

HomeFronts: Controversies in the Nontraditional

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No Place Like Home

"Becoming black is an inside job,[my son's] evolution into a proud black man will occur largely outside the walls of our home....well beyond the reach of my loving white arms."

Jana Wolff

We are rushing through the mall when we are suddenly aware that we are being watched. My partner leans into me slightly, whispering innocently, "Why are these people staring at us?" I catch a glimpse of our family in the mirrored sides of the escalator. In the reflection I see my handsome red-haired butch partner wheeling the stroller where our chubby-faced brown-skinned son is joyfully singing; I walk beside them, my red nails catching the glaring florescent lights and bouncing likes streaks of lightening back at us in the mirror. The heat and shock of this electric current hits me with all the force of a thunderstorm. My family, my precious, sweet family --the only home I've ever known -- stands out awkwardly, noticeably. We are somehow "odd," different and only barely welcome in the malls of America; our queerness presents a dissonant picture to the suburban shoppers.

That we are different, queer, is not exactly news to us. (On some level, I would worry far more if I "fit in" at the mall without raising an eyebrow.) I live in this world as an out Jew and a lesbian. I have been a hippie, and a braless feminist-- I am sure that if I were younger I would be pierced like a kewpie doll--; I have lived the pain, and joy, of otherness. My partner and I walk in this world with round fat bodies, and the erotic nature of our relationship is visible to all -- our queerness has never been secret.

But there is a different danger now, as strangers' eyes pierce my son's glowing laughter, annihilating his presence with what looks like disgust. I cannot minimize this hatred in a world where lesbian families are teargassed at the San Diego Pride parade - - a pregnant woman and 3 year old child hospitalized -- with nary a peep from the national media. I cannot ignore this ignorant evil in my neighborhood where the slightest suggestion of a three-year old temper tantrum in a tall black child is viewed as threatening. My black son's life is worth diddly-squat precisely because his most vulnerable behavior is viewed as potentially menacing.

My family is a danger to the American way of life, and therefore, my family is in grave danger.

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I am on the phone with my mother. I am discussing the possibility of adoption with her. She wants me to adopt an Asian child, "They are almost white," she says. I am baffled by this bizarre racist statement but I have since heard it many times. She said unequivocally, "You wouldn't adopt a black child, would you?" Her voice got hard on the word black. It was a dirty word and she knew it, but she wasn't going to flinch from its nastiness. With my stomach in my chest, I said, "Well, I would certainly consider it."

She pauses and calculates, as if attempting to be rational with someone who was clearly mentally ill. She told me about a TV show that she had seen that showed how black children raised by white parents grew up to hate them. I try to explain that there are many reasons that children are angry with their parents (knowing that she would miss the irony of this conversation). I tell her that many white parents had not raised their black children within the context of their own culture, the parents had tried to deny their children's ethnicity and that was why they were upset. She said, "They are so angry," slurring the word "they." I said, "They have a lot to be angry about", stressing the word "they." She said, "Sure they do, but why have them mad at YOU!!!"

Indeed, my mother's racism was not simply about the color of the child's skin. It wasn't a principled racism based on natural law, or racial superiority. My mother's concern was for me, a white woman with white privilege, who could easily adopt another child, a whiter child, and not open myself up to either black or white rage. A black person is a target in this culture, and she just didn't want to stand too close to that karma.

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I was a single lesbian when I adopted my one-week old son. After many years of struggling with infertility, I had just made an appointment for the following week to speak to an in vitro specialist. A friend called to tell me that her lover's sister had just given birth to a baby boy, who was being given up for adoption. This is what she told me: "His mother just doesn't want him and we simply can't take in another child [they had three]. He is just lying there in the nursery. Every other baby had family members gathering around and ogling their babies, and he is alone in the corner. His nametag said "Baby Boy." His mother will sign the final papers to relinquish him to the state tomorrow. Do you want him?"

I remember saying "yes" on my out-breath. I do not remember thinking about my mother's reaction. I do not remember thinking about having a son versus having a daughter. I do not remember thinking about the politics or risks of adoption. I do not remember thinking, "Why me? Why did you call me?" I do not remember thinking

about race. I only had one thought, which was half-formed -- "baby." As the thought matured over the next few minutes it became "a baby," and then "my baby," and then it just turned over and over again inside of me like warm clothes in the dryer, tumbling around, "my baby," "my baby."

"Yes!" "Yes!" "Of course, I want him. When can I get him? What should I do?" I waited through that long weekend. I worried that his birth mother would change her mind. I worried about how I was going to find a baby sitter so I could go to work on Tuesday. My life had a surreal feeling, knowing that everything was going to change, and yet everything just seemed so incredibly usual. Everyone told me to sleep because I might never sleep again, but of course I couldn't. I went out to Ames and bought \$500 dollars worth of baby things, including the most expensive car seat, one bib and two bottles.

The phone call came on the first night of Sukkot, the Jewish Harvest festival, and my son came home on Simchat Torah, the day in Jewish tradition that God gave Moses the Torah, our most holy book. Monday morning arrived and they piled out the car, three black women, 4 black children (I briefly worried about car seats), and one rather smelly, large, wide-eyed black baby. His birth mother handed me this precious holy baby, they piled back into the car and I had become a mother.

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I did not realize the earthquake of changes that trans-racial queer adoption would unleash. I did not realize when I offered to take in a homeless baby, that I too would become homeless

I expected resistance to the adoption from certain communities. One was the general homophobia I knew to expect from the patriarchal heterosexist mainstream community that thought that gay parenthood was an anathema. I also knew that many lesbian and gay parents felt unsupported within the gay community, and that parenting would change my relationship to my lesbian community. I suspected that the Jewish community would struggle with accepting a child of color, and that the issue of adoption, particularly trans-racial adoption would raise issues for many people, including my family. Finally, I expected resistance from both white supremacists and black nationalists whom I knew would find my family's very existence offensive.

I had, however, lived my rather queer life in a mixed race and alternative Jewish community, and many of my close friends were parents. I naively thought that within the confines of my alternative lifestyle my family would be bell-curve normatively queer. I was not prepared for the multiple levels of issues that trans-racial queer adoption would raise, even for the most progressive of my friends.

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Even after 25 years of anti-racism activism I did not realize how much white privilege I had until it was revoked. Being the mother of a black child meant that I was no

longer fully a member of the white privileged elite even if I had wanted to be. I no longer had the choice of moving within white culture as if it were my own. I was marked as a 'nigger-lover' as my mother had warned me I would be. Being the white mother of a black child is not the same as being the white lover of a black man, or even a black woman. I do not want to minimize the racism levied at interracial couples, especially interracial queer couples, but in my experiences it does not compare to the discomfort raised by trans-racial parenting. Even people who are uncomfortable with interracial adult relationships believe it to be an 'adult' decision. The idea of trans-racial parenting, particularly queer trans-racial parenting, raises concerns for the child - the unwilling participant in perceived deviance. As if other children are lucky enough to choose their parents and upbringing.

I was so delirious with joy those first few weeks that I didn't notice that my white friends kept asking me if I could "handle this"? Yes, they admired the baby as all babies are admired -- toes tickled and tushies squeezed -- but they also had this worried look. They worried about me being a single parent, and they worried about the cost of adoption, and they worried if his birth-mom would or could take him away -- all honest concerns, but not quite the whole truth. Like all new mothers I was too busy in the beginning to take much notice, but over time I realized they seemed to spend a lot of time discussing his skin color, which darkened as the days passed. I began to realize that they were uncomfortable, a bit awkward, with his racial features, which would come out as mild jokes about his wide nose, or thick lower lip. It was lighthearted and loving, not different from how other children might be teased for their baldness or having Uncle Henry's big nose, but over and over again it became tedious. They were struggling to integrate his blackness into their lives, as was I.

Flipping through the pictures of my 3-week-old son is one shot taken on a bad angle, looking right up his nose. His nostrils looked SO wide, I freeze looking at the picture. Who is this child? Could this be "my" child? How could I be the parent of someone with such different features than I have?

Racism for most of my white friends, perhaps for most white people, is something "out there," something that they witness from the comfort of their living room, watching a Klan rally on television, or reading a newspaper article about poverty in the black ghettos. They cluck their tongues and shake their hands and switch the station, or turn the page, to something less stressful. They view themselves as non-racist and abhor racist laws and police violence. They explain the fact that all their friends' are white as a random toss of the dice. They do not see themselves as participants in racist behavior, but as someone above or outside of it. This of course veils their own racism and ignorance, and absolves them of any daily responsibility in the perpetuation of the racist system.

In the first two years of my son's life, white friends, white neighbors, white colleagues, white baby sitters and white daycare workers told me again and again how soft his hair felt. His hair is a lovely, nappy brown. It is not particularly coarse, but it is certainly not "soft," especially by white standards. But they would pat him on the

head, like a cute puppy, and tell me how soft his hair was. I have never had a black person do this. I began to wonder had these white people never touched African woolly hair before? Did they think it was wiry like a Brillo pad? Certainly they were more comfortable touching him as a baby, then they could have been touching black adults.

A Latina friend said she taught her daughter to never let anyone touch her hair. She said this with a vehemence that shocked me at the time. It seemed so intense, a way to further separate out the races, so that white people could never know what black hair felt like and I thought this would just increase white ignorance. Moreover, it seemed cruel to me to have this pretty little girl child with her hair so lovingly braided, never being touched; I wanted to be able to touch her head casually, with ease, as I would touch any child's head or hair.

I have come to understand that her hair is off limits for touch as my body is off limits. Not because I am ashamed of my body, or because touch does not feel good, but because I can't trust others, except those I am very close to, to respect my body; it is better to not be touched than to be touched in a way that is not sacred.

White supremacy is not only ubiquitous, it is insidious. When white people see me on the streets they are often overly enthusiastic, ardent in their desire to recognize and honor this black child in a white woman's arms. They always assume he is adopted. They never assume I have given birth to him. They always assume that he has been adopted from the social service system. They often say, "he is so lucky." The assumption is that I have saved him from some horribly abusive situation and that now he is in a white home where he will be safe.

Sometimes black women have said this too, usually older women, grandmothers. They check me out and look deep in my eyes; they are testing me to find me capable of the task. If I pass their scrutiny their words and actions seem to convey a sense of relief, as if to say, "This one will have it easier."

I suppose it is true that if I did not adopt my son, he would have been placed in the system. Perhaps he would have been in many foster homes, perhaps he would've become another victim of the system. His biological mother has lost custody of her two other children and there is no doubt in anyone's mind, including his biological grandmother and aunt, that he has a better life now than he could have had if he had not been placed for adoption.

It is, however, hard for me to see how I saved him, when it is so clear that he has saved me. His biological mother did not know she was pregnant; she thought she had miscarried. It has been suggested that perhaps there had been twins. I hold a vision of my tiny embryonic son crawled up inside his birthmom, hiding and totally quiet, so know one would know he was there. Both Jews and blacks know a lot about hiding; our ancestors have excelled at it-- in barns and on rivers, in the woods and in attics --, we hide for our survival.

I have always viewed my son's existence in my life as a gift from the gods, undeserved in some way, but relieved that they had finally decided to recognize me and respond to my prayers. His name -- Shaiyah Ben Lev -- in Hebrew means "God's gift, son of the heart", and "shade, or protection" in Sanskrit. As a tree offers shade and protection to those who stand beneath it, my son -- god's most precious gift to me --, protects me from my barren womb, and from a life without children's laughter. I did not save him, but he saved me.

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I am bringing my son in public for his first outing on a cold winter's day, and I notice some black friends talking in the aisle of the concert hall. They do not come over to the baby and me, but kept glancing towards the baby carriage. I take a deep breath and carry my round warm bundle over to them. "Would you like to see him?" I ask, proud as a peacock. I attempt to ignore their obviously cool stares. "Sure" they lie, and barely looking at my handsome son they nod and say "very nice." They turn away physically, excluding us from their circle.

I must admit I didn't expect this. I did expect blatant racism from the white community, and less blatant racism from the Jewish community. I did expect raw honesty and abject ignorance from my immediate family. I did expect cold stares from both White and Black strangers on the streets. In my ignorance though, I did not expect negative reactions from within my own community, and from my friends who are of color.

I am having lunch with one friend and today she is very angry. She is angry because, in her words, "things are getting worse all the time for people of color." I am surprised to hear her say this. Not because I am ignorant of how bad things are for people of color, but because I do not agree that things are getting worse. "Are they worse than they were a little over 100 years ago before slavery was abolished?", I ask. I am clearly making her furious. "I am talking about the poverty in our community," she says, clearly not including me in the "our" though she is far more wealthy than I will ever be. I remember reading just the other day in Essence magazine that the numbers of black women opening their own businesses is extraordinarily high, and I report this success. My friend looks away from me, disgusted. "How many of those businesses fail?" she asks.

I am disheartened, and clearly losing ground by the minute. I am not new to the righteousness of black anger, but it is true that I am not used to having it turned on me. Black friends have often shared with me their frustration at other white people. Only half jesting they will say to me, "What is with you people?" but their tone tells me that they know that "we" are not all the same. My friends' anger does not scare me, but I do feel sick to my stomach. There is something here that I am not getting. I am not sure how we came to be on different teams. We are suddenly not two radical lesbian feminist anti-racism activists battling a racist patriarchy; we are White and Black, and

the fence between us is insurmountable. My friend looks at me, glaring, and says, "you have to believe things are getting better because of your are raising a black son."

I am defeated, my white flag waving in the breeze.

She is right of course. I am raising a black son in a war zone. I was warned by more than one African-American mom: They are only considered cute till 6 or 7, than they are in trouble. Do I have to believe that things are getting better, because I cannot believe that my son is truly in the grave danger he is in? How can I rise up to what is being asked of me? My friend accepts that the danger her children are in is a given, but my white skin privilege means that I have lived all my life with racism as something "out there," not something directed at *my* child. I will never have the skills my friend has to recognize, prepare for and combat racism, not if I read all the books, and go to all the right meetings, and wear my "practice anti-racism" buttons. I was born to this world with a shiny white privilege, *even* as a Jew, *even* as a raised working-class girl, *even* as a dyke. I parent my son as all Jewish mothers have, I expect him to survive, and thrive. I am not ignorant to racist violence or the social cost of Blackness. Blackness, though, evokes a different kind of bigotry than the invisible oppressions I have experienced. I have learned to survive anti-Semitism, classism and homophobia, to a large extent, by ignoring them. Although, of course, my roots are always showing, I do not walk in the world with my Jewishness, my working-class background or my lesbianism visible in the way that Blackness is visible. Although I never purposely pass, I have unconsciously used my invisibility as a survival tool. Not only is this a tool that my son will not be able to utilize, but it is one that will be used as a weapon against him.

A white woman who is the mother of three African-American children tells me this story. They are walking out of a grocery store and a white man who works in the store glares towards her teenage children and loudly slurs a racial epitaph. She says her first reaction was to give him a big piece of her mind. But she stops, noticing her children are watching her to see what she will do. She realizes that she cannot model this kind of aggressive, confrontive behavior. She cannot teach her child to respond to white violence with more violence. She marches back into the grocery store and explains the situation to the manager on duty. They go home and write a letter to the storeowner. Her children watch her every move, learning how to protect themselves without endangering themselves. I wonder if I would've held my tongue, if I'd remembered to only put the tools in his tool kit that will serve him.

An African-American friend says to me, "The problem with you white parents, is that you think you can protect your black children from racism." I do not answer her, but spend the next year contemplating this statement.

Here is my answer. I do want to protect my son from racism. What parent would not want to protect their children from becoming fodder for an angry white policeman's frustrations, or an elementary school teacher's prejudice? I also want to protect my child from schoolyard bullies, and fast moving cars, from electric outlets and large

bodies of water. I want to protect him as well from poverty, and homophobia, and anti-Jewish hatred. What parent would not want to do the same? The sad truth is that neither of us can protect our children from the ravages and pain of the world.

People of color have good reasons to be concerned about white adoption of "their" children. They have good reasons to be concerned that white families will not only be ill equipped to teach them how to survive racism, but more importantly that they will not be able to cultivate pride in their unique culture and heritage. How would I feel if Jewish children were being raised in Hindu, or Catholic homes, albeit good and loving homes? Would I believe that they were able to sing the right songs, eat the right foods, and learn the rhythm of our ways of life? I admit I would be leery, doubtful that a non-Jewish family could pull this off and have a child with a sense of comfort and pride in his identity.

Black friends are right to question whether I am up to the task. My issue is that they don't ask. They have not engaged me in conversations about adoption or race or even motherhood. What they have done is shut me out. Friendly lunches became unanswered phone calls. Invites to dinner are not returned. I hear through the grapevine that they don't want to be used as a "role model" for my son. My son at the time was not yet crawling and was a long way from noticing the racial configurations of those that came and went in our home. How did my measure of these friendships come down to race? The only role models I have wanted for my son were those I would've wanted anyway. If I had birthed my son or if he was white skinned, wouldn't I still want my black friends to be his role model? The sad part is that my son *has* lost good role models and indeed good black role models and we are all the worse for that.

The majority of African-American children available for adoption today are victims of a long history of racism in this country. They are victims of a system that has placed thousands of African-American children in foster care and has not created the economic support within the black community to foster these children. That black children can and should be raised within their own communities is, to me, obvious. That the African-American community should be furious at the racist system that perpetuates the destruction of its families is also obvious. However, the rejection by African-American activists of black children being raised in white homes is unconscionable. It may be difficult, given the history of racism and all the problems with the system, to expect black families to embrace white families who are raising black children. It may be too much to ask black families to extend the arms of their cultural matrix to include all their black children being raised in white homes. However, the reality is that many black children *are* being raised in white homes, and to turn their backs on these families is to condemn African-American children to the very white-bread existence that they feared for these children.

I decide to confront a friend. I say to her, "You have been avoiding me since the adoption. It is obvious you have feelings about this. Can we talk about it?" She shakes her head and says, "It is done."

It was said as a pronouncement, as one might announce the sex of a newborn child ("It's a boy") or a doctor might report the loss of a patient ("I am sorry but your father has died"). It was irrefutable and not open to discussion. It was a fait d'accompli, a done deal, irrevocable, undeniable and something she would have to accept with the grace of all survivors who must accept the unacceptable. It is done.

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When the coldness of the Christian world becomes too much, as a Jew, I can always "go home." It's true that as an out lesbian, not every Jewish space is warmly welcoming to me, but many are. There are many places -- shuls and community centers -- where I can go and just sit, and hear the familiar refrains of davenen, or the high-pitched gossip of older women gathering in the kitchen to prepare the sweet deserts and weak coffee. I can close my eyes, and breathe the smells and shuckle to the comfortable rhythm of what is most familiar.

I walk into Leo's bakery, where Friday afternoons are crowded with Jews preparing for the Sabbath. Most shoppers are not religious, this is for them a secular event, a way of marking time and reserving space for their families. Whether or not you are known by name, everyone chats with each other, sticking their noses a bit too closely into each other's bakery goods, wondering aloud if the bobka is as good as the German coffee cake, and if Aunt Sylvia would like it better.

I am holding my new son in my arms. I am still new to carrying a newborn baby, and am endlessly surprised by how very heavy he is. His little face is curled up in my breast, and I too start to sniff around at the bakery goods, wondering which desert will please my Sabbath guests the most. A older woman leans into me, imploringly, "Oye a new baby" she says, her hand motions demanding that I produce my baby, who will be sniffed and nibbled at like the bobka. Babies simply command attention in Jewish communities, and like the bakery goods, adults often proclaim them "good enough to eat" and threaten to "take a bite." I, proud new mother and miles away from my own family, -- gently turn my handsome son to this woman's view. She visibly jumps back, and although she says not a word I can see her thoughts -- "a shvartzer" -- a black child. She scans my face, searching for Jewish features, and then looks back down at my son's wide nose and round eyes and I can see her imagining my wild sexual escapades with a black man. She pulls herself together, and smiles. She sees my little boy for the first time, "He's so sweet" she says, "Good for the two of you" and I somehow trust that she means this. She is not 'really' racist, she would insist, just surprised. She went back to sniffing other bakery products; it is clear that Aunt Sylvia wouldn't want us to bring home this sweet desert.

The Jewish community, of course, is a tribe without borders. Jews are black and white, Chinese and East Indian, Arab and Israeli. I have a book of international Jewry and there are two pictures I love. One shows a Southeast Asian woman wearing a sari and a bindi, taking the chapati bread out of the big tandoori oven. The caption reads "A Jewish woman preparing for the Sabbath." The other picture shows a Japanese man with a yarmalka and tallis standing in front of an opened Torah. The caption

reads simply, "A rabbi." In my son's room is small picture, mailed to me by a friend months before my son's adoption. It shows congregation standing in front of their shul, men, women and children -- all are American Blacks.

But despite these images, racism is a powerful thing, and American Jews are mostly the descendants of Eastern Europe. In America it is our whiteness that has been our ticket and what people can resist what seems to be free tickets for a piece of the Apple Pie?

I decided not to circumcise my son. I did not think of this as "heavy" decision. It is consistent for me with my values about bodies and sexuality and holistic health care. I am shocked by the intensity of reactions. My Jewish friends who never celebrate Shabbat or attend schul, who are tattooed and pierced, who are non-monogamous radical dykes, insist that circumcision is part of the holy covenant, and that my son (read: "your black son") will *never* be accepted as a Jew if he has a foreskin. I struggle to find a local shul that will allow us a non-circumcision Naming Ceremony. I wind up screaming at people on the phone for their ignorance, heterosexist assumptions, blatant white racism and rigid Jewish orthodoxy. I create and plan a beautiful ritual that following the general guidelines of the brit milah, and incorporates the less traditional rituals from a girl's naming ceremony. We also pour libations to the African gods; Shaiyah's Uncle Felix invokes the presence of the Yoruba deities Yamayah and Chango. I chant the holy names of Ganesha, the elephant-faced god from India who protects the children. Loved ones including my son's biological cousins and his aunts - - Jewish, African-American and West Indian -- surround me. We are in a circle of protection creating our families from the flesh of our bodies. My son is a Jew because he is being raised to be a Jew with all his flesh intact.

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When I first decided to have a child, I began the way most lesbians do, seeking donor semen, and choosing between known versus unknown options. The process of choosing donor semen involves making endless choices, including hair and eye color and reading through piles of biographical profiles. Decisions about race also need to be made. One sperm bank color-codes their semen vials, White, Black, Yellow and Red and another told me that Jewish donors (in White vials, I'm sure) were in the most demand because people believe they are the smartest.

I considered inseminating with a Mexican donor. A Puerto Rican friend was appalled. "How will you sing lullabies to this child?" she asked. "You do not even speak Spanish." She thought it was racist of us to even consider this, and ended the conversation. A white colleague, who was also a lesbian and also struggling with infertility, told me she was using a Hispanic (her word) donor. I asked her how she intended to address issues of the child's culture. She looked at me dismissively and said, "the child is American," and she too ended the conversation.

'Creating' biracial children seems to bring up different issues from trans-racial adoption. One biracial friend said, "it is different if you love someone of a different race [as her parents did], but to purposely create children who will have to negotiate that is just not fair." A black friend said, "you don't just create kids to 'match' the kid you have." Another black friend said, "I am honored you would do consider birthing a black child; it proves more to me more than anything you have ever done that you are truly not racist." And yet another friend says, "You must do this or your son will be the only person of color in the family."

Living in a racist culture makes all decisions involving race suspect. Any choice made in picking a donor has racial and political implications, including choosing a white donor. Although it is often a less conscious decision, it is no less suspect.

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My friend Joel is a Jewish Gay man who is single, parenting a black son. Joel wakes up from the following dream: His son comes home from school speaking a thick black dialect; he can not understand him. He strains to understand him, but he cannot.

Before Joel became the parent of an African-American child, he did not think himself racist, and did not think that the lives of white and black Americans were all that different. Now he knows that as much as he loves his son, there are certain things we may never understand about him; he worries that they cannot speak the same language. He says, "There are certain things we don't know about ourselves until we cross that bridge." Janna Wolff, in a wonderful article on interracial parenting, calls it waking up from "a deep, white sleep." I have come to learn that many white people in my life were ignorant of their white skin privilege, not just asleep but they were damn near in a coma. What Joel does not say is that when we cross that bridge, there is no turning back.

I pick my infant son up from daycare, and I read his daily note. It says, "Today we learned how to make turkey sounds, and Indian sounds." I am outraged and complain to the school. I say, "Indians make the same sounds that all people do. They talk." I say, "Indians are not animals that make sounds, they are people, like you and me." I say, "Yes it matters that even an infant is not taught that Indians make sounds like animals." I know that I would've complained even if my son were white. I do not know if I would've pulled him out of the school, which I did immediately.

I do not think that being the white mom of an African-American child has made me more conscious of racism. I do not think it has made me a better anti-racism activist. What it has done is point the rage of the racists in my personal direction; it has made me more vulnerable.

Although white racists have now targeted me as their enemy, it doesn't mean that I am any more welcomed into communities of color or able to assist my son in acculturating within black culture.

Jana Wolfe says, "It must be hard for a child to have, as tour guides, parents who are tourists themselves. The risk is that the culture being visited will be reduced to its souvenirs."

I call a black friend and ask her to help me braid my son's hair. She says, "Black people spend way too much time dealing with their hair. I was tortured as a kid. Don't do it to your son. Let his hair just be. Don't worry so much about it." I repeat this to another white adoptive mom. She says, "That is really bad advice. You are being held to different standards than she would be. Let her kids' be wild; you keep your kids' head looking neat."

When my son gets the chicken pox, I email a black friend. "What do I do to help his skin not scar." She says simply, "Cocoa butter and vitamin E." She does not lecture me about black skin. She does not tell me "if you were black you would know the answer to that," which another friend says. She accepts that I am a tourist and she gives me directions. When I get the chicken pox four weeks later I discover that cocoa butter and vitamin E works really well on white skin, too.

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My partner and I have spent the last few years of our lives engaged in a long conversation about where we should live. Wherever we live we have to sacrifice something. If we live in a mixed race neighborhood where our son will grow up comfortably seeing other dark skinned people, and nelly dads and butch moms, we give up our dream of living in nature and having our son free to spend his growing years knowing safety and connection to the earth. If we live in the country we commit to driving miles each week to maintain any kind of Jewish community, or queer community or black community. Is this the price we pay for fresh air and unlocked doors?

Our neighbors are moving "uptown. An African-American family with two small children, they are moving to a white suburb, with big lawns and safe streets, in order to put their kids in "good schools." Another family, an African-American lesbian couple with children, lives out in a small town outside of our city. They are the only children of color in the rural school. These families know that their children cannot be better armed than with a good education. Their children will be educated in white schools, but come home to black families. We recently decided to pull my son from his multi-cultural day care across the street from our house, and place him in a Montessori School 20 minutes away. This school seems to offer an excellent education, though it stresses our budget to send him there. He will be one of the few children of color in the school. He will not come home to a black family.

Do we send him to an inner city school, where he will be around more kids of color so he will never become a tourist among his own people? Or, do we send him to the best schools we can, giving him a good education -- which is the sharpest weapon we can

give him to succeed in the this racist society -- risking a sense of estrangement from other black people?

We make our home on the borders. Living Jewish lives we are still outside of the Jewish community because we are queers raising a black child. As out lesbians, we are suspect as too radical because we are butch and femme, and too conservative because we are parents. As white parents raising a black child we have lost our membership to the white world, but not gained an admission to the black community.

I open the door arriving from work and smell chicken soup cooking on the stove. My son runs up to me, yelling, "Momma, you're home. Let's go light the candles." He smells of cocoa butter and macaroni, good enough to eat. On the table are the Chanukah menorah, and the Kwanzaa kinara. My son wears his yarmulke, standing between his two moms who adore each other. He is growing into a tall Jewish black man, the son of proud butch and femme lesbian parents. It is done; we are home.

Footnote:

Jana Wolff, Black Unlike Me (1999) The New York Times. February 14, 1999

Glossary of terms:

tushies -- (Yiddish tuchis) bottom, buttocks

shul -- (Yiddish) synagogue

davenen -- (Yiddish) to pray the prescribed prayers of the liturgy

bobka ---- Eastern European sweet bread.

shvartzer -- (German shvartz) black, refers to African-Americans, used in a derogatory manner.

Shuckle -- (Yiddish) -- to move back and forth rapidly in prayer

brit milah (Hebrew) -- ritual of the covenant of circumcision, performed 8 days of age for infant Jewish males.

yarmulke -- (Yiddish) skullcap worn by Jewish men traditionally,

Tallis -- (Yiddish) prayer shawl

Bindi -- (Sanskrit) red dot worn in on the third eye to show devotion towards God among East Indians.

Chapati bread -- East Indian bread

Kwanzaa kinara -- Kwanzaa is an African-American holiday and the kinara is the candelabrum that is lit.

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