

## Postcards from the Middle

### *The Journey of Transracial Adoption*

*This paper highlights some of the mothering issues revealed through our conversations with our participants, White parents of Asian children, a group to which we belong. Current literature suggests that dominant discourse in Canada is that the country is egalitarian and celebrates diversity and multiculturalism. As a result, only overt instances of racism are identified as such. While some mothers in our study subscribed to this discourse prior to adopting transracially, most experienced a growing awareness of the model minority concept and understood its negative implications. Having adopted transracially, some mothers are learning, either for the first time or more deeply, about the privileges of being White as they are taken to places typically difficult to access before becoming a multiracial family. Participants in our study also described how their children were living in between two worlds—in between White and Chinese communities. When a person is positioned between two cultures, this tensioned space can be (interpreted as) a lonely existence. By extension, we are positioned in the space in between as we (re)consider our identities as mothers and as adoptive mothers.*

Race may only be skin-deep biologically (Rothman, 2005) but its effects on how a person is treated in society go to one's very core. Our wonderful, at times heart-breaking, but always rewarding, experiences of being mothers of children adopted transracially brought us together and, influenced by our love of research, have impelled us to be reflective of our and others' actions and motivations (Gidluck and Dwyer, 2006). Our (evolving) views on the intersection of race, adoption, and mothering led us to conduct our own study. This paper highlights some of the mothering issues revealed through our conversations with our participants, White parents of Asian children, a group to which we belong.

We begin with our observations of the social construction of what it means to mother and to be a citizen in one's adoptive country. This is followed by themes of the topics discussed by our participants: racism, the model minority concept, White privilege, and the children's position of being between two cultures. Adopting transracially compels us to challenge dominant discourse.

### **“Where is she from?” An early postcard**

At the beginning of our work together, we focused on the social construction of birth and adoptive mothers (Dwyer and Gidluck, 2004). Over coffee we would compare questions we were asked or comments said to us: “Do you have any children of your own?” “Now that you've adopted, you're sure to get pregnant.” We realized that these comments and questions “perpetuate a socially held myth that adoption is a second-best and less-than alternative for all involved—that in being part of an adoption one has somehow missed out on a ‘real’ family experience” (Johnston, 2004: 3). This myth is an extension of the “hierarchy” of motherhood that provides status to certain “types” of mothers.

As Dee Paddock (2002) pointed out, “Many people who have not experienced adoption personally view us as having ‘failed’ in an important cultural way. We have failed to create a family that falls within the narrow definition of ‘normal’” (2). When we are viewed as “not normal,” by extension our children are viewed as “not normal.” Consequently, qualifiers are often used to refer to our children—“This is Lynn's adopted daughter,” “Sonya has a daughter who's adopted from China”—in situations where they would not dream of doing so in a non-adoptive family: “This is Sue's birth-control-failure son,” “This is Mary's caesarean-section daughter,” “This is Nancy's in-vitro son” (Johnston, 2004).

After realizing that because we chose to create our families through adoption that we were typically viewed by others as adoptive mothers rather than mothers, we explored the role of race in our experiences. We acknowledged that as mothers of children who are not of the same race, it appears obvious to others that our children are adopted, however, we didn't understand why this prompts strangers to ask questions about our daughters' origins: “Where is she from?” We began to talk to each other about the issue of race in conceptions of motherhood and how language contributes to our feeling of being on public display. We were surprised by the amount and types of questions we were asked as we shopped for groceries or ate in restaurants.

As Cheri Register (2001) points out, people ask personal questions only in situations they perceive as abnormal. Recently Sonya's four-year-old answered a stranger's question “Where are you from?” with “The Dwyer family.” Questions like this one led us to understand that our children will always be confronted with what Frank Wu (2002) calls “the perpetual foreigner syndrome” (79). Most citizens who have spent the majority of their lives in Canada would probably not answer their birth country either and say a

certain city or area of a city but our children are expected to say “*China*.” We continue to be surprised how some people demonstrate that the experiences of our children, and therefore, our experiences as mothers, should be public knowledge. As their mothers, we are expected to disclose personal information about our children’s lives before they came to be part of our families. We’re left to feel “rude” if we choose to ignore insensitive or prying questions or provide answers that aren’t what they hoped.

Strangers typically do not ask birth mothers how long their labour was or how painful, but we are frequently asked how long we waited and whether it was expensive. We, and our children, have the same need for and right to privacy as other people (Coughlin and Ambramowitz, 2004). But we are expected to “know what they mean....”

### **P. S. You know what I mean?**

We are working up the courage to answer “We’re from just over the street” when asked “Where is she from?” but we’ve been socialized to be polite—further puzzling us why others didn’t learn to not ask intrusive questions. When we don’t answer these types of questions as expected, we get “You know what I mean.”

Wu (2002), an Asian American law professor, reminds us that it is not just transracial families that face these kinds of intrusive and insensitive questions, but all people of colour. He says he is often treated as if he’s being silly if he replies: “I was born in Cleveland, and I grew up in Detroit.” Quite often, he suggests, answers like this are followed by the question: “Where are you *really* from?” (80, emphasis in original). He suggests that these types of questions imply that he is “a visitor at best, an intruder at worst” and that “people who know nothing about [him] have an expectation of ethnicity as if [he] will give up [his] life story as an example of exotic” (80).

We typically try to use positive adoption language when we do, in fact, know what they mean. As we each have two daughters, both of whom were adopted from China, we are often asked “Are they sisters?” or more frequently “Are they real sisters?” When we answer “yes,” some people express their amazement that we were able to adopt two children from the same birth family. Sometimes we answer, “They are real sisters but they are not biological sisters” hoping they get the message. But we hear their message loud and clear; since both girls are adopted by the same parents but are not viewed as “real sisters,” we are being told that we are not viewed as their “real” mother.

Certainly, the discourse of mothering doesn’t have to exclude us. We *were* “expecting” while we waited for our babies; we *do* have “children of our own” (we just didn’t give birth to them), we *are* our children’s “real” mothers, and our daughters *are* “real” sisters. And we did not settle for “second” best in choosing adoption as the way to grow our families. The love that binds us to our children is as “real” and as “strong” as if we had physically given birth to them.

It was these personal reflections as mothers that led us to explore other parents' experiences. Specifically, we wanted to know about their experiences around the issues of race, racism, and racial identity. We developed five overarching questions: 1) What does the concept of race mean to you? 2) Did adoption affect your "racial awareness" and/or conceptualizations of race? If so, how? 3) Has your family experienced racism and if so, what strategies have been effective in combating this discrimination? 4) Do you have specific strategies for promoting healthy racial identity development? 5) Are there resources available to assist you and your family in combating discrimination and promoting healthy racial identity development? If so, do these resources meet the needs of transracial families? If they do not meet your needs, what type of programming would be most beneficial to you?

We recruited participants from across the country using primarily the internet and newsletters of adoption agencies and associations. We were pleased by the interest expressed by others, many of whom appear to be grappling with the same issues as us.

### **Talking to others on the journey: Methodology**

Participants were parents who identified as White and who have adopted at least one child from Asia. Six focus groups were conducted with a total of 32 parents participating of which 27 were females. Twenty-nine had adopted from China, three had adopted their children from Vietnam (one participant had adopted children from China and Vietnam), and one adopted a child from South Korea.

Data was collected from three sources: a questionnaire (which included demographic information such as age, socio-economic status, and other family characteristics), written comments from the last section of the questionnaire, and focus group interviews. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire at the beginning of the focus group. This was to allow for demographic information to be shared privately with the researchers. Written open-ended questions were provided at the end of the focus groups to provide parents with the opportunity to elaborate on issues privately that they may not have felt comfortable doing in the group.

Hermeneutic phenomenology thematic analysis was used with the open-ended questions, including the spontaneous written comments and focus group interviews. Hermeneutics as a research method is a way of systematically dealing with interpretation (Bolton, 1987). Max van Manen (1990) explained hermeneutic phenomenological research as the study of lived experience; the description of the experiential meanings we live as we live them; and a search for what it means to be human. As Vangie Bergum (1991) explained, the hermeneutic phenomenological approach is concerned with the description of the experience and with the act of interpretation as a way of point to the nature of the phenomenon.

In qualitative research, themes are usually expressed as statements.

These statements highlight explicit or implied meaning that runs through most of the collected data or that involves deep and profound emotional or factual impact (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner and Steinmetz, 1991). One of van Manen's (1990) approaches to isolating themes in text, the selective or highlighting approach, was used to assist with reflective analysis. The text was listened to and read several times, asking, "What statement(s) or phrase(s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience?" (93). These statements were highlighted and arranged into working themes.

Once the themes and data were revisited several times, and a consensus on the essence of the experience, the data were turned to again to find examples of this "truth." Some features of the phenomenon were extracted that helped make its essence visible (van Manen, 1990) by asking the following questions of the data: Of what aspect is this an instance? What questions about an aspect does this item of data suggest? What sort of answers to questions about an aspect does this item of data suggest? (Lofland and Lofland, 1995).

### **Writing home: Becoming colour-sighted**

One of the themes that emerged during our focus groups was that race was not something most participants had given much thought about prior to adopting their children (Dwyer and Gidluck, 2006). Most parents indicated that they had given some consideration to the challenges of raising children of a race different from themselves but that it was only after their children were home with them that race really became salient.

*I guess I always thought that people would have the same attitude that I do that "we're all the same inside" but it's pretty naïve in a way. [Adoption] really opened my eyes to just what it means to be a minority and how [our children] have to be strong when we're not there to help them ... in the face of racial discrimination.*

Many parents in our study mentioned being colour-blind before they adopted—they didn't see White. "I hadn't ever heard the term White Privilege...White Privilege leads to a lot of stuff that I didn't realize until I started thinking back." As Register (2005) asserts, "That gift of sight is one of the greatest rewards an internationally adoptive parent ever receives" (94). Other authors also maintain that it is important for transracial adoptive parents to acknowledge the concept of White privilege (Frankenberg, 1993; Tatum, 1997; McIntosh, 1988) because many White people have never considered the benefits of being White. However, as Register points out, "Color blindness is a luxury our children can't afford" (84).

Many of our participants became (more) colour-sighted after becoming a multiracial family. Most had not reflected on the personal nature of race prior to becoming adoptive parents of Asian children, making them no different

than most other White people in Canadian society because being White means having the privilege of not having to consider race and its consequences in our society. Further, even much of the literature on multiculturalism, cross-culturalism, and diversity uses the words “ethnicity” and “culture” when actually referring to race. “It makes us feel racist if we acknowledge race, so we try not to, and we end up being color-mute.... Children learn ... that you don’t talk about race” (Bigler cited in Jayson, 2006: 25). This suggests that in addition to being socialized to be colour-blind, as part of the dominant race White people are also taught to be colour-mute.

It appears that many internationally adoptive parents feel more comfortable teaching their children about their ethnicity rather than about racism (Lee cited in Register, 2005), race, and racial identity. It is important for parents to acknowledge that while our families are inclusive, society is exclusive. Being White, many of us haven’t had to think about, let alone negotiate, this distance between family and society. However, after adopting transracially, some mothers realize that they learn to explicitly “do” family in ways biological mothers take for granted (Rothman, 2005). Questions such as “Are you the babysitter?” emphasize that we do not appear to others to be mother and daughter, because of race. In this way, transracial adoption is more complex than same-race adoption because visible differences between mothers and children increase challenges to our social acceptance as a family unit (Steinberg and Hall, 2000: 8). This distance between family and society seems contradictory to the “public exhibit” feature of being a multiracial family. Transracial adoption means that our family circumstances become “public” because of the visual differences between us and our children. We are, in effect, on display.

There was a recognition by our participants that when their children were with them they were given “the benefit of being honorary White.” And it was particularly troubling to many of the participants that people in the Chinese community saw their children as White:

*As the kids get older ... they can pass off to the White world that they're just normal Chinese kids. It's a littler harder in the Chinese community to do that because they don't act like Chinese kids. They don't eat the same foods. They don't behave the same way as Chinese kids being raised in Chinese families. They're different.*

Richard Lee (2003) has called this the transracial adoption paradox. He explains that racial/ethnic minority children adopted by White parents are racial/ethnic minorities in the society in which they live but are often perceived as if they are members of the majority culture because they have White parents. These children sometimes even perceive themselves to be members of the majority culture because of their adoption into a White family.

Many of the participants in this study were worried that they were not

equipped to help their children deal with racism. As one mother put it: “I’m about as White and as privileged as a White privileged person gets.... The only discrimination I have ever faced is gender based discrimination.” They talked about the paucity of post-adoption services to assist them, and their children, learn about racial issues: “There’s not a lot of post-adoption services.” Added another, “No, nothing.”

### **P. S. Canada’s not racist, is it?**

It is important to note that many of the parents in this study expressed that neither they nor their children had experienced racism—so far. Most of our participants had pre-school children and those who had older children concurred that racism did not really become an issue until their children started school. However, for the majority of Canadians, racism appears to be most directly associated with more obvious forms of abuse such as blatantly derogatory remarks and discriminatory actions (Driedger and Halli, 2000; Park, 1997; Satzewich, 1998; Schick and St. Denis, 2005). One mother said:

*I think it’s very hard when you know you’re White, you’ve lived with White privilege all your life and you don’t see anyone being overtly racist to your children. Because when your children are with you they’re sort of honorary White people. So, it’s hard to see race as an issue especially when they are little.*

Even overt forms of racism were seen to be committed by ignorant individuals and sometimes people who “don’t intentionally try to be racist.”

Dominant discourse in Canada is that it is an egalitarian nation that celebrates and embraces multiculturalism (Driedger and Halli, 2000; Satzewich, 1998). Multiculturalist ideology upholds Canada to be a tolerant, accepting, accommodating and just society that protects the rights of all individuals regardless of race (Park, 1997). One mother in our study stated:

*...race is a gigantic volatile complex issue in the United States ... and it’s an issue in Canada but it’s not an issue of the same nature at all. It doesn’t nearly, I think, as often prescribe your economic or social status in Canada as it does in the United States.*

It’s important to distinguish the difference between “discovering” racism (Rothman, 2005) and learning about racism. All participants in our study expressed knowing, on some level, about the existence of racism. Some expressed the sentiment that they thought racism was more extreme in the U.S. than in Canada. However, after beginning the journey of transracial adoption, race becomes (more) salient for these parents. One mother indicated that, as a White woman, she would not be able to really understand or experience racism because she did not live it but others have.



### **Seeing the space in between: Negotiating new identities**

Ted Aoki (1996) writes about the spaces in between the cultural identities of “East and West.” As two distinct cultural wholes, they are understood as a binary of two separate pre-existing entities, which can be bridged or brought together to conjoin in an “and.” This bridge can be viewed not as a path but as a dwelling place for people. He asserts that this third space is an ambivalent space of both East and West. Participants in our study also described how their children were living in between two worlds—essentially in a “third” space. “She can’t live on the White side and she can’t live on the Chinese side.” Some participants described how their children were viewed as White by some people in the Asian community and were viewed as Asian by the White majority. Others discussed how their children were not seen as Asian by some White people as demonstrated by comments such as “she doesn’t look Chinese” or “she’s starting to look more Chinese.” This is consistent with the transracial adoption paradox (Lee, 2003). This paradox contributes to the many contradictory experiences of the family, particularly of the children. Aoki also acknowledges that the space in between is a space of paradox, ambiguity and ambivalence, as well as conjunction and disjunction. He refers to this space between two cultural identities as a tensioned space. When a person is positioned between two cultures, this tensioned space can be interpreted as a lonely existence.

Terms such as “transracial” adoption emphasize the movement in getting across from one race to another. Aoki (1996) discusses the use of bridges in Oriental gardens, urging the visitor to linger rather than simply use it to get from one place to another. As mothers of children who are of a race different from us, we could use the space between East and West to linger and reconsider our identity as mothers.

Identity is not fixed. It changes over time and place. Anne-Marie Ambert (2003) writes that, “The birth culture constitutes a serious roadblock to the social acceptance of adoption” (2). This predominate discourse dismisses, excludes and even invalidates other women’s experiences and has forced us to reflect on our sense of identity as mothers. We argue that this language excludes and “minimizes” our experiences, and we examine the messages inherent in this language about what it means to mother. We, too, often feel positioned between two cultures—mothering and adoptive mothering. This is a tensioned space as we identify more with one or the other at different times. “Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within” (Hall cited in Aoki, 1996: 6). At times we are positioned as “mothers” and at other times we are positioned as “adoptive mothers.”

The space in between is a space where newness can flow as this is a space of generative possibilities (Aoki, 1996). This is consistent with what Lee (2003) points out, that it is important not to portray transracially adopted children as “passive recipients” of racial identity. “Identity is a complex mix of what one chooses, what is forced upon you and how one works with these dictated images”



(Park 1997: 19). Lee (2003) calls for more research on how these “adoptees personally negotiate their identities and sense of place in society” (725).

Some participants still worried about the future and about their children belonging to one community. As one mother pointed out:

*When they're on campus, they're not part of a White family, they're Asian born ... they're no longer attached to your family, they're seen as Chinese or Vietnamese. And in university there's a difference because our kids are going to be discriminated against from the Asian point of view as well as the White community. So where do they fall?"*

Jerry Diller and JeanMoule (2005) recognize that being isolated from their racial communities causes particular challenges for children adopted transracially. These children may lack support of the broader community, and have less protection as well as more exposure to conscious and unconscious biases and racism.

### **P. S. The model minority stereotype: Is it racism?**

The Asian mystique, created by the way western popular culture has portrayed people from Asia, is pervasive in North American society (Prasso, 2005). The model minority characterization of Asians is a pervasive one—hard workers, really quiet, very intelligent (Tatum, 1997; Lee, 1996). While this stereotype might initially seem to be a positive and beneficial one, it has the negative effects of silencing people and making individuals invisible (Pon, 2000). While participants in this study did not always frame the positive stereotypes or attention their children receive as the discourse of a model minority, it is clear that it troubled them that, as one participant described it, “The world sees all of our girls the same.... As gifted China Dolls.” Participants spoke about how their children often do, or do not, fit the commonly held stereotypes of Chinese people and how the child’s personality and family background are often overlooked.

While participants in this study quite openly spoke of the irritation and frustration they felt as a result of commonly-held stereotypes of Asians that they and their children had encountered, most did not consider this to be racism *per se*: “It’s not really racism—but lack of awareness” was one common theme when discussions turned to racial stereotypes. Another mother said:

*I don't think we've really encountered racism per say. I think what we have encountered is people's preconceptions ... people saying things like "you know she'll be musically inclined or very good at mathematics" and that type of thing.*

This reaction is consistent with Sheridan Prasso’s (2005) argument that most North Americans tend to associate racism with only direct actions or

overtly negative and discriminatory comments. As such, the model minority stereotype serves to deny that Asian North Americans experience discrimination (Wu, 2002).

### **Continuing on the journey**

Wanderer, your footsteps are the road, and nothing more; wanderer, there is no road, the road is made by walking. By walking one makes the road, and upon glancing behind one sees the path that never will be trod again. Wanderer, there is no road—Only wakes upon the sea. (Machado, 2003)

The current literature on children adopted transracially suggests that these children are “psychologically well adjusted, exhibit variability in their racial/ethnic identity development, and along with their parents, engage in a variety of cultural socialization strategies to overcome the transracial adoption paradox” (Lee, 2003: 728). Like us, all of the mothers in our study spoke about following the current trend of enculturation as part of their approach to mothering. Enculturation is defined as making a concerted effort to teach children about their birth cultures and heritages (Lee, 2003). But knowing about culture is not enough. Disregarding issues of race do not prepare children of colour to live in North American society.

In recent years, white families raising black kids, by birth or by adoption, have been fond of reassuring the children that color doesn't matter, and reassuring themselves that all you need is love. I don't actually believe that. And neither do most black folk. Not in America. Color does matter. You need a lot more than love.... If your child is going to grow up without the privileges of whiteness, you'd best learn what those are.” (Rothman, 2005: 50)

Learning to perceive differently often requires that one engage in activities that, in some way, remove one from the comfortable routines and habits of the familiar or well-known (Carson and Sumara, 1997). Having adopted transracially, some mothers are learning, either for the first time or more deeply, about the privileges of being White as they are taken to places typically difficult to access before becoming a multiracial family. Our responsibility to critique ideologies of indifference and homogeneity and value heterogeneity and difference (Borradori, 2003) is made that much more clear as mothers of children adopted transracially. Throughout our journey, we must question dominant borders and discourses. And as White mothers, we have the power to do this and leave not a path, but wakes upon the sea.

Authors' note: The title of this article is, in part, in reference to the film *Postcards*

from the Edge. The movie is about two women who explore their relationship as mother and daughter, including the daughter explaining how her mother's behaviour affected her childhood. The title is also in reference to mothering being a journey, of which we are in the middle. By exploring our mothering issues, we hope our daughters, and we, never end up on "the edge."

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