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Conclusion: Talking About Race and Adoption

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The persistent myth of ‘colorblindness’ in adoption

Two years ago, on vacation in the Great Smoky Mountains, I saw a white couple at a restaurant with their Asian daughter. Although her father told her to quit staring, I felt the girl’s eyes on me all through the meal. I smiled at her, feeling a strong sense of kinship, a pang of sympathy. As a child, whenever I saw another Asian person – which I hardly ever did – I used to stare, too, hungry for the sight of someone, anyone, who looked like me.

Much has changed in the 32 years since a social worker told my parents ‘not to worry’ about my ethnicity. Thanks to the many transracial adoptees who have shared their experiences, there is a greater emphasis on the importance of racial and cultural identity in adoption. Adoptees, adoptive parents, and those working in the field of adoption have devoted numerous books and blogs to the subject. The complexities and challenges of transnational and transcultural adoption have inspired documentary films such as Deann Borshay Liem’s First Person Plural and In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee, Stephanie Wang-Breal’s Wo Ai Ni Mommy, and Linda Goldstein Knowlton’s Somewhere Between. While ‘colorblindness’ in adoption has been widely challenged, not everyone is convinced – like the adoptive mother who recently told me, ‘I don’t see my son’s color. Race is just not an issue for us.’ Dr. Elizabeth Vonk, director of the MSW Program at the University of Georgia School of Social Work and an adoptive parent, leads a play therapy group for transracially adopted children. ‘I do still meet parents who are thoroughly convinced that a colorblind approach is best,’ she told me. ‘It is a belief system that makes positive racial identity development more difficult for their children.’

Race is undoubtedly an issue at the forefront of family and social life for the transracially adopted individuals and adoptive parents I interviewed for this chapter. I spoke and corresponded with numerous adoptees and parents, as well as a professor of social work who works with transracially adopted youth, asking them to share their experiences parenting or being parented in adoption, and what they think others both within and outside
the adoption community need to know about transracial and transcultural adoption. Some I found via online research and existing connections; others approached me after I put out a call on social media to ask for participants. I am grateful to all of my interview subjects for sharing their perspectives so that others might gain a better understanding of the issues and challenges inherent to transracial and transcultural adoption.

Problematic framings of transracial adoption

There are those who insist that any cultural loss or identity issues are unimportant compared to what children gain through adoption. This unfortunate ‘either-or’ framing of the issue finds frequent expression in discussion of transracial and transcultural adoption. In 2010, columnist and former President George W. Bush speechwriter Michael Gerson – whose wife is a Korean adoptee – wrote in the Washington Post: ‘Ethnicity is an abstraction – often an admirable abstraction, but not comparable to the needs of a child living in an orphanage... Every culture or race is outweighed when the life of a child is placed on the other side of the balance’ (Gerson, 2010).

In a National Review post criticizing Kathryn Joyce’s book The Child Catchers: Rescue, Trafficking, and the New Gospel of Adoption, adoptive father David French went so far as to dismiss ‘the “culture”’ (note the mocking quotation marks) of most internationally adopted children as ‘the culture of starvation, of rags, of disease, and of abandonment’ (French, 2013). What Gerson and French and those advancing similar arguments fail to realize is that cultural and racial identity need not – should not – be pitted against a child’s right to love, safety, and security. Lisa Szanto-Vraniak, an adoptive parent in Chicago, says that she often encounters people who seem to view adoption in similar terms – that is, as ‘salvation’ for fortunate children. This view diminishes or ignores what adopted children like her daughter have lost.

[Some people say] ‘She’s so lucky you adopted her’ – to which we reply that we are the lucky ones. How do you tell a total stranger that in order for your family to be complete, your daughter had to lose her first family? How is that ‘lucky’? As a mother, I want to shield her from the pain of losing her first family and the 22 months she spent in an orphanage. I also know that I can’t, and the best I can do is to let her talk, listen, offer comfort, and hold her when she cries. I am not looking forward to watching her go through the self-doubt or the pain, but I will do it because it is inconceivable that I would do otherwise.

Another common framework for transracial adoption holds that America’s ‘melting pot’ has somehow made racial and ethnic identity less relevant. In her 2012 NPR review of Somewhere Between, a documentary profiling four young women adopted from China, journalist and adoptive mother