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Mothers Confronting Racism

Transforming the Lives of Our Children and Others

BLANCHE RADFORD CURRY

Mothing Against Racism

Racism has been and continues to be an overwhelming psychological and sociological reality that is destroying American society. When our children are involved, the suffering and injustices that racism places on them are often heavier for mothers to bear than the agony and burdens of racism on ourselves.

Mothers and caregivers of all races can be significant change agents in transforming “race as problematic” into “race as enriching.”¹ “Womenfolk,” Johnetta B. Cole reminds us, are still our major socializers—the first and principal teachers of our children’s values, attitudes and behavior patterns—and as such we can be a “catalyst” for confronting racism.² As our children’s primary socializers, we can and must confront and challenge racism in their child rearing and their schooling as well as support related efforts like developing political policy that is clearly against racism. We can, as Cole states, socialize our children to respect multiculturalism and diversity, urge our schools to teach an inclusive history of America’s many people, and mirror lives which echo the needs of a pluralistic society.³

Discovering Their Race as Less Than

As I begin to think about confronting racism, I think of my own daughter's encounters with racism. Given her vivacious and loquacious personality, she is seldom wary of strangers. One day, when traveling through an airport terminal as a toddler, elated over people exchanging smiles and greetings with her, she discovered one white male at our departure gate who refused to reciprocate her greeting. She quickly asked, "Mom what's wrong with him?" I immediately responded, "Oh he's having a bad morning." As my eyes met his, his body language and my sense of his culture indicated his racist wish to deny her existence as a human being. I was pleased to be able to respond so quickly in a way that stunned him and did not further impact my daughter. While we waited for the plane, my daughter got the same reaction from some white girls she wanted to play with. Their white mother whisked her daughters away, and again my daughter asked, "What's wrong, Mom?" Scenes from Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* came to mind, as well as scenarios about white mothers not allowing their children to play with black children.⁴ I told her not to worry, that their mother wanted to ready them to board the plane.

Thinking of *The Bluest Eye* reminds me of other occasions when my children experienced racism. At two different schools a couple of my daughter's white classmates had made her feel that her hair and her race meant she was not as pretty as they were. I talked with her about inner and outer beauty and about different styles of physical beauty versus just white people's ideas of beauty. As we continued to talk and to look in the mirror, I emphasized the richness of having inner beauty, and her physical beauty as well, pointing out Queen Cleopatra and other beautiful African-American women, and reminding her of one of her favorite books, *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters*. We also discussed the advantages of black hair and skin versus white hair and skin. I reminded her that different textures of hair made different hairstyles possible and of the almost daily hair shampooing for whites versus every one to three weeks for blacks. She cherished her daddy's ritual kissing of her forehead and his saying he liked "pigtails" better than "ponytails," she enjoyed wearing "braids" with or without his ritual kissing, and she joyfully commented on Whitney Houston's

beauty, giving me a sense of success.

My son has also experienced the sting of racism. The night before his tenth birthday, he shared a painful incident involving racism at his school.⁵ As he shared what had happened that day—a white boy's piercing comment that he knew he was white because he didn't stay in the oven as long as my son had, that Africans live in huts, and so on—my son expressed the feeling too often shared by African-American boys. He said he wanted to be white because white people don't like black people, but black people like white people. Why was this, he asked. I fought back my rage and my feeling of failure to fortify him more against such racism. How and when does a mother explain racism to her child? How does she let him know that he will encounter many other experiences of racism, from subtle and not so painful to blatant and very painful? My priority was fulfilling his most immediate needs, making him feel good about himself. I thought quickly about how to build his self-esteem and strengthen his pride in his African-American heritage.

I began by saying that I'm African American, that I like being an African American and that I love having a bright African-American boy like him, that I would not have it any other way. Next, I reminded him of several great contributions to humanity by African Americans such as the gas mask, the almanac, the shoe mold, blood plasma, the horse bridle and so forth. "Remember," I said, "how few of the white students and the teachers knew about these contributions before I spoke at your school? Your unfortunate experience is why it is important for us to donate African-American books in your name to the school library in honor of your birthday—so people like that little white boy can learn that he is wrong." I explained further that too often white people do not know or deliberately overlook the contributions of not only African Americans but also Native Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans and other people of color. We ended our talk with my singing "Happy Birthday" early, along with the words, "You're my little boy, soon to be my big boy, my little man, my big man—you're my genius, you're my African-American boy and I love you." He smiled happily as he closed his eyes.

While making some progress in rebuilding his self-esteem and in celebrating his African-American heritage, I had not answered his question of why? Is he ready—am I ready—to use the term "racism" in

explaining what indeed was an experience of racism? Can knowing the meaning of racism have any transformative significance in confronting racism? In *Sister Outsider*, Audre Lorde defines racism as “the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance.”⁶ David Theo Goldberg states that “racism is generally considered to be discrimination against others in virtue of their putatively different racial membership.”⁷ Goldberg also notes that racism can be institutional, which he defines as a characteristic of institutions “whose formative principles incorporate and whose social functions serve to institute and perpetuate the beliefs and acts in question.”⁸

Kwame Anthony Appiah⁹ and Naomi Zack¹⁰ make a distinction between what I refer to as “transformable racism,” involving assumptions and false beliefs, and “pathological racism,” meaning the same as Appiah’s “cognitive incapacity,” a failure to distinguish between the world as it is and how one would like it to be.¹¹ When we encounter transformable racism, pointing out the facts adequately disputes false beliefs; but no facts are adequate enough for pathological racism. People living pathological racism are not capable of conceptualizing the absurdity of racism as a good reason for opposing it. Given this truth, there is no transformative significance in the meaning of racism to undercut or to undo pathological racism. Mothers must use other options to challenge pathological racism and consider the transformative significance of the meaning of racism as a beginning point for exposing assumptions and false beliefs about different races that serve as the basis of transformable racism. There is encouraging research that transformable racism can be unlearned.¹² It is possible as Spike Lee says, “to do the right thing.”

What Else

After my son’s experience and our conversation, I discussed the matter with my spouse, pouring out my anger and seeking other options to deal with the situation. My anger was compounded by my husband’s immediate response that it would be advantageous to be white. It was his usual philosophy, one of pragmatism wrapped in humor for easier coping. Yes, being white would make all aspects of our lives less

problematic. As African-American adults, we understand this philosophy and humor as a means for attaining a greater tolerance of daily racism.¹⁵ However, I was unwilling to trust that our son would understand this strategy as a means of coping with racism rather than deflating his self-esteem.

My husband and I talked about how much harder it is now than it was in our childhoods to instill self-esteem and pride in African-American children. We grew up with two working-class parents. Our children are growing up with two post-college-degreed middle-class parents and experiencing a decent education as well as social and various cultural exposures. Nevertheless, they face the same problems of racism, in varying degrees, that plague all African-American children, whether poor or wealthy, with one parent or both parents. Did desegregation help? As African-American children, my husband and I certainly lacked equal educational facilities and means compared to white children. But we surely had a strong sense of self-esteem. Could it be the media's conveying too many negative images of African Americans? For the most part, there was only one television or no television in our homes with limited viewing allowed.

Neither my husband nor I grew up with substantial daily contact with white people, since we lived in different neighborhoods from whites, shopped in different stores, ate in different restaurants, attended different schools and churches and so on. I concluded earlier that my strong self-esteem and my assertiveness toward white people during my teen and early adult years were somehow related in part to my rearing. Our all-black neighborhoods and schools were mirrors that enhanced our self-esteem and pride in our heritage. Similarly, our limited social worlds further sheltered us from situations in which whites promoted the idea of black inferiority. Of course integration is better than segregation. True integration is the beginning of diversity within unity—bridges to a greater quality of life for all of us. However, I subsequently learned of the overwhelming resistance to true integration in our society. As my social world widened during my early adult years, I discovered that African Americans were *supposed* to be different from whites, not their equals, but relegated to a subordinate position that had unfair consequences for all aspects of African-American people's lives.

Fortifying our children with strong self-esteem is important in confronting racism. Our children's encounters with racism make the fostering of self-esteem an *ongoing process*. The mother of my son's soccer friend recently talked with me about the need to rebuild the self-esteem of her seventeen-year-old son because of police racism directed against him. While driving the family's "nice" Jeep alone, as well as when other African-American teens were with him, the police had followed him and called his mother on three occasions, inquiring whether the Jeep had been stolen and questioning whether she was black when she pointed out that her son had his parents' permission to drive the Jeep and that he was very responsible. Of course, neither the white teenage neighbor who frequently drove his parents' nice Jeep nor his mother had to endure the experience of the African-American family. My friend's son began to lack enthusiasm about being a teenage driver and became reluctant about driving to school, work or on family errands.

This conversation reminded me of too many similar ones shared by other mothers of African-American teenage sons and of what I could expect when my son becomes a teenager. I also recalled how African-American males are sometimes stifled in different ways than African-American females are by racism in our patriarchal society, which models the male as the breadwinner, the hero, the macho one. African-American males have more difficulty achieving these images than do white males because of racism, irrespective of the proven problems with such images.¹⁴

A tool we mothers can use is collaborative dialogue with each other. Through collaborative dialogue, mothers provide one another with other options in our struggle to resist racism. Just as my son's soccer friend's mother had reminded me that elevating our children's self-esteem is an ongoing process, I shared options for dealing with the police that she had not considered. I began to think about other ways of resisting racism, actions beyond bettering our children's and others' self-esteem via a home richly expressive of their history and culture, by exposure to books, cultural, social and political events reflecting positive images of African Americans and other ethnic groups, by donating books on African-American culture and history to my children's school library, and by making presentations about the incredible contributions

of African Americans at our children's and others' schools.

In what other ways can mothers teach antiracism? Many of us can do more sharing about African-American culture and history at schools and elsewhere beyond Kwanzaa and Black History Month. Mothers need to talk more about what does and does not work in their antiracism endeavors. Sharing certain children's books, such as *The Color of My Fur* and *The Best Face of All*, has worked well for me in presentations against racism for both children and adults. We need to encourage open-minded white mothers and other nonblack mothers to speak and act against racism. Their conversations and actions against racism render important psychological dynamics for others who *look* like them, and also for African Americans. In some cases whites will be more receptive to antiracism from persons that look like them than from people of color. Similarly, it is often encouraging to nonwhites to know that there are whites who are willing to confront racism. Too often, white mothers' support of antiracism stops short of action, failing to bridge theory and practice.

Mothers can discuss students' acts of racism with teachers who are likely to address the matter. I recall sharing my observation of an act of racism with a white teacher. She thanked me the next day, relating that the two white girls had been counseled in accordance with school policy about their unacceptable acts toward an African-American male schoolmate of my children. Mothers should challenge school administrators to teach the contributions of different races throughout the year, especially those reflective of their school population. Similarly, mothers should advocate more participation of these students in various school activities and programs that not only elevate their self-esteem but enrich other students as well. We need more mothers to take an active role in the school support structures, in PTAs and as teachers' aids and substitute teachers, providing us more opportunities to teach antiracism to both students and adults.

I remain convinced that the paucity of African-American teachers is not only the result of salary concerns and school violence, but also of institutional resistance to teaching antiracism. Too often white students do not see African-American teachers in the classrooms, especially in more prestigious public or private schools, from primary through

postgraduate. During my tenure at one predominantly white institution, one student's evaluation related his total surprise at seeing a black woman with a red Afro teaching philosophy as well as his initial doubts about my abilities. He concluded, however, that my course had been one of the best in his four years of college, evidencing an experience of unlearning racism. On the other hand, another student at the same institution and during the same semester did not grow as much. In his evaluation, he related his enthusiasm over the course, books and what he had learned; however, he never credited me in any way as the person responsible for the development of the course or what he had learned.

At another predominantly white institution, I remember successfully putting out race fires in the classroom as I taught John Hope Franklin's *From Slavery to Freedom*, John Oliver Killens's *Youngblood*, and Alice Walker's *Meridian*. One student said on his course evaluation that he had taken my course to learn more about blacks for himself because he wanted to be able to provide blacks with quality medicine as a future doctor. He expressed much appreciation for what he had learned, relating how one of the readings had been particularly emotional for him. He also related that his grandfather would probably call me a nigger and his father would think it. I believe the experience that taught this student antiracism was one that focused on shared values and humanity rather than racism itself. Seeing common humanity within a racially charged situation helped him to see, and to get beyond, his inheritance of racism. A couple of semesters after graduation, this same polished-looking young man with the racist heritage embraced me in the shopping mall, reminding me of his fruitful experience in my class. I, too, learned antiracism from this experience, for I had concluded from this young man's sparring and questioning during class that he was skeptical of my competence. Over sixteen years of teaching, I have received many evaluations similar to that student's as I continue to attempt to get honest feedback from my students.

More Coping, Fortifying and Confronting

Beyond the absurdity of racism, how are mothers to persevere in

confronting racism while balancing the history and continuing presence of racism in America and the world? How can mothers persevere in challenging perpetuating theories and practices of racism? These questions remained steadfast among the many fleeting fiercely through my mind as I pondered my children's discovery of their race as "less than."

When mothers are "tired of being tired," we are reminded by other mothers that we are not alone in our struggle to teach antiracism. Mothers must realize that we cannot afford to count the struggle against racism as one of too many social causes we are too busy to address. Our collaborative dialogues with other mothers provide us with moral support, preventing us from lapsing into a persisting state of rage in our struggle against racism. Some days when I am tired of being tired, I let people know that it is their lucky day, reasoning that I at least confronted their racism in a general way. On other days when I am fighting not to be enraged by the insurmountable realities of racism, I go back to various scholarship on racism which presents acid tests of my belief in humanity and simultaneously re-energizes me to persevere in the urgent need of confronting racism.¹⁵ I also think about Julia A. Boyd's imaginary purse of coins—coins of Hope, Faith, Confidence and Compassion that are always with her. She says, "[W]henever I find myself in a situation that requires me to spend one of my coins, I just pull it out and go for broke. Now over the years I've found that these coins are magic, because they always manage to replace themselves. I think we all have a magic coin when we have hope."¹⁶ At other times, I have found that it is also effective to teach antiracism through unexpected humanizing actions that challenge us all to think beyond our own race. That act may be leaving behind my children's placemat coloring along with brown and black crayons for the restaurant manager, suggesting the need for these colors.¹⁷ Or it may be yielding to white persons who sometimes take note of my "Color Me Human" car tag that challenges all of us to expand our limiting assumptions of race.

This is a challenge reflective of multiculturalism, a principle that provides encouraging theory and practice for confronting racism. It balances tension between the one and the many within a pluralistic society and strengthens the political movement for a truly inclusive

democratic society. Multiculturalism offers compelling reasons for not conceiving differences as inferior, Other or threatening—conceptions that lead to racism—but instead seeing differences as sources of strength. Mothers can gain strength for antiracist work through reading and discussing works of multicultural theory¹⁸ and contribute invaluable to its realization by discovering ways of practicing it.¹⁹ Within the last five years, I have used multicultural theory to teach antiracism during my Black History Month presentations. Black History Month seems to be an opportune time to address African-American culture and history, as well as to examine other ethnic groups in the spirit of unity within diversity—dispelling the fear and ignorance that perpetuate racism. It is mothers' work, more so than academicians', that will transform racism so that all children will value diversity and know their own preciousness.

Notes

1. The use of "caregiver" here refers to both women and men as well as to feminists of both genders. Also, while I write here as an African-American feminist mother, I acknowledge that some of my experiences are shared to different degrees by some men.
2. Johnetta B. Cole, "What If We Made Racism a Woman's Issue . . ." *McCall's* (October 1990): 59.
3. *Ibid.*
4. For instance, see Elizabeth Hood, "Black Women, White Women: Separate Paths to Liberation," in *Black Scholar* (April 1978): 45-56, and Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984).
5. I have found that racism occurs in the lives of African-American boys more frequently than in the lives of African-American girls; hence my focus here on boys rather than girls. This situation is partly attributable to American patriarchal society seeing African-American boys as more of a threat than African-American girls, in competing for jobs, wielding power, and having influence. I do not, however, intend to minimize girls' experiences with racism.
6. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 115.

7. David Theo Goldberg, "The Social Formation of Racist Discourse," in *Anatomy of Racism*, ed. David Theo Goldberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 295.
8. *Ibid.*, 296.
9. Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Racisms," in *Anatomy of Racism*, ed. David Theo Goldberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990). The distinctions Appiah makes are extrinsic and intrinsic racism. He states that "[E]xtrinsic racism [is] discrimination between people [based on people's] belief that members of different races differ in respects that warrant differential treatment, respects—such as honesty or courage or intelligence—that are uncontroversially held. . . . [I]ntrinsic racism [is defined as] differentiat[ing] morally between members of different races because [one] believe[s] that each race has a different moral status, quite independent of the moral characteristics entailed by its racial essence. [B]eing of the same race is a reason for preferring one person to another." In the case of extrinsic racism, Appiah points out that awareness of facts will suffice to counter false doctrine. In the case of intrinsic racism, no amount of facts will suffice to counter false beliefs (5-6).
10. Naomi Zack, *Race and Mixed Race* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995). Zack draws a distinction between intentional racism, which involves conscious preference for one race over another, and unintentional racism. The former involves awareness and resistance to the idea that there are not differences between races, while the latter involves unexamined assumptions (26).
11. Appiah, "Racisms," 5.
12. See Nancy P. Greenman, et al., "Institutional Inertia to Achieving Diversity: Transforming Resistance into Celebration," in *Educational Foundations* 6, 2 (1992).
13. The appreciation of such humor is apparent in work like Daryl Cumber Dance's *Shuckin' and Jivin': Folklore from Contemporary Black Americans* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).
14. Given this reality of racism, one understands the notable sociological case of a little black boy placing his feet on top of his desk daily without comment. He responded to his teacher's inquiry about his behavior by saying he was "playing white man."
15. Works like: Frantz Fanon's "The Fact of Blackness" (1990), Cornel West's *Race Matters* (1995), W.E.B. DuBois *Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Maude White Katz's "End Racism in Education: A Concerned Parent Speaks" (1968), Patricia J. Williams's *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (1991), Gertrude Ezorsky's *Racism and Justice: The Case for Affirmative Action*

(1991), Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*, (1993), Jacqueline Jones's *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, (1985), Bill E. Lawson's *The Underclass Question*, (1992), John Oliver Killens's *Youngblood* (1954) were acid tests for me as I contemplated the focus of this essay.

16. Julia A. Boyd, *Girlfriend to Girlfriend: Everyday Wisdom and Affirmations from the Sister Circle* (New York: Dutton, 1995). This is one of many affirmations for getting through daily obstacles presented in the book.
17. This effort reminds me of a mother who colored one of the Charmin tissue babies brown in the sixties for her baby's self-esteem. Of course the company, as well as others, does this today. However, restaurants don't seem to have followed suit.
18. Our tendency to resist "differences" is related to the belief that to recognize differences is to order them hierarchically, with someone's (mine or theirs) family, community or values (spiritual, educational, social and political) inferior. Shelley M. Park and Michelle A. LaRocque suggested in a paper presented at the South Eastern Women's Studies Association Conference in 1992 that multiculturalism is a synthesis of unity and diversity—*shared* community that maintains the integrity of the different groups that comprise it.
19. Peter McLaren, in "A Dialogue on Multiculturalism and Democratic Culture" with Kelly Estrada in *Educational Researcher* 22, 3 (1995), explains that multiculturalism teaches us to displace dominant knowledges that oppress, tyrannize, and infantilize. It encourages us to imagine possible worlds, to create new languages and to design new institutional and social practices. He also explains the need for positive, affirmative discourses on race, ethnic identity, multiculturalism and gender. The definition of American culture needs to be expanded and understood not as negating a national identity, but as addressing the reality of diversity and a new pluralism. See also the works in the bibliography by Ronald Takaki and Vincent G. Harding for exceptional discussions of multiculturalism, Boyce Rensberger for the anthropology of race, and Taylor and Wolf for diversity and a new pluralism.

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