

SENDING BLACK BABIES NORTH
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Gabriel Melcombe, left, with his mentor in Vancouver, B.C.

American families often adopt babies from abroad, but frequently American birth mothers choose to place their infants with Canadian families.

SENDING BLACK BABIES NORTH

Summary: While U.S. couples spend tens of thousands to adopt children from abroad, more and more U.S. birth mothers choose to place their infants with Canadian families. Issues of race, money and culture raise questions about...

In every way, 11-year-old Gabriel Melcombe seems like a typical adolescent. He wears his hair in an impressive thatch and favors baggy jeans. He listens to hip-hop music. And, like others his age, he is struggling to carve out his identity.

But that search is made complicated by the fact that he is black, being raised by an adoptive white Canadian mother in this city founded by British fur traders.

Gabriel, with his soft brown eyes and ready smile, is the human face of international adoption -- and of a free market reality. At a time when the Western search for children stretches from China and Guatemala to Kazakhstan, Gabriel's birthplace may strike many as surprising: It is Philadelphia.

Americans pay as much as \$35,000 to adopt white or Chinese infants. But many African American children like Gabriel have difficulty finding permanent U.S. families at any price. Since the early 1990s, several hundred have found homes -- with white parents -- in Canada.

The irony of one of the world's wealthiest nations exporting its own children has not gone unnoticed. For many, it raises questions about identity, race and the tangled legacy of American slavery.

Margaret Fleming, director of a Chicago agency called Adoption-Link that specializes in African American adoptions, has placed 70 black children with white Canadians since 1993. "There is no shortage of American families willing to adopt," she said. "There is a shortage of American families willing to adopt these kids."

There is an "adoption hierarchy," Fleming said, that is impossible to overlook. "Blond, blue-eyed girls are at the top and African American boys are at the bottom," said Fleming, who is the white mother to five adopted African American children.

And yet, it is more complicated than just that. Often it is the African American birth mothers who are deciding to send their children to grow up in Canada, the last stop on the historic Underground Railroad, and where the black population numbers 2 percent.

Indeed, the majority of the Canadian adoptions -- as well as a growing number of American babies being adopted by foreign nationals -- are open adoptions, in which the birth mother has an array of parents from which to choose. Many of the birth mothers believe Canada provides a great advantage over the entrenched social order of much of the United States: distance. In a country where skin color predetermines much in life, the thought of a child enjoying hockey and tea in a relatively liberal society struck many as comforting, if not exotic. Once transplanted, the children themselves are exotic, too. While Vancouver is home to many immigrants from China, Hong Kong and India, blacks are unusual. Some, like Gabriel, make little effort to blend in in the Great White North.

"People call me 'Fro Man,'" he said, shaking his mane. "Everyone here is obsessed with my hair."

He seems at once amazed by the attention he attracts, and bemused by the reason for it. "A thousand times a day, people want to touch my hair," Gabriel said. "A thousand times a day."

International adoption can seem "tidier"

Adoption officials say that the reasons children like Gabriel and his sister, Maya, have found their way to Canada are straightforward: There are simply more black children available for adoption in the United States than there are families interested in adopting them.

But as international adoption in this country increases -- according to the U.S. Department of State, nearly 22,000 foreign-born children were adopted by American citizens last year, up from about 20,000 in 2002 and 8,100 in 1989 -- stories like the Melcombes' seem all the more striking. In the United States, prospective adoptive parents seek to adopt children overseas, mainly from Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America, for many reasons. They may be unwilling to wait years for their names to come up on domestic agency lists or are fearful of private adoptions in which birth parents might change their minds. Many find that preference for domestic adoptions goes to younger parents. Abroad, there are few age restrictions for adoptive parents.

The fear of birth parents appearing to reclaim their child was a motivating factor for Kelly and Timothy Burns of Baker City in adopting their daughter from China in 2002. Between them, the couple has five biological children who are grown; they adopted Maggie, 3, when both were in their 40s. "Domestic adoption never occurred to me," Kelly said. "And my husband didn't ever want anyone coming out of the woodwork to remove her from our home."

Adoption officials suggest additional reasons for adopting overseas. Evelyn Lamb, director of development for the Boys and Girls Aid Society of Oregon, said that international adoption can

seem "tidier" than domestic adoption. Adoptive parents can "fantasize," she said, about the circumstances that led a birth mother to place her baby for adoption elsewhere. Here, she said, blame is often levied on birth mothers for "lifestyle choices."

"You don't hear women in China being blamed for giving up their daughters," Lamb said. "You hear about how hard it is to live under communism."

Part of that blame, at least in the case of some black birth mothers, stems from the negative stereotype fostered by media reports in the late 1980s and early 1990s of the so-called "crack babies," infants who were exposed to crack cocaine during pregnancy. Many predicted that babies born to mothers who had smoked crack during pregnancy would suffer irreversible brain damage.

But research has disproved that. Claire Coles, a developmental psychologist who directs the Fetal Alcohol Center at Emory University in Atlanta, has studied the effects of drugs in pregnancy for 20 years. Generally, she said, cocaine does not affect growth or cognition, but may result in a "vulnerability" in some children in dealing with stress.

The false assumptions about crack deepened white America's reluctance to adopt black children, adoption officials say. "The myth persisted," Coles said.

Indeed, many say it helped lead to the notion that foreign-born children are seen as somehow "better risks" than American-born ones.

"By going overseas a lot of people have convinced themselves that they're getting 'different' children," said Deborah Aronson, executive director of Heritage Adoption Services in Portland. Heritage has facilitated several hundred international adoptions, including placing some U.S.-born children in Canada and Great Britain.

"Somehow they think that getting a 'special-needs' child from Eastern Europe is less 'special-needs' than the 'special-needs' child born in the state they live in," said Aronson, who is the adoptive mother of two African American adolescents. "It's just not true."

The notion of "supply and demand" among human beings is a discomfiting one, adoption officials say, but it is a reality. Since the development of the birth control pill and the legalization of abortion, fewer American infants have been placed for adoption.

National statistics on the number of adoptable infants, or their races, are impossible to come by because the United States has no central adoption authority, said Tom Atwood, president of the National Council for Adoption, a nonprofit organization in Alexandria, Va. But black infants and children, he said, "are generally more difficult to place."

The United States has not yet ratified the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, which would, among other things, more strictly regulate the process of intercountry adoptions.

Little adoption in Western Europe

Even as transracial adoptions from Asia and Latin America increase, African American children make up 40 percent of the children in the U.S. foster care system, Atwood said. In the United States, blacks account for 13 percent of the population.

Then there are some, such as Gabriel Melcombe, who are growing up abroad.

The number of American children being adopted by foreign nationals is not tracked, said Kelly Shannon, a U.S. Department of State spokeswoman. "When people ask for a passport, we don't ask where they're going," she said.

Adoption officials estimate the number of American babies being adopted abroad to be in the low hundreds per year and growing. Yet few outside the adoption community are aware of them. "They are not in the sunshine," said Susan Soon-keum Cox, spokeswoman for the Eugene-based Holt International Children's Services, a large agency that does not place American-born children overseas.

But Steven Kirsh, an Indianapolis adoption attorney, does. He estimates that he has placed about 100 African American babies to white clients in Sweden, the Netherlands and Switzerland since 1991. There is little in-country adoption in Western Europe, Kirsh said, because of liberal reproductive rights that include access to contraceptives and abortion. In addition, strong social safety nets provide child care and maternity benefits, lessening the financial burden of raising children. Most prospective adoptive parents, therefore, must turn abroad.

Most of Kirsh's adoption cases are open ones, with black birth mothers choosing to place their children overseas. "Americans like to think our society is colorblind, but it isn't," he said. "These birth mothers feel their kids will be more accepted for who they are there, and that's a big incentive."

A biracial Indiana birth mother was frank about why she favored a Dutch family over three U.S. ones for her newborn daughter. "We have a lot of prejudice and teasing and people in other people's business here," said the woman, 18, who asked not to be identified. "Over there they are nice and get along with everyone."

She was impressed by the family's travels to Spain, France and Switzerland. "My baby can go to those places, too," she said.

When they met, the Dutch family gave the birth mother a book filled with pictures of tulips and windmills, representing a world far from the Super Targets and Wal-Marts of the American Midwest. "She will have a better life there than here," said the woman.

Although she offered a romantic view of life in Holland, her own reality of growing up in the United States offers a window on race relations. "I got teased by whites, and I got teased by blacks," she said. "Nobody just let me be."

Trickle of interest turns into surge

The early 1990s were optimistic years. History had turned on its head. The Berlin Wall had crumbled, and the Soviet Union had disbanded. Nelson Mandela, a global symbol of racial injustice, was freed from a South African prison.

Interest in international adoption increased as Americans explored possibilities in Romania, Poland and elsewhere in the newly liberated Eastern Europe. Meanwhile, in Canada, where the wait for domestic adoptions can take years, prospective parents realized that American babies of color were available to them and began inquiring at agencies.

American adoption officials took reconnaissance trips to Vancouver and other Canadian cities, and, before long, a trickle of interest turned into a surge. Now, the United States is the sixth-largest provider of foreign-born adoptions in Canada, Canadian immigration statistics show. Since 1995, 600 U.S.-born children have been adopted by Canadians.

Turning to where the babies are

Anne Melcombe was among the first to adopt a U.S. child. In 1993, Melcombe, a Vancouver social worker, was ending her marriage. She had been a foster parent for many years, but longed for a more permanent relationship with a child. As a single person, she was ineligible for a healthy

Canadian infant, but she could get a child with fetal alcohol syndrome. She declined, unable to envision a child needing her well beyond adulthood.

Her caseworker told her that there were three countries in which a single mother could get an infant: Haiti, China and the United States -- but in the latter, only if she was interested in a black or biracial child. Because it was near and because there was no language barrier, Melcombe chose the States. Within three weeks of submitting her application, she was approved to adopt an infant.

When she got a call from her Philadelphia agency about a birth, Melcombe, raised by liberal parents in the 1960s, was ecstatic. "I figured that because I was open-minded," she said, "that was all I needed." She picked up Gabriel and returned to Vancouver.

There, Melcombe found other parents, including Karen Madeiros and Bob Broad, who had also adopted babies from the United States. Madeiros and Broad's Georgia-born daughter, Tianna Broad, was soon joined by a Georgia-born son, Garrett. And when Gabriel was 2, Melcombe adopted Maya from Philadelphia. The families got together: "The kids needed it, and so did we," Melcombe said.

Over time, she grew tired of what the parents call the "Safeway Syndrome" -- the propensity of strangers to comment on adoption, child raising and global politics.

One day, Gabriel, a toddler, was scampering ahead of Melcombe in the supermarket aisle. A woman called urgently to an employee, "This little boy is lost and needs to find his mother!" Melcombe said politely, "I'm his mother and he's fine." The woman blurted, "He's been wandering around the store without a parent in sight!" Melcombe resisted the urge to snap. "Actually," she said, "he's not been more than 10 feet from me since we got here a few minutes ago, but I thank you for your concern."

She doesn't fault people for not automatically "matching" her with her children. But she still recoils when people tell her "what a great thing you've done."

Trying to balance cultures

The adoptive families, many of whom are now navigating the shoals of adolescence, credit only timing for their circumstances. As Canadians, many are accustomed to more than occasional conundrums presented by their neighbor to the south and the long shadow it casts.

The Madeiros-Broad home in quaint suburban Coquitlam overlooks the North Cascades and the Fraser River. A maple-leaf windsock flutters off the deck, and Vancouver's skyscrapers loom to the west.

But the elegant taupe living room tells a different story. Juxtaposed with Broad's family heirlooms from the Saskatchewan prairie are paintings that evoke Harlem of the 1920s. Twin African drums rest in the corner.

Madeiras, born in Bermuda to a Portuguese father and an English mother, finds herself hunting a delicate balance between celebrating a culture and inviting stereotypes. At Christmastime, she went shopping for CDs for Garrett and listened to lyrics in the store for 90 minutes before she settled on one with (mostly) appropriate lyrics.

"Influences come from the computer, the TV -- everywhere," she said. "The older they get, the more whatever you forbid them to do becomes attractive."

At the moment, songs and videos are awash with the glorification of "pimps." Artists say modern-day pimps merely symbolize the flamboyant fashion sense of street hustlers, but critics are not so

generous. Neither is Madeiros, who cringes when she hears her son's friends tell each other, "Cool -- you look like a pimp."

"Kids love to emulate who they think is successful," she said. "At the moment the black male thing is Fifty Cent and P. Diddy. That makes an interesting piece -- and it certainly makes you think."

The adoptions of Jacob, 12, and Maddy, 11, have done just that for Yvonne and Jim Devitt, who also have a biological teenage daughter. "There are so many Caucasians out there who sail through their lives without any issues or concerns about who they might be in society," she said. "That's not the case for us."

At the same time, Canada provides a buffer, she said. (A few thousand African slaves were brought to Canada in the 17th and 18th centuries; slavery in all British colonies was abolished in 1833.)

"If I lived in the suburbs of Seattle or Portland, where there is a different racial history, could this have been my choice?" she asked. "I can't walk in those shoes. I just don't know."

A handful of times, black women have stopped Devitt with questions about Maddy: "Did you adopt her?" and "Who does her hair?" The gregarious Devitt has been reduced to a monosyllable. "Me," she has said.

"You really do her hair?" the women have asked. "You do a really good job."

"At what age do I become white?"

As their children grew, the parents group appealed to Vancouver's small but diverse black community to help as mentors. Every month, about a dozen young Canadians of African descent, from Eritrea to Jamaica, gather with the children at a community center.

One, Troy Peart, 32, is a financial analyst born to Jamaican parents in Toronto. It's not so easy to be black in Vancouver. When he sees faces with features similar to his, he nods. "We are just so few," he says. "I do it without thinking."

At his first meeting, he was not surprised to notice that some children were scared. "They had never seen so many big black men before," he said. Most striking was a story he heard about a boy confused by his own future, Peart said. Because he knew no black adults, he asked his father: "At what age do I become white, like you?"

Another could not fathom what Peart did for a living, assuming that he worked in the only place he had ever seen blacks: as a food preparer at the Sandwich Tree. The boy's father, dismayed, scheduled an appointment to visit Peart's office overlooking downtown Vancouver. The boy surveyed the glass-lined patio and modern skyline. "Cool," he said.

Peart looks at the situation matter-of-factly, and points to himself: part African, part Chinese, a masterful chef of jerk chicken. "There is so much diversity among us, how can you possibly say what it means to be black? What it means to be of African descent? What it means to be Eritrean Canadian or Jamaican Canadian or a black Canadian by way of adoption from Georgia?"

Still, he and his girlfriend, 26-year-old Avrillee Knoess, also a mentor with Jamaican roots, admire the parents. "They have sought this out. They have gone through social workers peering into their lives. They have paid a great deal of money. They are not trying to ignore the race issues, they are trying to confront them. They readily admit their limitations. And because of it, the lives of these children have been enriched."

As Peart sees it, the challenge now will be to keep the children involved with the group as they age. "They are forming their ideas of who they are," he said. "They need us now, especially."

Children called her "Medusa"

If the direction Tianna Broad is headed is any indication, the children will be more than just all right. Tianna, tall, strong and garrulous, possesses a self-confidence enjoyed by few people twice her age. On a recent Sunday, Tianna and two friends, Maddy Devitt and Maya Melcombe, piled into a car for the mentor gathering. Maya told a story about being teased for having a "flat face." Tianna, in the front seat, turned down the radio. Her head swiveled.

"They said what?" she asked.

Maya repeated her story.

"Oh, I've got a burn for that one," Tianna said. (A burn is a snappy comeback.)

"Tell them this," she instructed. "At least my mom didn't get a fine for littering when I was born."

The girls titter, and Maya practices her "burn" quietly.

Tianna, who has an open adoption with her white mother and grandparents in Georgia, has visited her birth state and considers Atlanta a paragon of cities.

She loved a recent trip to Bermuda: "Everywhere you went people were black. I felt like I was born there, like I belonged."

"Vancouver?" She waved off the snowcapped mountains as if they were strip malls. "Bo-ring." Of course, all adolescents wish to mark their identity, and to separate from their parents. Here, issues present themselves in ways both subtle and obvious. One boy calls his Canadian mother "Mom," not "Mum." One child uses "GeorgiaGrrl" as her e-mail name. Tianna defiantly pronounces the last letter of the alphabet in the American fashion, "zee."

"I don't know why they say 'zed,' " she said of the Canadian pronunciation, and of Canadians -- "they" -- themselves. She rolled her eyes. "It makes no sense at all."

But the world has a way of perplexing at every turn. And for these children and their families, it is prejudice that bewilders the most. Not long ago, Maya Melcombe came home from school in tears: Children had called her "Medusa" because of the twists in her hair.

Anne Melcombe comforted her daughter, and confronted parents and school officials. "I'm willing to make a lot of noise to make my kids' lives OK," she said.

But even so, there is sometimes a line that, despite her best intentions, even she is unable to cross. "I say to her, 'I can love you. I can support you. I can advocate for you. I can hug you. I can tell you what happened to me when kids teased me about things.'"

"But I cannot be black for you.' "

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ILLUSTRATION: 2 Color photos by RICHARD LAM - Special to The Oregonian

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Sidebar text -- THE PRICE(S) TO ADOPT; AN EXAMPLE OF ONE AGENCY'S FEE APPROACH

Sidebar text -- AGENCIES OFFER MINORITY PROGRAMS

Sidebar text -- ADOPTION: THE GEOPOLITICS, THE CHOICES



Shaun Tyakoff with her daughter, Imani, and husband, Alex Tyakoff.

Sidebar:

ADOPTION: THE GEOPOLITICS, THE CHOICES
GABRIELLE GLASER

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ADOPTION: THE GEOPOLITICS, THE CHOICES

Summary: As adoptions from Asia and Latin America increase, many black American children still lack homes

"I'm incredibly fortunate to have my kids, but I understand why it is I do. I wouldn't have them if I wasn't relatively wealthy, by world standards. My children are where they are because their birth mothers are poor and black in the South and had very few choices." -- SHAUN TYAKOFF, CANADIAN MOTHER TO TWO BLACK CHILDREN FROM THE UNITED STATES

With globalization in the 21st century, parents can -- and do -- adopt children from all over the world. But to a great extent, black children, particularly those born in the United States, have remained outside the adoption process.

"Family is such a sensitive topic, especially for people who've been trying to create one of their own and can't," said Louisa Burrus of Portland, the adoptive mother of two American-born daughters. Like both her girls, Burrus has one black parent. "The natural tendency is to want a child who looks like you, so you don't get obvious stares when you walk down the street."

Her husband, Scott Burrus, a white social psychologist, says: "By the time some people turn to adoption, they've dealt with the pain of infertility. Their goal is parenting, and they don't care if the child is purple. But others do. If you haven't resolved your infertility issues, maybe it's easier to look abroad."

Overseas adoption has special resonance in Oregon, home to Eugene-based Holt International Children's Services, one of the world's oldest and largest international adoption agencies. It was founded in 1956 after Harry and Bertha Holt adopted eight Korean war orphans, and appealed to others to follow suit.

In Oregon, they did: According to a 2003 U.S. Census Bureau study, Oregon ranks in the top one-third of states for percentage of foreign-born adoptees.

Richard Sullivan, associate professor of social work and family studies at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, said that international adoptions are an exchange paralleling the international balance of payments. "If women have the means to care for their babies, they don't relinquish them," he said. "Poor countries without good social safety nets can solve the infertility problems of people in wealthier ones."

"When people want a baby, they don't want to think about the political context of their acquisition," he said. "They don't want to think about it in terms of a 'commodity.' "

Ellen Herman, an associate professor of history at the University of Oregon who is writing a book about adoption, agreed.

"That doesn't make international adoptions not humanitarian," said Herman, who has a comprehensive Web site on the topic (<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~adoption/>). "But of course they are geopolitical, reflecting war, natural disasters and famine."

Shaun Tyakoff is more than aware of world affairs -- she is a professor of politics at Douglas College in Coquitlam, B.C. Shaun and her husband, Alex, a police analyst, chose to adopt in the United States because they trusted that the legalities would be orthodox. The Tyakoffs adopted Louis, 12, and Imani, 5, from Georgia.

"I'm incredibly fortunate to have my kids, but I understand why it is I do," said Shaun, who is U.S.-born. "I wouldn't have them if I wasn't relatively wealthy, by world standards. My children are where they are because their birth mothers are poor and black in the South and had very few choices," she said.

"I'm the best mother my kids could have, under the circumstances," she said. "But their birth mothers should never have had to face the choices they had to face."

Transracial, international adoption traces to early years of the Cold War, when U.S. servicemen stationed overseas brought home war orphans, and children were stigmatized for being mixed race, Herman said. It began to shift the pattern of adoption, which had emphasized "matching" looks with adoptive parents.

There was also a political undertone. As the United States fought communism around the globe, it was grappling with sanctioned racial intolerance at home.

When Americans began adopting Asian children, it helped demonstrate liberal U.S. values, Herman said. "It is a perfect example of social engineering -- the attempt by government officials to alter society."

The fact that U.S. schools were segregated until 1954, and interracial marriage was illegal until 1967, was another matter.

Traditionally African American children in need of homes have been adopted informally, by extended family or within churches. "When institutions have a history of rejecting you, you don't necessarily trust them," said Grace Osborne, pastor of the Grace Covenant Fellowship in Portland and adoptive mother to 16.

During the great migration of blacks from the South to the North in the early 20th century, families and communities were torn apart. In the 1950s some 50,000 black children were in need of homes, according to documents on Herman's Web site.

Child welfare officials tried to recruit white families to adopt children of color with outreach appeals such as one in Portland by the Boys and Girls Aid Society called "Operation Brown Baby," which ran from 1944 to 1977. But the reality is that most never found homes, Herman said.

Some black leaders denounced such projects, saying whites could not be culturally sensitive enough to raise healthy black children. Groups such as "One Church, One Child" have tried to recruit black adoptive families for African American children.

Adoptions of black children by whites in the United States peaked at 2,500 in 1970, Herman said. As adoptions from Asia and Latin America increase, Sullivan said, frank discussion is essential. "We have to develop a global consciousness about what it is we're doing," he said. "I'm not saying, 'Let's stop.' I'm saying, 'Let's be more honest about what this really is.' "

"I'm an old adoption worker and I love adoption," he said. "There are many positive outcomes. But there are unintended consequences of these exchanges. Can we not ask ourselves, 'Why are kids in our own countries not moving toward permanency?'"

Herman agreed. "Our history," she said, "continues to plague us."

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