

Adoption, Race, and Where's the Hairbrush?

by Lisa Lerner

Deep in the redwoods of tiny Loma Mar, California, it's another day of fun and games at summer camp. There's lanyards and basketball, swimming and hotdogs – all the things you'd expect, and one thing you wouldn't: a workshop on African American Hair Care. In front of us, a 6-year-old African American boy gets his head methodically shaved. His mother, a silver-haired white woman, watches the event knowingly; she's also got a 13-year-old African American daughter, whose head is graced by a beautiful cascade of long, gleaming braided extensions. Nearby, a white Berkeley couple engage in deep conversation with a hair care worker about their 2-year-old African American son's puff of fine baby hair, eager for every scrap of information regarding products and maintenance.

No, this isn't ordinary summer camp. It is sponsored by Pact, an Adoption Alliance, a California organization that facilitates the adoptions of children of color. In the majority of the families that attend the camp, the adoptive parents are white. This is what is known as transracial adoption. Even the most well-intentioned and aware adopters are stepping into unknown and immensely challenging territory when they take on a child of a different color. Adoptees can all too easily grow up feeling like they don't belong anywhere and face problems of acceptance from their biological ethnic group. That's where the hair care comes in. It's a far more urgent issue than you might immediately think.

"Hair is the canary in the coal mine," says Dr. John Raible, a regular speaker at Pact Camp who is a professor of diversity and curriculum studies at the University of Nebraska, and himself an African American adoptee with white parents. "Black folks are checking out your kid's hair. If the hair looks good, black people feel like your child is being taken care of."

The hair clinic takes place every afternoon of camp. Even though my 5-year-old daughter Vaishali is Indian, with hair as straight as mine and easy to throw into a silky, swinging ponytail, she develops a bad case of corn row envy almost as soon as we arrive, so when I spot the clinic's appointment clipboard, I sign us up.

Winter Walker, a buoyant, statuesque 26-year-old African American woman, is in charge. While we wait for our turn, Walker consults with two white parents, firmly explaining to their wiggling young African American daughter that she needs to sit absolutely still if she wants to have her hair done. The parents look dazed as their daughter complies, but when Walker starts to comb, the girl jumps up because it hurts too much. Smoothly, Walker talks her into submission while she moisturizes the hair and then switches to a gentle brushing.

Later Walker tells me, "There are a few parents here who did their kids' hair themselves and it looks as good as in a salon. Moms and dads took classes and learned to do hair. I was totally shocked! But some white parents are not able to maintain the hairstyles of their kids. In a black family, a mother teaches her child to become disciplined to sit through getting her hair done because it's part of the process of having hair on her head. A lot of kids with white parents can get up and do whatever they want. And then they walk out the door looking like they have poor hygiene."

This is Walker's first time at Pact camp and all the intimate contact with transracial adoption is kind of a shock. "At first I wasn't sure if it was good or bad, but I didn't agree with it. It didn't seem right to me. But after being in the experience it's like, 'Wow, there are so many layers to this.' It opened some doors for me of things to think about. If these white people can teach their children that they don't have white privilege like their parents then I'm all cool with it."

People question the system of adoption all the time and the hard, complex truth is that it is both better and worse for the children who are adopted. Adoption is a wonderful, happy event, but it is also a painful experience that encompasses enormous loss – transracial adoption even more so. By addressing this paradox when Vaishali is still so innocent, before the dreaded teens are upon us, I'm hoping to get us armored. At the very least, I'd like to learn a couple of coping strategies that do not include cocktails (mine) or buckets of tears (hers and mine).

This year is the camp's fifth and most anticipated incarnation and Vaishali and I are tenting it here for five days to learn how to be a happy, healthy, proud transracialized family. Transracialized is a concept articulated by Dr. Raible, who proposes that a person can become transracialized by loving, caring for, and becoming part of the native community of a person of another race and/or culture for an extended period of time. He believes that when a person becomes transracialized they can develop a more sophisticated appreciation of differences among people of color, transcend the myth of color-blindness, and gain a deeper understanding of race and discrimination in order to become an ally in the fight for racial justice. It's a tall order and it's not going to happen in five days. But just hearing about it gives me high hopes.

Much of Pact camp for the younger adoptees, or Littles, as they are affectionately called, is pretty much the standard fare of fun and games. But among the many thoughtful presentations, education on the mysterious ways of African American coiffure is making its formal debut this year. As well as the daily hair clinic, there is also a lecture presented by Pact staff member Lisa Marie Rollins with the title "Black Hair: Culture, Politics and Identity All Twisted On My Head." Indicating her fluffy, dyed-copper curls, Rollins tells us, "Over the years I've had the four hundred hairstyles to prove it." Bubbly and passionate, Rollins is an African American adopted by white parents, PhD candidate of ethnic studies at the University of California at Berkeley, founder of the support network AFAAD (Adopted and Fostered Adults of the African Diaspora), and writer/performer of the one-woman show "Ungrateful Daughter," a title that is enough to make any adoptive parent both cringe and buy a front-row seat.

Clicking through a slide show of images of African American hair, Rollins tells her rapt white audience that African hair has always had specific political and cultural meaning. "The braids on black people's heads in pre-colonial Africa were like very detailed ID cards. They showed everything from tribal affiliations to how much wealth a person had," she says. Then came slavery and with the wave of a blade, the slaves' hair – and identities – were obliterated. Even though the hair grew back, all throughout slavery people were not allowed to braid, decorate or lock their hair. Hair has always represented power, and for black slaves it meant their very life; those with straight, more white-looking hair worked within the shelter of the house, and those with more African-looking hair were doomed to backbreaking work in the field.

Throughout her lecture, Rollins is jovial and chatty, never condescending, but the mood in the room is layered. This is no ordinary history lesson; every point is a finger jabbing our hearts. We look with queasy sympathy at slides of a cute pre-pubescent Rollins sporting stiff, artificial white-girl hairdos as she asks us to understand that hair issues are not just something black people used to struggle with many years ago. "I grew up in all-white surroundings in the 70s and 80s," she says. "All around me were white little girls with long flowing hair. I was told I was ugly, that my hair was ugly and no one would ever like me because I looked funny. It was an extraordinarily painful time for me."

I think of the swinging rainbow of beads in the hair of Vaishali's little camp friends as Rollins explains that black slaves secretly braided maps of escape routes to freedom in their hair.

Parents look serious as they learn that natural hairstyles like the afro were a protest of white beauty ideals that positioned black men and women as ugly, untidy and uncontrolled. We learn that the African American hair salon has always been a lively social place where news and gossip are disseminated and I make a note to ask my Indian friends back home about where Indians go to get their hair done. But I also know that I'm looking for a lot more than just a place to do hair. The room grows quieter as Rollins speaks about the bond created between mother and child through the intimacy of long hours spent weaving row upon row of tiny, tight, scalp-pulling braids.

"Parents today need to understand that when they send their black children out into the world those children are not only judged by their skin," Rollins continues. "In some relaxed settings, like the San Francisco Bay Area, it's perfectly acceptable for some white children to walk around looking like they just got out of bed. But it's just not the same for black children. They will carry with them all of the negative assumptions of blackness if they are unkempt. People will assume they are impoverished or have no one to care for them."

Throughout the week, we have been encouraged not to impose only the culture of the parents on the culture of the children. I tell Pact staffer Julie Randolph a story I heard about a white couple who refuse to properly care for the hair of their African American daughter because, as they put it, "We don't care what's on her head, we care what's in her head." Randolph is an African American and adoptive parent of two African American boys, so I'm curious to hear her response. "I don't understand why the two things have to be mutually exclusive. Plenty of African American families manage to groom their children's hair and educate them," she tells me. "When this child gets to be a teenager she will find a whole part of her culture that her parents have dismissed and she will find it without them. That's kind of sad." Randolph continues, "The white parents of children of color need to understand what life their child is going to be living when they are not with their white parents. It's not something you can know as a parent unless you can be an active member of your child's cultural community."

In all honesty, everything I learned at Pact camp has made me nervous. But I recognize that it's a good nervous, the kind where I can feel deep-seated assumptions start to crumble and a certain inner narrowness begin to expand. Some of what I'm hearing is hard to hear, but it's no harder to hear than when some clueless stranger back home comes up to me and says, "Oh, you're so wonderful; what a great thing you have done, saving this poor child from a terrible life; she is so lucky." My response to that has always been, "No. I am the lucky one. All parents are lucky." All of us white parents of children of color need to develop antennae to find ways for our kids to have entree back into their cultural communities. I don't want Vaishali to lose that just because she was adopted by me.

Lisa Lerner is the author of the novel JUST LIKE BEAUTY. She lives with her family in Brooklyn, New York.