

**Born to Stand Out:**

**An Autoethnography about Transracial Adoption**

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### **Abstract**

This article uses an autoethnographic approach, incorporating creative writing with academic research to analyze the cultural significance transracial adoption has on society and the adoptee. Transitioning between personal experiences and qualitative research, I focus on adoption trauma, physical and mental hardships faced by adoptees, and end with solutions to lessen the stress of transracial adoption. Influenced by other writers who don't glorify adoption, I highlight key moments in my life as an adoptee that coincide with their scholarly approach. I use these moments to demonstrate the power of storytelling by engaging the reader with sensitive but relatable subjects such as race, identity, abandonment, and parenting.

*Keywords:* transracial adoption, autoethnography, adoptees, colorblindness, cultural assimilation, implicit bias, identity

**Born To Stand Out: An Autoethnography About Transracial Adoption**

*My first name was Mecca Dione Coleman. The bright lights were blinding my newborn eyes, but I could just make out a figure. Mom. She would be the one to take care of me for the rest of my life. There was a warmth emanating around her as she looked down at me. She smiled for a second, but it quickly faded as gloved hands engulfed me and took me away. Pain was evident on her face. I wasn't sure if it was me who caused it or if it was the doctors. It made me cry. She looked away, and I never saw her face again.*

*My second name was Hannah. I was in a room full of other babies, but I felt alone. All I wanted was to be held. Once and a while, a kind lady would come in and feed me lukewarm milk. She wasn't my mom. I felt helpless.*

*My third name was Emily. A couple smiled down at me as I looked up at them curiously. There was another girl beside me. Your sister, they told me. Something wasn't right. My stomach hurt, and these weren't my parents. Where was my mom? For days I cried non-stop. The baby girl next to me always had a smile on her face, and I couldn't understand why. I was placed in a basket on top of a dryer and given medicine that tasted vile to keep me quiet and made me feel sleepy. Where was my mom? One day, another couple showed up. I looked at my second mother, who had the same look on her face that my first mom did. I'm leaving again. Was it my fault? Did I cry too much?*

*My name is now Sydney Kathryn Parkhurst. I am a transracial adoptee, adopted by parents of a different race. When I was about a month old, my adopted parents took me into their care and have never looked back. Am I grateful to have them? Yes. Have I struggled to get to where I am? Yes. Do I wish some things could have been different? Yes. Do I blame them for it? Not entirely.*

This article explores the complex issues surrounding adopting a child of another race. Using autoethnography, I transition between personal experiences and qualitative research, focusing on adoption trauma, physical and mental hardships faced by adoptees. Finally, I offer recommendations for prospective adoptive parents that can be used to lessen the trauma of adoption.

### **The Overlooked Intelligence of an Infant**

Society seems to glorify adoption. Whether it's in books, movies, or television, not many people mention the other side of adoption—the adoptee's point of view. From the outside, it's easy to look at adoptees and assume that everything is alright. But in reality, most of them are struggling and might not even know it. Verrier (1993) expresses, "All of this rhetoric ignores one simple but critical fact: *The adoptee was there*. The child actually experienced being left alone by the biological mother and handed over to strangers" (p. 10). When I first read this sentence, I was in shock. It was hard to comprehend that I had actually met the woman who gave me up. To me, she was a ghost—a made up person that I had created but would never meet.

I was recently in an adoptee writing workshop, and we were asked to write about our experiences as adoptees. I chose to write about somewhat recent memories that had shaped my adoption experience. I was surprised when two adoptees wrote about experiences they did not even remember. They zeroed in on the moment they got adopted and feelings that may have arrived while getting taken away from their biological mothers. This fascinated me because it highlighted the adoption trauma that took place as babies, which they are comprehending now as adults.

It is scientifically proven that "babies know more than they are supposed to know. Minutes after birth, a baby can pick out his mother's face—which he has never seen from a

gallery of photos... Their cries of pain are authentic. Babies are not unfeeling; it is *we* who have been unfeeling” (as cited in Verrier, 1993, p. 5). Since babies can understand human nature better than we thought, how complex is adoption, and what do we need to do to pay attention and lessen the trauma?

### **Abandoned By Blood**

*I kneeled at my window; face pressed to the cold glass. Date night, they'd said. I watched as their car pulled out of the driveway, a million thoughts running through my head. One of them at the forefront: What if they got in a car accident? What if I never saw them again? I could hear my nana making popcorn in the microwave downstairs for our movie night. I didn't want a movie night without them. I clasped my fingers together like they had shown me in church school and bowed my head. Please, Lord, please. I begged. Please let them come home safely and quickly. I looked around for something, anything that would strengthen my prayer to God. I saw my wallet sitting on my bedside table and picked it up. I grabbed a quarter out of it and placed it on the windowsill. Anything you want, I'll give you God, please. Luckily, God answered my prayers without taking the quarter.*

According to *The Science of Parenting Adopted Children* by Arleta James (2019), when a birth mother is experiencing any type of stress (e.g., domestic violence, anxiety about adoption, family matters, etc.), it has a significant effect on the unborn baby. She writes, “In fact, fetuses who experience higher maternal stress in the womb are more fearful and more reactive to novelty as infants and young children. These children are at higher risk for affective problems like depression and anxiety as tweens and teens” (p. 55). As a baby, I cried non-stop unless my adoptive mother was holding me in her arms. My brain immediately recognized that with her, I

was safe. She was my security blanket. As I grew older, those feelings did not go away. It was difficult for me to be away from her at school, and I experienced frequent stomach aches in response to anxiety and stress. Verrier (1993) claims, “With or without accompanying physical symptoms, a child, when separated from his adoptive mother for the first time, is very likely to experience a great deal of anxiety. On both a physical and an emotional level he will be reminded (although most likely unconsciously) of that first separation” (p. 127-128). My parents ended up taking me to numerous specialists in order to figure out what was wrong with my stomach. None of them came to a real conclusion as to why I was getting these pains. Looking back on it now, the discomfort was most likely caused by my body’s reaction to stress from that initial separation.

When I was a kid, my two favorite picture books were *Owl Babies* by Martin Waddell and *Just You and Me* by Sam McBratney. To other young kids, I’m sure they were just books that were read, put down, and never picked up again. But for me, they meant so much more. *Owl Babies* is about three owl siblings in their nest together, and their mom leaves. The two older babies try to reassure each other that everything is going to be okay. But the youngest one, named Bill, keeps repeating, “I want my mommy.” *Just You and Me* is a book about a baby goose (Little Goosey) and its mom who go through life together, just the two of them. They get stuck in a storm, and the mother tries to find them shelter. However, each place they go to is filled with other inhabitants. Throughout the story, the mother goose says, “Just you and me,” and Little Goosey replies, “Just me and you.”

These books remind me of how dependent I was on my adoptive mother for so long. I was taken from my birth mother’s arms and given to a caring home. Then, I was adopted, given up a second time, and brought into my current mother’s arms. Although I can not remember any

of this since I was only a month old, my body certainly did. From the minute I was born, I was looking for a sense of security—a sense of safety. When someone finally gave it to me, I gave in entirely, but unconsciously, I was worried it would go away. Separation anxiety was a predominant part of my life up until 5th grade. I was that little owl in the tree crying for his mother. I was that Little Goosey who wanted nothing else but the comfort of his mother. My adoptive mother was my whole world for so long that I could not breathe without thinking she would abandon me.

### **A Black Girl Living in a White World**

*I laid next to my mom, my fingers tangled in her “limp blonde hair” (as she constantly referred to it as).*

*“Why can’t I have hair like yours,” I asked, already knowing the disappointing answer.*

*“Honey. I don’t think you realize that people would kill for your hair.”*

*I rolled my eyes and grunted as I took my hands off her head and onto my own. I knew that she would never understand what it was like to have hair that you could never let down without it frizzing. Hair that when you woke up, you immediately had to put up in a bun or else you would look homeless the rest of the day and be made fun of.*

*I hated my hair.*

Being adopted comes with its struggles, but being transracially adopted can make you feel like an alien in your own community. Transracial adoption is “the practice of placing children with adoptive parents of a different race than their own” (Goss, 2012, p. 12). Alexis Oberdofer (2019) is a biracial transracial adoptee who currently has two transracially adopted children of her own. She recalls, “as a preschool-aged child, I clearly recognized racial

differences. I wanted my hair to be long and blond, rather than short and curly. On occasion, I would wear a towel on my head as I imagined what it would be like to have long straight hair. I wondered how long I could make my appearance reflect that of my mother's" (para. 6). This identity crisis that Oberdofer brings up is a reality for a lot of Black transracial adoptees. In her article, Hollingsworth (1997) talks about the psychology of identity depending on age: "Early in preschool years, children begin to develop an 'inner self,' in which they think more deeply or internally about themselves and describe themselves in terms of at least momentary internal states" (as cited in Hollingsworth, 1997, para. 21). As children go off to school for the first time, they start to recognize the differences between themselves and the other children they meet at school. Adoptees begin to realize that their family situation is different from everyone else's. Transracial adoptees find out that most of the other kids resemble their parents.

When I started to develop an "inner self," it was harder to accept that I was not like everyone else. I did not want to stand out. I grew up in a 94.7% white (United States Census Bureau, 2019) community with white parents. As Oberdofer (2019) mentioned, hair was an ongoing struggle for Black kids trying to fit in. I did everything I could to make it straighter and more "normal" like everyone else's. I was not taught that chemically straightening my hair was damaging and something I would regret later in life. The physical differences between whites and Blacks were more evident as I grew up surrounded by whites. Since 1972, The National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) stated that Black children belong in Black families where they can develop a sense of belonging and education about being a Black person in today's racist society (paras. 2-3). While hair was an ongoing challenge, it was not the only thing I missed out on by having a white family.



In college, I attended a Black Student Union meeting to see if I would be able to gain a better connection with my race. The first question that they asked us was, “What is your favorite Black film?” I immediately froze. I could not think of one primarily Black movie that I’d watched other than *Black Panther*. Was I supposed to know one right off the top of my head? Without this connection to my race, I had a mental battle when it came to my identity. I was too Black for whites but too white for Blacks. My Black culture was taken away from me as a baby. However, I did not have as many struggles as most Black male transracial adoptees face.

In her article, Oberdofer (2019) mentions having “the talk,” a conversation about how to survive as a Black man in America, with her Black son, ““He asked, “Mom, what’s the worst thing that can happen?” Without hesitation, I replied, ‘You could die.’ ‘Why did you have to go there?’ he wanted to know. Sadly, whether my child is biological or adopted, raising a child of color, I cannot ignore the realities that he needs to take to heart as a person of color living in a society where race does matter” (para. 11). The sad reality of living in America is the fact that racism is still an issue. Personally, as someone who grew up in a 94.7% white (United States Census Bureau, 2019), liberal town, I was not aware of the blatant racism outside of my community. My white adoptive parents knew nothing of the dangers of raising a Black child in America. We called our secluded town the “Barrington Bubble” because nothing ever happened there. It was a safe community with middle to upper-class families that did not need to worry about crime. If I were a Black male transracial adoptee, I would not be prepared to go out into the real world after leaving my privileged hometown.

### **Alienated From Society**

*“What are you?” A middle-aged woman with straight blonde hair asked me as I rang up her fruit, placing them in her cart.*

*Shrugging, I answered as I usually did with, "I have no idea." I debated whether or not I should follow up with the fact that I was adopted and hadn't taken a DNA test, but I didn't have the patience. Why did everyone need to know?*

*Obviously not satisfied with the answer, the woman opened her mouth to ask another question, but I interrupted her.*

*"That will be 60.72." I looked at the computer screen, ignoring her prying eyes.*

Adoptees are more apt to receive microaggressions from outside sources than non-adoptees (Baden, 2016). Often, we are questioned about our status of finding birth parents. While this is a recurring thought in an adoptee's mind, it's a very personal question and usually more complicated than others would think (Verrier, 1993, p. 103). Verrier (1993) argues, "This lack of personal identity precludes having a sense of belonging to the greater society" (p. 103). For example, I was always told by my adoptive parents to be aware that my birth parents might not want to be found. They also warned that my birth parents could be in a situation where they have already moved on with their lives. With this hovering over my thoughts about adoption, I was not sure if I was ready to find my birth parents or why it mattered to other people if I was. The "greater society" that Verrier mentions is ignorant about how adoptees feel about being adopted, how one seemingly harmless question can make an adoptee feel more detached from society.

Richard Lee (2003), a professor of psychology at the University of Minnesota, wrote an article about the background and history of transracial adoptees. In his article, he uses a study conducted by Brooks and Bark (1999), which revealed that out of 244 Asians and African American transracial adoptees, roughly half of them reported discomfort over their racial appearances (as cited in Lee, 2003, p. 718). Transracial adoptees struggle with a sense of identity

because they feel the need to fit into the society they grew up in. However, society does not always accept them because racism and prejudice are still prevalent in America today.

Receiving questions such as “what are you” or “where are you from” can be damaging to the self-esteem of a transracial adoptee who wants to fit in. Although people may think of it as innocent, their question is blatantly pointing out that the adoptee is different. “What are you” was a question I constantly received while growing up. I did not think much of it since it happened so frequently, but a small part of me knew that it was weird people were asking me this. Why weren’t other people getting this question, too?

Not many people realize this, but parents have an incredible amount of influence on their child’s identity. A podcast by NPR called *Code Switch* interviewed multiple transracial adoptees to understand how they experienced life growing up. One of the participants, Melissa Guida-Richards, explained that she was told her whole life how different she looked from her family because she had darker skin. It was at age nineteen that she found out she was adopted and was a Latina. She remembers, “everyone in my life lied to me because they believed that they were making the right choice. Basically, my entire life was whitewashed... I’ve been trying my best to learn about the culture... And it’s hard” (Meraji, 2018, 2:25). What Guida-Richard’s parents were doing, perhaps without realizing, is called color blindness. Color blindness, in terms of race, is when people believe that the color of people’s skin is insignificant. This is a common theme for most white adoptive parents. For example, my parents claim that they were trying to let my sister and I know that we were their children no matter what we looked like. While this seems like a justified statement, it is ignoring the child’s identity and culture.

An article by Richard Lee (2003) claimed that “A variant of cultural assimilation is a humanistic strategy that emphasizes a ‘colorblind’ orientation or view of humanity without

reference to ethnicity and race” (p. 721). Although this may seem like an ignorant way of thinking, Americans have been doing it for centuries. Cultural assimilation takes people from one culture and tries to initiate them into a different one, often without consent. This has happened to the Native Americans, Chinese, Africans, and many other groups who have immigrated to the United States. The same thing happens to transracial adoptees as they are forced to assimilate into a culture not of their choosing.

### **Ongoing Systemic Racism and Implicit Bias**

*The screen flashed images and videos of slaves being beaten in the south. The documentary was talking about how Blacks were treated like animals—sold to the whites. My cheeks burned. Why was I embarrassed? I tried to sink down in my seat even more. As I looked at the slaves, my hands immediately went to my hair in a bun. I felt around it, making sure no curls were showing. I could feel the stares of the other white, straight-haired kids around me. They think I’m Black. I was suddenly very aware and self-conscious of my skin that was a shade darker than everyone else’s. Was I Black?*

The Child Welfare Information Gateway (2020) defines implicit biases as “unconscious attitudes toward others often based on stereotypes that contradict a person’s conscious beliefs” (p. 4). These types of biases help people form opinions around topics, people, food, etc., based on previously collected information. While they are necessary to how people think or act, these biases can become unconscious racism. According to the NAACP (n.d.), 56% of the US incarcerated population represents African Americans and Hispanics. In addition, an African American is five times more likely to be stopped without a cause than a white person (para. 3). The media shows more Black people in jail and gives police the implicit bias that Blacks are more likely to commit crimes than whites. In reality, this bias is incorrect. The NAACP provides

statistics saying, five percent of illicit drug users are African Americans, yet they represent 29% of those arrested and 33% incarcerated for drug offenses (para. 3). You may be asking yourself why these statistics are in a transracial adoption essay. The reason is that adoptees also have implicit biases.

When I took a DNA test my senior year of high school and found out that I was half Black, I did not know what to think. I had always known that I was not completely white, but confirming that I was Black was eye-opening and terrifying. As the little girl who sat in class watching videos about slaves, I hoped that no one was looking at me, thinking that I was Black. Why was that? Because society paints a negative picture of Black people. I hated my hair because it was not blonde and straight like all of the “pretty girls” people glorified around me or on TV. Other than my dark skin that could pass for being tan, my hair was something that stuck out like a sore thumb. A dead giveaway that I was a minority.

History has taught people to fear and loathe Black people because they are not equal to everyone else. As someone who just wanted to fit in with everyone else, I was terrified of myself. I grew up “whitewashed” but very obviously was not only white and could never fit in as a Black person because I wasn’t “Black enough.” Being adopted has taught me that society tries to fit everyone into categories. You’re either white or Black, right or wrong, bad or good. My parents tried to put me in the white category, but I did not only belong in the white category. I had Black blood too.

### **Fixing A Broken System**

*I stepped onto the ice as I had a million times before. But it was different this time. The sound of the crowd in the stands was deafening. Nothing like I’d ever experienced while playing girls hockey. A smile crept onto my face as I confidently skated*

*around the ice for warm-ups. The smile lasted for a couple of minutes before fading when realizing that my helmet had to come off for the National Anthem. I placed my helmet down on the ice, suddenly feeling very aware of the other team lined up behind us.*

Everyone is definitely looking at how bad my hair looks right now. Why can't it just be straight? *The butterflies in my stomach were not going away.*

The Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA) was put in place in 1994 to ensure that minority children weren't waiting in foster care or waiting to get adopted longer than their white peers (Kalisher, 2020, p. 4). In an attempt to get minorities out of the system quicker, MEPA led to more transracial adoptions. According to the article written by Kalisher (2020), "28 percent of all adoptions in 2017-2019 were transracial. Of these transracial adoptions, 90 percent involved children of color adopted by parents of a different race. Although adoptions and transracial adoptions increased since MEPA, racial disparities persist" (paras. 4-5). With this act in place, parents did not need to take the time to educate themselves about adopting a child of a different race. Adoption agencies cared only about getting the children to a loving family, regardless of race—colorblindness.

While providing a child with a loving home was a priority, many did not realize that transracial adoptions are more complex and have more trauma than same-race adoptions. Although adoption is trauma (Verrier, 1993, p. 16), I believe that there are ways to lessen traumatic experiences for adoptees. Firstly, adoption agencies need to be aware of the effect transracial adoption can have on children. I spoke to D. Mobley (personal communication, June 24, 2021), Family Coordinator of the Open Door Adoption Agency in Thomasville, Georgia, who was optimistic that adoption agencies are trying their best to integrate resources for parents who are about to undergo a transracial adoption. Mobley mentioned required resources such as

books on adoption and classes about raising a child of a different race and said that it's important that adoptive parents should further their education about transracial adoption. Personally, I wish that these resources were around when my parents were adopting in the early 2000s. For them, race was not a factor. They were just prepared to adopt a baby and make him/her their own. Little did they know that this baby would be deprived of her culture and identity as she grew up surrounded by white people.

The second solution to help fix the system starts with the parents. Many times when adoptees are young and do something out of the ordinary (e.g., lying, throwing temper tantrums, separation anxiety, running away), parents look to causes sought by non-adoptive parents (James, 2019, p. 41). For example, if children have separation anxiety, parents might think that it's just because they are shy or do not like school. In reality, adopted children could be dealing with the abandonment from their mothers and are terrified of losing another parent. Those words often cannot be verbalized at a young age, so parents must recognize the difference between adoption trauma and behavioral problems not caused by adoption. In order to do this, there are plenty of suggestions that parents can put to use. *The Science Of Parenting Adopted Children* by Arleta James (2019) explains, "All children require time. The child with a history of trauma may require support... Parents will need to develop the vigor to make choices that are safest and most suitable for their unique family" (p. 52). Ensuring adoptees have what they need to feel comfortable, whether therapy or a support system, is essential to lessen the trauma of adoption.

## **Conclusion**

You may be reading this and thinking, "well, I don't want to adopt anymore." However, this essay is not meant to dissuade parents from adopting. I wrote this essay hoping that future or current parents of adoptees will read it and be compelled to research before bringing an adopted

child into their lives. As a transracial adoptee with parents who received no information on how to raise a half-Black child, I struggled. But that does not mean that I do not love my adoptive parents. I know that I am in a much better place than I would have been if I had not been adopted. However, I also lost a significant part of my identity due to the fact that my adoption was closed. Luckily, adoption agencies are now moving away from closed and toward open/semi-open adoptions. While this may be a great step in integrating culture into an adoptee's life, adoptive parents still need to be ready for what is to come. They need to be educated enough for this child before and during the adoption process and also acknowledge that they are not a savior or above anyone else by adopting.

Adoption trauma is an issue that adoptees deal with, usually unconsciously, unless they receive counseling to help them through it. A transracial adoptee deals with trauma and also has to deal with the identity crisis that comes with alienation from a racist society. By adoption agencies better-educating parents on how to raise their child, adoptees will experience a better understanding of their culture and identity. They will also learn how to navigate life with a strong connection to their blood and their background. These adoptive parents should be people who want to take on the challenge of adopting a child and are willing to integrate his/her culture into their own. It will not be easy, but if done correctly, it will save the adoptee from a lifetime of stress.



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