

Media Reviews

One Battle After Another: A Tribute to Biracial Daughters of White Fathers

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I, like many others, left the theater pleasantly amused by the quirky, frenetically charged hijinks of Paul Thomas Anderson's action-thriller, *One Battle After Another*.¹ On a macro level, the film touches on the increasingly building tension between radical progressive movements and a militarized governing system. But if you look close enough, beyond the immigration raids, citywide protests, and explosive Nissan Sentra car chases, there is a heartfelt coming-of-age story about a Black teenage girl and her White dad.

Bob is played by Leonardo DiCaprio, who appears to be jumping at the opportunity to step out of his typical nonsense action-guy roles to play a bumbling, washed-up ex-revolutionary stoner dad. His daughter is Willa (Chase Infiniti), the 16-year-old product of Bob's short but wild romance with Perfidia (Teyana Taylor), the former leader of "The French 75" rebel group who quickly leaves her new family in pursuit of her revolutionary agenda. When Willa becomes the target of the walking, talking (or in this case, limping) personification of toxic masculine White supremacy, Colonel Steven Lockjaw (Sean Penn), Bob gets dragged off the couch and back into the world of disorder and insurrection that he never quite fit into to begin with.

In the film, Bob reflects mournfully on his struggle as a single dad to connect with Willa, not even being able to help her do her hair (and with the state of his own man-bun in this scene, it is not hard to believe). In interviews, Anderson mentions how this line was inspired from his own experience raising his biracial daughters, as well as his wife Maya Rudolph's relationship with her widowed father.² With this movie, Anderson speaks to the perhaps underrecognized challenge of navigating fatherhood across racial, gender, and intergenerational divides, while simultaneously tackling personal grief and need for fulfillment.

Multiracial children constitute an ever-growing and ever-diversifying population in the US. Studies conducted on mental health trends in this group have shown mixed results. Some have found a significant, though not "pervasive," difference in psychiatric pathologies among children of interracial parents compared to single-race parents.³ Broader nationwide studies have largely found higher rates of depression, substance use, and poor mental

health outcomes in interracial vs monoracial groups.^{4,5} These results seem to be tied to the youths' (ages 0-25) specific racial identities, social settings, and familial dynamics. They note that even with these findings, multiracial individuals are often excluded from these studies or all conglomerated into the "Other" category, further limiting our awareness.⁶

Oh et al. demonstrated that children struggled most when they experienced discrimination, invalidation of their multiracial identity, isolation from certain parts of their heritage, or pressure to choose one side over another.⁴ Nonetheless, one study showed particular strengths among this demographic, as they often engage in more identity exploration and have broader social networks.⁷ Estranged or confined to small boxes, multiracial children struggle to develop a sense of self. Supported in all their identities, they can thrive in and even enrich the world around them.

I personally am the daughter of a Chinese Malaysian immigrant mother and a White, Californian, classic-rock-loving dad. After my mom passed away when I was 2 years old, my dad pulled out every stop for my brother and me. He hosted hair-bow-making parties for my cheerleading tournaments, stood by my side at the premiere of every new *Twilight* movie, and even took us on weeks-long trips to Malaysia so we could still get to know our family. I will forever admire and have immense gratitude for the lengths my dad went to make sure we still felt whole, especially as he himself lost his mother when he was just 10 years old.

Nonetheless, looking back at my childhood, I often felt afloat, unsure of how to place myself in a world that could not place me. While I was blessed with a family that held the world wide open for me, it was often unclear where exactly I was supposed to be going, or what booby traps I might encounter along the way. Not having known my mom, I instead grieved the parts of her I imagined she would have shared with me and resented the effort it took to figure them out alone. I remember the shame in choosing my brother's Legos over my Barbies, as if I was losing all hope of attaining femininity with every plastic brick I snapped into place. I brought mu shu pork takeout for school lunch, an advertisement to all that, despite my ambiguous appearance, I was in fact Chinese American. Even



now, I still get trapped in indecision when forms ask me to choose my race singly as “White,” “Asian,” or “Other.”

And I will be clear—Bob is *nothing* like my dad. He is perpetually high (a paradoxically paranoia-exacerbating coping mechanism for his constant fear of government assassination), extremely disconnected from his daughter’s life and feelings, and too traumatized from his past to allow Willa to shape her own future. The absence of her mother, who ties her to her femininity and Blackness, means she has many battles she must tackle alone, from what to wear to the school dance to how to live up to her insurgent destiny. Yet instead of encouraging her to find the less accessible aspects of her heritage, Bob prohibits her freedom entirely—an attempt at paternal protection that conversely traps them both inside a cabin deep in the woods of rural Northern California.

We feel her anger and loneliness at the beginning of the film, tasked with babysitting a father who projects his own sense of alienation onto her and deprives her of any space to grieve or even learn who her mother was. It is only when she is whisked from this world into her mother’s realm of the French 75 that she starts to recognize the docile, suburban life her father restricted her to is neither where she came from nor who she is supposed to be. Dropped into the deep end of a convent full of Black revolutionary nuns with Colonel Lockjaw nipping at her ankles, Willa is forced to trust her life to the women that represent the most unfamiliar, radical, and spunky aspects of herself. She may not understand them, or even like them, but she trusts them. It is that trust that ultimately guides her not just to survival but to her own self-actualization. And always just a step or two behind her in this journey is Bob, who even in his stoned haze cannot help but recognize how brilliantly she shines when given the opportunity and community to do so.

Unlike Willa, I was never held back but always cheered further on by my dad to explore my roots. Instead of plunging headfirst, I got to carefully wade through all the different waters around me. And slowly but surely, I gathered the courage to embrace opportunities to form my sense of self as I see fit. From sharing my background proudly with those around me, I have found support systems in all these different realms. I now plate my dad’s famous BBQ ribs right next to the traditional Cantonese steamed fish at my annual Lunar New Year feast. I have gained kinship, confidence, and identity in the “White,” the “Asian,” and the “Other.” In the end, Willa and I both got to reach that fulfillment. But personally, I prefer the path that avoids being chased by a ram-paging neo-Nazi.

Every child is their own universe, and it is not the job of any parent to define the child’s life for them. What they can do is provide their children with the space, courage, and wisdom to take the world on for their own, with the security that they will always be there to catch them if anything goes astray.

I still get that feeling—working hard to create your identity and sense of self but also sensing there is a part of

you that is always outside of your reach. As an aspiring child/adolescent psychiatrist, I have recognized isolation like mine and Willa’s in the children and adolescents who flow through our clinics. I have seen how disconnect or being torn between identities can cultivate loneliness, anxiety, and depression. As providers for children and families, we have the opportunity to bolster this self-exploration and discovery. We can help youth construct self-narratives that integrate the various aspects of their heritage, connect them to communities that specifically highlight multiracial backgrounds, and encourage their families to embrace every aspect of their heritage. Most of all, we can emphasize to each of them the power of finding clarity and pride in every part of yourself.

PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY

This article explores how Paul Thomas Anderson’s film *One Battle After Another* captures the complicated experience of children with parents of different races. Research shows that multiracial youth have more overall mental health concerns than those from single-race families. This is especially true when parts of their identity are dismissed or divided. Nonetheless, these populations also have unique strengths. Here, we emphasize the importance of helping youths and their families understand and embrace their unique cultural backgrounds.

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