifteen years ago, so it's really become our home and it's a wonderful place for a mixed-family. Not perfect, not paradise, but a wonderful place to be a family.

Wolff and her husband had not initially planned to adopt. Fertility-issues lead them down the adoption path. Wolff and her husband, Howard, moved to Hawaii because of an employment opportunity and enjoyed it, staying ever since. In noting that she moved for her best friend,

Wolff characterizes the relationship that she shares with her life partner.<sup>162</sup>

Wolff explains that her work was not portable, clarifying,

I have a master's in Architectural History and that's a pretty impractical field. So I was working at the Smithsonian and I was running a Turkey Hill factory in Alexandria for a while. And well yeah and my husband is an architect and is now director of marketing for an architectural firm. He and I were doing the same job for different firms and I lived in Boston. He lived in Albany. We met at a conference in Washington, DC. We got married, lived in Washington, DC and then moved to Honolulu. It doesn't make any sense, but basically we thought we'd give it a try. So there's no, I mean it's not a great story except that it sounds very unliberated to have followed a man and yet our relationship was quite androgynous in that we would have done the same thing. He would have done it for me, so that felt more liberated.

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Wolff, interview by author, 5 March 2004, Gaithersburg, MD.

Wolff's mentioning of the gender politics in moving for her husband reflects her belief in gender equity. As Wolff indicates, she and Howard have lived in Hawaii for the past fifteen years. Howard works for an architectural firm, while Jana Wolff is a writer and editor, "I'm a fulltime ghostwriter." She states, "These days, many of my friends and colleagues are from racial minorities." Wolff explicates, "Our community in Honolulu is extremely diverse, though not in the way that reflects our family. Whites are not the majority, Asians are (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino)."<sup>163</sup>

When asked to elaborate on her experience living in Hawaii, particularly on the racial dynamics, Wolff replies,

I don't know how that is relevant except this: In Hawaii whites are not the majority. We're called haoles. So I have the visceral I have everyday that this real experience of being in--that you have in your life, which is not being the majority, which is not being the norm, which is hearing epithets and slurs and being on the receiving end of that. And I think that's been a great thing because it's one thing to hear about and it's another thing to experience it. But the diversity that's in Hawaii is not reflective of our family. So blacks make up two percent of the population. I don't know the Latino population. I find that this is the part that troubles me. I have an easier time getting my arms around the black community and the meaning of blackness even though that's vast than I do around the Latino community and the meaning of being Mexican American, Hispanic, Chicano. It's very hard for me to get hold of the symbols and then to pass them on and help educate me and my son about what they mean. So the only thing we can do is meet people of those cultures and learn through some kind of osmosis.

Besides being Jewish, where Wolff is in the minority when it comes to religion, she is also a minority when it comes to race in her community. Wolff suggests that this has helped to educate her regarding the status of minorities in the U.S.<sup>164</sup>

Wolff explains that once she and her husband were unable to have children, they turned to adoption. Wolff notes that "Both adoption and transracial families were unfamiliar to most of our friends. They were curious, somewhat supportive, and relieved it wasn't them. Grandparents were worried." She further mentions, "One couple we were friendly with had adopted a boy from Columbia. We subsequently de-mystified the experience for friends who

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid.; Ibid.; and Wolff, "Re: questions & phone interview," Email to the author, 2 February 2004.

followed us into transracial adoption.” Wolff notes her husband’s support. Wolff’s husband is mostly absent from her account. When asked about this, Wolff notes, “Howard has been involved every step of the way and is my partner in every regard. He was also my first reader. I left him out because the experience I was focusing on was that of the adoptive mother. He is my biggest fan, a wonderful dad to Ari, and my best friend in the world.”<sup>165</sup>

*Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother* is a chronological account of Jana Wolff’s experiences. Using the rhetorical devices of humor and brutal honesty from infertility to birth mother reunions, Wolff allows the reader access to her feelings. Wolff uses provocative chapter titles with her short chapters, such as “Could We Love Somebody Else’s Child: What if we get a dud?” and “Spit-Up is Spit-Up: Adopted poop doesn’t smell any different” and “Mother and Child Reunion: Is she going to kiss him or kidnap him?”<sup>166</sup>

Like the other two adoptive mothers profiled in this dissertation, Wolff mentions how she always knew she wanted to be a mother. Wolff begins her book writing,

My mother tells me that, as a little girl, I used to give birth to my doll Kate several times a day as I let her fall out from under my T-shirt. Careful to support the baby’s head, I’d pick her up and stick a little plastic bottle filled with pretend juice or milk to her lips. I was a very good mother. Thirty-something years later, I realize that delivering Kate was the closest I ever got to giving birth. Many little girls play ‘mommy’ just like I did, but none of us dreams of becoming an adoptive mother. Adoption is not in the repertoire of child’s play. It is nothing to which children aspire and a process for which we, as adults, are woefully unprepared.

The theme of motherhood runs through these three women’s stories. Although this might be a common trend with women in general, what is distinct here is that all three women visualized themselves as mothers.<sup>167</sup>

After Jana and Howard decide to adopt, Jana starts questioning, “It’s hard enough to imagine loving somebody else’s child. What if the baby we adopt turns out to be a dud?” Wolff details the initial adoption process, including the home study, which she refers to as “one of the

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<sup>164</sup> Wolff, interview by author, 5 March 2004.

<sup>165</sup> Wolff, “Re: questions & phone interview,” Email to the author, 2 February 2004.

<sup>166</sup> Wolff, *Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother*.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.



many humbling steps along the gravel train.” Wolff provides examples of her letter to potential birth mothers, both the letter she desired to write and the one she actually wrote. Here are the first sentences of each, respectively: “Dear Birth Mother: I know I should be really grateful to you, but I don’t feel very grateful having to beg a complete stranger for her baby when I really want my own. If you don’t feel qualified to be a parent yourself, how are you going to decide whether we are qualified?” And: “Dear Birth Mother: This must be a very difficult time for you. It takes courage to think about what would be best for your child and to choose adoptive parents for him or her.” Wolff’s pain and resentment towards the adoption process is exhibited in her letters, as well as her humor and anger.<sup>168</sup>

Wolff and her husband adopt through a California adoption agency. Wolff discusses interacting with her child’s birth mother, Martie, who was eighteen and Mexican-American. Her ex-boyfriend, James, was the father of the child. He was also eighteen and biracial—African-American and white. Wolff reflects upon her initial meeting with Martie,

This, I realized was the ultimate job interview. The young woman sitting at my side was holding out parental destiny in her hands (well, her uterus). She may have been feeling vulnerable at six months’ pregnant and without a boyfriend or health insurance, but she was actually the powerful one. Where once we were supplicants to our nearly forty-year-old bodies, our new fertility goddess was only eighteen.

After interacting with Martie, Wolff feels relieved and recognizes, “That’s when it occurred to me that we were all part of an unspoken conspiracy to make it work. She needed us, we needed her.” Indeed, there is unique relationship between the birth parent(s) and adoptive parent(s), an odd dependency of sorts.<sup>169</sup>

In her “Unspoken Preferences: What matters is what you get, not what you want” chapter, Wolff candidly discusses choices when it comes to choosing children in the adoption process. Reminiscent of Sharon Rush discussion of gender parenting preferences, Wolff wanted a girl. She explains her gender preference, writing, “Adoptive parents are supposed to feel grateful for whatever they get. That’s why I didn’t announce my preference for a girl. When your baby is

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 27; Ibid., 35; and Ibid, 36.

not coming from your body, you tend to grope for whatever is familiar. Growing up as one of four sisters, I knew a lot more about periods than penises.” Like Rush, Wolff concludes, “I had to admit that I *didn’t* want a child enough to suffer through a lifetime of illness, deformity, or disability.” She remarks how this may have been her choice but she did not know what she would do had Martie’s baby been unhealthy.<sup>170</sup>

Wolff highlights the inequity in adoption, “We had to answer questions that biological parents have the privilege to ignore or deal with later. The intrusively thorough application forms presented options like they were menu items.” Yet, as Wolff argues, these choices are not without repercussions, like lengthy waiting times and health issues. Wolff discusses same-race matching at length. Wolff’s remarks capture her initial feelings and may be contrasted with her current thinking and therefore are quoted length:

Perhaps they’ve actually thought through the long-term impacts and concluded that life is simpler when kids look like their parents, tougher when they don’t, and roughest when neither their faces nor their races match.

For those who are willing to cross the color line with an interracial adoption, there is another decision: this one so distasteful, it’s often avoided. A shameless discussion about skin pigmentation—how dark is too dark—often reveals an unconscionable preference for yellow over brown, for brown over black, for light over dark. There are many more Asian babies than African-American babies being adopted by Caucasian parents; as if the yellow-white combination is somehow less interracial than the black-white one.

We knew we wanted a healthy newborn, but we didn’t feel a strong need to be matched by race or features. Our willingness to parent a child of a different race had more to do with naïveté than with altruism. We didn’t understand at the time that we might be taking on a job even bigger than parenting ... that of transmitting a culture that was not ours. We simply knew that we wanted a baby, we believed that we would be good parents, and we presumed we could love in any color. We also thought we could love in any shade. Naïveté served us well in expediting our application and expanding our adoption options.

Initially, Wolff is naïve to transracial adoption. Like Rush, Wolff explains how her naïveté worked to her advantage in terms of uniting her with a child quicker than if she had been waiting for a white, newborn baby.<sup>171</sup>

Wolff tries to understand her perspective versus Martie’s. She writes,

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 42; and Ibid, 43.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 51; and Ibid 53.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 54-55.

Martie and I were both waiting—only she was waiting for it to be over, and I was waiting for it to begin. A split screen might have shown Martie watching *Oprah* from a sofa in her living room, while I was watching *Oprah* from a StairMaster in the hotel’s fitness center. We were two illegitimate mothers of one illegitimate baby—each of us slightly defective by society’s standards. Maybe we’d talk about it one day on *Oprah*.

With wit, Wolff recognizes that she and Martie share different positions in this process.

Although Martie’s physical delivering of the baby would be over, in open adoptions, as this was, is it ever really over? In further reflection of Martie’s position, Wolff concedes,

I could never do what our birth mother was about to do—both relinquish her baby and invite an audience to view the birth. Both are acts of enormous generosity, incredible strength. By comparison, I was a full-blown wimp. Funny how our friends saw us as ‘courageous’ and ‘risk takers.’ To me, Martie was the *real* hero.

Wolff admires Martie’s sharing of the birth experience with her. Martie delivered a boy named

Ari. Instead of the clichéd love-at-first-sight, Wolff remarks,

Because he hadn’t come out of me, I was allowed to think what would be unthinkable to a mother who had given birth. I had a horrible option: an escape clause. The concept of returning damaged goods was repugnant to me: What right did I have to demand a perfect child? Here was a living being, perfect in his own way. I didn’t love him yet, but I could never walk away from him.

Wolff grapples with the alleged instant-bond mothers are supposed to have for their children.<sup>172</sup>

Wolff elucidates her first feelings when seeing her new son,

“He’s so dark,” I thought, and felt ashamed for thinking it. But he was. I expected black hair, but I had also expected olive skin, like Martie’s. My racist gut reaction was fueled by gut fear. I was pretty sure I had taken on more than I could handle. Adoption of a white kid would have been enough of a stretch, but we had to go for a baby that not only came out of someone else’s body, but out of someone else’s culture. What were we thinking? What kind of pseudo-Peace Corps types were we pretending to be? All I could think of was that we were too white to be he parents of someone this black.

As Wolff noted, Martie’s baby’s racial make-up would be “half Hispanic, a quarter African-American, and a quarter Caucasian.” Thus, Wolff had incorrectly imagined that this would equate into a particular skin color and phenotype. Wolff’s comment reveals her feelings on skin color correlating with levels of difficulty in parenting. Wolff believed having a lighter-skinned baby would make parenting easier for her and her husband. Wolff is operating under the idea

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<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 63; *Ibid.*, 67; *Ibid.*, 66; and *Ibid.*, 71.

that if she looked like the baby, parenting would be easier. Skin color and race do not always match. In fact, people of all races exist in all shades, in spite of their parents' coloring.<sup>173</sup>

Wolff's son Ari's skin color is also the cause of concern of others. Wolff writes,

The morning after Ari was born, we were met in the nursery by a thirty-something female pediatrician and a social worker. My husband and I were asked to sit down, so that the professionals could 'break' the news to us that this happened to be a dark baby with African-American features and ethnicity: "Were you aware of this and was that going to be a problem?" queried this concerned pediatrician.

Wolff further explains the position of the hospital staff regarding Ari's skin color, "We were being counseled by well-meaning, white health professionals who assumed that, once we knew this baby would look black, we wouldn't want him. That kind of racism was more offensive than my own. Their message that morning: 'It's not too late.'" The hospital staff assumes that a white couple would not desire a child with a visibly non-white appearance. Wolff's distinction between her racism and the racism of the healthcare professionals is unclear. When asked to differentiate it, Wolff explains,

My racism was based on my ignorance and lack of consciousness about the issues. I was completely uneducated about parenting a child of color. The young, white social workers who talked to us were projecting their own preferences for white babies. Their warnings of "You might be making a mistake" did not appear to be coming from a place of wanting to educate us about the responsibilities of transracial parenting.

Similar to Rush's discussion of her daughter being classified as "special needs" by the state, Ari's skin color is looked at as a defect.<sup>174</sup>

Wolff recounts how her bond to Ari took time. She explains her initial response to parenting,

Of all the people wanting a child, how did we get you, baby boy? And how did you get us? By virtue of a piece of paper that your mother signed, I have the right to be with you in this, your first half hour of life, to touch you, to watch your very first sponge bath. You had absolutely no say in the matter. You did not invite me into your bassinet, much less your life. Maybe that's why I am feeling like an imposter, like an intruder, like I haven't really earned the right to be here.

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 74; and Ibid., 43.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 87; Ibid., 88; and Wolff, "Re: questions & phone interview," Email to the author, 2 February 2004.

Beyond the fact that she did not give birth to Ari, issues of race may influence Wolff's "feeling like an impostor, like an intruder." In other words, since she did not see herself reflected in her child, perhaps this encouraged her to feel like an "imposter" or "intruder." Like Maureen Reddy's feeling like an impostor, race combined with parenting raises questions of validation. Parents are prompted to feel inauthentic. This signals society's over-determinacy on race-matching in parenting.<sup>175</sup>

Wolff received mostly positive feedback from her family and familial support when Ari was born. Wolff writes, "My parents stood there for a long time afterward, throwing kisses automatically. The smile on my mother's face seemed to start each time I looked up from the baby and dissolve each time I looked down. This can't be what she dreamed of when I walked down the aisle." This appears to suggest that Wolff's mother was disappointed, Wolff clarifies, "She, like all parents, assumed that she'd have biologically related grandchildren when I got married." Wolff's clarification points to adoption versus birth parenting, yet the transracial part is what makes this split visible and may account for Wolff's mother's dissolving smile.<sup>176</sup>

Wolff writes about another race related family incident explaining that "Only once, in Ari's first months, did I hear a remark from a family member that set off my racism radar. 'He really responds to music ... maybe that's the black part of him.' We talked about it right away, apologies were expressed, but it took me a while to unbristle." When asked if she has faced other racial experiences with her family, where this racism radar comes from, and what it looked like before she had Ari and heard racist remarks, Wolff responds,

Once you fall in love with someone from another race—either through friendship, adoption or marriage—you are forever changed, you are no longer monoracial. Before becoming Ari's mother, I would feel offended about a racist remark; now when I hear one, I am personally outraged. Where I might not have spoken out earlier, I do now. You get bolder.

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<sup>175</sup> Wolff, *Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother*, 78.

<sup>176</sup> Wolff, *Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother*, 82; and Wolff, "Re: questions & phone interview," Email to the author, 2 February 2004.

Wolff's transition from offense to outrage clearly displays her beliefs shifting. She now identifies racism in a personal way, as she suggests, she is "forever changed."<sup>177</sup>

Although Wolff admits that she did not experience love at first sight, she did feel a connection and that connection grows into a mother's love. Before the adoption is finalized, Wolff ponders,

In the quiet moments—there are just a few—I am struck not by the miracle of birth but by the miracle of adoption. That a legal proceeding can bring complete strangers together, try to meet the needs of all the parties, and ultimately form a family, is really quite profound. The particular match between child and adoptive parent is oftentimes arbitrary, and yet, we don't like to think of love that way.<sup>178</sup>

She considers the larger ideas involved with adoption, stating, "Adoption is a bittersweet solution to a two-way problem. Sweet, because a baby in need of a home finds a home in need of a baby. But bitter because it is nobody's first choice, and the baby will grow up one day to understand that." When asked, if Ari understood that yet, and if she still believes that he will have this perspective one day, Wolff responds,

Adoption may have been my second choice, but Ari is not my second choice. He is not a booby prize. I think what he understands is that adoption makes life more complicated for everyone involved in it. It makes his life harder in some ways, easier in others. Who Ari is includes who he might have become growing up with Martie ... and we'll never really know about that alternate existence, except to embrace it.

Wolff provides a similar answer when asked about her desire for a girl and how her experience would be different if Ari were a girl. She responds that "The opportunity to adopt a second child came up when Ari was under a year old. We were not ready for another child at that time. I guess we didn't want a girl enough to pursue a subsequent adoption either." She further explicates, "I can't envision Ari as a girl, and can't come up with an answer to your hypothetical question."<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Wolff, *Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother*, 104; and Wolff, "Re: questions & phone interview," Email to the author, 2 February 2004.

<sup>178</sup> Wolff, *Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother*, 110.

<sup>179</sup> Wolff, *Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother*, 111; Wolff, "Re: questions & phone interview," Email to the author, 2 February 2004; and *Ibid.*

As some in the U.S. see Judaism as a religion while others see it as a culture or as a race, Wolff is careful to distinguish her practices and beliefs, writing,

Being Jewish means something to my husband and me, but it doesn't mean everything to us. We light candles before Sabbath dinner on Friday night and volunteer on temple committees; we celebrate the holidays with friends and take off from work on the big ones. But being Jewish is not our defining trait. It's harder to teach a child about a religion you take for granted than one which you fanatically uphold.

Wolff also relays that her family has worked to fuse its cultures. She recalls, "One December, when Kwanzaa and Hanukkah overlapped, we hosted a Kwanzukah party, which has since become a tradition bringing together our African American and Jewish friends. We did not have to give up our heritage to connect with our child's." The Wolff family is able to celebrate all of their cultures, even bringing them together at the same time.<sup>180</sup>

Like Rush's experience with Mary, Wolff notes her experiences with race and physical appearance, stating,

I used to explain that Ari was half Hispanic, a quarter African-American, and a quarter Caucasian. Which he is. But I came to realize that nobody cares about percentages, and multiculturalism is disconcerting when what people want are labels: singular categories. In spite of his rich ethnic blend, Ari is perceived as black. And we need to help him learn what that means.

In articulating Ari's racial heritage with the reality of how he is received, Wolff concisely reflects issues of hypodescent. When asked how Ari currently identifies in terms of race and otherwise and as to the racial constitution of his peer group, Wolff replies, "One of Ari's best friends is Black and Christian; the other one is white and Jewish. It has been much harder to get our hands around Ari's Mexican heritage than his African American heritage. He identifies most strongly as from Hawaii, Jewish, and Black."<sup>181</sup>

In the quotation that serves as one of the epigraphs to this chapter, Wolff argues,

In my son's absence, I could be any other white woman, unaware of her unearned privileges. In my absence, he could be any other black male, a source of purse-tightening

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<sup>180</sup> Wolff, *Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother*, 137; and Jana Wolff, *Adoptive Families* (March/April 2000): 16.

<sup>181</sup> Wolff, *Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother*, 141; and Wolff, "Re: questions & phone interview," Email to the author, 2 February 2004.

anxiety that is reflexive in some. What we are together—a very happy, loving family—is not always what others choose to see.

Wolff illustrates the bond and separation she sees in her mother-son relationship. Wolff's bond relies heavily on the visual. One wonders how she assesses families where the children are not adopted but do not resemble their parents? Perhaps her earlier comment regarding adoptive parents is relevant: "life is simpler when kids look like their parents, tougher when they don't, and roughest when neither their faces nor their races match." Asked to explain the derivation of her "unearned privileges" comment—specifically asked, "did this knowledge come only from experience or did you read up on this topic?" Wolff answers, "The feelings come from personal experience; the knowledge comes from reading and cross-cultural friendships."<sup>182</sup>

Wolff elucidates her feelings on her whiteness, remarking:

The assumption of my whiteness bothers me, because I can no longer look at the world with the presumption that things are 'right.' What I see is the false, white premise upon which standards of goodness and normalcy are based. For me, now, the world is forever askew; something is missing. It has always been missing, but I previously lacked the personal stake that is prerequisite to racial enlightenment. You don't have to search far—from the Candy Land game board, to the roster of teachers at school, or the greeting card section at PayLess—to see that blacks are either missing, misrepresented, or included as if for extra credit.

Wolff does not want people to assume that she is white. She interprets her bond with her son as changing her perspective from that of the average white person. She contends,

When I'm not with my son, people think I'm white. Not a cross-burning skinhead, just a run-of-the-mill white person: enlightened enough to appreciate positive portrayals of blacks on TV and in books, happy to have black neighbors and friends, and unknowingly supremacist, as most whites are.

Wolff views most white people as "unknowingly supremacist" and sees herself in a different category.<sup>183</sup>

The difference in position that Wolff distinguishes relies on her experiences parenting her child of color and the knowledge that has ensued. Wolff is now aware of white privilege and she is attempting to renounce it. She does not want to be seen as white; rather she wants her position

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<sup>182</sup> Jana Wolff, *Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother*, 143; *Ibid*, 54; and Wolff, "Re: questions & phone interview," Email to the author, 2 February 2004.



understood and acknowledged: "I am part of an interracial family whether or not I am in Ari's presence. I don't look different as a result, but my friends, my work, my life does." She feels invisible as Ari's mother because of their races, "Cultural myopia doesn't allow other people to see us as family, no matter how much we feel like one." Wolff's desire to be seen as belonging with her son, her discomfort with white privilege, and her insights on race and racism gained through parenting are reoccurring themes throughout these parents' narratives.<sup>184</sup>

Wolff explains that the intended audience of her book was "prospective adoptive parents, particularly women." She notes that the "book evoked strong reactions. 95% loved it and thanked me for giving voice to taboo thoughts; 5% hated it, thinking I was an unworthy mother for having those thoughts." Some people reacted to Wolff's candid remarks, particularly about the birth mother. Marketed as adoption literature and targeted at a parenting audience, Wolff's audience is different than many of the other informants, who were hoping to target people dealing specifically with the issue of race.<sup>185</sup>

Despite publishing her book and several essays on adoption and often speaking to media and conferences regarding adoption, Wolff explains how adoption is not always at the forefront of her mind, stating, "I go for days at a time without thinking about adoption." She contends that this is still true, "Because we are an interracial family, we continue to get asked questions about adoption. But in our circle of friends and family, it has become a non-issue. Adoption recedes as time goes on, and yet it is never far away from any of our minds."<sup>186</sup>

Distinguishing adoption's role, Wolff writes,

One of the primary filters through which adoptive families interpret the world can be labeled in two parts: 'adoption-related' or 'something else.' It's not that thoughts of adoption stay in the forefront of an adoptive parent's mind, but they are never so far away that they can't be called up in a millisecond.

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<sup>183</sup> Wolff, *Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother*, 142-143; and *Ibid*, 142.

<sup>184</sup> Wolff, "Re: questions & phone interview," Email to the author, 2 February 2004.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>186</sup> Wolff, *Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother*, 161; and Wolff, "Re: questions & phone interview," Email to the author, 2 February 2004.

Later, she writes, "Back in our pre-adoption 'Dark Ages,' I thought race was a non-issue when it came to parenting. In fact, it is the issue. We have to deal with race before adoption, because it is more immediately noticeable to other people." Reflecting on these two statements, I asked Wolff, how she would characterize parenting now in terms of adoption and race? Wolff answers,

Race trumps adoption, because that's what people see. But parenting trumps race, because that's what we deal with most. Like all parents of young teens, we are involved in a dance with our son where independence is one partner and dependence the other. Transracial adoption complicates everything, but doesn't pre-empt the normal struggles that are taking place.

Wolff captures the humanity of adolescence that transcends race or adoption. She and her husband are dealing with typical teenage issues of rebellion and angst.<sup>187</sup>

Wolff turns to the visual contrast in her and Ari's physical appearance as the marker of transracial adoption for others and even for Wolff herself. Regardless of his heritage, if people did not visually experience Ari as a person of color how would the Wolffs adoption experience differ? The Wolff's experience with race is an obvious, yet complicated reminder of how race and, in turn, blackness revolve around the visual and physical.

Similar to other informants, Wolff argues that her perspective on bias has been shifted,

Loving my son as I do, I have become an acute barometer of bias: I notice where race makes a difference, and I can't find a place where it doesn't. Attuned to the slightest suggestion of discrimination and prejudice, in even the most innocent and mundane places, my antennae are always up. I've seen racism on playgrounds, in swimming pools, in glances, in books, on applications, and at the doctor's office.

Wolff's awareness of racism is heightened through parenting. Wolff, like Rush, attempts to characterize the racism that she witnesses, writing,

Much of the racism I have seen firsthand is what I'd call "friendly" racism: one of the most virulent strains by virtue of its unwitting perpetrators. I am taken aback that people ask my son if he wants to be an NBA basketball player when he grows up, and ask me if he's from Africa.

Both informants are able to speak to various forms of racism. They understand that subtle, covert racism can be just as dangerous as, if not, more harmful than overt acts.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Wolff, *Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother*, 129; *Ibid.*, 142; and Wolff, "Re: questions & phone interview," Email to the author, 2 February 2004.

Like Rush and the other participating parents, Wolff worries about protecting her child. She proclaims, “It made us feel sick to hear about it and to know that, much as we would like to, we simply cannot protect Ari from prejudice and stupidity that exist in our world.” Emotions run beyond those expended on protecting their children. Wolff notes,

My life would have been easier if I had a biological child, or an adopted child who matched. For that matter, my life would have been easier without any kids. With my husband, I signed up voluntarily—albeit naïvely—for a tougher life. But, as it turns out, it’s a much richer one, too.

Parenting in general is difficult and transracial parenting is hard.<sup>189</sup>

In contextualizing her transracial adoption experience, Wolff states,

When life doesn’t quite go the way you thought it would, you keep peeling these layers of reality and you either cope with it or you give up on it, and I kept coping with it so now we’re going to have an adopted child and the next surprise was that it wasn’t a girl, which we had all assumed it was. And the next surprise was that it wasn’t a light-skinned person, so I keep changing, except the me that is changing is much more fluid than I was when I started out of necessity. I need to keep, and that doesn’t mean that I don’t have a core, but it’s a birth process, you know. And there are times that I would say this tomorrow, there are times when this whole race thing because like you, I try to read as much as I can and learn as much as I can and it’s very present on my mind to the point where close friends of family accuse me of being hyper-vigilant. Oh, you’re just reading into that. It’s not there. Oh, I think it is. I think racism is so engrained. It’s in the air. And there are times when I feel like such a little tiny speck in the process. I feel so overwhelmed by the institutionalized racism that I can’t do anything about it and it tires me out. And I worry about my son. I worry that I won’t be able to advocate for him and I’ve done him an injustice by creating this hybrid. And then there are other times I feel very hopeful. And I think that families like ours are going to have a very big affect each of us in a very small way, our own ripple. Here’s what I know: I know that transracial adoption is good for me and my husband. My hope is that it’s also good for our son, and that I don’t know yet. I know it’s made his life harder; I know it’s made our life harder, but my hope is that it’s made all of our lives better and I hope that doesn’t sound too “Polyanna-like.” It’s made my life better in a few ways. One is that I’ve had to figure out how I feel about certain issues and if you’re a white person who hasn’t had to deal with race, you don’t have to figure that out. It’s also made me feel I have more of a language to talk to people about race. I’m less afraid of being with people who are unlike myself, not just racially, but it’s expanded into other kinds of diversity. I feel more engaged with the world and more responsible for what in it, and, in my case, those aren’t just aren’t platitudes, but sometimes they bum me out because it gives me an extra job and I have enough to do already.

Wolff articulates her assessment of transracial adoption. She expresses what she sees as the positive and admits that there are struggles. She is reflexive and worries about racism and

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<sup>188</sup> Wolff, *Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother*, 144-145; and *Ibid.*

<sup>189</sup> Wolff, *Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother*, 147; and *Ibid.*, 152.

parenting. Captured in the essence of Wolff's sentiment is the idea of constant motion, where perspectives change, as life evolves. When asked if her whiteness has shifted since the adoption of her son? And, if so, in what ways has it been transformed? Wolff replies,

Before the adoption of my son, my whiteness was invisible, the norm. Then it became visible, and it was painful to acknowledge the privileges it bestows. I went through a stage of disliking my whiteness, of showing bias toward cultures of color. As with all evolutions, you eventually assimilate the pieces.

In response to feeling guilty and pained for benefiting from white privilege—that her own child cannot partake and indeed is discriminated because of—Wolff at one point felt a need to favor communities of color in a compensatory-type action. She now feels like she has assimilated her position with white privilege. Currently, Wolff and her family are working on assimilating the pieces of raising an adolescent male.<sup>190</sup>

Another white adoptive parent who writes about raising an African American adolescent male is Becky Thompson. Thompson is associate professor of sociology at Simmons College in Boston, Massachusetts, where she has taught since 1996. Thompson writes about her experiences as the adoptive mother of a son, Adrian, in her book *Mothering without a Compass: White Mother's Love, Black Son's Courage* (2000). Thompson begins her book with a recurring theme mentioned by each of the three adoptive mothers: anticipating motherhood. Thompson writes,

I had known for many years that I was going to be a mother. In fact, I had had a recurring feeling since early adulthood that a child would simply arrive on my doorstep. My intuition was that I wouldn't even have to go and fill out papers. A child would simply show up at my house. So, I wasn't very surprised when Adrian—the younger brother of Andrea, a marvelous, twenty-one-year-old woman who had become my goddaughter a few years earlier—arrived for a two-week summer vacation in August 1997 and then announced a week later that he was staying for good.

Rush, Wolff, and Thompson had each foreseen their mothering. Thompson's situation, however, was different than the other two adoptive mothers since she adopted a nine-year-old rather than a newborn. In some ways, Thompson's story may be read as a continuation of Wolff's published narrative, which concludes with her son as a toddler. Both authors write with a raw honesty,

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<sup>190</sup> Wolff, interview by author, 5 March 2004; and Wolff, "Re: questions & phone interview," Email to the author, 2 February 2004.

candidly discussing (transracial) adoption-related issues that others usually refrain from covering.<sup>191</sup>

In her book, Thompson uses fifteen chapters and 169 pages to center on the first year of parenting Adrian across the color line. At the beginning of her experience, Thompson explains,

I have been reading as if my life depended on it, wanting so much to know how people raising adopted children talk with them about betrayal, abandonment, and loneliness. I want so much to read writing by white and Black women who are raising Black sons. I want to have, already on my bookshelves, easily reached, writing about the vulnerability, joy, terror, and deep loneliness I feel as I am learning to mother. I search through store after store, in hopes of finding a book that will tell this story, only to realize that no *one* book will do. This is a story of discontinuity, not found in any one place, best reckoned with if I accept fragmentation as an inevitable part of my past, his past, and our present together.

Similar to the other participating parents, Thompson searches for written sources on her new found parenting that might prove insightful. Thompson's desire to locate books that reflect transracial adoption or whites parenting blacks provides insight into the way she operates in her professional life as a sociologist who searches for knowledge through publications, while herself contributing essays, editing and writing books.<sup>192</sup>

*Mothering without a Compass*, as the title suggests, presents Thompson's 1997, a year when she suddenly becomes a mother. When Adrian sees the book title he asks, "Does that mean you don't know what you are doing?" Thompson recalls,

A quick easy laugh comes out of my body with a big smile. So smart he is. So quick. So to the point. I take a big breath while, inside, two opposite answers in equally clear voices chant to each other: "Of course, I know what I am doing. No, I definitely don't know what I am doing. I am winging it." Closer to the truth, I think to myself, "Well, I don't know what I am doing. I have never done this before. I am going a day at a time." At the same time, I remind myself not to say that to him. He needs to feel my confidence. Confidence I do have, intuitively, somehow."

This exchange between Adrian and Thompson highlights continued themes throughout the book. These themes include, self-reflection and introspection, the mother and son relationship, and development.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Thompson, *Mothering without a Compass*, 1.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

In Thompson's quotation that stands as an epigraph to this chapter, she debates how to parent through the particular issues and topics she chooses to discuss with her son. Thompson asks a central question: "What does it mean to be a white woman attempting to raise him respectful of African American culture and aware of the violence perpetrated against African American people by people of my race, violence that, I fear, Adrian is already facing?" Like other participating parents, Thompson is cognizant of the need to prepare her son for racism and violence. She is aware of white violence against African Americans and notes where she and Adrian locate socially. Utilizing self-reflection, Thompson struggles to answer her question of the meaning of a white woman raising a son to respect African American culture all through her story.

Two examples illustrate Thompson's efforts to show consideration for black culture while attempting to be a responsible parent. Both of these examples relate to violence and African American men. First, Adrian receives three action figures as Christmas presents. Thompson writes,

The Hulk figure, arguably the worst of the lot, comes bound to a huge cementlike block that looks like a combination Nautilus weight-lifting machine and electric chair. The instructions show Adrian that he is supposed to strap the Hulk in at the legs, arms, torso, and neck and then push a button on the back, which allows Hulk to burst out of his bondage. I shudder as Adrian shows me how Hulk should be strapped in, flashing on Mumia Abu-Jamal, on death row in Pennsylvania, and my friend David Gilbert, who is in prison until 2056 for his militant organizing against imperialism and racism in the 1960s and 1970s.

These action figures trigger a connection with prisoners for Thompson. Thompson is discomforted by the idea that the Hulk action figure is supposed to "burst out of his bondage"; an illusion both to slavery and to the prisoners she is working to free. Thompson contemplates how she should explain her dislike for the action figures and tries to understand Adrian's admiration for them.<sup>194</sup>

As Thompson's story continues, she returns to the action figure subject and offers,

The most I have done so far with my quandary about Adrian's toys, specifically the action figures, is to quietly separate the electric chair/Nautilus machine from its Hulk

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<sup>194</sup> Thompson, *Mothering without a Compass*, 29-30; and *Ibid.*, 38.

figure, burying the machine under a bunch of sheets in his closet. (Wondering, is it my place to throw it out? It isn't my toy—it is his. But I don't want him to have it, so it stays in limbo.) So far, Adrian hasn't seemed to notice that the plastic piece that constrains Hulk is missing.

Thompson feels conflicted, as she does not want Adrian to have the toy because of what it represents, yet she is uncertain if it is her place to discard it. She chooses a compromise. As she attempts to do her own academic work, she notes, "The noise from the Hulk machine forces me to look up, to take notice, and to make sense of the politics of my silences: what to say and what not to say to Adrian." Thompson keys in on the larger issue that this toy symbolizes: her parenting intersecting with her politics.<sup>195</sup>

Ultimately, Thompson chooses decisive action in regards to the toy. She declares, "The plastic electric/Nautilus machine under the sheets in the closet, I am now sure, has got to go. In the trash, with no mention to Adrian as I try to silence one screeching voice in the cacophony of voices that I carry around with me now." The second example actually provides Thompson with clarity for her actions with the toy. The example involves Thompson's choice to listen to the book-on-tape of Ernest Gaines's novel *A Lesson before Dying*. The novel centers on a young black man who is sentenced to death for murder, although he did not commit the crime. The young man's attorney tries to convince the jury not to execute his client because he is less than human and not worthy of killing. The young man's godmother asks the local black schoolteacher to teach her godson that he is indeed a man before he is put to death.<sup>196</sup>

Thompson is unnerved when the schoolteacher shares the young man's story with his students. She writes,

I found myself feeling sick, so mad at the teacher for telling the children about the execution, thinking that there was no reason, at their very young age, to have to carry the weight of that racist civilization in their bodies. There has to be some space for innocence. Telling the children about Jefferson's execution left the burden of history on their backs too early. And yet, as I wrestled with this, the burden they carried seemed outrageously unavoidable.

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 53; and Ibid., 54.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 64; and Ibid., 54-57.

Thompson decides to listen to the tapes alone, without Adrian. Like the school children, she thinks Adrian is too young to bear the burden of this weighty history. Soon after reaching this conclusion, Adrian and a friend face an incident with teenagers threatening them, “scaring them back ‘into their place.’” Thompson reconsiders her decision to listen without her son, querying, “So who am I protecting, except myself, by turning off the audiotape of *A Lesson before Dying* when Adrian is with me? So much I need to know. I feel wobbly in the knees, wanting so much to be up to the task, looking to those around me for help, overwhelmed when I can’t find it.” Thompson waffles between wanting Adrian to enjoy the innocence of youth and wanting to prepare him for the realities of racism and violence.<sup>197</sup>

As Thompson reconciles her ideas of parenting with her child’s wishes, society’s ideals, and reality, many questions are raised for her. Similar to when she “feels wobbly in the knees” and seeks help from others when considering the audiotape example, Thompson again looks for help in answering her many questions, offering, “I am left wondering if being an adult means accepting that alone, I am insufficient to the task of finding answers to my questions.”

Thompson’s ability to ponder these questions and to look within her past, her politics, and her knowledge highlights the introspective cultural tradition that she employs, which might signal a self-sufficient approach. On the other hand, Thompson’s ability to seek out and ask for assistance exhibits her participation in the tradition of community, where people rely on each other for support.<sup>198</sup>

Besides looking at herself and seeking help from others when parenting, Thompson also considers Adrian’s experiences and their shared connections. One of these connections is abuse. Thompson recounts her own history of abuse. She writes of the physical and sexual abuse she endured, and her own abuse of another. For example, Thompson recalls,

The times my mother hit me. The bald spots, as my sister said, when my mother pulled my hair out, or my sister’s hair out. All the times I raised myself. Held myself. Held my sister, Jasmine. Felt alone. Watching her break the bedroom door, putting her hand

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 57; and Ibid., 59.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 39.



through the panel of wood. Watching her throw dishes. A whole set. Her going after Jasmine, shaming me.

Thompson has painful memories of her mother's "storms," with feelings that include "rage" and "emptiness." Thompson also remarks on the physical and verbal abuse that Adrian encountered from his white stepfather, Damion. She writes, for example, of his, "Dreams of attacks, so likely fueled by years that Damion abused Adrian, of Damion hitting him from behind and when Adrian was naked, of Damion getting drunk at night and then driving with the family . . . in a car, huddled together, fearing for their lives." Adrian's difficult recollections cause nightmares.<sup>199</sup>

Both Thompson and Adrian seek refuge in their tears. They recall these volatile situations and cry. Thompson writes, "My therapist gave me a teddy bear I could hold in the night. She gave me a birthday gift every year as I cried and cried and cried, wondering if I ever got gifts as I child. I probably did but have no memory." Similarly, Thompson explains Adrian's tears when he recalls the abuse he faced or the triggers it causes such as the nightmares and fear. She concludes, "He is already a survivor, having found a way (with the help of his mother, sister, and me) to be freed of his stepfather's abuse." Thompson and Adrian share this "survivor status." They have both faced terrible abuse at the hands of others and are dealing with its vast repercussions.<sup>200</sup>

The trauma involved with physical abuse has prompted Thompson to recognize her physicality. From discussing her eating problems to Adrian's not understanding eating portions to worrying about the perception of their physical bonding, comments regarding the "body" are found throughout Thompson's text. For example, Thompson notes her sense of self, "I am aware of my soft skin but not-so-cushiony chest and stomach—a product of my years of running and rowing crew before Adrian came into my life." Thompson explains that "Since Adrian came,

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 44; and Ibid., 101.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 47; and Ibid., 103-104.

much, if not most, of our bonding together has been on a physical level," such as hugging, sitting in laps, lying next to each other, and contact sports, all mentioned in Thompson's narrative.<sup>201</sup>

The body and the physical also represent a developmental space where Thompson wants to achieve an understanding of a mother-son relationship with Adrian. For example, Thompson notes,

I want Adrian to know that I am in charge, that I mean what I say, and that he can trust my words and actions. I want him to know, in his bones, that I am capable of taking him on—inside and outside the house—if need be. It is important to me that he knows I can do 250 sit-ups without stopping. That I can run six miles before breakfast and still playfully pick him up and toss him across the room. I know that eventually the situation will be physically reversed. At 105 pounds, he can already pick me up high and hold me there. But by the time he can outwrestle, outrun, outsprint, and outbench-press me, I hope that my moral authority will be absolutely secure.

Almost coming full circle later in her narrative, Thompson offers,

It is my pride and fear about his growing, both in the same instant, that filled my eyes with happy tears this week when, for the first time, he outran me in touch football and then scored a touchdown. Not only had he caught the ball despite my real attempt to intercept it; he had also run right past me, even though, as I admitted only to myself, I was going at top speed. I yearn for the little boy he was when he came to me, with his one suitcase and his round, round belly.

Thompson believes that physical achievements create boundaries and lines of authority. She also reads physicality as growth. It is important to her that Adrian understands she is in charge. She believes he needs to know this to feel supported.<sup>202</sup>

When asked to comment further about the body playing such a large role in her narrative, Thompson responds,

Well, I think that the academy requires us to give up our bodies. That one of the most profound ways that heterosexuals are placed themselves out of the academy is the denial of the body. What gay men and lesbians and transgender people bring to the academy is, "oh no we're not giving up our bodies." You know we are our bodies. It's like you know when you go to the American Sociological Association meeting, the annual meeting, the only place where there are real bodies, living, breathing, performing bodies, is the gay and lesbian caucus. It's like every other context there, even desks, we're cut-off below our heads. We are only supposed to be our heads. Well, for someone who is in the process of healing from being disassociated as a kid to then being a context where I'm supposed to give up my body again and be trained to do that and then teach students to give up their bodies, too. I'm part of the violence then. I'm part of the violence process of

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 19-20; and Ibid., 20.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 89-90; and Ibid., 138-139.

repudiations. And for writers, like our words come from our bodies and because emotion is at the heart of what we're able to write about, so then when I get told that I shouldn't have a body that really I shouldn't have an emotion is to say I shouldn't be a writer, or I need to write in a disembodied way, which is abstract of too formal language that you're dead on the page. And this is my critique of most post-modernist writing is that it's dead on the page. It's not touching people.

So mothering was an amazing gift because I was experiencing my body and I don't know how to say it, you know. It's an illusion that we live in separate bodies. That's a Western concept. A Buddhist understanding is that we are actually the same organism you and me and I have often felt that this body is a great limitation because I can feel quite connected to somebody else's body, you know separate from sex, but just the experience of being two human beings in a space together could be quite intimate, right. So to have that knowledge and then to begin to see the world through Adrian's eyes is in some ways to be living in his body. And the reason I hesitate about that is that in some ways it's taboo to say that because we always—the party line is that I can never as a white woman know what it is to be black. But when you have a mother-son relationship, those boundaries get blurry because when things happen to him it's not like they happen to me, but I then see what it's like for him. It's like when he came home and you know they had taken this magazine about dolls and tossed it at the kids. White kids had tossed the magazine about dolls across the room and said, you know, “No boys do that.” And Adrian came home and he had all of these Barbie dolls. But those Barbie dolls were his connection to his sister. Those Barbie dolls were like when he would be part of an imaginary world of taking care, of nurturing of domestic life, of rescue, of escape. You know he plays with Barbie dolls with his closest friend Diana, my partner Hannah's daughter, right. For him to get that message that if he's going to be a boy, he can't play with Barbie's. It was, I really saw what it meant for him as a boy to be learning this gender socialization that was antithetical for just the softness in him.

Thompson has strong feelings on the body's potential and its meaning. These beliefs intersect with her sexual orientation—as a lesbian, spirituality, politics, and profession. She zones in on the blurry boundaries of race and parenting, especially when conflict occurs.<sup>203</sup>

A few times in her narrative, Thompson explains that Adrian needs to act two ages at once or waffle between acting his age and acting like a toddler. Thompson refers to this phenomenon as “age-traveling,” and attributes this to his abuse, his adoption, and his current circumstances. Notably, in turn, Thompson does some age-traveling of her own. She writes, “As a consequence of mothering Adrian, I am going through my childhood again, sorting through memories, as if for the first time, that I thought I had already resolved in my eight years of therapy.” Like Jane Lazarre and her sons, the reciprocity of the relationship between Thompson and Adrian is seen through the body and age-traveling. Thompson and Adrian play off each other, as they negotiate their mother-son relationship. As their bond grows, Thompson explains

to Adrian, “Well, this is a relationship we are creating. Like none other. Made up of you and me. So totally unique. It isn’t one that has already been mapped.” Thompson acknowledges the journey she and Adrian are on together. Years of therapy, reclaiming her body, and finding comfortable spiritual practices have been part of Thompson’s independent journey.<sup>204</sup>

During our interview and in an essay Thompson published entitled, “Time Traveling and Border Crossing: Reflections on White Identity,” Thompson thoroughly details her biographical information. She writes,

I was born in 1959 in a Mormon hospital in Logan, Utah to two teenage parents who were wildly in love but hardly equipped to parent or to see themselves through to a healthy marriage. A brilliant, spontaneous, and complicated woman, my mother began rebelling against Mormon expectations about women and sexuality early in life.

After Thompson, her parents had another daughter, Jasmine. Growing up, Thompson had two fathers, whom she refers to as her “first father” and “second father.” She explains,

My first father is an alcoholic who spent his life between jail, halfway houses, studio apartments, and the street. He rarely held down a steady job and never had any money. He had a wry sense of humor and the heart of a poet. He, like my mother, was raised a Mormon and saw marriage as a way to escape restrictive religious influences. He lived with my mother, my younger sister and me until I was three, when my mother packed us up in the back of her powder blue Falcon in the middle of the night and, without telling anyone, drove from Logan, Utah to Phoenix, Arizona, leaving behind my father, whose drinking problem had escalated.

Thompson describes her life with her second father, stating, that when she was five,

My mother married a man from an upper-class, Ivy League, Episcopalian family who offered her welcome financial stability but was unable to match her intellectually or emotionally. They soon had a son, my brother, Stuart Little, affectionately named after the rat in E.B. White’s book of the same title.<sup>205</sup>

The marriage between Thompson’s mother and her second father ended when Thompson was twelve. During her time with her two fathers, Thompson lived in different places and experienced different class levels and sources of stability. Thompson reflects, “With each marriage, geographical move, and divorce our social class status shifted, as income, values, and

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<sup>203</sup> Becky Thompson, interview by author, 21 October 2003, Boston, MA, tape recording.

<sup>204</sup> Thompson, *Mothering without a Compass*, 41; and *Ibid.*, 67-68.

the priorities attached to class changed.” Thompson was raised as a “latchkey kid” and, at times, a single mother who worked as a teacher in urban school systems in multiracial schools raised her. Thompson describes her past background as a “kind of roller coaster,” offering examples of watching her first father attempt suicide after taking Antabuse, and the violence between her parents. She writes, “I was exposed as a child to relatives’ alcoholism, physical and emotional violence, and incest, and I had neither the language nor the context needed to name this abuse.”<sup>206</sup>

Thompson spends time reflecting on the impact that abuse and other factors have played on shaping her life and identity. Class is one of the factors that has prominently shaped Thompson’s life narrative. Thompson explains, “Crossing class borders, on the other hand, was wrought with shame and confusion . . . As a latch key kid, I lived in rented housed and got toted around in a beat-up old car—that my sister, mother, and I watched in awe as it caught fire in a mall parking lot.” Thompson explains the class and social differences between living with her second father and relying on the income of her single mother. Living in a wealthy suburb with her second father allowed Thompson access to many resources. A disconnect remained between Thompson and the wealthy children in the community, particularly after her mother divorced. Thompson recalls,

I made my way through high school waitressing at various twenty-four-hour restaurants, making french fries at McDonalds, cleaning people’s houses, and babysitting for neighborhood children. On school mornings my sister and I routinely went through the ordeal of frantically searching for clean matching socks that didn’t have holes in them.

The economic standing of Thompson’s parents and her mother’s desire for her children to receive quality education led to the fluctuation of class levels in Thompson’s early years.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Becky Thompson, “Time Traveling and Border Crossing: Reflections on White Identity,” in *Names We Call Home: Autobiography on Racial Identity*, ed. Becky Thompson and Sangeeta Tyagi (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996), 95; *Ibid.*, 96; and *Ibid.*

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*; Becky Thompson, interview by author, 21 October 2003, Boston, MA; Thompson, “Time Traveling and Border Crossing,” 96.

<sup>207</sup> Thompson, “Time Traveling and Border Crossing,” 96; and *Ibid.*, 96-97.

Thompson's class-consciousness developed over time. Three quotations illustrate her levels of understanding and introspection. First, she writes, "As a young child I didn't know that life for others was different than my own. I didn't realize how profoundly the divorces limited how much money we had, in which area of town we lived, and which schools I attended." Second, she explains, "I didn't start to feel hurt and excluded because of class divisions until I was an adolescent, when I became exposed to people from upper-class backgrounds." Third, in exhibiting the gendered operation of class through an example of relatives leaving college money for her brother and not for her or her sister, Thompson contends,

When I was in college, I started to seek out other students who were putting themselves through, but in high school I had neither the language nor the confidence to find camaraderie from other students who had also ridden financial roller coasters. While outwardly I professed a disdain for what I called frivolous things, like cheerleading and prom queen contests, inside I yearned to be thought of as pretty and as one of the group.

Thompson provides insight into her movement within social structures, as well as the impact this had on her understanding of the situations. From not seeing difference, to feeling exclusion, to seeking unity, Thompson delves into feelings of pain, jealousy, and solidarity. Thompson's varying class experiences acted to develop her fluency with multiple class traditions.<sup>208</sup>

Through a few anecdotes, Thompson's current class standing is mentioned in *Mothering without a Compass*. Thompson notes that children at Adrian's school are raising pet cockroaches in comparison to her own upbringing fighting these creatures off. She recalls grocery shopping with a partner, "But Ella, Bounty is so expensive we might as well buy cloth," I would argue, the Mormon in me screeching that any paper towels, especially Bounty, were unnecessary if you had clean rags at home . . . still haunted by the Mormon ethic to waste nothing—not even paper towels." She currently refers to herself as "a single mother from a mixed-class background who is now trying to hang on to middle-class status." Thompson's frugality from her Mormon days is now combined with her middle-class status as a college professor and writer.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 96; Ibid.; and Ibid., 97.

<sup>209</sup> Thompson, *Mothering without a Compass*, 73; Ibid., 85; and Ibid., 89.

Thompson refers to her class shifts as “crossing class borders.” Border crossing is a main theme in Thompson’s understanding of her life. When we met and in her writing, Thompson points out that she has lead a life in transition; specifically, she mentions her often-changing geographic spaces. Now, in her early forties, she explains, “This is my thirtieth house that I live in now, and my tenth academic appointment. I’ve moved a lot, and some of that was as a child.” Thompson reflects on the many spaces she has lived,

When I was a child these moves had been punctuated by divorces, remarriages, promotions, demotions, battery, upward and downward mobility. As an adult, the moves have been instigated by love found and lost, jobs begun and finished, college and graduate school started and finally completed.

Her many spaces and intellectual interests lead Thompson to consider the notion of border crossing, “I too am concerned about the details, the specific contexts and the exact scenes that reveal the pain, the pleasure, and reasons for border crossing. I am concerned with why people cross borders, what bolsters our traverses and what we lose and gain in doing so.”<sup>210</sup>

Thompson’s moving from house-to-house prompts her to specifically consider the role of border crossing in her own life. After one of her academic moves, she contends, “During this latest interstate border crossing I realized that all my life I have actually been crossing borders—state, religious, educational, sexual, body, racial and cultural. One of the most difficult and life-affirming has been crossing racial borders.” When asked about her background, Thompson explains, “And then racially, I don’t think that white kids think of ourselves necessarily as white nearly as early as black and Native American kids see their racial identity as marked, but now I look back on it and there was all kinds of ways that I was being taught about whiteness.” Answering a question about her whiteness and, more specifically, her ethnicity, Thompson details,

Well, I’m Danish. I think I’m probably other more, but for Mormons, Mormon is the ethnicity. It’s a little bit like being Jewish. I mean the Mormons consider themselves a “chosen people.” Like they identify themselves like Jews and that kind of way. They see themselves as a persecuted people, which is truly bizarre because they are the ultimate capitalists. But because I have polygamy in my family, my great grandfather had nine

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<sup>210</sup> Thompson, “Time Traveling and Border Crossing,” 96; Thompson, interview by author, 21 October 2003; Thompson, “Time Traveling and Border Crossing,” 94; and *Ibid.*, 93.

wives, for example, that's like their departure from mainstream United States. So for Mormons, in my experience, Mormon is the ethnicity. But, you know, the nine wives were each "given a track of land in Utah" and that land is Native Land, and not that I was taught that as a kid. I pieced it together as an adult in teaching race and ethnic relations and understanding some more of Native history.

Thompson's association of border crossing, race, whiteness, ethnicity, and religion highlight the intersections of these components of her identity. Thompson's intellectual curiosity and sense of justice shine through, as she points out the Mormons appropriation of Native Americans' land.

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Thompson explains that while growing up Mormonism was her ethnicity. She details her family's involvement, recalling,

My mother rebelled against the Mormon Church, as did my father. So I was raised on the context as an atheist, context of tremendous rebellion, but I've always thought that when people are really, really rebelling strongly against something, they are in fact embodying it in many ways, too. I learned a tremendous amount about being Mormon by default. And, you know there's some things about, I mean there's a lot about Mormon life that's despicable to me. It's as patriarchal as you can get. It's no coincidence that it's polygamist, some people practice polygamy. And they're capitalists to the nth degree. Money is what counts. You know whiteness is embedded in everything.

Despite her parent's rebellion against Mormonism, Thompson was exposed to this culture and its influences. When asked to speak about how it specifically influenced her ethnicity, Thompson responds,

Anyway, so I have, as you see, strayed from the Mormon tradition, but I still have like anything, there are some pieces of the Mormon background that I hold onto or that are just in me that I respect. Things like a real reverence for the land. That's a very deep connection between Mormons and Native people in that way; you don't waste anything, nothing; everything has a use; a sense of taking care of the people around you. Now, for Mormons that means you just take care of Mormons, but there is a sense of needing to be part of a larger community. And I don't take it for just Mormons, obviously, but I do have a sense of you know if you have money and people around you need it, then that's what you do and vice versa. So did that get to the ethnicity thing?

Thompson admittedly has departed from the teachings of the Mormon Church. Today, she celebrates various religious holidays, including Easter and Passover, meditates, visualizes, and follows particular elements of Buddhism. She notes, she is "now living in a home where 'eclectic' might be the only term to describe the spirituality I practice." Following this eclectic pattern,



Thompson is able to extract parts of Mormonism that agree with her, while dismissing the notions that do not, such as patriarchy.<sup>212</sup>

Thompson also learned messages on gender through Mormonism, including,

That Mormons are deeply patriarchal. Even when they weren't, even when there wasn't a father in my life, the message that I got was that women are, by definition, inferior to men. Even though my mother was a very strong woman, independent woman, supported us, there was, she grew up thinking she was dirty because she was a woman and, therefore, her daughters were dirty. There is tremendous male birthright in the Mormon family. So, you know, when my brother was born, he was the one.

Like gender, Thompson received messages from her mother regarding race. These too, were mixed messages but appear more progressive, although complicated, than those on gender.

Thompson explains,

During the years we lived in Phoenix, my mother taught English literature at a predominantly Black urban high school. Like many young people in the 1960s, she had rebelled against her parents and religious traditions and supported the Civil Rights Movement, wholeheartedly. However, as far back as I can remember, my mother's teaching, political affiliations, and intellectual interests reflected her opposition to racism and her commitment to integrated education.

In contrast to her mother's progressive stances regarding race and black people, Thompson recalls instances with her mother acting in racist and racial ways towards African Americans.

Thompson critiques these experiences and contends, "White people may be opposed to racism on a structural level, while simultaneously upholding it in private contexts" and denounces her mother's "romanticizing of African American people."<sup>213</sup>

Besides the messages surrounding race that Thompson received from her mother, she had some experiences that involved race when she was young. For example, when Thompson was very young she lived in a Chicano neighborhood. She also experienced brief interactions with Native cultures. She recalls,

So anyway, I think that okay another message around race is connected to language. The language that I heard outside of my family in one of the neighborhoods was Spanish. At

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 94; Thompson, interview by author, 21 October 2003; and Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Thompson, interview by author, 21 October 2003; Ibid; and Thompson, *Mothering without a Compass*, 118.

<sup>213</sup> Thompson, interview by author, 21 October 2003; Thompson, "Time Traveling and Border Crossing," 99; Ibid., 99; and Ibid.

that point, Spanish was the safe language for me because what was going on in terms of violence was in English. This is an interesting thing because that meant that I needed to be intensively hearing and listening to and studying Spanish to get access to my memories in English of the violence. In other words, Spanish was my avenue to getting to the English piece. There's a lot about race there. You know a little white girl who was experiencing two different worlds and two different languages inside and outside of the house and learning about safety through that.

Thompson links the violence she witnesses and endures at a young age in her home with English, in contrast to the peace she sees in Spanish outside in her Chicano neighborhood. Thompson's components of identity intersect once again. This time the connection comes around race, language, and the body.<sup>214</sup>

Thompson noted her many homes throughout her lifetime. She started living in Utah and moved to Arizona, Massachusetts, and to California, where Thompson attended high school in a "wealthy, exclusively white, Los Angeles suburb." After high school, Thompson attended Colorado College with her high school boyfriend. During her year and a half at Colorado College, Thompson began to explore her sexuality. She recalls, "So I was there for a year and a half. I started to have fantasies about girls. I never had fantasies about boys. I think it was just interesting, and I started to show up at gay men's parties. I didn't know why I was there."

Thompson had avoided dealing with feelings of lesbianism until this time. She explains the early messages she received about gender and sexuality, stating,

Sexuality, there was so much abuse in my early childhood that I think that by the time I five I was pretty much fully disassociated. And I really stayed disassociated up until I got into therapy, when I was twenty-three. I think when I started to play Rugby and I started coming out as a lesbian when I was nineteen, I think I began to get into my body, but I wasn't really until I got into therapy that I even understood the concept of disassociation. I just took it for granted. So I was sexually active very, very young. I was with a boy all through high school and I'm very grateful for that. I don't think I could have taken being marked in any other way than what was already going on. But my first sexual relationships were with girls but I just didn't name it in that way. What I got from my mother around sexuality was that women had a right to have freedom in terms of sexuality. She certainly was free in that way, but that women were also dirty.

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<sup>214</sup> Thompson, interview by author, 21 October 2003.

Thompson did not feel comfortable adding sexuality as another place where she would be “marked.” Likewise, calling it a “hostile environment,” she did not view Colorado College as a safe place and transferred to an Urban Studies program in Chicago.<sup>215</sup>

In Chicago, Thompson fell in love with her first woman lover and she began to come out as a lesbian. Thompson details the period, excitedly stating,

So I was in this Urban Studies program and then after I had been there for nine months and I was living in Chicago and just loving it. You know, I was coming of age of a lesbian at a moment in multiracial feminism where white women were not allowed to use the term “feminist” unless it dealt with race. I really had—right from the very beginning—I was coming out and in 1979, which is like, that was like Combahee River Collective was ‘74 to 79. *This Bridge Called My Back* was being written at period, you know and people were going all around the Michigan Women’s Festival, which is where I was playing like naked rugby, was where they were also doing readings from *This Bridge Called My Back* . . . I mean it was an extraordinary moment and so I was getting a message that lesbian feminists were about justice, that lesbian feminists who were white were about anti-racism. And from Chicago I went to U.C. Santa Cruz.

After her time in Chicago, Thompson went to the University of California at Santa Cruz to finish her undergraduate degree. Through her experiences at U.C. Santa Cruz and her time spent in multicultural and feminist circles in Boston, while earning her Ph.D. in sociology from Brandeis University, many women of color mentored Thompson. Thompson states,

I was getting a tremendous amount of support around learning about African American studies, about the history of colonialism, to look at the world from an international perspective, to understand social location. So by the time I finished graduate school, I had this remarkable mentoring from women of color academics, many of whom were also activists.

During this period, Thompson was “involved with” a black women lesbian academic.

Thompson’s relationship and her activism included her connection to a network of black lesbians.<sup>216</sup>

During this time in the 1980s, Thompson thought about being a mother. She explains, “So in terms of the mothering piece, I always thought I would be a mom and even when I was still in graduate school I thought I would be a mom, but either I was with women who weren’t

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<sup>215</sup> Thompson, “Time Traveling and Border Crossing,” 96; Thompson, interview by author, 21 October 2003; and Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Thompson, interview by author, 21 October 2003; and Ibid.

ready or I wasn't ready or, you know, I hadn't started that time in my life." Thompson recounts the activities that lead to her mothering. While teaching at a university in Connecticut, Thompson met a young woman, named Andrea, through their shared participation on a crew team. Andrea became Thompson's goddaughter. Thompson sums up their relationship, writing that she had "Gone to her crew races. Bought her clothes. Been with her on school vacations, Christmas, Thanksgiving, and more." In August 1997, Andrea brought her brother Adrian for a two-week vacation with Thompson. Adrian decided to stay and his mother, Grace, agreed, asking Thompson to parent her son.<sup>217</sup>

Thompson writes of her initial thoughts on the prospect of parenting Adrian, claiming, "My mind raced, wondering what I would need to know as a white lesbian to raise an African American boy in a country that so complicates that arrangement." Thompson agrees to parent Adrian and their life together begins immediately. She further explains her initial thoughts,

In moments of panic, I feel like I need to create a village from scratch. There are whole categories of people I need to know now in a way I didn't before. African American mothers of Black children. White mothers of Black children. Writing mothers of small children. White lesbians with children of color. Black children who play with action figures and Beanie Babies. White children who already have African American playmates—so that Adrian won't be their first.

Thompson turns to a community of friends for support in helping to adjust to parenting. She recalls,

Of course, I didn't have a clue at first about what I'd need to begin to mother Adrian. I didn't know that mothering him would force me, enable me, to become closer to a whole community of people I might never have met otherwise. I didn't have one moment to reflect, to ask myself how to learn what I was going to need to know.<sup>218</sup>

Although Thompson has written a substantial amount of race-related scholarship—including essays, edited collections, and books—she initially resisted telling her story of mothering Adrian. In response to a question asking what made her want to write *Mothering without a Compass*, Thompson answers,

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid.; and Thompson, *Mothering without a Compass*, 119.

<sup>218</sup> Thompson, *Mothering without a Compass*, 1; Ibid., 4; and Ibid., 5.

I was visited by a loving spirit. It's not like I wanted to write this book. It just happened. It started coming and I got the first whole chapter. It just wrote itself. It really did feel like a birthing process. I would be visited by a loving spirit, a whole chapter would come out, and then I would be bone dry for like two weeks and think I didn't have anything else to say, but I don't even know what that was exactly. And then I'd have another visitation and a whole 'nother chapter would come out of me and then I'd be bone dry and then it wasn't like until four or five chapters that I finally whispered to the closest person in the world to me . . . who has listened to everything I've written. I said, "I think I might have something. I think I will write." And then I just kept, you know, nine months, the time of a birth, is exactly the period of time for that book. I was visited. I have certainly experienced that feeling as well with the novel [her current project] of being visited, guided. And I don't want to say that as if I don't have agency in it; it's not like I was this bland medium, but I do feel like with creative writing that I have the opportunity to be in a trance like space that is connected to a larger presence than myself. It's a wonderful, scary experience, cause I'm not in charge.

Thompson's "birthing" language stands as an interesting metaphor to her book on mothering.

Thompson offers the deep process she underwent during the writing of this book. She speaks of being guided by a spirit. She refers to the relationship she shares with Adrian as a "spiritual journey" and claims they share a spiritual connection.<sup>219</sup>

Sharon Rush also mentions a sense of spirits in her writing process. Rush writes,

I often have asked myself how Blacks cope with racism and while I'm not positive how they do it day in and day out, I know that developing a spiritual center is important. About the time I began to articulate my idea of transformative love, my daughter wrote something for the book that resonated with what I was feeling and also my growing awareness of the importance of spirituality in the daily struggles against unfairness. I have shared the writing of this book with my daughter from the beginning, although it is only as she gotten older that she has taken an interest in it. I invited her to write something for the book on several occasions, and a few months before her tenth birthday she wrote the following: [Mary's, "My Word to the World"].

Rush distinguishes between spirituality and organized religion. Although she does not claim the same relationship to spirits in her writing process as Thompson, the two authors do share in the fact that their adopted children were involved in the writing of the books that center on their adoption.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> Thompson, interview by author, 21 October 2003; and Thompson, *Mothering without a Compass*, 68.

<sup>220</sup> Rush, *Loving across the Color Line*, 173.

At age nine, Rush's daughter, Mary, wrote a short piece on racism for inclusion in *Loving across the Color Line*. Thompson's son also participated in the writing process of *Mothering without a Compass*. Thompson explains,

He announced one day that he wanted to read the book, "start to finish." So he did, in three sittings, during which time he laughed, got sad, and along the way took out a few passages that he found "too personal" or "embarrassing." We talked a lot as he read, about what he remembered and what he was feeling. As he read, he wanted us to sit side by side, practically on top of each other. Lots of hugging. Lots of closeness. I learned more about him. He was right out there about the passages he wanted me to take out. In our times together, he referred to me three times as his mother (which he had never before done in my presence). "I have two moms," he told me. "You and her. She and you." A claiming session that brought us toward each other. Happily so.

Through offering editorial suggestions, Adrian and Thompson share in the production of the book. Other participating parents create a space for their children's input in the work that involves both of them. For example, in advance of her adoption lectures and seminar presentations, Jana Wolff discusses the content with her son Ari and his birth mother. Also, Francis Wardle, as discussed in the next chapter, is assisted in the operation of his website on biracial children by his own children, who also frequently co-author essays with him.<sup>221</sup>

After Thompson finished writing *Mothering without a Compass*, she searched for publishers. She notes,

Well, I finished *Mothering without a Compass* by then. So I was sitting on it and I tried to get a literary agent and sent it out to three literary agents, all of whom creamed it. And I just couldn't take it. I just felt—so I thought maybe if I go the academic route and you know put it along side *A Promise and a Way of Life* I would have a better chance of getting it published.

Thompson did place her two books together and once again she turned to the University of Minnesota press, which has published all but one of her five books. When asked why she did not consider a trade press or consider the adoption literature route, Thompson explains,

Well, you know, the trade off of that—I mean there's a lot of different things about an academic press. One is that an academic press doesn't tend to do memoirs, books without footnotes, right. The University of Minnesota tends to be on the left side of academic presses. You know I got lucky as well. I mean this was another way I had a gift come to me and that Doug Armato, who is the director of the University of Minnesota Press, when he heard that I had *A Promise and a Way of Life*, I had never worked with him before, but he says, "What do you need?" And I work the best one-on-

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<sup>221</sup> Thompson, *Mothering without a Compass*, 164-165.

one with people, so I said what I need is to have a conversation with you face-to-face. So he flew to Boston so we could go have a meal together.

Thompson appreciates the support she received from her publisher, whom she felt was quite committed to her and her work.<sup>222</sup>

Asked to discuss whom her intended audience for the book was, Thompson replies, “I don't know. I'm still not sure who's reading it. I don't know. I'd love to know.” Unlike other participating parents who wrote for specific audiences, Thompson does not claim to write for any particular group. Thompson discusses her social location and the content of her book, stating,

I think those are some real controversial issues in that book. I think they're not a lot of lesbians writing about cross-race stuff. There's, you know it's like Lambda has never included any of my books in any of their poet—you know they have the prizes every year. I don't think any of the books that I have written have ever been considered for any of the prizes that I know of, because they don't read as primarily—you know what happens is how do you categorize this book? Is this a lesbian book? Is this a book about race? Is this a book about parenting? It's, you know, *A Promise in A Way of Life*, there's so many lesbians in that book. It's like crawling with lesbians, but did that get read as a lesbian text?

Thompson's book, like her life narrative, involves multiple cultural traditions. The experience Thompson shares defies traditional norms of parenting. Race, sexuality, age, and adoption factor in Thompson's narrative, making it a story that is not easily categorized. In her reflective questions regarding how to categorize her book, Thompson mentions the Lambda Literary Foundation's Lambda Literary Awards. For the past seventeen years, the Foundation has presented yearly awards honoring the best works in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender literature. It is unclear how books are selected to receive honor from this Foundation and why Thompson's works have not garnered recognition from this group. Perhaps Thompson's

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<sup>222</sup> Thompson, interview by author, 21 October 2003; and Ibid. Besides *Mothering without a Compass* and *A Promise and a Way of Life*, Thompson also published *A Hunger So Wide and So Deep: American Women Speak Out on Eating Problems* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), and co-edited with Sangeeta Tyagi, *Beyond a Dream Deferred: Multicultural Education and the Politics of Excellence* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), and the previously-cited, *Names We Call Home: Autobiography on Racial Identity*.

simultaneous focus on race—multiracial feminism, whiteness, transracial parenting, women of color with eating problems—and sexual orientation does not appeal to some.<sup>223</sup>

In *Mothering without a Compass*, for example, Thompson discusses the nexus of racism and homophobia. She writes about how Adrian’s learning about gay and lesbians helped him to talk about race and racism. She offers, “It was when he asked me about examples of heterosexism that he first offered his own feelings about racism.” Thompson explains the connection,

In my college classes, I teach about the power of bridge work—how knowing about one oppression can, in some situations, lead people to want to learn about other oppressions. But to see Adrian reach toward his knowledge of racism to let me know that he understood heterosexism, to see that his outrage when I told him about gay-bashing could help him see why I would feel outrage about racist violence, convinced me like never before of the power of bridge work as a translator of experience.

Thompson professional knowledge assists her understanding of the experiences she encounters with her son. The example of Adrian’s bridge work between heterosexism and racism has a profound impact upon Thompson.<sup>224</sup>

When asked to identify herself through markers in contemporary U.S. society, Thompson responds, “Well, definitely as a lesbian. I guess a seeker of justice, trying to be a writer . . . I’ve been a mother. . . I’m a teacher. In fact, I definitely feel like I’ve been called to teach.” Asked to further distinguish the “seeker of justice” piece, Thompson explicates,

Yeah, and the reason I guess I would say it that way is that I think especially lately I am very hesitant to—I see in a way I never saw before the depths of patriarchy and racism together and so I guess I am part of that contingent of lesbian feminists who, you know I decided to write a book on the history of anti-racism, so I was privileging race and in most everything I’ve done I’ve privileged race because of how often it falls out of the frame of reference with white people. But I’m really against injustice on a lot of different levels. And the reason I said “seeker of justice” is that there’s something about the “anti-” that doesn’t fit with the Buddhist-self in me, which is about affirmation. What are we working for? And the seeker of justice piece is also I’m all caught up in it.

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<sup>223</sup> See Lambda Literary Foundation. 23 July 2005. <<http://www.lambdalit.org/>>.

<sup>224</sup> Thompson, *Mothering without a Compass*, 129-130; and *Ibid.*, 130.



Although Thompson does not mention “athlete” or “intellectual” in her list of markers, these traditions come up many times in conversation and her writings. Notably, she does not mention “white” or reference race.<sup>225</sup>

Elsewhere Thompson has traced the development of her white identity. Although she parents Adrian across the color line, Thompson contends that her “racial identity remains constant as a white woman but my consciousness was reshaped every single day.” She explains that she had been border crossing long before parenting. She gives examples of being in interracial lesbian relationships—where she received a lot of education and consciousness-raising—teaching African American Studies classes, teaching African American students, and spending a year at Princeton University [as a postdoctoral fellow in African American Studies] with Cornel West and Toni Morrison, offering, “you know, it’s like if you’re in a context where you’re one of the only white people and you keep listening over and over it becomes—mean it’s the way I see the world.” “The way I see the world” remark signals Thompson’s consciousness being “reshaped.” Thompson also mentions not feeling safe and not wanting to be in all-white settings.<sup>226</sup>

As for other contemporary issues involving race, Thompson believes in affirmative action and explains reparation “is to hold ourselves accountable.” She thinks that the multiracial movement is important in recognizing people’s multiple identities, yet she is concerned about the government’s use of the numbers. When asked about transracial adoption she remarks,

Transracial adoption: I think it’s damaging when white parents attempt to adopt kids of color and then they continue to live white lives where they’re asking kids of color to be their emissaries and their educators. I think white people who adopt kids of color already need to have made a lot of steps in their lives . . . So I don’t think it’s okay to adopt kids of color and put them in white suburbs and send them to white schools. But I don’t think it’s okay for white people to live in white suburbs and send their kids to—I don’t think it’s okay for them to send their white kids to white schools.

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<sup>225</sup> Thompson, interview by author, 21 October 2003; and Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.; and Ibid. For Thompson’s tracing of her white identity development see Thompson, “Time Traveling and Border Crossing,” and Thompson, “Subverting Racism from Within: Linking White Identity to Activism,” in *Privilege: A Reader*, ed. Michael S. Kimmel and Abby L. Ferber (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003): 381-399.

As with her feelings on all-white settings and groups, Thompson is clear in her desire to see everyone engaged with multicultural, multiracial living. Through her personal and professional life, Thompson provides an example of what she hopes will reflect the integrated future. As for her mothering, Thompson explains, "This time for me, with Adrian, is a study in non-action. It means knowing that, ultimately, I am not in charge. The law will not decide where Adrian will be. Love is bigger than the law." Thompson ends her story relinquishing the control she earlier attempts to assert in regard to parenting, an ending more in line with her ideals and hopes.<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> Thompson, interview by author, 21 October 2003; *Ibid.*; and Thompson, *Mothering without a Compass*, 162.

## CHAPTER FIVE: HARRINGTON AND WARDLE

This kind of understanding changes everything. Only when I *became* black by proxy—through my son, through my daughter—could I see the racism I had been willing to tolerate. Becoming black, even for a fraction of an instant, created an urgency for justice that I couldn't feel as only a white man, no matter how good-hearted.

Walt Harrington, *Crossings*<sup>228</sup>

But – with all our discussions about raising children – we never argued about how to raise biracial children. We assumed there is no difference between raising White, Black, and biracial children. Maybe we assumed this because all of our academic classes never addressed the issue. Maybe we are naïve. Maybe, at the time (late 1970s) the thinking still was that all children, regardless of culture, race, and ethnicity, have the same needs, and therefore should be raised the same way.

Francis Wardle, *Tomorrow's Children*<sup>229</sup>

Walter “Walt” G. Harrington is a self-described “againer.” He explains, “‘an againer’—as in someone who is by nature predisposed to be against whatever it is that everybody else is for. As in, ‘I’m again’ it.’ Short for ‘I’m against it.’” Harrington’s rebellious status marks his life story and impacts his views when it comes to race and parenting. Early on in our in interviewing, Harrington offers an example of his beliefs, stating, “I don’t know if you dug out that old piece of mine from the *Washington Post* about across the color line. As one of the guys said, I’m the kind of guy who says when I die, bury me face down so the world can kiss my ass goodbye.”<sup>230</sup>

Despite his individualistic thread, Harrington seeks to help his biracial children develop an understanding of their culture and a healthy sense of themselves. Harrington is the author of five books and a former *Washington Post Magazine* writer. He now teaches literary journalism at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana.

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<sup>228</sup> Walt Harrington, *Crossings: A White Man's Journey into Black America* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), 447.

<sup>229</sup> Francis Wardle, *Tomorrow's Children*, (Denver, CO: Center for the Study of Biracial Children, 1999), x.

<sup>230</sup> Walt Harrington, interview by author, 21 February 2004, Champaign, IL, tape recording.

Harrington was born in 1950 about twenty-five miles south of Chicago, IL. He explains that “My father was a milk man, definitely lower mid-class, but he was a teamster, and as the post-War or World War II sort of the elite unionization people took route. He was well paid for a blue collar working class guy, but that certainly in the fifties you were one step from real poor” and that his mother was a homemaker.

Harrington writes about his parent’s class status in a chapter entitled “Skunk Hollow” in his book, *The Everlasting Stream: A True Story of Rabbits, Guns, Friendship, and Family* (2002).

Harrington explains,

My father built our cinder-block house in the years after he returned from fighting the Japanese in World War II. He worked ten hours a day, six days a week at the dairy and built the house in his spare time—nights and Sundays. My folks bought ten acres for seven thousand dollars with a thousand-dollar down payment borrowed through the dairy’s owner. They lived paycheck to paycheck in the land’s dilapidated cottage-four rooms heated by a fat and brown oil-burning stove. The outhouse was out back. They were so poor that about all they ate for the first six months in the country were the chickens my father raised and the eggs they laid.

Harrington provides insight on his class status while growing up. In this chapter, Harrington also reflects on his relationship with his parents.<sup>231</sup>

When asked if he is religious, Harrington answers,

Raised Catholic. My father was an agnostic, but atheist actually, but never talked about it because when Catholic, you know they got married in ‘45 and that was still the days when you signed an agreement to have your children raised in the Church and so my mother was Catholic and we went to church every week and my father dropped us off, disappeared and came back and picked us up. When he had to work on Christmas morning delivering milk, we walked three miles in to make sure we got Christmas service and we walked three miles back home in the cold Chicago weather. So my mother was a serious-minded Catholic. We didn’t go to Catholic school though. We went to public schools and then we did the catechism route.

Religion marks Harrington’s life in unexpected ways. First, one of the two books Harrington ever voluntarily read includes the journals of Pope John Paul.<sup>232</sup>

Second, Harrington offers,

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<sup>231</sup> Walt Harrington, “Skunk Hollow,” *The Everlasting Stream: A True Story of Rabbits, Guns, Friendship, and Family* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2002); and *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>232</sup> Harrington, interview by author, 21 February 2004, Champaign, IL.

I always had a knack for writing. I did have that. In the fourth grade I won the catechism class, you had to write an Easter essay. I was really a knucklehead. In elementary I was barely able to be passed almost. I didn't want to be there. I wanted to be out in the woods. We were in the country and they shipped us into the suburbs to go to school. The kids all seemed more well to do than I was and I didn't do well. But I can remember I turned in this essay, which I had to do, and the teacher who could not pronounce my name. She had some kind of a lisp of something she called me "Water" instead of Walter, which my name wasn't Walter, which wasn't my name—no one called me "Walter"—but she called me Water and she announced it: "Water had won the Easter essay writing contest" and she read my essay to the catechism class. And I still remember the bang up and it was "Father Forgive Them For They Know What They Do" and I thought hmm, this is pretty cool.

Thus began Harrington's writing career. He was editor of his high school's newspaper.<sup>233</sup>

Harrington has two siblings, a sister who is five years older, and, another sister, who is five years younger. Harrington's community lacked racial diversity. He grew up in a "strictly white" community. He cannot "recall ever talking to a black person until [he] was a teenager." During high school in the mid-1960s, Harrington remembers one Jewish male student and one black female student. He explains that during high school, the civil rights movement was occurring and he was aware of it. Harrington recalls,

I was appropriately liberal-minded without having to deal with any of the realities of what that meant and my folks were quiet about that, other than that you should treat everybody right. We never had racism voiced in our house, but I knew my parents were conservative. I don't know how I knew; I just knew that they were conservative on that issue [race].

Unlike his parents, Harrington explains that his grandmother was a racist.<sup>234</sup>

Although she did not use racial slurs, Harrington recalls her racial stories,

Big Grandma said she'd seen "coloreds" everywhere. She said that while standing in line at the Walgreen's she'd heard one colored lady tell another colored lady, "I *always* carries a razor in *my* purse." Big Grandma said this with dramatic inflection, a shiver, and a kind of rage, but I missed her complex meanings.

At the time, Harrington did not fully understand his grandmother's racism or references but her disdain for blacks was clear.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.; Ibid., and Harrington, *Crossings*, 13.

<sup>235</sup> Harrington, *Crossings*, 2.

Harrington's first experiences talking and getting to know black people came during the summer of 1967. He was sixteen. Harrington was asked to and joined an all-black baseball team. Befriending a black teammate humanized black people for Harrington. Yet the race divide and time period inhibited his friendships.

Neither of Harrington's sisters finished college. One went to college for three years and works as a secretary. The other sister went to college for a year and is a homemaker. He distinguishes between his own class status and that of his sisters'. One of Harrington's sisters is married to a tool and die maker for a Ford factory. He sees them as "true member of the elite working class—a tool and die maker for Ford."<sup>236</sup>

In trying to break free of his parent's "blue collar" status, Harrington saw schooling as his opportunity to upward mobility. His parents encouraged him "not to be a bum" and to "make something" of himself. Harrington offers,

I wasn't a particularly serious student, but other than the math and science, I was a very good student and I always enjoyed political science, sociology, history and I went to a college not having a clue of what I was going to do, but knew what I couldn't do because I couldn't do math or science, so then I was going to be a lawyer. Yeah, everybody goes to college are going to be a lawyer like history and social science and so I didn't know what I was going to do and I was not what you would call a serious, serious student, but I enjoyed school and I took it seriously, not because I was so fascinated by knowledge but because of the push of not wanting to be blue collar. There's no doubt about that and I kind of blew into enjoying the intellectual dimension of knowledge, but I wasn't born into it.

After high school, Harrington attended Blackburn College, a small school of five hundred students in Illinois.<sup>237</sup>

There was not a lot of choice in Harrington's college path. He was going to attend college. Any choice came between living at home and attending community college or moving away with a full scholarship to Blackburn. Living away from home appealed to Harrington and it made an easy choice. Harrington states,

I mean literally I grew up in a family where you didn't know there was a difference between community college, Blackburn College and Harvard. You wouldn't have

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<sup>236</sup> Harrington, interview by author, 21 February 2004, Champaign, IL.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

known. I mean if it's college, it's college. You didn't matter where you went to college, you just went to college and I had no understanding what a status distinction was associated with where you went to school. So when they offered me a free ride, I was gone.

Harrington's discussion of college highlights his family's lack of familiarity with higher education, most likely reflecting a class standing. Harrington points at that Blackburn had just started a program to attract black students from Chicago and St. Louis.<sup>238</sup>

Harrington's explains his experiences with race during college, "Until I went away to college in 1968, Pee Wee and his teammates were the only more-than-casual acquaintances I had ever had with black people. In college, I thought I didn't have a racist bone in my body."

Harrington recounts a story of his againer self caused him to clash with the black students in his dormitory. Believing that it was unfair and wanting to go against the masses, Harrington refused to sign a petition for the campus to turn a space on campus into a black students' housing.

Harrington explains, "I'd been tarred as a racist, a reputation I was stuck with for my four years of college." Harrington's independence streak gets him in hot water with campus activists.<sup>239</sup>

In college, Harrington dated white women. There were few black women on campus and even few interracial couples. Harrington's future wife, Karen, was also there at college, but the pair did not know each other. When asked about interracial dating, Harrington remembers,

There was some and my wife was there actually. Karen was there at the time. She was two years younger and we didn't know one another, but she was a babe. She was a babe and I noticed her and there was another girl. I can't remember her name who would sometimes—she was a black girl and she would sometimes show up at like one of our parties and we were all white guys. There were some black guys on the floor that would hang out with us and she would sometimes show up at a party and I had heard she was kind of cute, but I actually just never met anybody where that issue came up at that point in time.

Harrington acknowledges the pressure against interracial coupling. He notes, at that time, "the pressure would have been on any black kid not to date a white kid."<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Harrington, *Crossings*, 14; and Ibid.

<sup>240</sup> Harrington, interview by author, 21 February 2004.

Years later, in 1975, Karen heard Walt giving a radio interview for this political magazine in Springfield, IL. She called and invited him to dinner and they started dating. Harrington mentions his relationship to his sister, stating,

“Oh yeah, you remember Karen Elliott?” I said I dated her a few times and my sister, at the time, went to my mother and said, “Wally’s dating a black girl” and my mother called me all upset about this and I said, “Mom, don’t worry about this. I mean I went out to dinner with her a couple of times. And she said, “this is how these things start.” And she was right.

Harrington’s mother turns out to be a prophet, predicting her son’s union. Walt and Karen married in 1979 and they ended up living in various Pennsylvania cities.<sup>241</sup>

Harrington’s parents objected to his son’s choice to marry a black woman and they refused to attend the wedding. Harrington reflects upon this time. He is careful to note that this is his opinion of what happened but, spotlighting his journalistic-style of thinking, he contends that he is unable to know what his parents’ reasoning was, nor can he really ever objectively discuss his parents’ perspective because of his closeness to the situation. Harrington states,

It’s just as you know when interviewing people you’re close to is one of the hardest things in the world. You don’t have the distance to observe what’s going on there. So much of this is still from—I have to infer it from things. But my belief is that my parents are certainly of their era and they believe that when you marry across the race line that, that meant, because of their era, you disappeared. You had nothing to do with your family anymore. You moved it into the black world. That was it. You were gone because it was virtually a shunning process. And so from their point of view they worked hard, they had sacrificed, they had helped me get through school, they had very little money, but they always did whatever they could to help me and they were really proud of their son. My mother used to make jokes all the time about how long I had been in school and what a terrible student I had been in elementary school and now they couldn’t get me to get out of school. My son is going to be a professor and they were just really proud of this stuff and their kid had done this. And now here I was going to throw it all away and I had been a rebellious kind of kid, obviously, and so they took it as a personal affront. They thought it was like in your face. It was like a rejection of all their sacrifices and everything that they believed in, in terms of mobility really and then you throw the third rail of race in there, too. I think it was more mother than my father, but I’m still not completely sure. But I would occasionally write them a letter and it was three or four years before we had any communication with them and they wouldn’t come to my wedding. My sister came. It wasn’t like . . . they were very nice. “I’m sure Karen is a very nice girl from a very nice family, but this is something we cannot abide by” and I was like, “Nobody tells me what to do!”

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid.



Harrington tries to describe his parents' sense of what their son's participation in an interracial marriage represented to them. Harrington explicates the dedication and pride his parents had invested in him and this is why they strongly objected to his choice of partner, seeing it as failure. Despite his parents' wishes, Harrington's self-proclaimed contrary nature and sense of justice led him to follow his own intentions.<sup>242</sup>

Harrington's response to his parents' rejection of his marriage fits in with his larger againer and self-sustaining beliefs. He proclaims,

You know honestly it was like bury me face down so the world can kiss my ass goodbye, and my parents weren't going to tell me what to do, and it was remarkably self-centered, arrogant kind of outlook on life, but at the same time it was a kind of principle, you know a view of my life, but it was not "plannish" in the sense that I would do what my family and my community, what I would do to stay in their good graces. And so it was not until three or four years later and I sent them a bunch of photos of us at our nice suburban house playing with my son and I had been invited to the White House and had a dinner with the President and I think things like I don't know happened. My father sent me this very wonderful letter just saying this has gone on long enough. And it was just a really wonderful letter and I had actually come to visit them. I had dropped by to visit them. Unexpectedly I just flew to Chicago, rented a car, drove out to the house and knocked on the door and I stayed for a day or two and all I can say is the 900-pound gorilla in the room and nobody talked about what we talked about and I say in *Crossings* that I think I left thinking this is it, this can't ever be, this gulf cannot be bridged. And then like a few days later I get this letter from my father saying this has gone on long enough. You're walking out the door and I should have said something to you and I couldn't bring myself to speak and it just seems that we realize these things until it's too late and it's organized and that's when my mother said to my sister "well, he lives so far away we probably won't see him that often anyway."

Harrington readily admits that his attitude was "self-centered" and "arrogant" but the deeper meaning is his explaining of his reaction as a "kind of principle" or his "view of my life." As he again mentions his reference to the story one of his interviewees told him about the world "kiss[ing] his ass goodbye," Harrington has made it his own mantra. Harrington stood up to his parents and did not speak with them for three or four years. Finally, the family reconnected after Harrington and his father exchanged letters.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.; Notably, Harrington's recounting in the interview this part of his life almost exactly parallels his writing about it years earlier in *Crossings*, signaling how vivid this remains.

Harrington's in-laws, "had a different reaction to our marriage, and they said not a word about race. They remained true to their lifetime belief that race shouldn't matter, that it should never be an excuse or an explanation." In fact, Harrington recalls, "When Karen told her parents, her father's response was, 'you're going to marry that scrawny guy?' I was scrawny then, but he made no comment about race whatsoever." Harrington's wife's family was a military one and Harrington speculates about how this influenced their views of race.<sup>244</sup>

Beyond Harrington's familial rejection, he suggests that he never noticed any racial discrimination against the newly married couple. He admits that because of who he is, he would not have noticed, explaining,

They would have had to walk up to me and say something before I would notice because I didn't give a crap. When you're an againer you just don't care and so that's why I'm saying that kind of attitude of marginality. I was always a person who was marginal. I was not a fan's fan. I was not a joiner. I was always proudly marginal and always a doubting Thomas and always a skeptic. Frankly I think John O'Hara's terms "in my youth I have a large dose of unearned cynicism." That kind of cynicism that smart ass, you know that smart kids have. They haven't lived enough to really deserve to be cynical. They just take it out on as a mantle, and that's kind of what I was like.

Harrington's againer status offers him insulation from others. One wonders how gender, and Harrington's self-conception of it, impacts his ability to claim this independent, loner status. Harrington again explains his life philosophy, which is key to understanding him. Here, Harrington provides a sense of his acceptance and even pride in being marginal and skeptical.<sup>245</sup>

Asked what the descriptors are that Harrington would use to characterize himself, he lists: "Ambitious, tough minded, kind, clear-eyed, self-centered, let's say self-absorbed, curious, curious, curious, curious and that's almost by definition the quality of anybody who's a journalist, thoughtful." Harrington talks about being a journalist and what he has learned from the profession. He discusses how this has forced him to see multiple perspectives. Harrington suggests,

And the whole notion of, I believe almost nothing is 100 percent. I believe in the First Amendment 100 percent and I believe in the electoral vote of the public almost 100

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<sup>244</sup> Harrington, *Crossings*, 21; and Harrington, interview by author, 21 February 2004.

<sup>245</sup> Harrington, interview by author, 21 February 2004.

percent, but on any kind of issue for me it's always now 60-40 or 55-45 or 75-25. You know I'm able to understand why people who oppose legal abortion oppose legal abortion. You know they're not wacko. I disagree with them. I come down the other side of that public policy issue, but they're not crazy. They're not crazy at all. They've got a set of beliefs and values that are perfectly consistent with those people reaching that conclusion and so I have a real problem with folks who demonize their opposition and I think that is a result of some temperament on my part, but I think a lot of it is really the outgrowth of the experience of a lifetime of journalistic inquiry.

Harrington's beliefs in independence what coupled with his journalistic understandings enables him to create a space for people's freedom of viewpoints on various topics. Moreover, Harrington sees all sides of an issue and does not care for extremism.<sup>246</sup>

Part of his desire to understand others' perspectives prompts Harrington, in 1992, to engage in a particular writing project. After being married to a black woman for ten years and fathering two children, Harrington began research for *Crossings: A White Man's Journey into Black America* (1992). In his prologue, the author explains how he was driven to take time off from work and away from his family to travel across the United States interviewing black people. He was driven to take this trip by a racist joke. Although Harrington has previously heard many racist jokes, while listening to this one he has an epiphany: "This idiot's talking about my children!"<sup>247</sup>

This episode occurs while Harrington is at a dental appointment. The scenario causes Harrington to question his own position and wonder what it is like to be black. Prompted by the racist joke and afterthought, Harrington admits he has spent "years of what I believed was a life lived across the color line. Yet only today, at age thirty-nine, have I really felt the intimate intrigues and confusions of race in America. Only today, for the first time, have I crossed the line." The dental appointment prompts Harrington to think critically about race for the first time:

Thank the idiot in the dentist's office. His callousness had pierced my lifetime of distant intellectualizing about race and struck at the place where my hopes for my children reside, struck at my heart and not my head. In that instant, I was touched and humbled, converted. In that instant, I knew in my heart that I didn't know anything about race, that I never had. That I had to start again.

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<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Harrington, *Crossings*, 1.

As a white male, Harrington had never been in the minority and dealt with the repercussions of that status in the U.S.A. Recognizing that his children hold a different racial position than he does causes Harrington to see the relevance of race in his life. Notably, despite his ten-year interracial marriage and birth of two children, it takes another white male's racist joke to trigger Harrington's conversion.<sup>248</sup>

Unlike the intimate family portrait of Lazarre, Wolff, or Thompson, or the hybrid—theory and memoir—work of Reddy, Harrington's *Crossings* book mainly discusses his meetings with black Americans across the country, relaying little about his own family. He does note, however, that his children describe themselves as "tan and bright tan." As he prepares to embark on his research journey, he mentions the irony in his trip: "And I think how strange it is that I'm about to leave this black woman behind so that I might learn more about black America." Harrington consoles himself by remembering that "I'm doing this for myself, my children, and the dentist with his racist jokes."<sup>249</sup>

After completing his extensive year-long trip, Harrington reflects on what he has learned and about his motivations for taking the trip. Harrington recalls his experiences with his father and then thinks about his own parenting and the influences he possesses over his children.

Harrington sums up his newly acquired knowledge:

This kind of understanding changes everything. Only when I *became* black by proxy—through my son, through my daughter—could I see the racism I had been willing to tolerate. Becoming black, even for a fraction of an instant, created an urgency for justice that I couldn't feel as only a white man, no matter how good-hearted.

Harrington's belief that he can become "black by proxy" parallels Lazarre's claim of being a person of color.<sup>250</sup>

He contends that no matter how sympathetic, whites cannot truly understand the position of African-Americans nor the need to change the racism that blacks receive. Harrington declares, "It is absolute proof of our continued racism that no white person in his or her right

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 2; and Ibid., 3.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 1; 4.

mind would yet volunteer to trade places, *become* black, in America today." Harrington, however, does not question how many people of color in their right minds would actually want to trade places and become white. Harrington does not acknowledge the positive aspects of blackness in this equation, a noticeable absence since he speaks fondly of black culture in *Crossings* and *The Everlasting Stream*. He shares, "After my journey, frankly, I'm less frightened of black people, and I downright admire their humor, their worldly-wise skepticism, and their amazing ability to make something out of nothing."<sup>251</sup>

At the end of his book, Harrington informs his readers: "I wasn't a [N]eanderthal on race when I took to the road; a mossback wouldn't have married a black woman in the first place." Harrington's curiosity as a journalist and in general is exhibited in his desire to explore and learn. Harrington believes that the fact that he would marry interracially proves that he knows something about race. Marrying interracially does not necessarily grant an informed perspective on race; rather, it may speak to love or naïveté.<sup>252</sup>

After his journey, Harrington shares, "I have learned this: We white people would be better off if we opened our hearts and our heads, listened more and talked less." Harrington's missive provides an example of a suggestion to ameliorate race relations and cross cultural understanding. Still, his message is idealistic since it ignores the structural issues involved with racism and discrimination. Nonetheless, Harrington's candid discussion with fellow whites is an attempt to counteract the prejudice he witnesses. With his newly acquired knowledge, perhaps Harrington might have confronted his dentist. Harrington ideas address the need for intra-personal as well as inter-personal dialogue and action pertaining to issues of race and race relations.<sup>253</sup>

While being interviewed, Harrington filled in the voids regarding his family in *Crossings*. His children have moved beyond the "tan and bright tan" naming of their racial identity.

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 447.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 447; and Ibid., 445.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 447.

Harrington children are currently both in college. He reports that his twenty-one year-old son considered himself “mixed race” in his teenage years and that he now thinks of himself as “black.” Harrington recounts a story of his son getting in a fight at school and being suspended under a zero-tolerance discipline policy. Harrington talked to the principal to get the situation resolved because his son had been called “nigger,” which instigated the fight.<sup>254</sup>

Harrington explains that his eighteen-year-old daughter is less aware of issues regarding race. Harrington states, “I just think being really light skinned having almost exclusively white friends that she just hasn't been on the front of her mind in the way that it was for my son and I don't think she's burdened by it. In a way I just think that it's not a central part of her identity.” There is a visible difference in skin color and features between Harrington’s children. Harrington notes that his daughter could “pass” for white, possibly influencing her perspective and identity development.<sup>255</sup>

Thinking about Harrington’s experiences with race and his writings, he may fancy himself as an expert. When asked if this is the case, Harrington is quick to answer, “I hope not.” While researching Harrington, I found that he appeared in a video entitled, *Racism Didn't End*. The information with the video stated, “Eight American leaders-of-color discuss their own experiences of racism and the high cost that racism exacts not only on individuals but on organizations and society as a whole.” Other participants appearing in the video include African American civil rights leaders Julian Bond and Mary Frances Berry. I found it fascinating that Harrington was included as a “leader-of-color” and wondered what he thought about his racial transformation.<sup>256</sup>

When asked about it, Harrington responds, “That's just shoddy description, that's all. I bet that's not conscious. I'll bet they just don't know how else to say it or they don't remember

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253 Ibid.

254 Harrington, interview by author, 21 February 2004.

255 Ibid.

256 *Racism Didn't End*, director, Mykola Kulish, producer, Jovida Hill (Buffalo Grove, IL: CorVision Media, 1996, video recording).

that I'm white, whoever wrote the tag lines." Shoddy description may have been a part of it and the "againer" did not want to make much of it, but this description of Harrington as a "leader of color" does point, however symbolically, to the transformation he feels he underwent.<sup>257</sup>

While Harrington sees his children as black, a white parent in a similar situation who would likely disagree with Harrington's categorization is Francis Wardle who is white/European and views his children as biracial. Wardle is the Executive Director of the Center for the Study of Biracial Children and teaches at Red Rocks Community College in Colorado and the University of Phoenix/Colorado Campus. Wardle is married to an African American and Chickasaw Indian. They have four children, three daughters and a son. Wardle has published many articles and two books that look at the topic of multiracial studies: *Tomorrow's Children* (1999) and *Meeting the Needs of Multiethnic and Multiracial Children in Schools*, coauthored with Marta I. Cruz-Janzen (2004).<sup>258</sup>

Wardle founded his Center in 1991. He explains what led him to start the Center,

About when my oldest daughter was four years old, she came back from a little argument she had with a child in an apartment below us who had recently come from Mexico and this little boy had used racial words and said, "you know basically I'm right and you're wrong and besides you're black and I'm not." And my daughter said, "it doesn't make sense he's darker than me." So we realized we've got an issue to deal with. So my wife and I started, as good academics, looking for all the academic information and found absolutely none. This is in 1982 and so we did two things. One is talked about how we were going to raise our kids based on our basic beliefs, based on a few friends we had and one psychiatrist we found when we were in Kansas City, Missouri. And we went against the tide at that time and said, you know there are obviously, we felt obviously a combination of both of our heritages and then we also decided to start speaking out because nobody else was in providing information further down.

So, again, an experience with a child experiencing racism, prompts one of these white parents to an understanding that they will have to learn more about the issues related to raising children of color.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> Harrington, interview by author, 21 February 2004.

<sup>258</sup> Francis Wardle, *Tomorrow's Children*; and Francis Wardle and Marta I. Cruz-Janzen, *Meeting the Needs of Multiethnic and Multiracial Children in Schools* (Boston, MA: Pearson Education, 2004).

<sup>259</sup> Francis Wardle, interview by author, 19 March 2004, telephone, tape recording.

Wardle later discusses a school situation with his son where he encounters a black female assistant principal who wants to expel his son from school. Similar to Sharon Rush's experience, Wardle asks, "How does a white male of a multiracial child deal with a black female who clearly had some agenda about kicking a kid out?" Strikingly parallel to Walt Harrington, Wardle recounts, "The issues were because my son was continually harassed and my son doesn't put up with that. He defends himself and then the Denver public schools if you allowed them to fight, whether you're the victim or not, you're kicked out." Repeatedly, school stands as a place where white parents of multiracial children/black children encounter racism. Schools lack an understanding of the needs of these children, a void that Wardle is trying to fill.<sup>260</sup>

Moreover, Wardle writes that he and his wife argued about how to raise their children, debating child-rearing techniques, since they followed different educational schools of thought. Candidly, Wardle notes in response to his daughter's experience,

But – with all our discussions about raising children – we never argued about how to raise biracial children. We assumed there is no difference between raising White, Black, and biracial children. Maybe we assumed this because all of our academic classes never addressed the issue. Maybe we are naïve. Maybe, at the time (late 1970s) the thinking still was that all children, regardless of culture, race, and ethnicity, have the same needs, and therefore should be raised the same way.

Wardle's story resonates with the naïveté Jane Lazarre's admits before her sons are born regarding the racism that her sons would face. Like the other participating parents, Wardle first searched for information regarding his parental situation. He explains, "So we did what good academics do – we sought out advice from experts; advice on how to raise healthy biracial children. And we found – none!" All the participating parents cite the lack of available sources.<sup>261</sup>

After having two of their children, Wardle and his wife made conscious decision. They decided that

our children would be raised with a combination of knowledge, appreciation and pride in Ruth's background and heritage, and in my background and heritage. They would

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

<sup>261</sup> Wardle, *Tomorrow's Children*, x; and Ibid.



not be raised as all White or all Black; neither were they to be raised as half White and half Black. We were going to raise our children as fully biracial – a new and different identity from a person with a single race identity. Just as a bicycle is a significantly different vehicle from a unicycle, so our children’s identity is a combination of Black heritage and White heritage. Biracial means both; it does not mean half and half.

Wardle offers examples of how he and his wife supported their children in understanding their full heritage, including visiting Wales near Wardle’s childhood home and researching and visiting Ruth’s Chickasaw heritage. He notes, that in turn, “Our children are proud of their great, great grandfather who was one of the first Labor Members of Parliament in England, and another great, great grandfather who was a well-known medicine man.”<sup>262</sup>

Wardle’s approach to raising his children to be fully aware of their multicultural heritage resonates with Maureen Reddy’s efforts to have her children appreciate their Irish heritage or Jane Lazarre’s support of her children’s understanding of their Jewish heritage. Notably, in contrasting experiences, the two mother’s end up raising their children as black, while Wardle raises his children as biracial. The intersection of race, ethnicity, and religion converges with these parents’ choices to pass on cultural traditions to their children.

Instead of applying the traditional “one-drop rule” of identity, or even the “mulatto” as half a black person line of thinking, Wardle believes in allowing his children to assume a fully biracial identity. Another reason he starts the Center is to help institutionalize his efforts. He explains that he had been doing much of Center-like work prior, “people would call and ask me to send articles and call me and want to know my opinions in this and the other and called me for newspapers and even for talk shows.”<sup>263</sup>

Wardle writes about the resistance he and his wife faced,

But in 1982 much of the rest of the country was not ready for this approach, and many still are not. Since the early struggle, the couple have been accused by school principals of “being uptight about your child’s identity,” have been told their children must “select one identity,” even though the school forms explicitly require “an accurate identity,” and have worked ceaselessly with their children to help them understand the blatant and subtle race-specific activities, expectations, and groups in their schools. They also found

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid xi; Ibid., xiii, and Ibid., xiv-xv.

<sup>263</sup> Francis Wardle, interview by author, 19 March 2004.

a variety of ways to expose their children to all sorts of racial, ethnic, national, linguistic, religious, and cultural diversity.

Wardle's efforts do come early in the chronology of the participating parents. A consistent thread in Wardle's narrative deals with resistance and action. He describes wanting to start the Center "before some university did it because I figured they'd screw it up. So I really wanted to get ahead of the curve and start doing it before the university did it." Moreover, he explains that because he speaks of multiracial people in a positive sense, he is often dismissed as a source. Likewise, Wardle recounts a story of how his children were dumped from a television interview because they did not have any negative experiences to report regarding their multiracial heritage.<sup>264</sup>

Thus, Wardle is prompted to actively promote accurate and positive information on biracial and multiracial people, specifically children. According to its website,

The center for the Study of Bi-racial Children produces and disseminates materials for and about interracial families and biracial children. The Center provides advocacy, training and consulting. Its primary mission is to advocate for the rights of interracial families, biracial children, and multiracial people. We believe this population has unique needs and challenges not addressed by society's institutions.

Wardle's focus on children comes from his own educational background. Wardle has a bachelor's in Art Education from the Pennsylvania State University, a master's from the University of Wisconsin in cultural foundations in Education, and a Ph.D. from the University of Kansas in Curriculum and Instruction in Education with a focus on human development and family life, "really child psychology, and then I specialize in early childhood."<sup>265</sup>

Wardle explains he was "born on Bromdon Farm, Bridgenorth, Shropshire, England, April 24, 1947, the second child of Derek and Madge Wardle." Wardle has five siblings, three

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<sup>264</sup> Wardle and Cruz-Janzen, *Meeting the Needs of Multiethnic and Multiracial Children in Schools*, 8; Francis Wardle, "An Interview with Francis Wardle, Ph.D., Executive Director of the Center for the Study of Biracial Children," by Charles Byrd, *Interracial Voice* (February/March 1994), 17 January 2004 <<http://www.webcom.com/~intvoice/interv7.html>>, pg. 2. Wardle has explained that his children did indeed encounter negative racial experiences, at school e.g., but he does not address this discrepancy.

<sup>265</sup> For the *Center for the Study of Biracial Children*, see <<http://www.csbccncfamily.com/>>; and Wardle, interview by author, 19 March 2004.

sisters and two brothers. One of his siblings has a master's degree. The others have their bachelor's. When asked about his community and the class level of his family of origin, Wardle answers, "This is a difficult question to answer. While my parents were from middle class families and both had college degrees, in education, we belonged to a religious community and were extremely poor - so poor my brother and I lived in what used to be a hen house for a time!" Wardle's religious community was "the Bruderhof, or Society of Brothers, an Anabaptist group with the same historical roots as the Hutterites, Amish and German Baptists." He writes, "Francis, however, was raised in a radical Anabaptist faith, whose historical ties come out of an opposition to both Catholicism and the Lutheran reformation. His faith believed very strongly in adult baptism."<sup>266</sup>

Wardle and his family came to the U.S. when Wardle was sixteen. When asked if his family was involved with the community in the U.S., he answers,

Well, it was the same community. What happened it came out of Germany after the First World War and eventually then there were communities in German and England. Hitler kicked it out of Germany, as you could expect, but when England declared war on Germany, they declared that they were intern anyone from Germany who was living in England. So most of the community, not my parents, but most of the group went to Paraguay, South America. So at one point there were communities in Germany, England, Paraguay, Uruguay, and the United States and then they decided to consolidate and that's when we came over to this country as part of that consolidation. So we moved simply from one community to the other. They don't view it as moving from country to country.<sup>267</sup>

Wardle explains how his religious upbringing influenced his views on race,

And so I was raised much more with a sense of belonging to this religious community and with a distrust and antipathy for anyone else regardless of their color. So my identity was a member of this group not as a member of a racial group. And I think that's the easiest way to understand it, and as such was an outcast. I mean in the schools and since the schools in England didn't sing "God Save the Queen" and got in trouble for that and when I came over here, didn't stand for the flag and got in trouble for that.

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<sup>266</sup> Francis Wardle, "Re: dissertation interview," Email to the author, 16 March 2004; Ibid.; Ibid; and Wardle and Cruz-Janzen, *Meeting the Needs*, 133.

<sup>267</sup> Wardle, interview by author, 19 March 2004.

Similarities between Harrington's individualistic attitude and Wardle's independent position exist. Both men share this outsider status.<sup>268</sup>

Wardle points to his upbringing when he lists individuals or systems of belief that most influenced his ideas about identity and race and ethnicity. He states,

My background taught me that a person's worth was based on their individual integrity, honesty, and commitment. Because I grew up in a communal society, the ability of the individual to stand up for his beliefs was stressed. This is why I am opposed to group diversity. Gandhi, Martin Luther King, G.B. Shaw, Paul Robeson, Bertrand Russel, both my parents were some of my heroes.

When pressed to explain his opposition to "group diversity" or viewing race as groups of people, Wardle points to his roots,

Well, actually no. It's a very interesting and it's difficult to understand because it is pure Communism in that people who work there do not get paid. You work according to your ability and get paid the same, which is nothing. Women work. They have programs from infancy on up, communal programs, to take care of the kids so the women can work. Technically, you don't own the clothes on your back and if you need something you go to the person in charge and say, you know I need a new pair of shoes and they go take you to the shoe room they have and see if they can find a pair that fit you, and no money changes hands. So it's totally Communistic, however, they also put tremendous focus on the responsibility of the individual to make sure that the community doesn't lose its way or doesn't do things antithetical to its common beliefs. So you even though you live communally, you're expected to be able to stand up to the whole community if the whole community is going in the wrong direction, which is really strange to explain and which is why I'm so critical of these people who say you've got to raise, you know the schools don't work for black kids because they're more communal and all those kinds of things. It doesn't make sense, so but so one of the things that really upsets me about diversity is wherever I see it written it's always we've got to be responsive to the black group and the Hispanic group and the, and I say, wait a minute, no. We have to be responsible to individual black kids but not the group.

Wardle's current belief system is clearly influenced by his early interactions and involvement with the Anabaptist community. It is unclear how Wardle squares the communal dependence of living with his suggestion that individual beliefs were stressed in his community. Nonetheless, Wardle is no longer a practicing Anabaptist. He is now an atheist. Thus, Wardle is fluent with multiple religious and communal traditions. Four of Wardle's siblings still participate in the

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

religious community, the other brother has returned to Great Britain and lives on a farm in Wales.<sup>269</sup>

Wardle explains how he and his wife had religious conflict over whether to baptize their children, as his wife wanted them baptized Catholic. Wardle suggests,

Couples who come from different religious backgrounds must carefully and diligently address the issue, hopefully exploring their differences before they commit to marriage. If one or both parents are no longer active believers, this may help, although deep-seated values are based on our religious upbringing. Further, because extended family support is critical for the interracial and interethnic family, the possibility of losing extended family support because of religious conflicts with in-laws should not be underestimated.

Based on his experiences with religion, Wardle clearly recognizes the importance of religious beliefs within family interactions.<sup>270</sup>

Wardle and his wife, Ruth, met while he was in Kansas City teaching school in either 1974 or 1975. They met during a folk dancing activity. They were subsequently married in 1977. Prior to Ruth, Wardle dated black, Native American, white, and Hispanic women. Asked how he would characterize his interracial experiences while growing up, Wardle makes clear, "I lived in Guatemala for a while, and Taos, New Mexico (Hispanic, white and Native American). My schools in England were all white; my high school in USA was integrated; my college experience (3 degrees) mostly white."<sup>271</sup>

Wardle recounts his family's reaction to his marriage and a follow-up question on whether his family had any problems with him marrying someone outside his race,

No, I don't other than the religion in that I had left the community and that is somewhat problematic. It's not as bad as leaving the Amish community, but clearly your parents would prefer you stayed in the community and then marry somebody from outside the community, but I don't think the race issue was anything beyond that.

He briefly notes that his wife's parents were more upset than his own. His parents were more concerned with Wardle leaving the religious community. He further explains,

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<sup>269</sup> Wardle, "Re: dissertation interview," Email to the author, 16 March 2004; and Wardle, interview by author, 19 March 2004.

<sup>270</sup> Wardle and Cruz-Janzen, *Meeting the Needs*, 133-134

<sup>271</sup> Wardle, "Re: dissertation interview," Email to the author, 16 March 2004.

Because of their religious background and what they preached to me, I felt they had no choice but to embrace my wife. They certainly have been extremely supportive of the family. We moved back to the community for one year, so that my children could experience my culture, and the folks were very supportive during that time.

Asked if his parents were still disappointed that he is no longer in the community, Wardle responds, “two things have happened. One is that I think they have respected my life choices and that my life has been productive and that I think they also have changed somewhat as a community and are less critical of people who are different.”<sup>272</sup>

Notably, Wardle argues that his whiteness has not shifted since the birth of his children nor has it been transformed. Interestingly, Wardle contends that “No, it hasn't, primarily because I never saw myself as white. Since living in the U.S., I have often been reminded that I am British (at least not American); also, because of my background I am different from the typical American person. My interests also go beyond being white.” So Wardle’s perspective is different than the other white author/parents. He rejects the notion of whiteness and therefore rejects his own status as white. He believes that his perspective regarding his whiteness was not changed because of his children. Yet, this does not mean his perspective regarding race was not changed, as exhibited with his example of having to deal with the racism his children were experiencing.<sup>273</sup>

Wardle speculates that his non-American status may influence his perspective. Indeed, Wardle may hold an outsider-insider position when it comes to some aspects of race—outsider because of his non-American status and insider because of his whiteness; however, Wardle argues he is different than the “typical American person. My interests also go beyond being white.” His foreigner status may separate him from some Americans. His comment regarding his interests going beyond being white probably prevails for most Americans. Still, this does not mitigate racism nor does erase the white privilege Wardle receives because of his phenotype and social location.

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<sup>272</sup> Wardle, interview by author, 19 March 2004; Wardle, “Re: dissertation interview,” Email to the author, 16 March 2004; and Wardle, interview by author, 19 March 2004.

Wardle notes that he and his wife are not currently involved with many social groups or networks,

We don't have much of a social life, neither of us. Most of my network is through my work, which is both Bedrocks Community College and University of Phoenix. I also do some consulting around playgrounds, Head Start, those kinds of things and occasionally do things with interracial groups here. Those are I'm going to do some training on adults and I think next month on multi-racial issues. And my wife is both a teacher and a family therapist.

Wardle describes the composition of the current community where he lives in Denver, Colorado, "Our current neighborhood is fairly white, but there are some black families in it. My family, of course, is integrated." He further details, "Denver is very multiracial - Hispanic, Ethiopian, African American, and many mixed families. Our part of the community is fairly white, but with some black families."<sup>274</sup>

Wardle was at the forefront of the multiracial movement, particularly with his activities in the 1980s, yet he argues, "I made some decisions not to get politically involved. I felt my contribution was better in terms of, you know family and children's issues." Currently, Wardle is involved in some international work, especially some cultural exchanges with South American countries. He makes clear, "I teach for the University of Phoenix (a private institution) and Red Rocks Community College, do some consulting, and write college textbooks and articles." Wardle teaches psychology, early childhood growth and development, and curriculum, which will be the focus of an upcoming book. Wardle claims to have published hundreds of articles on the topic of biracial children. His work at his Center influenced his two related books. In 2003, Wardle wrote a textbook entitled *Introduction to Early Childhood Education: A Multidimensional Approach to Child-Centered Care and Learning*. In all of his books, Wardle uses photographs that he takes, including many of his own family. This usage derives both from Wardle's interest in

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<sup>273</sup> Wardle, "Re: dissertation interview," Email to the author, 16 March 2004.

<sup>274</sup> Wardle, interview by author, 19 March 2004; and Wardle, "Re: dissertation interview," Email to the author, 16 March 2004.

photography and for his desire to see more images of multiracial children and families in the media.<sup>275</sup>

Notably, Wardle's two texts on the subject of biracial children, *Tomorrow's Children* (1999) and *Meeting the Needs of Multiethnic and Multiracial Children in Schools* (2004) are hybrids in their own right. In other words, the books are part guidebooks, part theory, and part family autobiography. Wardle's main objective is to provide support and information. Wardle explains his book, "The primary audience for the first book is parents of multiracial children. I felt professionals could also benefit, but it's targeted to parents. The second book is targeted to teachers and other professionals working with children preschool - school, and their families." Many of the same themes Wardle discusses in our interviewing appear in the books, including the anecdote about his four-year-old daughter's experience with race and skin color with their neighbor. Wardle suggests that his book "*Tomorrow's Children* has been positively accepted by parents, and by reviewers in the US and England. It's too early to tell about the other book."<sup>276</sup>

In a large way, Wardle's books are advice books, as he suggests the target audiences are people who interface with multiracial children, specifically parents and educators. Wardle reviews the methodology of *Tomorrow's Children* in his "Introduction," stating,

This book uses our experiences as an interracial family to provide advice, examples and ideas to other interracial families, teachers, and other professionals committed to supporting the healthy development of all children in their programs, including biracial, multiracial and multiethnic children.

Similarly in the first chapter of *Meeting the Needs of Multiethnic and Multiracial Children in Schools*, Wardle states, "The focus of this book is to explore ways schools can meet the needs of the ever-increasing number of multiethnic and multiracial children and their families in our P-12 programs (Preschool through twelfth grade)." Accordingly, when asked what advice he would give to other people parenting within interracial families, he declares, "Read my books!!! There is

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<sup>275</sup> Wardle, interview by author, 19 March 2004; Wardle, "Re: dissertation interview," Email to the author, 16 March 2004; and Francis Wardle, *Introduction to Early Childhood Education: A Multidimensional Approach to Child-Centered Care and Learning* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2003).

<sup>276</sup> Wardle, "Re: dissertation interview," Email to the author, 16 March 2004; and Ibid.



so much, but the main advice is: hold your head up and be proud of what you are doing; teach you children to be proud of their full heritage, starting at preschool, and resist any pressure to side with one race or the other.” Beyond reading his books and viewing his Center’s website, Wardle has thought and ideas regarding related issues.<sup>277</sup>

Wardle, for example, articulates his beliefs on transracial adoption as a “complex issue, but I very much support transracial adoption if there is no suitable family of the same race - and, of course, if the child is biracial, then if there is not interracial couple. By far the most important thing for me is that a child has a secure, responsive, nurturing family, regardless of their race.” Since at least the mid-1990s, Wardle has not affiliated with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) or the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) because of their views on transracial adoption. He believes it is not the business of the state to define people’s race. He points out that Germany and South Africa did this and that “we should not be in the same business.”

When asked about his sense of the future, particularly in terms of race, Wardle responds,

I believe that the census will soon find the entire concept of racial labels obsolete - as Brazil discovered. I think academics and racial groups will try to perpetuate racial politics, but I believe the common person will simply reject the continuation of this approach. It will take time. But I am fairly optimistic, especially for the grass roots. Academics will be the last group "to see the light."

As noted, a consistent thread in Wardle’s narrative deals with resistance and action. He noted wanting to start the Center “before some university did it because I figured they’d screw it up.” This resonates with his comment about academics being the last group to “see the light” and at other times mentioning that “academics are way behind the curve.”<sup>278</sup>

Moreover, Wardle is wary of the way academics operate. He tells a story,

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<sup>277</sup> Wardle, *Tomorrow’s Children*, xi-xii; Wardle and Cruz-Janzen, *Meeting the Needs of Multiethnic and Multiracial Children in Schools*, 1; and Wardle, “Re: dissertation interview,” Email to the author, 16 March 2004.

<sup>278</sup> Wardle, “Re: dissertation interview,” Email to the author, 16 March 2004; and Wardle, interview by author, 19 March 2004; and Wardle, “Re: dissertation interview,” Email to the author, 16 March 2004.

Let me tell you yesterday I was teaching a class, a graduate class, you know through Phoenix. It's on growth and development and we were looking at an article for marriage and family counseling on the model used by many therapists to look at marriage and the article essentially is arguing that the model is obsolete. And I asked the students about initial response to the article before we got into it, and this one student said why in the world do they have to use such big words? And I looked at her and said I have no idea because I write books and I write articles and you don't have to do that.

Wardle is as suspicious of academics as their need to use jargon as he is of the Census and the data collection agencies of the federal government. He declares, "this movement has always been and continues to be led by the grassroots and I think academics have been very, very slow to get on the bandwagon and really understand the fundamentals of the movement," which he sees as acknowledgement and agency: "since when does the government get to decide who we are?"<sup>279</sup>

Another point that upsets Wardle involves language, which he views is connected to other larger themes. He asserts,

I get so upset about people who get hung up on terminology because I don't think that's the issue. The issue is whether we give/allow people to define their lives the way they want to. Secondly, because as a culture we have denied this category group of people and we don't have the correct of knowledge since words come out of knowledge, not the other way around.

Initially when I contacted Wardle regarding interviewing him, I used the term "transracial parenting" in my solicitation. I used this term as I sent chain letters to both birth parents and adoptive parents. The term makes sense for some adoptive parents who adopt across racial lines; however, Wardle caught my error and responded:

I find it strange you use the word transracial for biological children. Since my children are as much my race as my wife's, the term does not make sense to me. But, that's a minor issue (In fact, one of my pet peeves is how many people get hung up with the words that go with interracial families and multiracial children.)

Wardle is true to his word as he questions my error but declares that this is not his main purpose. Further, Wardle clarifies his views on language, remarking, "it really doesn't matter what we call

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<sup>279</sup> Wardle, interview by author, 19 March 2004; Ibid.; and Ibid.

people. It's how we treat them." He also questions the evolution of language and draws a parallel between terminology and multiracial people's existence.<sup>280</sup>

One of the initial reasons I wanted to interview Francis Wardle was because of an interview he did with Charles Byrd and the online resource *Interracial Voice*. It was a lengthy interview published in February/March 1994. Wardle made some pretty strong statements and I wondered about his current views. First, in the interview Wardle claims that when it comes to finding information regarding biracial children and interracial families "99.9% of what's available is wrong." When asked what he thinks now? Wardle does not quantify a specific number again. He does assert, "I would still say that the majority of academic pronouncements is wrong," suggesting that the grassroots arena is more accurate. He does, however, see some positive:

There's been drastic improvement based on one thing and that is the Internet. The Internet is a simply destroy the gatekeepers and the gatekeepers were publishers and academic editors and journalists and you couldn't get stuff in either place that argued for multiracial identity. And now the Internet, there are none and this is right before *Interracial Voice* got on the Internet. So yeah, I think it's much better largely because it's well totally because of the Internet, not largely totally.

Again, Wardle suggests that academics are not helpful in providing accurate information on multiracial people, neither in terms of publishing, research questions, or academic resources (such as monoracial studies departments). Some would disagree with his granting of credit to grassroots activists. A critique of the grassroots activists efforts in the multiracial movement is that white parents want recognition of their identity and they co-opt multiracial status for selfish reasons.<sup>281</sup>

In the same *Interracial Voice* interview, Wardle claims that the focus on interracial relationships and biracial children is a "fad." He now thinks, that it still is a fad, "To some extent, yeah, and it's partly a fad driven by people like you and it's wonderful that people like you, but people who are multiracial who have looked for information about who they are and they've

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<sup>280</sup> Wardle, interview by author, 19 March 2004; Wardle, "RE: dissertation interview," Email to the author, 27 February 2004; and Wardle, interview by author, 19 March 2004.

<sup>281</sup> Wardle, "An Interview with Francis Wardle," by Charles Byrd, *Interracial Voice* (February/March 1994); Wardle, interview by author, 19 March 2004; and Ibid.

found nothing.” Wardle exhibits his Center’s mission and its work with students, like me, who turn to it/him for information. He estimates that 99% of requests for information from his Center’s website come from multiracial people.<sup>282</sup>

When asked about ballot initiatives against recording race, Francis Wardle returns to his stance of individual rights over group rights,

I think that in one of the things that I try not to get involved in too much is the politics of it because I think that forces sometimes you into a position that is not consistent with the rights of individuals to make their own choices. But I do believe my definition of racism is restricting a person’s freedom of choice based on their race.

Wardle’s notion of individual rights in light of his communal upbringing prompted me to explore in greater detail his thoughts. Comparing his beliefs of independence to Walt Harrington’s ideas, I wanted to understand how Wardle applied his individual rights notion beyond issues of race. Thus, I asked some specific leading questions:

J: You seem to be very clear in terms of the individual rights, so what do you think about something like gay marriage or other groups beyond just race?

F: Well, I think that, I mean one of the things that really upsets my wife is when the gay movement paralleled the same as the interracial movement. She gets furious and I think she has a point in it. I think that for two reasons. One is that all liberation movements need to be looked at individually, but secondly, the interracial movement has got no support from other liberation movements. We have not been supported by any black groups; we haven’t been supported by Hispanic groups; we haven’t been supported by any other liberation the disability groups. So I think there’s a kind of contradiction there. I have some problems with gay marriage simply because I think that marriage is ultimately something that the state decides on and so it’s not a right. It’s what the state wants to support. So I think it is different than interracial marriage.

J: That’s interesting though because most people would fall back on the religious point and you said that you are an atheist.

F: No, I fall back on the state had money and the responsibility of the state is to support things like public education that goes for the state.

J: Okay. So what do you think about school vouchers, then?

F: I’m a hundred percent for school vouchers and I’ve supported school vouchers since 1973.

One of the reasons Wardle supports school voucher’s is because of individual’s rights. I wonder, considering Wardle’s belief in individual rights, how Wardle negotiates families who are

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<sup>282</sup> Wardle, interview by author, 19 March 2004.

interracial but choose to identify their children monoracially. Further, I believe, considering his comments on individual's rights, that Wardle supports multiracial children who choose to identify monoracially, yet how does this influence his thinking?<sup>283</sup>

Wardle sees the multiracial student organizations that have sprung up in the last decade as quite positive. Wardle believes affirmative action is "fine, if it's based on need." Wardle predicts that the Census of 2020 will not have racial categories on it. He is not as familiar with the current efforts of multiracial organizations/support group, such as the AMEA, which he once helped to establish. In his decade-old *Interracial Voice* interview, Wardle suggested that the AMEA support its local branches, stating, "We need to put all the limited energy, effort and money against the enemy. Local groups and other organizations that are trying to eliminate racism and trying to support interracial families are not the enemy." When asked to explain who he is categorizing as the enemy, Wardle asserts, "Anyone who denies individual people the right to identity who they are whether they want to identify as a single race or multiracial." Although Wardle's usage of the term "enemy" may be harsh, in the end, Wardle grants multiracial people the agency to define themselves.<sup>284</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> Wardle, interview by author, 19 March 2004; and *Ibid.*

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*

## CONCLUSION

Each of us is a unique member of the sets of endless groupings that touch us, whether called racial, gender, disability, family, ethnicity, or nationality. Perhaps for strategic purposes we may choose to affiliate along one of a few lines of group membership, but these lines may shift as our strategies and goals change.

Martha Minow, *Not Only for Myself*<sup>285</sup>

In a well-known essay from the mid-1980s, Barbara J. Fields suggests the need for a revision in the understanding of race. She argues against race as a biological fact by presenting an example of the bizarre way race works, especially when it involves parents and children. The social construction example Fields uses is the "well-known anomaly of American racial convention that considers a white woman capable of giving birth to a black child but denies that a black woman can give birth to a white child." Fields' example demonstrates the problematic definition of biological race, and presents the mother-child relationship as a valid vantage point from which to understand race.<sup>286</sup>

Within this dissertation, white author/parents of biracial or black children explain how their viewpoint has shifted. Some of these parents claim specifically to no longer be white—some now claim to be people of color. Historically, some African Americans with white heritage have attempted to gain recognition of this whiteness for social, political, and economic reasons. For example, Homer A. Plessy, who was one-eighth black and seven-eighths white, an "octoroon," from the "separate but equal" *Plessy v. Ferguson* 1896 Supreme Court case, fought to have his 7/8ths whiteness recognized in his identity so that he could ride the "white only" train car. Plessy's request was refused. A more recent example comes from Eldrick "Tiger" Woods. Woods requested the recognition of his multiracial identity through his usage of the term "Cablinasian" to describe his mixed-race ancestry. Many fans and members of the media ridiculed Woods for not monoracially-identifying. It is noteworthy to compare the white parents'

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<sup>285</sup> Martha Minow, *Not Only for Myself: Identity, Politics, and the Law* (New York, NY: The New Press, 1997), 39.

<sup>286</sup> Barbara J. Fields, "Ideology and Race in American History," in *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, ed. J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson (New York: Oxford UP, 1982), 149.

ability to claim racial transformation with the ability of these mixed-race people to change the understanding of their racial standing.<sup>287</sup>

The historical value of whiteness may easily be traced back to the *Plessy* case, and, of course, earlier. In denying Plessy his ability to ride in the train car of his choosing, all but one of the Supreme Court justices held that the reputation of whiteness stood as “property.” The roots of whiteness and its relationship to immigration, assimilation, and class have been further explored in many recent books, including the work of Grace Elizabeth Hale, Noel Ignatiev, David Roediger, Matthew Frye Jacobson, and Theodore Allen. Additionally, the value of whiteness is seen in John Howard Griffin’s southern journey as a white man disguised in blackface in 1959 and recently by Andrew Hacker’s college classroom experiment. Hacker questions his students, asking them to name the amount of money their whiteness is worth to them. Hacker’s students respond that the changing of their race from white to black requires millions of compensatory dollars for living as a black person in the United States. Hacker explains, “And this calculation conveys, as well as anything, the value that white people place on their own skins. Indeed, to be white is to possess a gift whose value can be appreciated only after it has been taken away.” This exercise spotlights the continued worth of whiteness.<sup>288</sup>

To obtain the advantage of being perceived as white in society, some African Americans “passed” as white to advance themselves financially and publicly. Sometimes, those blacks who were phenotypically white crossed the color line for short periods, like the workday or a vacation. Others permanently *became* white. From the flawed logic of the one-drop rule to the wide-range of physical features, African Americans have been broadly defined and

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<sup>287</sup> Oprah Winfrey, “Tiger Woods,” *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, April 24, 1997.

<sup>288</sup> *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896); Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995); David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991); Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working-Class History* (London: Verso, 1994); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998); Theodore Allen, *The Invention of the White Race: Volume One: Racial Oppression and Social Control* (London: Verso, 1994); John Howard Griffin, *Black Like Me* (New York, NY: New

characterized. Within the black community and (other communities of color such as Latinos) “colorism” is an issue. Colorism, also known as “the color complex” and “colorstruck,” emphasizes a hierarchy with light skin and whiteness and European-features as superior in terms of standards of beauty and physicality. Whiteness is, and has been, valued within U.S. society, including within black communities. Both passing and colorism highlight the historical and contemporary value of whiteness and white privilege. With the significance placed on whiteness, it is difficult to understand why one would reject his or her white identity. Nevertheless, this dissertation has shown that it is parental identification that influences the group of white writers to shift their whiteness and belief systems.<sup>289</sup>

In “Chapter One: Historical Grounding,” I introduced my topic through providing a few examples of the legal and social regulation of race and sex in U.S. history, such as anti-miscegenation laws and the “one-drop rule” to “passing” and the “what about the children?” question. Offering a glimpse into the beginnings of legal segregation of the races, I reviewed the 1662 statute based on the principle *partus sequitur ventrem*. Reviewing the experiences of a few interracial families, I contextualized the history of white parents of biracial or black children. In “Chapter Two: Contemporary Location,” I provided contemporary examples that relate to my study. I discussed the two main academic fields where I locate my work: whiteness studies and multiracial studies. Multiracial studies is a work in progress and I contributed to thinking about its parameters. The reviewed author/parents’ position as “border crossers” and originators of a new literary genre is examined. I explained my research methods, including my process and

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American Library, 2003 [1960]); and Andrew Hacker, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995, New and Rev. Ed.), 36.

<sup>289</sup> For African American racial identity see, William E. Cross, Jr., *Shades of Black: Diversity in African-American Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1991); Janet E. Helms, *Black and White Racial Identity* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, 1993). For colorism see, Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall, *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* (New York: Doubleday, 1992); and Marita Golden, *Don't Play in the Sun: One Woman's Journey Through the Color Complex* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2004). For passing see, Elaine K. Ginsberg, ed. *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1996); Shirlee Taylor Haizlip, “Passing,” *American Heritage* 46.1 (February/March 1995): 46-54; Adrian Piper, “Passing for White, Passing for Black,” *Transition* 58 (1993): 4-32; and Paul Spickard, “Issues and



theoretical framework. In ethnographic/life history fashion, I self-reflect, considering my social location as it relates to my informants and my larger subject position in society. Finally, I reviewed the literature written on my topic.

“Chapter Three: Reddy and Lazarre,” “Chapter Four: Rush, Wolff, and Thompson,” and “Chapter Five: Harrington and Wardle” focus on my informants’ lives. I discuss biographical information, key incidents, and viewpoints. I use long block quotations to provide voice to my informants’ experiences and understandings. Comparative analysis is utilized throughout my dissertation.

To explore the parenting experiences of white parents, I decided to select a small sample of individuals and to explore their experiences and conceptualizations in detail. I located individuals who had written essays and books about their experiences and I conducted in-depth life history interviews with them. The written texts are very useful since they provide detailed, well thought out reflections on the previous life of the individual, the parenting experience, and the transformations. My interviews allowed me to supplement this information, to learn more about aspects they did not cover, to bring the story up-to-date; for example, to hear about incidents that have taken place as the children grew up, and to ask more about their transformations. As I hope I have demonstrated, the combination of text and interviews offers rich material about these individuals and their experiences.

As I stated in the beginning of this dissertation, I am not claiming, of course, that these parents under review are representative of all white parents of biracial and black children. These parents are highly educated, many with advanced degrees. Some of them are fluent with poverty, however, they are all now middle or upper middle class. These parents have all spent considerable time thinking about these issues. In fact, they not only thought about their experiences, they also wrote about them. Thus, these parents do not reflect “typical” white parents of biracial or black children.

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Interpretations: Passing is Passé,” in *Mixed Blood: Intermarriage and Ethnic Identity in Twentieth Century America* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

The key experiences for these parents are similar. Marriage to a partner of a different race is a significant experience for the informants who are married interracially. Maureen Reddy's account of the discrimination she faced while dating her future husband is pivotal to her understanding of racism. Although Harrington suggests he does not notice racism while dating his future wife, negative family responses impact his experience. Lazarre moves from naïveté regarding race to understanding its heightened place in society. Francis Wardle deals with his family's response to his dating someone outside of their religious/social living "community."

For the parents who are married to a black partner, Reddy, Lazarre, Harrington, and Wardle, they cite their relationship with their in-laws as transformative. Jane Lazarre, for example, explains that she and her mother-in-law "shared qualities deeper" that "would draw [her mother-in-law] and me together into a friendship as binding as any I have known." Similarly, Walt Harrington writes, "I think of my father-in-law as a friend." The authors recount how traditions related to black culture—such as haircare, music, and the oral tradition—are passed on to them by their in-laws.<sup>290</sup>

Birth of the children stands as another formative event in the parents' shifting. Lazarre, for example, mentions her race changing when she becomes pregnant, "Soon after I married Douglas and became a member of a Black American family, I became pregnant and, in the innocent, exultant power of the first day of a first and wanted pregnancy, I realized that I – my body and self – was no longer exactly white." On the other hand, Wolff includes a lengthy discussion of her son's birth. In contrast to Lazarre, she has a more tempered response to her child's birth,

Because he hadn't come out of me, I was allowed to think what would be unthinkable to a mother who had given birth. I had a horrible option: an escape clause. The concept of returning damaged goods was repugnant to me: What right did I have to demand a perfect child? Here was a living being, perfect in his own way. I didn't love him yet, but I could never walk away from him.

Wolff notes that she wishes "it had been love at first sight. I wish it had been bliss. But I was saddened by the innocence and the importance of this newborn, who had neither a name nor

parents for the time being.” She explains, “I don’t feel much like a mother, and I don’t feel anything like *his* mother.” Wolff chronicles her bond with her son, as her love grows deeper. Though she does not have the same initial connection that Lazarre feels, from the start Wolff’s son’s race is an issue, as people comment on and worry about her son’s skin color as soon as he is born.<sup>291</sup>

The parents discuss discriminatory experiences they either encounter or those that they witness through their children. The knowledge they acquire is key to their understanding of race, and in turn, their own consciousness. Reddy, for example, discusses the experience with the photographer where he wanted to use her son as model because of his looks and light skin color. Harrington discusses his dentist’s racist joke. Wardle talks about his young daughter’s hearing negative racial remarks from her neighbor. Sharon Rush writes about her daughter’s experience with her white track coach holding her daughter back during a race, hoping to advance a white fellow runner. Through recurring nightmares, Becky Thompson sees the residual effects of the racism her son faced at the hands of his white stepfather, who taunted him by calling him a “slave” and beat him.

Each of the parents has had negative experiences interacting with educators and schools in general when it comes to their children. Wardle and Harrington discuss their sons fighting because of racist remarks and then dealing with administrators who were trying to enforce “zero-tolerance” fighting policies. Rush and Thompson discuss tracking and how their children were considered low-achieving because of their race. Notably, school’s consistent role in the narratives of my informant’s highlights the nexus of the individual and the institutional. The parents’ views are impacted by educators lack of understanding of their children’s identities. Interestingly, a few of the parents are influenced by their experiences with educators of color who either a) turn out not to be antiracist allies or b) are unable to effectively counteract institutional racism.

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<sup>290</sup> Lazarre, *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness*, 43; and Harrington, *Crossings*, 7.

<sup>291</sup> Lazarre, *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness*, 2-3; and Wolff, *Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother*, 71; and *Ibid.*, 78.

Physical appearances are key to the parents' experiences with race and their understanding of race and racism. Likewise, historical tropes or characterizations of black and mixed-race people impact the parents' consciousness. For example, Reddy notes that the photographer focused on her son's looks. Although she does not use this terminology, the photographer saw her son as "exotic." From "jezebels" to "octoroon balls" to current descriptions of biracial popular entertainment figures like Mariah Carey or Halle Berry mixed-race people have been characterized as exotic, and sometimes erotic, and therefore desirable under this framework because of their physicality. At least one parent worries her daughter will be seen through the lens applied to "exotic" mixed-race beauties. Whether it is in contrast to their own looks or as a way of painting a portrait of their children, discussing of skin color and physical features are regularly mentioned in the parents' narratives.<sup>292</sup>

Besides the exotic mixed-race beauty, another stereotype of black men appears in the informants' accounts. Wardle and Harrington allude to their son's facing punishment in school because of fighting. Their stories share a background of black men's violence and uncontrolled behavior, witnessed in U.S. popular culture, and sometimes referred to as the "black buck." Moreover, a few of the informants discuss fear of their sons being seen as criminal because of their race. Reddy vividly captures the thread that runs through this aspect of the accounts. She recalls worrying about her nine-year-old son playing in the neighborhood:

You know that you have waited too long to warn him about this danger, and about others that are real and present now that he resembles an adolescent. He has to be told to keep his hands out of his pockets when he is in stores, for instance, lest he be seen as a shoplifter. He also must learn how to talk to the police who will surely stop him when he is out riding his bike some day soon. You ask your son to feed his pets and to make his bed, hoping the chores will give you enough time to figure out how to explain these facts of life to him without destroying his innocent sense of fun. You never faced such dangers as a child, as so you have no model to follow.

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<sup>292</sup> For discussion of multiracial people and the exotic, see Cynthia Nakashima, "An Invisible Monster: The Creation and Denial of Mixed-Race People in America," in Root, *Racially Mixed People in America*, 162-180. For a discussion of mixed race people, marketing, and beauty, see Ruth La Ferla, "Generation E.A.: Ethnically Ambiguous," *The New York Times*, 28 December 2003, Section 9: 1.

Lazarre notes that her son was “frequently stopped by the police and asked to identify himself though he was doing nothing suspicious or wrong. He was frequently ‘mistaken’ for a mugger, a thief, a troublemaker of some kind.” Wolff reflects on the racism that her son endures and adds, “Since my husband and I cannot protect him, we try to prepare him. At the dinner table, sometimes, we practice what to say.”<sup>293</sup>

Not only are these parents discussing the dangers that their children face in U.S. society based on their race, they are acknowledging their understanding of these dangers and their fear. Interfacing with particular institutions is dangerous for the children of these informants. The parents’ responses to the social locations of their children is seen through Reddy and Wolff’s comments on warning or discussing the appropriate actions their children should take when these events occur. It is also viewed through Thompson’s conflict whether to honor her son’s innocence or to prepare him for the violence and racism he potentially faces. As Reddy suggests, preparing one’s children for the racial discrimination he or she will face is new to the parents and marks an element of this racial shifting.

Experiences from practicing what to say when one faces racism to feeling a deeper pain and sense of anger when encountering racist jokes at the dentist’s office signals shifting in the participating parents’ sense of their identity and in their views of race. Reddy sums up her book, writing,

This book documents my own journey toward an internalized understanding of race—white and black—and racism as the white wife of a black husband and the white mother of black children, challenging along the way both white views of blacks and black views of whites.

Reddy is arguing that her book details the process she underwent, leading her to a more comprehensive understanding of race. Thompson offers a similar comment, writing,

Yet, the five years of living with Ella and being in constant touch with her African American family, the years I have been teaching African American studies and learning from African American scholars and activists, and now seeing race through my own as

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<sup>293</sup> For a discussion of the “buck,” and other black figures, see Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 1994); Reddy, *Crossing the Color Line*, ix; Lazarre, *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness*, 65; and Wolff, *Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother*, 147.

well as Andrea's and Adrian's eyes have made me a different mother than I would have been otherwise. Still white, clearly, but also aware that there are some white, and probably some owning-class, ways of doing things that I don't want to reproduce. I don't want to appropriate African American culture or take for granted the lessons I have learning from African American life.

Thompson notes all the ways she has learned about blackness and race. She pinpoints her mothering as shifting her awareness about race, allowing her to see some ways of acting she wishes to avoid. Reddy, Rush, Thompson, and Wardle systematically discuss race, racism, and white privilege in their books. Other authors discuss some of these aspects.<sup>294</sup>

In reviewing her status, Reddy explains,

It was only when I stopped being white, in some sense, that I began to understand what whiteness means in America. Under South African apartheid, the white partner of a black person was reclassified as "colored": legally, in other words, there was no such thing as a white/black marriage. Although we do not live under apartheid, a de facto reclassification happens here, too, I think: the white partner, in learning what being black in America entails, learns what whiteness means and loses or abandons at least some of that whiteness. Being white—unless you are an out-an-out racist—usually does not include any consciousness of whiteness as a social signifier, as a state with meanings of its own.

Utilizing her academic training, Reddy is able to context her experience with larger global happenings. Reddy's remarks resonate with Harrington's comments. Harrington writes,

This kind of understanding changes everything. Only when I *became* black by proxy—through my son, through my daughter—could I see the racism I had been willing to tolerate. Becoming black, even for a fraction of an instant, created an urgency for justice that I couldn't feel as only a white man, no matter how good-hearted.

Harrington offers the insight he gained through parenting. He argues that there is a difference between "good-hearted" whites and the sense of urgency blacks feel towards racism. Similarly,

Jana Wolff writes,

The assumption of my whiteness bothers me, because I can no longer look at the world with the presumption that things are "right." What I see is the false, white premise upon which standards of goodness and normalcy are based. For me, now, the world is forever askew; something is missing. It has always been missing, but I previously lacked the personal stake that is prerequisite to racial enlightenment. You don't have to search far—from the Candy Land game board, to the roster of teachers at school, or the greeting card section at PayLess—to see that blacks are either missing, misrepresented, or included as if for extra credit.

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<sup>294</sup> Reddy, *Crossing the Color Line*, xii; and Thompson, *Mothering without a Compass*, 79.

Although they describe this transformation using different terminology, Reddy calls “it learning what being black in American entails,” Harrington names it as a “king of understanding,” and Wolff discusses how she “look[s] at the world,” each of these three authors speaks of a consciousness that has shifted. Reddy’s comment about being white not including an understanding of whiteness’ significance resonates with Wolff’s observing of most whites as “unknowingly supremacist.” This is important to note since it suggests the level of knowledge and development they believe white people have on issues of race.<sup>295</sup>

Reddy calls her book a “record of my own coming to racial consciousness” and Lazzarre writes about a “series of coming-of-age experiences related to race consciousness.” The shift in racial consciousness prompts these parents to write about their experiences. They are documenting their experiences to “knowing” about race, tracing their steps toward “getting it,” or at least seeing the insider’s knowledge that their children possess.<sup>296</sup>

As noted with each informant, they write their books for different audiences. They discuss race with their families. They challenge people in various arenas: school, the athletic field, and the grocery store, for example. Some of them teach about race or African American literature, or even theorize about different forms of racism, yet, they do not consider themselves experts on the black experience or on race. In fact, a few of the informants talk about still learning. One wonders if they consider themselves experts in their academic fields—sociology, literature, and journalism? Is it the experiential component of race that does not allow them, as white people, to feel comfortable claiming an authoritative position? How would this relate to feminism, particularly for those who teach Women’s studies?

The shift in racial awareness causes the parents to reconsider their racial status. Almost all of them create terms to rename their experience, Reddy talks about being a bridge between the races, Harrington discusses being black-by-proxy, Rush claims to be neither white nor black, and

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<sup>295</sup> Reddy, *Crossing the Color Line*, 21; Harrington, *Crossings*, 447; Wolff, *Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother*, 142-143; and *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>296</sup> Reddy, *Crossing the Color Line*, 16; and Lazzarre, *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness*, 41.

Lazarre argues she is a person of color now, “some color with no precise name.” The parents do not readily have the language to easily discuss their transformations. In his book, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), Paul Gilroy provides some background on the situation that the parents face. Gilroy writes,

The reflexive cultures and consciousness of the European settlers and those of the Africans they enslaved, the “Indians” they slaughtered, and the Asians they indentured were not, even in situations of the most extreme brutality, sealed off hermetically from each other, then so be it. This seems as though it ought to be an obvious and self-evident observation, but its stark character has been systematically obscured by commentators from all sides of political opinion. Regardless of their affiliation to the right, left, or centre, groups have fallen back on the idea of cultural nationalism, on the overintegrated conceptions of culture which present immutable, ethnic differences as an absolute break in the histories and experiences of “black” and “white” people. Against this choice stands another, more difficult option: the theorisation of creolisation, métissage, mestizaje, and hybridity. From the viewpoint of ethnic absolutism, this would be a litany of pollution and impurity. These terms are rather unsatisfactory ways of naming the process of cultural mutation and restless (dis)continuity that exceed racial discourse and avoid capture by its agents.

Gilroy critiques the need to view concepts in binaries. He points to the reciprocity of the sharing of cultures that derives from the interaction of ethnic groups. He also highlights the lack of language available to name racial mixture and racial transformation.<sup>297</sup>

Language is critical to understanding. Maria Root explains language’s importance, stating, “Our racial vocabulary provides border markers that are rigid reflections upon our history of race relations and racial classification. Without the experience of recognizing race in all its manifestations and shades, we can not shift its meaning, deconstruct it, or combine it.” Root discusses the lack of language to “accommodate” the biracial person. Similarly, there is a lack of language to elucidate the experiences of these racially transformed participating parents. As noted, the parents develop names for themselves. Like Tiger Woods’ experience with developing a term outside of the traditional lexicon of race terms, the parents’ terms might appear suspect. Still, the ability to name one’s self represents power.<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> Lazarre, *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness*, 135; and Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 2.

<sup>298</sup> Root, ed., *The Multiracial Experience*, xxiii;



As an act of reclaiming agency, Root includes the this idea of naming oneself in five of her twelve precepts under her “Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People.” She provides tenets such as, “I have the right to identify myself differently than strangers expect me to identify” and “I have the right to create a vocabulary to communicate about being multiracial.” I have frequently used Root’s “Bill of Rights” in my teaching. Students initially agree that all of the Rights make sense, that everyone should be empowered in these ways; however, after review, people tend to object to one Right in particular: “I have the right to change my identity over my lifetime—and more than once.” The students who have objected voice concern over the idea that people can change their race. These students understood race to be fixed and operate under the notion that people’s race is static for a lifetime. They desire that if multiracial people have a choice of race at all, that they choose early and stay consistent within this context. One wonders how these same students would react to the parents who participated in this dissertation.<sup>299</sup>

Our racial terminology has changed over time. In a *Village Voice* piece from the late 1980s, Trey Ellis discusses the shift in race terms from “black” to “African-American.” He objects to the focus on the shifting of terms for people of African descent when there are larger issues impacting this community, contending,

While blacks (Blacks, Afro-Americans, African-Americans) should be worrying about the daily litany of our worsening, horror-story statistics (infant mortality, college dropout, murder, crack-addiction rates, you name it), up pops this nonissue to sap energy that we cannot spare. This is a topic to take up Sunday afternoon over barbecue, reward for a week of wrestling with real problems.

Ellis argues that he often switches the racial labels that he calls himself and concludes, “When somebody tries to tell me what to call myself in all uses just because they came to some decision at a cocktail party to which I wasn’t even invited, my mama raised me to tell them to kiss my black ass.” In his piece, Ellis correctly points out that there are important issues impacting blacks. Ellis correctly asserts that he should be able to switch his racial labels, yet, even while reviewing the litany of terms that blacks have been called and have named themselves, he underestimates the historical and contemporary role of naming. In contrast to Ellis’s “nonissue” designation of

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid., 7.

racial labeling, Root suggests, “Self-designations are important vehicles for self-empowerment of oppressed people. Labels are powerful comments on how one’s existence is viewed.”<sup>300</sup>

After figuring out the importance of language and naming, I was drawn to an essay by Thompson where she too argues for new language. Thompson writes,

There is much to be gained when white women whose racial identities have undergone major change find ways to recognize and support each other. In part, this will require us to name ourselves in positive terms. The demeaning terms imposed upon us—“wannabe’s” or “whiggers” (white niggers), and accusations that we are “slumming” or “committing racial suicide”—are obviously inappropriate descriptions. And yet, the term “antiracist” doesn’t fully capture this identity or location either. Like the term “race-traitor,” the term “antiracist” says who we are only by what we are against. In addition, many of us have come to our racial politics through an antioppression stance which assumes that racial justice must occur alongside dismantling sexism, poverty, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and other oppressions.

We also need positive terms for white people who see multiple points of view and whose community ties are multiracial and multicultural. We need to talk about what living in this borderland feels like, how we get there, what sustains us, and how we benefit from it.

Thompson is specifically discussing white women who have undergone racial identity change. I would expand this to include men. Her comments fit quite well in describing the participating parents’ position. Thompson places herself and other similar white women in the borderlands. She reviews the terms, “race traitor” and “antiracist” and concludes that they do not fit. France Winddance Twine also connects race traitor with antiracism, offering, “Lazarre and Reddy, like Harriet Beecher Stowe and the abolitionist speechmakers of the nineteenth century, couch their antiracist appeals in the charged language of the family.” Although the precise language is not available, there are historical points of reference and contemporary actions that situate the participating parents’ situations.<sup>301</sup>

Like racial labels, racial terms have power. Racial epithets are akin to fighting words. Within the last twenty years, charges of racism or racially insensitive remarks have consequences. As earlier reviewed in the fictional example from the *Human Stain*, the protagonist professor is

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<sup>300</sup> Trey Ellis, “Remember My Name,” *The Village Voice* 34.24, June 13, 1989: 38; and Root, ed. *The Multiracial Experience*, xxiii.

<sup>301</sup> Thompson, “Time Traveling and Border Crossing,” 105; and Twine, “The White Mother,” 144.

charged with racism when after five-weeks into the semester he questions the whereabouts of two students absent from his class, asking, “Does anyone know these people? Do they exist or are they spooks?” It turns out the two absent students are black and they go to the campus’ administration raising charges against the professor. Within the last decade a few examples from Washington, DC highlight the power of public displays of racism impacting people’s lives. Senator Trent Lott resigned as Republican majority leader after coming under fire for making racially insensitive remarks. Two officials from the administration of Washington, DC’s Mayor Anthony A. Williams resigned after using racially insensitive remarks, including “jungle bunnies” and “niggardly.” In the sports world, Al Campanis, Jimmy “The Greek” Snyder, and Rush Limbaugh have all lost their jobs for “racially offensive statements.” People generally do want to be branded racist thus charges of racism may have real effects today.<sup>302</sup>

As earlier noted, Gish Jen has suggested that certain ethnicities “trump” one another. Similarly, the one-drop rule suggests that having any black ancestry makes one black. Likewise, when Lazarre marries her husband she discusses becoming “a member of a Black American family” and a few of the authors discuss “crossing the color line,” but they point out that this is a one-way street. This notion returns to the Field’s quotation at the beginning of this “Conclusion,” where Field’s explains the illogic of race since white women may give birth to black children but black women may not give birth to white children. The narratives of these white parent/authors capture our inability to define the experiences of people involved with interracial parenting.

Initially, Susan Gubar’s “racechange” presents a venue that might provide space for understanding the transformations these parents exhibit. Under scrutiny, racechange relies on static notions of black or white, the very notion it is critiquing. In other words, “posing” and “passing” assumes that one is moving from one static identity to another static identity. Like

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<sup>302</sup> Roth, *The Human Stain*, 6; Elissa Silverman, “Loose Lips: Howard’s End,” *Washington City Paper*, 7 November 2003: 8; On sports see, Leonard Shapiro and Lise De Moraes, “More Fallout in Limbaugh Affair,” *Washington Post*, 3 October 2003: D1.

notions of the borderlands, racechange needs improvement because it essentializes identity in its current conception.<sup>303</sup>

Utilizing the lessons of intersectional analysis and critical race theory which both encourage making connections, one area to explore for theorizing on these transformations might be sexuality. For example, common themes of transformation and shifting appear in the memoirs of transgender people. Although gender and race are different, there are connections that rely on the body. Queer theory and sexuality may provide insights into language developmental and theoretical notions of identity.

The parents' claims of racial transformation not only question whiteness and white privilege, but they also shed light on blackness and race. By evaluating the parents' ability (or inability) to disconnect themselves from white privilege, the parameters of whiteness and blackness are exhibited. In other words, who determines race and its contours? Defining black and blackness is difficult. In his essay meditating on what constitutes "black culture" David Lionel Smith asks, "Is participation in black culture a biological privilege, or can anybody join? Conversely, is black culture obligatory for black people, and does blackness preclude them from mastering nonblack cultural modes?" Since we do not have fundamental definitions, Smith claims that his questions cannot be answered. Ronald W. Walters and Sarah Willie, however, provide insight to Smith's inquiries.<sup>304</sup>

Reviewing the Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas controversy, Walters contends,

To be Black is to stand in a tradition of culture and to be identified with that culture insofar as one shares its basic tenets with others of that group . . . But to be Black also has a political content which emerges out of the way in which the group has sought to pursue its interest, often in conflict with other groups in society. Perhaps the issue here is what it means to be *politically Black* and to share the goals and methods of the Black mainstream both in their historical importance and in their current application to problems facing the Black community.

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<sup>303</sup> Susan Gubar, *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>304</sup> David Lionel Smith, "What is Black Culture?" in *The House that Race Built*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1997), 180.

Walters' notion of blackness raises the political element of identity. Under his notion, one is not just born black; rather, he or she must adhere to an ideology. Historically, Walter's ideas of unanimity might have been more accurate. With class factors and other groupings at work there are different ways to be "politically black" in the contemporary U.S.A. Moreover, who is determining what constitutes the black mainstream, pollsters? Does not this logic perpetuate the idea of calling for a monolithic black leader(ship)? Walters' definition does not account for political splitting of the community and equates dissent with non-group membership.<sup>305</sup>

Willie is more inclusive in her understandings. In asserting her multiracial identity, Willie argues,

The fact that I look colored and get treated correspondingly is a status that I did not choose. That is the sense in which I have been chosen, against my will. But I also choose Black people—choose to stand on behalf of Black people, with Black people, as a Black person, not half a Black person—and that decision, I want to argue has less to do with my color than with my politics.

Willie distinguishes blackness from phenotype. She explains that one's physical appearance is not a chosen identity. She contends that multiracial people of African descent are not *less* black. Willie's point about blackness and physicality not having to correspond to social mythologies is exhibited in many recent memoirs, including the work of Gregory Howard Williams, Adrian Piper, Judy Scales-Trent, and Toi Derricotte, all of whom are racially ambiguous people with African descent who choose to be publicly and privately black. Like Walters, Willie underscores a political component of blackness.<sup>306</sup>

Willie further explains her notion of blackness, continuing,

I believe that anyone (even if you think you're White) can choose to stand on behalf of Black people, with Black people, as a Black person. This is not encouragement to go out

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<sup>305</sup> Ronald W. Walters, "Clarence Thomas and the Meaning of Blackness," in *Court of Appeal*, ed. Robert Chrisman and Robert L. Allen (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1992), 217-218.

<sup>306</sup> Sarah Willie, "Playing the Devil's Advocate: Defending a Multiracial Identity in Fractured Community," in *Names We Call Home*, 276; Gregory Howard Williams, *Life on the Color Line*; Adrian Piper, "Passing for White, Passing for Black," *Transition: An International Review* 58 (1992): 4-32; Judy Scales-Trent, *Notes of a White Black Woman: Race, Color, Community* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995); and Toi Derricotte, *The Black Notebooks* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997).

and misrepresent oneself or to dis-acknowledge the privilege that one's society or school or company of friends affords one. The good news, however, is that anyone can choose to suffer the consequences and partake of the joys of identifying with Black people or other misrepresented, marginalized, and disenfranchised people.

Willie argues that anyone stand as a black person. As examined in Greg Tate's recent edited volume of essays, *Everything but the Burden: What White People are Taking from Black Culture* (2003), so much of contemporary popular culture, indeed American culture, is impacted or borrowed from black culture. Thus, the "average" person is fluent with some aspects of black culture, even if they are misrepresentations. To address this, Willie is careful to include in her line of reasoning qualifiers of misrepresentation and privilege. Her stance that anyone can stand on behalf of or as a black person centers on the political element of blackness. Walters and Willie's offerings on the definition of blackness raise many questions, including, what their definitions mean to ideas of race, biology, heritage, passing, representations, agency, and politics? If anyone can choose blackness, as Willie suggests, how are questions of authenticity addressed? The white participating parents could stand as black, according to Willie. Yet, what would look like, how would it play itself out?<sup>307</sup>

These definitions of blackness highlight the slippery nature of race. Race in the U.S. is intertwined with other components of identity, including ethnicity and class. Higginbotham, as earlier noted, points to the metalanguage of race, yet its intersectionality aspect also makes it tricky to understand. Martha Minow's quotation that stands as an epigraph to this "Conclusion" pinpoints the shifting nature of identity markers. For strategic purposes, she suggests, people may shift their affiliations as "strategies and goals change." Minow recognizes and addresses the fluidity of identity.<sup>308</sup>

The participating parents are prime examples of people whose goals have changed. Race is now salient to them in ways it was not before parenting. From their shifted location, the

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<sup>307</sup> Willie, "Playing the Devil's Advocate: Defending a Multiracial Identity in Fractured Community," 276; Greg Tate, ed. *Everything but the Burden: What White People are Taking from Black Culture* (New York, NY: Broadway Books, 2003).

<sup>308</sup> Minow, *Not Only for Myself*, 39.

participating parents present their perspectives on race, affirmative action, and the future. The parents are realistic in their outlook of the future in terms of race. In the past, some have professed that interracial marriage and the likely accompanying biracial children are the keys to ending racism. For example, Orlando Patterson argues that integration means intermarriage. Similarly, in the introduction to her book on the life of Philippa Schuyler, *Composition in Black and White: The Life of Philippa Schuyler* (1995), author Kathryn Talalay states that Philippa was “the ‘grand experiment’ of her parents, George and Josephine, who believed that the solution to America’s race problems lay in miscegenation.” Interestingly, in a similar vein without the same intent, white supremacists, like slaveholders, feared that interracial coupling would make races indiscernible and contaminate whiteness. The participating parents do not believe that multiracial children are critical to ending racism. They recognize the new forms of racism that ensue and persist.<sup>309</sup>

Examining their objectives, their viewpoints, and political stances, I argue that the parent/authors are providing a project they would classify as antiracist and progressive. They recognize racism and white privilege and speak out against both. Despite the ideas of race traitors, it is unclear how people extricate themselves from white privilege. It is something one can relinquish? Nonetheless, the parents’ shift is contingent upon parental-identification. What does this say about justice and equality? Is a parenting experience required for antiracist beliefs? I would argue it is not, however, the parenting experience does raise the level of urgency against racism with almost all of these participating parents. The parent’s understandings of blackness is based mostly on what Willie refers to as choosing “to suffer the consequences.” Perhaps this is because the parents spend time detailing discrimination in their books. Their agenda usually centers on documenting the discrimination their children face and how this has enlightened

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<sup>309</sup> Orlando Patterson, *The Ordeal of Integration: Progress and Resentment in America’s “Racial” Crisis* (Washington, DC: Civitas/Counterpoint, 1997), 193-198; Kathryn Talalay, *Composition in Black and White: The Life of Philippa Schuyler* (1995), viii; Looking at the low numbers and history, Patricia J. Williams points out that unions between the races have existed since the beginning of the nation without interracial marriage acting as “the political solution to our racial

them. They do mention positive familial times (like holidays) but it is infrequent that they focus on the ways in which they “partake of the joys of identifying with Black people.”<sup>310</sup>

Throughout this dissertation I noted the audience of the parents’ books. Many of the informants discussed the void in the literature. They searched for information on interracial parenting and found little or nothing, or did not like what they found. They aimed to fill this void and to share their stories. They have contributed to filling this void, offering a variety of approaches and thoughtful analyses. Still, these authors are not without their critics. One critic is Randall Kennedy, who reviews two of the participating parents’ books in an article he writes and later includes in his book *Interracial Intimacies: Sex, Marriage, Identity, and Adoption* (2003).<sup>311</sup>

Kennedy critiques Jana Wolff and Sharon Rush, ending his criticism contending, “It should by now be clear to readers that I strongly disagree with Wolff and Rush on crucial questions of culture, law, politics, and parenting. Nevertheless, I support their right to adopt children regardless of race.” Kennedy’s disagreements are multi-fold. They include, first, his belief that Wolff and Rush exhibit an over-reliance on racism as an explanation for everything. He argues,

For one thing, like many black parents of black children, Wolff and Rush (as far as we can judge from their books) suffer from a surfeit suspicion that causes them to rely overmuch on racism as an explanation for every insult and injury.

Second, referencing their actions as “vigorous self-denigration,” Kennedy questions the confidence of Rush and Wolff to write books about adoptive parenting without challenging the practice of race-matching in adoption-related practices. Third, Kennedy objects to Wolff and Rush’s failure to confront the NABSW’s stance opposing transracial adoption.<sup>312</sup>

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worries,” see Williams, “Big Words, Small Divisions,” *The Nation*, (August 25/September 1, 1997): 9.

<sup>310</sup> Willie, “Playing the Devil’s Advocate: Defending a Multiracial Identity in Fractured Community,” 276.

<sup>311</sup> Randall Kennedy, “State of the Debate; White Parents, Black Children,” *The American Prospect*, 12 August 2002, 32; and Randall Kennedy, *Interracial Intimacies: Sex, Marriage, Identity, and Adoption* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 2003). All references to Kennedy come from his book.

<sup>312</sup> Kennedy, *Interracial Intimacies*, 466; *Ibid.*, 462; and *Ibid.*, 463, 465.



Kennedy applauds the parenting of Rush and Wolff and acknowledges their love for their children. Yet, he condemns the two authors for not showcasing their own stories as successful examples of parenting regardless of race, stating,

Nothing more poignantly reflects the continuing grip of racist superstition on American society than the myopia of Sharon Rush, Jana Wolff, and others who, despite their own fruitful experiences with interracial parenting, have conceded and continue to concede—wrongly—that opponents of the practice are correct in claiming that whites, because of their race, are *necessarily* either inadequate as caretakers of black children or inferior to black parents.

Kennedy reserves his harshest criticism for Rush, who he describes in detail: “Rush in particular has evinced a pathetic inability to criticize any idea emanating from anyone whom she perceives to be authentically black. In her book, there are no bad black people, no unsound decisions by blacks, and no questionable policies advanced by black groups.”<sup>313</sup>

I asked Rush to take the opportunity to respond to Kennedy’s criticism. Rush admits her initial naïveté with the adoption process. She wishes that Kennedy had contacted her to further explore her viewpoints, particularly as they are both law professors. She explains,

It’s okay and he made some comment like he thinks I don’t know that there are any bad black people in the world, and I’m not that naïve. But I do get down a lot on white folks for racism and I get down on myself, especially at the time the book came out because the whole point of this book is not in a narrative way to say, look guys if you have a civil rights lawyer dedicated to this and she doesn’t get it, then the country is in deep trouble, and that’s sort of the point of the book. It isn’t, I’m not in the beating myself up kind of way, but in a way that says more about the problem of white denial perhaps than it does about me. And I don’t even write to people of color. My audience is to whites . . . It was mostly white schoolteachers.

Rush contends that she is sophisticated enough to understand that all black people are not “good.” She explains that differentiating between types of black people was not her purpose and that this would have taken away from her effort, which was to get white people to think critically about race. Moreover, she argues that her intended audience for her book was white people, who she was trying to reach with anecdotes and understandings of her own development, particularly as a fellow white person and as a civil rights lawyer.<sup>314</sup>

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid., 464-465; and Ibid., 465.

<sup>314</sup> Rush, interview by author, 9 December 2003.

Likewise, I asked Wolff for her response to Kennedy. She offers,

I used to be an apologist for transracial adoption. I thought that, for a child, being in a loving, healthy, biological family was the first choice. I thought that being in a loving, healthy, racially matching adoptive family was the second choice. And that being in a loving, healthy, transracial adoptive family was the third choice.

Now I think that transracial adoption offers rewards to the people in them. I know that my husband and I have benefited: we are more enlightened about racial realities and more skilled at communicating the issues. We are more comfortable with people unlike ourselves. My greatest hope is that Ari, too, is better off for the experience. I don't mean better off socio-economically (which he is, because I have used my white privilege to my son's advantage.), but better off by virtue of having lived cross culturally. I have begun to see transracial adoption as a beneficial opportunity for personal growth (you have to figure out where you stand on things) and for enlarging your realm of personal responsibility.

Wolff's response signals a shift in her stance. She no longer apologizes for transracial adoption in the way that she was critiqued for by Kennedy. Yet, she does not take the public positions that Kennedy insists. Instead, Wolff personalizes her experience, precisely what she does in the book, offering her opinions as they relate to her specific situation.<sup>315</sup>

Although Kennedy does not offer his critique on Thompson's book, he would most likely object to some of her thinking, as in many ways it mirrors Rush and Wolff's works. Thompson, for example, explains her beliefs that white women need others when raising black children, writing,

There were things that Adrian could talk about and get support for with African American people he trusted that could not happen with me alone. With the dean of admissions, the counselor, the teacher, and a friend, I had been there, permitted to witness the telling, the lesson. But there is no way a white woman can raise an African American child alone. The politics of race and gender and class reign.

Thompson is careful not to treat black culture as a commodity and to recognize that there are multiple black cultures. Still, Kennedy would likely challenge Thompson's reliance on race-matching in her parenting efforts.<sup>316</sup>

Kennedy raises theoretically sound arguments against the parents' reliance on racial assumptions, yet, in this instance how does theory match with reality? Ideally, adoption would not exist, as everyone who wanted children would be able to have them biologically and those

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<sup>315</sup> Wolff, "Re: questions & phone interview," E-mail to the author, 2 February 2004.

who had children would be able to take care of them. This is not the case and adoption exists in various cultural forms. Kennedy appears to lack an appreciation for the vulnerability in the stories of these adoptive parents. The transracial experience acts to make these parents even more vulnerable than if they had same-race adopted. Kennedy also fails to gauge the purpose of the books and the audiences for whom they were intended. The parents may be somewhat at fault here for not clearly outlining their intent. I respect Kennedy's ability to take a theoretical, idealized stance. I just wonder if he is fully appreciating the power of race and the complexities of adoption.

My research suggests that the author/parents' claims range from political statements to informal ways to connect with their children. It is my hope that the data I collected will: 1) add to the multiracial studies literature; 2) allow a better understanding of the racial borderlands and its border crossers; 3) spotlight key experiences that lead to belief transformations, consciousness-raising, and identity shifting; 4) highlight the simultaneous fluidity and rigidity of U.S. notions of race and racial identity; 5) pinpoint agency in determining race; 6) assist the knowledge of human relations when claims of racial transformation meet social structures and white privilege; and 7) provide tools to develop terminology and language that is more accurate and inclusive when discussing racial and ethnic beings.

Because of their parenting experiences the men and women detailed in this dissertation have undergone systematic belief changes, including shifts in their constructions of race and racial identity. These author and parents have written about their experiences and in most cases developed new untraditional terms to speak of themselves of themselves and their racial identity. This shift reflects the participating parents' vivid engagement with the racism and racial experiences that their children endure. As a result of their parenting, these people feel that they no longer see the racial world from a solely "white" position. Their consciousness has shifted.

"Shifting Whiteness: A Life History Approach to U.S. White Parents of "Biracial" or "Black" Children" adds to the public debate over racial categories, displayed in Census 2000's

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<sup>316</sup> Thompson, *Mothering without a Compass*, 18; and *Ibid.*, 80, 79.

switch in racial designation. The efforts and achievements of the “multiracial movement”—the grassroots protests which led to the census switch and to the recognition on some forms of “multiracial” as a distinct racial grouping—highlight both race’s fallacy and its continued influence. The life stories presented here present individual narratives involving race, which include common themes. Fully understanding the contours of race is a necessary part of deconstructing racism.

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