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The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

# Rethinking Fit

**by Julia Sudbury-Oparah**

My thirteen-year-old nephew comes to visit for a fortnight. Displaced from friends and family in England, his place of birth, he is seeking expression for his tentative teenage masculinity via African American popular culture. Obsessed with Bloods and Cripps, he has memorized rap songs and struts about in a macho pose with his baggy jeans slung low, Hip Hop style. I talk to him about the messages transmitted in "gangsta" culture: the violence, individualism, materialism and sexism. We discuss other belief systems, African values of community cooperation, respect for women and spirituality. We reason about Rastafari philosophy, the belief in natural living as an alternative to accumulation and greed. My husband takes him into work, shows him life as a Black male professor, stimulates his belief in achieving despite the barrage of negative images about Black masculinity. Together, we offer him other faces of Blackness, alternatives to the nihilism and defeatism of gangsta rap, possibilities rooted in his own Jamaican history and African legacy.

This, then, is the complexity of Blackness. My nephew, embedded in a Black family, surrounded by adult role models, can make real choices about which elements of that complex world he wishes to embrace and which to reject as destructive. At his age, as a transracially-adopted person, I had no such choices.

So when a White person says to me, "it doesn't matter if they're black, white, brown or green..." or "there's only one race, the human race," a shudder goes down my spine. Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglas, Marcus Garvey...don't matter. The Montgomery Bus Boycott, Brown v. Board of Education, the March on Washington...don't matter. The Jubilee Singers, the Harlem Renaissance, Motown... don't matter. Black people were not enslaved, did not resist, escape, campaign and lose our lives because we were "green." Yet these are the arguments that many "lay" people use to justify transracial adoption. Those two sentences erase a history of oppression and survival against enormous odds, as well as a legacy of courageous resistance and struggle. They also set us up to fail. As we grow into our teens, adopted children discover that being "human" is simply not enough.

What does this have to do with "fit," fitting in with our adoptive families, our families with us? "Fit" is adoption jargon for finding an appropriate family for a child, not placing a placid child in a hyperactive family, a slow learner in a house full of academics. Adoptive children are quick learners, adaptable and fluid; they shift their ways of being to "fit" their new environments, avoiding and internalizing difference, that marker which leads the inevitable question about "where you come from." Even transracially-adopted children hope against hope to be the same, for to be different is to risk being singled out and as all adoptees "know," it happened once; it can happen again - one day you just might wake up and find yourself homeless, family-less, motherless. As a child, I desperately wanted to be the "real" daughter, my sister revealed as the true impostor. She was not adopted and she looked like my parents: white skin, blue-gray eyes, light hair. My mother, I was constantly reminded, wasn't my real mother. By implication, that lack of reality also rubbed off on me. Engaged in the never-completed task of being the perfect daughter, I came home with "A"s and was top of my class to please my father, cleaned house and baked cakes with my mother, mediated and kept the peace between my siblings. Yet I knew I didn't "fit," I wasn't the "real" one. For everyone could see it. I built a thick skin, hoping to become impervious to the everyday injuries, the looks of disbelief as I announced my belonging to the family, the well-meaning question which plunged a cold knife into my soul: "Where are you from, dear. No, I mean, where are you really from?"

Where was I from? "Winchester," I'd answer. If pressed: "I was born in Scotland." Frustrated by my blithe answer, my refusal to acknowledge what they could so easily see - my lack of belonging - the questioner would generally give up. But the question rang in my ears. I knew no answer. My birth father was "an African." But Africa to me meant the swamps and "rebellious natives" of Tarzan movies; surely my father wasn't one of them? He was Black, but "Black" to me meant frightening images of rioting gangs on the television. How could those dark and terrifying images of violence and aggression have anything to do with me? Yet that anger resonated with emotions which I had not even acknowledged and I began surreptitiously to enjoy the look of terror in the old woman's eyes as she crossed the road to avoid passing me, or the transition from suspicion to fear as I confronted the shopkeeper who was following me down the aisles. Blackness to me began to symbolize anger: anger at the years of being chased,

intimidated, mistrusted by White children and adults, anger at not being "real," however hard I tried. My parents could not talk to me about these feelings; I could not even express them myself. They were embedded in my psyche, shaping my view of myself and my ability to trust other people. In the context of a White family, these feelings, these experiences just didn't "fit."

Fourteen years later, my nephew would take on the same tough exterior in response to the continued racism and exclusion experienced by Black young people, but his Black extended family would be there for him. To talk about his anger and his fears. To joke about the ignorance of White racists. To show him that his feelings are valid. To help him to see that Blackness is beauty, power, creativity, history, connectedness, community... and yes, anger against injustice, which we can turn into activism, not self-destruction.

Where does this leave me, a transracially-adopted adult? As I grew older, surrounded myself with Black culture, learned to listen to my inner self and value my African identity, I went through a series of transformations. From brown, to mixed race, to Black, to African Caribbean, to Nigerian, to Ibo. As I traced my history and found both my birth parents, I was able to recognize the complexity of my African heritage, to find the inner calm which comes from being grounded in who you are, not forever trying to live up to someone else's reality.

And where do I fit? My Ibo Father, his wife and siblings have shown me an acceptance and unconditional love which touches deep places in my soul. With them, I am the eldest daughter, a privileged position in a Nigerian family. My Father makes up for lost years by telling me about the Ibo way, the importance of supporting the extended family, keeping roots in "the village" and being strong and independent. As he speaks, I feel that I have already heard his words, I know his belief system, because in many ways I have already made it my own. In a profound sense, I "fit" into this new/old family. Yet, of course, there can be no real homecoming; twenty-eight years have been lost and I, stepping in my Father's independent footsteps, have become too self-reliant to be the daughter he wishes to protect and shelter.

My Birth Mother also speaks in a way which is familiar to me. She reminds me of the years I spent denying my history and my sense of isolation and of the never-adequate attempts to do the right thing. Her nervous energy, born of suppressing the pain and shame of my adoption, kept even from her own mother, makes me uncomfortable. She is a workaholic, supporting everyone except herself, never stopping to listen to her own feelings. I do not like the elements of myself I see in her.

My adoptive parents, patiently wading through the mud I keep digging up as I turn up yet another stone in the history of my adoption, are growing with me. No longer do they wince when I identify as African; no longer are they ignorant about the legacy of Black women's resistance, of which I feel a part. Gradually, I begin to see the ways we could have "fit" our similarities. My mother's warm intelligence, spirituality and belief in helping others. My father's hard-working ethic and confidence in his intellectual and rational abilities. In many ways, we were an ideal fit. But their failure to see my Blackness, our divergent histories, never allowed that fit to gel. Now twenty-eight years later, I realize a need to keep moving forward, building the families we never were.

This article cannot end with a checklist of dos and don'ts for transracial parents. To create one would be to imply that my parents "did not get it right." I think that we need to move away from the view of adoption which suggests we are all just individuals and that "race" either doesn't matter or can be dealt with through naive celebrations of difference. We need to address the structural reasons for the large numbers of Black children who are available for adoption, to look with honest eyes at the ongoing decimation of Black communities and the impoverishment of Black single mothers. We need to question a system which makes adoption an alternative to poverty. Anyone truly committed to the best interests of Black children should be campaigning for welfare rights and demanding funding for organizations that help Black families stay together. The solution is not for adoptive children to be counseled out of their anger, but for adoptive parents to be as angry and as passionate about racism and oppression as their children are. Only then"can we jointly create a progressive society where "race" (and racism) do not create problems.

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