INTRODUCTION

IN THEIR PARENTS’ VOICES: Reflections on Raising Transracial Adoptees is the second of two volumes on black and biracial men and women who were adopted primarily in the 1970s by white parents when most of the children were younger than 2 years old. In Their Own Voices: Transracial Adoptees Tell Their Stories (2000) reports the experiences of twelve women and twelve men then aged 22 to 31 (with one male outlier who was 57) and who were transracially adopted. The stories of these transracial adoptees were obtained mostly through telephone interviews, with a few done in person. We found participants through referrals from individuals and organizations, responses to an ad in Interrace magazine, and through the Internet. Some initiated contact with us. Some were well-known personalities whom we sought out for interviews. The interviews lasted at least two hours.

The stories told by the adoptees in In Their Own Voices reveal their thoughts about family, adoption, and self-identity issues from their adult perspective. This book substantiates the claims empirically demonstrated by traditional researchers (from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s), primarily in the fields of social work and child development, that love and stability are essential in establishing healthy families, including those families made through transracial adoption. But In Their Own Voices further stretches the reader to ask the critical question: Is love (and stability) enough? Do parents of transracial adoptees have to make changes in their lives, such as the neighborhoods they live in, the churches they attend, and the friends they have?

In Their Parents’ Voices picks up where In Their Own Voices leaves off, this time drawing from the personal accounts of the adoptive parents, many of whom had the opportunity to read their sons’ and daughters’ intimate discussions of their adoptive experience. The parents reflect upon their journeys, which entailed adopting and raising black and biracial children against the backdrop of the civil rights movement and amid the controversy about transracial
adoption. In this second volume parents representing sixteen families from the first volume talk candidly about their reasons for adopting, the adoption process, the challenges and triumphs they encountered in raising their children, and the relationships they have with their adult children and, in many cases, with their children’s spouses and children. The parents express their opinions about transracial adoption and the stance taken in the early 1970s in opposition to transracial adoption, and they offer recommendations to other adoptive families who are in the process of raising children of color.

Our research design for this book was similar to the one we used for In Their Own Voices; we primarily interviewed participants by telephone (with the exception of two couples and one parent). The interviews lasted on average 1.5 hours and were then transcribed and mailed to each participant for her or his review and consent before publication.

Although the parents in this volume reflect on the often bitter debates carried on for more than thirty years about the consequences of transracial adoption, it is no longer a factor for families seeking to adopt today. The debate formally ended in 1996 with the passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act, which in essence stated that race shall not be a factor in adoption.

Unfortunately, statistics about transracial adoption remain difficult to pinpoint. Most would agree that the actual numbers of transracial adoptions of U.S. citizens by U.S. citizens are still very small. Some scholars continue to use data from a 1987 study because of the scarcity of statistical information on transracial adoption; it found that “92 percent of all adoptions involve an adoptive mother and child of the same race…. In only 8 percent of all adoptions are the parents and children of different races.”¹ But as noted in In Their Own Voices (2000) the 8 percent figure also included thousands of international adoptions, and in actuality, in those cases where a black American child had been adopted by a white family domestically, the figure could be as low as 1.2 percent of all adoptions.²

**TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION**

The institutionalized beginnings of transracial adoption of black children in North America trace to the activities of the Children’s Service Center and a group of parents in Montreal, Canada, who in 1960 founded an organization called the Open Door Society.

In the United States 1961 marked the founding of an organization whose original purpose was to provide placements for black children in black adoptive homes. Parents to Adopt Minority Youngsters (PAMY) was founded in
Minnesota and worked with the Minnesota Department of Public Welfare. PAMY was one of the first groups formed in the United States along the lines of the Open Door Society and provided similar referral and recruitment services and handled public relations. But PAMY’s involvement with transracial adoption, unlike that of the Open Door Society, came as an unexpected byproduct of PAMY’s original intent, which was to secure black adoptive homes for black children. From 1962 through 1965 approximately twenty black children in Minnesota were adopted by white families through the efforts of PAMY. These adoptive parents seemed not to fit the stereotype of the adoptive family, an infertile couple. For the most part they were not infertile, and they did not regard their act as a substitute for biological parenthood.3

By 1969 the United States had forty-seven organizations similar to the Open Door Society. Among the major ones were Families for Interracial Adoption, the Council on Adoptable Children, Opportunity, the National Council of Adoptive Parents, and Adopt-A-Child-Today.4 Their primary function was to help secure adoptive homes for all parentless children, with particular emphasis on children with “special needs,” a category that included children of color.

Historically, both private and public adoption agencies have had a bank of white adoptive families larger than the number of available white children. For example, a 1957 study found that at any given time two to eight approved white adoptive homes were available for every white child, whereas only one approved black family was available for every ten to twenty black children.5

By 1970 the number of available nonwhite children still far exceeded the number of approved nonwhite homes. That year, 21,416 approved white homes were available for 18,392 white children, and 1,584 approved nonwhite homes were available for 4,045 nonwhite children. This meant that 2,461 nonwhite children had little hope of being adopted into nonwhite homes.6

The 1970 study provided combined figures for public and private agencies that showed that 116 approved white homes were available for every 100 white children and only 39 approved nonwhite homes were available for every 100 nonwhite children.7 The following statement, from the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), demonstrates that the agencies in the 1970 survey did not even consider transracial adoption as a way of finding homes for the nonwhite children for whom nonwhite homes could not be found: “Again, the reader must be cautioned that the data do not take account of the white adoptive homes that are in fact available for the placement of nonwhite children. If it were possible to place a nonwhite child in about one out of every nine approved white homes, there would be an available adoption resource for all children reported by the 240 agencies.”8 Clearly, the assumption in 1970 was that it was impossible to consider placing nonwhite children with white families.
Adoption agencies that serve black children predominately tend to have a higher proportion of black social workers on their staff than agencies with small populations of black children. Studies have shown that a social worker’s race is one of the strongest factors affecting attitudes toward transracial adoption, with black social workers disapproving more often than white social workers.9

At its 1972 national conference the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) presented a position paper that attacked and repudiated transracial adoption. The following excerpt establishes the flavor of the attack:

Black children should be placed only with black families, whether in foster care or adoption. Black children belong physically, psychologically and culturally in black families in order that they receive the total sense of themselves and develop a sound projection of their future…. Black children in white homes are cut off from the healthy development of themselves as black people.

The socialization process for every child begins at birth. Included in the socialization process is the child’s cultural heritage, which is an important segment of the total process. This must begin at the earliest moment; otherwise our children will not have the background and knowledge which is necessary to survive in a racist society. This is impossible if the child is placed with white parents in a white environment….

We [the members of the NABSW] have committed ourselves to go back to our communities and work to end this particular form of genocide [transracial adoption].10

The popular black press, especially Ebony, continued to feature articles in which adoption and transracial adoption were the central themes.11 These were wide-ranging reports that attempted to present the gamut of positions and ramifications involved in black adoption. In August 1974 Ebony devoted an entire issue to the black child, with the adoption controversy woven throughout several reports.

Many of the readers’ letters that Ebony published after that issue appeared contained the following sentiments: Whites are responsible for having produced a white racist society. Their act of adopting blacks is insulting and psychologically damaging and dangerous. It’s ironic; once whites enslaved us because they considered themselves superior, and still do. Yet now they want to “rear and love us.” Why?12

In 1974 the Black Caucus of the North American Conference on Adoptable Children recommended “support [for] the consciousness development
movement of all groups” and “that every possible attempt should be made to place black and other minority children in a cultural and racial setting similar to their original group.” In May 1975 the dean of the Howard University School of Social Work, who was also president of the NABSW, stated that “black children who grow up in white homes end up with white psyches.”

Most black writers opposed to transracial adoption challenged two main hypotheses: The number of black couples willing to adopt black children is insufficient; and the benefits that a black child will receive in a white family surpass those received in an institution.

They observed that many potential nonwhite adoptive parents are disqualified because adoption agencies widely use criteria adopted for screening white middle-class parents for selection. The writers also observed that blacks historically have adopted informally, preferring not to rely on agencies and courts for sanction. Therefore the figures cited by agencies were an inaccurate reflection of the actual number of black adoptions. Critics also claimed that no longitudinal outcome data were available to show that transracial adoption of black children outweighed the known disadvantages of institutional or foster care and predicted that black children adopted into white families would suffer family and personal problems as the children grew into preadolescence and adolescence. A leading black organization pointed to transracially adopted black children who were being returned to foster care because the adoption was not “working out” or were being placed in residential treatment by their white adoptive parents because they could not manage them.

Black professionals and organizations cited two National Urban League studies as further evidence that institutional racism is one of the primary reasons that more black children are not given to prospective black adoptive families. These studies reported that of eight hundred black families applying to become adoptive parents, only two families were approved (0.25 percent), compared with a national average of 10 percent. Another study concluded that 40 to 50 percent of black families sampled would consider adoption.

What is the explanation for the discrepancy between the apparently widespread desire to adopt among blacks and a dearth of approved black homes for adoption? First, blacks have not adopted in the expected numbers because child welfare agencies have not actively recruited in black communities using community resources, the black media, and churches. Second, many blacks have a historic suspicion of public agencies and therefore restrict their involvement with them to whatever extent possible. Third, many blacks feel that no matter how close they come to fulfilling the criteria established for adoption, the chances of winning approval are slight because many reside in less affluent areas.
On August 20, 1996, President Bill Clinton signed into law the Adoption and Safe Families Act, which prohibits “a state or other entity that receives federal assistance from denying a person the opportunity to become an adoptive or a foster parent solely on the basis of the race, color, or national origin of the person or of the child involved.” The provision also prohibits a state from denying or delaying the placement of a child for adoption or foster care solely on the basis of the race, color, or national origin of the adoptive or foster parent of the child involved. The federal statute went into effect on January 1, 1997.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Beginning in 1971–72 Rita Simon and Howard Altstein conducted a twenty-year study of families who adopted across racial lines. They interviewed the parents, the birth children, and the adopted children in 104 families living in the Midwest. The major findings showed that the transracial adoptees clearly were aware of and comfortable with their racial identity. They both laughed at and were somewhat scornful of the NABSW’s characterization of them as “Oreos: black on the outside, white on the inside.” As young adults the black adoptees stressed their comfort with their black identity and their awareness that they may speak, dress, and have different tastes in music than inner-city blacks—but that the black experience is a varied one in this society, and they are no less black than are children of the ghetto.20

Throughout the study Simon and Altstein also described how the birth children were reacting to the transracial adoption experience. In the early years Simon and Altstein reported siblings’ occasional expressions of annoyance and anger at how much time and energy the parents were devoting to their adopted child: “Our family life has been turned upside down since ‘D’ came home,” or “‘M’ gets all the attention.” But these remarks were few and far between. In the large majority of the families, the black adoptee was “my brother” or “my sister”—to be cared about, played with, and, if necessary, protected. Race had receded into the background.21

Other studies conducted of families who adopted across racial lines have reported similar findings. Elizabeth Bartholet, who teaches civil rights and family law at Harvard, surveyed the literature and reported:

The evidence from empirical studies indicates uniformly that transracial adoptees do as well on measures of psychological and social adjustment as black children raised in racially in relatively similar socio-economic circumstances. The evidence also indicates that transracial adoptees develop com-
parably strong senses of black identity. They see themselves as black and they think well of blackness. The difference is that they feel more comfortable with the white community than blacks raised inracially. This evidence provides no basis for concluding that, for the children involved, there are any problems inherent in transracial placement.22

After more than thirty years transracial adoption, particularly the adopting of black and biracial children into white homes, continues to be an intriguing subject. Many questions about the identity and racial identity development of these children remain unanswered, and the lessons learned from parents who first ventured on this path and have raised their children to adulthood have not been completely explored or openly discussed. We hope that the experiences described here by these courageous and generous parents will provide insights into the complexities of the transracial adoption phenomenon.

NOTES

7. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 222.
21. Ibid., 222–23.
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