

The Experiences of Mothers of Children of Mixed Heritage *The Theme of the “Body Physical”*

This article springs from research I conducted (2001) on the experiences of mothers whose children of mixed heritage were attending elementary school in southern Ontario, Canada. Using feminist research methodologies, I explored what role, if any, their children’s mixed ethnicity had played in their mothering and in their children’s elementary school experiences. In the literature written by mothers of children of mixed heritage, there is often an undeniable emphasis on the physical body, with a particular focus on bodily differences arising from ethnicity. When mother and child physically appear to belong to different ethnic backgrounds, mothers write of their tangled emotions. Thus, being mixed or giving birth to mixed children may bring about a uniquely heightened awareness of the body as body and facial parts are analyzed and examined for the interplay of genetic blends. Participants in this study similarly recounted stories that were rooted in the world of the body. Mothers discussed facial features, skin tones, hair colour, and how each particular child looked, for example, “more Canadian” or “more Latin.” This study also suggests that multiracial individuals experience the concept of physical attractiveness in dramatically different ways because images of mixed ethnic identity, robust health and illicit sexual allure are jumbled together in the eyes of the beholder. Participants recounted lived experiences of this stereotype while simultaneously experiencing that surge of maternal pride that has been felt by many mothers of all backgrounds—monocultural, multiracial, or otherwise—whenever her child receives a compliment.

“Are you in the kitchen or the living room?”

I looked down at my feet. One foot rested on the wooden floor of the living room while the second was on the linoleum of the kitchen.

“Both. I’m in both.” (Walters, 1998: 114)

Using feminist research methodologies, I conducted a study (Gormley, 2001)

on the experiences of mothers whose children of mixed heritage were attending elementary school in southern Ontario, Canada. For the purposes of this study, the term “feminist research methodologies” referred to research that benefits women. “What makes a qualitative or quantitative approach feminist is a commitment to finding women and their concerns” (DeVault, 1999: 30). In this mothering research, I explored, among other questions, what role, if any, their children’s mixed ethnicity had played in their mothering and in their children’s elementary school experiences. I discovered that the physical body was a theme that appeared frequently both in the literature on individuals of mixed heritage and in my research; thus, the central argument of this article is that the multiracial experience is often viewed through the lens of the Physical Body. I begin my discussion by acknowledging my close personal stance to the topic. Then I provide details on the research design of my study and refer to the criteria used when selecting participants and to the plethora of terms used by others when referring to multiracial children. A synopsis of my literature review is then presented, which demonstrates that mothers who write on this topic place an undeniable emphasis on the physical body by reflecting upon, comparing and contrasting body parts. Participants in this study similarly recounted stories that are intertwined with the concepts of robust health, desirability, and physical attractiveness. I next delve into the uneasy connection between “mixed blood” and stereotypes of unbridled and illicit sex. Finally, I conclude that giving birth to or being an individual of mixed heritage brings about a unique awareness of the human body.

I was drawn to this topic for mainly personal reasons. As the mother of two sons of Asian/Caucasian mixed heritage, my interest in this subject arose from my most innermost feelings for my children: the desire to help them to thrive in their world. I wanted this study to lead me towards a deeper appreciation of our experiences (both mine and my children’s) as they go through the school system; therefore, I hoped that, at some level, my fuller understanding would help to strengthen our mother-child bond. This topic also appealed to me because of my personal lived experience of complex identities. While I look, sound, and have a family name that is completely Irish Canadian, through my Mexican mother I have another identity—that of *mexicana*—a fact that some of my teachers, I recall, had trouble believing.

The study involved a total of 12 individual interviews of approximately two hours in length and participants were middle-class, educated women. Except for one non-mother who was mixed heritage herself and who volunteered to shed insights on the experience, all other participants were mothers. Participants’ marital status was not given prominence in the interviews, but there were three married women, two separated (almost divorced) women, one widow, and one single non-mother. In all of the unions, at least one partner was White (either White North American or White European). Four White men and three White women were among the unions. The non-White partners were Black, Latin, and Asian. It was not my intention to have a sample of unions

in which at least one partner was White; it just happened that way because the composition of this group was determined by the participants who were available to me for this study. All of the mothers had children in the public elementary school system enrolled in the regular schooling stream. No private or religious schools were represented in the sample.

Determining just who exactly qualified as a mother of children of mixed heritage was somewhat difficult to decide. Certainly, numerous studies have different definitions (Chiong, 1998; Schwartz, 1998a, 1998b). In my study, however, I looked for mixed heritage or multiracial experiences in which there was (a) the union of two or more races according to the traditional racial definitions of Blacks, Whites, Asians, First Nations, Aboriginal peoples, etc., and /or (b) the union of two or more different language groups. So according to my categories, a Black Canadian father with a White Canadian mother would be mixed, even if they both speak the same English language; and a Spanish-speaking Costa Rican mother and a German-speaking Austrian father would be mixed, even if society classified both as "White."

I also needed to decide what term to use to describe the children. "Children of mixed heritage" is the term that I finally decided to use the most frequently for those children who are often referred to in the current literature as "multiracial," "biracial," "interracial," "mixed," "mixed-race," or sometimes "multicultural." The term "heritage" has multiple usages in the postcolonial literature, but in this study, I limited its meaning to the ethnic background of an individual or his/her family. In the literature on the multiracial experience, such children are also occasionally described as "mixed heritage" because each biological parent is from an ethnic background different from the other parent. There are countless other ways to describe such persons including "betwixt and between," "blended," "cosmic," "half-caste," "interethnic," "melded," "multiethnic," "mixed ancestry," "mixed lineage," "mixed parentage," "a new people," "transnational," "transracial" (Fernandez, 1992; Gailey, 2000; Nieto, 1996; Root, 1992; Schwartz 1998a; Tizard and Phoenix, 1993, to name a few). Scholar Rishma Dunlop (1999) delves into a challenging analysis of the hidden complexities of such labeling identities. However, with the permission from my participants who were comfortable using this "label," I employed this term mainly because it was a convenient way to convey ethnic background information to the reader.

When conducting a literature review on mothers of children of mixed heritage, I found that there is an undeniable emphasis on the physical body. To elaborate, there is no physical space less distanced than that of a child spending nine months in his/her mother's womb. The title of the article *Bearing Blackness in Britain*, exploring Blacks' attitudes towards White mothers of mixed Black/White children, recognizes the profound physical attachment of carrying a multiracial child in utero (Twine, 2000). For mothers who were once united by an umbilical cord to their children of mixed heritage, this link takes on a dramatic role as body and facial parts are analyzed and examined

for the interplay of genetic blends. The writings of both mothers and children (now adults) are frequently based in reflections on their physical appearances, entranced by the differences or similarities of the corporeal aspects of their heritage. Of course, many mothers in single-heritage unions are enthralled with the physical make-up of the new being that has come forth from their bodies (counting toes, determining who the child resembles, being pleased if we “see ourselves in her,” etc.). However, being mixed or giving birth to mixed children may bring about a uniquely heightened awareness of the body. One such mother describes her dizzying fascination with looking at and staring at children of mixed heritage:

I see the features that I associate with one race, and then I see sometimes these features slip into the features I associate with the “other” race. Each time the image slips from one race to the other, I know I’ve lost at least half of it, and so I need to keep looking, for what? Am I waiting for some amorphous homeostatic moment when the images will coalesce as neither this nor that but something else entirely? (Marín, 1996: 113)

The mixed heritage physical body exerts its power over mothers’ and children’s emotions. Jennifer Morales (1996), white appearing yet a quarter Filipina, a quarter Mexican, and one half northern European, writes that her blond-haired, fair-skinned children pose a special challenge to her. Her life goal is to teach them that as multi-racial individuals, they “have the ability and responsibility to move back and forth across the lines of race” (47) in spite of their appearance of single-race heritage. This mother’s reflections are among the most outspoken in revealing how skin colour as the route to racial and gender privilege is a prime motivator in determining her mothering style. Yolanda Flores Niemann (1996) writes that her biracial son’s colouring: light skin, blond hair, green eyes contrasted with her olive skin and caused people to often ask if she was the family maid or nanny. Once again, the emphasis is on how the mother’s and the child’s bodies differ from each other.

Lynda Marín (1996), herself a mixed product of a “smoky dark brown-armed” Nicaraguan father and an Anglo-American mother, “felt genuinely troubled that every bit of the Latino seemed to have disappeared in one generation” (115) when her infant son was born surprisingly dissimilar to her. A mother of a single-heritage union might also feel shocked if her child were born, say red-headed amongst a family who weren’t. However, such a mother probably would not feel bereft, and would not grieve her child losing part of its maternal ethnic heritage. In contrast to my above fictional mother, Marín looked down at her “brown hands [which] stood out in stark relief against the unmistakable pallor of his [her baby’s] tiny tummy, fingers, face.... When his first hair grew in golden, I felt disoriented” (114). Her disequilibrium, she reflects, was due to the fact that “her racial anchoring in brownness” (115) was

floundering in the rocky seas of anxiety “as if I were not really who I thought I was” (115)—a woman in turmoil because how could she still be Latin if she had been the conduit for a white child?

Another mother writes of the surprise she received when her son of mixed Japanese/Anglo-American was born looking nothing like her:

He was nine pounds seven ounces, twenty-three inches and about as far from an Asian baby as a baby can get: red hair, blue eyes, just the faintest golden suggestion of eyebrows and eyelashes, and porcelain-white skin. (Genetics is a strange thing: the woman in the labour room next to mine was half Japanese, and her husband was white. When I saw their baby, I was astonished: He looked completely Japanese, with fuzzy black hair, large, almond-shaped brown eyes, and tawny skin). (Butcher, 1996: 17)

Perceived physical similarities and differences between the child’s body and the mother’s body play a unique role in the relationship between mothers and children of mixed heritage. Of course, when any mother gives birth to a son, there is much difference between their bodies. The “beautiful, basically gender-neutral child” is then transformed into “It’s a boy” (Koppelman, 1999: 90). However, the mixed race literature that I reviewed focused especially on the bodily differences arising from ethnicity. Many mother-authors reflect on the deep love and hope they hold for their children, while simultaneously writing about their comparisons of each other’s bodily characteristics, facial features, and skin tones. In the literature reviewed, the physical connection between mother and child is celebrated and tangled by many emotions.

Participants in this study similarly recounted a few stories that were rooted in the world of the body. By analyzing the interview data, I discovered a number of themes, but one surfaced particularly frequently, that is, the Body Physical, which exerts its effect on people of mixed heritage from babyhood through elementary school and onwards through adulthood. (I purposefully placed the adjective after the noun “body” as a way to emphasize “physical.”) The mothers in my study discussed facial features, skin tones, hair colour, and how each particular child looked “more Canadian” or “more Latin.”

Elena¹, a Uruguayan participant married to a White Canadian, joked that her blonde-haired, blue-eyed daughter looked more Swedish than Latin, and yet this confident, vivacious little girl might surprise many people in the future whenever she would start speaking Spanish (Interview, August 18, 2000). Gaby (from Mexico) mentioned that even though her daughter was very fair, her thinking was “very Mexican” as a result of their spending so much time together. Another mother, Margaret, was trying to de-emphasize society’s preoccupation with the body, but found that sometimes other people (usually friendly strangers) would be puzzled by their contrasting physical images.

But when we go to stores and that, because we look so different, everyone remarks. A lot of people first-hand say, "Oh, she's not your daughter, is she?"...And then we explain. "Her father is from Honduras and that's why her skin is darker. That's why she has dark eyes." (Interview, July 31, 2000: 3)

Children of every racial and cultural group are beautiful and certainly single-heritage children are very beautiful. However, this study suggests that multiracial children and their mothers experience the concept of physical beauty in unique and complex ways. Some mothers in my study talked about the attention that their children received (and continue to receive) because of their perceived "good looks" and also, occasionally, because of their good health. They reported "an exaggerated emphasis on physical appearance" (Bradshaw, 1992: 77) and the fact that "this increased attention to physical appearance is expressed in such labels as *exotic, beautiful, or fascinating*" (77, emphasis in original).

Cynthia L. Nakashima (1992) states that this "seemingly positive image is actually very complex and needs to be questioned and studied very carefully" (169) and Carla K. Bradshaw (1992) argues that "it can lead to the feeling of being an outsider in some situations" (77). They look at the historical reasons behind the perceived beauty associated with individuals of mixed heritage and offer the possibility that "the idea that multiracials are attractive might very well be connected to the stereotype ... that they are ... vulnerable and linked to unbridled and illicit sex" (Nakashima, 1992: 170).

Nakashima and Bradshaw have raised a worthwhile point. If this stereotype is analyzed in further depth, highly complex historical and sociological reasons may emerge for the development and prevalence of this stereotype. Nevertheless, the participants in my study, including me, viewed the compliments that our children had received as contributing positively to their overall sense of self-esteem, and I am filled with pride whenever I am told that my children are handsome. Beth, a participant in my study, talked of the many compliments her Black/White daughters receive because of their beauty. I also talked about my mothering experiences of multi-racial beauty.

When they were babies, they got it all the time and I figured it was because they were babies, but it never stopped. We were at the zoo one Sunday and I had a lady come up to me and said "Are these your daughters?" And I said, "Yes" and she said "They're absolutely stunning" and I said, "Thank you very much." And as they have gotten older, it hasn't changed. People have never stopped saying it, or appreciating them, or seeing them for what they are, which is so nice. (Beth, interview, July 26, 2000: 2-3)

When we were living in Taiwan, people would cross the street just to look at Joseph because they were so curious about a mixed race child. Then they

would say to me “Oh, what a beautiful child.” And it was all positive, so he felt confident about himself—he knew he was cute. But then he would hate it whenever these strangers would come over and try to touch him, pat his head. Then he would be very rude to them. (Louise, interview, July 12, 2000: 9)

Margaret, the mother of a mixed Estonian/Honduran daughter, reflected on her “beautiful, Hispanic-looking girl” and then described her encounter with another family of mixed heritage:

There is an Estonian children’s camp—a summer camp. I just went there yesterday. In that camp, there was one mixed family—an Estonian man with a Guyanese wife. My sister and I were together. We’re in our 40s. We were just looking at the kids. Estonian children are beautiful, but they’re all really fair-haired, really fair. And then the three children of the mixed heritage family were dark. They looked so different in a good way. The father, when he was young, we used to call him “mousy.” No one would ever call his two boys “mousy.” My sister said they looked so virile, even though they’re aged twelve and thirteen. (Interview, July 31, 2000: 12)

Margaret’s sister, by describing the “mousy” man’s sons as looking “virile,” has referred to “perhaps the most common and most constant offshoot of the biological-psychological profile of people of mixed race” (Nakashima, 1992: 168), which is a focus on their sex appeal. Citing historical images of extremely passionate half-breeds, Nakashima (1992) analyzes possible factors that have created this impression.

A ... possible factor in this stereotype is that multiracial people are physical reminders of the biological nature of sex and love. No stories about storks delivering babies can explain how a “Black-looking” baby can have a White or Asian mommy, or how a Eurasian can look like an Asian person with blond hair and blue eyes. The genetics of reproduction are, as they say, written all over the faces of mixed-race people. (168).

In my interview with Caroline, a young woman in her 20s, the non-mother, who describes herself as “mulatto,” we talked briefly about the 40-page Zellers Department Store advertising supplement in that weekend’s *Saturday Star* newspaper (Interview, August 3, 2000). Out of a total of 36 models (including children, teenagers, and adults), eleven appeared mixed. This would account for a whopping 31 percent of the people portrayed! Of course it would not be easy to know with any certainty the ethnic background of these fashion models. However, we were both in agreement that certain individuals looked

“Latin mixed with something else,” or “Afro-Asian,” or “Eurasian,” etc. It was obvious to us that the advertising agency that produced this brochure considered it a good idea to employ numerous models of mixed heritage to promote the products. Later on in the interview, I asked Caroline whether beauty had played a role in her life.

When I was just born, and when I was a toddler, and a little child growing up, my mother in particular was warned that she'd have to guard me more closely because I'd be the apple of everybody's eye. I'd be the desire of you know, every man. That kind of jeopardized my mother's confidence. She wants me to be accepted, and appreciated and this and that. But she doesn't want that everywhere I turn, people are after me. (Interview, August 3, 2000: 6)

Caroline's “exotic” beauty as a child of mixed heritage “jeopardized her mother's confidence” and caused her much worry. Caroline talked of her perceived beauty being simultaneously a blessing and a burden in her life. As a multiracial woman, she faces challenges that are intertwined with race and gender, since numerous images of females who are “half-breed” Indian, Mexican “mestiza,” “mulatta,” or “Eurasian,” are centred on fantasies of erotic lust (Nakashima, 1992). Such images are a jumble of mixed bloods, desirability, and vulnerability—the latter because historically such women often were weak in a social, political, and economic sense. “Because of the structure of power in the American gender system (as well as in many other gender systems), weakness and vulnerability can be very exciting and attractive when applied to females” (Nakashima, 1992: 169).

Interestingly, around the time of my data collection, *The Toronto Star* ran a series of articles on multiracialism (Infantry, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c). Images of 12 children of mixed heritage appeared in the individual and group photographs that accompanied the articles. Subtitled beneath one large photo was: “This is what Canadian looks like” (2000c). The children are favourably described as “almond shaped eyes and freckled cheeks” (K1); “delicate features and mocha skin” (K3); “black [but] with lengthy, spiraling tresses” (K1). A teenager of mixed Indian/German heritage responds to these articles in a Letter to the Editor about the “the changing face of tradition and culture” (Khurana, 2000). *The Toronto Star* chooses to photograph her, thus making her letter the only one that day to be accompanied by an image of the writer's facial features. They headline it: “Mixed: A Beautiful Word,” as if finally answering the always burning question of “*what do multiracial children really look like?*” I agree with the headline: the children and teenagers pictured are all very beautiful, and as a mother of two mixed-heritage boys, I am more pleased than dismayed that the *Toronto Star* has reinforced the stereotype that children of mixed heritage are “aesthetically appealing.” At the same time, I am also uncomfortable with the idea that beauty is something that can be assessed by a journalist, authorized

by a newspaper editor, and then perpetuated by a wide customer distribution. Perhaps *The Toronto Star*, like all media, has put onto paper what already is often thought about in our beauty-driven society. “The idea that multiracial people are beautiful and handsome is one of the most persistent and commonly accepted stereotypes, both historically and contemporary ... people of mixed race have become ‘known’ for having attractive physical appearances” (Nakashima, 1992: 170-171).

A spin-off of this stereotype is that multiracial children’s bodies are unusually salubrious and robust. Recognizing that it is a hypothesis that has never actually been medically proven, Margaret joked about the idea that certain genetic blends tend to lead to physical strength and vitality:

...Even animals—I know animals are animals. But don’t you see thoroughbreds—like a thoroughbred horse or a thoroughbred dog—even though they’re both so fine and so cherished, they’re more susceptible and vulnerable to disease and germs, whereas a mongrel is not so easily sick [Margaret is laughing good-naturedly and joking as she explains this]. I’ve heard many times with humans, an interracial child is supposedly stronger physically.... Like Liz, she doesn’t eat all that well, and I don’t give her supplements and hopefully, she’ll stay healthy. It’s funny—she’s never sick. Her sickness—it’s only for a day or two and that’s it. (Margaret, interview, August 10, 2000: 11)

Unfortunately, my children have had their fair share of coughs, colds, ear infections, and a wide variety of other common childhood ailments, so they do not possess this particular “advantage” of being genetically mixed. Margaret spoke of numerous people commenting to her on the healthy and athletic nature of mixed heritage children. Thus, she described another perception related to the physical nature of multiracial individuals.

Margaret raised good points that need to be addressed, such as her criticism of the emphasis on race as a defining characteristic of an individual. She pointed out that society remains overly-driven by outward appearances: “It is so physical, in the body ... maybe we’re making a mountain out of a molehill. For me, mixed children are not that different from others” (Interview, August 10, 2000: 10).

As stated earlier, children of every racial and cultural group are beautiful—I write that sincerely. But multiracial individuals experience the concept of physical attractiveness in dramatically different ways—images of mixed ethnic identity, robust health and illicit sexual allure are jumbled together in the eyes of the beholder (Bradshaw, 1992; Nakashima, 1992). Participants and I recounted lived experiences of this stereotype while simultaneously experiencing that surge of maternal pride that has been felt by many mothers of all backgrounds—monocultural, multiracial, or otherwise—whenever her child receives a compliment. According to this study, giving birth to mixed children

or being mixed brings about a uniquely dizzying awareness of the body, because such a mother will often compare her body (and her ethnic identity) to that of her child. As my participants' stories suggest, mothers and their children of mixed heritage experience the Body Physical in particularly unique ways.

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¹Participants are identified with pseudonyms.

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