The Parent as Citizen: Multiracialism in Jane Lazarre’s *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness: Memoir of a White Mother of Black Sons*

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**Abstract**

The term “multiracialism” describes a paradigm shift in U.S. racial discourse at the turn of the twenty-first century, wherein a centuries-old taboo of miscegenation is reinterpreted as new democratizing potential for the nation at large. Expanding insights into the ways in which affirmations of White motherhood in public spheres have been central to the rise of multiracialism, this article investigates Jane Lazarre’s *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness* (1996 / 2016) to highlight the publication of memoirs as one mode of asserting White parental ties to Black children. I argue that memoirists like Lazarre draw on the culturally resonant script of the American Puritan conversion narrative to articulate and valorize White mothering across the color line as a site of intimacy that enables anti-racist politicization: “I am no longer white. […] I am a person of color now” (Lazarre 135). My analysis scrutinizes the terms on which Lazarre mobilizes this experience as a didactic model for a shared connection between citizens across racial divides. In the process, I examine how the color line becomes imagined as the nation’s contemporary frontier and ask if Lazarre’s ambivalent rhetoric of conversion might further relate to her Jewish positionality as well as interracial heterosexuality in larger historical and affective dynamics of U.S. citizenship.

**Keywords:** Black Studies; Critical Mixed Race Studies; Multiracialism; Motherhood; Affective Citizenship

1 Parenting across the Color Line

Familial affiliations across the U.S. color line constituted a criminalized taboo for more than three centuries. By striking down anti-miscegenation laws...
cegenation laws in the 1967 landmark case *Loving v. Virginia*, the Supreme Court may seem to have settled the civil rights question over the legitimacy of heterosexual interracial marriage, bringing an official end to segregation in the American institution of family (Roberts, “*Loving*” 176). Yet, it was only in the 1990s that the broad paradigm shift toward cultural legitimization—commonly referred to as “multiracialism”—unfolded (Ibrahim vii). At the turn of the twenty-first century, the longstanding taboo on Black-White racial mixing was frequently translated into the alleged fulfillment of civil religious mythology that celebrates “America” as a democratizing melting pot. As scholars such as Kim M. Williams and Habiba Ibrahim have demonstrated, this turning point in racial discourse was propelled by cultural negotiations over what kind of parent counts as a productive citizen and particularly revolved around publicly validating White mothering across the color line.

As will be expounded below, White motherhood was central to the formation of multiracial activism, the reform of the U.S. census in the year 2000—which for the first time allowed citizens to identify multiple racial affiliations—and Barack Obama’s first presidential campaign in 2008. In addition to activism, legislation, and broader visibility in representations across various media, discourses of White mothering figured prominently in a plethora of autobiographical works that have emerged starting in the 1990s that seek to authorize interracial familial intimacies by inscribing them with national significance. These works range from bestsellers such as James McBride’s *The Color of Water: A Black Man’s Tribute to His White Mother* (1996) and Obama’s *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (1995 / 2004) to Macky Alston’s documentary *Family Name* (1997), and include lesser-known works like Becky Thompson’s *Mothering without a Compass: White Mother’s Love, Black Son’s Courage* (2000) and self-published texts such as Anthony M. Hynes’s *The Son with Two Moms* (2015). I subsume this array of works under the umbrella term “interracial family memoirs” and approach their cultural work within dynamics of affective citizenship, as a process wherein a personal account is designed to generate national recognition and belonging (Berlant and Prosser).

One strand of this larger phenomenon has been a series of works by White women who use memoir as a practice to seek public recognition as mothers of Black-identified children and as a mode to engage the nation in the form of an anti-racist intervention. As a case study of this activism via memoir, I offer an analysis of Jane Lazarre’s *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness: Memoir of a White Mother of Black Sons* (1996 / 2016), a paradigmatic example of the genre.

My reading of Lazarre’s narrative is prefaced with an overview that, first, sketches the factor of motherhood in the rise of multiracialism and, second, discusses the categories of parenthood as well as memoir with regard to citizenship in order to explain how Lazarre strives to assert her position as a *White Mother of Black Sons* in public spheres. Over the course of this article, I demonstrate how Lazarre employs memoir

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1 A note on racial terminology: this article employs terms such as interracial, cross-racial, or multiracial synonymously.

2 In my research, I employ the term “interracial family memoirs” for a broad range of autobiographical works that revolve around the quest to document and affirm one’s kinship relations across the color line. My use of the term “memoir” takes its cue from the predominant labeling of these works as memoirs in subtitles and selling practices. More importantly, however, it serves to frame these narratives’ explicit emphasis of relationality within a thematic as well as temporal focus in contradistinction to a model of “full-life narratives” (Couser 22; emphasis in original; see also Smith and Watson 127-66).
as a tool to render her interracial attachments visible and legitimate through two main interlinked strategies. On the one hand, she adapts the culturally resonant script of the American Puritan conversion narrative to articulate a transformation toward anti-racist consciousness that is anchored in maternal identification with her sons: “For Adam and Khary [...] I became a black body, not Black, but black in a way [...] I am the carrier, I am the body who carried them, released on a river of blood” (xix-xx; emphasis in original). On the other hand, her individual story of familial identification and transformation is simultaneously put forward as a didactic model for citizens wanting to enter into a sense of national belonging that bridges racial antagonism. My analysis scrutinizes how both strategies capitalize on the cultural authority of White child-centered motherhood in American political life and then moves on to interrogate how Lazarre’s ambivalent secularized conversion rhetoric might further relate to her Jewish positionality as well as interracial heterosexuality in larger historical and affective dynamics of U.S. citizenship.

2 White Motherhood and the Rise of Multiracialism

The formation of multiracial activism, the census reform, and updated melting pot rhetoric in Obama’s first presidential campaign are often framed as milestones in a seemingly general, increasing social embrace of interraciality. But such an account obscures how only specific cross-racial constellations were endowed with cultural respect and national relevance. The figure of the White mother in particular—in terms of activism as well as symbolic representation—loomed large in the emergence of multiracialism. In Mark One or More: Civil Rights in Multiracial America, Williams identifies White, middle-class, heterosexual, biological mothers as primary initiators and leaders of multiracial activist associations. In her analysis, these women indirectly affirmed their public parenthood by demanding the state to revise the census, so that it would create an official relationship between Black children and their own White positionality through a formal reclassification of these children as multiracial (1-38). Proponents of multiracialism frequently framed such activism as an extension of the 1960s civil rights movement (Root xxviii–1; Ibrahim 67; Zack). According to this logic, public acknowledgment of a subject’s multiple racial affiliations was idealized as the mental decolonization from the one-drop rule that seemed to threaten the recognition of White mothering across the color line in post-Loving America. Critics such as Jared Sexton, however, have reframed the frequent rhetorical mobilization of a mother-child dyad in multiracialism as a desexualizing “quarantine” discourse that is actually invested in designtatizing the interracial intimacies between these White women and their Black partners (154).
With regard to Obama’s first presidential campaign, a range of scholars have called attention to its narratives of White maternal association. As Cherrie L. Moraga argues, White motherhood here functioned as a form of symbolic capital that rendered Obama eligible for civic representation among White voters in a way that a Black maternal background could not have (166). Zooming out from the campaign, Ibrahim has dissected how Obama’s national ascent as well as the larger rise of multiracialism and its validation of White motherhood played out against the background of hegemonic discourses around maternal Blackness. From the “Moynihan Report” in 1965 to Losing Isaiah in 1995, Ibrahim identifies a pattern across state policies, literary texts, and films over the course of the second half of the twentieth century that routinely pathologized, surveilled, and disciplined Black women for an alleged familial dysfunctionality that continues to be ascribed through tropes of putative sexual deviance, matriarchy, child neglect, and economic reliance on the state. According to Ibrahim, such pernicious practices and discourses produced a foil against which White women could implicitly come forward in 1990s multiracialism as superior mothers to Black children within a normative ideal of motherhood as White, able-bodied, middle-class, cis-gendered, and heterosexual, but desexualized as well as child-centered (43-80). As I trace in the following section, this particular emergence and consolidation of White motherhood in multiracialism was shored up by larger developments in how parenthood figures in discourses of citizenship in the U.S.-American context.

3 “Domestic Nation”⁴: Discursive Repertoires of Familial Citizenship

Following Lauren Berlant’s definition of American citizenship as “a constellation of rights, laws, obligations, interests, fantasies, and expectations” (“Citizenship” 41), the present section highlights this constellation with regard to parenthood in the national imaginary and emphasizes its affective dimensions in multiracialism’s larger socio-political environment at the end of the twentieth century. Invocations of familial intimacy in discourses of national belonging have always been implicated in shaping boundaries of substantive as well as affective citizenship. Civil religious myths such as the Founding Fathers and ideas of Republican Motherhood, for instance, not only indicate the prominent place of the parent figure in U.S. democratic culture but may also reveal the figure’s raced, gendered, classed, and sexual dimensions, past and present. The metaphorical as well as literal category of parenthood in the United States emerges as a historical prerogative of Whiteness that was denied to African Americans along with formal citizenship in the making of the nation through settler colonialism and enslavement. Significantly, Black people begin to appear in mainstream discourse of familial nationhood as infantilized “domestic others” without parental

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³ The quotation “domestic nation” is taken from the title of Till Werkmeister’s monograph on sentimentalist familial discourse in U.S. novels on 9/11.
affect or parental competencies who are supposedly in need of a guiding White patriarch and a White maternal civilizing influence (Hill Collins 18; Peterson 115). Enslavement as social and civil death systematically disrupted and overwrote Black parental claims through codified White supremacist logics of ownership that furthermore rendered interracial parentage formally void through laws such as partus sequitur ventrem (Spillers 79). Historical residues of the Black parent as non-citizen continue to manifest themselves in myriad ways. Racial profiling in the state’s practices of penalization and incarceration, for instance, particularly undercuts or delimits the custody rights of Black parents and acts in tandem with discourses that demonize Black mothers as a danger to their own children and to national progress (Roberts, Killing 56-150; Ibrahim 43-81). Dominant discourses of White motherhood within national frameworks, by contrast, arise from notions of Republican Motherhood that oppress as well as empower White women within an ideology of “domestic patriotism” (Paul, Myths 224). In this genealogy, they are historically refused formal political office but assume authority in public life within a heteronormative and reproductive task of birthing and forming the ideal future American citizen through domestic commitment (Paul, Myths 221-27; Kaplan 591).

This cultural authority lives on in the formation of a new U.S. political culture that Berlant calls an “intimate public sphere” (Queen 1) and that represents a precondition for the emergence of figures like Lazarre. What has come to the fore since the Reagan era, in Berlant’s view, is a predominant understanding and practice of citizenship as a “condition of social membership” (Queen 5), in which political participation, communication, and representation have placed the validation of one’s personal life center stage in public debates. Berlant reconstructs this shift as an effect of conservative policies since the 1980s by which the state has increasingly reduced social obligations toward its citizens through strategies of economic privatization that have outsourced a number of tasks to a heteronormative institution of family as a naturalized and idealized guarantor of national well-being (Queen 1-25; see also Edelman).

In a conflation of family life with patriotic dedication, political communication among citizens—as well as between citizens and the state—has reoriented itself toward an emphasis on activity in the familial sphere. This preoccupation with the domestic more specifically centers around the trope of the White child as a version of ideal citizenship, as a placeholder for desires and fears around national futurity: “[T]he nation’s value is figured not on behalf of an actually existing and laboring adult, but of a future American” (Berlant, Queen 6). The parent as citizen, then, becomes by extension a crucial figure, an agent who secures the well-being of a future America in a project that is predominantly coded as the reproduction of White heteronormativity.

Berlant describes this new political culture as an “intimate public sphere” (Queen 1) to conceptualize a discursive arena that citizens en-
In the broadest sense, this tradition might even be said to begin with the founding documents of the United States, in which the first-person plural "creates rather than articulates" a national "we" (Barnes 1).

What is now usually edited as Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography was originally published as memoir: Mémoires de la vie privée de Benjamin Franklin (McLennan 29-30). As memoir has become the prevalent term for autobiographical narratives over the last decade in commercial publishing as well as in scholarship, terminology has come full circle, as memoir predates autobiographical storytelling, the expression is predominantly used to designate those self-representations that revolve around another person, a selected aspect of one’s life, or, often, both, in contradistinction to the model of individualist “full-life narratives” (Couser 22; emphasis in original; see also Smith and Watson 127-66). It is this emphasis on relationality that governs the popularity of interracial family memoirs and the larger memoir boom at the turn of the twenty-first century in the reading practices of an intimate public.

As I discuss over the course of this article, citizens like Lazarre come forward in this intimate public sphere not only by overwriting the cultural taboo of interracial heterosexuality with the political currency of child-centered White motherhood but also by using memoir as a way to render interracial familial attachments available for communal national identifications.

4 Memoir as Citizenship Technology

The memoir boom of the past three decades has represented one pivotal platform for the development sketched above. While memoir in common parlance may seem to simply represent the current umbrella term for autobiographical storytelling, the expression is predominantly used to designate those self-representations that revolve around another person, a selected aspect of one’s life, or, often, both, in contradistinction to the model of individualist “full-life narratives” (Couser 22; emphasis in original; see also Smith and Watson 127-66). It is this emphasis on relationality that governs the popularity of interracial family memoirs and the larger memoir boom at the turn of the twenty-first century in the reading practices of an intimate public. But the contemporary memoir boom also taps into a longstanding tradition in which autobiographical discourse has been central to formal as well as emotional citizenship status.

This tradition is conventionally linked to Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography as a text that tethers this particular genre to national identity. Actively solicited as a didactic example for an aspirational early republic (McLennan 42), the text has become a template for narrating one’s life along vectors of discipline, perseverance, self-reliance, and progress as perceived “hallmarks of American citizenship” (Rak, Boom! 162). In this manner, autobiographical narrative has been crucial for various oppressed minority groups in their attempts to lay claim to full legal as well as cultural citizenship; it can be conceptualized as a literary passport, as a document that renders the abstract legal and affective conditions of citizenship into concrete aesthetic form.

Along these lines, memoir has been positioned as a “citizenship technology” (Rak, Boom! 210), as an autobiographical act that generates national belonging by making the self publicly visible via culturally esteemed and recognizable scripts: “[T]he taking up of generic form [becomes] the taking up of a normative norm (a norm to which valorization is attached)” (Berlant and Prosser 181). Memoir has thus been praised as a democratizing medium. Prominent life writing scholar G. Thomas Couser, for instance, claims that “it appears to be open to anybody” (5), and prolific memoir writer Mary Karr promotes the form as
the authentic voice of America’s common people: “You need not be fancy in diction and syntax […] only true. […] Use the proletariat’s blunt, monosyllabic diction to work magic” (52).

Instead of reading this genre as a validation of mythic American egalitarianism, I join Julie Rak in examining the memoir boom as a symptom of anxiety over social connection in an intimate public sphere. Drawing on Berlant’s research, Rak locates the current popularity of memoir as part of the historical legacy of sentimentalism in nineteenth-century women’s culture, which engaged with political conditions through a paradigm of intimate identification with others, particularly via the reception of and exchange over literature (Boom! 182–83). For Rak, the extensive production and exchange of memoirs in the past decades is enmeshed in an intimate public sphere where political questions are primarily negotiated on an emotional level through individualized personal stories of overcoming hardship instead of through public debates about concrete policies.

Interracial family memoirs participate in this phenomenon by employing relational narrative as a technique to inscribe the self into affiliations across the color line that, in turn, are extended into frameworks of national belonging. In this shared effort of putting forward the individual family story as a collective one about the American nation, interracial family memoirs mostly follow a similar narrative formula. First, these memoirs usually begin with a form of prologue as an address to the public in which the autobiographical subject thematizes a struggle for the recognition of interracial kinship. Second, the ensuing main narrative conventionally consists of a quest narrative that spatializes the social obstacle of the color line across which familial affiliations are claimed in a plot shaped by suffering, perseverance, and progress. Third, the ending frequently presents the color line itself as seemingly overcome in constructions of closure and racial transcendence. Time and again, interracial familial intimacy is ultimately declared as an empowering allegory of American nationhood by way of revised melting pot rhetoric and as an ideal unifying model of emotional attachment among American citizens. In the following, I briefly review the cultural work of this overarching formula at the intersection of affective citizenship / interraci-

cality and transition into my case study of Lazarre’s Beyond to lay out the specific manner in which memoirs by White mothers have sought to produce national recognition within this narrative pattern.

The recurring narrative in interracial family memoirs represents an (over)compensatory project. Over the span of several centuries, miscegenation was frequently construed as a threat to the political, social, moral, cultural, and even biological integrity of U.S. nationhood in a hegemonic discourse that Werner Sollors describes as an “American exceptionalism” in the policing of racialized boundaries (Interracialism 12). Interracial family memoirs function as a corrective to such pathologizing ascriptions. They attempt to catapult miscegenation from its histori-
cal status as “un-American” into the very proof of national membership at the turn of the twenty-first century through an authorizing vocabulary of foundational mythology that extends from reconceptualizing the melting pot as a form of post-racial promised land to incorporating values such as upward mobility and progress. Filtering a story of kinship across the color line through hegemonic myths of nationhood in these memoirs often works in tandem with ideas of family as nuclear, biological, heterosexual, and middle class as a form of normalizing strategy and as a politics of sentimentalism (Nyong’o 175). In the intimate public sphere of interracial family memoirs, the struggle for national reconciliation across the color line is usually not understood in terms of developing and implementing a set of structural strategies for social justice. Instead, this endeavor is explicitly launched as a matter of empathy, and, implicitly, as a project of “biopolitical overcoming” (Nyong’o 5), by imagining a naturalized concept of biologicist-heteronormative family as the key conduit through which a better national tomorrow can be imagined. Jane Lazarre’s Beyond (1996 / 2016) exhibits key characteristics of this larger narrative and ideological formula. Furthermore, it is a paradigmatic example of how White women sought recognition as mothers of Black children by mobilizing maternal affect as an ideal motor for anti-racist politicization across the country.

5 Anti-Racist Conversion Narratives as Maternal Activism

In Beyond, Lazarre—a White, Ashkenazi, middle-class American woman and a literature professor—recounts an anti-racist “conversion” (1) experience that evolved in the process of marrying her African American partner (Douglas White) and birthing and raising their sons (Adam and Khary) over the course of the 1980s and early 1990s in New York City. Lazarre’s quest to have her position as a White Mother of Black Sons recognized in public is firmly placed within the larger formula of the interracial family memoir. It begins with a prologue thematizing conflicted belongings, transitions into the main narrative as a “journey across the American color line” (51), and ends in constructions of reunion, reconciliation, and transcendence. But her memoir is also paradigmatic of the subgenre of memoirs by White mothers who predominantly follow different politics than those discussed in the context of multiracial activist organizations.

In this literary vein of activism, the primary concern is not to promote the category of mixed race as a civil right. Instead, these mothers use memoir as a way to affirm their relationship to Black children in public by seeking to display a shared critical positionality on anti-Blackness as a pervasive force in U.S. society. Their memoirs converge in a secularized narrative of conversion that encodes mothering across the color line as a transcendent site of intimacy that enables a radical personal transformation toward anti-racist commitment. It is a transforma-
tion that finds its climax in the following proud claim by Lazarre at the end of her narrative: “I am no longer white. However I may appear to others, I am a person of color now” (135). My analysis unpacks Lazarre’s ambivalent claim in two main steps. First, I contextualize her memoir as an adaptation of the culturally resonant template of the Puritan conversion narrative and reconstruct how it serves as public address and as a mode of inscribing familial as well as communal belonging. Second, I offer a symptomatic reading that identifies her putative conversion into a Person of Color as a residual discourse on citizenship that is tied to historical dimensions of interracial heterosexuality and Jewish ethnoracial identity.

Accounts of conversion in the U.S. context are often studied with regard to constructions of selfhood. Yet, as Patricia Caldwell demonstrates in *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginnings of American Expression*, relating one’s conversion has always also been a practice of affiliation in the public eye. In order to gain membership in New England Puritan congregations in the seventeenth century, applicants were required to tell a convincing autobiographical story of their conversion in front of the prospective congregation. This story usually relied on an established narrative model. At its center stands an extraordinary religious experience that enables the realization as well as confession of past sinfulness and initiates a struggle for reformation that is often articulated through a trope of cumbersome wandering. Usually, the narrative culminates in a stabilizing claim to a new self and a “post-conversion life” (Hindmarsh 344) as part of a spiritual community (Caldwell 163–86; Morgan; Payne). Beyond such performances, written accounts operated on the same formula and were circulated as a didactic tool for engendering religious transformation in others. The Puritan conversion script has seen a wide array of secularized adaptations and can be understood to have evolved into a key interpretative as well as narrative pattern in the U.S.-American cultural archive (Lösch and Paul 173–75). Virginia Lieson Brereton even goes so far as to diagnose an “American addiction” (104) to this narrative pattern, the unabated popularity of which she explains through its logic as an American success story that negotiates myriad transitions from literal and figurative “old worlds” to designated new promised lands (105). From a similar historical perspective, Birgit Däwes further ties the script’s trope of wandering to actual “uncertain spatial orientation” (319) within a project of settler colonialism and frames the conversion narrative as a device that levels anxieties over illegitimate belonging and racial alterity at the “new world” frontier.

Memoirists like Lazarre adapt the conversion narrative as a recognizable as well as valorizing practice in public communication. The script is modified by transposing its traditional function of asserting new religious beliefs and affiliations into a claim to anti-racist consciousness and cross-racial familial belonging. In the process, White maternal memoirists reinvent the rhetoric of the frontier as a color line
challenge at the turn of the twenty-first century and seek to stabilize and authorize their place in a changing landscape of American family: “Displaced somewhere between American Blackness and American whiteness, I stop still on the street and for a moment can’t remember where I am going” (Lazarre 48-49).

In the prologue to her “conversion” (2), Lazarre steps before a congregation of readers in an intimate public sphere, where emotional identification with her as protagonist is put forward as a didactic model for anti-racist emulation through a framework that Lazarre calls, with recourse to the work of Chinua Achebe, “imaginative identification”: “We do not only see; we suffer alongside the hero and are branded with the same mark.’ [...] [O]ur capacity to understand and feel the suffering of another even though we have never experienced that particular suffering ourselves. [...] For me, this has always been the task of autobiographical writing” (xxiii-4; emphasis in original). Lazarre communicates the larger political struggle for anti-racist transformation through an individualized story of motherhood as a “long [...] incremental journey” (xx) from the “terrible and inexcusable ignorance of racism” (xv) to the recognition of its “pervasive reality” (xiv): “I saw my country, its history, and therefore myself differently, a difference that in key ways would change the way I saw everything and therefore the way I lived” (3).

Lazarre begins the main narrative with a section entitled “Color Blind” (21), in which she scrutinizes how her “pre-conversion” life (Hindmarsh 344) had been shaped by race in acknowledged ways. This step is implicitly put forward as a confession as well as a form of atonement through a public display of shame that analogizes her previous unawareness about White privilege and the quotidian degree of racial violence to a “crime” (34): “I am terribly, visibly, shamefully white” (9). As I elaborate below, this emotional struggle from racial unawareness toward anti-racist consciousness is spatialized as geographical disorientation within the trope of the frontier in order to frame anti-racism as a national mission. Finally, Lazarre communicates the completion of her individual “journey across the American color line” (51) by incorporating the lyrics of the conversion hymn “Amazing Grace” as a guiding framework for her transition from “a state of colorblindness” (xx) to anti-racist consciousness: “I once was lost but now I am found, was blind and now I see” (95; emphasis in original).

It is important to note that throughout her recitation of this conversion narrative, Lazarre is speaking to two audiences at once. On the one hand, she aims her narrative at the Black community, hoping to achieve membership by offering a convincing testimony of anti-racist politicization. On the other hand, her account is directed at White readers as a personal manual of political instruction. This doubled dynamic is illustrated by the very title of her memoir, Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness, which takes its cue from the sermon “the ‘Blackness of Blackness’” (21) in Ralph Ellison’s novel Invisible Man. Indirectly, repeated analo-
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See Jane Lazarre’s Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness (Duke UP), Maureen T. Reddy’s Crossing the Color Line (Rutgers UP), Barbara Katz Rothman’s Weaving a Family (Beacon Press), Becky Thompson’s Mothering without a Compass (U of Minnesota P), Sharon E. Rush Loving across the Color Line: A White Mother Learns about Race (Rowman & Littlefield).

6 “We Can All Cross the Wilderness”: The Color Line as American Frontier

Over the course of her quest for public recognition, Lazarre rejects Whiteness and embraces motherhood as two seemingly distinct formations. I argue, however, that it is the conjunction of White motherhood as a longstanding ideal of familial care that allows not only emotional validation but public articulation in the first place. It constitutes a symbolic capital which enables the publication of White mothers’ memoirs by prestigious presses and thus reinforces their kinship claim across the color line in terms of respectable visibility. For memoirists like Lazarre, naturalizing an ideal of White, heterosexual, middle-class, and child-centered motherhood implicitly creates a path toward a public speaking position from which to then launch their anti-racist critique. In a legacy of effective sentimentalist rhetoric in American political life, she...
comes forward as a devoted, suffering mother who demands that nothing breach a seemingly universally sacrosanct maternal-filial union: “I feel exiled from my not-yet-grown child. […] What is this whiteness that threatens to separate me from my own child? Why haven’t I seen it lurking, hunkering down, encircling me in some irresistible fog?” (24).

If the display of overcoming hardship and suffering functions as a “silver bullet” of “earning” affective citizenship in the United States (Paul, “Staatsbürgersentimentalismus”; my transl.), Lazarre implements and amplifies this form of citizenship technology by displaying perseverance in maternal suffering via the iconic American and Americanizing spatial metaphor of the frontier. In an array of metaphorical descriptions, she narrates her quest for maternal-filial belonging as, for instance, an “unbridgeable distance” (10) or an “escape from whiteness” (97) and renders a struggle of White mothering across the color line legible through the valorizing template of an American frontier challenge, wherein she defends her putative right to maternal recognition:

I was astonished to learn that in the Black world, everyone spoke about race all the time. Whites were always identified in stories about history and daily life. I remember the slight auditory shock—like earth shifting, or a sudden change in ocean current—when individuals were identified as “white” while Black was always the unspoken assumption, rather than the other way around. […] [A]s if I had traveled thousands of miles from home, I entered a new world. […] We can all cross the wilderness, quickly forget the forty years of wandering, concentrate only on the epiphany, as if it came out of nothing, suddenly gracefully there. As they used to tell us children were born, erase the pain, the agony of birthing: and suddenly she was there. (42, 83; emphases added)

The quote above serves to exemplify how the larger narrative adapts the Puritan conversion narrative’s concept of territory in order to negotiate racialized boundaries of belonging. In the logic of the text, Lazarre has putatively severed ties to the “old world,” where Whiteness as a privileged structural positionality had been a naturalized, invisible norm. Crossing the color line is first communicated through the register of a transatlantic passage toward the discovery of White racism as a “pervasive reality” (xv). This transition is then framed as a sense of emotional disorientation (“earth shifting” / “change in ocean current”) but gradually reframed as an opportunity for individual as well as collective anti-racist transformation (“epiphany” / “We can all cross the wilderness”). Lazarre’s rhetoric anticipates eventual integration into a “new world” as a secularized promised land that enlists White subjects in the cause of anti-racist community and relocates her into the fold of Black America: “[P]erhaps there is a place I have not yet imagined where exiles and strangers gather, racial hybrids of consciousness which can run as thick as blood, who out of necessity make the effort to rename what it means to belong” (51). In narrating her quest across the color line through the ambivalent trope of the frontier, Lazarre seemingly goes native and for-
mulates a claim to a rightful presence in a new “Black world” (42), but she returns to an intimate public sphere with the expanded consciousness of an allegedly “ex-white person” (128) who addresses the nation in a maternal call for action: “You speak out against even the smallest injustice, whoever you are” (134).

In Beyond, Lazarre tacitly imagines herself on an “errand into the wilderness” of anti-racism and seeks to intervene in public to make Whiteness visible as a formation of past and ongoing anti-Black violence. At this particular frontier, a threatening racialized encounter becomes reformulated as the negotiation of Whiteness as that which undercuts familial and communal belonging. But Lazarre mobilizes motherhood as a form of intimacy and labor that putatively cancels out her White positionality. Repeated references to childbirth, such as the “agony of birthing” (83), underscore a biological connection across the color line and function as a metaphor for maternal and anti-racist commitment as a path of secularized atonement: “I have earned my stripes” (38). Ultimately, this logic culminates in her eventual claim to a complete conversion as a disassociation from Whiteness: “I am no longer white. However I may appear to others, I am a person of color now” (135).

As a more recent strand in Critical Whiteness Studies points out, such statements construct a form of redemption by conflating the recognition of pervasive racism as one’s “self-extraction from racist structures” (Shotwell 83). Such narrative acts ultimately “convert […] shame into pride” (Ahmed 27) in a circuit of affects that Susan Arndt breaks down as follows: “I am a good white person, I am not really white anymore” (349; my trans.). Lazarre’s anti-racist testimony tries to function as both a public intervention and as an unburdening maneuver that overwrites shame over White racism with pride over political consciousness. Yet, as I trace in the following, her self-perception and description as an “ex-white person” (128) can furthermore be examined in terms of residual discourses on citizenship that relate to the predominantly Jewish positionality of White maternal memoirists as well as to interracial heterosexuality.

7 The Right to Sing the Blues

My analysis reads Lazarre’s ambivalent self-identification, in part, in relation to the changing position of Jews in the American racial order in a development that Michael Rogin describes as the “conversion of Jews” (80) into White Americans toward the mid-twentieth century (see also Brodkin). Not only Lazarre, but a majority of White maternal memoirists mark Jewish affiliations in their texts. Alongside maternal identification with her children, a history of anti-Semitic oppression, exclusion, and marginalization becomes thus foregrounded as a crucial factor in Lazarre’s transformation toward anti-racist politicization. In fact, her invocation of the color line as frontier challenge is simultane-
The Biblical Exodus, in turn, functioned as a central reference point for American Puritan conversion narratives in a Red Sea / Atlantic analogy (Caldwell 136).

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ously likened to wilderness through a reference to the Exodus (“forty years of wandering” [83]) and narratively framed in a text section entitled “Passing Over,” which revolves around various instances of her family’s celebrating Passover: “[T]he Jewish Holiday […] marking the liberation of the Jews from slavery in Egypt” (67). What registers in this pun on Passing Over / Passover is a larger dynamic in the narrative in which Lazarre gradually emphasizes Jewishness, over Whiteness, as the salient dimension of her subject position to mediate historical proximity to Black struggles as well as affective identification with Black communities in the present: “African American literature often described my own deepest emotions, presenting a vision of the world and experience that was profoundly familiar to me, a white, Jewish woman. […] the […] universal theme of suffering, resistance, and liberation” (xvi).

Lazarre joins the ranks of a “secular Jewish tradition” (Seidmann 261) of artists, authors, and intellectuals who have articulated political solidarity with Black emancipatory movements. Time and again, Jewish American public figures like Lazarre have positioned themselves as interpreters and ambassadors of African American culture in White America who are seemingly historically endowed with “the right to sing the blues,” as Jeffrey P. Melnick’s eponymous study puts it (see also Glaser). Lazarre desires to underscore that right on account of familial connection and intensifies it into a right to belong. Her narrative of “awakening” (20) is even anchored in a moment of reflection on her sons’ roots from a Jewish perspective when criticizing the lack of critical memorialization around enslavement: “I suddenly realize I am standing in an American Yad Vashem, a museum of a holocaust inadequately remembered and insufficiently grieved” (16). In Beyond, Lazarre unfolds her own genealogy along the violent markers of pogroms, the shtetle, and concentration camps and connects it with her husband’s genealogy from the Middle Passage and slave plantations to Jim Crow, which converge in their sons as a mixture of “genes” (123). Along these lines, she documents the climactic scene of a family reunion in the following words: “Everyone comes over, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, even this great-granddaughter-in-law, a Jew, one generation out of Eastern Europe, now having contributed her history and genes to the descendants of the rural South, of slavery […]. Khary [Lazarre’s son] writes in his narrative […]. ‘[…] My body is full of your blood’” (123).

Lazarre’s family narrative can be read as an update of Israel Zangwill’s influential theater piece The Melting Pot, which wrote Jewish immigrants into a collective imaginary of American belonging. In a figurative way, Lazarre has become a Zangwill who has learned “to sing the blues,” not only with regard to the expansion of melting pot rhetoric to include African Americans but also in terms of literary style. In a framework of call and response, all of her chapters are prefaced with quotations by Black intellectual figures that she incorporates as leitmotifs in a cyclical, associative narration of family history: “[…] it has become like
a known rendition of some jazz or blues structure […], it plays over and over” (110). Underneath Lazarre’s eloquence, however, her narrative also produces “retellings” and “refrains” (110) of something other than family history, which implicitly concerns the relationship between citizenship and sexuality.

8 White Motherhood in the Wake of Loving

At first glance, Lazarre seems to present “ex-white” as a figurai
tive self-designation for a presumed intellectual and emotional tran-
sceendence over race via maternal identification and dedication. In this
manner, her self-description as “ex-white” participates in a larger
conceit of weaving throughout the text that analogizes the writing
of memoir to domestic maternal labor: “[G]reyish, brownish, bluish
tweed. Some color with no precise name” (135). On multiple occasions,
however, Lazarre also literalizes the metaphor as a bodily transforma-
tion in a way that foregrounds heterosexual, biological, child-centered
motherhood. In fact, this dynamic unfolds early on in the narrative
when she identifies a moment during pregnancy as a harbinger of po-
litical “awakening” (20):

More than twenty years before, in 1969, 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 pregnan-
cy, I realized that I—my body and self—was no longer exactly white. […] 
[D]uring the next twenty years I would undergo a transformation of con-
sciousness as defining as any I have ever known. (3)

Lazarre here offers a description of her body to concretize and reinforce
a budding “conversion of the mind” (40) that will eventually turn shame
over past racial ignorance into pride over present racial awareness. But
there is more to it. In my symptomatic reading, she also recodes shame
over interracial heterosexuality in unacknowledged ways that displace
historical structural forces into personal affect in the present. Her mar-
riage in 1969 and the birth of her sons are events that unfold only two
years after heterosexual–interracial families have become legal on paper
nationwide as a result of Loving v. Virginia in 1967. This relatively imme-
diate background surprisingly goes unaddressed in the text, but it mani-
fests itself across the narrative in rhetoric that systematically deflects
connotations of illegitimacy. I understand Lazarre’s self-perception as
“no longer exactly white” (3) as the far-reaching effect of “surveillant
citizenship” (Stumpf 117), in which White communities have policed,
struck, and punished White women for interracial intimacies in
terms of a surveillance of nationhood as the reproduction of White su-
premacy—beginning with colonial legislation that could, among other
things, mandate temporary bondage for White women who intermar-
rried and/or gave birth to Black-identified children (Kennedy 222; Sol-
lors, Neither 395-96).
Lazarre’s memoir inverts a historical (and ongoing) stigma on sexuality by moving motherhood center stage. Not only does she overwrite a tabooed dimension of interracial sexuality with an authorizing framework of “marriage” and an “innocent […] and wanted pregnancy” in this specific passage (3), but her narration overall consistently diverts attention away from her husband and primarily revolves around maternal-filial intimacy as the exclusive origin of anti-racist politicization and of her feeling “no longer exactly white” (3). In a new additional preface to Beyond’s twentieth-anniversary edition in 2016, Lazarre has reinforced this maternal conversion paradigm. The preface begins by declaring solidarity with the Black Lives Matter Movement and proceeds by cementing her claim to belong to Black children and the Black community through the cultural authority of biological motherhood with the following comment on the birth of her sons: “I became a black body, not Black, but black in a way […]. I am the carrier, I am the body who carried them, released on a river of blood” (xix). Lazarre imagines her rhetorical self-blackening as the ultimate anti-racist gesture in public engagement. But even as a metaphor, the gesture comes full circle and obfuscates the very position of privileged Whiteness she set out to render visible. The entire memoir, including the programmatic title Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness, is fundamentally invested in the idea of being able to exempt oneself from racial positionality through the assumed transformative powers of motherhood. In Beyond, Lazarre actually fetishizes normative motherhood along with the Blackness of her sons. They are interpellated as savior figures whose proximity not only endows her with the ability to discover her Whiteness but, putatively, also to transcend it. In Lazarre’s memoir, physical closeness to Black bodies is once more transformed into a longstanding White fantasy about the transmission of Blackness through proximity: “I think of the Black bodies which are the closest bodies to me in the world” (81; see Dreisinger). For Lazarre, the barrier of the color line that initially threatened to separate her from her children ultimately becomes “converted” into a redemptive conduit through which reproduction supposedly transfers the children’s Blackness onto a previously White mother as a form of liberation.

9 Conclusion: The Parent as (Non-)Citizen

Addressing affective dimensions of citizenship via the figure of the parent in U.S. culture, this article turned to discourses of White motherhood as a key factor in the political paradigm shift toward multiracialism at the turn of the twenty-first century. As part of this shift, memoir functions as a citizenship technology for producing national recognition of White mothering across the color line. In an intimate public sphere that prioritizes an emotional engagement with political conditions through individualized and familial stories of overcoming hardship, memoirs like Beyond validate the previous taboo on interra-
cial intimacies through a register of White maternal suffering that is
inscribed with national significance. Time and again, a personal, ma-
ternal story of anti-racist politicization is publicly recited (via memoir
publication and reception) as a didactic model for citizens wanting to
enter into a sense of national belonging that bridges a racial divide. This
intervention is communicated through the culturally resonant template
of the “all-American conversion narrative” (Lösch and Paul 173). Its ad-
aptation in White maternal memoirs valorizes anti-racist commitment
as a reframed frontier challenge on the cusp of the new millennium,
where unacknowledged White oppression is positioned as the existen-
tial threat to a project of national community.

In Lazarre’s case, the affiliative labor of the conversion paradigm
also operates on a subnational level. Lazarre not only seeks to publicly
affirm her belonging to Black children but desires to extend her ties to
Black familiality into political membership in Black America at large.
This process of affiliation with Blackness runs parallel to a gradual
disassociation from Whiteness and culminates in Lazarre’s new met-
aphorical self-designation as “person of color” (135) to express emotional
and political attachment to the African American community. This at-
tachment is equated with a position within the community, a position
that is ostensibly earned through maternal as well as anti-racist work.
The ambivalent claim to have become a Person of Color, however, can
furthermore be understood as a residual discourse historically produced
by the legal as well as extra-legal surveillance of White women’s sexual
activity and in terms of Jews’ shifting place in substantive and affective
American citizenship as a property of Whiteness (Harris).

In Beyond, Lazarre attempts to expand her civic status onto her sons.
She invests the symbolic capital of White, nuclear, heterosexual, mid-
dle-class, biological, and child-centered motherhood in U.S. political
culture as a site of intimacy that secures the well-being of the child as
a stand-in for ideal citizenship and national futurity. Implicitly, Beyond
becomes another site where this version of maternity is mobilized as an
intimacy that can bestow affective citizenship on Black masculinity in
a conversion from ascribed abject threat into identifications as national
sons. But, according to Lazarre, the transfer of affective membership
putatively works the other way around. She continuously emphasizes a
maternal blood connection to her Black children as her separation from
Whiteness and inclusion into Black America: “I became a black body,
not Black, but black in a way […]. I am the carrier, I am the body who
carried them, released on a river of blood” (xix).

This rhetoric actually inverts and eclipses a historical and ongo-
ing legacy of Black motherhood as a “carrier” of racialized oppression
and civic death. This legacy is grounded in the slave law partus sequitur
ventrem, which codified enslavement as a Black matrilineal inheritance
of oppression and extends into enduring discourses of Black mother-
hood as ostensibly antithetical to a functional American family, national

9 This scenario has, for instance, played out in the popular movie The Blind
Side (2009) by John Lee Hancock.
progress, and familial affective citizenship (Spillers; Sharpe 74; Ibrahim 173). Lazarre may explicitly put forward her narrative as a universal account of motherhood to garner broad recognition, but in oblique ways she references how an effective public invocation of the mother as citizen is primarily available in terms of Whiteness. The emergence of the White Mother of Black Sons at the turn of the twenty-first century indirectly plays out against a silenced figure of Black motherhood as an ongoing non-citizen who is usually either absent in or peripheral to multiracialism’s imaginaries of national belonging.

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