



Multiracial Child Resource Book

Living Complex Identities

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Editors

MAVIN
FOUNDATION



Maya Rovelstad

Age: 3

Racial/Ethnic Heritage: Mexican and Puerto Rican

Three and a half years ago Maya was born in Texas in the very hot month of July. We were fortunate enough to be present at her birth and to spend two weeks with her birthmother and maternal grandfather. I am not sure who was more nervous when we first met, but we were all grateful for the chance to get to know one another. I now know that Maya got her great sense of humor from her grandfather and her delight in climbing and speed from her mother! Since then we have visited and continue to talk regularly. I am convinced that the connection will enable Maya to better understand who she is as she grows. And I know the contact has been of comfort to her birthmother.

Still, Maya, who is Puerto Rican and Mexican, will grow up with Caucasian parents and an older sister who was adopted from Peru, likewise also in an open adoption. Because both our daughters are of color they will share many experiences: the experience of growing up with parents who don't look like them, of living in a Euro-centric world where racism is built into the system, and likely the experience of "not fitting" into the neatly-drawn boxes of this society. They will likely share an experience in the community of adoptive families in which there appears to be a lack of understanding of the challenges transracial adoptees may face. After all, it is very easy to go through life as a White person without ever having to consider what life is like if you are not White. Unfortunately, it is not yet a requirement for prospective

adoptive parents to pass "Race Issues 101!" On the positive side, they will hopefully share the knowledge that regardless of how a family comes together, there is no difference in the love that family members have for each other. I also hope they will know that our diversity is our strength.

What they won't share is the complexity of being of mixed ethnicity. The pre-occupation with fitting everyone into a system of Black and White will add another challenge to Maya's life. To provide her with an opportunity to develop cultural competency and to establish authentic connections to her cultures of origin is even more difficult. Still, I hope that through personal relationships and cultural experiences, Maya will be able to take pride in who she is and feel good about her specific make-up. Maya is already noticing eye and hair color differences. She is convinced that people with green eyes can see at night, though her dad doesn't seem to confirm that theory! Her beautiful tight curls attract a lot of attention and so far she says she likes the comments. Of course, at three she is met with nothing but smiles and she misses the inquiry that at times follows as to "what she is."

We are already talking about both race and adoption in our family. We will continue to do so both at home and in our community. In our school district we are working at implementing multicultural education and in our community we continue to raise awareness of equality and justice. After all, how can we fully support our children if we are not willing to work to change the things that make their lives difficult?

Testimonial

Chapter 15

Domestic Transracial¹ Adoption and Multiraciality²

By Gina E. Miranda, Ph.D., C.A.P.S.W.

Occupying the social status “transracial adoptee” or “multiracial” challenges the very core of many cherished beliefs and taken-for-granted assumptions of how race, family, and culture are lived in the United States. As transracial adoptees, we defy the notion that all children are parented by persons with whom they share a racialized group membership and cultural heritage. We are made aware that in the U.S., when physical appearances and heritages among family members do not match or when its constellation drifts from the biological mother-father parenting norm, the possibilities for our healthy development within these contexts occasions disproportionate public concern and professional debate. Through classroom assignments (e.g., family trees/genealogies), compulsive stares that accompany family outings, or polite interrogations from strangers, neighbors, and friends, we and our families are routinely put on notice regarding the degrees of our difference.

As multiracial adoptees with White parents and a range of racialized appearances, many theories, both academic and folk, regarding how an identity is developed may not fully represent our realities. Not all of us have had access to our birth cultures through immersion experiences or relationships that existed in the context of our daily home life. Knowledge about our cultures of origin sometimes remained separate from us during childhood because of our adoptive parents’ choices, or forever unknown

due to missing information at the time of our conception, birth, or because of inaccurate information within our case files. Some of us were placed for adoption because of our mixed racial heritage.^{3 4 5} All of these facts of our beginnings and circumstances of our adoptions can facilitate an acceptance or rejection of our known/unknown biological origins, shape our interactions with others assumed to be similar, and complicate the paths we take in putting together the pieces of our identity puzzle across the life course. Some search for this biological connection and locate their birth families. For others, we socially construct our kinship network to include relationships and experiences that affirm us and, in turn, become reflections of our identities into adulthood.

Multiracial children, however, have been an overlooked population within most transracial adoption studies. Their needs have also been ignored by the child welfare system,⁶ a system that continues to lack a detailed and uniform method for recording and reporting the biological racial heritage of children in its care. Therefore, after first reviewing the literature one might conclude that this population comprises an insignificant proportion of children adopted transracially. Yet despite missing data from national statistics, a closer read of transracial adoption research provides some evidence that bears noting. Given the lack of data and research on other populations of mixed race adoptees, the

following discussion will draw from research involving those with Black-White parentage (hereafter referred to as biracial). The relevance of these findings to multiracial adoptees with other racialized backgrounds will be noted as the multiracial literature on non-adopted populations permits.

Biracial Children and Transracial Placement

It is rarely acknowledged that biracial children have often dominated the sample populations within transracial adoption research dating back to some of the first and most extensively referenced studies in the United States. As Table 1 below indicates, two recently published studies on transracial adoption outcomes continue this trend with samples that are over 70% biracial.

Early adoption literature indicates that this population of mixed race babies is most representative of the first transracial adoptions involving infants of Black descent in the U.S.^{7 8} Indeed, what is known about transracial adoption outcomes for "Black children" is largely reflective of the experiences of biracial adoptees.⁹ Yet these facts and any possible analysis of unique factors associated with multiraciality and identity work are overshadowed largely because of two unyielding socio-political realities.

First, with few exceptions, the polarized discourse surrounding transracial adoption practice has narrowly framed the debate and resulting research to pursue two overarching closed-ended questions: Is transracial adoption good or bad, and can White parents raise children of color to have high self-esteems and positive racial identities? Research has responded by focusing on assumed culturally universal factors of well-being (e.g., academic achievement and self-esteem) and has historically relegated its investigation of racial identity to decontextualized and mutually exclusive racialized preferences (e.g., friends and dating partners) and single-racial label use.¹⁰ Disproportionately, these studies focus on outcomes for children of Black descent. When adoptees score well on self-esteem and school achievement measures and follow socially prescribed norms by matching their racialized biology with the "correct" racial labels (interpreted as their identity) transracial adoption is deemed a success. Though skeptics remain, few studies have attempted to explore more dynamic and fluid conceptualizations of identity development

for this population. Even fewer have pursued the complexities of this process for multiracial adoptees.¹¹ Unfortunately, the politics of transracial adoption have held this entire field of research an intellectual hostage; in nearly 30 years of scientific inquiry few transracial adoption studies have strayed from these master domains.

Secondly, it should not be surprising that this body of research mirrors the society in which it is conducted, a society that categorizes anyone with any Black heritage under the "one-drop rule" as Black. In addition to the existential hazards this poses to an individual's identity development in society, it is problematic because transracial adoption research has historically had an implicit goal, and an explicit societal expectation, of assessing White parents in their abilities to transmit so called "healthy racial identities" to their adopted children. Existing research has not fully appreciated the diversity of racialized heritages and physical appearances within its own samples, a diversity that arguably is central to understanding the findings related to outcomes of racialized identity development. In fact, the very definition of "healthy identity" and the processes of its development for multiracial adoptees remain unexplored territory. Our inability to fully and directly access this research in ways that have substantial relevance for the majority of participants within many of these studies ultimately limits the ability of parents and

Study	Percentage of biracial transracial adoptees in sample*
Grow & Shapiro (1974)	82% biracial (90% described as light skinned)
Zastrow (1977)	95% biracial
McRoy & Zurcher (1983)	73% biracial
Simon, Alstein, & Melli (1994)	Phase 4 study: 68% biracial**
Vroegh (1997)	78% biracial
Patton (2000)	73% biracial
Simon & Roorda (2000)	71% biracial

*This is an underrepresented list—only studies on domestic transracial adoption providing racial heritage data for biracial adoptees are included. **Data on biracial adoptees not provided for earlier phases of study.

social workers to make informed decisions throughout the adoption and parenting process. Collectively, these two realities have left the field of child welfare and individual adoptive parents with a conceptualization of "needs" among transracial adoptees within often simplistic, monocentric, and decontextualized frameworks.

Given recent shifts in how the nation officially categorizes race and the burgeoning field of multiracial literature, it is timely to extend this social movement and discussion of identity development to acknowledge the various ways in which one's racialized biology and racial appearances mark a significant group of multiracial persons whose racialized identity work does not occur in biological family systems. The purpose of this final discussion is to begin this shift in exploring the responses of adult biracial adoptees in their advice to future and current adoptive parents of biracial children.

The information and quotations used in this final section are drawn from dissertation research that includes a series of in-depth interviews with 15 adult biracial adoptees who were raised in the northern U.S.¹² Representing myriad physical appearances, most (n=13) were women, and all participants were between the ages of 21 and 32. This study covered a broad range of topics with participants, including questions about their adoption stories, how they were racially socialized in their families, and lessons they had learned about race and culture into adulthood. It is hoped that presenting an extremely limited selection of findings related to parenting advice will begin a conversation that can branch out to more deeply explore the diversity of experiences with identity work among the population of transracial adoptees who have multiracial heritage.

Insider Wisdom on Transracial Adoptive Parenting and Biraciality

In the long run, I feel like I have this HUGE gift, to be able to relate to people...to both worlds. Nobody's getting over one on me! (Female adoptee, age 30)

I think...it's taken a lot of intrinsic motivation on my part to really develop me. Just pulling things from friends and reading books, and just...walking around in my own skin. And I *still* struggle with it, okay? I still



Pact: An Adoption Alliance

Pact is a nonprofit organization begun by two adoptive parents in 1991. Since its inception, Pact has been dedicated to the mission of providing the highest quality adoption-related services to children of color, their birth parents, and their adoptive parents. Pact also works with adoption professionals to facilitate adoptions and to initiate programs that better serve clients raising children of color. Top priority is given to programs especially designed to support and inform adopted children and adopted adults of color. Importantly, Pact goes beyond traditional adoption services by offering extensive post-placement opportunities for all families raising children of color, providing informative and essential education, connection, and support.

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have people calling me red bone and a half-breed. But...really...I've had to rely greatly on myself." (Female adoptee, age 28)

And you know, I'll be 80 years old, and I'll still be figuring things out. You know? Never really be able to figure things out. Never REALLY be able to explain it to my friends *exactly*. (Male adoptee, age 28)

If nothing else was clear among this population, it is that life presents opportunities to change and rework who one is in relationship to shifts in society, life events, and changes in family composition. All stories were filled with negotiating and renegotiating the importance of race and transracial adoption across the life course, and an understanding of one's own story particularly in relationship to those of other adoptees and multiracial people. This is a unique dimension of the identity development process for this population, as there are no "cultural traditions" or wisdoms that fully speak to the reality of their experiences. Although some referred to the generation of transracial adoptees who were adopted in the 1960 and 1970 as "our generation," and that "we were some of the first," there is no collectivity of elders to seek in gaining cultural wisdom of being a transracial adoptee. Or perhaps, the elders are in the making and are now only in their 30's and 40's. Therefore, among these respondents, developing one's identity was understood as a lifetime journey often forged on one's own, ideally with the support of parents, friends, and the families they created along the way.

One of the adoptees who described her parents' approach as supportive in culturally grounding her identity development particularly in the Black community states, "...in order to know...I had to be IMMERSSED in that. My parents didn't take me *outside* of the African American culture. They didn't stick me completely in it, though, and leave me either. They were there with me, and we would talk through things, and we ALL learned things." This statement reminds parents of the importance of being open to one's own growth and change in order to meet the needs of a transracially adopted child. For biracial and other multiracial adoptees, this can require highly pro-active parenting

in making connections and developing relationships that may not be naturally occurring in any community. It may also require parents to develop a more sophisticated understanding of diverse historical and contemporary racialized dynamics in the communities of color that represent their children's birth cultures.

Many adoptees described their White parents as unaware of existing skin tone politics and racial litmus tests¹³ within the Black community. One adoptee recalls her experiences after her parents enrolled her in a more diverse high school so she could develop friendships with Black peers. Not having prior exposure to a Black community, she felt she could have been better prepared:

I DEFINITELY did not get that. I mean, it was like I was sent to school to fend for **myself**! You know!? My parents had no idea—but that's what it was. It was like being thrown into a cage of lions, and like, here—okay—good luck! Hope you make it out okay—if you haven't been beat up by the end of the day! And THAT, that scars. That left huge scars—and I see it come out now.

Certainly all adoptees' childhood experiences in a Black community were not solely negative, and as adults, five claimed this cultural context exclusively as where their greatest comfort lies. Yet, it is telling that the language used to describe some experiences in both White and Black communities was often reflective of war terminology and living in hostile environments. Many talked about the "survival skills" they needed or the "armor" and "ammunition" required in "fending" for themselves during times when their parents were not around, or able, to protect them in either predominantly Black or White contexts. This finding is consistent with research involving non-adopted multiracial populations beyond Black-White who also report having to deal with racism and racialized interactions in myriad cultural communities. Experiencing challenges to legitimize one's identity and cultural insider status in specific cultural contexts is not an uncommon phenomenon, even for multiracial adults.^{14 15 16} Consequently, White adoptive parents must appreciate that despite their love for their children, the world will not consistently respond

in kind to a child who is both mixed race and transracially adopted. It would behoove both social workers and parents to be aware of these within-group dynamics and not assume that a child's racialized biology alone will facilitate a reciprocal bond or automatic acceptance between those who share this heritage. In fact, these findings suggest transracially adopted multiracial children must develop additional skills beyond coping with racism to negotiate their multiply othered statuses as adoptee, as transracial adoptee, and as multiracial. Among these skills is the ability to anticipate the inevitably inconsistent reactions that their politicized social statuses and often racially ambiguous appearances evoke across different contexts.

Clearly, parents cannot prevent a child from experiencing racism, colorism, and racial litmus tests, nor do all multiracial adoptees require the same cultural or racial socialization. Yet, choices parents make in their neighborhoods of residence and the environments they provide for their children do set the parameters of their children's racial and cultural worlds. In so doing, they establish the boundaries of a child's early ecological competencies, and ultimately, a child's confidence to survive and thrive within those contexts. Most of the adoptees in this study (n=13) believed it was important to live in substantially diverse communities and for parents to find additional ways of incorporating an adoptee's birth cultures into the family's identity and daily life. Missing these experiences was not damaging to their future success within mainstream White society. It was damaging, however, to their sense of competence and acceptance in predominantly Black communities, into adulthood. It is highly probable that other groups of multiracial adoptees lacking ongoing and immersed exposure to their birth communities of color would also render similar outcomes.

Feeling confident in one's communities of origin is important for adoptees not because all biracial persons, for example, must feel comfortable around all persons of Black descent, but because developing these relationships and cultural connections allows the adoptee to truly "choose" and construct an identity that is grounded culturally and affirmed experientially. If being biracial/multiracial means one has choices in how to identify, then transracial adoptees who are multiracial have a right to



Whale Talk
Chris Crutcher, Greenwillow Books, 2001

Geared towards a teenage audience, *Whale Talk* is a witty portrayal of high school's delicate social hierarchies. Centered on a high school's new swim team, the book is narrated by T.J., an adopted, Japanese-Caucasian-Black headstrong teen who is wise beyond his years. Vying to change a school athletic program that places greater value on letterman jackets than the heart and soul of each athlete, T.J. creates a swim team of people like him—misfits. Although his crew develops into a respectable team, what is more important is the long bus rides that offer each student important time to share the pain that makes them who they are. Great for ages 12 and up.

have ongoing access to immersion within their birth cultures so they have something tangible, beyond racial labels, to choose from. Ideally, this requires parents to not only be learning along with their child, but be facilitating that competence within their child. As one adoptee who was raised in a Black community comments:

As a parent you need to be willing to integrate the community, don't make your CHILD do that. And that's what my parents did. That's why my experience is so different. Because you're supposed to be able to handle that as an adult, don't throw that on your child. The biggest mistake I see adoptive parents make is that they think that's all we need—love—and a few cultural events each year, a Black book...a few token friends of color. I think it comes from...the parents' sense of being comfortable or uncomfortable within that, then I think they give the tools to the biracial person that they need to survive. I grew up in a family where we didn't look like each other, and it was respected—celebrated. We didn't have to hide it—the best and worst of both worlds.

Ultimately, child welfare practitioners and others involved in the adoption process bear initial responsibility for ensuring that potential adoptive parents gain this knowledge and cultural competence early on and most definitely prior to placement. This requires social workers to engage in critical conversations about race and culture with adoptive candidates to explore potential intrafamilial racism including their own racism or colorism, and any assumptions they may endorse about multiracial people. These conversations must transcend the monocentric frameworks typically applied to understanding the needs of transracial adoptees to recognize the unique racialized experiences for children who are multiracial. Arguably, child welfare professionals must themselves be trained in providing racially sophisticated services to potential adoptive parents, and sanctioned to make placement decisions that reflect the short and long term best interests of each child. Achieving this objective is problematic for many reasons. Among them is the fact that the child welfare system continues to operate

primarily under monocentric methods of racial categorization and monocultural understandings of racialized biological heritage. It is hoped that this chapter and others within this book will offer a strong argument for the need to support the child welfare system and social workers in pursuing a knowledge base that advances how the profession addresses issues of race and culture for any adoptee, but for transracially adopted children of mixed heritage in particular.

This can begin by utilizing existing multiracial literature, theory, and research to construct more culturally relevant frameworks for conceptualizing and understanding the needs of multiracial children. In so doing, the enduring politics of the transracial adoption debate and of multiraciality can be repositioned and understood as powerful contextual factors salient to the lifetime identity work of multiracial adoptees. Certainly, their best interests are served when child welfare professionals and adoptive parents attend to issues of race and culture in ways that reflect its complexity in the world in which each adoptee will live. Indeed, any future discussion of the best interests of this population must begin and end with the voices and acquired wisdom of those adoptees who are now adults and have lived this experience.

Did you know?

Here are some well-known people who are both multiracial and adopted:

Greg Louganis (Diver, Olympic gold medalist)

Dan O'Brien (Athlete, Olympic gold medalist in the decathlon)

Notes

- 1 It is widely acknowledged that "race" is a biological fiction. Racialized language and labels without capitalization are used in this paper to recognize this and its unyielding reality as a socially constructed dimension of daily life in the United States. Therefore, "transracial adoption" in this paper refers to parents racially designated "white" adopting children of "multiracial" heritage born in the U.S.
- 2 Multiracial and mixed race will be used interchangeably as pan-racial labels to refer to people whose parents claim different racialized group memberships. For a more detailed discussion on the limitations of language in the U.S. in research on adoption, race, and racialization of identities see: G. E. Miranda, *Mixed Feelings: Stories of Race, Kinship, and Identity Among Biracial Adoptees*, Dissertation. Madison, University of Wisconsin, (2002).
- 3 For testimonies involving mixed race adoptees who report being surrendered for adoption by their white mothers due to their black heritage see: S. Patton, *Birthmarks: Transracial Adoption in Contemporary America* (New York: New York University Press, 2000). See also Miranda, *Mixed Feelings* (2002).
- 4 Miranda, *Mixed Feelings* (2002).
- 5 Regarding increased foster care placement of mixed race children with white biological mothers, see: G. Folaron and P. M. Hess, "Placement Considerations for Children of Mixed African American and Caucasian Parentage," *Child Welfare* 72(2) (1993), 113-125.
- 6 G. Folaron and P. M. Hess, *Child Welfare* (1993).
- 7 D. Day, *The Adoption of Black Children* (Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1979).
- 8 For a discussion of past transracial adoption research and the treatment of mixed race children of black-white descent in child welfare systems past and present see: Miranda, *Mixed Feelings* (2002).
- 9 Given the continued unmet demand for healthy white infants among the majority of adopters who themselves are white, other populations of mixed race children with white heritage (e.g., latino/white, asian/white, native american/white) may also represent a higher number of placements with white parents.
- 10 For a more detailed critique of transracial adoption research and measures of race and racial identity see: Miranda, *Mixed Feelings* (2002).
- 11 Miranda, *Mixed Feelings* (2002).
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Litmus tests refer to the political nature of being mixed race or "light skinned." In this case, within the black community the biracial person's so called "authentic blackness" is tested. Transracial adoptees and multiracial persons are particularly vulnerable to these litmus tests when their racialized appearances or their cultural behaviors are understood to be "white." For a discussion of racialized behaviors and the history of race as performative in the black community see: J. M. Favor, *Authentic Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).
- 14 P. F. Gaskins, *What Are You? Voices of Mixed-Race Young People* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1999).
- 15 C. C. O'Hearn, ed., *Half and Half: Writers on Growing Up Biracial and Bicultural* (New York: Random House Books, 1998).
- 16 M. P. P. Root, ed., *The Multiracial Experience, Racial Borders as the New Frontier* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996).

