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Abstract

This autoethnographic research project examines the transformational learning of a transracial adoptive adult mother and daughter through the lens of postcolonialism. As collaborative researchers, adult adoptee and adoptive mother, examine this lifelong learning experience through critical self-reflection, qualitative meta-analysis, and autoethnographic research methods within the overarching historical and sociopolitical context of Haiti. The findings address the lived complexities of increasingly hybrid families, particularly around the contentious boundaries of race, nationality, and colonial history, as they impact transformational learning. Color blindness and racial identity development for both mother and daughter within their relationship are explored. Implications for adult educators around the use of autoethnography to engage the social imagination and employ disclosure toward transformative learning are discussed.

Keywords

transformative adult learning, autoethnography, postcolonialism, transracial adoption, color blindness, racial identity, disclosure

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One must learn disclosure.

Stephen Brookfield

I, Joni, find this a difficult article to write; I am always finding other research writing or teaching tasks to engage with instead of bracing for the self-disclosure I know this particular piece will call out. But after reading Stephen Brookfield's *When the Black Dog Barks: An Autoethnography of Adult Learning in and on Clinical Depression*, Brookfield's (2011) bravery in the form of self-disclosure and then critical reflection on his experience from the framework of adult education practice was for me transformative—understanding that disclosure is a learned behavior and that the disclosure takes both a “leap of faith” and the application of critical reflection.

So, with my daughter's willingness to collaborate with me, we have embarked on this transformative learning journey which in my daughter's words is the “sharing of an experience so it can be seen differently”—the *it* being transracial adoption. We also want to illuminate the lived complexities of increasingly hybrid families as contrasted to larger policy and public conversations. This is a shared story told from two positionalities. Like me, my daughter, Rebecca, seems to want to write but also is afraid of the disclosure that may be called for in the writing. But, her willingness and the potential that this collaborative writing and learning experience may hold for the continued transformation of our adult mother/daughter relationship is compelling (Monk Kidd & Taylor Kidd, 2009), as is the value it may hold for others grappling with the tensions and the impact of history, ethnicity, and race within family relationships today.

As two adult coresearchers, we are also collaborative autoethnographers (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010) who reflect upon our adoption experience within the context of current ethnographic fieldwork in the country of adoption origin—Haiti. As mother and daughter, now adults—one an adult educator, the other an international development professional, we have the unique vantage point of past reflection, lived experience, and current nongovernmental organization (NGO) fieldwork.

We begin with a discussion of transformational learning and postcolonialism as these perspectives frame this study. We then delve into a brief history of Haiti and global transracial adoption. In conjunction with postcolonialism, the historical context is a catalyst for our learning and in some ways, the history of Haiti is a metaphor for our relationship: birthing, abandonment, adoption by another, and reconstruction of identity.

In the second half of this piece, Rebecca will speak for herself from her perspective as an adult adoptee who returned to her origin of birth to work. It opens with a description of data collection and analysis methods, then the remainder of this portion of the article is formulated into a dialogue extracted from face-to-face, FaceTime, telephone, and text messages between the two of us over nearly 2 years. Through this method of self-disclosure, we discuss our awakening and ongoing understanding of our racial identities, that is, perhaps for us and our relationship,

the strongest evidence of transformational learning. The article concludes with comments surrounding the scientific and scholarly significance of autoethnography and implications for adult educators.

Transformational Learning and Positionality

According to Johnson-Bailey, there are two main strands of literature on transformational learning: the individualistic theory of Mezirow and the concept of conscientization from Freire (2012). Johnson-Bailey argues that neither Mezirow's nor Freire's brand of transformative learning explicitly engage race or positionality and that a more expansive understanding of transformative learning, one "that incorporates the work of theorists who explore issues of power and culture" (Johnson-Bailey, 2012, p. 268) like Bourdieu, 2000; Giroux & Patrick, 1997; Foucault, 1980; hooks, 1989 be considered while still embracing the individualistic theory of Mezirow and the collectivist theorizing of Freire (Johnson-Bailey, 2012). By examining the life-changing event of our transracial adoption within the larger context of colonialist history, this autoethnography resonates with this broad understanding of transformative learning.

Consistent with this understanding of transformative learning theory, this study is also positioned from a postcolonial framework. Utilizing González's (2003) essay on ethics for postcolonial ethnography, we, the researchers, are looking for space not only to write our own personal stories but to incorporate them within larger stories of colonialism which are often overarching themes in transracial adoption. Because many transracial adoptions are international adoptions as well and are initiated in formerly colonized countries by predominantly White adopting parents from colonizing countries, the placement of our story is within this context.

By writing this "story within a story," there is the possibility for the disruption of these colonistic paradigms. González (2003) explains postcolonialism in this way:

It must (and can) show that one has stepped out of the domination of colonialist thought . . . this is an act of great courage, in that unlike *pre*-colonial awareness, there is now a sense of coexisting within social systems that may or may not still be fully or partially in the creative grasp of the colonial fist. (p. 81)

From this theoretical framework, the transformative personal narrative, in this case of an adoption experience, is embedded within another narrative of international and interracial adoption as a tool of colonization. Again, it is our aim in this article to articulate how this public dialogue around postcoloniality and cross-racial and international adoption with all of its historical entanglements and pain affect our understanding of our mother/daughter relationship, but also how it permeates all of our lives in a world of increasingly global families. We begin with the historical context.

Birthing—A Black Nation

Outsiders frequently hold distorted perceptions of Haiti: the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere; a voodoo nation; culturally resistant to progress; Haitians as victims; and a country with little connection, marginalized from the postmodern West. History tells a different story. Haiti has been “intertwined with that of Europe and the United States for three centuries,” and today’s Haiti cannot be understood without an understanding of its complicated, yet rich and tragic history (Dubois, 2012).

Haiti was born out of a tortuous and unjust world on an island that may have been one of the richest and most productive in the 1700s (Dubois, 2012.). It was then the French colony of Saint-Domingue, made up of enormously profitable yet horrific French slave plantations. These plantations were populated by roughly a million imported African slaves who died premature deaths on these brutal sugarcane and coffee plantations. But the French plantation owners were made exceedingly rich by exporting sugarcane and coffee to European consumers (Dubois, 2012).

It was into this context that Haiti was born. Beginning in 1791, slaves revolted on the plantations of northern Haiti and within 2 years established freedom for all plantation slaves. A former slave and French general, Toussaint Louverture, would defend the new Haiti from further European invasion and make way for the establishment of a formal declaration of independence.

In a time of colonization and slavery, the world was not ready to support this first Black sovereign nation led by former slaves. A free Haiti was a threat to the institutions of slavery, White supremacy, and colonialization in France, Europe overall, and the United States. The result was enforced political and economic isolation for this new nation. Europe’s and the United States’ unwillingness to recognize the first Black nation would have ramifications for centuries to come (Katz, 2013).

Postcolonialism and Transracial Adoption

“Haiti was postcolonial before postcolonial was cool” (Curtis, 2014). Simply understood, postcolonialism is the period following colonialization; existence following a nation becoming independent from colonial rule. From this perspective, Haiti has been in an uneasy postcolonial period far longer than other former colonies. By the first half of the 20th century, the worldwide colonial project where European empires reached perhaps their greatest advance and whereby many non-European peoples and nations had been conquered and occupied was when the first ideas and narratives around transracial adoption developed (Hubinette & Arvanitakis, 2012; Wexler, 2000).

Hubinette (2000) uses gender studies scholar, Laura Wexler’s term *imperial sentimental narrative*, to explain the developmental thinking around the adoption of non-White children by European upper-class families as the narrative of reparations, reconciliation, and salvation. Hubinette goes on to say that these early

sentimental narratives predated the real beginnings of transracial and transnational adoptions in the 1950–1970s during a time of decolonization during the Cold War (Eske, 2010) and perhaps the most noted work of the Holt family which would become Holt International, Inc., still involved in international adoptions today (Dewan, 2000; Gravatar21, 2011; University of Oregon, 2012). Hubinette, a researcher and a political activist interested in issues of adoption and racism especially as it focuses on the adoption community of Korea, describes the origins of transnational and interracial adoptions in his words as “forced child migration” and “the trafficking of an estimated half a million children to date” (Hubinette, 2006, p. 1).

In the 1950s, the practice was initiated as a rescue mission with strong Christian fundamentalist and particularly Lutheran undertones, while it came to be perceived as a progressive act of solidarity during the left liberal 1960s and 1970s. Today, and since the 1980s, international adoption has developed into a consumerist choice in the leading adopting countries and regions of the United States and Scandinavia (Hubinette, 2006, p. 1).

In regard to these suggestions that international adoptions, including Holt International Children’s Services adoption, could be categorized as a type of child trafficking or forced migration, in conversation with a colleague about this research, Margaret Patterson an adoptive mother and adult education researcher responded:

He (Hubinette, 2006) could not be more wrong . . . While I have no doubt that some individuals and even agencies do traffic children, Holt International is not one of them. In Korea, according to Bertha Holt who I met before her passing, the biracial children of Korean nationals and US soldiers were summarily rejected and frequently left to die. (M. Patterson, personal communication, April 20, 2015).

Patterson goes on to clarify that Holt International adoptions, one of the largest and most successful international adoption agencies, cannot be characterized and is the furthest thing from a “consumerist choice, child migration, or trafficking.”

Transracial Adoption as White Privilege?

But for Hubinette, international adoptions, which are frequently transracial, are the privilege of Whites; thus in a postcolonial world the extension of colonial privilege and hegemony. Hubinette cites the orphan train (Holt, 1992), where non-White adoptive parents were forbidden from adopting White children. Further examples is in pre-Civil Rights United States is when a handful of states legislated against interracial adoption and the fostering of White children by non-Whites. In the late 1990s, there was a widely publicized case of a Black woman in Detroit who wanted to adopt a White girl and was prohibited (Kennedy, 2003).

In 1972, The National Association of Black Social Workers [NASBW] expressed strong reservations against the practice of transracial adoption for many of the

reasons that White families would not be able to support their Black children in navigating a racist society, would not impart a strong sense of Black identity and self-worth, and would separate Black children from and prevent them from integrating with the Black community—at best ill-advised and at worst being a form of ethnic genocide (NASBW, 1972). Since 1972, the NASBW has stepped back from this position; nevertheless, it still remains a strongly held view that transracial adoption should be a choice of last resort when all avenues for same race adoptions have been explored (NASBW, 2003).

Despite this history, most adoption research takes on a more balanced perspective exemplified in the work of Smith (Smith, Cardell, & Juarez, 2011). Smith writes his ongoing blog about race and adoption from an American vantage point, but the perceptions apply to all transracially adoptive families and children living in America:

Although I strongly understand their viewpoint and agree whole-heartedly with the NABSW rationale, I also believe that white adopting parents have every good intention in raising their children with love. The reality is that the majority of black children in foster care will stay there until they age out on their eighteenth birthday, and I certainly cannot say that this is a better alternative to being reared in an all-white context. However, I believe there is an additional alternative, and that is to encourage white parents to educate themselves and take ownership of their place in history and the unearned benefits they receive from a racist society (Smith, 2012, April 12).

Specifically, for Haiti, the 2010 earthquake brought the complicated institution of transracial adoption, which traditionally and predominantly involved White parents from Canada and the United States, into the forefront. Both the corruption in the form of child trafficking and the compassion of adoption were exposed. According to Reitz, through the department of Homeland Security, the special humanitarian parole for Haitian orphans short-term program was developed to expedite legal, legitimate adoptions already in progress, or near finalization when the earthquake hit (Reitz, 2010; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services [USCIS], 2010). Through this program, an estimated 1,200 Haitian orphans were approved to travel and be adopted through an expedited process immediately following the earthquake; the program was open for a specified time period and then closed by request of the Haitian government and normal international adoption processes restored (USCIS, 2010). Reitz (2010) and other adoption specialists view international adoption and transracial adoption from a very different framework:

Intercountry adoption is a form of immigration. It is offering some of the most vulnerable—orphaned or abandoned children—a permanent home and the chance to become one of us. Adoption in any form is an incredible act of generosity and kindness . . . There is no better or worse, no right or wrong, in offering a homeless child a home and a chance . . . (p. 792).

Postcolonialist theorists would take a divergent view perhaps encapsulated in Hubinette and Arvanitakes's (2012) quote about what they call the "glorification of today's White adopters of third world children."

... interracial families and transracial adoptions of our time seek to complete the processes of conceptualized and autochtonisation, thereby encapsulating the desire to live with and become the *Other* in a way that had not been accomplished previously. Here we see the division between the Western *Self* and the non-Western *Other* collapse into an antiracist transracial fantasy of postcolonial reconciliation, white cosmopolitanism and a vision of a future global family . . . white people can finally feel that they are comfortable with non-white people and at home in the non-Western world. (p. 703)

Patterson has taken argument with Hubinette and Arvanitakes's terminology of "glorification" and "fantasy of postcolonial reconciliation," stating:

What if the adoptive parents *aren't* glorified? Some people have praised us for taking an orphan from overseas, stating how "good" we were and what a "blessing" it was for our daughter to have us. We had to reply that we were the ones who were blessed by her coming into our family. Other people have been highly critical . . . constantly being noticed for our decision, or having to explain the relationship to strangers, doesn't feel much like glorification!

Patterson goes on to say,

It is an interesting word choice, this "fantasy." When you are up with a sick child in the night who is howling because she has an ear infection, or sitting with her as she struggles line by line through a difficult homework assignment, there is no fantasy, only harsh reality, that of a child who needs her parent. (M. Patterson, personal communication, April 20, 2015)

Much scholarly research has been done in the field of transracial and international adoption over decades and there are multiple and complex findings as well as multiple political positions taken on this emotionally and historically charged issue (Chuang, 2010; Kirton, 2000; Patton, 2000; Simon, Alstein, & Melli, 1994). Certainly, the emotion-laden arguments and historical context previously presented raise tensions in our understanding of our own relationship with the sometimes resultant feelings of guilt and shame. Little academic research has been done from the position of adult mother and daughter relationships through the lens of transformative adult learning theory from a postcolonial perspective; it is into this dialogue, tension, and diverging views that we situate our autoethnography.

Autoethnography—Mother and Daughter—Our Own Narrative

Autoethnographic research encompasses a broad spectrum of types from evocative to analytic which are interdisciplinary and well-respected (Chatham-Carpenter, 2010; Pathak, 2010; Pierce, 2010); this study leans toward an analytic approach (Anderson, 2006). In adult education, we have seen autoethnographies emerge in the past decade (Chapman, 2003; Glowacki-Dudka, Treff, & Usman, 2005; Sykes, 2014; Taber, 2005), and a few have connected issues of race and adult learning (Boyd, 2008) as this research does.

Typically autoethnographies are individual, but in this case this is a coconstructed ethnography (Sochacka, Guyotte, Walther, Kellam, & Constantino, 2013) and as such examines cultural and relational lived experiences, encompassing “ambiguities, uncertainties, and contradictions” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 279). The dialogic approach is both process and product valuing the individual voices as well as learning collectively through all stages of the research process: data collection, analysis, and writing (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013). We use a modified sequential model, one autoethnographer writes then exchanges writing with coresearcher eliciting responses and reactions; and then she either responds verbally or in writing interjecting her story. The process goes through many iterations before a coconstructed piece is created (Ngunjiri et al., 2010; Sochacka et al., 2013).

Furthermore, the research question related to transformational learning which ultimately emerges is: How do postcolonial paradigms impact the learning of racial identity in transracial adoptions? And what significance does this understanding hold for transformational learning in other contexts?

Data Collection and Analysis

This autoethnography began nearly 2 years ago in both Haiti and the United States; we collected our data through both face-to-face and electronic conversations, journaling, 4½ weeks together in Haiti on two separate occasions and a road trip across the United States. Our time together in Haiti allowed for us to return to the orphanage from which Rebecca was adopted in 1990; she was 9 years old. Because we have been living in different parts of the world for much of these past few years, we have communicated both in writing and, almost weekly, in phone conversations. We both audio recorded and handwrote our conversations and reflections. Our reading and literature review included reading on both transracial adoption and transformational learning theory in intersection with a study of Haiti’s history through fiction and nonfiction Haitian authors, most notably, Danticat (1994, 1996, 2004), Dubois (2012), and Roumain (2012).

Our data analysis process utilized NVivo 10 qualitative software into which we downloaded all our journal notes, interviews, and texts for coding purposes. Open

coding was employed (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) utilizing the node functions of the software with nine codes emerging. From this traditional grounded theory approach and these codes, we developed further questions for our dialogues and journaling which led to our initial writing of this article. Analysis continued through the first phase of our writing with core codes of transformational learning, color blindness, and racial identity emerging. We view this as a constructivist approach to grounded theory where the researcher as the author reconstructs experience and meaning and reflective writing emerges as a part of the analysis process (Charmaz, 2000). Through iterative analysis over an extended period of time approaching 2 years, memoing, dialoging, writing, and rewriting analysis continued until we unearthed one main theme of racial identity learning; it emerged for both of us. This analysis process was rigorous in applying both data collection and analysis triangulation including textual, audio, visual data analyzed through investigator, and methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1978). This constructivist grounded theory approach worked well with autoethnography in that it recognizes the following assumptions:

people create their own realities by seeking to understand the world in which they live; it does not seek a single truth; is not free from bias; tells a story; does not approach a generalized truth but creates concepts and hypotheses that may be transported to other similar contexts. (Charmaz, 2000, p. 503)

Dialogue and Disclosure

Rebecca

“I think we are all over the place. It all seems so disjointed and coming from different angles.” I told this to my mother after reading over one of our first drafts of this article. How do you relate history, to us, to adoption? I had never thought about all of the different perspectives on transracial adoption and colonialism, but I guess it all makes sense. How can you argue with history?

For me though, I don’t want to go back. The past is the past, and there is nothing I can do to change it. I feel I must look forward. So why have I agreed to write this with my mom? For she is my mom. Sometimes even as an adult I call her “mommy.” We are very close. I feel this is the way my life was supposed to be. I do want to work on this project with her, knowing that she is more engaged in this autoethnography more than I am because I am preoccupied and sometimes a little overwhelmed with my job at the NGO and being back in Haiti.

Creole is coming back to me. I stopped speaking it when I was adopted on October 11, 1990, my dad’s birthday and my adoption birthday. I seldom disclose about my adoption; I am very private. I was 9 almost 10 years old, and in 1990 Haiti was going through major political, economic, and social turmoil following the Duvalier regimes and under the provisional government of Ms. Ertha Pascal-Trouillot who took office in March of 1990 with the intention of ushering in free

and fair democratic elections. President, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, would be elected in December of 1990, 2 months after I left. I suspect that this “window” of time aided the ability of my parents to adopt and “get me out” of Haiti. Leaving the turmoil of Haiti, I would enter my own tumultuous journey in America.

I grew up in an American orphanage in Carfour founded and developed by a Black missionary named Eleanor “Mom” Workman. As children, we were almost never allowed outside the walls of the orphanage compound which was sort of like a walled fortress where we lived and went to school and church. Although I was fluent in Creole and had been taught French, I was nearly fluent in English as well. Many of the volunteers and workers were American or Canadian, and because I had a good ear, I learned English from the American missionaries. In some sense, we were little Americans within the orphanage seeing very little of Haiti. I guess this was for our protection.

I prayed to God to be adopted. I guess I never was specific with God, not asking for Black or White parents so my parents and two brothers are White. I never questioned my parent’s motives, and I never looked back until now. I was told my birth mother died in childbirth. I was also told that I was on a government list to be sent to France—a child trafficking list—to be transported for child pornography and child prostitution. It is all so mixed up, just as Haiti is mixed up. But I am proud of being Haitian. Haitian’s are resilient and so am I. I am a survivor and a fighter like Haiti. I am proud of my people—their resilience and their fighting spirit.

Joni

I understand that in Caribbean culture, many cultures outside of American White culture, you can call many people your mother. But I don’t like it when other women, well-meaning women mostly Black, call Rebecca their daughter or their adopted daughter. I guess I am sensitive. I admit it. I am Rebecca’s mother—they can be her Auntie or Aunt—but I am her mother. When Rebecca says that it is all “mixed up” and being a fighter, I resonate with both those feelings. This past year my reading and studying of Haitian history and transracial adoption has presented me with a, yes, disorienting dilemma. I now more than ever admire the bravery of the Haitian people and detest the continued well-meaning undermining of the Haitian government, economy, and the ability of the Haitian people to succeed as the first Black republic. I understand how some scholars understand transracial and international adoption to be just another colonistic tool of predominantly White Europe, America, and Canada. How do I make sense of this in my relationship with my daughter? For she is my daughter not my adoptive daughter.

Like my daughter, I think I am a fighter. I have fought to be her mother despite my own insecurities and perhaps the perceptions of others. In the days before my mother, Rebecca’s grandmother, died; we found her napping in the fetal position and now I somehow sense that going back to birthing is a way of understanding both the life process and our steady progression to death. So, for me, this whole

journey of going back to so many births: the birth of Haiti, Rebecca's birth and birthplace, and adoption as a birthing is perhaps a journey to the death of old ideas and new ways of knowing and understanding my relationship with Rebecca as an adult child.

Rebecca and I were with my mother, in the hours and days before she died. In the emergency room, we alone were the first to hear the words from the doctor "she is trying to die." We stood by her side expressing how we loved her, talking to her, singing, and crying. Two adults—mother and daughter—these stories are all sort of mixed up in my mind—the true stories of my mother's death, Haiti's birth and many deaths, Rebecca's birthplace and adoption, and the birthing and growing of our relationship. Perhaps Rebecca is exactly right when she said, "I think we are all over the place. It all seems so disjointed and coming from different angles." And yet, I want to fight to tell the story, despite the counternarratives, of adopting my child, my Black child. Buck (1972) wrote about this experience in this way and I resonate with her experience:

Adopting a Black child into my White family has taught me much I could not otherwise have known. Although I have many Black friends and read many books by Black writers, I rejoice that I have had the deep experience of being mother to a Black child.
(p. 64)

Rebecca

Returning to Haiti has been and continues to be transformative for me. I lead a group of worshippers during church and Bible study services on a regular basis. Our team of singers is all Haitian natives, and we sing and worship in Creole. The sounds, language, rhythm and tone of both the music, and Creole stir me and engage me in the music in a way that English does not. It is this return in my soul that is significant and transforming at several levels.

When I first arrived in Haiti to work, now almost 2 years ago, I used to close my eyes in the van as we drove through the streets. Perhaps I was not use to the poverty and pain of my Haitian people and found the realization disorienting. This idea of a disorienting dilemma rings true. As an adult returning to Haiti, I understand that I was fortunate to be adopted by my parents, and I told them that I was thankful. Verbally this was new, and I think this verbal declaration has made our relationship even stronger, I am still learning, still trying to make sense of it all.

Joni

To my shame, I did not start investigating Haitian history until several years ago when Rebecca was in graduate school studying international relations. Since the inception of this study, I have immersed myself in the history and literature of Haiti and intend to continue to do so. This is transformative learning for me both in my

recognition that because I have White privilege, I could afford to know very little about my child's cultural heritage and history; from a position of privilege, I could afford to have that all be invisible including the aspects of Haitian history that suggest the collusion of America and Europe in the oppression and continued oppression of Haiti to this day. From this postcolonial perspective, I am forced into a disorienting dilemma and a painful recognition—the first step in Mezirow's transformative learning stages. The self-examination of this feeling of shame of somehow being unknowingly a part of an intrinsically oppressive institutionalized structure is the painful part and yet experiencing such a deep mother/daughter bond is shameless.

Along with other scholarly work that I have engaged in, this critical self-examination has led me to assume the role and to label myself as both a social activist scholar and antiracist ally. Transformative learning theory states that in this kind of adult learning, which really is the core or should be the core of all adult learning, you not only assume new roles in light of new knowledge but then develop competence and confidence in those roles. The result is the integration of the new learning into your identity, relationships, work, and life as a whole. This can certainly describe the process of having been and continuing to engage in this research.

In terms of my relationship as Rebecca's mother, it has matured me and made me more confident of my role as her adult mother and her friend. How this occurred I am not totally cognizant. But I do know that understanding her country of origin's history and brave heritage has made me even more proud of her and her contribution to our family. I have a renewed respect for my daughter, her current work and her cultural heritage. Perhaps it has helped me to relate to her as an adult and not as the little child we adopted; perhaps this learning, at least for me, has matured our relationship. At some level, I feel a deep affinity for Haiti, through my daughter, a deep connection to their ongoing struggle for independence and social justice.

Rebecca

I do feel an affinity to the Haitian people, my people, but I am also an American because of my adoption. So as an American, I was forced to confront race. Yes, I think I can say this study has contributed to my learning, awareness, and personal struggle with my racial identity. I was color-blind growing up; we as a family were color blind. My adoptive parents never talked about race much therefore I never saw myself in a racial way; I just saw humanity. But as an adult, things are changing not just because of this study, but I will say that this study does push opportunities to talk about what we seldom spoke about but was always present—race. So now I am aware and now I cannot go back to color blindness. And it is like I am making myself look in the mirror as I come to this consciousness, that there is color and I am Black, and what am I going to do with this?

Joni

I think I regret not discussing, grappling with race earlier in our relationship. I guess we were so busy bonding as child and mother, and I had not yet articulated my own racial identity. From my position of privilege, I did not have to recognize that I was White—in fact, this racial recognition did not come until much later in life. Embracing my White racial identity perhaps made me feel that I might be more distant from my daughter and all I wanted was to be close—to bond as mother and daughter.

Rebecca

I don't know if I will ever come to terms with it—racial identity. It is very complex for both of us, this learning. Through this awareness of Haiti's history and colonialism, I am forced to see the injustices. What kind of a system creates orphans like me? A system where a biological mother cannot raise her child? I never saw the world that way before.

But from that history and system came another system (international adoption) where my White mother can still raise a Black child; the mother–daughter relationship is color blind in my mind. And it has produced positive agency. By that I mean that transracial adoption, despite its history and perhaps colonistic undertones, is a positive experience. Look at the outcome. Look at the person it created and is still to be finished. For example, it is weird for me to see people only having Black friends or White friends for that matter. I deal easily with different people; I am comfortable in international, intercultural, and interracial setting. The world needs people like me.

Joni

My daughter said that she wanted to make sure that this article communicated that all is not negative and that with transracial adoption there is in her words a “ray or glimmer of hope and a positive outcome.” I agree for so many reasons, among them for me comes this awareness and better understanding of my racial identity and learning to be a mother to an adult child.

Rebecca

Maybe the transformational learning is in the personal struggle, the awareness of our racial identity. It seems race is a contentious topic in this current time; it is important to understand it within the context of our relationship from the perspective of history. I think we have a contribution to make to others—our relationship and how we make sense of it is a prototype of sorts, I believe.

Implications for Adult Education

Beyond the individual transformational learning, what are the implications for adult educators and adult education more broadly? We think there are perhaps three implications: autoethnography as a tool both for research and pedagogy, social imagination as a tool of transformative learning, and learning to disclose.

A concern sometimes raised in academia as it surrounds autoethnography is the scientific and scholarly significance of this type of research, as it can seem highly self-indulgent and almost self-therapy. But with a more analytic approach to autoethnography, this approach is able to tap into what adult educators Mills called social imagination which was then further articulated by both Habermas and Gouthro:

Sociological imagination, first defined by adult educator, Mills (2000) as mental space where personal conflicts intersect with global or institutional contexts and where space is the connection between personal worlds and the “systems world (Habermas, 1989). Gouthro (2005) calls this temporal dimension “homeplace”—the space in our minds and lived experiences that are crucial to identity development as adult learners including past memories that affect present behaviors. (Schwartz, 2014)

For adult educators, this connection between global history and personal history often has the potential to unlock transformative learning as our students, and ourselves, are making sense of ourselves and our cultural, racial, global history, while grappling with our own personal identities and worlds. The kind of pedagogy that creates space for these kinds of narrative is often transformative (Lyle, 2013). So beyond the personal value for the authors, we contend that there is qualitatively scientific and scholarly significance for adult educators and researchers in both the process of autoethnography as a research method and a pedagogical process in the classroom.

As Chang (2016) has aptly stated and is pertinent to adult education:

When manifested in increased self-reflection, adoption of the culturally relevant pedagogy, desire to learn about “others of difference,” development of an inclusive community, or self-healing, the self-transformative potential of autoethnography is universally beneficial to those who work with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Through the increased awareness of self and others, they will be able to help themselves and each other correct cultural misunderstandings, develop cross-cultural sensitivity, and respond to the needs of cultural others effectively. (p. 14)

Finally, we have alluded to the link between disclosure and transformative learning for us and posit that disclosure to ourselves and others is a way into transformation. Disclosure is intimately connected to reflexivity, critical thinking, and may open the door to challenges to hegemonic thinking. We propose that the concept of disclosure as a pedagogical tool, its boundaries and potential, in the adult education classroom seems ripe for further investigation.

Coda

In conclusion, we would like to return to Brookfield's (2011) opening quote "One must learn disclosure (p. 37)." We would add our own quotes gleaned from our ongoing transformative process outlined in this article: "Don't push the river" which comes from an old Chinese proverb. For us, learning and choosing to disclose are transformative, but in choosing we cannot hurry or "push" the process. It came at a pace comfortable and acceptable to us. "We do not want to push the river" as we are exploring deeply painful and deeply strong emotions and memories and this cannot be forced or rushed. This means that our autoethnographic research has been slow, deliberate, intentional, rigorous, and methodical.

Joni

Coming to terms with our racial identity is at the core of what we have learned so far. And indeed, there has been some transformation in our relationship; for me as a White mother of a Black adult daughter—I am both more and less comfortable "in my skin." More because I know she loves me despite my Whiteness and less because I understand more deeply the systems and institutions that made us mother and daughter.

Rebecca

I no longer can be color blind, I am forced to grapple with being Black, understanding what that means to me and others in a racialized world. How do I take ownership of what is happening to me now? And how do I communicate that there is hope and agency in my relationship with my mother and White family despite the evil systems of colonialization that seemingly led to these relationships. How can I live in this world as a model or prototype because that is what I would like to be for others also struggling with their racial identity, like me, so that they can know they can be border crossers—across race and nationality? Some questions are not yet answered. The river continues to flow.

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