

# MULTIETHNIC FAMILIES AS PERFECT MATCHES

## A Study of Verbal and Visual Metaphors in Children's Picture books on Interracial Adoption

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**Abstract** – This paper sets out to investigate interracial adoption narratives in children's picture books and explores how these narratives are constructed through the combined use of verbal and visual metaphors. The study examines a selection of six picture books published in the U.S.A. over the last few years and targeting a readership between the ages of four and eight. Interracial adoption books can help youngsters make sense of their reality and can be relied upon to initiate family conversations about difficult topics such as the lack of genetic bond and resemblance between parents and children. Since metaphors involve talking about one thing in terms of another, they can be strategically used in picture books to make complex concepts accessible to young readers. The study identifies the main metaphorical configurations of interracial adoption discourses in children's books by means of a hybrid methodological toolkit that integrates the approaches of Critical Discourse Analysis, Critical Metaphor Analysis and Multimodal Metaphor Studies. Findings suggest that narratives about interracial adoption are positively biased and often contain oversimplifications or inaccurate descriptions of adoptees' life situations; while these stories aim to offer children reassuring answers about complicated issues such as identity and ethnicity, they frequently fail to provide validation for adoptees' ambivalent feelings towards their new situations and families.

**Keywords:** metaphor; adoption narratives; critical metaphor analysis; multimodal metaphor studies; interracial adoption.

### 1. Interracial adoption and children's books: Some preliminary information

Interracial adoption (also known as transracial or visible adoption) started after World War II and the Korean War (Garcia Gonzales, Wesseling 2013, p. 257). Since then, this practice has been the object of an animated debate. On the one hand, there are those who claim that being adopted by parents from another racial background—white/Caucasian for the most part— may cause children to have difficulties in developing a sense of ethnic identity and to be ashamed of their origins (Docan-Morgan 2010, p. 337). International interracial adoption, involving adoptees from third-world countries, is also

heavily contested by people who consider it “a new form of colonialism and cultural imperialism” that reproduces unfair social structures in the adoption countries (*ibid.*). Supporters of interracial adoption reply to these criticisms by highlighting that moving children out of institutionalized care to place them into a permanent family serves their best interest (*ibid.*).

Although racial homogeneity still represents the norm for most families in North America and in Western countries, multi-ethnic households “are on the rise in the context of globalization, transforming assumptions about what a family should be” (Sun 2021, p. 232). These demographic changes are, as yet, only partially acknowledged in literature and films (Satz 2007), although the situation is changing rapidly.

In this regard, scholars Macarena Garcia Gonzales and Elisabeth Wesseling remark the presence of a “flourishing niche market of children’s books about adoption for young adoptees that are mostly produced by stakeholders in transnational adoption” (2013, p. 258). These books function as mirrors through which adopted readers can see their self reflected (Sims Bishop 2012), as the stories and characters presented are modelled on those of adoptive families. Children’s literature has been shown to affect young readers’ understanding of their lives and of the context in which they find themselves (Sun 2021, p. 232); as a consequence, interracial adoption books can help them make sense of their reality and “can be an effective way for families to address sensitive issues and contextualize their experiences, [and be turned into] a means to initiate dialogues between adoptive parents and adoptees who might be reluctant to open discussions or ask questions” (*ibid.*).

These stories offer both a source of entertainment and repertoires for identity construction (Garcia Gonzales, Wesseling 2013, p. 258) as they include narratives which contribute to children’s progressive coming to terms with their past (Suter *et al.* 2014). Over the last few decades, scholars have increasingly recognized the importance of narratives, which they define as social constructions that permeate our everyday life to the point that we interpret the world and signify ourselves to others through them (Gergen, Gergen 1986). Visibly adoptive families in which “members’ racial characteristics provide visual evidence of a lack of biological ties to both insiders and outsiders” (Galvin 2006, p. 242) negotiate their identity relying on language and social interaction remarkably more than biological families (*ibid.*). This might explain why adoptive parents are avid consumers, reproducers—and oftentimes even creators—of interracial adoption narratives.

Tropes based on analogy (e.g. metaphors or similes) are among the rhetorical and linguistic devices deployed to make complex issues such as adoption easily comprehensible to small children. As underlined in the following section, metaphors in particular are used to communicate – in simpler and more accessible terms – unfamiliar concepts which young

readers may encounter in their books.

## 2. “Metaphors we adopt by”

### 2.1. Aims

According to Lakoff and Johnson's classic definition (introduced in their volume “*Metaphors We Live By*”), metaphors involve the representation of an “aspect of a concept in terms of another” (Lakoff, Johnson 1980, p. 10) on grounds of observed affinities or correspondences between them. These scholars define ‘source domain’ the semantic field metaphorical items are selected from, and ‘target domain’ the entity or conceptual meaning described by the metaphor. As this figure of speech aids with the understanding of notions which may be unknown to the audience, a readership of children lends itself by its nature to a wide use of metaphors. More recent research has focused not solely on metaphors' role as cognitive tools but also on other strategic functions (Garzone 2021, p. 161); more specifically, they have been recognized to also provide a framing for the entity or event that they describe (Semino 2008). The choice of source domain foregrounds certain elements of the target domain while backgrounding others (Lakoff, Johnson 1980, pp. 10-13 and *passim*), that is to say different metaphors can offer different framings of an identical object or experience. As a consequence, distinct individuals' understanding and interpreting of the same reality may vary depending on the metaphors they are exposed to.

The study of metaphors can thus offer a valuable insight into the narratives presented in children's books and describe the way in which this trope can contribute to young adoptees' coming to terms with and framing of their present and past situations. At the moment, scholarly work analyzing children's book on adoption is scarce (Jerome, Sweeney 2014, p. 681) and scientific inquiry into interracial adoption stories even more rare. Starting from this premise, this study intends to contribute to filling this gap. It sets out to identify recurring metaphors in a sample of picture storybooks for young interracial adoptees and to single out the dominant metaphorical configurations at the basis of adoption narratives. In so doing, the research aims to shed light onto the strategies utilized to help adopted children process their life history and investigate their identity against the backdrop of their multi-racial families. The findings of this analysis will enrich the debate about whether adoption narratives in children's books contain oversimplifications, stereotypes and inaccurate or biased descriptions. Stories targeted at small children are inevitably simple and easy to follow, but, according to some studies (cf., among others, Bergquist 2007; Kokkola 2011;

Chen 2013; Garcia Gonzales, Wesseling 2013; Jerome, Sweeney 2014; Sun 2021), numerous books provide an idealized representation of transracial adoption, a representation that may end up generating confusion or, worse, a sense of inadequacy in young readers if they do not feel or act the same way as the fictional characters. By focusing on how interracial adoption, young adoptees and birth/adoptive parents are metaphorically portrayed in children's picture books, this study verifies whether the latter present an unrealistic and romanticized view of adoption and of the parties involved.

## 2.2. Materials and method

In order to reach these objectives, a sample of books was constructed on the basis of the following criteria: first, all the stories had to be written in English for an English-speaking readership. Second, the dates of publication of the volumes span from the mid 2010s to 2020, which means they are relatively close to the time of writing<sup>1</sup>. As a matter of fact, by investigating books that were published recently, the study intends to provide a snapshot analysis of interracial adoption narratives currently circulating in the U.S.A<sup>2</sup>. Finally, the target audience of the books is comprised of readers between 4 and 8. This range was chosen since the age of 4/5 coincides with the moment “when parents begin to actively share adoption information and when children begin to understand adoption language and label themselves as adopted” (Jerome, Sweeney 2014, p. 682; cf. also Brodzinsky 2011). Finally, all stories had to be set in the post-adoption stage and explore issues connected with racial heterogeneity.

The picture books for the analysis were singled out by cross-referencing lists of titles featured on specialized websites<sup>3</sup> on interracial adoption, on the reading social media platform *Goodreads* (goodreads.com), and on the world's largest online selling marketplace *Amazon* (amazon.com). Specialized websites and *Goodreads* were instrumental in the identification

<sup>1</sup> Five books out of six were published between 2016 and 2020 and provide a recent representation of interracial adoption in children's picture book. In spite of its 2003 publication, “*I Don't Have Your Eyes*” was exceptionally included in the data set because, besides meeting all the other criteria established for the selection, it had a strong focus on racial and cultural diversity within adoptive families which made it particularly suitable for the research.

<sup>2</sup> As already noted (cf. §1), over the last few decades the number of both interracial adoptions and of children's books featuring adopted protagonists different ethnicity than their parents have been rising steeply in the USA. Consequently, recent publications on the issue of racially diverse families represent a noteworthy object of study.

<sup>3</sup> The websites used in this study are the following: (i) *Adoptive and Foster Family Coalition* (<https://affny.org/>), (ii) *The Open Book Blog. A Blog on Race, Diversity, Education and Children's Books* (<<https://blog.leeandlow.com/>>), (iii) *Colours of Us* (coloursofus.com), *Creating a Family* (<https://creatingafamily.org/>), (iv) *Pact, an Adoption Alliance* (<https://www.pactadopt.org/>).

of the most popular books dealing with the topic of transracial adoption; *Amazon* was used “because there is a broader selection than what may be in any one physical bookstore at one point in time” (Jerome, Sweeney 2014, p. 682) and because sales of niche books (such as interracial adoption children's picture books) represent a significant portion of total book sales within the online marketplace (*ibid.*). *Amazon* is therefore a valuable source that allows determining what products are available for purchase and may have a significant circulation, thus exerting a certain impact on interracial adoption discourse.

Restrictions of language, dates of publication, age group and availability led to the following sample of six books:

- 1) “*And That's Why She Is My Mama*” by Tiarra Nazario (2020)
- 2) “*Mommy Doesn't Look like Me*” by Jason M. Rhea (2020)
- 3) “*Heart Match*” by Bernadette Pankey (2020)
- 4) “*Mommy and Me Don't Match*” by K. Monsma (2018)
- 5) “*My New Mom and Me*” by Renata Galindo (2016)
- 6) “*I Don't Have Your Eyes*” by Carrie A. Kitze (2003)

The materials selected were analyzed through the use of a hybrid methodological toolkit. Drawing on the assumptions that metaphors manifest themselves in a variety of semiotic resources and that the visual component is as important as text in picture books (Calvo-Maturana 2020, p. 286), this study relies on a combination of methods – whose main framework is discourse-analytical – suited for the examination of both verbal and pictorial metaphors. The tools of Critical Discourse Analysis (‘CDA’; Fairclough 1989) are here integrated with those of Critical Metaphor Analysis (Charteris-Black 2004; 2005) and Multimodal Metaphor Studies (Forceville 1996; 2006; 2013) and synergically employed to investigate the selected book sample. Just like CDA, Critical Metaphor Analysis or ‘CMA’ has been traditionally utilized in research about media and political discourse. However, since it “is an approach to the analysis of metaphors that aims to identify the intentions and ideologies underlying language use” (Charteris-Black 2011, p. 45; Charteris-Black 2004), it can be legitimately applied to the examination of social constructs such as adoption narratives in order to disclose their ideological underpinnings.

Both CMA and Multimodal Metaphor Studies entail a three-step metaphor analysis process heavily indebted to Fairclough's model (1995) featuring the three stages of identification, interpretation and explanation and which, in turn, hinges on Halliday's systemic functional linguistics framework (1985). Metaphor identification is connected with ideational meaning “that is, identifying whether [metaphors] are present in a text and

establishing whether there is a tension between a literal source domain and a metaphoric target domain” (Charteris-Black 2004, p. 35). Both CMA and Multimodal Metaphor Studies share the view that “the *purposes of use* within *specific discourse contexts*” (emphasis in the original; *ivi*, p. 247) are crucial factors to account for in the identification/interpretation stages. As regards CMA, this is because “metaphor choices may be governed by cognitive and semantic and pragmatic considerations and by ideological, cultural and historical ones” (*ivi*, p. 248). As for Multimodal Metaphor Studies, the salience of context and purpose is also linked to the fact that the pictorial mode lacks the grammatical cues corresponding to the “paradigmatic verbal ‘A IS B’” (Forceville 1996, p. 111); as a consequence, the wider pictorial-verbal context plays a key role in visual metaphor recognition. Metaphor interpretation is concerned with interpersonal meaning, i.e. the kind of social relations that are constructed through the use of this trope, while metaphor explanation has to do with textual meaning, “that is, the way that metaphors are interrelated and become coherent with reference to the situation in which they occur” (Charteris-Black 2004, p. 35)<sup>4</sup>.

The three steps of metaphor identification, interpretation, and explanation make it possible to assess the degree of conventionality of the verbal/visual metaphors featured in adoption narratives; this kind of information is paramount in establishing how ideologically charged the latter can be, since, as Charteris-Black maintains,

[t]he advantage of using metaphors –*especially those that have become the conventional ways of expressing certain points of view*– is that this taps into an accepted communal system of values. This has the effect of making a particular value system more acceptable because it exists within a socially accepted framework (emphasis added; 2004, p. 12)

After illustrating the method and before moving onto to the analysis, a couple of *caveats* are worth mentioning. The first is that the verbal component of two picture books (i.e. “*Mommy Doesn’t Look like Me*”, “*And That’s Why She Is My Mama*”) contains rhymes, which means that word choice may be affected by the presence of this device. The investigation of these texts will take this peculiarity into account. Another point that should be preliminarily raised is that the vast majority of the books has been written, edited, and sometimes even illustrated and self-published by adoptive parents. This is very common in the field of children’s adoption publications (Bergquist 2007, p. 300) but should nonetheless be considered in a study like

<sup>4</sup> Both Charteris-Black’s and Forceville’s model present taxonomic classifications of metaphors whose items are not described in this section but will be illustrated whenever necessary in the following sections.

this. As a matter of fact, it is reasonable to assume that the fact that adoption narratives are produced by people who have a personal involvement in this practice may affect the way the latter is described in the books.

### 3. (Un)matching looks

An initial glance at the data set reveals interesting patterns. First, it is possible to observe that youngsters' point of view dominates the narratives. The presence of an internal focalization coinciding with adopted children's perspective is immediately apparent in the titles, which contain numerous instances of first-person singular pronouns and possessive adjectives. This may have to do with the fact that one of the plausible purposes of this kind of book is to offer a simulation of possibly awkward conversations within multi-ethnic families about lack of physical resemblance. It may be also claimed that these texts provide templates for identity-affirming responses that adoptees can rely on during challenging encounters (especially when their parents are not there; cf. Suter *et al.* 2010, p. 254).

Another feature shared by most of the books is that they construe the metaphor of the '(perfect) match' to indicate the developing relationship between adopted children and their parents. This metaphor is lexicalized and therefore not immediately detectable. However, the notion of 'match' belongs to the 'source domain' of clothes and fabrics and is utilized in the books to suggest that the combination of adoptive parents and children is congenial and harmonious just like textures and colors that fit together. In the stories, the 'target domain' of this metaphor is somewhat unstable as it either includes physical resemblance or behavioral affinity; as illustrated below, the target becomes the object of an intense discursive negotiation (sometimes realized through the use of reported speech) between family members.

The ways in which the 'match' metaphor is presented in the texts and in the pictures is characterized by a certain degree of ambiguity. From the textual perspective, recurring patterns emerge in the narratives: they start with the child's acknowledgment (often expressed through the PHYSICAL RESEMBLANCE IS (NOT) A PERFECT MATCH metaphor<sup>5</sup>) that their aspect is noticeably different from that of their parents. The subsequent step is represented by the adult's rejection or downplaying of the concept that family members are not a perfect match and the emphasis on similarities (conveyed in many books by the metaphor BEHAVIOURAL RESEMBLANCE IS A PERFECT MATCH). Finally, the epilogues of the

<sup>5</sup> Block capitals are used in this chapter in accordance with the conventional notation for indicating source domains in metaphor theory.

stories may feature the metaphor of the ‘heart match’ and end with the child narrators no longer confused but at peace with their identity.

### **3.1. Dialogism and negotiation of physical appearances**

As already noted, interracial children’s books may present young adoptee readers with situations that they may be too intimidated to experience in real life; in particular, “child narrators in these books candidly express their feelings and raise questions adopted children are afraid of addressing or questions with which they are often bombarded from other people” (Chen 2013, p. 98). The issue of looking different from one’s adoptive parents or siblings can be “unsettling, leading to a feeling of not fitting into the family” (Brodzinsky 2011, p. 2003) for some children. Even when it is not, this issue has inevitably to be tackled and the possible ways of doing it are described very similarly in most books. The starting point of the narratives coincides with either a question (which is answered by the mother in a subsequent reported dialogue) or with a statement contained in a concessive construction. Although all stories rely on a first-person narrator whose perspective coincides with that of the adoptee, the voices of other actors (those of parents but also those of people who bring up the subject of physical resemblance with the child) are also incorporated in the text, but to different degrees. In other words, an element of dialogism is observable in all the texts, but, whereas some stories incorporate reported speech (Fairclough 1992, pp. 117), others present instances of interlocutive dialogism (Brès/Nowakowska 2005, p. 139), that is to say they contain strategies aimed at anticipating the addressee’s possible response to the narrator’s utterance. In “*Mommy and Me Don’t Match*”, the little protagonist starts her story by highlighting the visible differences between her mother and herself:

My mom has light skin. And I have brown skin. She has brown hair and green eyes. I have black hair and brown eyes. (Monsma 2018)

She eventually expresses her uneasiness caused by the dissimilar looks with the ‘match’ metaphor with a direct question. Her mother’s response consists in first briefly acknowledging the fact that her skin/hair/eye color is not the same as her daughter’s and then in coming up with a list of reasons why the two of them in fact do match (i.e. they have the same number of hands, legs, toes, and belly buttons).

“Mommy, how come we don’t match?”[...]  
“You are right, honey” [...] But I have a question for you! I have two hands. How many do you have” (Monsma 2018)



“*Heart Match*” also begins with a case of reported speech including the ‘match metaphor’:

I ask my mom why our family doesn't match. She says we do! / The bottoms  
of our feet match. / The palms of our hands match. / Our teeth match. Even our  
tongues match. (Pankey 2020)

In this case the mother does not mention physical differences but she asserts the validity of the ‘match’ metaphor by repeating it in a series of examples contained in the same sentence structure. It is to be noted that the way in which the speech is reported makes it impossible to conclusively establish whether these repetitions are to be attributed to her or to her son. Whatever the case, the latter seems to eventually internalize the adult's point of view because he eventually declares, “*I tell my mom that we all match in the dark*”.

What happens in both Monsma's and Pankey's books is that the mother figures partially or totally rejects the notion that they do not match with their children. The way in which they deny it is by modifying the elements of the target domain: in the first book, the attention of the adoptee is taken away from the color and drawn onto the matching number of body parts. In the second, the mother mentions physical features whose color is identical no matter the ethnicity, a strategy that her son appears to have learned as he notices that the dark makes it impossible to distinguish between skin tones.

If “*Heart Match*” may include some final hints at colorblindness, this notion plays an even more important role in “*Mommy Doesn't Look like Me*” where the grown-up tells the child not to worry about her skin shade because God's love is colorblind. The mother's response therefore contains a particular metaphor, a personification, which attributes an adjective typically used to qualify human beings (‘colorblind’) to an abstract entity (‘God's love’).

What the extracts from the reported speech of the three books suggest is that the maternal figure typically downplays (although not in the same ways) the potential issues connected with a dissimilar physical appearance, in spite of the problems they may create in adoptees' social relations. The belittling of the importance of skin color and, more in particular, the reference to colorblindness appear rather problematic as

colourblind altruism downplays the adoptee's heritage, reduces racial antagonism to individual adaptation problems or generational conflicts, ones contained within the domestic locale. Raised in an assumed colourblind utopia, the adoptee is expected to live up to the multicultural ideal. Thus, because her subjectivity is presumed to be thoroughly assimilable, and her splitness is denied... (Chen 2013, p. 100)

The presence of dialogues in these narratives enables authors to show how adopted children initiate a conversation about something that they perceive as troubling (i.e. the fact that they do not resemble the rest of their family) and gradually come to accept their parents' opinion that looks are not important. In other picture books, the presence of phenomena of interlocutive dialogism – and, more specifically, of concessive constructions – may indicate that the point of view of the grown-ups has been totally introjected by the adoptee; in this case the parent's voice is not reported in a dialogue, but is embedded in the sentences that make up the child's narrative. In *“And That's Why She's My Mama”* the little protagonist affirms:

So even though we may look different / she loves and cherishes me every day.  
/ And that's why she's my mama / in every single way. (Nazario 2020)

The fact that mother and child do not share the same appearance is encoded in a concessive clause, that is to say a subordinate clause which carries less weight than the main clause. The loving attitude of the 'mama' is represented as what counts and what determines her parental status, not her physical resemblance (or lack thereof) to her child. The use of the modal 'may' to hedge the meaning of the expression 'look different' also deserves to be mentioned.

The book *“I Don't Have Your Eyes”* consists of a series of repeated statements containing a concessive 'but'. These statements follow an identical structure which starts with the acknowledgement of a physical difference between the adoptee and an adult family member (unlike in the other stories, here fathers and grandparents are also present) and ends with a coordinate clause introduced by a concessive 'but' which highlights the affinity in the behavior of grown-ups and youngsters (e.g. *“I don't have your ears... / ... but I have your way of hearing those in need”*). This means that the remarks on lack of resemblance which occur at the beginning of the sentence are always contradicted by comments on how the child acts analogously to the rest of the family; the placement of the coordinate clauses arguably serves the purpose of providing the second one with more weight so that its message is given prominence.

The only book where the maternal figure appears not only acknowledge but to even value physical differences is *“My New Mom & Me”*<sup>6</sup>. The protagonists of the story are animals, a mom cat and her little dog,

<sup>6</sup> Monsma's book is rather ambivalent in this respect. The mother recognizes that she and her daughter do not share the same look and she also says that she loves her little one's different features yet she appears to try and focus the child's attention away from them.

characters which correspond to anthropomorphous metaphors. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) define anthropomorphism an example of ontological metaphor where human behaviors or traits are applied to animals or non-human entities. Anthropomorphous metaphors are widely used in children's stories to explain concepts or make abstract ideas easier to understand. In the case at hand, the lack of biological bond between adoptive parents and children is metaphorically represented by animals belonging to different species. The dog narrator explains that he felt uncomfortable about not looking like his mother (a striped cat) so he painted stripes on his body. The cat, though, does not approve of this behavior as she claims that their diversity is an enrichment:

I was worried that I didn't look like Mom, so I tried to fix it. But Mom said I didn't need fixing. She likes that we are different. Actually, I think I like it, too. (Galindo 2016)

On the one hand, it is possible to affirm that the interaction between mother and son seems comparable to the dialogues analyzed in the other books as it once again confirms that (adoptive) children are very easily affected by their parents' views and may quickly and uncritically accept them. On the other hand, though, the message conveyed in this exchange is remarkably different from the others which tend to downplay the lack of physical similarities between parents and children.

### **3.2. Simile-type pictorial associations and metonymies**

As already hinted at in the analysis of the textual component of the books, the 'match' metaphor is mainly based on metonymies where the various body parts (hands, ears, skin etc.) stand for the whole body and the body stands for the character. The visual representation of the 'match' metaphor possibly makes its metonymic quality even more apparent, as three front cover pages out of six as well as some of the books' pictures do not feature the protagonists' full figures but only a part of them.

Whether children and their parents are depicted in their entirety or metonymically, the books' illustrations typically rely on simile-type pictorial associations, a kind of visual trope that consists in the juxtaposition of two entities placed next to each other so that the viewer can establish a comparison between them (Forceville 1996, p. 137)<sup>7</sup>. The simile-type pictorial association can therefore be utilized to depict instances of identity

<sup>7</sup> Similes are forms in which "indirectness in conceptualization through a cross-domain mapping is expressed by direct language" (Steen *et al.*'s 2010, p. 58); as such, they can be considered as "metaphor-related words" (*ibid.*) and included in the analysis.

negotiation, such as those examined here (Calvo-Maturana 2020, p. 296). Figure 1. well exemplifies a pictorial simile emphasizing the resemblance and the contrast between a body part of the mother and of that the adoptee. The sets of feet of the two are placed in front of each other (interestingly, the picture portrays the perspective of the parent and not that of the child who is the narrator of the story). While mother's and daughter's feet and toes may not match in color, their mirror position, identical shape (and the fact that the characters are wearing the same attire although in different shades) invite the viewer to construct the 'match' metaphor. Although these elements may be the most immediately impactful, the text and the little girl's hand detail in the image also contribute to drawing the reader's attention to the identical number of toes of the characters<sup>8</sup>.



Figure 1  
*Mommy and Me Don't Match* (Monsma 2018).

The books *I Don't Have Your Eyes, And That's Why She's My Mama*, and *Heart Match* also abound in simile-type pictorial associations which convey the message that adoptive parents and children do match in spite of their visible differences. Figure 2, taken from *And That's Why She's My Mama*, portrays a mother-daughter duo in which the former probably comes from an

<sup>8</sup> As noted in subparagraph 3.1, the mother draws the child's attention away from the differences in skin tones and hair/eye colors and focuses it to the fact that they have the same number of toes, hands, belly buttons etc.

Islamic country and the latter looks African-American. This image is rich in details which reveal the lack of physical resemblance between the two (for instance the dissimilar types of eye/nose shape and skin tones); moreover, the different headwear and accessories (a hijab in the case of the mother and little dreadlock wooden balls in the case of the daughter) metonymically indicate that they do not share the same religious or cultural heritage. However, the almost symmetrical position of the characters and the fact that they are both performing the same action, i.e. having a popsicle of an identical purple color, allow for the activation of the 'match' metaphor.



Figure 2  
*And That's Why She's My Mama* (Nazario 2020).

To conclude, the pictorial similes appearing in the books seem to represent the outcome a careful balance between foregrounding and downplaying physical differences and similarities between adoptive parents and children, and between depicting them as 'matching' and as 'unmatching'. By and large, the analysis of the visual metaphors used in the picture books corroborates the results obtained through the investigation of the textual component: just like authors, illustrators tend to belittle dissimilarities and emphasize resemblance (although not in the same way and not to the same degree). This may be achieved shifting the attention away from features, such as skin tone or nose shape, that immediately reveal the lack of genetic bond between the characters and by giving prominence to those shared by all ethnicities. Another strategy which can be identified both in the verbal and in the visual elements of the books is the construction of the 'match' metaphor on grounds of behavioral affinities: children and parent match not because of how they look, but because they act in a comparable way. The emphasis on

similarity of behavior lies at the basis of another recurring metaphor which represents a sort of declination of the main one, the ‘heart match’ metaphor.

#### 4. Heart Metaphors

Tropes based on heart metonymies are common in the books. In particular, two metaphors stand out because they are included in many of the narratives (namely *I Don’t Have Your Eyes*, *Heart Match*, and *Mommy and Me Don’t Match*): the ‘heart match’ and the ‘heart is a womb’.

The first metaphor represents another attempt to minimize the importance of physical differences by stressing the shared inner values at the core of the interracial family identity. The notion at the basis of the ‘heart match’ is that, although mother and child may only partially ‘match on the outside’, they perfectly ‘match on the inside’ because they have the same beliefs, ideals, and feelings in common. This idea is typically introduced in the conclusion of the stories as it seems to provide the character of the adoptee with an appeasing answer to her/his initial worries about not looking like her/his parents. The words and structures used to realize this ‘happy ending’ are almost identical in all books. In *I Don’t Have Your Eyes* the narrator states

I don’t look like you on the outside.../ ... but I look inside and *in our hearts we are the same*. (emphasis added; Kitzte 2003).

The conclusions of “*Heart Match*” and “*Mommy and Me Don’t Match*” are even more similar; the former reads

My mom says that we are a perfect match where it matters the most – *in our hearts*. (emphasis added; Pankey 2020).

and the second ends with

Even though we look different on the outside, *our hearts beat the same*. [...] most of all I love your heart. *Your heart that matches mine*. (emphasis added; Monsma 2018).



Figure 3  
*Heart Match* (Pankey 2020).

The ‘heart match’ metaphor is habitually depicted in images of the mother hugging her little ones and holding them close to her bosom. These pictures generally correspond to the final scene of the books and suggest that having a difficult conversation about physical and behavioral appearances has produced the effect of bringing parents and children nearer to one another, both literally and metaphorically. Their remarkable closeness on the page (cf. Figures 3, 4, and 5) is strategic in activating the conceptual metaphor INTIMACY IS (PHYSICAL) PROXIMITY.



Figure 4 (left)  
*Mommy and Me Don't Match* (Monsma 2018).  
Figure 5 (right)  
*My New Mom and Me* (Galindo 2016).

Figure 4 is a representative example as it both communicates the notion of physical and emotional closeness between the characters and constructs the conventional metaphor HEART IS (THE PLACE OF) LOVING FEELINGS. The hand of the little girl rests on her mother's chest, a gesture that draws the viewer's attention to the part of the body where the heart is located and that expresses various layers of meaning. It may be linked with the idea that the two characters 'match on the inside', but it may also suggest that the mother's heart is, metonymically, a symbol of her love for her daughter and, metaphorically, the place where the latter was born from.

Adoption narratives often draw on the notion that adoptees grew not in their mother's bellies but in their hearts and they rely on the metaphor A HEART IS A WOMB (cf. Calvo-Maturana 2020, pp. 302-305). The pervasiveness of this trope in these narratives is probably due to the ever-present "concerns in the determination of belonging between adoptive parents and children" (*ivi*, p. 303); the use of 'womb' as a source domain allows the authors of these books (who, as already mentioned, are often adoptive parents themselves) to discursively construct a figurative biological bond between them and their children. The interaction between the concept that the 'heart is a womb' and that the heart is the metaphorical location of love is also relevant in adoption discourse "in which love and longing are represented as the moving engines of adoptive parents" (*ibid.*).

However, the HEART IS A WOMB metaphor is only hinted at in most of the books selected for this study (i.e. in *Heart Match*, *Mommy Doesn't Look like Me*, and *Mommy and Me Don't Match*; cf. Figure 4): it mostly appears in pre-adoption narratives which aim at helping young readers make sense of their past experiences and arrival in the new family<sup>9</sup> (and not in post-adoption ones like those examined here). In any case, it is worth mentioning that the visual component of these books is extremely rich as it is often linked with multiple levels of sense-making.

*My New Mom and Me* also feature an illustration of the little dog and his adoptive mother embracing; the puppy's paw is, too, placed on mom cat's bosom thus construing both the INTIMACY IS (PHYSICAL) PROXIMITY and the HEART IS (THE PLACE OF) LOVING FEELINGS metaphors (cf. Fig. 5). However, unlike in the books mentioned above, this image does not coincide with the (happy) resolution of the story. As a matter of fact, it does not follow a conversation about physical differences at the end of which adoptees are reassured to be part of a perfect match, but it appears in the middle of the narration, when the dog confesses that sometimes he feels really sad for no reason (a tear falling from his eye can be seen in the picture). The visual metaphors activated by the hug/heart images carry out a

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Riboni (2022).



different function than that realized in Pankey's and Monsma's books, because they convey the idea that the intimacy between cat and puppy is based not on the downplaying of differences but on the loving acceptance of the latter's negative feelings, in spite of the fact that he himself is incapable of pinpointing their origin.



Figure6  
*My New Mom and Me* (Galindo 2016).

The narrative in *My New Mom and Me* does not culminate in a final embrace, but the book concludes with an illustration of mom cat and her little one walking away from the viewer (cf. Fig. 6) and the words “*We are learning how to be a family*”. The combination of the visual and the textual element gives rise to the metaphor (LEARNING HOW) TO BE A FAMILY IS A JOURNEY. Although both mother and child are involved in the learning process, the leading role of the former is indicated by the fact that her eyes are fixed on the path ahead while the dog is walking by her side looking at her.

The use of this metaphor provides a dynamic ending to the story: whereas the other books contain static epilogues that provide a final statement on the issue of visible differences between adoptive family members, *My New Mom and Me* depicts the challenges that may present themselves to a multi-ethnic household as obstacles that can be encountered and collectively overcome during a journey.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

The analysis of the main metaphorical configurations of the selected interracial adoption picture books has revealed that they are not particularly creative, as the same tropes repeatedly occur and can be identified across

narratives. The fact that these stories not present significant variations may make them easier to understand, assimilate, and memorize by children. In particular, the presence of recurring metaphors can favor young readers' comprehension as they are used in these books to make sense of and communicate unfamiliar concepts in simpler and more accessible terms. Moreover, the choice of the 'perfect match' metaphor (and its declination of the 'heart match') can prove to be very reassuring for a readership of young adoptees; they can identify themselves with the child narrators who start their stories by raising uncomfortable questions about their looks and identity and end them by appropriating and reproducing their parents' view that lack of resemblance is not important. The main message of both texts and pictures is that physical similarity does not equate parenthood and that adoptive families belong together in spite of different looks.

However, although with exceptions and to varying degrees, these narratives provide a simplistic, inaccurate and sometimes biased illustration of the reality of interracial adoption. While it may be inevitable to simplify matters for a target audience of small adopted readers, exposing them to "the rhetoric of celebratory multiculturalism or a glorification of the maternal bond" (Chen 2013, p. 114) may not be the best way to welcome their feelings of anxiety or worry about their different looks (besides not preparing them to tackle possible unaccepting or even hostile behavior). What happens in most stories is that the parent re-negotiates the terms of the 'match' metaphor as far as the target domain is concerned. Whether the adult acknowledges that they do not match with their children or not, the argument that they bring forth is the same: the elements of the target domain selected by the adoptees to claim that they do not match with their parents are of little importance and others should have been chosen. In some cases, other physical attributes are presented as the 'correct' target of the 'match' metaphor (e.g. the color of the hand palms and not skin tone). Most narratives, however, focus on the dichotomy between the notion of 'matching on the outside' and that of 'matching on the inside', with the heart metonymy standing for the location of the emotions of the characters. All books suggest that the emotional alignment between family members counts more than their outer looks and the child narrators are depicted as eventually embracing this view.

Anyway, the young adoptees who read these stories (or whom these stories are read to) may feel differently from the characters they identify with. In spite of their authors' intentions, these books do not necessarily offer an authentic portrayal of adoptees' life situations (Sun 2021, p. 243) as children "are denied a chance to rehearse real-life situations and enact mixed, ambivalent feelings about adoption" (Chen 2013, p. 114). Rather than help adopted youngsters make sense of their emotions and accept them wholesale (even the negative ones), this kind of narratives does not seem to validate

them. Young adoptees may feel that their “resentment, anxiety, confusion, bitterness and ambivalence are unwarranted” (Sun 2021, p. 242) because they do not always necessarily harbor the same positive feelings towards adoption as their fictional counterparts. Moreover, the downplaying of the potential issues connected with different physical appearances may lead children who worry about them to feel unsupported and not understood. The definition of ‘disenfranchised grief’, which designates socially unacknowledged suffering, may be appropriate to describe the feelings of adoptees whose parents cannot accept and welcome negative emotions and anxiety about adoption and not fitting in (Doka 1989; cf. also Brodzinsky, 2011 p. 204).

It is important to stress that children who are exposed to these stories may find it difficult to challenge the romanticized view of interracial adoption contained in them not only because of their young age, but also due to the pervasiveness of narrative patterns and the conventional nature of the tropes these books are built upon. The main metaphors singled out in the research have become so lexicalized that they are not immediately identifiable as figures of speech, with the result that they are easily incorporated in dominant discourses and harder to contest (cf. par. §2). This may also explain why they are so widely and uncritically replicated in the picture books.

A possible reason for the idealization of interracial adoption in these narratives may have to do with the fact that the latter are firmly in the hands of adoptive parents, who are the authors of most of these books. In spite of opting for a child narrator presenting an adoptee’s perspective, these stories reproduce adults’ discourse on transracial adoption and (perhaps understandably) promote a positively biased view of it. Creating, circulating, and reading books which portray young adopted children as uncritically happy and not significantly affected by questions such as racism and isolation may have a therapeutic effect on adoptive parents, but not necessarily on adoptees. While it is easy to comprehend why adults struggle with acknowledging and accepting that their children may entertain ambivalent emotions towards their adoption, cancelling such emotions from books targeted at them may not be in their best interests. These narratives are devised with good intentions (Sun 2021, p. 243) but may partially fail to become a useful resource for young readers who have been adopted.

As previously noted, not all picture books offer a simplistic and biased description of interracial adoption. For instance, Galindo’s and Nazario’s stories appear to provide less ideological and romanticized representations of it. Neither “*My New Mom and Me*” and “*Mommy and Me Don’t Match*” seem to belittle physical differences and issues connected to them. In particular, Galindo’s book contains and normalizes episodes of unhappiness and grief where the adopted dog claims to be sad without providing reasons

for his feelings and where he receives unconditional love and acceptance from his mom cat. A minority of authors thus seems able to come up with narratives and metaphors that can be empowering for adoptees, although most writers provide an idealized (and not particularly valuable) representation of interracial adoption.

As a consequence, it is hoped that over the next few years the number of publications attentive to the ambivalence of children's feelings and accepting of their negative emotions will increase, thus changing current prevailing discourse on interracial adoption. It is also hoped that more scholarly work such as this – admittedly limited – analysis will be produced that focuses on this topic and that can contribute to the shaping of future interracial adoption narratives in cultural media products and to the prevention of stereotypes and stigma.

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