

PREFACE TO THE
TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

In the original prologue to this memoir, written twenty years ago, I used the words of Chinua Achebe as epigraph and talisman. Those words still guide my work in memoir, fiction, and poetry; they form a direction for me as I read, write, and live; they constitute a central belief, indeed, a kind of faith.

“Imaginative identification is the opposite of indifference,” he tells us in his essay “The Truth of Fiction.” “It is human connectedness at its most intimate. . . . It begins as an adventure in self-discovery and ends in wisdom and humane conscience.”¹

The relationship of the art of writing to self-discovery and humane conscience (within which I include “politics” with a small *p*) has often been contentious, derided, or denied, but for me it is a central aspect

of craft—point of view, an ethical choice, and a quality of inspiration I would even call soul-deepening.

Words from another writer who has guided me for many years, James Baldwin: “The conundrum of color is the inheritance of every American, be he/she legally or actually Black or White. It is a fearful inheritance, for which untold multitudes, long ago, sold their birthright. Multitudes are doing so, until today.”²

The warning in this statement has been a truth of American life for centuries, yet it has most often been ignored, dismissed, even repressed by the majority of Americans. We have seen a series of tragic and horrifying murders of black men and boys by white police and vigilantes, resulting in only one indictment, a trial and verdict still in the future at this writing: South Carolina, April 2015: the murder of Walter Scott, a fifty-year-old black man, captured on video, running fast from a white man who is wearing the uniform of a police officer but betraying the requirement to protect the innocent, who is shooting Scott in the back as he tries to escape. “It was like he was shooting a deer,” my husband says, tears of grief and rage indistinguishable, his words echoing many others—*it was like he was an animal*. Just when I thought I might have found some even partially adequate words to respond to the atrocities of 2015, Freddie Gray was killed in Baltimore. Indictments on various counts were brought against the six police officers involved.

Baldwin’s words should be sounding in all our ears with the force and ringing echoes of the Liberty Bell in 1776, but this time the ringing calls us not to a celebration of freedom for a portion of the citizens of a new nation, but to memory restored and reality faced at last. As I read and reread these words, I am forced to pause, to wonder in fear and anger, if more murders will occur before it is too late to add new sentences, new victims’ names.



On the night of June 17, 2015, a young white man entered the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, where a group of parishioners were engaged in prayer study. The white

man who had been welcomed into the church massacred nine people, including the minister of the church, Rev. Clementa Pinckney. Mothers, grandmothers, sons, brothers, husbands, and wives were shot down in cold blood, told before they died that they had to die because black people were taking over the nation. One was allowed to live, to report to the world the actions of the man who saw himself as a redeemer of the white race. The shooter was arrested and indicted, and it soon became known that he'd visited white supremacist historical and Internet sites while cloaked in flags and insignia of Nazis, apartheid-era South Africa, and white supremacist Rhodesia. Many white people, as well as people of all backgrounds across the country, rallied with and supported the African American citizens of Charleston. Yet the threadbare veil of national racism—long standing and long denied—has now been torn to shreds, our national disease shown to be unhealed, unrepaired, unreconciled.

Like many other Americans, I watched the funeral for Rev. Pinckney on television, listened as the first African American president of the United States—the president whom white racists have been threatening to kill since his election, questioning his very American-ness, trying to defeat and humiliate him—Barack Obama delivered a eulogy that was both a powerful indictment of racism and a meditation on the concept of grace. Though I am not religious, through his words I came to understand a new meaning of grace—the grace of holding on to a sense of meaning in the face of moral chaos, that peace and goodness might survive in a violent world, that the capacity for forgiveness, so astonishingly and movingly expressed by members of the victims' families facing the murderer in court, is also within us all. In a nation many commentators rushed to define as “postracial” soon after Obama's election in 2008, now revealed as a nation yet to come to terms with what is being called the “original sin” of slavery and segregation, the president stood still at the podium and sang. In a subdued but emotional voice, he sang, at first alone, then accompanied by many in the congregation, “Amazing Grace.”

In a recent column in the *New York Times*, Professor Nell Irvin Painter, historian and writer, suggested that white allies of black liberation struggles, still in progress, should call ourselves abolitionists, as white allies did

during slavery. This name feels accurate and appropriate now. Once again, seeking grace, but also moral and historical clarity, I turn to Baldwin's prescient and brilliant essay, "Stranger in the Village."

In the situation in which Americans found themselves, these beliefs [of equality and democracy] threatened an idea which, whether or not one likes to think so, is the very warp and woof of the heritage of the West, the idea of white supremacy. . . . and the strain of denying the overwhelmingly undeniable forced Americans into rationalizations so fantastic that they approached the pathological.³

With all the Confederate flags coming down, with our always too quickly abandoned vows to "talk about race" in our nation, even many of the best of us white Americans remain in denial, wanting above all to retain a sense of innocence and ignorance of historical and contemporary realities.

"And anyone"—Baldwin again—"who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster."⁴



So it is with a renewed sense of responsibility and a deep sense of humility that I write about race and racism, "the conundrum of skin color," the relationship between the art of writing and conscience. That sense prevails as I recall the personal history that gave rise to this memoir.

My first working title for this book was *The Education of an American Woman*, a phrase that now appears at the end of the prologue, an education that is lifelong. In one sense, this memoir is a personal family story. I became part of an African American family when I was twenty-three years old, almost fifty years ago. The child I wrote about as "Benjamin" in my first memoir, *The Mother Knot*, is forty-five years old now, a writer and actor with a teenage daughter of his own. The baby born at the opening of that book is forty-one and spends his life dedicated to African American, Caribbean, and Latino children and youth in an organization in Harlem he cofounded and now directs, The Brotherhood-Sister Sol. This is the story of a white Jewish woman who fell in love with an African

American man in the mid-1960s, when marriage between races was still illegal in many states in this nation. Now my husband of forty-eight years, Douglas White, has encouraged, taught, and helped me in many ways as I pursued the theme of race and African American culture in my work as a writer and a teacher. When I married him, I also fell in love in some ways with his whole family, at the center of which was his powerful and magnetic mother. She helped us raise our sons and contributed in many ways to this memoir, telling me her stories and allowing me to retell them in my own words. Still a dear and constant friend to me, at ninety-one years old she can walk four miles with an ease I cannot manage.

When I found the precise words for the title of this book—*Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness*, a different turn on Ralph Ellison's famous phrase—I meant to suggest the possibility of rejecting willful innocence and persistent ignorance of history, of being oblivious, out of callousness or bigotry or fear, to the history and legacy of American slavery and generations of racial oppression continuing. I was recording a transformation in consciousness—a shift, even a sea change, formed by the unique intimacies of motherhood, but also by long and serious study.

So in another sense, this is a story about a writer-teacher. Between 1984 and 2006 I taught fiction, memoir, and courses in African American literature at the Eugene Lang College at the New School in New York City. Ironically, the place that gave me the opportunity to learn and teach this literary tradition, so central and influential in American literature, was also a place I ultimately left due to unresolvable arguments about race. Whether curriculum, faculty, and recruitment of students should or should not include attention to the history of race in America continues to be a debate and challenge at all levels of education; it is a subject which, in 2015, is being discussed and argued widely again. Still, for almost twenty years I was able to learn from colleagues, students, and my own studies about how American culture and history have been profoundly influenced by African American writers—their insights, their wrestling with questions of American identities and the nature of freedom, the music and cadences of a literary tradition that continues to inspire and grow.

The story of teaching undergraduates and learning from them is inseparable from my story of being a mother of black sons. The internal

and social transformations that are intrinsic to motherhood have for me, by necessity, converged with the theme of the history of race in the literature I love, in the nation where I was born and have lived my life.

I wrote this memoir all those years ago to share what I had learned as a teacher of classes where black students—a clear minority in this small New York City college within a well-known university—required and deserved both a facilitation of voice and the right to be silent, where white students and students of color from many backgrounds required and deserved a freedom from sentimental guilt and the false denials of “color blindness” to be given the chance to experience the solidarity of imaginative identification themselves—as Americans, as human beings who, as Baldwin told us, are “trapped in history, and history is trapped in them.”⁵

I wrote with a sense of shame for our nation’s foundational history, for the following decades of segregation and Jim Crow—now commonly called an American apartheid—a system my husband, his brothers and sisters, and of course his parents and uncles and aunts were born and grew up in, and thus in living memory of my family. When I read my words now, I am afraid that perhaps that arc of the universe Martin Luther King Jr. described as bending toward justice will be just too slow and incremental to reach some glorious end in time for my teenage granddaughter to enjoy, too slow for her to know that *not* the color of her skin but the content of her character will be the primary determinant of her life and opportunities.⁶ When I wrote this memoir in the 1990s, I still hoped that would be the case for my sons in their adulthood. For them, now in their forties, despite both legal and social progress, even more so for those less privileged than they have been, it is far from the case.



Like many Americans, I have been horrified by the violent racial killings of the past year, so when I was asked in 2015 to contribute an essay about being the mother of black sons for a forthcoming book,⁷ an essay that was then reprinted on many sites online,⁸ I was grateful. Once again, I wrote out of a sense of passion and anger. I wrote—like many others

who have witnessed the hatred and vicious attacks on the first African American president of the United States—with a terrible lack of surprise. I know that to come to understand American race history and American racism, I've had to make a conscious effort to experience “imaginative identification”—to comprehend what every black American child begins to understand by the age of earliest consciousness and what every African American adult knows about ongoing racism in both personal and civic life—in our neighborhoods and social lives, in our schools, prisons, and police departments, from our arts institutions to our most powerful corporations: *race matters*. African American writers have so written throughout our literary history, from Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs to Toni Morrison, from Rita Dove to Claudia Rankine and Sekou Sundiata.

This past winter, I wrote the words below in an attempt to claim once again my sense of “humane conscience” and to describe my experience with the “conundrum of color.” I include the full essay now as a part of this preface, though at times its tone differs from what I am writing today—this being the voice in which I felt best able to join the collective voices crying out, bearing witness, demanding change.

Once White in America

for Adam and Khary

Black body
swinging in
the summer
breeze
strange fruit hangin from the poplar trees.⁹

It was 1969 and 1973, both times in early fall when I first saw your small bodies, rose and tan, and fell in love for the second and third time with a black body, as it is named, for my first love was for your father; always a word lover, I loved his words, trustworthy, often not expansive, sometimes even sparse, but always reliable and clear. How I—a first-generation Russian Jewish girl—loved clarity! Reliable words—true words, mea-

sured words, filled with fascinating new life stories, drawing me down and in. The second and third times I fell in love with black bodies I became a black body, not Black, but black in a way, I'd say, without shame and some humor for mine is dark tan called white. But I am the carrier, I am the body who carried them, released on a river of blood.

Am I black in a cop's hands when he is pushing, pressing hard for dope or gun, or a rope, or a knife, or a fist? I am not a black body, yet my body is somehow, somewhere, theirs — Trayvon's, Emmett's, thousands more at the end of a rope's tight murderous swing, black as a night stick splits my head, shatters my chest, black as a boy not yet a man walking toward a man with a gun, suddenly shot dead, a just-become man, walking down the stairs toward a gun, black as a tall man, a big man, looking strong but pleading for his breath, killed by choking arms and bodies piled on top of his head.

Walking the sidewalks of my city in the morning, I dodge white dads' bikes daily, their little toddlers strapped into a back seat, and I don't mind because riding in the street or wide, traffic-filled avenues does seem a dangerous way to get to nursery school. Later in the morning, when I am still walking, the white fathers or mothers bike by me again, now with the back seats empty. I look around for police, wondering if there will be a ticket for riding on the sidewalk, since no child's safety is at stake. No cops in sight. My great-nephew, young and black and not fully grown, was stopped and handcuffed by police some months ago for riding his bike on the sidewalk, his often glazed eyes glazing more deeply now.

Once I wrote a novel story about a black man named Samuel, enslaved in Maryland's western shore in 1863. His death was terrible and sadistic, his body dismembered by the man who called him property, for the crime of impregnating the man's daughter, a woman I called Louisa. I named her in part for a strong friend I wanted to conjure by my side as I wrote, but she was based on a real young woman who lived in actual history, a woman named Jane, the same name as my own. Samuel's death was so brutal I had trouble reading my own words out loud, or even to myself at times, though I had written them: a slow dismemberment, piece by precious human piece, this nearly unspeakable violence also taken from

a horrific reality I had read about in books about torture during slavery, an image that refused to leave my mind, especially in the dark or when I closed my eyes. I watched him die with Louisa, and with Ruth, Samuel's mother, a character based in part on my mother-in-law, granddaughter of an enslaved American, my close friend for more than forty years, and I tried not to hide my eyes from the brutal human dis/memberment—the belief that they could erase his memory, his life as a man, yet thinking in this way to preserve the memory of his crime: a black man, enslaved, fathering the child of a young white woman who loved him. I called the novel *Inheritance*. I wanted to claim the terrible history of my country, to honor the necessity of collective memory. I want to assert the power and capacity, the necessity, for human empathy and the deeper than skin-deep identification that comes with love.

My words telling Samuel's story are almost as close to myself as my body-carrying boys, my sons, whose keys finally in the door at night assuaged my panic, waiting, waiting, trying to contain the fears, not only of muggers but, yes, of police, fears I had learned about most specifically as I listened, as they did, to their father talking what is now known as The Talk: Never run on the street, not even on your own block to catch the bus. Always show your hands. Never fail to be respectful even if police are insulting and disrespecting you. They have sticks, and guns, and your job is to come home safe.

My son's best friend in college, proud of his new car—*stopped*—in front of our building in Manhattan, thrown up against a car—*and frisked*—years before this assault had become a legitimized method with a frightening name. Once white in America, I watched and listened as I had learned to do in more creative, soul-expanding ways—learning from my new family about African American history and culture, witnessing my older son, always a lover of music, his face filled with mixed emotions as he listened in a high school classroom to Louis Armstrong singing the searing lyrics and haunting melody of “Black and Blue”; my younger son loved poetry and has almost the same name as one of the falsely convicted boys in the Central Park Jogger case, so he wrote poems about them—the animal names they were called, the possibility, later proven,

of their innocence. Searching for healing, I introduced him to African American poetry, a centuries-long tradition of various and elegant forms, poems of lamentation, and of the grace of memory and love.

Once white in America, I searched for space within myself to absorb new meanings, meanings by now so fully absorbed they are entwined inseparably with my sense of the world as it is, the self that I am. I watch the television film again and again of Trayvon's sweet face; of Michael Brown gunned down in Ferguson, Missouri; of Eric Garner, a man in my own city screaming *I can't breathe*. I hear my husband's voice, after nearly fifty years of living in New York City his tones and even some pronunciations returning to the southern sounds of his youth and childhood: "I remember Emmett Till. When he was killed. He was the same age as I was. I still remember it—how it felt to me then."

I want to reverse the meanings of the song I heard last month, after hundreds of listenings to recordings—this time by Audra McDonald, who sounded so like Billie Holliday, whose songs she was singing, whose gardenia she played with, on and off, on and off her thick black hair, whose drink she drank, put down, sipped again, whose graceful walk she walked, but sometimes wobbled, nearly falling, whose pain and anger she spoke in shouts and whispers about nightclubs and shameful insults, haunting memories and whites-only bathrooms when you very badly need to pee, of desertions and abandonments of many kinds, Audra singing such perfect Billie you could swear you were in the club hearing Billie's tones, soft and low to contrast with the terrible words echoing through time, from mind to body to mind.

The bulging eyes, the twisted mouth . . .
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh,
and the sudden smell of burning flesh.

Their newborn silken flesh, the deep sea eyes, the graceful mouth—the first time I saw their faces, rose and tan, wide staring eyes, one, then a few years later the other—hearing their father's sigh of relief and cry of joy, the long, hard labors over once, then twice, and me smiling and alive.

Skin darkened slowly as they grew into men. “Are you half black?,” someone asked when one of them was a child. He looked down. Which half?

“What color am I Daddy? I mean, you know, what color am I? Really? Am I black like you?” “Yes, Son, you are black, like me.”

Black men, body and mind, in this white, white country I write and rewrite.

It is 1863
and 1965
and 2008
and still we wait
for the bodies
to stop
falling, for our minds
to slow like rivers
after a storm,
waters
darkened to rich
olive brown by moist soil
lifted,
surfacing, warm.

It was Mississippi, he was just my age and I was scared, and
angry . . .

It is Staten Island, New York . . .

It is Ferguson, Missouri . . .

No one indicted, no one held to blame.

“1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 — 6 — 7 — 8 — 9 — 10 — 11 — 12 — 13 — 14 — 16 — 17 —
18 — 19.”

We chanted loud, Women in Black, United Nations Plaza, in 1999, calling out slowly the times Amadou Diallo was shot for pulling out his wallet. His mother’s voice in the vestibule where he was murdered, crying out his name — *Amadou, Amadou* — again and again and again.

Emmett Till's mother insisting on an open coffin. Mothers and fathers of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, calling for justice but also for peace.

It is 2015 and there are so many names. I would pray but I am *not a believer*, as people call us now, but I do believe, in action, in what has always been called struggle, in what I insist on calling faith, in the human capacity and responsibility to know and feel another human story, in what I can now call grace. I witness my son, a man of forty, marching from Washington Square Park, up 5th Avenue, across 34th Street, downtown on 6th, long renamed Avenue of the Americas, to One Police Plaza. He marches and shouts with colleagues and friends: *I can't breathe! Black lives matter!*

I believe in words. I am a mother/grandmother/writer/teacher/wife of a black man for forty-eight years/friend/Jewish American woman who loves color and still knows words can sometimes, might somehow be a part of the way, to everything. I am the tan woman whose sons are tawny amber autumn leaf and almond brown cedar umber spring earth brown, whose sons are black men now, the woman whose young nephew walks dangerous streets and rides on dangerous sidewalks, whose young granddaughter is "mixed," but clearly not white, slowly discovering and naming her inheritance.

Right now, as I write in the early winter days of 2015, I want courage here, a collective call, a shared claim—we are the mothers and fathers of black sons shot down on northern streets and stairwells and highways. Whiteness *is* a social and political category created to embed in the mind a false description of the body, its purpose to confirm privilege and superiority, to deny solidarity. It is not me. I reject it. It is not you.

We can't breathe.



White supremacy has always included a fierce, often violent insistence on purity. From nation to nation, from decade to decade and century to century, homes, villages, and whole nations are destroyed, millions killed, in the name of racial purity, religious purity, ethnic purity. Yet we know

enough about the human condition to know that none of us is pure, and race itself has been shown to be a false genetic category. Yet *race is*, as I said in this book written twenty years ago. Just as *blackness is and blackness ain't*, as Ralph Ellison wrote in *Invisible Man*. Just as we know, despite denial and racial hatred, even despite individual and collective struggles toward imaginative identification, *whiteness is and whiteness ain't*.

Some years ago, I began another memoir, still in progress, about my father, an immigrant from Kishinev, Romania (then a part of Russia, now Chisinau, Moldova), a lifelong radical activist and communist—with both a small and for years a capital C—until the 1950s when he finally left the Party that had betrayed him. Yet he retained the socialist ideals that had drawn him and sustained him from his youth in the “old country” to his death in New York City in 1971. In the course of writing this book, I contemplate my legacy from him—the gift of loving language, certainly, and at least two other gifts that have driven, illuminated, and created my life.

One is embodied in the old Creole saying I quote toward the end of this book about race and motherhood: “Tell me who you love, and I will tell you who you are.”

The other gift, embodied in words from the same part of this book:

I feel a certain envy of people who have found a solid sense of self and direction in cultural identity, but it is a reality of my situation that I am not grounded in an identity signaled by nationality, color or religion. . . . Many who speak and write publicly, now, find their identities, their reconstructed selves, in cultural roots. But this is not where I have found myself. In trying to map this mobile, protean terrain, I sometimes think of my father who was a member of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, the American volunteers who went to Spain to fight Franco's fascism. I was proud of that history and deeply affected by it. The position of outsider in American society seemed a moral place to stand. The idea that Spanish fascism was the business of my father, a Russian born American Jew, seemed unquestionable and right.

I try to be true to his legacy by honoring the essential voices of those who speak out, break silence, and though it is hard—perhaps more so as one ages—to join with those who try to bear witness, “to transform silence into language and action,”¹⁰ to labor to describe, despite failure and setbacks, the risk of being mistaken or wrong.

I will end with the words of another poet, Phillis Wheatley, a plea to end the vast system of slavery in which she continued to live.

No more, America, in mournful strain
of wrongs, and grievance unredressed complain,
No longer shall thou dread the iron chain,
Which wanton Tyranny with lawless hand
Had made, and with it meant to enslave this land.¹¹

Two hundred fifty years later, it is freedom from lawless tyranny and murderous hatred we are calling for still.

Jane Lazarre

JULY 2015

NOTES

1. Chinua Achebe, “The Truth of Fiction,” in *Hopes and Impediments* (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1989), pp. 151, 153.
2. James Baldwin, Preface to *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. xii.
3. James Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village,” in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. 172.
4. Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village,” p. 175.
5. Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village,” p. 163.
6. Martin Luther King Jr., 1963 speech in Washington, D.C.
7. George Yancy, Maria Davidson, and Susan Hadley, eds., *Mothers of Black Sons* (forthcoming).
8. See “On the Problems of Breathing in America,” TomDispatch, February 15, 2015, at http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/175956/tomgram%3A_jane_lazarre,_on_the_problems_of_breathing_in_america.
9. “Strange Fruit,” sung by Billie Holiday, lyrics from a poem by Lewis Allen.
10. Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” in *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984).
11. Phillis Wheatley, “To the Rt. Hon. William, Earl of Dartmouth, His Majesty’s Principal Secretary of State for North America,” in *Poetry of Witness, the Tradition in English, 1500–2001*, edited by Carolyn Forché and Duncan Wu (New York: Norton, 2014), p. 285.