

Article

Dreaming for Our Daughters: Un/Learning Monoracialism on Our Journey of Multiracial Motherhood

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Abstract: How is monoracialism un/learned from generation to generation? In this duoethnography, the co-authors engage in reflexive letter writing to purposefully connect their personal relationships with Ariel's daughter, Azalea, to their academic ideas as poststructural scholars. In doing so, they practice letting go of inherited dichotomies (such as mother versus scholar), lean into expansive ontoepistemological possibilities informed by their both/and positionalities as mama-scholar and auntie-scholar, in order to dream of expansive, healing, and liberatory futures that can emerge from connecting across difference, listening with raw openness, and pursuing radical interrelatedness.

Keywords: duoethnography; monoracialism; motherhood; multiracial; poststructural

1. Introduction

Ariel: Azalea—my bright and curious, three-year-old daughter—is my greatest teacher. This has been true since before she was born. In ways that I never expected or imagined prior to becoming a parent, my daughter has revealed to me the limits of my own socialization; for example, the prevalence with which I privilege preference and choice. Anytime I ask Azalea if she prefers blueberries or raspberries, or to choose if her favorite color today is pink or black, she cheerfully replies, “both!” In doing so, she reminds me that there can be abundant joy in resisting the frameworks we have inherited, such as the seemingly simple idea that children should have favorites. Furthermore, she causes me to critically reflect upon my often unconscious tendency to default to habitually dichotomous ways of thinking and being. Perhaps most poignant, and what serves as the impetus for this project, are the moments when I have asked Azalea if she looks more like mommy or daddy.

As an Asian American transracial adoptee raised by White parents, this question is rooted in my own insecurities and racial isolation. Growing up, I did not have access to racial mirrors. Even though I phenotypically present as monoracially Asian, my racialized experience as a transracial adoptee meant I struggled with never feeling Asian enough or White enough (Ashlee and Quayle 2020). The Muppets’ song “One of These Things is Not Like the Others” felt like the number one single on my childhood soundtrack. As an adoptee who is not in reunion with my birth/first family, Azalea is my first known biological relative. As such, I have been slightly obsessed with our physical resemblance since before she was born. I have never seen my nose or eyes reflected in anyone else; and in truth, I have ached for this biological resemblance and kinship for much of my life. And, as the mother of a multiracial child, I am learning that this desire to see myself racially reflected in Azalea may be prioritizing my desires (as a transracial adoptee who regularly failed to meet others’ expectations of what family could and should look like) over my daughter’s best interests.

With time, introspection, and learning from being in intentional and reflective community with Lisa, my co-author and a multiracial Filipina and White Woman of Color, I



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have come to realize that the very premise of asking Azaelea if she looks more like mommy or daddy is a multiracial microaggression (Johnston and Nadal 2010). One that has the potential to cause great harm. Asking Azaelea to conceive of herself in parts, rather than regarding her for the whole, beautiful, complex, person that she is passes my racial pain onto her and future generations, which may problematically perpetuate hegemonic narratives of racial authenticity. Thus, as the title of this piece indicates, multiracial motherhood has been for me, a journey of un/learning monoracialism, which Johnston-Guerrero and Renn (2016) define as the social beliefs and organizational systems that “assume and prefer that individuals are one race only” (p. 140).

Lisa: As a multiracial Woman of Color, I am incredibly grateful for the time I get to spend with both Aerial and Azaelea. As a master’s student, Aerial served as a mentor, friend, and colleague who inspired reflection about my liminal racial identity that transgresses the rigidity and boundaries of social identity categories. In many ways, Aerial made me feel *seen*. Over the years, I have gotten to know Aerial as a scholar, friend, and now a mother to Azaelea. She has pushed my thinking and helped me to see the world in different ways, often asking questions that probe me to imagine the world beyond how it exists. As my relationship has developed with Aerial, I have also been able to forge a relationship with Azaelea as her “Auntie Lisa”. When I am in a room with Azaelea, my heart lights up and she is the person I want to spend time with. When I reflect upon my experience as a multiracial child, there is a part of me that wishes I could have had someone to look up to or to process how I was feeling about my multiracial identity. Because of this, it is my hope to forge this kind of relationship with Azaelea. She serves as an embodied representation of the multiracial future. She is the reason I write, and she makes me hopeful for a world where multiracial people feel like we belong. Azaelea is absolutely incredible, inquisitive, brilliant, and curious. As a three-year-old, she has expanded my thinking and revealed to me how I often see things through a binary lens.

It is Azaelea’s commentary about movies, questions she poses about the world around her, and her way of being that inspire me to reflect upon how I perpetuate monoracialism myself as a mixed person. For example, I have been socialized to prefer distinct racial categories and because I cannot imagine a clear alternative, I have a fear of pushing boundaries in my scholarship and thinking. Azaelea’s authentic and fearless questioning and being encourages me to face this fear and reflect upon how I must also continue to unlearn monoracialism.

2. Theoretical Framework

This project is an exercise in extending our paradigmatic perspective to life beyond the academic arena, viewing our journey of multiracial motherhood as an integral part of our academic identities rather than apart from them. Inspired and informed by Women of Color academic-elders and auntie-scholars (Neosh 2021) such as Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) and Kakali Bhattacharya (2020), we blend the borders of who we are with how we approach this research. We trust and follow our ontoepistemological curiosities, guided by an internal compass of interconnectivity (Keating 2013) and the understanding that our ways of knowing and being are not discrete (Barad 2007). As mama and future mama, professor and emerging academic, we endeavor to un/learn monoracialism on our journey of multiracial motherhood to dream of expansive and empowering possibilities for our current and future multiracial daughters. We frame this project of un/learning genealogical narratives of monoracialism—simultaneously a maternal and scholarly endeavor—in Keating’s (2013) theory of interconnectivity as a purposeful (and poststructural) approach to parenting and framework for multiracial motherhood.

By tracing the lineage and legacy of un/learning monoracialism in our journey of multiracial motherhood, we add our voices to mama-scholars who have come before us (Matais 2016; Matais and Nishi 2018; Nishi 2018). Adding to the cannon of ParentCrit, we hope to foster a more racially just and inclusive future for our multiracial children. We situate this project as a “mode of intellectual and spiritual travel, soulwork, epistemolog-

ically rooted in love, occurring at the intersection of personal and professional theories, research, and practices that move toward justice” (Howard et al. 2020, p. 2). We reflect, talk, think, and dream together of expansive, healing, and liberatory possibilities that can emerge from connecting across difference, listening with raw openness, and pursuing radical interrelatedness (Keating 2013).

Our shared love for Azaelea (Ariel’s daughter and the flower girl in “Auntie Lisa’s” wedding) is one connection across our differences. Additionally, our shared experiences with racial liminality as a transracial adoptee and multiracial person, respectively, inform our mutual commitment to un/learning monoracialism as we have both experienced firsthand the pain and oppression it inflicts. While we acknowledge that power plays out differently in transracial adoption and multiracial kinship (Ashlee and Combs 2022), we choose to listen to each other with raw openness. Our openness to be changed by what we hear is the cornerstone of our shared journey of multiracial motherhood. Finally, we practice radical interrelatedness by recognizing that un/learning monoracialism is healing and essential for our own liberation and in order to dream of a liberatory future for Azaelea as an embodiment of future multiracial generations.

3. Methodology

In dreaming for our daughters, we draw upon duoethnographic methods (Norris and Sawyer 2012) to reflect upon our learned lineage of monoracialism and to explore generational trajectories of racial liminality through parenting and relational epistemology. Duoethnography is an extension of autoethnographic methodologies which focus on individual experiences to reveal larger themes about cultural and social aspects of the world, thus blurring the lines between personal and cultural (Bochner and Ellis 2002). We argue that autoethnographic methods are uniquely aligned with poststructuralism because of this liminal blurring of the personal and cultural and expanding beyond traditional linearity associated with research methods. Our work demonstrates poststructural congruency (aligning research design decisions with poststructural paradigms) because we push methodological boundaries by centering our own narratives to highlight expansive epistemologies (Agger 1991). Specifically, Norris and Sawyer (2012) define duoethnography as “a collaborative research methodology in which two or more researchers of difference juxtapose their life [herstories] to provide multiple understandings of the world” (p. 9). As co-researchers and co-authors, we approached this project from different social locations as a transracial adoptee mama-scholar and as a multiracial auntie-scholar to illustrate multiple perspectives on un/learning monoracialism and dream for our (current and future) multiracial daughters.

Our methodological process was fluid, intentionally organic, and iterative in nature. Our guiding research questions were: (1) How do generations un/learn monoracialism? and (2) How is racial liminality (as a poststructural de/re/construction of racial identity) passed on (consciously and organically) from mother to daughter? While this is our first collaborative project exploring poststructural possibilities in parenting, this is not our first time critically reflecting together on the implications of our liminal racialized experiences. Several of our past projects (Ashlee and Combs 2022; Combs and Ashlee 2020) have explored our similar and shared experiences of not measuring up to monoracist expectations.

In brainstorming how to undertake this project, we decided to intentionally center hope and love. Rather than start (again) with chronicling and reflecting upon the many ways in which we have been harmed by monoracialism, we chose to imagine forward, articulating our hopes and dreams for Azaelea as an embodiment of future multiracial generations. We found ourselves, and our methodological approach to this project, influenced by caregiver-scholars who engaged in letter writing and reflexive parenting such as Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) and Maya Angelou (2008). In both *Between the World and Me* (Coates 2015) and *Letter to My Daughter* (Angelou 2008), the authors utilized letters as mechanisms to explore insights about race and parenting and imagine a world for future

generations. Informed by these works, we individually wrote letters to Azaelea about race, offering our dreams for her as an embodiment of future multiracial generations.

We then read our letters aloud to each other and recorded our processing conversation. We concluded our conversation by engaging in an initial, informal analysis of our letters; identifying key ideas and insights that most embodied our dreams for future multiracial generations. Several days later, using Zoom's automatic transcription function, we individually read through the transcript of our recorded conversation. We left comments on resonant passages, allowing for threshold insights (Wall 2006) to emerge. In alignment with poststructural ways of knowing and pushing beyond linear methodological approaches, we did not engage in rigid or systematic coding. Rather, we individually immersed ourselves in the data and employed a dialogical process informed by duoethnographic methods (Norris and Sawyer 2012). This iterative and organic approach to data analysis gave rise to an unstructured and incisive conversation about our shared insights.

Norris and Sawyer (2012) assert that trust and vulnerability are two key tenets of duoethnographic inquiry. As co-researchers, we demonstrated trust and vulnerability by sharing our unfiltered hopes for Azaelea (and future multiracial generations) and by naming some of our own insecurities in the research process. Through analytic dialogic moments (Norris and Sawyer 2012) and sharing of ourselves by recalling our own experiences navigating monoracialism, we uncovered insights related to multiracial motherhood and expansive possibilities for future multiracial generations. We extend this ethic of trust and vulnerability to our readers by sharing our letters to Azaelea in their entirety.

My dearest Azaelea,

For some time now you have been thinking beyond binaries. Anytime I ask you to choose a favorite color, candy, or toy (which much to my chagrin, seems to be something I ask of you quite often; to choose one thing over another) you gaze up at me, eyes full of joy and cheerfully reply, 'both!' There is no doubt or hesitation in your voice. Only a reverberant simplicity and delight. Every time this exchange plays out between us, I am humbled and amazed by your response. I find it stunningly beautiful that you (my littlest love at just three-years-old) seem to grasp the complexity and beauty of a both/and philosophy so intuitively; something that took me over thirty years to do.

As I think about what the future might hold, I am filled with dreams for you, my darling daughter. I dream of a world in which you are free to experience and express the joy and beauty of being both. I dream of a world in which you have a trusted community with whom you can process the complexities of living beyond others' expectations. I dream of a world in which you are regularly reminded and affirmed that you are enough; exactly as you are. I dream of a world in which you are holistically recognized and represented; rather than fragmented (in census categories or storybooks). I dream of a future in which you forge meaningful connections with others who are like you (not necessarily the same as you, but with those who may have similar liminal experiences as you, like with Auntie Lisa) and with whom you can share and encourage each other through interconnected and transgressive kinship. I dream of a future in which you feel empowered—and supported, by me, daddy, and a host of other anchors in your life—to live beyond the limited and limiting categories so often prescribed to confine and foreclose connections, post-oppositionally pursuing expansive possibilities of knowing, being, and relating that are healing and liberatory. I dream of a future in which your embodiment of both/and—which may be rooted in your multiraciality—extends to many other aspects of life and is appreciated as the gift of brilliance it is (not only for those who may experience liminality in their own identities, but also for how identity is conceptualized, performed, and understood broadly).

When I was your age, as a Child of Color (specifically, a transracial, transnational, Korean American adoptee; although I did not have that language at the time) raised by two White adoptive parents, I often felt alone and isolated in my racial identity. As you know, Nanna and Grampa loved me deeply, and yet as products of their own socialization growing up in rural, predominantly White communities in the 1950s and 1960s, they were ill-equipped to help me navigate the complexities of race as a Person of Color who embodied racial liminality. While we occasionally acknowledged my Korean ancestry, we did not discuss the difference between ethnicity and race. Growing up we did not talk about systemic racism as an inherited system of power that shapes daily life and how society

is structured. We did not talk about colorblindness as an aspirational ideology, which often fails to acknowledge the racial realities of People of Color.

As a child, I did not know any different or better. However, now as I contemplate my responsibility as your mother, I realize (with the benefit of hindsight) the cost of not having candid conversations about race growing up. I did not have an inheritance of knowledge to draw upon when it came to navigating racial microaggressions. I did not have language to describe or make meaning of my racialized experience. I share this because I hope that I can offer something different for you. I know that while we share some racialized experiences (as Women of Color with liminal racialized identities); being a monoracial, transracial adoptee is not the same as being multiracial. My perspective is informed by my positionality, and as such I will likely make mistakes and missteps along the way. However, I also commit to being purposeful in my parenting; to cultivating relationships with multiracial people so you have aunts and elders to process your multiraciality with if you so wish, to advocating for representative media (prioritizing images and characters that reflect your multiraciality), and to remaining humble in how I view the world; recognizing the limits of my understanding and the expansiveness of yours.

I love you fiercely and unconditionally,
Mommy

Dear Azalea,

I hope that you continue to dream big and feel empowered within your multiplicities. I am writing this letter right after your third birthday and at the start of the new year, 2022. I mention these details because this year I am getting married and you will be a flower girl on my special day. I couldn't imagine a more incredible young person to share this experience with. Whenever I think about you, I think of the word incredible. What I hope for you is that you continue to shine bright even in a world that may try to dim this light.

This reflection makes me think about an experience I had at a wedding a few years ago, where similar to you the flower girl was a young mixed Asian Girl of Color named Ophelia. That night I imagined and even whispered manifestations of hope and love for Ophelia as she traversed a monoracial world. I wanted her to know she was enough, and I wanted her to know she could be both. Whenever I see a multiracial child, I think of these Ophelia manifestations. This is what I dream for you, Zae. I dream of a world where you feel empowered to exist as all of who you are, a world that does not exhaust you with choices, and a place where your worldview is valued. Before I continue, I want you to know that you embody who I write for. You are the reason I believe in this work. You have pushed me to think beyond what currently exists.

My own monoracial mother did the best with what she had. Through learning and unlearning, I give her grace. She created everything from nothing to provide me with opportunities and my life. She taught me to fight hard, nuance resiliency, and that love can manifest in the most subtle ways. She was not prepared to discuss multiraciality with her mixed race daughter, and that's okay. I always imagine what it would have looked like to have these intentional conversations with my mom or with both of my parents. It excites me that you will have these opportunities.

I read a book this summer about inspiring young girl activists. It made me think that as a young girl I metaphorically stood in a hinge position or in a diagonal line. In other words, I was an imaginative thinker and I thought in waves rather than linearities. In school each year as I got older, I started to stand straighter. My diagonal became a straight line as my toe moved an inch what the world viewed as normality. I wanted to exist beyond this, but I lost it. I lost my creativity and a part of who I was. As a graduate student, I've spent so much time finding the diagonal and unlearning what I spent years learning. I say this because I believe it is our multiplicities that allow us to dream this way. Don't lose this, Zae. Continue to push the boundaries. I have watched you change minds and push thinking as a three-year-old. I am incredibly excited to watch you change the world. I will be in the front row cheering you on.

Inspired by a multiracial scholar, I draw upon Maria Root's (2003) Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People to end my letter to you with affirmations. I want you to know you are enough. You are both. Your ideas matter. You provide a perspective that is needed. You don't have to choose, but you can if you want. Dream big. Stay expansive. Be who you are. Love who you are. You are loved.

*With Love,
Auntie Lisa*

4. Emerging Insights

We wrote these letters not only to give breath and life to the hopes and dreams we hold for Azaelea (and all future multiracial generations) but also to make sense of our journey of un/learning monoracialism as current and future multiracial mothers. By purposefully connecting our personal relationships with Azaelea to our academic ideas as poststructural scholars, we practice letting go of inherited dichotomies (such as mother versus scholar) and lean into expansive ontoepistemological possibilities informed by our both/and positionalities as mama-scholar and auntie-scholar. We share emerging insights from our on-going process of becoming with readers, as parents and caregivers of multiracial children and as race scholars and educators seeking to un/learn monoracialism on our journey of multiracial motherhood.

4.1. Encouraging Expansive Ways of Thinking and Knowing

Throughout our dialogic reflections, we explored the idea that monoracialism as a social force may be reflective of a broader societal condition (a learned—and taught—construction of power) that preferences discrete singularity and privileges categorization. For example, Aerial admitted:

Much to my chagrin, this is something I ask of Azaelea quite often; to choose one thing or another. It's not even conscious. We will just be sitting by the fire reading a book together and then I'll ask her, "Do you like bunnies or monkeys more?" and she'll think about it for a second, and then her eyes will light up and she'll say, "both!" It's like, why did I feel the need to ask that question in the first place?

While choosing favorite animal characters from a children's book may initially seem like a benign interaction, Aerial worried about the impact her unconscious tendency to default to structuralist framing may have on Azaelea's growth and flourishing. Especially as Azaelea may find that the structures she has inherited (such as the notion that people should be one race, as defined and imposed by monoracialism) may not be reflective of her lived experience as a multiracial person and, in fact, may be problematic and oppressive.

Drawing from her own experience as a multiracial person, Lisa shared:

Being a multiracial young Girl of Color allowed me to see the world [expansively]. And then, what made me sad was that I feel like my whole life, I spent not being that way anymore, even though that [expansiveness] was an innate part of who I was.

Lisa reflected upon the ways in which her formal education and schooling contributed to her own existential dissonance as a multiracial young person. Embodying the brilliance of her both/and positionality, Lisa simultaneously extended grace to educators (recognizing that they/we too exist within inherited structure) and described the potentially detrimental impact of teaching multiracial young people linearity and categorical thinking. Discussing Bloom's Taxonomy—which underscores cognitive processes such as defining, classifying, and organizing knowledge—on the development of her worldview, Lisa noted:

When you think in multiplicities, like you may already be evaluating, imagining, and creating but like educators want us to be defining, understanding, recollecting . . . regurgitating because that's the basics, like the starting blocks of education. But I just think it was hard for someone [like me] with a liminal identity.

This critical reflection on schooling and early-life socialization in which Lisa learned categorical and structuralist thinking spurred Aerial to consider how "even the way in which [I] think about the world, think about [Azaelea], think about choices, think about preferences . . . it's not expansive and doesn't allow for multiplicity." As a monoracial mother journeying to un/learn monoracialism, this dialogic exchange enabled Aerial to recognize that

I need to check myself . . . and [consider] what can I do to contribute to a world where she [Azaelea] will feel more and more empowered and emboldened to reject the [limiting and limited] parameters of the options presented to her. Not just at home with mom and dad, but throughout life. And maybe where that burden doesn't even fall on her all the time, but where like the framing and the possibilities are like you [Lisa] said more multiplicitous.

Lisa concurred, "that's my hope, that she [Azaelea] doesn't lose that . . . that even if the world doesn't want her to be that way [liminal and expansive], I just hope she stays that way. The world needs it, y'know?" In our dreaming for Azaelea (as an embodiment of multiracial futures) and endeavoring to un/learn monoracialism, we discovered the importance of encouraging a confidence in multiplicity that may help empower our current and future multiracial daughters to exist, dream, and think beyond the rigidity of the systems and structures they have inherited.

4.2. Examining Power in the Complexity of Racial Choice

The notion of racial choice resurfaced multiple times throughout our dialogic conversations. In her letter to Azaelea, Lisa wrote, "Zae. I dream of a world where you feel empowered to exist as all of who you are, a world that does not exhaust you with choices". For Lisa, the complexity of choice as a multiracial person stems in large part from racial peer policing, which painfully reinforces essentialized notions of race and suggests certain preferences and behaviors (i.e., ordering a pumpkin spice latte) are only associated with specific racial groups (as evidenced by cavalier comments such as "that's your White side"). The racialization of her everyday choices was particularly vexing and complex for Lisa against the backdrop of monoracialism, which meant these ascribed associations failed to recognize her multiraciality. According to Lisa, "the fear of what someone might think if I eat this certain thing, or if I wear this certain outfit, or if I do this certain action . . . is frustrating and really exhausting".

The power of racial choice played out differently for Aerial as a transracial adoptee, who reflected:

I have long felt like my racial choices are invalidated, like there are times I want to say that I identify more with whiteness than Asianness, but society and others constantly mirror back to me, 'No, that's impossible, you're clearly Asian.'

Aerial phenotypically presents as monoracial Asian; however, her experience as a transracial adoptee has given rise to a transgressive, borderland racialized identity (Ashlee 2019). This has resulted in a complicated—even paradoxical—dynamic whereby she both benefits from and is rendered invisible by monoracialism.

Although our experiences navigating the complexity of racial choice differ notably given our respective positionalities, we mutually found the examination of racial choice to be laden with opportunities for poststructural interrogations of how power plays out in un/learning monoracialism. For example, Lisa's exhaustion with the implications of everyday choices (weighing and worrying about how individual lifestyle decisions may be measured by others' limited projections of what it means to be Asian or mixed-race) highlights the question of who gets to decide what constitutes acting like (or performing) a certain race. Meanwhile, the microinvalidations Aerial encountered (repeatedly being told she does not have choice in her racial liminality) invite the question of whether race (as a social construct undergirded by monoracialism) is ascribed (defined by others), avowed (defined by self), or a complex mix of both (Ashlee 2019).

5. Conclusions

Dreaming for our daughters is a project of both relational and professional significance. This journey has been deeply personal and an intergenerational invitation to pursue purposeful (and poststructural) approaches to parenting as a framework for multiracial motherhood. Through this duoethnographic process, we discovered that we can work to un/learn monoracialism by encouraging expansive ways of thinking and knowing in our

multiracial daughters and by examining how power plays out in the complexity of racial choice. Both pursuits require relational and intellectual humility; recognizing that as much as we hope to teach our daughters about how to un/learn monoracialism, they in fact may have something to teach us.

As Aerial noted in the opening line of this paper, she and her husband often refer to Azaelea as “our greatest teacher.” This rendering of a child as someone with valuable insight to share, rather than characterized as an empty vessel for adult caregivers to fill with our knowledge or depicted as a blank canvas for us to paint our truths upon has been a powerful—and, we argue, poststructural—(re)framing of parenting. Perhaps in part because of ageism, it can be tempting to default to the (mis)perception that adults are wiser and more informed than children. We (as adults) are expected to teach them (as children) the skills and strategies needed to navigate the world because we have more experience with the world. And yet, perhaps exactly because of this dynamic—our whole lives have been enmeshed in inherited systems of power such as monoracialism—we may in all actuality be more likely to accept and replicate rather than resist or (re)imagine contemporary manifestations of power that shape our everyday lives.

Taking a poststructural approach to how we parent may enable us to recognize and reconfigure the limited and limiting nature of our socialization, as evidenced by our preference and priority for discrete, singular choices in seemingly mundane topics such as asking Azaelea her favorite color, candy, or toy. Rather than rejecting her response of “both!” as naive or childish, a poststructural lens to parenting invites us to consider the brilliance and boldness of her expansive perspective. As we dream of a world in which Azaelea (and other multiracial daughters) feel empowered and emboldened in their multiplicity—exploring and enacting their racial liminality—we recognize that this journey must begin with our own un/learning of monoracialism.

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