

Mothering White Children *An Africana Canadian Woman's Experience*

Unsafe environmental conditions, including parents' inability to care for them, abuse and high risk behaviour by their primary caregivers, force many children out of the places they call home. When they leave home, the Canadian state assumes immediate and sometimes long-term care for them. Caring involves being placed in foster homes that offer a balance between the needs of the children and the provisional abilities of the foster families. This is not unusual; however, placing a White foster child with a Black foster family, headed by a single woman in a middle class predominantly White suburb, offers sufficient challenges to warrant further exploration of how racist attitudes are maintained and transformed in everyday relationships between state representatives, the general White population and the Black family. This article explores my experience of ongoing tensions along racial lines while caring for children as a foster parent.

Introduction

This article explores my experiences of mother as a foster parent for the Canadian state. The discussion entails challenges experienced and acts of resistance from professionals including representatives from a child welfare agency, teachers, community agencies, and members of our local community. A response is offered addressing the stereotypical notion of Black mothering and questions are raised about the institutional practices in child welfare agencies specific to White children's placement with Black or racialized families. The paper concludes by questioning practitioners' colour-blind approach in their work with racialized foster parents and solidifying Black women's roles as mothers.

Offering children safe, nurturing, and supportive environments to live is one of the most important roles of a foster family. When children are placed

in homes and they are guided to reach their fullest potential, fostering children can be seen as a noble cause. I am motivated by the potential intrinsic rewards in mothering children who are away from their mothers. I take pride in experiencing the children's growth and changes along the way and yes, I take some of the credit for the children excelling. In fact, I consider my role as a foster parent one of civic duty and social contribution. I am an African Canadian woman of Caribbean descent; I mother every child in my presence including my two biological children, nieces, nephews, friends' children, and my children's friends. I am unpartnered (single); I mother my children with the support of family and friends. I live in an affluent suburb that is predominantly White, middle class, heterosexual, two-parent families. Why do I want to mother foster children? I became interested in mothering foster children of African descent in light of their increasing numbers under the care of child welfare agencies and the limited culturally appropriate foster parents to care for them.

In spite of my commitment to children of African descent, I did not hesitate to offer a young eleven-year-old child of European descent a home when I was asked to do so. My first priority is to offer children a safe and nurturing environment, help them to develop and maintain positive relationships with family, and where possible assist with family reunification. Foster parents committed to nurturing children and working with the child welfare agencies towards family reunification is not unique. John Nasuti, Reginald York and Karen Sandell (2004) suggest that Black foster families often work toward these goals. The child was a part of our family for 26 months and during that time, I was privileged to work directly with some practitioners in the child welfare agency and in other community agencies who supported my position as the child's primary caregiver unconditionally and accepted my mothering role. However, numerous individuals including social workers, teachers, other foster parents, medical practitioners, community members, and the child's biological father challenged my mothering role as it pertained to this child. These challenges are the focus of this discussion.

The specific experiences that occur while mothering this child are numerous, however, this paper focuses on my interactions with primarily White women (non-racialized) social workers in the child welfare agency and community agencies. Specifically, I address practitioners' attempts to delegitimize my mothering role in this child's life and their resistance to my role as the child's primary caregiver. I document my experiences of mothering White children to challenge the notion of the Black woman as the mammy, to disrupt the pathological notions of the insensitive Black foster mother, and to make visible my experiences of racialized and colonized identity in a space that is designed for the good White mother.

Resistance comes in many forms

Motherhood is constructed through a particular lens and, in Canada, is based on the values of White middle-class women's perspective. Andrea O'Reilly

(2006) suggests sensitive mothering has become the dominant discourse in mothering; contemporary and “good mothering is defined as child-centered and is characterized by flexibility, spontaneity, democracy, affection, nurturance, and playfulness” (81). This concurs with my experience of mothering children for the state. I am expected to chauffeur children to and from social, extracurricular, and academic activities, schedule appointments, arrange transportation, and accompany children to the appointments (e.g. doctor, dentist, and therapist), attend to school concerns, help with homework, liaise with biological families and numerous professionals, attend agency meetings, cook, shop, offer guidance, arrange birthday parties, spend quality time, and love the children. Often agency personnel seem to forget that foster parents have primary families for whom they cared for before the placement of foster children and that those familiar obligations continue in spite of the addition of foster children.

My first recollection of being branded an insensitive and incompetent foster mother occurred when a community agency case worker and one of its volunteers argued that I had placed an unreasonable amount of restrictions on the relationship between the foster child in my home and the agency volunteer. They offered suggestions and examples of attributes considered acceptable and expected parent behaviour, while simultaneously identifying the difference in my behaviour when compared to other mothers. The caseworker suggested that I had no need to “know every little thing” that occurred between the foster child and the volunteer. In other words, I was not a flexible and supportive foster mother. The volunteer explained her frustration in having to “constantly check things out” with me as that restriction eliminated the possibility of spontaneity. The level of resistance in working with me as the child’s primary caregiver became more evident as time passed. The community agency caseworker suggested that a social worker at the child welfare agency be the liaison between the community agency representatives and myself. This proposal was intended to facilitate planning activities that required my input but circumventing direct contact with me. The agency caseworker felt the new arrangements would eliminate their interactions with me and therefore reduce any areas of tensions and conflicts. In this way, the agency caseworker and its volunteer who worked with the foster child could contact the child through traditional mails, electronic mails, telephone voice messages left on my mailbox, and direct telephone calls using my telephone number. All this would be done without directly communicating with me, thus effectively rendering me invisible and ultimately silenced as the child’s foster mother and primary caregiver. It is not unusual that challenges would develop among adults attempting to care for and support foster children, however, Susan Whitelaw Downs (1996: 203, 216) argues that these problems appear to increase when Black foster parents are involved; for example, “there is some evidence of a lack of communication between agencies and black foster parents in comparison to whites” (216); These tensions, while frustrating at times, do not deter me from being fully committed to mothering foster children.

Many foster parents love their foster children, worry about them, nurture them, help them with family reunification, and are emotionally attached to them regardless of genetic connections to family's bloodline (Henderson, 2005). However, when I tried to assume my mothering role, practitioners often questioned my legitimacy to make decisions for this non-racialized foster child. For example, a practitioner shared information with the foster child prematurely after a strategy had been agreed upon, claiming that the child was old enough to make her own decision about certain situations. Furthermore, the worker suggested that I was overprotective of the child and that my actions were stifling the child's growth. On other occasions, the agency caseworker and the volunteer devised clandestine operations to help the foster child remain in contact with her former foster mother, another White woman. These attempts undermined my mothering relationship with the foster child and created conflicts between the community agency representatives and myself. Clearly, foster parents are challenged in many ways (Brown and Calder, 1999; Swartz, 2004) but one of the primary areas of resistance occurs around parenting strategies. Child welfare workers and agency personnel constantly challenged my mode of parenting by suggesting that I was too strict, too sensitive to their suggestions and my mothering style was too inflexible so it conflicted with the foster child's personality. During a particular challenging phase of my relationship with the community agency, I was also mothering a 16-year-old, racialized foster child. Many of the same structures and guideline were implemented for this child, yet community agency representatives and child welfare personnel made no negative observations or leveled critique at my mothering style or role. Why would there be such a difference in disapproval that originated from and instigated by primarily White women who unrelentingly challenged my mothering role for non-racialized foster children?

Connecting race and experience

Frequently, community agency representatives used stereotypical labels such as aggressive, argumentative, confrontational, angry, hostile, and uncivilized to describe me in meetings and written communications. This occurred numerous times in the presence of the foster child. To compound the situation, agency personnel have publicly expressed negative characterization of me as an individual, as a parent, foster parent, and as a primary caregiver for a particular non-racialized foster child. During a particularly tense period, the caseworker responded to telephone concerns of the foster child in a letter to the Children's Aid Society representative. She suggested "it is the position of our agency that the foster parent must agree to engage the volunteer and the agency in both a positive and civilized manner in order for this relationship to continue." She further noted her agency's unwillingness to continue in a relationship with me by stating that its volunteer was "...no longer willing to continue without support and civility from Delores." In yet another assault, the case worker argued that the agency "...continued to try to work in an unsupportive, and at

times, hostile home environment...” which impacted the relationship between the foster child and the volunteer. The final expression of White supremacy and White saintly motherhood came when the caseworker refused my many attempts to schedule a meeting with all concerned parties. The caseworker’s response to my attempts to reconvene was met with a refusal and a suggestion that my tone of voice “...was neither apologetic nor conciliatory” so she had “continued concerns as to whether her [my] intention is to mend fences, participate positively and move on.”

My ability to mother as a respite foster parent for children (of any racial background) and for parenting racialized children long-term has never been questioned to my knowledge. My relationship with some of the staff in both the child welfare and community agency resembled that of the proverbial mammy whose mothering role was to nurture and care for White children but was denied decision-making power in caring for the children. I make this reference to Black women’s perceived roles as being suited for domestic work in Canada (Brand, 1999: 174-191; Calliste, 1991: 141-143). This point will be elaborated on later in the paper. In the interim, I continue to expose my experiences with White women practitioners while mothering this non-racialized child.

The racial differences between my family and the foster child created discomfort for some staff and foster parents in the child welfare agency. One child welfare worker couched her discomfort by explaining that my home had become inappropriate given the child’s own discomfort living in a home with racialized (Black) people. Without consulting me, she quickly made arrangement to remove the child from my home and shared detail information of the new foster family with the child. These arrangements would not have been made without the knowledge and approval of senior agency staff. Jason Brown and Peter Calder (1999: 488) note foster parents are often unaware of agency plans and arrangements for foster children until the time of implementation. Similarly, I was unaware of the plans for a change in foster homes until the foster child shared them with me. Fortunately, through a combined effort of a therapist in the community who worked with the child, child welfare agency staff, and me, the child remained in my home until reunification with her kin 12 months later. This question of racial differences between foster children and foster parents is worth further exploration. While that discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, I am challenged by one question. Given that the majority of African Canadian children are placed in foster homes with White parents, what is the child welfare agency’s response when racialized children declare that they prefer to live in homes that are racially compatible with them?

I resist the colonized mothering role “of the mammy—the faithful, obedient domestic servant” (Collins, 2000: 72-73) who takes care of White children but ‘ole har caana—that is, she knows that regardless of her status in the family she remains a mere servant. One community agency case worker admonished me for not being a proper representative of a “professional foster parent.” She wrote: “However, if it is not her intention, or the intention of the Children’s Aid

Society to require her as a professional foster parent, to support and facilitate this match in a positive manner ... we can not continue with the match” (Personal communication, 2005). Veli-Pekka Isomaki (2002) offers a discussion on the possible professionalization of foster parenting which is different from the intended meaning of the agency caseworker. Here like the mammy, the social worker attempted to control the space from which I mother as well as the shape of my mothering, particularly in relation to the White foster child. Based on practitioners’ reaction and their attempts to delegitimize my mothering role, I can only surmise that they were reacting to the Black mother matriarch, the bad mother and the mirror image of the mammy, the good mother (Collins, 2000). The matriarch was not the Canadian government’s vision of Caribbean women who were stereotyped as suited for domestic work and caregiving in particular (Calliste, 1991: 141-143). As a Caribbean immigrant, I remain cognizant that many women of my mother’s generation could only gain entry to Canada as domestic workers even when they were skilled and well-educated. These women assumed the mothering roles in White middle-class women’s homes while those women gravitated toward the paid, formal workforce. The generation of Canadian White children mothered by Black Caribbean women now have their own children. However, it appears that these girls who have grown into women have unchanged expectations of Black women, even those of us who are similar ages and who have surpassed their educational level and social status attainment. Many people continue to perceive Black women as mummies—babysitters and nannies for White middle-class children but lacking the decision-making power of a real mother. In effect, my mothering role is restricted, and to many of the women who harbour these notions of Black mothers, I am a non-entity and ultimately invisible.

White practitioners’ refusal to recognize me as an African Canadian woman mothering White children is problematic. Practitioners often comment that they see a caring foster mother not a Black foster mother. Colour-blindness allows people to think that everyone is the same and helps them to deny the different, often discriminatory experiences of racialized women (O’Brien, 2000: 52-53). This is unproductive and does little to support racialized foster parents who undoubtedly confront racist ideas and actions in their roles as foster parents and mothering in particular. In fact, workers generally ignore or are unaware of the implications of they, themselves or others labeling women like me as being hostile or uncivilized. Furthermore, when White children articulate their discomfort in being placed in racialized foster homes, and being mothered by Black women, workers are unsure of how to help the children address their feelings, and deconstruct the assumptions and stereotypes of Black women mothering White children.

Another area of tension for non-racialized children is the community assumption that they do not belong in some families because they are racially different. When in public with White foster children, frequently, people in my local community erroneously assume that I am the children’s friend, babysit-

ter or the nanny. This assumption is never made when I am with Black or Bi-racial children. This is unlike the experiences of foster parents in Alberta who, according to Bown and Calder, (1999: 488) felt that they were treated as “glorified babysitters.” This is a White middle-class perspective of foster mothering and clearly does not account for race and other social intersections. This position is amplified by Patricia Hill Collins’s (2000) argument that “Black motherhood as an institution is both dynamic and dialectical. Ongoing tensions around motherhood characterize efforts to mold the institution of Black motherhood in order to benefit intersecting marginalization of race, gender, class, sexuality, and nation” (176). As African women in the diaspora, we are defining our roles as mothers and refuse to have our mothering roles dictated by men or White women. Clearly, my racial representation is not invisible to community individuals and some children. How then do we account for this colour-blindness among some practitioners?

Practitioners’ colour-blindness affects the relationship between Black foster parents and agency staff; however, it also affects agency training and support. “Foster parents are in need of both education regarding the issues the children in their care face, as well as support in coping with the emotional demands of caregiving” (Kurtz, 2002: 43). While the child welfare agency offers various types of training, the agency’s ability to offer support to racialized foster mothers, like myself, is inadequate. Training does not account for racial differences of foster parents and rarely does it incorporate the centrality of race for racialized foster children. This is not to suggest that issues of diverse concerns are not mentioned; however, racial concerns are not integrated into training and support, unless the workers are themselves racialized persons. Latino foster parents identify the need to have more Latino agency staff in order to minimize the cultural inadequacies that the fostering Latino population experience (Torres, 2004). This argument can be generalized to many racialized population. Inadequate training and support create tensions and misunderstanding in the relationship. In addition, practitioners’ colour-blind approach further exacerbates issues of communication. In spite of these racialized experiences, the literature discussing challenges that foster parents experience generally do not include experiences of racism unless the article is specifically focused on racialized foster parents (Denby and Rindfleisch, 1996) or mothering in the margins. As an African Canadian woman, I am expected to be an unpartnered mother and I am expected to mother Black or Black-biracial children. The combination of mothering without a male counter partner and mothering White children for the state in my home appears to be an anomaly to many White middle class women.

Black women continue to embrace single and unmarried motherhood despite “systemic racism, poverty, and social ostracism” and in so doing assert “their ability to operate outside of patriarchal and heterosexual institutions (Pietsch, 2004: 73). I asserted my ability to mother this particular child for 26 months. During that time, I challenged community agencies, the child’s

biological family, staff at the child welfare agency, community volunteers, other foster parents, her friends' parents, and school teachers as I fought to protect my biological family from hostility, racism, and verbal assaults. During those 26 months, I was the most consistent adult in the child's life; yet agency staff neglected to facilitate a process for me to share information that would have helped the child's kin to better understand her and support her needs during the transition phase. This is especially crucial given that the family member had not lived with the child beyond her fourth birthday, had an inconsistent, estranged, and conflicting relationship with the child for at least 32 months, and had only spent brief times together with the child over an eleven-year time span. Was this an attempt to erase my perceived power in this child's life, to ultimately undress me as a mother and therefore deligitimize my mothering role? My status as a single parent and Black woman occupying and sharing the solitary space reserved for White heterosexual married women confronts and renders the status quo defunct. Erica Lawson (2000) states that "the idealized expression of sexuality, reproduction and motherhood are anchored within the institutions of marriage and the nuclear family structure (23)." I do not fit into the accepted categorization of woman and mother. Furthermore, my role in mothering White children for the state when these White mothers are deemed incompetent serves as a further insult to White women who constantly challenged my mothering role for these children. Here lies the conflict—how can my presence as a mother be legitimized and I be freely endowed with the decision-making power for White children when I am branded illegitimate, similar to my mother's generation who were used to serve the needs of the nation as domestic workers, nannies, and babysitters and then discarded?

Conclusion

In spite of the challenges to my role in mothering White children, I remain on the frontlines fighting to claim my space as a mother in all its complexities. My mother was and remains my most ardent teacher and role model in this regard. I have a responsibility to continue carving out a space for her grandchildren and ensuring that the space I create remains for future generations of Black mothers.

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