

Twentieth  
Anniversary  
Edition with a  
New Preface

# BEYOND THE WHITENESS OF WHITENESS

Memoir of a White  
Mother of Black Sons

JANE LAZARRE

## PRAISE FOR *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness*

“Lazarre cuts close to the bone in this penetrating ‘story of the education of an American woman.’”—Mary Carroll, *Booklist*

“In the end there is the great gift of being taken into the life of American black culture. On the way there, this mother and child—the most intimate relationships from infancy—has no public or political recognition for years. A kind of love story and useful as well to people in interracial lives and families.”

—Grace Paley

“[A] compelling story of one mother’s honest efforts to reach across the chasm between black and white America to comfort and guide her sons as they navigate their way to adulthood and self-sufficiency.”

—Gregory Howard Williams, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*

“Through the profoundly human caring of this book; its luminous beauty, passionate authenticity, truth and power; its multi-lensed and sourced hard-wrung wisdom—and yes, through the art with which it is written—we see, feel, understand what we never have before, the ways of the Whiteness of Whiteness; and we are challenged, enlarged, and enabled, as was Jane Lazarre, to move Beyond. This revelation book, so capable of creating change-making comprehension, is of crucial importance for our country’s self-knowledge and vision.”—Tillie Olsen

“A novelist, essayist, and teacher, Lazarre presents her troubling but clear-eyed vision of her life and times with incisiveness and grace.”

—John Gregory Brown, *Chicago Tribune*

“The inimitable eloquence of Lazarre’s *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness* defies facile summation.”—Kwame Okoampahoofe Jr., *New York Amsterdam News*

“Jane Lazarre has written an extraordinary book. *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness* is a personal memoir, a lively tale of teaching and family life, humorous, sad, and loving. Yet *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness* is also a profoundly political book. Through maternal, autobiographical reflection, Jane Lazarre confronts the white racism that has shaped American society and remains our harshest tragedy and deepest challenge.”

—Sara Ruddick, author of *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*

“A compassionate, compelling outpouring of anecdotal family stories and confessions . . . that fine-tune the reader’s awareness to racism in everyday life. Lazarre’s voice is artful and measured, like a friend’s, and her prose is thick with images. . . . *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness* provides substantial food for thought for both white and black perspectives on the murky issue of race in America.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“Powerful, moving, and beautifully written . . .”

—Richard L. Zweigenhaft, *Greensboro News & Record*

“This insightful Jewish mother opens our eyes to the pervasiveness of racism in our culture—a reality that Jews and other whites can easily ignore.”

—Rabbi Rachel Cowan, author of *Mixed Blessings: Marriage between Christians and Jews*

“[An] illuminating book . . . *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness* offer[s] invaluable insights not just for those working to raise children in biracial families, but for all who would like to understand the notion of whiteness in order to see beyond it and reach for fairness.”—Boyd Zenner, *Women’s Review of Books*

“This is a passionate, provocative, and moving narrative that should be on every American’s reading list. Jane Lazarre writes from an angle of vision that seems completely missing from the fractured and deeply troubled discourse about race in America. Her honesty and courage in telling this story is as instructive as it is praiseworthy, compelling us to think and feel differently.”—Sekou Sundiata, author of *The Circle Is Unbroken Is a Hard Bop*

“*Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness* will be the classic Lazarre’s *The Mother Knot* has become, a book in which a piece of American experience gets its full telling, a necessary book.”—Ann Snitow

“[Lazarre] . . . moves the reader. . . . When she writes, ‘I wish I could become Black for my sons,’ she delves straight into the heart of her dilemma.”

—Helen Schulman, *Elle*

**BEYOND  
THE  
WHITENESS  
OF  
WHITENESS**



# BEYOND THE WHITENESS OF WHITENESS

*Memoir of a White Mother of Black Sons*

TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH NEW PREFACE

Jane Lazarre

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*For Douglas H. White*

*and*

*Lois Meadows-White*

*and for*

*Leona Ruggiero,*

*who has been with me*

*every step of the way.*

*And for*

*Simeon Meadows White,*

*in lasting memory.*



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Several years ago, while participating in a faculty seminar at Eugene Lang College, I began to learn some of what I have tried to present here regarding the way in which all our knowledge of ourselves and our society is illuminated by a study of race and racism in a multicultural perspective. I am indebted to my student assistant, Cynthia Cohn, to my colleagues in that seminar, and especially to its leader and convener, Toni Oliviero, Associate Dean of the college, for expanding my knowledge of African American and Latino studies and of the profound relationships between curriculum and pedagogy.

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PREFACE TO THE  
TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

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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.”<sup>1</sup>

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.”<sup>22</sup>

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