**Seemingly Minor Mistakes White Adoptive Parents of Children of Color Often Make**

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All white parents adopting children of color should know of the big, damaging mistakes we stand to make:

* not moving to an area where our children will see people that mirror them daily (an[adoptee’s experience](http://the-toast.net/2014/11/11/race-adoption/))
* not having close friends who mirror our children (an[adoptee’s experience](http://www.npr.org/2014/01/26/266434175/growing-up-white-transracial-adoptee-learned-to-be-black))
* not celebrating and integrating important components of our children’s race and culture (an[adoptee’s view](https://redthreadbroken.wordpress.com/2014/06/22/parents-of-adoptees/))
* not supporting our children in searching for or maintaining a relationship with their families of origin ([an adoptee’s search](http://thosefourlittlewords.com/2014/09/07/finding-my-family/))

*(The tremendous impact of these mistakes should be taught in Transracial Adoption 101. If they somehow weren’t or were not absorbed, parents need to educate themselves — especially by hearing from adult transracial adoptees. Please read the very important links above to learn how adoptees feel about these monumental mistakes. You might also start with* [*Inside Transracial Adoption*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1849059055/ref=as_li_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1849059055&linkCode=as2&tag=momeit-20&linkId=LO6722W76R6Y477E)*http://ir-na.amazon-adsystem.com/e/ir?t=momeit-20&l=as2&o=1&a=1849059055. There are a few other helpful links below.)*

There are also seemingly minor mistakes that we transracial adoptive parents commit regularly. They are often ignored during discussions about raising our adopted children. They are also routinely blatantly disregarded in favor of doing the exact opposite. While we parents might think these are harmless mistakes, they can act as [microaggressions](http://www.microaggressions.com/) that slowly chip away at our children’s identity and self-worth, packing a tremendous emotional punch over time.

Here are 10 seemingly small mistakes we often make that add up over time (in no particular order):

**1.  It is a mistake to get the brunt of personal care advice for our children from other white adoptive parents.**

I cannot tell you how many blogs, websites, books, and social media groups have been created by white parents to learn how to take care of our black children’s hair and skin. I assume there are plenty of similar resources for other children of color as well. I perused them all in the early years of parenting. Not one single black hair stylist or black friend had heard any of the terms I learned from those resources. Co-washing, 4C hair, yarn extensions, apple cider vinegar rinses. They are foreign terms to every black professional who has styled my daughter’s hair.

In the beginning, I usually received a good chuckle, a shake of the head, and advice that I stop getting hair advice from white people. Now, just to stay up to date, I ask if they’ve heard any of the terms tossed around on white sites. I still haven’t found a professional who knows them, though some of the black mothers who are mentors on adoption sites do. They don’t necessarily use them in their daily life, but they’ve heard them.

Though we are responsible for our children’s personal care when they are young, they need to learn how to care for themselves eventually. They will likely go to professionals of color for care when they are adults. We can help them learn the proper terminology and care when they are young to save them from embarrassment and isolation later on.

See #2 for some resources.

**2.  It is a mistake to buy hair and skin products from white adoptive parents and white-owned businesses.**

Buying personal care products specifically for the race of our children from white adoptive parents and white-owned businesses contributes to some serious [columbusing](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Columbusing). It is hard enough for any small company to get ahead. Taking business away from small companies that know the ins and outs of personal care for our children from a lifetime of experience is shameful.

It also sends our children the message that, despite all the products out there developed by people who mirror them, we thought the ones created by people who mirror us would be better.

Bonus tip: Go to a farmers market in a diverse area. One can find amazing professionals of color and business owners who have developed incredible products for our children (I have seen products for black and Asian hair at our favorite market).

* Click [here for Skinfolk,](http://www.myskinfolk.com/shop/hair/hapi-mane-hydrating-hair-oil/) the small woman and black-owned business from a local farmers market that my daughter loves.
* Click [here for Viva Woman](http://www.vivawoman.net/), a personal care blog (with some other fun stuff thrown in) for Asian women.
* Click [here (Un-ruly)](http://un-ruly.com/) and [here (Black Hair Kitchen)](http://www.blackhairkitchen.com/) and [here (AfroBella)](http://www.afrobella.com/) and [here (Curly Nikki)](http://www.curlynikki.com/) for blogs about black personal care. Click [here (Clear Essence)](http://www.clearessence.com/) for black skincare for both men and women.
* Click [here (Latina)](http://www.latina.com/beauty/best-latina-beauty-blogs) for a list of Latina beauty blogs and vlogs.

**3.  It is a mistake to follow news sources exclusively run by and for white people.**

Even the most well-intentioned and seemingly diverse news sources run by white people favor stories about white people. They are bound to show a bias that excludes and often denigrates people like our children. Furthermore, their stories are centered around white culture and are not likely to include our children’s culture — except as a feature that can [otherize](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=otherize) or exoticize our children.

News sources that represent our children will keep us informed about our children’s cultures, countries, trends, important people, etc. They will also help to balance the stories we hear on other news sources.

There is plenty of media available that caters to our children’s race/culture. We need to make sure we are getting a good portion of our news from them. When our children are ready, they can get their news from them as well.

* Click [here (Black News)](http://blacknews.com/)  and [here (Black News on Facebook)](https://www.facebook.com/blacknews) for black news. You can also click [here (Ebony)](http://www.ebony.com/) and [here (Ebony Facebook)](https://www.facebook.com/ebonymag).
* *The Root* is probably one of the largest sources of black news online. Though launched by Henry Gates, Jr. (black) and Donald E. Graham (white), it is owned by Graham’s company. It is under the umbrella of *Slate* and I find it to be unbalanced in terms of positive and negative stories involving people of color. I think it often demonizes and profiles people of color.
* Click [here (Latina Lista)](http://latinalista.com/) and [here (Latina Lista on Facebook)](https://www.facebook.com/LatinaLista) for a Latina-owned online new source.
* Click [here (Asia Times Online)](http://www.atimes.com/) and [here (Asia Times Online on Facebook)](https://www.facebook.com/asiatimesonline) for an Asian-owned online news source.

**4. It is a mistake to focus on multiculturalism and diversity to the exclusion of our children’s culture.**

We adoptive parents often talk about how diverse our communities/schools/activities are. We find movies that portray a variety of people. We read books to our children that show children of all colors. These are important parts of raising a child adopted transracially.

Our kids need to be immersed in their own culture as well. A neighborhood whose diversity is made up of Latino, black, and white families is not going to offer a cultural haven for children of Asian decent. Likewise, a multicultural book club that reads one book about a black child per year is not going to offer the same benefits to a black child as a book club specifically for black children.

It is great to embrace all cultures. It is also important to place our children’s cultures at the top of the list, directing more of our energy and resources there than anywhere else.

**5.  It is a mistake to continue to swim in the pool of primarily white culture.**

As with news sources, it is important that we parents surround ourselves with the culture of our children. Besides helping us learn about our children’s cultures, and thereby equipping us to teach our children, it normalizes our children’s cultures for us. This is vitally important to our children. We are always more sympathetic to people we see as a normal part of our world. This is why it is so difficult for many white people to ascertain the drastic disparities in the [treatment of black people vs. white people by the U.S. legal system](http://newjimcrow.com/about), to use a current example. It is also why we criticize aspects of other cultures that, in context, are not any more bizarre than aspects of white culture (e.g. While a passionate Gospel choir in a black church might feel awkward to many white people, an unemotional, perfectly still choir in a white church might feel awkward to many people raised in black churches).

When we remain steeped in our own culture, it is nearly impossible to appreciate other cultures. It also makes it much easier for us to criticize our children’s cultures without even knowing it. When you roll your eyes and proclaim that the Mexican customer who just came in to the shop where you work needs to learn to speak English, your children hear you criticizing people who speak a language other than your own. When you scrunch up your nose every time someone asks if you tried *Kimchi* while visiting Korea, your children hear you expressing disdain for an element of their culture (Also, that’s just not right; *Kimchi* is the new chocolate).

This is not to say that we have to love everything about our children’s cultures. That’s not genuine. But we can take more time to really experience our children’s cultures and we can be more diplomatic in expressing our opinions.

We should listen to music, watch movies and TV shows, frequent markets and businesses, enjoy comedy, read magazines and books, peruse fashion and entertainment news — all through sources that represent our children’s cultures.

**6. It is a mistake to openly criticize and ban harmless trends enjoyed by our children’s cultures.**

If we are willing to pick our battles regarding the trends from white culture that our white children want to try, we have to be willing to pick our battles about the trends our children of color wish to try from their cultures. Basically, we can’t let a white son get a surfer hair-cut, but tell a black son he can’t loc his hair. If you don’t have a white child, look at the trends other kids in your life follow and ask yourself if you would be okay with that before you decide what your child of color can and can’t explore.

**7. It is a mistake to decorate without considering our children of color.**

If we decorate with pictures and paintings of people, our children need to be represented. When we pick a style, we should consider how it fits with our children’s cultures. Our children are not always going to live with us. We want them to grow up feeling as comfortable in themselves and in their cultures as possible. Surrounding them with elements of their cultures contributes to that goal.

This extends to holidays too. For our children’s first Christmas with us, we received a lovely black Santa as a gift. Many years later, my children now teens, it remains their favorite decoration to put out each Christmas. This year, my teens told me that between black Santa and the several black creches we have, they feel like home is a respite from all the white Christmas they see everywhere else.

**8. It is a mistake to avoid re-evaluating our political and religious beliefs so that they benefit our children of color.**

This is perhaps the most difficult mistake to consider on this list, but also the most important. When we choose to adopt a child transracially, we are choosing to support every bit of them. We cannot go into transracial adoption assuming that our children will mold to us and accept our beliefs (really, we shouldn’t go into any parenting with that assumption). It is our job to create an environment where our children feel safe and loved.

Attending a place of worship that singles out our children, either because they are the only people of color there or by turning them into mascots for diversity or adoption, can make our children feel unsafe, a feeling that should not be associate with worship. Likewise, if the place of worship we attend [demonizes families of origin, our children’s cultures, or differences](http://mommymeansit.com/racism-in-adoption-community/), they will not likely feel safe. Finally, we can damage our children’s identitity and sense of security if our place of worship regularly and publicly promotes a [“white savior/adopt-to-save” mentality](http://mommymeansit.com/god-in-adoption/).

The same should be said for political affiliations.  When we agree to adopt a child transracially, we are agreeing to consider how our political beliefs and how we vote will affect our child’s future. Voting for policies that promote racism sends our children a message that our worldview is more important than their dignity and safety. Supporting politicians who spew hatred towards non-white people tells our children that they are less-than, that we care more about the hateful politician than our own children. And we have to think carefully about the way our political choices shape the educational system in this country. It is already [stacked against children of color](http://mommymeansit.com/battling-the-school-to-prison-pipeline/).

When we refuse to re-evaluate our religious and political beliefs, we convey the painful message that our own comfort is far more important to us than that of our children.

If we cannot re-evaluate our religious and political beliefs to provide for our transracially adopted children, we should not adopt outside of our race and religion.

**9.  It is a mistake to plan vacations without considering our children of color.**

Going to a bunch of civil war re-enactments across the country might be fun for the white members of the family, but will it feel good to our black children? Mt. Rushmore is cool, but pretty white. That Day of the Dead Festival in the square of small-town white America might be colorful, but how will a Latino child feel about the bastardization of a holiday sacred in his country?

How about heading to the non-tourist areas of that Caribbean island you visit every winter? Or take your island vacation to South Carolina’s [Gullah Islands](http://diasporadash.me/post/26656617061/the-gullah-creole-language), founded by members of the African diaspora, this year? Look into museums that highlight contributions and innovations of your child’s culture. If we need to stay in the U.S., we can go to big cities that are likely to have pockets representing our children’s culture (Think places like [Little Haiti](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Haiti) in Florida, [Chinatown](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinatown,_Chicago) and [Devon Avenue’s Southeast Asian neighborhood](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Devon_Avenue_%28Chicago%29) in Chicago). Spend time in each destination where the people of color spend time. We can still see the historical landmarks that interest us, but we should be sure to include the history that is not represented at those sites as well.

Immersing ourselves in the culture, news, and fads of our children’s culture can help tremendously with planning a vacation.

**10.  It is a mistake to believe that any one immersion experience is enough to connect our children of color with their cultures.**

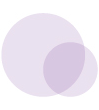
Adoption culture camps are hugely popular and wildly expensive. They are also largely attended by other transracially adopted children and last a short period of time. They will not magically give our children all the tools they need to feel a part of their culture. Language programs are wonderful for children whose original language is not English, but they don’t provide the whole picture. A meal here and there at a restaurant serving food from our children’s culture does not make up for being raised outside of their cultures. All of things are important contributions to creating a comfortable and safe environment for our trasracially adopted children, but they cannot stand alone.

More importantly, they cannot be done alone. Sending a child to culture camp every year while the rest of the family stays home might send a hearty message that their culture or origin is fine for them, but not for us.

We need to participate. We need to appreciate.

By choosing to adopt a child of another race/country/culture, we agree to become a family of that culture/race. This means that we are required to step out of our own comfort zones in nearly everything we do (and think). Considering how challenging it can be for a child of color to even develop a comfort zone when raised by white parents, this task is not as daunting as it seems.

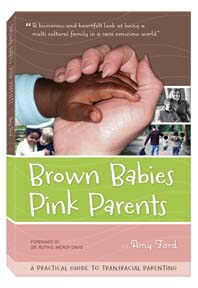
[Ten Commandments of Black Hair Care for White Parents](http://www.naturallycurly.com/curlreading/curlykids/ten-commandments-of-black-hair-care-for-white-parents/)

[](http://www.naturallycurly.com/curlreading/authors/amy-ford-2/)by: [Amy Ford](http://www.naturallycurly.com/curlreading/authors/amy-ford-2/) 9.20.10

Amy's hard-won guidelines are well worth noting

Next Article: [Looking for a New Haircut? Of Course You Are! »](http://www.naturallycurly.com/curlreading/wavy-hair-type-2/looking-for-a-new-haircut-of-course-you-are/)

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My new book, "Brown Babies Pink Parents", is officially six weeks old and I am thoroughly enjoying the feedback pouring into my inbox, especially about the chapter on hair. Every adoptive mother has a story to tell about learning to comb their daughter’s hair. Some are tremendously funny and others aren’t so much. The most frequently asked question I receive as the white mother of African American daughters has to be about the hair and I am so proud to say, “I did it!” It wasn’t easy to learn how to care for my children’s hair and my mission is now to pass along those hair lessons to other mothers. If nothing else, I want to say, “Don’t be afraid! Give it a try and then practice. You can do it!” For this purpose, I have created the Ten Commandments of Black Hair Care for White Parents, as found in Chapter 8 of "Brown Babies Pink Parents."

1. Thou shalt not wash your child’s hair every day.
2. Thou shalt not treat your child’s hair as your do your own.
3. Thou shalt apply oil to your child’s scalp daily.
4. Thou shalt comb hair on a regular basis despite tears, screams, and tantrums.
5. Thou shalt commit yourself to learning the art of hair maintenance.
6. Thou shalt seek professional help from a licensed stylist when in doubt.
7. Thou shalt practice, practice, practice.
8. Thou shalt avoid sandboxes.
9. Though shalt not take every piece of advice offered to you regarding hair and skin.
10. Though shalt not let younger children style their own hair.

I can’t imagine how you could go wrong if you follow these simple guidelines. The rest is gravy! Specific styles can be learned. The important thing is to open yourself to the experience of learning a new skill. I have a creative freedom with my children’s hair that I will never know with my own. When I was a little girl, there were 3 hair styles available to me —one pony tail, two pony tails, or French braids, which I now know originated in Africa, not France. Not so for my girls! My children’s hair can be shaped and sculpted into a multitude of styles, making me feel like a hair artist. Yes, learning a new skill can be intimidating, but only as long as you allow yourself to be intimidated. Isn’t your baby love worth it?

Personal Response: 7 Biggest Risks of Raising Black Children in a White Environment



[](http://brianwilkins.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Mtown-1979.png)

My homies Joe, David, Patrick, Greg, Geoff, Grant, and I. Circa 1979.

This interesting article “7 Biggest Risks of Raising Black Children in a White Environment” was published on [Atlanta Black Star](http://atlantablackstar.com/2015/01/19/7-biggest-risks-of-raising-black-children-in-a-white-environment/7/) January 19. My hometown, [Marshalltown, Iowa](https://ci.marshalltown.ia.us/) (population about 24,000 back then), was 95-plus percent white when I was born and raised (1970s, 1980s, early 1990s). The Des Moines schools I went to after my parents were divorced around 1987 were at least 60/40 white/black, give or take. I was shuffled back-and-forth between the two towns after 7th grade, thus I have a really unique perspective.

I’d like to address the 7 biggest risks with personal responses.

**1. Children Can Be Harassed About Being Smart**

I got straight A’s (E’s in elementary school) until 6th grade when my parents got divorced and I turned rebellious about school and life in general. I was moved to a different class in 1st grade – from Mrs. Speas (I think) to Mrs. Ketchum (I know) because I was too smart. Mrs. Lentz was supposed to be the “mean” 4th grade teacher. She had me skip a few assignments the other kids did because my Apple II-e computer game I programmed was long and needed to be finished.

My fifth grade teacher (Schroeder?) had my good friend Michelle and I skip regular class assignments, and work with/mentor the mentally challenged class. We helped them with reading and math, and even produced, wrote, and performed a play starring ourselves and said kids.

My seventh grade year (my first year in a 60/40 white/black school after my parents’ divorce) I was still a math whiz and my black male teacher (which I never had in my life to that point) was impressed at my ability. I was motivated to do well for him. In hindsight, however, I obviously should have been in the next math class up. The Marshalltown school would have moved me up; the Des Moines school did not.

I turned into a f\*\*\* up after 7th grade in all classes; skipped school a lot and did just enough to graduate.

**2. Too White for Blacks, Too Black for Whites**

This is an interesting one. I met my best friends for life Corey and Chris (my first black close non-family friends) when I moved schools in 7th grade. I was called a lot of names by black girls: nerd, “underweight” (that was one of my favs), “you talk like a whiteboy,” etc. When I was in elementary school, I used to get really uncomfortable when everyone would stare at me when slavery was taught in history classes. A few white girls would always want to touch my hair and call me “fuzzy wuzzy.” One girl poured a little water on my head in junior high because she wanted to see what black people’s hair did when it was wet. It all annoyed me, but they meant no harm. In fact the latter girl I had a major crush on.

Other than the aforementioned, I don’t remember much else pertaining to this subject.

**3. They Don’t Learn Code Switching**

There may be some merit to this. Code switching is explained:

***“Black people raised in predominately white..communities never develop, or are slow to develop, what sociolinguists call alternate “registers,” specific varieties of informal/formal styles of speech that are racially and ethnically distinct from the white dominant group.”***

I give my upbringing – both my parents and communities – credit for teaching me to be myself. My black friends in Des Moines would sometimes poke a little fun at me for listening to Roxette, Poison, or other “white music.” My white friends would be fascinated by the rap and R&B I’d have on my walkman.

I went through my “hip hop stage” from 8th to 11th grade, wearing fake gold chains, Flavor Flav clocks, and getting in a few fights to show my street toughness (got my ass beat a few times…still weighted less than 100 pounds in 9th grade). I even tried to “talk black” for one year (9th grade). But I realized I sounded ridiculous, stopped, and just kept speaking normally. Plus I learned girls seemed to be more interested in me being articulate. So I sacrificed stereotypical “blackness” (which I obviously didn’t do well anyway) for girls.

After high school I moved to Phoenix and auditioned for my first radio job. I didn’t get hired at the hip-hop FM frequency (The AZ Party Station) because “you sound too white.”

**4. Black People Tend to Look Down on Them, Thus Affecting Their  
Sense of Blackness**

My hometown was as white as can be. But my dad and family were VERY black. My dad still partially had his southern accent (he was born in Arkansas) and my mom was the epitome of a black woman! Plus I’d be around my dad, uncles, and cousins a lot, as many of the few black families in my hometown were relatives. My sense of blackness was well-developed as a child.

[](http://brianwilkins.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Pride-of-Iowa.jpg)

My dad is on far left; middle row. My uncle is right next to him, and my cousin is next to him in the sunglasses. An all-black softball team (circa 1981), in a white town.

Again I got called a few names by black girls when I first moved to Des Moines, but don’t really remember the guys saying much, other than insulting my lack of basketball ability.

The guys never really mentioned much about me being “white sounding” or anything. First time I hung out at Corey’s house (7th grade), we were looking at Playboy magazines. I remember him saying “I didn’t think you’d be doing this” mostly because I spoke too “proper.” But after a while we all knew we were just kids. Even the white guy in our crew, Ross, had black people in his family.

[](http://brianwilkins.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Crew-extended.png)

The extended Des Moines crew: Todd, Shawn, and Caleb. 1991.

People who don’t know me today will pre-judge, but more power to them. I definitely have no problem with my “blackness” today. Its easy for me to strike up conversation with anyone because of my upbringing. I’ll jam Debbie Gibson or [Trisha Yearwood](http://youtu.be/mUFObCZtGWQ) in my van while driving; followed by Eazy-E and Outkast; and don’t care what people think.

I’ve successfully incorporated my true self into many office settings and people actually seem to appreciate the candor (of course tailored to whatever the overall company culture is). I like to believe black folks today in general appreciate my work, *inter alia*, exposing the police state and not wavering from truth even if its unpopular among the “mainstream.” But again its easy to live and get along with anyone when you don’t care what others think of you regardless of their race.

**5. It Can Make Them Sick**

This point focused on black kids raised by white families, and other black people subsequently “sensing” they are frauds. This doesn’t pertain to me.

**6. Black Girls Especially Can Suffer Lowered Self-Esteem**

Well, I’m not a girl so obviously this doesn’t pertain to me. But my little sister turned out ok. She’s highly successful in her career.

[](http://brianwilkins.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Little-Sister.png)

My little sister Tonya and I.

My big sister passed away years ago (love you Michelle). She definitely had no self-esteem issues, and was always willing to beat up any girl who hurt her little brother’s feelings! Also have to mention my big brother Claude Jr. He is married with kids, and has a great career.

**7. Black Children Can Be Confused by the Many Racial Micro-Aggressions**

I was always treated the exact same by teachers as all other students in my home town. In fact there were times I thought my teachers were picking on me when I was in elementary school because they made me do more work and harder work than the others. But it was because they were developing skills they believed I had.

There were, of course, a few stupid kids who would make a few stupid remarks and gestures. But a vast majority were laughing WITH and not at me. This kid Schipull, when I was in elementary school and 6th grade, would always “strut” a little bit to imitate my “trying to walk black.” It was actually really funny and he was a good friend. This kid Pfantz would call me “Jackson” and make silly remarks. But it was all in fun. I would get annoyed when girls would say I looked like “X black person on TV with glasses.” But I got over it.

When I got older and graduated from my home town school, a few guys were a little annoying. But if they said their “nigger” jokes, I’d say very cruel, very demeaning things back (re: talk about the fat kid being a virgin and girls not liking him; telling them they’re cursed because they burn and get cancer in natural sunlight, etc.).

[](http://brianwilkins.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Seniors.png)

Crazy seniors 1993 (and a junior and a college freshman): Donnie, Kyle, Chris, Matt, Blake, and Matt.

I remember one kid saying “I smell nigger” when I got close to him. I responded “yeah me too. Its coming from your mom’s pu\*\*y.” He never said anything like that again. I still love him and all my boys from M’town, and in hindsight, some of the racial slurs prepared me for the real world outside of the fish bowl.

I grew up in a white town in the late 1970s and all 1980s – when [Diff’rent Strokes](http://youtu.be/9xU9d1VAsiA?t=9m26s), Facts of Life, Silver Spoons, Cosby Show, and other TV shows like them dominated the air waves. Black was presented in a positive way in all of them, unlike the coonery of today’s hip-hop, television, and movies. Plus black and white were always together in media and it was just normal. I believe that helped a lot. Mass media have the power to shape society however it chooses. Sadly I believe there are ulterior motives that aren’t positive in the monopolized media environment today. As someone whose worked in corporate radio and newspapers, I got to see some of this first-hand.

I’m happy how I grew up. My parents splitting up had far more of a negative effect on my life than the black/white dichotomy; as I think it would any child. Regardless the world and my hometown are very different in 2015. I highly doubt my old community could be replicated again, ever, anywhere.

**Categories:** [American Culture](http://brianwilkins.org/?cat=7)