Mothering Children of African Descent:
Hopes, Fears and Strategies of White Birth Mothers

by

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Introduction

It is often acknowledged that African identities are "complex, contested and contingent," and that these negotiations and contestations are conducted in many locations around the globe (Ahluwalia and Zegeye 113). However, there has been little discussion thus far about the role of non-African parents of mixed African-Western children in these processes. In many parts of the world where the African Diaspora has spread, there are increasing numbers of children being born to African and non-African parents, particularly (but not only) African fathers and non-African mothers of diverse ethnicities. Non-African parents may play a significant role in facilitating, supporting, or obstructing their children's positive identifications and associations with Africa and "Africanness," especially if and when the marriage or relationship breaks down and the child or children reside with the non-African parent.

In this article, I use extracts from interviews with white Australian birth mothers of African Australian children to explore how they negotiate some of the complexities, challenges, and rewards of mothering children of African descent. I argue that the contributions of non-African mothers of African-other children add an important dimension to discussions about the complexities of postcolonial and Africana hybrid identities. The article begins with a description of empirical data sources, some information about the field of research, and an exploration of the theoretical underpinnings of the discussion. This is followed by a discussion of some issues described by research participants, with an emphasis on narratives about lived experience and intersubjective dynamics. The article concludes with a brief reflection on the implications of these narratives.

Data Used in this Article

The extracts used in the article are taken from interviews I conducted with eight white Australian women who are the birth mothers of mixed African and (non-African) Australian children. Five interviews were conducted specifically for this article, and three were conducted as part of a broader qualitative research project I undertook regarding African Australian relationships (Stopford 13-35; 15-30). Of the eight participants, seven are of Anglo Celtic descent and one is of Dutch-Italian parentage. All except one, who met her husband in Kenya, met the fathers of their children in Australia, although four had spent time in Africa prior to their relationships. The qualitative research methodology was constructed specifically for psycho-social research, and incorporates participatory and cross-cultural perspectives on research practice (Stopford 13-35; Lather 2-13; Luke and Carrington 5-24; Haig Brown 19-32). In regard to the African fathers of my participants' children, four are from Ghana and the others are from Senegal, Mauritania, Malawi, and Kenya. The higher concentration of Ghanaian men reflects the fact that I have a stronger connection with the Ghanaian community than other African communities in Australia, and possibly also that the Ghanaian community is one of the largest and most longstanding.

The Research Field

Despite the plethora of recent literature about interracial and postcolonial subjectivities, there has been little in-depth discussion thus far about mothering children of mixed cultural, ethnic, and racial descent. The focus of discussion in mixed race and hybridity studies tends to be on the children of couples of mixed cultures and races, rather than the parents themselves, and the damage done by racist and essentialist discourse to the children of those people who cross "the color line," especially black/white relationships.

There have, however, been some studies of mixed race and culture families that focus on the parents and their responses to their children (Phoenix and Owens 158-177; Dalmage 1-32). There has also been some feminist and critical race research and discussion specifically about or by white mothers of African descent children in Western locations, and white mothers of African descent children living in Africa, with a particular emphasis on the way white mothers resist racism and try to foster positive identifications with blackness (Reddy 43-64; Lazarre 21-51; Twine 729-746, 878-907; Adomako Ampofo *In My Mother's House*). Because fighting racism and fostering Africana identities are of course inextricably linked, I see this research as continuing the work of the aforementioned writers.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Given that there has been so little research or discussion on the role of non-African parents in supporting and encouraging (or discouraging) African affiliations for children of African descent, my primary goal in this article is to provide some information for interested readers about the ways in which white birth mothers manage and negotiate some of the associated complexities and challenges. To this end, I include as much interview material as possible, and avoid lengthy theoretical discussions. However, since my overall argument is that the narratives of white birth mothers add another dimension to discussions about the complexities of postcolonial and Africana identities, it is important to acknowledge the cross-disciplinary perspectives that shape my methodology and analysis before introducing my interlocutors' voices.

As Denzin and Lincoln write, the qualitative researcher often works "between and within competing and overlapping perspectives" (5). As a psychoanalytic clinician and a psycho-social researcher, and as a white woman in an African Australian community and extended family, I work at the interface of social and psychological theory and Western and African perspectives on gender, kinship, sexuality, family, and culture. In addition to clinical perspectives on attachment and relationships, my thinking for this article is shaped by Afrocentric perspectives on motherhood, marriage, family, and kinship; Western research on white mothers of "black" children (noted above); and African, postcolonial, critical race, and postmodern perspectives on transculturation, hybridity, and identity (Nzegwu *Cultural Epistemologies of Motherhood*; Oyewumi *The Invention of Women*; Sudarkasa *Conceptions of Motherhood*).

Identity, Hybridity, and Transculturation

The issues touched on in this article—mothering, culture, gender, racism, identity—are, needless to say, extremely complex, both practically and theoretically. While it is well beyond the scope of the article to undertake an in-depth exploration of the theoretical debates and discussions associated with all of these interweaving dimensions of the African/non-African contact zone as they manifest in the narratives of my interlocutors, it is important to note why and how I use certain key terms in this discussion, specifically: "identity," "transculturation," and "hybridity." Based on the quotation I chose to begin this article with, as well as my earlier reference to "hybrid" Africana identities, it is already apparent that I am sympathetic to postmodern and postcolonial frameworks that critique any notion of an essential, singular racial or cultural identity or category. Anthony Appiah's description of identities as "complex and multiple" that "grow out of a history of changing responses to economic, political and cultural forces, almost always in opposition to other identities" resonates strongly with this writer (178).

In a similar vein, I am drawn to the work of cultural and postcolonial theorists who embrace Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity in order to emphasize "complicated entanglement rather than identity, togetherness-in-difference rather than virtual apartheid" (Ang 3).

As the white mother of a mixed African child and a member of a multiracial and cultural extended family, it is hardly surprising that I am drawn to formulations of hybridity, complexity, and multiplicity. However, there are important complexities and conflicts associated with the use of the term "hybridity," one of which is particularly relevant to the discussion in this article. This pertains to the observation made by some writers that the mutual transculturation of "colonizer" and "colonized" implied by notions of hybridization is—in reality—often a highly asymmetrical mutuality since it usually entails the destabilization or assimilation of the less powerful (previously colonized) culture by the more powerful culture. In other words, the use of the term "hybridity" as a celebratory catch-all phrase can too easily overlook the realities of post-colonial (in the temporal sense) and neo-colonial power relations (Shohat 99-131; Nzegwu 175-202).

The question of power relations is of course critical in African-Western relationships at both micro and macro levels. As we will see in the following interview extracts and dialogue, nearly all of the interview participants seemed to be conscious that without vigilant effort, their children's African Australian hybridity was unlikely to reflect a relatively equal mix of Western and African cultural practices and languages. It is for this reason that—although it has largely been replaced in the lexicon of cultural and postcolonial theorists by the term "hybridity" in any discussion about the African-Western "contact zone"—I think it is essential to retain the concept of "transculturation" as it was originally coined by Cuban ethnographer Fernando Ortiz; that is, to differentiate the frequently irresolvable tensions between cultures in conflict from the neat resolutions of difference sometimes implied by concepts such as hybridity and syncretism (Pratt 7).

The Mother's Role

According to the young men and women interviewed by Anne Phoenix and Barbara Tizard in their research regarding the racial identities of young people of mixed black and white parentage in the United Kingdom, it is parents who have the strongest influence on mixed race/culture children's feelings about their identity (132). And as Phoenix and Tizard note at another point, most of these young people's closest attachments were to their mothers, who were generally white (164). Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that for the majority of these young people, their white mothers were very influential in their formation of a positive racial identity (and the criteria for a positive racial identity included a definite pride in color).

Certainly, for my respondents there seemed to be no question about the central importance of their roles as mothers in fostering their children's positive dual Australian African identities and affiliations. When a mother is white and her child is not, there are obviously enormous complexities to this process, but although they have varying strategies, different relationships with Africa, and different opinions about their roles in supporting African affiliations for their children, none of my participants seemed to feel that the difference in color between them and their children diminished the importance of their role in supporting and encouraging their children's "Africanness." In fact, one participant, "Mary," an Anglo woman in her late thirties who has a two-year-old son with her Senegalese partner, feels strongly that her own love of African dance and music (particularly Senegalese), is an important influence on her son:

Well, I strongly believe that he does have two cultural identities...and I guess my role is to sort of ensure that he gets enough exposure to both of those and being conscious, I guess, that we live in a white society where everything around us is white Australian. I try to include much literature and television and things like that that actually reflect the African side, the cultural side is an important part of it. I guess also because I've had quite a number of years of being interested in the African cultural side of things and I think it's important for him to see that that's part of me, too, and that being African, well, having an African identity, isn't necessarily just about being black, but it's actually, you know, it's having a respect and a reverence, I guess, for the history and the culture. I guess that's actually really important to me because there's a lot of stuff that's happening in Africa now that I don't think is good in terms of it becoming more westernized. And ok, it's good to have more disposable income, that'd be good, but losing some of the things that are more traditional, I guess, African traditional things, especially the music and dance, for me is my main connection obviously. But the stories and the history and the relationships between people and all that sort of stuff I admire a lot about Africa.

Mary's narrative seems to suggest that she although she is visibly located entirely in a white cultural identity, her subjective experience is that she herself has two cultural identities, and that she has been "Africanized" to some degree through her time spent living and studying dance in Senegal. She has a "respect and reverence" for African cultures and history which she wants to transmit to her son, partly to counteract the hegemony of white Western culture in Australia, but partly, too, to counteract what she sees as the increasing westernization of Africa.

"Josephine," an Anglo woman in her early forties previously married to a Ghanaian man, had this to say about her twelve-year-old son:

It's always been really important to me that he be in contact with both of those backgrounds (Ghanaian and Anglo Celtic) as I've been bringing him up...I don't know how successful I've been in him being in touch, but I think he's got a very strong sense of himself as being an African Australian and being a Ghanaian Australian...you know, one thing is he is saturated with Australian mainstream culture anyway just by living here, so he's going to be exposed to all that, so I feel a bit like there needs to be a kind of affirmative action in relation to the African culture

Similar thoughts and ideas about the importance of countering the dominance of white Australian culture with a kind of "affirmative action" in terms of being an active part of creating a visible African presence in everyday life (food, music, clothing, and videos) were expressed by the majority of participants. While some felt their own affection for Africa was important, others felt it was entirely the responsibility of the African father to bring a positive African presence into their children's lives, and that their role was primarily to encourage and support their children's communication with their fathers. For example, "Sally," an Anglo woman in her forties with two adolescent daughters from a previous marriage to a Malawian man, as well as a six-year-old daughter from a more recent marriage to a Ghanaian man, said that she isn't particularly drawn to African cultural expressions (except food). But because she really wants her daughters "to have a good experience of both sides," she strongly encourages them to maintain regular contact with their fathers.

Another perspective was offered by "Maria," who has two young children with her Ghanaian husband. Maria, who is in her late thirties and of Dutch Italian parentage, also feels strongly about the necessity of supporting her children's dual identity. However, unlike most of the other participants, whose anxieties seem to relate primarily to the difficulty of developing a strong and positive African identity in a white-dominated culture (especially if they have separated from their children's fathers, which is the case for over half the participants), Maria is more concerned that mixed African-white children identify too strongly with their African—or black—side.

I think it's sad that people who have got African backgrounds and are half caste, a lot of the time now I notice that they identify with their black side and forget about their white side, even people who are more on the white side, they're black, and they deny their English background, even Bob Marley; his father was Scottish and he's a black man.

While Maria's desire is, like the other women quoted, to mother her children in a way that makes them feel good about their mixed parentage, her perspective seems to be "color blind," involving a refusal to acknowledge the implications of living in a society where white (and Western) is normative. Only one other participant shared Maria's humanistic and idealistic approach; all the other participants seem to be acutely aware of power imbalances in the wider world, and actively involved in trying to redress the balance in various ways.

African Fathers, Othermothering, and Family Connections

Although the narratives of my interlocutors portray (on the whole) their commitment to supporting the African affiliations of their children, they are under no illusions about the fact that it is the actual presence of African fathers and other African people in their daily lives that makes all the difference. In Mary's words:

> …*he brings all of the African—most of the Africanness in the house is produced through him. In the sense of also, like, his friends, African friends who come round and that's really important to me and important for my son that he has an extended network of, you know, African people.*

Other participants who live with the fathers of their children made similar comments. Obviously, there are significant ramifications when the couple has separated and the children live with their white mother, as is the case for the majority of my respondents. As many researchers note, the challenges faced by intercultural couples often appear to surpass the everyday struggles and negotiations faced by monocultural and racial relationships and families, and anecdotal evidence suggests that many African and non-African Australian couples contend with numerous difficulties (Luke and Carrington 5-24; Durodoye 71-81; Foeman and Nance 540-557). Some of these struggles and stressors relate to "the anomalous status" of intercultural and racial couples "in a racially divided society, while others have more to do with intra relational cultural differences, especially conflicts over parenting styles (Benson 146). Added to this, there is the enormous difference between Western and African kinship, family and community life, and the lack of communal "holding" for interracial and cross cultural relationships and families.

While it is difficult to accurately assess separation and divorce rates for African and non-African couples, they do appear to be higher than average, and in the aftermath of separation from the father there are often many difficulties for "single" white mothers in trying to sustain connections for themselves and their children with African people and communities. I use quotation marks for the word "single" because within African schemas, there is no such thing as a single mother; all mothers are part of a wider network of family and community, regardless of their marital status. As Akosua Adomako Ampofo writes, mothering in most African societies "involves a collective responsibility held by a network of women, but also including some men, in a given community" (9).

Unfortunately, this is not often the case in Australia, where the best many women can hope for is that their former partner will stay actively involved with the children, and include them in their African community. As we will see, this doesn't always happen. Many African men living in the West seem to expect that women will be the primary caretakers of children, as in Africa, and if they separate from the mother they often seem to feel that the child belongs more in the mother's world than in their particular African community. As I have written elsewhere, there are many complexities and challenges for African-Western families residing in the West related to different marriage, family, and kinship systems (Stopford *Trans Global Families)*. In a sense, the white birth mother who separates from her African partner potentially misses out on the best of both worlds; given the expectation in the Western nuclear family system that fathers will play an active role in parenting their children, including after separation, there is rarely a supportive network of women from her own extended family of origin to be involved in a daily hands on way with "othermothering," but nor is she plugged into a network of African women from her ex-partner's community. Added to this, as the mother of "black" children, she no longer fits comfortably in all white families and environments.

All of the respondents who no longer live with the fathers of their children spoke at length about the particular challenges they face, the strategies they adopt, and the distress they sometimes feel in trying to keep an embodied African presence in their children's lives. "Barbara," an Anglo woman in her forties with two adolescent daughters from her marriage with a Ghanaian man (from whom she is separated), cried during the interview while talking about her daughters' reactions to their father's absence:

They [the two girls, age 14 and 16] are undergoing pretty intense identity crises, both of them have issues regarding their color, and their appearance, and their hair...They really resent the fact that their father's not there, he doesn't support them, and yet they carry this appearance that every time, every stranger, so many people think they've got a right to comment on their appearance and the comments are always very positive, but the children don't appreciate them in a positive way, they resent that their father's not there, so it's not like we're African and our father's here. They don't embrace the culture because it's not been given to them to embrace, and they're very angry about it.

Sally also made direct links between her two teenage daughters' fluctuations in pride about their African "side," their feelings about their appearance, and their relationship with their Malawian father, who they have only recently begun to correspond with regularly via email and phone (he left when they were toddlers and disappeared completely for many years).

In regard to her daughters' access to their African fathers, Sally said:

I've always wanted that for them from the word "go" because I think it's very, very important because they have this external appearance that other people see first, and even at a small age, people are curious and will question them about that, and that kind of annoys me in a sense because they're a person first. I know it's only natural to do that, but I think they get annoyed with it, too, now and that's why they're starting to explore their country of origin for themselves.

One respondent, "Margaret," an Anglo woman in her mid-thirties, said that it was specifically concern about her small daughter's Africanness that led her to stay with her (Mauritanian) partner much longer than she would have had she been childless:

I was really worried about her Africanness, I guess, and how we were going to manage that or how she was going to feel connected to that if I wasn't with him. And when I was with him, I actually thought that the only way to have that connection was with him, so even though there was violence in the relationship...that was definitely one of the reasons I stayed longer than I should have. I was really worried about how that would be for her, and I wasn't sure at that time how it would be for me to negotiate, either.

In Margaret's case, some of the friendships she developed in her husband's community did survive the breakup of the relationship, and she has gradually built up a supportive community of African and non-African friends and family, including her ex-husband's brother:

I'm really, really lucky that her dad has a brother here who I always got on with really well while we were together and while we weren't together. That's been difficult at different times, but basically, we're family. So, I mean for me, you know, the biggest difference I see in myself than to other white friends of mine who have got kids would be that my daughter's not mine, she's not mine, she's ours, you know. So, when I'm talking to her auntie or uncle, I'll say "our daughter."

During our interview, it emerged that the difference between Margaret's way of thinking about her daughter and her white friends' responses to their children was partially shaped by a Senegalese woman who takes an active othermother role in her daughter's life. This connection, along with the support of her ex husband's brother, her involvement in the Muslim community, and the commitment of her white friends to support a multicultural and racial lifestyle, seem to have allayed many of Margaret's fears about her daughter's "belongingness." Sadly, of all my interlocutors, Margaret seems to be the only one who has a close and harmonious relationship with an African woman. Only one other respondent, Josephine, has reasonably frequent contact with an African woman, the Ghanaian wife of her ex-husband, but due largely to conflicts over parenting practices, this relationship seems to be fairly fraught with tension. Josephine's son, however, seems to have a good relationship with his father's wife.

In Barbara's case, any hope that the arrival of her daughters' father's new Ghanaian wife in Australia would herald the beginning of an extended family situation with an African othermother was quickly dashed. Because she was still in a sexual relationship with her children's father and wanted to maintain the connection with him both for her own and her daughters' sake, she hoped that the two women would be co-wives. But the Ghanaian wife had apparently been led to believe by her husband that the relationship with Barbara had ended, and she refused to accept Barbara or her husbands' daughters' presence in her home. The situation became so volatile that the police had to be called in. Eventually, the relationships completely broke down, and Barbara's ex-husband returned to Ghana without either wife, or any of the children.

When I asked Sally whether she and her daughters were connected to African women, she replied that there is "a real big absence," which she is very disappointed about. When I asked her to elaborate, Sally said:

Oh, maybe just within the community that I'm involved in, the Ghanaian community, yeah, I kind of feel disappointed in that sense...there's been no day-to-day support; if I went to a house, they have a house full of families, but they don't do that, they don't come to our house and do that. I don't know whether that's because they feel uncomfortable or whether they feel, "Oh, she's ok, she's coping, everything's alright" because I know they embrace the children so well, but then why didn't they embrace, why hasn't that happened with...I suppose, too, I kind of didn't put myself there, as well, so I suppose there's a kind of barrier...it's really hard to know, and I hate to bring that cultural and that white thing into it, but I kind of feel that maybe they think that if they get involved with the white girls, it's going to be problematic.

Clearly, "that cultural and that white thing" is important in a myriad of ways in African and non-African relationships, and perhaps especially so in women's relationships, given the very different ways black and white women are incorporated into white supremacist symbolic and material structures. Although Australia is increasingly multicultural, whiteness is overwhelmingly normative, and racism (both overt and covert) is pervasive. Given the history of white colonialism in Africa, and the fact that black women are still so often objectified and devalued in racist and racialized systems, while white women are frequently idealized, it is hardly surprising that there are many barriers to close and ongoing connections between African and white women in Australia.

Perhaps this is part of the reason why around half of my interlocutors spoke passionately about the importance of staying connected to Africa as a place. "Lisa," for example, an Anglo woman in her forties who met the Kenyan father of her four daughters many years ago while visiting Kenya, started a company offering cultural and spiritual safaris to east and southern Africa as a way to maintain regular and frequent travel to Africa. When I asked Lisa why she feels she has to keep going back to Kenya, she said:

I feel that in our Western paradigm we've lost a lot of important things, such as the family base, and we've lost the fact that relating is more important than anything else...I mean, you know, the infrastructure is poor, and the ambulance may never come, the government might be corrupt, the power might fail and the water might not be there, but if you fall over in the street, thirty people will rush up and pick you up, you know, and if you get in an accident, someone will take you to hospital and take care of you.

Earlier in the interview, Lisa said that she "fell in love with Africa" before she met and fell in love with her daughters' father, and several other participants, including Mary, Josephine, and Barbara, had a strong response to Africa as a place before they met the fathers of the children. Josephine has taken her son to Ghana twice and when her ex-husband, his wife, and their four children go to Ghana next year for at least six months she and her son plan to go, too, so that he can be part of his father's extended family in an African setting.

Barbara also has "a dream to go back," as she puts it, but says that she hasn't been able to afford the trip for all of them. Now her daughters are not interested in accompanying her if and when she does return to Africa.

One of the many challenges for white birth mothers whose children do not have a consistent relationship with their fathers or other African relatives and friends in Australia is that they (the mothers) are usually the sole, or primary, economic providers for their children and cannot therefore easily afford to take their children to Africa to connect with other members of their African side of the family. Of course, taking children of African descent to meet family in Africa is by no means a straightforward process whereby they feel automatically or fully accepted in African kinship systems. In my own son's case, for example, the warm welcome extended by his father's family when I first took him to Ghana seems to have helped heal some of the wounds caused by his father's withdrawal from his life (at that time), but he also found it very confounding to suddenly move from being "black" in Australia to being "Obroni" in Ghana.

As many have written, people of mixed cultural and racial parentage often feel that they don't firmly belong in any one community (Nowika 1072-1086; Potter and Phillips 901-927). Whether these experiences are destructive or constructive depends largely on the responses of others. When children of African descent are "othered" both in Australia and Africa, it can be painful and alienating, but when these experiences are mediated and processed empathically and insightfully in close and trusting relationships with mothers, fathers, and other relatives and friends, a strong sense of pride about their African heritage, and their ability to bridge different worlds, can grow. The growing numbers of mixed African and non-African couples and people, and the growing awareness of the damaging effects of essentialist racial discourse and practice on children of mixed parentage, heighten the importance of developing practical and theoretical frameworks that recognize the necessity of retaining and celebrating specific African cultural histories and practices without indulging in "the impossible assumption of originary unity and racial purity" (Brah and Coombes 4).

Conclusion

In this article, I have utilized interviews with white Australian birth mothers of children of African descent to explore how they attempt to facilitate and support Africanness in their children, and to argue that non-African parents may play a significant role in the formation of Africana identities in the African Diaspora. Space limitations prevented exploration of other important issues discussed by my interlocutors, including the question of children learning the languages of their fathers, the significance (or insignificance) of religion in daily life, and differing ideas about good parenting.

Although my respondents face many dilemmas and difficulties, most feel that it is a critical part of their maternal responsibility to foster their children's dual (or multiple) racial and cultural identifications, regardless of their feelings about the fathers of their children. For many, their own love and respect for African traditions and practices, coupled with an awareness of the implications of the hegemony of whiteness in Australian society, informs a conscious commitment to try to embrace Africanness in their daily lives.

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