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Raising Katie

What adopting a white girl taught a black family about race in the Obama era.

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Newsweek Web Exclusive

Several pairs of eyes follow the girl as she pedals around the playground in an affluent suburb of Baltimore. But it isn't the redheaded fourth grader who seems to have moms and dads of the jungle gym nervous on this recent Saturday morning. It's the African-American man—six feet tall, bearded and wearing a gray hooded sweatshirt—watching the girl's every move. Approaching from behind, he grabs the back of her bicycle seat as she wobbles to a stop. "Nice riding," he says, as the fair-skinned girl turns to him, beaming. "Thanks, Daddy," she replies. The onlookers are clearly flummoxed.

As a black father and adopted white daughter, Mark Riding and Katie O'Dea-Smith are a sight at best surprising, and at worst so perplexing that people feel compelled to respond. Like the time at a Pocono Mountains flea market when Riding scolded Katie, attracting so many sharp glares that he and his wife, Terri, 37, and also African-American, thought "we might be lynched." And the time when well-intentioned shoppers followed Mark and Katie out of the mall to make sure she wasn't being kidnapped. Or when would-be heroes come up to Katie in the cereal aisle and ask, "Are you OK?"—even though Terri is standing right there.

Is it racism? The Ridings tend to think so, and it's hard to blame them. To shadow them for a day, as I recently did, is to feel the unease, notice the negative attention and realize that the same note of fear isn't in the air when they attend to their two biological children, who are 2 and 5 years old. It's fashionable to say that the election of Barack Obama has brought the dawn of a post-racial America. In the past few months alone, *The Atlantic Monthly* has declared "the end of white America," *The Washington Post* has profiled the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's struggle for relevance in a changing world, and National Public Radio has led discussions questioning the necessity of the annual Black History Month. Perhaps not surprising, most white and black Americans no longer cite racism as a major social problem, according to recent polls.

But the Ridings' experience runs counter to these popular notions of harmony. And adoption between races is particularly fraught. So-called transracial adoptions have surged since 1994, when the Multiethnic Placement Act reversed decades of outright racial matching by banning discrimination against adoptive families on the basis of race. But the growth has been all one-sided. The number of white families adopting outside their race is growing and is now in the thousands, while cases like Katie's—of a black family adopting a nonblack child—remain frozen at near zero.

Decades after the racial integration of offices, buses and water fountains, persistent double standards mean that African-American parents are still largely viewed with unease as caretakers of any children other than their own—or those they are paid to look after. As Yale historian Matthew Frye Jacobson has asked: "Why is it that in the United States, a white woman can have black children but a black woman cannot have white children?"

That question hit home for the Ridings in 2003, when Terri's mother, Phyllis Smith, agreed to take in Katie, then 3, on a temporary basis. A retired social worker, Phyllis had long been giving needy children a home—and Katie was one of the hardest cases. The child of a local prostitute, her toddler tantrums were so disturbing that foster families simply refused to keep her. Twelve homes later, Katie was still being passed around. Phyllis was in many ways an unlikely savior. The former president of the Baltimore chapter of the National Association of Black Social Workers, she joined her colleagues in condemning the adoption of black children by white families as "cultural genocide"—a position she still holds in theory, if not in practice. She couldn't say no to the "charming, energetic" girl who ended up on her front doorstep.

Last November, after a grueling adoption process—"[adoption officials] pushed the envelope on every issue," says Mark—little Irish-Catholic Katie O'Dea, as pale as a communion wafer, became Katie O'Dea-Smith: a formally adopted member of the African-American Riding-Smith family. (Phyllis is her legal guardian, but Mark and Terri were also vetted as legal surrogates for Phyllis.)

To be sure, it's an unconventional arrangement. Katie spends weekdays with Phyllis, her legal guardian. But Mark and Terri, who live around the corner, are her de facto parents, too. They help out during the week, and welcome Katie over on weekends and holidays. As for titles: Katie calls Phyllis "Mommy" and Terri "Sister," since technically it's true. Mark has always been "Daddy" or "Mark."

"Let me just put it out there," says Mark, a 38-year-old private-school admissions director with an appealing blend of megaphone voice and fearless opinion, especially when it comes to his family. "I've never felt more self-consciously black than while holding our little white girl's hand in public." He used to write off the negative attention as innocent curiosity. But after a half-decade of rude comments and revealing faux pas—like the time his school's guidance counselor called Katie a "foster child" in her presence—he now fights the ignorance with a question of his own: why didn't a white family step up to take Katie?

Riding's challenge hints at a persistent social problem. "No country in the world has made more progress toward combating overt racism than [the United States]," says David Schneider, a Rice University psychologist and the author of "The Psychology of Stereotyping." "But the most popular stereotype of black people is still that they're violent. And for a lot of people, not even racist people, the sight of a white child with a black parent just sets off alarm signals."

Part of the reason for the adoptive imbalance comes down to numbers, and the fact that people tend to want children of their own race. African-Americans represent almost one third of the 510,000 children in foster care, so black parents have a relatively high chance of ending up with a same-race child. (Not so for would-be adoptive white parents who prefer the rarest thing of all in the foster-care system: a healthy white baby.) But the dearth of black families with nonblack children also has painful historical roots. Economic hardship and centuries of poisonous belief in the so-called civilizing effects of white culture upon other races have familiarized Americans with the concept of white stewardship of other ethnicities, rather than the reverse.

The result is not only discomfort among whites at the thought of nonwhites raising their offspring; African-Americans can also be wary when one of their own is a parent to a child outside their race. Just ask Dallas Cowboys All-Pro linebacker DeMarcus Ware and his wife, Taniqua, who faced a barrage of criticism after adopting a nonblack baby last February. When The New York Times sports page ran a photo of the shirtless new father with what appeared to be a white baby in his arms (and didn't mention race in the accompanying story), it sent a slow shock wave through the African-American community, pitting supporters who celebrated the couple's joy after three painful miscarriages against critics who branded the Wares "self-race-hating individuals" for ignoring the disproportionate number of blacks in foster care. The baby, now their daughter, Marley, is in fact Hispanic. "Do you mean to tell me that the Wares couldn't have found a little black baby to adopt?" snarled one blogger on the Daily Voice, an online African-American newspaper.

For the relatively few black families that do adopt non-African-American children, and the adoptive children themselves, the experience can be confusing. "I hadn't realized how often we talked about white people at home," says Mark. "I hadn't realized that dinnertime stories were often told with reference to the race of the players, or that I often used racial stereotypes, as in the news only cares about some missing spring-break girl because she is blonde."

Katie, too, has sometimes struggled with her unusual situation, and how outsiders perceive it. When she's not drawing, swimming or pining after teen heartthrob Zac Efron, she's often dealing with normal kid teasing with a nasty edge. "They'll ignore me or yell at me because I have a black family," she says. Most of her friends are black, although her school is primarily white. And Terri has noticed something else: Katie is uncomfortable identifying people by their race.

Is she racially confused? Should her parents be worried? Opinions vary in the larger debate about whether race is a legitimate consideration in adoption. At present, agencies that receive public funding are forbidden from taking race into account when screening potential parents. They are also banned from asking parents to reflect on their readiness to deal with race-related issues, or from requiring them to undergo sensitivity training. But a well-meaning policy intended to ensure colorblindness appears to be backfiring. According to

a study published last year by the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, transracial parents are often ill equipped to raise children who are themselves unprepared for the world's racial realities.

Now lawmakers may rejoin the charged race-adoption debate. Later this year the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, an independent federal think tank, is expected to publish a summary of expert testimony on adoption law—much of which will ask Congress to reinstate race as a salient consideration in all cases. The testimony, from the Evan B. Donaldson institute and others, will also suggest initiatives currently banned or poorly executed under existing policies, including racial training for parents and intensifying efforts to recruit more black adoptive families.

Would such measures be a step back for Obama's post-racial America? It's hard to tell. The Ridings, for their part, are taking Katie's racial training into their own hands. They send her to a mixed-race school, and mixed-race summer camps, celebrate St. Patrick's Day with gusto and buy Irish knickknacks, like a "Kiss Me I'm Irish" T shirt and a mug with Katie's O'Dea family crest emblazoned on it. But they worry it won't be enough. "All else being equal, I think she should be with people who look like her," says Mark. "It's not fair that she's got to grow up feeling different when she's going to feel different anyway. She wears glasses, her voice is a bit squeaky, and on top of that she has to deal with the fact that her mother is 70 and black."

But even if Katie feels different now, the Riding-Smiths have given her both a stable home and a familiarity with two ethnic worlds that will surely serve her well as she grows up in a country that is increasingly blended. And it may be that hers will be the first truly post-racial generation.

URL: <http://www.newsweek.com/07-24-09>



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