

The personal is political: Racial identity and racial justice in transracial adoption

By JaeRan Kim

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Good morning. I want to begin by thanking Mary Boo and the NACAC board for the invitation to speak today. It was only three years ago that I moved from MN to Washington state and I credit the professional and personal adoption community in Minnesota with really shaping my work. I have had the fortune to collaborate with NACAC many times during my time in MN and it really does feel like I'm coming home.

Many of you know parts of my story; from my blogs or other work I've done, but I'd like to give you a quick synopsis, so you have a sense of where I'm coming from and why I am so passionate about the topics of racial and social justice.

I was born in South Korea in 1968 and adopted in 1971 to a white family in Minnesota. My adoptive mom was pregnant with my sister when I arrived, and my sister was born just three months after I arrived. My brother was born 14 months after my sister, which means my parents had three kids in less than 18 months. I was the only adoptee and person of color in both my nuclear and extended family. My parents were kind and loving, and also completely unaware of their own racial privileges, and clueless about how to raise a child of color in a white environment. They were told by their adoption worker to assimilate me and they did a great job of that.

As a result, this is what Asian culture looked like in my family when I was growing up [Slide]. And I joke that the town I grew up in was so white it had an entire store devoted to whiteness called Blanc de Blanc (and it's still there) [Slide]. Our family lived less than 20 miles away from a major city that included Korean churches, restaurants, grocery stores and in general, "diversity." And yet, the only times our family ventured to "the big city" was at Christmas time to see the Guthrie Theater's production of Dickens' "A Christmas Story. But I didn't know what I was missing in terms of racial and cultural diversity.

I've been talking to adoptive parents and professionals for over 30 years. My first official gig happened was when I was 16 and it was for a group of parents who had either adopted or were in the process of adopting. I think my adoptive mom was asked by church friends if we'd speak, although I honestly don't remember my mom saying anything! I remember being the only adoptee in the room and being asked questions about my experience.

There I was, sitting next to my adoptive mom, answering questions about being a transracial adoptee, and my mom and I had never had a conversation about our transracial adoptive family. The only time my race came up was when my family minimized my racial and ethnic difference. I was often reassured by them that they didn't see me as Korean, they saw me just as their daughter. Because our family didn't see me as Asian or Korean, I didn't have a language with which to talk about race. I didn't know "transracial" was a word. I didn't know how to describe racism. And in our family, we didn't talk about race or racism. How do you talk about and describe something you have no language for? And so, in that living room surrounded by white adoptive parents, I told them what they wanted to hear: don't worry about race and culture. Love is enough.

We know love isn't enough. Like anything else you value for your children - their education, their spiritual development, their work ethic - love isn't enough to guarantee children will achieve any of these things. Parents need to invest in them. The same goes for your child's racial and ethnic identity. You can't leave this area of their development up for chance. A transracially adopted child *will develop* a racial identity whether or not it's addressed in a family. How adoptive parents and communities support racial identity for transracial adoptees will impact the kind of relationship that transracial adoptees will have with them.

Like many transracial adoptees I began the hard work of learning about being a person of color and how to talk about race during and after I went to college. And once I began to learn how to talk about race, I knew that I wanted to help other transracial adoptive families learn to talk about race too.

So, coming full circle back to Minnesota, when I was asked to present on race and adoption, I thought about Minnesota's strong support ethic for social services and adoption is one of the many evidences of that. Minnesota has also historically been one of the states most

open to, and supportive of, refugee and immigrant communities. But Minnesota is also a very historically white state, particularly outside of the Twin Cities Metro area. Minnesota has some of the highest rates of transracial adoption and immigrants and refugees...and also some of the highest disparities in education, child welfare, and incarceration among black and native Americans. In 2017 WCCO reported that Minnesota was the second worst state for racial disparities. So, Minnesota has a long-standing reputation for charity. But as Michael Eric Dyson said, "Charity is no substitute for justice...we must never ignore injustices that make charity necessary, or the inequities that make it possible."

My talk this morning is titled "The Political Is Personal: Racial Identity and Racial Justice in Transracial Adoption." Today during this presentation, I will be challenging all of us to think beyond identity-affirming family spheres and consider how we can all join together actively working for racial justice for all. I'll be sharing insights from my personal experience, my professional work with transracial adoptive families and child welfare and adoption professionals, and my own research. I'll also be referencing my book chapter in *A Good Time for the Truth: Race in Minnesota*. Finally, I'll present a call to action for adoptive parents and allies with suggestions for how to work for transracial adoption justice.

What does transracial adoption justice look like? I have five main thoughts I'll share with you today. Transracial adoption justice involves:

1. Intersectional thinking - to understand that as transracial adoptees, our lives are impacted by both race and adoption, not just one or the other
2. Being believed when we experience discrimination and oppression based on our racial, ethnic and/or adoption identities
3. Having the white people in our lives do their own work to understand the history of race, power, privilege and oppression in our country including what it means in a both a broad and personal context to be white
4. Having people in our lives who care about our communities, not just us as individuals

5. Considering the long haul - that the focus on us as children is limiting and can be damaging - if adoption is truly a lifelong journey, then we need people who spend the first two decades thinking about and preparing for the next fifty-plus years of our lives

Transracial adoption justice involves Intersectional thinking - to understand that as transracial adoptees, our lives are impacted by both race and adoption, not just one or the other

The idea of an adoptive family as a shelter for a child who has experienced the loss of their first family is an appropriate metaphor; the care and intimacy that a family can provide to any child goes beyond the first level of Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs. More than providing the warmth of a literal shelter made of wood and bricks and stone, a family provides emotional shelter for kids who have experienced loss, grief, and trauma.

But providing shelter is not always easy. As writer Sara Ahmed says, "It can be painstaking to build a shelter from materials left behind; from histories that make it difficult for some to survive." For adoptees of color in the United States, these left behind materials and histories include a legacy of colonization, slavery, war, forced immigration, laws and policies that discriminated against our families and communities because of our race, ethnicity or religion.

If an adoptive family builds a strong shelter but does not include what is needed in terms of a shelter for a child's racial and cultural identity, then it's like letting a hole in the roof continue to leak. Eventually the hole is going to get bigger and bigger until part of the roof collapses. It should not be the transracial adoptee's job to build a racially strong shelter all by themselves.

Having a "good" (however one defines that) adoptive home does **not** erase the losses transracial adoptees experience. For example, nothing in my American, middle-class upbringing could make up for the loss of my Korean family and culture and language. I'm not convinced by the notion that a "well-adjusted transracial adoptee" is one who never questions their racial or

cultural-related losses: never goes through an identity crisis or feels disconnected with or struggles with fitting in. If anything, whenever I meet a transracial adoptee who identifies as white and rejects their racial or ethnic group, I understand that this is a person had to, for their emotional, psychological or physical survival. These adoptees learned that to identify as a person of color was not safe.

Transracial adoptees need people in their lives who understand that racial, ethnic and cultural needs are as important as a stability, good parents, good education, physical and mental resources, and spiritual development. Too often our racial, ethnic and cultural needs get thought of as “add-ons” that would be “nice to have” but not as important as the other stuff.

One of the Korean adoptee participants in one of my studies, who was adopted as an older child, told me:

My parents were given not-so-good advice when they adopted us which is they were told to not have that connection [to Korea] and I remember specifically telling my parents I wanted to continue my Korean, because they had found a woman who spoke Korean and trusted and I said I would like to take Korean classes, and they opted not to have me participate because they thought it would delay my process of learning and adjusting to the American culture. It's probably one of my [biggest] disappointments about their decision but I tried to understand the advice they were given and that they were trying their best.

One of the aspects of the Adverse Childhood Experience Study that has bothered me from the beginning is the lack of racial application. While I applaud many of the aspects and goals of the ACES framework, I believe that experiencing racial discrimination and bullying is a toxic and adverse childhood experience and excluding this shows a lack of intersectional thinking. It is harmful for a transracially adopted child to grow up without being affirmed in their racial and ethnic identity or in a society where they fear being targeted by for just existing and doing everyday things, as we have recently seen with all of the white people calling the police on black people for mowing their lawn, having picnics, and swimming. Transracial

adoption justice would include an intersectional lens on the ACES and an analysis of how race and racism intersect with these types of adverse childhood experiences.

Another common focus in adoption that typically is presented as a binary involves the focus of attention on attachment in adoptees. We conceptualize attachment as if it's free of any racial considerations and most of our interventions lack racial and cultural components. But for transracial adoptees, I'm going to go as far as to say that when transracial adoptees feel their adoptive parents don't have their back regarding racial and ethnic discrimination, it will only complicate their trust and attachment building to their adoptive parents.

A few weeks ago, I attended the International Conference on Adoption Research in Montreal, Canada. One of the keynote speakers was Jessica Leinaweaver, an anthropologist and author of the book *Adoptive Migration: Raising Latinos in Spain*. Dr. Leinaweaver spoke about, "acceptable fictions" in which include changing the birth certificate for an adopted child that has the adoptive parents listed as birth parents and changing a child's birth name or creating a birth date. Dr. Leinaweaver told us that in Spain there is a civil code that even allows intercountry adoptive parents to change the place of their child's country of birth on their "new" birth certificate.

Sometimes, as a way to focus more on the adjustment and attachment part of adoption or because talking about race and culture is too difficult, racial differences and racial realities in transracial adoptive families are erased or minimized. It's not either/or. Transracial adoption justice doesn't implement or endorse acceptable fictions in order to favor adjustment, attachment or permanency over racial and cultural needs but rather incorporates and integrates a child's racial and cultural needs as assets to adjustment and attachment.

Transracial adoption justice means we are believed when we talk about our experiences with discrimination and oppression based on our racial, ethnic and/or adoption identities

When the transracial adoptee talks about their experiences growing up in a family where they are racially or ethnically different than their adoptive parents, and they talk about the discrimination, prejudice and racism they experienced in their home or in their communities, they are being truth-tellers. In my chapter for *A Good Time for the Truth*, I wrote:

To be a Korean adoptee in Minnesota is to be both hyper-visible and invisible at the same time. It means that people can tell you they don't see you as Korean as if that is a compliment. Translation: you are not one of those Asians...Being a transracial adoptee means being a race-traitor every day and having to accept that this makes you more likable. Being a transracial adoptee in Minnesota is having people expect you to say thank you when they tell you how "articulate" you are. Being a Korean adoptee in Minnesota means having to explain your personal adoption stories to people you don't know because no one understands how you can be from Plymouth or St. Cloud or Moorhead or Rochester when asked, "Where are you from. No, where are you really from?"

Growing up, like many transracial adoptees, I experienced racism and discrimination. Sometimes they were overt, like when I was called racial slurs by kids or adults. Sometimes they were subtler, like when teenagers at my summer church sleep-away camp used to mock me by calling out the names of Japanese cars at me. As a kid what seemed like the favorite way for other kids to taunt me was to sing-song the poem, "Chinese, Japanese, dirty knees, look at these!" while pulling at the corners of their eyes.

When I shared these experiences with my parents, I was told it wasn't because of my racial or adoption status. They didn't know better - they thought they were being helpful and lessening the impact of the bullying. This is a form of gaslighting - when a person tries to convince you that what you've experienced didn't happen. Eventually I learned that this was one aspect of my relationship with my parents that wasn't going to be affirmed and I stopped telling them about these experiences. Because my parents didn't know how to talk with me about racism, what could have been a shared opportunity became a point of detachment.

In the 1960s, psychologist David Kirk developed a theory called "shared fate" based on his experience working with adoptive families. Kirk himself was an adoptive parent and his shared fate theory was controversial at the time because it challenged the dominant paradigm in adoption practice, which was matching. Matching meant placing a child into a family where the child looked as if he or she could have been biologically born to the adoptive parents.

Kirk found that parents that rejected the differences between themselves and their adopted child – that is, those parents that wanted to erase the fact that the child was not biologically theirs – struggled more in their relationship with their adopted child than the parents that accepted those differences. According to Kirk, the families who accepted difference were able to recognize their child’s history and saw their family as having a shared future, or shared fate.

Although Kirk didn’t apply a racial lens to his theory, I argue that shared fate applies in a similar way. My parent’s response to me when I told them about racial discrimination was informed in part because they didn’t see me as Asian or Korean, and therefore they couldn’t understand why I would be experiencing it. Assimilation and rejection of difference comes at a cost, the cost of the adoptee’s identity development and often, cost of the parent child relationship when the child becomes an adult and finds others who provide validation of their racial and ethnic identity.

Transracial adoption justice involves having the white people in our lives do their own work to understand the history of race, power, privilege and oppression in our country including what it means in a both a broad and personal context to be white

For many white people, culture is something they can relate to - my paternal grandmother was a Norwegian immigrant and growing up it was a big part of our family identity. I used to attend Sons of Norway events and wear the white dress and a laurel on my head at Christmas for Santa Lucia. Culture is celebrated, but race, for many white people, is never discussed or acknowledged. Think about how whiteness in news stories or in books is the default - race is only described when a person is not white.

Even though in the U.S. most of our education is based on white history, literature and science, it’s never explicitly stated as such. People sometimes complain about why we have black history month, Asian history month, etc. and it’s because everything else the rest of the year is based on white history and the default, which means whiteness is the reference point to which non-white becomes the add-on or the differentiator.

It's not a mistake that some of the legislation in our country that governs transracial adoption looks like it's anti-racist but in fact is only anti-racist toward one group of people, and that is white people. The Multi-Ethnic Placement Act and Interethnic Provisions stated goal was to eliminate racial discrimination in federally funded foster care and adoption placements with the intention that children won't be delayed or denied placement based on their race, color, or national origin. However, the MultiEthnic Placement Act and Interethnic Provisions benefits prospective parents who want to adopt children of color - it does not eliminate discrimination against children of color because it actually prevents child welfare and adoption workers from ensuring that white adoptive parents will actively nurture and affirm a child of color's racial and ethnic identity. This means that for a transracial adoptee, it's the luck of the draw if their white adoptive parent is actively anti-racist at best, non-racist at bare minimum, or racist in the worst-case scenario.

Transracial adoption justice means that those parenting transracial adoptees and those who facilitate transracial adoptions understand the history of race, power, privilege and oppression in our country including what it means in a both a broad and personal context to be white. It's not enough to strive to be non-racist, we should be striving to be anti-racist. And if you are a white adoptive parent of a child of color or a white social worker facilitating transracial adoptions, then I ask you to think about how you are being anti-racist in your parenting or social work/adoption practice. My best advice on how to do this is to read the work of scholars and activists who write specifically on these topics. There are wonderful resources created and written by white anti-racists. I encourage you to look into the work of Tim Wise, Robin DiAngelo, Peggy McIntosh, Jane Elliott, and Paul Gorski.

In addition to understanding the history of whiteness and how whiteness has influenced how child welfare and adoption is practiced, transracial adoption justice involves having people in our lives who care about our communities, not just us as individuals

To illustrate this point, I'll share a story. A few years ago the program I managed at the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare at the University of Minnesota won the national Angels in Adoption award, and I got to attend the award ceremony in Washington, DC. The

celebrity guest speaker was actor Katherine Heigel, who is a transracial adoptive parent. As Heigel began her speech, I nudged my colleague and said, “she’s going to tell the starfish story.” As Heigel began to tell the starfish story, my colleague said, “HOW DID YOU KNOW?” And my response was, “because people LOVE to tell the starfish story about adoption!”

If you aren’t familiar with the starfish story, here it is: a child walks down a beach that is covered with starfish that have washed ashore. The child picks up a starfish and throws it into the ocean. Then he picks up another one and throws it into the ocean. A man who is witnessing this says to the child, “why are you doing this? Look at how many starfish there are! Don’t you know that you’ll never be able to make a difference? You can’t save all these starfish.” The boy looks at the man, picks up a starfish, throws it into the ocean, and says, “I made a difference to this one.”

The moral of this story is that each of us can make a difference in the life of one person, even if the problem seems overwhelming. And as an inspiration for us to value our relationships and the difference we can make to each other, I agree! But when people relate the saving one starfish as the same as saving one child through adoption, that is where I disagree. Too often adoption is seen as saving an individual child. Saving the one starfish without considering why the starfish washed ashore ignores the broader factors that continue to perpetuate the problem. For me, the starfish story is not a call to save individual starfish; we must also be addressing the what is happening in the ocean.

Transracial adoption justice means that if you have adopted transracially or if you facilitate transracial adoptions, you are equally focused with communities of color as you are about individual children. Do you know the what communities’ cares and concerns for racial and social and economic justice are? Do you participate in activities that address these concerns? Do you vote for legislators that fight for equality for your child’s larger community? Because no matter how much you care about your child, to my next point, eventually they will become adults and be seen as a member of that larger community. In his memoir, *Black Baby, White Hands*, author Jaiya John writes that when he was a child he was seen as a cute little brown teddy bear but when he grew up people saw him as a big black grizzly.

My last point is that transracial adoption justice involves considering the long haul

A parent's job for the first decade of their child's life is to keep them safe. Their job for the second decade of their life is to help their child learn how to keep themselves safe. And from that point on – the remaining 50 or more years – your job is to be present and to have a mutually healthy, supportive, reciprocal relationship. You may think that this last part is a given, but what I've learned over the years is that it's not. Because for many adoptees, it's a deliberate choice whether or not they are going to stay engaged with their adoptive parents. And some make the choice to walk away. I want to encourage you to make decisions now that will assist a strong and healthy relationship between transracial adoptees and their parents as adults.

Adulthood is also the time when many adoptees start thinking about a birth family search or even living in a birth community or birth country for an extended time. It's also when racial identity begins to become more important to a transracial adoptee because we now have to live in a world where our adoptee status isn't visible. For me, choosing to live in racially diverse neighborhoods, traveling to Korea, and re-incorporating my Korean name were important aspects of my identity development and these were the biggest areas of tension between me and my adoptive family.

In 2009, the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute published a report based on a survey of adult adoptees titled, *Beyond Culture Camp*. Responses from the Korean adoptees surveyed found "most Korean adoptees grew up in communities that were less than 10 percent Asian, but almost half (47%) indicated there are larger numbers of Asians in their current communities. This shift also was reflected in the fact that 67 percent of the Koreans described the extent of diversity in their childhood communities as "not at all" to "not very much," whereas many (42%) indicated there is "very much" diversity in their communities as adults (p.25)."

Elizabeth Raleigh, an associate professor of sociology at Carleton College, did an analysis of U.S. Census data and found that Asian adopted children were more likely to live in white-monoracial neighborhoods than the average white child. I'll say that again - the average adopted Asian child lives in a more-white neighborhood than the average white child. For

many transracial adoptees, adulthood means being able to have a choice where to live and so many transracial adoptees move from racially isolating areas to more diverse areas. Adoptive parents will need to understand that the values that influenced *their* choice of where to live sometimes comes at a cost to their transracially adopted child's racial or ethnic identity development.

Transracial adoptive parents often choose to live where *they* feel most supportive and comfortable - even if it's not a racially affirming place for their transracial adopted child. Often adoptive parents will apologize to me, telling me that they know where they live isn't diverse but "*it's a great place to raise a child.*" I agree with them, it's a great place to raise a WHITE child. It's not necessarily a great place to raise a child of color.

If a transracial adoptee has experienced a lot of discrimination and racism in their childhood communities, adoptive parents need to understand that their child may not want to visit them there. It's stressful to be hypervigilant all the time, to wonder when the next person is going to tell you you don't belong there, or worse, call the police for driving on that rural road or stopping at the gas station or driving into that town.

Another thing to consider when thinking about the adoption journey is that for transracial adoptees, identity development often happens later than for non-adoptees, particularly since racial identity often has to occur outside of the adoptive family and the community contexts.

Psychologist Erik Erikson, who developed the psychosocial developmental model, theorized that adolescence is the time when a person's task is to answer the question, WHO AM I? At this stage of life, stepping away from seeing oneself solely in terms of their family, an adolescent begins to think about individuating, and what characteristics they possess that make them unique. Again, one of the aspects of Erikson's model that is missing is racial, ethnic and cultural identity considerations. During adolescence, teenagers typically switch from parents and adults as the compass for their values toward peers and media influences - but Erikson's model uses mono-racial communities - likely white - as a reference point. How do transracial adoptees see themselves reflected in their schools, neighborhoods, and in media products

during adolescence? This is why transracial adoptees must continue working on their identity throughout their adulthood.

The “identity crisis” Erikson suggests that happens in adolescence often gets repeated as transracial adoptees go to college or leave the adoptive home and have to figure out who they are racially as adults, when the world sees them not as “so-and-so’s child” but as a potential Trayvon Martin or Philandro Castile.

I was 36 when I legally changed my name to re-incorporate the racial, ethnic and cultural ties I felt represented ALL of who I am. I added - not subtracted - my Korean birth name to the name my adoptive parents gave me. My parents were upset. They personalized actions I made to “reclaim” my identity along a false binary – if they didn’t see me as Korean or our family as a multiracial and multicultural family, being Korean to them meant I didn’t want to be part of the family. We had to work to get to a point where they understood I was not trying to become more “Korean” in order to leave our family and that their support for my Korean identity would actually improve our relationship.

There is a body of research that looks at racial and ethnic socialization practices of parents. Research finds that having a strong sense of racial and ethnic identity can be protective factors to youth for dealing with oppression, racism and discrimination. These studies are three examples of the how strong identity benefits different racial and cultural communities [Slide].

In the study I conducted with colleagues at the University of Minnesota of adult Korean adoptees, part of our interviews with Korean adoptees focused on how they practiced racial, ethnic and adoption socialization with THEIR children. For some of the parents their own limited exposure and acknowledgement of their racial or ethnic identity presented a challenge to how to teach racial, ethnic and cultural pride to their kids. Parents talked about feeling inauthentic and the pressure they felt from the Korean community for not being “Korean enough” in parenting their kids.

I’ve spoken to many adoptees who say they’re willing to endure holidays and visits with parents who are racially and/or culturally insensitive, but that that they draw the line if this behavior extends to their children. Again, this is what I mean about the long haul; some of the adoptive parents I’ve talked with who express the most hurt are those whose adult adoptee

kids have chosen to keep the grandchildren out of reach. Adoption workers - consider asking questions related to the long-term adult relationships when you work with prospective and adoptive parents.

Where do we go from here? How can you be part of a growing movement toward transracial adoption justice?

How do we begin to think toward a justice-based reframing of transracial adoption? First, have a heart that is based in humility. We talk a lot about “cultural competence” and “adoption competence” but I think it’s important to acknowledge that like anything else we do in life – whether it’s our work or our hobbies, it’s more about our journeys and process than it is about reaching some mountaintop. I love the social work concept of starting where you are and knowing there’s always room to grow.

The work of researcher Carol Dweck is helpful here – we can all be aiming for a growth mindset rather than having a fixed mindset. A growth mindset is based in humility – knowing that mistakes will be made, but it’s about what we learn from our mistakes that help us achieve, not being so afraid to make mistakes that we stand firm in defensive mode. It’s like having our feet stuck in cement. We can defend where we are but doing so will never help us get to where we want to be. A fixed mindset says, “I’m right and I’m not going to change my mind.” A growth mindset says, “What does the other person know that I don’t? What could I learn from this that would make me do better next time?” As Maya Angelou said, “I did then what I knew how to do. Now that I know better, I do better.” So, I encourage you to enter these conversations and incorporate into your work a sense of humility and a growth mindset.

In addition, I encourage you to really understand that for transracial adoptees, the personal IS political and the political is personal. As a transracial adoptee, I encounter people every day who don’t think I should exist because of my gender, my immigration status, my country of origin, and my race. And I am privileged in terms of my class, gender identity, sexual orientation, and able-bodiedness; there are transracial adoptees who have more marginalized identities than I do. When I hear people talk about “deporting immigrants” they’re talking about me. When politicians and institutions enact policies that exclude people with my identities, they’re including me. Colin Kaepernick, the football quarterback who has been

blacklisted for his activism for racial justice is a transracial adoptee – his white adoptive parents have not been able to protect him from the world’s treatment as just another black man. Intercountry adoptees are being deported. If you care about transracial adoptees care about the oppression they experience as members of marginalized communities.

My final suggestion is to respect transracial adoptees as the experts they are. Transracial adoptees are constantly seen as children, or in literary parlance, “unreliable narrators” of our own lives. National Public Radio, including our own Minnesota Public Radio, has been particularly problematic in this regard but all media, adoption agencies, and many adoption-related organizations do this too – a panel or conference will be convened on transracial adoption and yet no transracial adoptees will be at the table.

Transracial adoptees are the ultimate experts in what it’s like to be a transracial adoptee. Way before I earned a PhD in social work, I’d already earned my PhD in transracial adoption. The PhD only gave me better language and theories to help me understand transracial adoption, and a few letters behind my name. Like any other group or community, transracial adoptees are a diverse group and knowing a couple of us doesn’t mean you know everything. That goes for us transracial adoptees too – that’s part of why I do research on transracial and intercountry adoption, so I can better understand the diversity of our experiences.

We all have a tendency toward what’s called “confirmation bias” – that is, looking for responses that fit what we already think. It’s important to learn from and listen to all of the transracial voices out there. You may find some of these voices really hard to hear – and that’s why it’s important to hear them. Read our books and blogs, watch our videos and films, and most importantly, make sure transracial adoptees are at the table to be part of the conversation. Just as you wouldn’t have an all-male panel talking about the experiences of women without any women present, or an all-white panel talking about the black experience without any African Americans present, don’t allow a panel on transracial adoption happen without transracial adoptees present. If you are an adoption agency or an adoption organization, it is your responsibility to cultivate relationships with a diverse group of transracial adoptees.

I'm going to pose now some specific actions that each of us can do to be part of a growing transracial adoption justice movement. Being an ally is a good start, but the actions I'm going to suggest are calls for ways to act in addition to allyship. I am going to challenge us to be actively anti-racist and, as Joan Williams from Harvard Business School researches, ways to be "bias interrupters" and interrupters of white supremacy. Overtime I've learned some critical lessons on how to be a better "interrupter" mostly through my own mistakes and through trial and error. These include:

- Understanding that having friends and family that are part of a marginalized community does not alone make me an ally. I cannot claim allyship because of who I love, but by my actions
- It is my job to seek to understand the experiences of others and what they need, not what I think they need
- Being an ally does not deserve a standing ovation. If you are an ally for the recognition and pat on the back, you are not an ally.
- Find support from others doing anti-racist work. For the white people in this room, that means finding a group of people who will lovingly call you in and be a truthful mirror and window. Mirrors help you see what you are; and windows show you what's possible. We live in a call-out world where we are shamed for our mistakes. Find those people who will gently call you in and support your growth mindset.
- Actively interrupt offensive jokes and comments. Depending on who it is, you can directly tell them what they said is hurtful or inappropriate, or what I often do is "social work" them – I might ask, "I'm not sure I understand what you're saying. Could you explain what you mean?" or sometimes if you know someone fairly well, I might say, "huh. That surprises me coming from you." The point is to let that person know you don't support their comment. But as Brene Brown says so often, shaming others isn't the solution. Find ways to challenge people with kindness.
- Leverage the power and privilege you have to bring about social change that benefits marginalized communities, especially if they involve not just children in those communities but all of its members

Conclusion

I'd like to end with a return to the starfish story. Another of the aspects of the starfish story when used as a metaphor for adoption that is missing is that in the story the boy throws the starfish back into the ocean. If this was an adoption metaphor the more appropriate action would be that the boy takes the starfish home in a pail and raises it in his bathtub.

If transracial adoptees are like starfish, if we are eventually to be thrown back into the ocean, to join our fellow starfish, two things need to happen. First, the starfish must be prepared to join their fellow starfish community or they will have a hard time surviving. And second, the ocean is home to an incredible, diverse world of sea life. If there is something happening in the ocean so that some of its members aren't doing well, don't we all have a responsibility to work toward ensuring the ocean is a place where all can thrive?

Thank you.