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Mothering Across the Color Line: White Women, "Black" Babies

Heidi W. Durrow[†]

"It is hard to write about my own mother. Whatever I do write, it is my story I am telling, my version of the past."¹

Dear Mor,²

I died a million deaths tonight when I called you a white woman. I had called to ask you about a paper I was writing: *Mothering Across the Color Line: White Women, "Black" Babies*. It's supposed to be a personal essay—sometimes scholarly, sometimes sentimental—that analyzes motherhood and racial difference.³ I had been working on it for days, but my pen had piled words on the page that held no meaning. I had lost the passion for writing and, most importantly, I had forgotten the reason the piece seemed necessary to write. "Could you help me?" I asked. "Could you tell me, *as a white woman*, why it is important that your experience be written about?" Once the words escaped, I felt as if I had orphaned myself. Referring to you as a white woman made you seem abstract—a white everywoman, faceless and wholly unconnected to me. The words ripped our relationship apart: for that moment, you were not my mother, but something Other. The separation frightened me. The last thing I wanted to do was confront our difference, to put into words the fact that despite our similarities, when we walk out into the world together, the world acts on us in profoundly different ways.

And yet the separation was absolutely inevitable. Talking about race forces us to name names. The name given you is white. The name I have is black, despite the fact that I am biracial, despite the fact that I am both black and white. How can these names describe us, or our relationship? Race preempts

[†] Associate at Cravath, Swaine & Moore in New York; A.B., Stanford University; M.S., Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism; J.D., Yale Law School. Special thanks to Professor Vicki Schultz for her interest, faith, and support.

1. ADRIENNE RICH, *OF WOMAN BORN: MOTHERHOOD AS EXPERIENCE AND INSTITUTION* 221 (1976).

2. "Mor" is the Danish word for mom or mother.

3. This paper discusses a pervasive assumption of motherhood: that white begets white and black begets black. This paper explores the complicated societal position of white women who cross the color line and give birth to half-black babies. It is a rare examination of the intersection of race, gender, and female experience. Part I points out that the assumed notion is that motherhood is a monoracial institution. That is, theorists assume that mother and child share the same race. This assumption about motherhood and mothering erases the profoundly different experience of mothers who have biracial children. Specifically, this assumption prevents an exploration of the "raceing" effect on white women of giving birth to biracial children. This section discusses the inheritance of race and rights between the white mother and half-black child. Part II discusses the way in which the law enforces the notion that motherhood is a monoracial institution. This section draws on the transracial adoption controversy in an attempt to discover the underlying assumptions about mothering and the "teaching of race." Part III advocates beginning a discussion about the existing shades of gray between mother and child and accounting for the racial difference in the mother-child relationship. Moreover, this section argues that recognizing the transgressive nature of a white woman's relationship with a biracial child can be a step toward building a bridge between black and white.

our right to tell our story as we choose. It reduces to a drop the complexity of our bond. I think this is why I have avoided talking with you about the inner turmoil I have experienced being biracial. Facing that truth meant that I would have to face your whiteness, “the difference in our ethnic appearance,” as you said on the phone tonight.

But tonight I needed an answer and I asked the same question in various ways, hoping that you would speak *as a white woman*, hoping that you could explain to me the reason that this paper is important to write. And then, after a long pause, you said: “Maybe it’s important to write about the experience I had because it helps people understand you kids. Maybe it’s important because it helps kids of women like me understand their mothers. Does that work?”

“Yes,” I said. “But then isn’t this just another paper about me?” I asked. And then I thought: It certainly would be nice to understand your life. Maybe if I understand the ways that I changed your life, I will understand the intangible ways you have shaped mine.

So take a look at this paper. Tell me what you think. Do you recognize yourself in these stories and theories? Am I beginning to understand?

Always your daughter,

* * *

I have begun to carry with me an old photograph of a plainly dressed woman. In the photograph, the woman is leaning on a door frame—apparently taking a short break from the oppressive heat in which I imagine she has been hanging clothes to dry. Several blonde wisps have escaped the confines of her tightly wrapped bun and hang in long strands below her shoulders. She is wearing unfashionable maternity clothes that hug her swollen belly. It is her belly that is the focus of this picture. She grasps it, coddling the small unborn bundle. Seeing on her face the cusp of a smile—the smile of expectancy of a young pregnant woman—I am reminded again that the child this woman envisions in her expectant look does not resemble the child that a stranger imagines this pregnant woman will bear. You see, this woman, my mother, is white. And the child that she will give birth to—me—is a brown-skinned baby girl.

I carry this photograph now because I am beginning to think about having a child of my own. I am 26, one year older than my mother was when she gave birth to me. I imagine rubbing my belly as my mother did hers, delighting in the possibility of sharing an adventure with the to-be-born being. But with the expected delight comes a measure of fear. How will I know how to mother a child? What do I know about motherhood? What if I get it all

wrong? I search this photograph for clues about what a mother should be. Am I like the woman in the photograph? Is she me? I sense that mothering for me will take a vastly different shape than it did for my mother—as her experience differed from the experience of her own mother, and the mothers before her.

My mother mothered on the vanguard. She is a white Danish woman who crossed the color line in 1960s America and gave birth to three half-black children. Her mothering experience was profoundly different than mine will be. My child will most certainly be brown like me. I do not need to imagine, as she may have, what it would feel like to replicate myself graced with a different color. My child will not experience the world in a markedly different way than I have; she will see her brown face in my eyes without seeing difference, without seeing the chasm of color that would separate us if we did not share the same brown skin.

When I look at the photograph, I see revolutionary potential in my mother's act of mothering across the color line: she created the most intimate alliance between black and white. Mothering the "other" created a bridge between the difference. When I look at the photograph, I long to experience motherhood as she did, but know that I cannot. When I look at the photograph, I realize that I have forever lost the chance to experience mothering as my mother did.

I. MOTHERHOOD AND MONORACIALISM

Children naturally map their small reality onto the wider world, eliminating dissonance with the absolute certainty that their own experiences define the norm. When I was younger, I thought it was common for white women to mother brown-skinned kids like me. I grew up on overseas military bases where it seemed like a lot of black G.I.'s married white women, particularly non-American white women. Two of my best friends had black fathers and European mothers.

Thinking back, I suppose that I did not even consider the fact that I looked different from my mother until I was seven years old. It was 1976, the height of the afro rage, and my mother decided to cut off her long blonde locks for a short permed afro. I went with her to the hair salon that day because I wanted to be the first to see her new hairstyle. The rollers and magic potion that transformed my mother's hair fascinated me. I want hair like that, I told my mother. I thought we could be twins. With an okay from my mom, the stylist placed me in a chair, brushed out my long hair, and with what seemed like two sweeping scissors snips, she shaped an afro on my head. I looked in the mirror horrified by the fact that my hair would do this without the coaxing of that magic potion. I rushed to my mother for comfort and snuggled against her, finding the sharp smell of her perm strangely soothing. And then, seeing myself in a mirror, I noticed, for a fleeting moment, the stark contrast of my brown skin against her white. I closed my eyes.

Today, I still struggle to understand why, for the most part, people see only the difference between me and my mother. And in the moments in which I am most conflicted about my difference, I blame her as daughters are wont to do. *She should have known better. She should have known better than to think that having biracial children would not create difficulties in a race-obsessed society. She should have known that we would have to create ourselves in a society in which racial ambiguity is suspect and biracial identity is not considered legitimate.* But I stop blaming my mother when I think of her actions in the context of history. Creating a story in which she is not the first white woman to cross the color line somehow legitimates her choices and makes her actions appear to be part of a radical project to undermine the oppressive belief in race and racial categorization.

Despite anti-miscegenation laws, white women gave birth to biracial babies long before this century. These mulatto children of white mothers were considered “free” in some slave states.⁴ But other states enacted strict penalties for white women who crossed the color line because, as one scholar has reasoned, white women who engaged in “miscegenic affairs” endangered the transmission of property.⁵ As punishment for creating an outlaw culture, white mothers of biracial children were often subject to fines and other legal penalties.⁶ Virginia, for example, enacted a law in 1691 that punished any free white woman bearing a mulatto child by requiring her to pay a fine or face indentured servitude for herself and her child.⁷ Despite such laws, many white women persevered through the punishment and loss of dignity because of their love for their mixed-race children. These women endured prison sentences that could last up to six months and paid fines for mothering across the color line in defiance of anti-miscegenation laws.⁸

When I think of this history, I release the tangle of anger, resentment, and blame and think of my mother as a necessary outlaw instead of a woman doggedly clinging to her own naiveté across the color line as a radically life-affirming choice. The institution of motherhood has required that bearing children be an exercise in replicating the self. Her decision to make the mother-child relationship racially dynamic—not monoracial—is evidence that she understands that she will not lose herself in a multiracial heir: Her racial self is not necessarily vanquished when whiteness is not visible in her child. This “philosophy” shows that a non-alienating relationship with the Other is possible. Patricia Williams expresses quite eloquently the beauty and life-affirming quality of transracial mothering: “Is there not something unseemly,

4. Barbara K. Kopytoff & A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., *Racial Purity and Interracial Sex in the Law of Colonial and Antebellum Virginia*, 77 GEO. L.J. 1967, 2005-06 (1989).

5. DIANE ROBERTS, *THE MYTH OF AUNT JEMIMA: REPRESENTATIONS OF RACE AND REGION* 19 (1994).

6. Kopytoff & Higginbotham, *supra* note 4, at 2000-08.

7. NAOMI ZACK, *RACE AND MIXED RACE* 79 (1993).

8. Kopytoff & Higginbotham, *supra* note 4, at 2005-06.

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 and demandingly dependent for everything, sustenance itself, from a white woman. . . . *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.*"⁹

A. Family as Multiracial

Recognition of the experience of the racially dynamic mother-child relationship necessarily leads to recognition of the family as multiracial. A person picturing a family usually thinks of an even-complected group—one tone gracing the whole. When *I* look at *my* family, I see a cacophony of color. In the family portrait that decorates my desk, my family shades vary from my father's deep cocoa brown to my mother's bright off-white hue. My brothers and I range in color from my little brother's iced-tea colored skin to my own brown-honey mix to my older brother's brown-yellow tone. In the photograph, we are clearly a family. But our family bonds are not necessarily apparent when the colors are separated; it is only when we are all together—when you can see the shade gradations—that we truly look like a group of folks mixed up with each other.

The multiracial family confounds assumed notions about how to define a family. Naomi Zack theorizes that race has served as a primary kinship identifier in white America.¹⁰ That is, individuals are white if their families are white, in both a genealogical and an extended sense of family, and a family is white if and only if each family member is white. Therefore, if they are all white, they may be kin. "From a white point of view, the concept of race has to do with white families . . . with how the white family is conceptualized."¹¹ But conceptualizing the family in this way erases the experience of the multiracial household.

I have bumped up against the idea that a family is made up of one race more than a few times. In those moments of suspended disbelief, I am orphaned by the stranger who cannot understand that, yes, my mother is white, and I am not.

It was in a small town in Northern Spain where I studied for a term during college that I felt most profoundly that someone else's assumptions about my family identity could separate me from my family. One of the maids with whom I had often spoken during my three-month stay stopped me in the community restroom to ask why my eyes were so light, a shocking blue-green-gray.

"Because my mother's eyes are this color," I replied in simple Spanish.

9. PATRICIA WILLIAMS, *THE ALCHEMY OF RACE AND RIGHTS* 226-27 (1991) (emphasis added).

10. See ZACK, *supra* note 7, at 22.

11. *Id.*

My inquisitor looked puzzled. Because I knew that I had constructed the Spanish sentence correctly, I realized she needed more information. I added, "My mother is Danish; she is from Denmark. A lot of people from Denmark have eyes that are this color."

"I don't understand," she said, thoroughly puzzled.

"My mother is white and she has eyes this color and so do I," I said, the anger now noticeable in my voice.

"Your mother is white?"

"Yes."

"And your father? What color is he?" she asked.

"My father is black."

"Your mother is white and your father is black," she said slowly to herself and then suddenly roared: "Una mezcla!"¹² I saw the light bulb go on above her head: Miscegenation doesn't create little beasts; white women can have brown babies. She was fascinated.

She grabbed my hand, and all the while stroking it, asked: "Your mother is white—how white is your mother?"

"She's as white as you are," I replied.

"And your father? How black is he?" she asked, still stroking the brown on my hand.

"He's the color of chocolate. He's much darker."

The woman, tickled by the idea, giggled to herself and would not stop petting my brownness. That I, the product of a miscegenic union, was not a small monster must have been a great surprise to her. But the experience was equally shocking to me. My family identity was invisible to her; the family bonds that held my family together were unfathomable.

It is not just the biracial child who experiences the feeling of not being recognized as a part of her own family. The white mother of the biracial child, quite painfully, experiences it too. When race acts as the primary kinship identifier, the reality of her family dissolves. One white mother of biracial children describes the horror of living in a racist English community, and the desperate feeling of not being recognized as the mother of her mixed-race children:

In the park, Esme ran up to this old woman who was feeding ducks and [the old woman] moved away from her as if she was dirty and said to me quietly, 'You are breeding bloody coons, what do you think you are doing?' These are my children. How can people see only race and not that?¹³

12. "A mixture!"

13. YASMIN ALIBHAI-BROWN & ANNE MONTAGUE, *THE COLOUR OF LOVE: MIXED RACE RELATIONSHIPS* 221-22 (1992) (interview with Sue Norris).

In moments like that, the white mother of biracial children is divorced not only from her children, but from motherhood itself.

Defining family identity in terms of race makes the familial bond fragile. "White" family identity is particularly fragile, in this respect, because it "rests on unverifiable negations, and it can be easily destroyed by the recognized presence of black people in the family."¹⁴ "Black" families, on the other hand, have traditionally been more accepting of difference and of an ancestor's multiracial past, and less threatened by the recognition of a white past or white kin.¹⁵ Black people understand that because of strict racial classification statutes, people with "one drop" of black "blood" have traditionally been defined as black.¹⁶ Black families may have come to expect that there was at least one white ancestor in their past.¹⁷ In Shirlee Taylor Haizlip's recent family memoir, *The Sweeter the Juice*, she documents the fascinating reunion of two sides of her family, one which identifies as black and the other which identifies as white.¹⁸ When she concludes her search for family members—white and black—Haizlip writes: "All in all, I have grown a great deal less certain about the vagaries of race and know that I am ambivalent about its implications. But I am comfortable with that ambivalence, for it keeps my doors and windows open."¹⁹ When race is no longer a primary kinship identifier, we can consider—and embrace—our possible "relatedness" to Others, even those who seem markedly different than we are; the Other does not seem necessarily foreign. We are left to discover new definitions of family and create more love.

B. "Raceing" of White Mother

Having biracial children changed my mother's status as a white woman. I remember in high school my mom was working at a bookstore a block away from the school. A very good friend of mine who is white knew my mother and saw her almost daily at the bookstore and at the community theater where we performed together. One day I remember mentioning, in the context of our conversation, that my mother was Danish. "Your mother is Danish?" she asked. "Oh, my gosh, all this time I thought she was black." Perhaps she heard my mother's thick accent as some sweet Gullah dialect; perhaps she was fooled by the fact that my mother does go to tanning salons, and perms her hair. (I still think she looks like a white woman who goes to tanning salons and perms her hair.) My friend's misapprehension is a clear example of how

14. ZACK, *supra* note 7, at 49.

15. *See id.* at 36-39.

16. F. JAMES DAVIS, WHO IS BLACK? ONE NATION'S DEFINITION 5 (1991).

17. *Id.* at 6; *see also* ZACK, *supra* note 7, at 75 ("It has been estimated that between 70 and 80 percent of all designated black Americans have some degree of white ancestry.").

18. SHIRLEE T. HAZLIP, THE SWEETER THE JUICE (1994).

19. *Id.* at 267.

my mother, in a certain sense, inherited race from me; she became implicated by my brownness, or, as my brothers and I jokingly say, our mother became “guilty” by association. Lisa Jones, the biracial daughter of Hettie Jones and the black activist and writer Amiri Baraka, describes how her mother celebrates this transferred “guilt”: She embraces her changed racial status as a white mother of biracial children by marking the race box on Census forms “Other.” On the line beside the box that demands explanation she writes, “Semitic American mother of black children.”²⁰

Although it is only rarely that people actually believe that my mother is black, the fact that she has biracial children definitely creates ambiguity in her social status in relation to race. Women who have mothered across the color line suggest that having half-black children “races” them. This experience of being “raced” does not mean that white women become black, nor does it mean that they suddenly share the same status as black people do. Instead, it means that white women become acutely aware of their own whiteness in situations where they never did before. They become much more conscious of the racial ordering of society. Mothering across the color line gives white women access to a new range of emotions about race because of their personal stake in the issue. Maureen T. Reddy describes the effect her biracial son’s birth had on her understanding of race: “With [my son]’s birth, I felt a more intensely personal stake in racial issues. It was my own child’s life that was on the line when racial equality, affirmative action, and human rights were threatened, which is every day, everywhere, in this country.”²¹ White mothers who mother across the color line naturally adjust their political positions in order to reflect a new sensitivity. “Motherhood has been more than a domestic chore or emotional bond for my mother,” writes Lisa Jones.²² “It’s a political vocation—one she’s taken seriously enough to go up against the world for. She always stands ready to testify about how her children and blackness have broadened her own life.”²³ By relating to “blackness” in a profoundly intimate way, white mothers experience race; that is, they experience—perhaps for the first time—the fact that they are white, and in the same moment recognize their connection to the black community. “I’ve become a white mother in a Black household,” explains one white mother.²⁴ “As far as you can, while still obviously remaining white, you take on the hurt of racism against your children—initially maybe you take it on more.”²⁵ Ruth Frankenberg calls this empathic experience “rebound racism.”²⁶ “The impact of racism on white women is premised on, and shaped by, its effects on their

20. LISA JONES, *BULLETPROOF DIVA: TALES OF RACE, SEX, AND HAIR* 32 (1994).

21. MAUREEN T. REDDY, *CROSSING THE COLOR LINE: RACE, PARENTING, AND CULTURE* 173 (1994).

22. JONES, *supra* note 20, at 34.

23. *Id.*

24. ALIBHAI-BROWN & MONTAGUE, *supra* note 13, at 229 (interview with Kay Reece).

25. *Id.*

26. RUTH FRANKENBERG, *WHITE WOMEN, RACE MATTERS: THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF WHITENESS* 112 (1993).

significant others of color; but though it is related, the impact is neither identical to nor merely a weaker version of the original impact: it is qualitatively new."²⁷

But the white woman's "raced" status is still contingent. She is often accepted without reservation. The white woman's "raced" status is often invisible to co-workers or classmates who do not know her well. The white mother of biracial children can often "pass" when she operates in the world separate from her children:

It is terrible to say this, because I am talking about my own children and I love them, but because I am white, if I'm on my own, I can walk anywhere, I feel free, nobody bothers [me]. But when I have my children with me, I am a prisoner to how people feel about me and the children. I can feel their looks and the prejudices, even when my children can't. And you do want to belong.²⁸

In such moments, the white mother of biracial children is the "beneficiary" of what I call compulsory whiteness.²⁹ By that I mean that because the white mother looks (is) white, society assumes that her family is not complicated by racial difference. "Even to radical white American thinkers, whiteness has long assumed the status of normalcy; like heterosexuality, it is the center around which everything else moves, the standard against which the Other is inferior, deviant, exotic, or simply noteworthy."³⁰ As beneficiaries (or victims?) of compulsory whiteness, white mothers of biracial children struggle to make their unique racial status visible. My mother often raises objections and registers her offense at insensitive remarks made in her presence, always explaining that she has mothered "those people." She may *look* like a white woman, but her white skin conceals a racially-dynamic personal and home life.

II. LAW AND THE MYTH OF MONORACIAL MOTHERHOOD

As I struggle to understand the difference (and sameness) of mothering across the color line, I cannot help but reflect on the transracial adoption controversy that rages across the country.³¹ In the last few years, many states

27. *Id.*

28. ALIBHAL-BROWN & MONTAGUE, *supra* note 13, at 222 (interview with Sue Norris).

29. This term was inspired by Adrienne Rich's phrase, "compulsory heterosexuality." See ADRIENNE RICH, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, in BLOOD, BREAD, AND POETRY: SELECTED PROSE 1979-1985, 1,23 (1986).

30. Judith Levine, *The Heart of Whiteness: Dismantling the Master's House*, VOICE LITERARY SUPPLEMENT, Sept. 6, 1994, at 11.

31. See, e.g., Elizabeth Bartholet, *Where Do Black Children Belong? The Politics of Race Matching in Adoption*, 139 U. PA. L. REV. 1163 (1991); Zanita E. Fenton, *In a World Not Their Own: The Adoption of Black Children*, 10 HARV. BLACKLETTER J. 39 (1993); Julie C. Lythcott-Haims, Note, *Where Do Mixed Babies Belong? Racial Classification in America and Its Implications for Transracial Adoption*, 29 HARV. C.R.-C.L. L. REV. 531 (1994); Joan Mahoney, *The Black Baby Doll: Transracial Adoption and Cultural*

have articulated adoption policies that make transracial adoptions difficult.³² The controversy over transracial adoptions erupted in 1972 when the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) first condemned the adoption of black children by white parents as a form of cultural "genocide."³³ For the most part, biracial children are treated in much the same way as black children; black parents are often considered to be more suitable for a half-black child than two white adoptive parents.³⁴

Laws concerning transracial adoption have become as conflicted and confused as the debate they purport to address. In August 1994, the National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform State Laws approved a revised version of the Uniform Adoption Act that deals with the transracial adoption issue.³⁵ The Act, as written, prohibits policies that deny prospective adoptions because a child is a different race or ethnicity than the adoptive parents.³⁶ And in October, Senators Howard Metzenbaum and Carol Mosley Braun sponsored a bill entitled the Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA) that, like the Uniform Adoption Act, was intended to facilitate interracial adoptions.³⁷ The law, as proposed originally, eliminated race as a factor from transracial adoption procedures. During the committee process, however, the bill changed considerably.³⁸ By the time the measure was passed, the law had been rewritten to allow agencies to consider race in transracial adoption proceedings as one of a number of factors in determining proper child placement.³⁹

The debate is perplexing because it does not seem to be informed by circumstances experienced by numbers of biracial children today. The reality

Preservation, 59 UMKC L. REV. 487 (1991).

32. However, per se laws and policies that forbid transracial adoptions of black and biracial children by white families have been declared unconstitutional. See *Drummond v. Fulton Co. Dep't of Family & Children's Servs.*, 547 F.2d 835 (5th Cir. 1977).

33. ELIZABETH BARTHOLET, *FAMILY BONDS: ADOPTION AND THE POLITICS OF PARENTING* 94-95 (1993).

34. See Kim Forde-Mazrui, Note, *Black Identity and Child Placement: The Best Interests of Black and Biracial Children*, 92 MICH. L. REV. 925, 934-36 (1994). But see *Reisman v. Tennessee Dep't of Human Servs.*, 843 F. Supp. 356 (W.D. Tenn. 1993). In *Reisman*, the court stated that a biracial child must be allowed to be adopted by a white family in furtherance of the child's equal protection rights. Biracial children, the court said, "are entitled to claim the rights guaranteed by the Constitution of both the white and black races for equal protection." *Id.* at 363. The court based its decision on the premise that a biracial child should be allowed to live in a home that informed her of her biracial heritage and culture. *Id.* at 364. The court determined that a white family could do that as well as a black family.

35. Susan Chira, *Law Proposed to End Adoption Horror Stories*, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 24, 1994, at A12; see also Allen C. Platt, III, Note, *Adopting a Compromise in the Transracial Adoption Battle: A Proposed Model Statute*, 29 VAL. U. L. REV. 475 (1994).

36. Chira, *supra* note 35.

37. See Rita Kramer, *Adoption in Black and White*, WALL ST. J., Oct. 24, 1994, at A14.

38. See Bill Maxwell, *Adoption and Race*, ST. PETERSBURG TIMES, Oct. 16, 1994, at 1D.

39. Howard M. Metzenbaum Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994, 42 U.S.C. § 5115a (1994). As of this writing, Senator Metzenbaum supports a new measure which is part of a GOP welfare-reform bill that would deny federal funds to agencies that discriminate in placing children based on race. Metzenbaum believes that regulations being prepared by the Department of Health and Human Services will thwart the purpose of MEPA: "Some bastards at HHS intervened and did the bill great harm." Martha Brant, *Storming the Color Barrier*, NEWSWEEK, Mar. 20, 1995, at 29. See also Kramer, *supra* note 37; Maxwell, *supra* note 38.

is that white women who are natural parents to biracial children are not considered unsuitable parents simply because of their race. Many single white mothers raise their biracial children without a black adult present. What is the difference between a white adoptive parent of a biracial child and the white mother who raises such a child alone?

The governing motive of those who favor placement of black and biracial children with black families is that they believe white parents cannot adequately teach black and biracial children about race. According to some opponents of transracial adoption, black and biracial children need to be raised by black parents in order to develop a "positive racial identity" and "skills for coping with a racist society."⁴⁰ Leora Neal, executive director of the NABSW's Adoption Service in New York, argues, "A lot of things are learned in African-American family settings every day through nonverbal communication. Adopted children aren't going to pick that up living in another culture."⁴¹ But to accept Neal's argument erases the reality of my experience and the experience of all biracial children raised in homes with single white mothers.

It is true that white mothers may often fear that their whiteness will prevent them from being able to prepare their children to deal with the way in which race will factor in their lives. "I'm not frightened for them because I think they will survive, but I'm frightened for our relationship—that there will be very difficult periods for them and very difficult periods for us," says one white mother.⁴² She continues:

I might not always be able to give them the right answers because I haven't experienced the things they are going through. There might be periods when—perhaps during adolescence, when you often do feel distant from your parents for lots of other reasons—there will be an added dimension. And yes, I am frightened for them in that I feel their hurt very keenly, and if it's something that I can do nothing about they're just going to have to learn to survive without me.⁴³

Often, white mothers feel that they must relegate to their black partners the business of teaching race to the child. "I never saw myself as [my son]'s racial role model," writes a white mother. "[H]is father provides that modeling, with support from a large network of black friends and relatives. I *did* see myself as instilling racial pride through teaching [our son] about black history and art, and through my own appreciation of black culture, which is part of what I teach professionally."⁴⁴

40. Forde-Mazrui, *supra* note 34, at 926 (discussing NABSW arguments against transracial adoption).

41. Michael J. Weiss, *Love Conquers All*, THE WASHINGTONIAN, Oct. 1994 at 98, 102.

42. ALIBHAI-BROWN & MONTAGUE, *supra* note 13, at 231 (interview with Kay Reece).

43. *Id.* at 231-32.

44. REDDY, *supra* note 21, at 69.

But the fears of white women that they will not be able to teach race are unfounded. Society teaches biracial children about race in the ways that people interact with us and in the media images we see. Our mothers teach us about love. In *Black, White, Other*, Lise Funderburg presents interviews with sixty-five biracial (half-black and half-white) adults ranging in age from eighteen to sixty-seven.⁴⁵ The interviewees discuss the role that being biracial has played in their development, philosophies, and ambitions. Interviewees who discuss their relationship with a white parent consistently explain that they did not feel that the white parent had an obligation to teach race. They found that society acted on them in ways that made it impossible to not learn about race and racial issues. Most importantly, many interviewees believed that their white parent had taught them how to appreciate their unique status in the world.⁴⁶ Lisa Jones notes that the most important lesson her white mother taught her was to value difference. "My mother, more than anyone I know, has taught me difference as pleasure. Not as something feared or exotic, but difference as one of the rich facts of one's life, a truism that gives you more data, more power, and more flavor."⁴⁷ It is this lesson that white mothers can teach their biracial children just as readily as a black parent could. It is this lesson that parents (biological and adoptive) must teach their other-raced children.

III. THE REVOLUTIONARY POTENTIAL OF "OTHERMOTHERING"

In 1833, white abolitionist Lydia Maria Child published a book, *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans*, which called for the immediate emancipation and integration of blacks into the mainstream.⁴⁸ The primary means for full integration, she wrote, would be radical miscegenation.⁴⁹ Child believed that if women mothered across the color line the next generation would be populated with an amalgamated, new race. This new race, she believed, would no longer be burdened by racial strife and division.

Child's utopian plan is implicitly based on the notion that a racially dynamic mother-child relationship serves as a model for an ideal harmonious relationship between races. Making the unique experience of white mothers of biracial children visible reveals that it is possible to achieve *natural* multiracial relationships. By revealing the experience of white mothers of biracial children, we learn the lessons of "othermothering"⁵⁰—of nurturing,

45. LISE FUNDERBURG, *BLACK, WHITE, OTHER* (1994).

46. *Id.* at 31-32.

47. JONES, *supra* note 20, at 33.

48. ROBERTS, *supra* note 5, at 127-29 (discussing LYDIA MARIA CHILD, *AN APPEAL IN FAVOR OF THAT CLASS OF AMERICANS CALLED AFRICANS* (1833)).

49. *Id.* at 128.

50. See REDDY, *supra* note 21, at 154. Reddy borrows this term from Patricia Hill Collins, who uses it to describe women who care for children not their own by blood or legal adoption. See PATRICIA H.

respecting, and living in solidarity with those who are different. Othermothering reveals that a multiracial progressive movement (particularly a feminist movement) is achievable.⁵¹

Historically, othermothering has been a primary job of black women in America. Black women, who could find only domestic work to support their own families, "mothered" white children as nannies and nursemaids. But this kind of othermothering does not provide the model for interracial cooperation. Too often, these relationships are sentimentalized. The affection is tainted by the forced financial reality of the relationship. A writer as perceptive as Adrienne Rich could write:

As a child raised in what was essentially the South, Baltimore in the segregated 1930s, I had from birth not only a white, but a black mother. This relationship, so little explored, so unexpressed, still charges the relationships of black and white women. We have not only been under slavery, lily white wife and dark, sensual concubine; victims of marital violation on the one hand and unpredictable, licensed rape on the other. We have been mothers and daughters to each other; and although, in the last few years, Black and white feminists have been moving toward a still-difficult sisterhood, there is little yet known, unearthed, of the time when we were mothers and daughters.⁵²

This kind of othermothering fails the ideal; in these situations, white and black women merely imitate the mother-child relationship in an attempt to disguise the true power dynamic and the divisions between them.⁵³ It is not that black women cannot "mother" white children, or even that the emotion felt by white children in such situations cannot be accurately described as love, but that when there exists an economic dimension to the mother-child relationship, the bond is not built on emotional honesty. "There is no trickier subject for a writer from the South than that of affection between a black person and a white one in the unequal world of segregation," notes a Southerner trying to negotiate the wicked terrain of Southern race relations.⁵⁴ He continues:

For the dishonesty upon which such a society is founded makes every emotion suspect, makes it impossible to know whether what flowed

COLLINS, BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT: KNOWLEDGE, CONSCIOUSNESS, AND THE POLITICS OF EMPOWERMENT 119 (1990).

51. REDDY, *supra* note 21, at 154.

52. RICH, *supra* note 1, at 253.

53. To be fair, I must note that Rich retreats from this sentimentalized memory of her black nanny in a 1986 update of *Of Woman Born*. "The above passage overpersonalizes and does not, it seems to me now, give enough concrete sense of the actual position of the Black domestic worker caring for white children. Whatever the white child has received both in care and caring, the Black woman has given under enormous constraints." ADRIENNE RICH, *OF WOMAN BORN: MOTHERHOOD AS EXPERIENCE AND INSTITUTION* 255 (1986).

54. Howell Raines, *Grady's Gift*, N.Y. TIMES MAG., Dec. 1, 1991, at 50.

between two people was honest feeling or pity or pragmatism. Indeed, for the black person, the feigning of an expected emotion could be the very coinage of survival.⁵⁵

White mothers of biracial children understand the love between black and white quite differently. Their love disrupts a status quo which depends on keeping black and white separate. And beyond changing the attitudes of mother and child toward interracial alliances, white women mothering across the color line change the attitudes of an expanding circle of others:

A relationship like this definitely changes you for the better because it opens you up to different attitudes and ways of life. But I think it's changed my family even more radically than it's changed me, particularly my mother. She now wants to and tries to empathise with the problems that Black people have, which I don't think she would ever have done before. . . . [O]nce the children are born and as a grandparent you give that unconditional love, then you have to take on lots of other things. It's a shame that you can't change the world for everybody, you can't make everyone become a grandparent of Black children.⁵⁶

* * *

I have a recurring dream of birth and fear. In the dream, I give birth to a small brown bear. When the baby finally emerges, bewildered by this new sun, this new air, I look at it, disgusted. How could I have given birth to such a monster? I wonder. But as tears roll down my face, I reach for the young bear—my arms outstretched, my fingers grasping for the small beast. But the small brown bear is not there.

When I look around, I see what has become of him. A young white woman has taken him from me. The young white woman holds the bear above her head and shakes him until he giggles. A crowd gathers around her, cooing at the child and congratulating the young white mother. It is clear that the small brown bear loves the young woman.

The dream's shapeless terror jars me from my sleep—with my young brown bear stripped from me, I can find no solace or peace in my dreams.

The dream is about envy, as well as anger. The envy is rooted in the painful recognition that I will never be able to imitate my own mother's mothering experience—only a white woman can do that. The anger is fueled by my abiding apprehension about the mother-child relationship between a white woman and a brown-skinned child. Is the relationship as natural as I

55. *Id.*

56. ALIBHAI-BROWN & MONTAGUE, *supra* note 13, at 232 (interview with Kay Reece).

would like to believe? Is it necessarily a revolutionary bond? As a woman of some color, I resist the belief that transracial mothering is imbued with the authenticity of feeling that monoracial relationships have. My resistance does not arise out of rational emotions, but out of envy: I do not want to imagine that my mother's experience was unique if it is one that I cannot share. And yet, as a brown-skinned child, raised by an incredible woman (who happens to be white), I know that it is because of this relationship that I have learned the most profound lessons about loving difference, and accepting that which is naturally foreign.

I want to transform the envy and the anger of this dream into hope. I want to be able to look at the young white woman and understand the courage it takes for her to create such complexity in her life by mothering the brown child. I want to be able to discover in the young white woman's mothering the potential for her to create a relationship with me. I want to understand the difference of the young white woman mothering the brown child, but still recognize the love.

