INTRODUCTION

THE MEN and women whose opinions we elicit in this third volume in the series are the siblings of the twelve men and twelve women whose experiences of having been adopted across racial lines were explored in the first volume, In Their Own Voices. At the time of the interviews the twelve women ranged in age from 22 to 28. Eight were adopted at age 3 months or younger. The other four were 1 year, 18 months, 2 years, and 6 years old, but the 6 year old had been living with the family as a foster child since her birth. Rhonda, adopted when 2, had been in foster care with an African American couple, who may have wanted to adopt her but were disqualified because of their age. Rhonda was abandoned by her birth mother, taken directly from the hospital to the black foster family, and then was finally adopted into a white family. Five of the twelve describe themselves as “mixed,” the others as black. Kimberly, one of the five who describes herself as mixed is married to a white man and is the mother of two sons. Two of the mixed respondents are married to black men, another is unmarried but has a son who is two and a half, and the fifth is unmarried and has recently moved back to her parents’ home. Eight of the women have at least a bachelor’s degree, one is working on her Ph.D., one has an MS in speech communications, and one is working toward a master’s degree in social work. One graduated from high school and had taken college courses but was not currently working toward a degree.

Of the twelve male participants, eight were adopted before they were 6 months old, one was adopted when he was 2, two were adopted when they were 5, and one lived with a white family in a southern, rural Virginia community from 1954 to 1959, from 13 to 18 years of age. Four were born and raised, respectively, in Iowa, Michigan, Illinois, and Oregon. The other eight were born and reared on the East Coast in Connecticut, Vermont, Massachusetts, New York, Maryland, and Virginia. Eleven of them, when interviewed, ranged in age from 23 to 31. Lester was 57. Six are married: three to white
women, one to a Haitian woman, and two to American black women. Four have children; one adopted a black child when the child was 6 months old. One is a single father.

The careers of the respondents varied greatly. There was a professional athlete and Olympic Gold Medal Winner, a minister, a property manager, a ninth-grade teacher, an aspiring screenwriter, a student, a stockbroker, an actor, a police officer, a technical writer, and a retiree from the Department of the Army. Eight of the participants held at least bachelor’s degrees. At the time the interviews were conducted most of the respondents lived in small or medium-sized cities.

The adoptees’ stories reveal their thoughts on family, adoption, and self-identity issues from their perspectives now as adults. While *In Their Own Voices* substantiates the claims that were empirically demonstrated by traditional researchers (from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s) working primarily in the social work and child development fields, which is that love and stability are essential in establishing healthy families, including families established through transracial adoption, the stories also push readers to ask this critical question: Is love (and stability) enough? Must parents of transracial adoptees make radical changes in their lives on matters such as the neighborhoods they live in, the churches they attend, the friends they have?

The second volume reported the parents’ reactions to adopting across racial lines. *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 about their sons’ and daughters’ intimate discussions on their adoptive experiences. The parents reflect upon their choice to adopt and raise black and biracial children against the backdrop of the civil rights movement and the controversy over transracial adoption. In volume 2, parents representing sixteen families introduced in volume 1 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 grandchildren. The parents express their opinions on transracial adoption, the opposition by certain groups in the early 1970s to transracial adoption, and they offer advice to other adoptive families in the process of raising children of color.

Similar to the research design of *In Their Own Voices*, the authors interviewed participants for *In Their Parents’ Voices* primarily over the phone (with the exception of two couples and one parent). The interviews lasted one and a half hours, on average, and were transcribed and mailed to each participant for review and consent before it appeared in the book.
In Their Siblings’ Voices takes readers full circle in our series on transracial adoption. This volume gives voice to twenty of the (adult) children who were born to the parents in the second volume and are the white non-adopted siblings to the adoptees in the first volume. Some refer to this group in the adoption literature as the “invisible voices.”

It may be argued that white non-adopted siblings in these veteran families did not participate in the decision their parents made to adopt a child of color, nor were they subject to the controversy over the validity of transracial adoption, but the authors contend that these siblings nevertheless have a definite voice in promoting the understanding of transracial adoption. These individuals were affected (and continue to be) by the adoption whether they asked for it or not. Growing up with siblings who were adopted from different racial and cultural backgrounds almost certainly transformed their identities. But to what degree? Has the transracial adoption experience hurt or helped white non-adopted siblings? Have their experiences with transracial adoption visibly shaped their views as adults about race, adoption, and their own identity? Do they think transracial adoption is good policy for families? What can researchers, foster care and adoption professionals, adoptive parents, adoptees, and the public learn from the experiences of this important group about the intended and unintended consequences of transracial adoption in the long term?

In Their Siblings’ Voices highlights the stories of eight men and twelve women representing eleven of the sixteen families from the second volume. Four families from that same volume did not participate in the siblings study because they did not have children born to them. Another family was not represented because the only non-adopted sibling chose not to participate in the study owing to a busy work schedule. In this volume, seven of the siblings interviewed were born after their parents had adopted at least one non-white child, and thirteen siblings were born before their parents adopted transracially.

The eight men interviewed for the current volume range in ages from 29 to 40. All but two have bachelor’s degrees, and most of them earned advanced degrees (master’s degree, Ph.D., and Jurist Doctor). The two men who only had high school diplomas and some college courses pursued entrepreneurial ventures. The careers of the respondents the authors interviewed included an electrical engineer, investment researcher, elementary school administrator, attorney, academic faculty member, founder of a technology company, CEO/owner of manufacturing companies, and a senior manager for a large corporation. Five of the eight men are married, and three of the five have children. Of the three single men, two have never been married. The third
divorced and has a child. The married men all have Caucasian wives with the exception of one who has a Japanese wife. All of those married with children chose to have their own children. Two of the men interviewed, however, have expressed interest in adopting. The majority of the male respondents identified themselves as Protestant, one identified himself as Jewish, and another did not identify with any religion. Most of the men, like the adoptees in the first volume, live in small or medium-sized cities.

The twelve women interviewed for the current volume range in age from 28 to 54. Eight earned their bachelor’s degrees and some went on to take graduate courses; only one of the women completed her master’s degree. Of the four women with only high school degrees, most of them have taken at least a few college courses. The women’s career choices included a program director of a wound healing center, a travel agent, an artist/stay-at-home mom, a project manager of a utility company, a minister/entrepreneur, a manager for a telecommunications company, a nurse, a stay-at-home mom/business owner, a laboratory technician, an employee of a medical billing company, and a customer service representative. Six of the twelve women are married, two are divorced, and four never married. Nine of the twelve women have children. All the children are Caucasian, except for one multiracial child. None of the women respondents chose to adopt. The majority of the women interviewed identified with the Protestant faith. Three women indicated that they had no religious affiliation, or it was “still to be determined.” Most of the women, like the men respondents, lived in small to medium-sized cities.

The research design used in the first two volumes in the series is consistent with that used in this third volume. All the participants were interviewed by phone; the interviews lasted one and a half hours on average; and the interviews were then transcribed and mailed to each participant for their review and consent before appearing in the book.

Understandably, the interviews solicited for the first volume were more challenging to obtain, given the “hidden voices” of black and biracial adult adoptees throughout the country. Locating these adoptees was difficult, as was earning their trust so that they felt comfortable telling their stories publicly, especially given the sensitivity of the subject. The lengthy process also required that we, as authors, continually reassured the participants that their stories would be used appropriately and with integrity. Helpful, perhaps, was that one of the authors had been adopted transracially and was willing to be interviewed for project.

In the subsequent volumes the authors were able to obtain the interviews from family members more easily. In fact, some family members told the
authors that they, too, wanted their voices heard. The authors attribute this response to the success of the first project and the adoptees’ initial experiences in participating in the work. It must be said that all the participants in this series believed strongly that their voice had value and should be included in the adoption literature, and that the honest discussion about transracial adoption, as it touches families throughout this nation in increasing numbers, must continue.

THE WHITE NON-ADOPTED SIBLING

In the first two volumes of the series on transracial adoption the authors presented both sides of the transracial adoption controversy, which heightened in the early 1970s. The debate, as many readers know, primarily centered on whether black and biracial children could grow up to become healthy individuals and productive citizens if raised in white families. One concern of the opponents in the debate was that these children would grow up without a strong sense of being black, and they would be separated from their racial and cultural communities of origin and be unprepared to function in a “racist society” as African American adults.¹

The fact is, however, that much of the research generated in the twentieth century, especially in the early 1970s through the early 1990s, argued that transracial adoption was good policy for families because they focused on the social development and self-esteem of these children of color living in white homes. Many of the social scientists engaged in that research conducted interviews mostly with white adoptive parents and asked them about their perceptions of their adopted child’s/adolescent’s assimilation into their family and their child’s/adolescent’s level of self-esteem.² In some cases, the researchers asked the children/adolescents themselves about their own racial identities and self-esteem.³ The findings in these studies reinforced the premise that love was enough when raising these children in white homes. On the other hand, little information from these traditional studies revealed how the white non-adopted siblings reacted to the transracial adoption phenomenon.

What do we know about the white non-adopted siblings in these families from the traditional research? The Simon-Altstein longitudinal study from 1971–91—the only study that tracked this segment at all—reported that among the 104 Midwestern families they interviewed, the birth children indeed reacted to the transracial adoption experience throughout the study. 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 rare. In most 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.4

There is still much more knowledge to be gained from the experiences of the white non-adopted siblings in transracial adoptive families moving into adulthood. We must ask them if adoption was good for them. Did they have to take on added responsibilities because they had a black or biracial brother or sister in their family? Does the transracial adoption change how they think of themselves as white individuals in society? We must learn from the past by looking at these veteran families, including the white non-adopted siblings, so that we can better inform and prepare our social work students, adoption professionals, and families in the twenty-first century about how to most effectively build racially integrated family structures where every member has a voice and is equally valued.

One of the few available resources that examines non-adopted children in transracial adoptive families is a dissertation written by the scholar John Raible, titled Sharing the Spotlight: The Non-Adopted Siblings of Transracial Adoptees (2005). In his study he interviewed twelve white non-adopted adults who grew up with a transracially adopted brother or sister. He divided their stories into five categories, based on five different types of siblings: safe siblings, responsible siblings, moral siblings, aware siblings, and, finally, the ultimate transformation, what Raible terms “transracialized” siblings. He defines “transracialization” as the unusual and creative ways to enact new racial identities. Raible argues that transracialization transcends the normal ways in which we learn to see the world in racial terms, including the ways that we understand ourselves and others as “raced” beings. In concluding his study, he reported mostly positive outcomes and experiences among the siblings: “All of the sibling participants expressed deep affection and love for their adopted brothers and sisters.” He added, however, that “[still] others shared heartbreaking stories of suicide, estrangement, trouble with the law, and so on.”5

Perhaps through Raible’s study and now the publication of In Their Siblings’ Voices, we can gain a deeper understanding of transracial adoption from a different angle, through the eyes of white non-adopted adult siblings. It is essential to hear the voices of these individuals before we make assessments and generalizations about their experiences within the discussion of transracial adoption.
NOTES


