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White Birth Mothers of Black/White Biracial Children

Addressing Racialized Discourses in Feminist and Multicultural Literature

This paper reviews literature relevant to White birth mothers of Black/White biracial children. Citing research on interracial marriage, motherhood, women's racialized identity in interracial families, racialized motherhood, and multicultural counseling and diversity, issues needing further study and inclusion in the feminist and critical multicultural literature will be identified.

In this paper I introduce current feminist and multicultural literature relevant to White birth mothers of Black/White biracial children. As such, it is neither complete nor comprehensive; rather, it is an introduction to some of the questions about racialized identity that might affect and inform how these mothers experience themselves.

Before I present this literature, I will briefly introduce myself and my reasons for investigating this very particular area. This past September marked the 22nd anniversary of giving birth to the first of my two Black/White biracial children. Reflecting back, I can say that it also marks the beginning of my informal research into the issues White birth mothers of Black/White biracial children encounter. Though I knew at the time I was crossing a social boundary not often crossed that would bring childrearing challenges different than those faced by other mothers in my cohort, I was unprepared for the frequent question "What about the child?" that family, friends, colleagues, and sometimes even strangers would ask me.

Outwardly, unwavering and defensive, I would let them know that I did not share their concern. Inwardly, I began to ask questions of my own. What gave others permission to question my choice to have interracial children and what subtext produced feelings of judgment and indictment inside me? As my children grew and others began questioning how my children were being reared

to identify racially, my own questions changed. Though I felt confident in myself as a mother, I began wondering about the impact of racialized discourses on the self-concept of White birth mothers of Black/White biracial children in general. Turning to the literature for answers, I discovered a growing body of research pertaining to biracial children, adolescents, and adults, but a dearth of literature pertaining to parents in interracial families in general and to mothers in these families in particular. The literature that I did find generally pertained to the child's need for an uncontested identity and how parents could support this.

Given that the number of interracial families continues to rise due to social and demographic changes, the need for further research addressing other issues relevant to these families will likely rise as well. Research exploring the everyday experience of White birth mothers of Black/White biracial children in the Canadian context is one such need.

Since space constrains the length of this paper, the breadth of literature I present is limited. Because of this, notions of women's racialized identity in interracial families and racialized motherhood will be introduced without the framing discussion of the history of opposition to interracial heterosexual relationships. A brief discussion about relevant research concerns concludes my paper.

Women's racialized identity in interracial families

Discussions of family generally take place within dominant social discourses that privilege monoracial heterosexual relationships and patriarchal nuclear families. While all families falling outside this norm face particular challenges, the particular challenges facing interracial families occur within racialized discourses particularly harsh on White women involved with Black men. Various theories about White women who marry Black men have been posited. According to Paul Spickard (1989), Merton's "exchange" theory or "rule of hypogamy" is the generally accepted theory about gender patterns in intermarriage between Black men and White women to date. He states:

> Certain upwardly mobile lower-caste men—those who are conspicu-
> ously handsome, talented, rich, or well-educated—trade those assets
> in a marriage contract for the higher caste status of women who have
> status but lack beauty, talent, wealth, or intellect (1989: 8).

Ruth Frankenberg's (1993) interviews with women uncover equally de-rogatory attitudes. From discourses about White femininity where White women involved in interracial relationships are presented as "sexually loose," "sexually unsuccessful," or "sexually radical," to discourses about interracial relationships as "transgressing fixed racial or cultural boundaries," she describes attitudes reminiscent of the United States' antimiscegenation past (1993: 77). Others site similar findings. In her interviews with White women with

Black partners, Carmen Luke found that these women perceived, through overt or covert looks and comments, that they were considered "less than White" (1994: 60). Frances WinddanceTwine's finding that transracial mothers are "subjected to forms of surveillance, discipline and moral censure usually restricted to women of colour" (2001: 130) supports Luke's. And according to Twine, though transracial mothers are one of the fastest growing social groups, they remain marginalized in feminist analyses of race and racism.

Racialized motherhood

The literature on racialized motherhood is central to my research. Briefly discussing literature on Black motherhood, then moving to an overview of the literature on White birth mothers of Black/White biracial children, I will identify recurring themes that contribute to racialized discourses about White birth mothers of biracial children. Discussing notions of maternal competence, transgression and status change, questions of how these social constructions may lead to internalized feelings of shame, guilt or judgment for these women will be raised. Finally, I will present the perspective of two birth mothers on mothering Black/White biracial children.

Patrice DiQuinzio writes that mothering is often a subject of contention and controversy because "being a mother and being mothered are both imbued with tremendous social, cultural, political, economic, psychological, and personal significance" (1999: viii). For some, the points I raise may seem contentious and controversial as well.

According to Patricia Hill Collins:

> Motherhood occurs in specific historical contexts framed by interlocking structures of race, class and gender, contexts where the sons of White mothers have "every opportunity and protection," and the "colored" daughters and sons of racial ethnic mothers "know not their fate." (1994: 57)

This strong statement offers an example of how motherhood becomes racialized outside of dominant discourses. While Collins is justified in giving voice to concerns Black mothers face in raising their sons, her assumption of racial sameness silences the voices of those White mothers whose sons and daughters also face racism. When she asserts that "White women's children are socialized into their rightful place in systems of racial privilege" while "racial ethnic women have no such guarantees for their children" (1994: 68), she not only universalizes their experiences, she also implies that a child's future prospects are contingent on their mother's race.

Beverly Greene also writes that a Black mother's role includes tasks not shared by their White counterparts, specifically racial socialization of Black children (1990: 208). Stressing the incumbency on Black mothers to prepare their daughters to become Black women, she states that if a "natural" mother

is unable to do so, "extended family, peers, or educational and mental health environments may do so," though these "influences may be less intense and powerful" (218). Greene's concern that a mother's failure "to mitigate the dominant culture's devaluing message can be associated with maladaptive adjustments in her daughter" (218) carries implications for White birth mothers of Black/White biracial daughters. Tracy Robinson voicing similar concerns writes:

> White women, who are not aware of themselves as racial beings within a "racialized" world, may be compromised in their ability to provide their non-White children with important racial socialization skills and messages, yet little is known about the types, if any, of racial socialization messages that White mothers give to their non-White children. (2001: 171)

A theme of racial minority children's mental health being contingent on their White birth mother's ability to socialize them to cope with systemic racism is common in the literature. Robin Miller and Barbara Miller's (1990) article on bridging the gap between African-American and White parenting styles of mothers of biracial children, and Ravinder Barn's (1999) research on White birth mothers of mixed parentage children within the British child welfare system exemplify this. According to Miller and Miller the availability of "ethnically self-assertive role models" and an "ability to cope with the world from a minority perspective" are crucial for the biracial child's developmental and mental health (1990: 176). This view, based solely on research findings on African-American parents' role in socializing their children, implies that White birth mothers need to adopt the socialization skills of African-American parents. However, Miller and Miller's conclusion that "neither the mother or father of an interracial child is capable of empathic understanding or role model provision for a mixed-race person" (1990: 176) creates doubts about these parents' abilities to create environments conducive to their children's mental health. These doubts are reflected in Barbara Tizard's and Ann Phoenix's assertion that while attitudes toward interracial relationships have improved, worries about the children of these unions continue. Despite benign appearances, the shift from "eugenic concerns with miscegenation" to "liberal concerns about child welfare" still constructs mixed relationships as problematic (2002: 39). Because the theme of maternal competence prevails in discussions about child welfare, White birth mothers remain under the lens. With most literature on multiracial families focusing on the children, a body of literature helpful for understanding the parents of these children in general and the mothers in particular is also needed. To date, Twine (1996; 1999; 2000; 2001) has contributed the most to the literature on White birth mothers of Black/ White biracial children. She, along with Frankenburg (1993), Luke (1994), Robinson (2001), Maria Root (2001) and Tizard and Phoenix (2002) are

among the first to discuss these women within the context of discourses of racialized identity.

According to Twine (2000) there has been little sustained theoretical or empirical analysis about the ways racism structures the maternal experience of White women with Black/White biracial children. She states that most feminist theorists have assumed that mothering takes place within monoracial families and that White women are considered raceless or racially neutral (Twine, 1999). For Twine, "White women who give birth to African-descent children in contexts of White supremacy and racial disparities provide an innovative theoretical lens through which to examine the multiple meanings of maternal competence" (2000: 78). Given my interest in how racialized theories of maternal competence affect White mothers, Twine's research provides a reference point for my own research to build upon.

As I have shown, the theme of maternal competence emerges throughout the literature. According to Twine, racism complicates the meaning of maternal competence for White birth mothers of Black/White biracial children in several ways. Citing her study of transracial mothering in Britain, Twine (1999) identifies four themes related to maternal competence that emerged in her interviews with ten White birth mothers who classify their children as "Black."

The first theme was the struggle to negotiate the racist attitudes and practices of their natal families. For some women, the desire to continue their relationship with their natal families clashed with their desire to protect their children's positive self-esteem. Though the consequences of the pressure they felt to negotiate this struggle affected many mothers' mental health in ways ranging from nervous collapse to clinical depression, their desire to maintain their natal family relationships prevailed.

The next theme Twine identifies is pressure to find safe residential communities for raising children. Like their need to negotiate the effects of racism within their family environment, transracial mothers expressed their need to negotiate the everyday racism within the social environment of their neighborhoods, fearing that they or their children might be targets of racial abuse in predominantly White residential communities.

Themes of "othermothers" or co-mothering alliances and Black extended family relationships are the third and fourth themes Twine identifies. Because White transracial mothers often felt unable to provide Black cultural role modeling or mentoring to their children, they reported needing to rely on the Black community or Black friends and family for support. Twine reports that the women found the Black community both affirming and challenging. While many community members supported interracial relationships and felt sympathy for poor White women struggling to raise their children, others did not. Still, those who identified the Black community as their reference group and support, raised the theme of needing to constantly prove their maternal fitness to Black women about their ability to run a culturally appropriate household (e.g., through cooking, hair care, and discipline). Twine's conclusion that,

consequentially, trans-racial mothers often subject themselves to harsh self-surveillance and criticism to ensure their cultural competence as mothers of Black children underscores the need for further research addressing the particular stresses of being the subject of racialized discourses about the maternal competence of mothers constructed as racially different from their children.

Other aspects of the racialized discourse on White birth mothers of Black/White biracial children relevant to my research are themes of transgression and status change. Twine writes:

> The meaning of "transgression" and the process by which certain categories of women are defined as transgressive remains central to feminist analyses of race and reproduction ... White women who become transracial mothers are often perceived as transgressive in their families and communities. Transracial mothers, that is, mothers who are socially classified as belonging to a racial group considered distinct from that of their birth children, may be subjected to forms of surveillance, discipline, and moral censure usually considered restricted to women of colour. (2001 130)

These themes, like those of maternal competence, also can impinge on these women's self-concept. Subjected to assumptions about their "maternity, morality, sexuality and respectability," as well as to "verbal abuse, physical abuse, and the denial or withdrawal of social courtesies typically extended to White people by other White people" (Twine, 2001: 133) these women face numerous challenges. For example, Luke (1994) found that the White women with Black partners reported frequently experiencing innuendos regarding their sexuality. Statements like, "She couldn't get a White man," or "White men aren't good enough for her," racialized their sexuality outside of the White heterosexual norm. Katerina Deliovsky (2002) writes that White women in interracial relationships are often called "White slut" or told, "You go Black, you never go back."

The birth of interracial children also introduces significant issues that are usually irrelevant in monoracial families (Root, 2001). For families who regard "racial reproduction as an important product," a relative who marries outside the race will be marginalized. Attitudes such as, "If you divorce your husband, you still have biracial children so there is no going back" (138), highlight the concept of transgression. Root asserts that White women seem most affected by how their biracial children changed their identity since they were no longer considered White enough in the White world, yet under suspicion in the non-White world.

Luke draws similar conclusions. Because White women can experience profound changes in identity and social relations as their "public status" changes due to an interracial relationship with men of colour, their identities change

from being "insiders within their own dominant culture to becoming outsiders within" (1994: 58-59). As well, the perceived racial differences between a White mother and her child can undermine her "public maternal status" as she negotiates questions about her biological relatedness to her own child (Twine, 2000). This public scrutiny placing a White woman in interracial families outside of the monoracial heterosexual norm creates particular challenges for her. As Luke states, "Her sense of self, her family, work, and community relationships, and the politics of everyday life are circumscribed by discourses of culture, race, and racism which are not always congruent with how she is visually perceived in the world" (1994: 68).

The narratives of White birth mothers Maureen T. Reddy (1994) and Jane Lazarre (1996) reflect their own experiences mothering Black/White biracial children in the racially stratified United States. Echoing many of the concerns stated above, they offer perspectives and insights from their own rich experiences as mothers, but also as academics schooled in American literature.

Reddy (1994) in her autobiographical memoir uses literary analysis and ethnography to explore her awakening from "a delusion of colorlessness" brought about by her children's own discovery of race. Describing her experience as a member of an interracial family as "standing on the color line" or "as a bridge uncomfortably stretching across it touching both sides while somehow remaining in the middle"(5) she succeeds to soften the language of racial transgression seen above. Reflecting that as a White woman, she was not "taught about resistance and survival" (16) as her children's father was, she shares her uncertainty about her ability to help them with the challenges they will face because of their race. With interracial families usually either invisible, silent, or represented as pathologized subject of sociological study with their subjectivity absent, these families are "left with few but negative guides"(10). For these families in general but for the White mothers in particular, learning how to help their children navigate the racialized world is yet another part of the bridge across the color line. To Reddy "some of the difficulty of living as a bridge would be mitigated by company, but crossing the color line is a strangely lonely journey" (9).

While Reddy (1994) and Lazarre (1996) share many of the same perspectives on being White mothers of children who identify as Black, there is poignancy in Lazarre's account that seems to amplify the feeling of loneliness that Reddy speaks of.

Lazarre (1996), a Jewish mother like myself, writes that as "a Jewish mother I am watching my sons move farther and farther away from a sense of a Jewish identity and, although I am not religious at all, this leaves me feeling a specific kind of loneliness"(66). Like Reddy's (1994) experience of "crossing the color line," Lazarre describes feelings "layered with anger, shame and sheer confusion" (66) about living with race in America where even fundamental maternal feelings to protect her children are touched by race. Highlighting two friends responses to her fear of being unable to protect her sons from experi-

ences such as racial profiling, Lazarre juxtaposes her White friend's "sudden insight that this is a common story of motherhood with a terrible added dimension" to a sense "gentle tolerance" in her Black friend's response (67).

Another theme that Lazarre returns to in her text is a feeling of being racially different or 'other' to her children, a feeling that seems to cause her distress. Stating that since her "sons reached adolescence beginning their lives as *young Black men in America*," she has wondered again and again whether "they think of me as white before or after they think 'my mother'… 0does it touch off even a flashing moment of regret, an unbridgeable distance between us?" (10). When Lazarre tells us that on conveying to one of her sons that she understands why he rejects a biracial or "tragic mulatto identity" he responds saying, "I don't think you do, Mom. You can't understand completely because you're white"(24), the painful impact of racialized discourses on White mothers can be felt.

As demonstrated above women in interracial relationships and White birth mothers of Black/White biracial children become the subjects of public and familial discourses about their sexuality and maternal competence incomparable to those about White women in monoracial heterosexual unions. The stress of this may lead some to seek professional support and guidance. As we find ourselves called upon in this way, it is incumbent on us to have a framework for understanding these women's particular struggles.

In closing, I draw attention to research issues raised by Vanessa Bing and Pamela Trotman Reid (1996) and Root (1992). According to Bing and Trotman Reid, the portrayal of women and people of colour in both traditional and feminist psychological research is problem laden. Though progress has been made for certain groups, there remain large numbers of "unknown women" and "unknowing research" (176) Stating that because White feminist research often essentializes women's experiences, socially constructed markers such as race, class, sexual orientation, and gender that determine social placement and relative power are often overlooked. Referring to women of colour and poor women, Bing and Trotman Reid argue that, "further strategies are needed to begin to explain the needs and to hear the voices of the women who are still unknown in psychological research" (192). White birth mothers of Black/White biracial children who fall outside the juxtaposed categories of Black or White racialized identity are of these unknown.

To address this Bing and Trotman Reid (1996), and Root (1992) claim the need for different research models. Root (1992) contrasts older research "situated in an era marked by linear models of identity, rigid thinking about race and racial boundaries, and overt racism" (181) to today's ecological theories emphasizing "the interaction of social, familial, and individual variables within a [historical] context" (182). To Root, more than sampling and interpretation need to be considered when designing a study; the terms researchers use and issues of who performs the research are also important. Citing examples including the commonly used term "outmarriage," Root asks us to re-examine the connotations and biases inherent in many frequently used terms. As well,

she suggests the importance of initial research being done by multiracial persons or those "intimately informed of the experience by living a multicultural existence and in a multicultural environment" (188). Though Root acknowledges this could result in bias, she suggests that triangulation methods can offset lack of objectivity. Still, according to Root, the potential benefits of the researcher "intimately" understanding the relevant "social ecology," outweighs the potential drawbacks.

In this way, I hope my own intimate knowledge and experience of being a White birth mother of Black/White biracial children will benefit my research on the issues mothers like myself face.

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