

Activism in Adoption

adoption education for the 21st century



Course Catalog

Activism in Adoption centers the voices of birthparents and adoptees at all stages in the adoption journey to improve outcomes for everyone in the adoption constellation.





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Most adoption education ends before an adoption is finalized. But where other adoption education programs stop, **Activism in Adoption** is just getting started.

Activism in Adoption covers the entire parenting journey, from building a relationship with your child's birthparent before placement, to embracing and understanding your child's origin story, to understanding challenges many adoptees face navigating those origin stories as teens and young adults, to advocating for ethical adoption practices.

We believe that everyone involved in adoption deserves the full, honest truth about its lasting impact. When we learn from the people most impacted by adoption - birthparents and adoptees - we can improve outcomes for every member of the adoption constellation.



Whether hearing from all members of the adoption triad or adoption professionals, I always feel encouraged when I participate in Activism in Adoption trainings. There's a lot of work we can do to continue growing in openness and support of birth families, adoptive families, and adoptees. AiA is laying the groundwork for growth, asking the hard questions, and providing a space for people to learn how we can help these populations thrive.

-KG, Adoption Professional, LMSW

OVERVIEW

**Activism in Adoption education sessions fall into four categories:
Relationships, Resilience, Race & Intersectionality, and Ethics & Advocacy.**

RELATIONSHIPS

A healthy open adoption is the best way to improve outcomes for adopted people, and we all want that! But there is no roadmap for how adoptive parents are supposed to build strong relationships with their child's birthparents, which is why we bring birthparents in to help.

RESILIENCE



To improve outcomes in adoption, every member of the constellation needs to develop the resilience necessary to grow through the challenges adoption presents. Adoptive parenting is a form of therapeutic parenting, and the skills and mindset necessary to be successful aren't always intuitive.

RACE & INTERSECTIONALITY



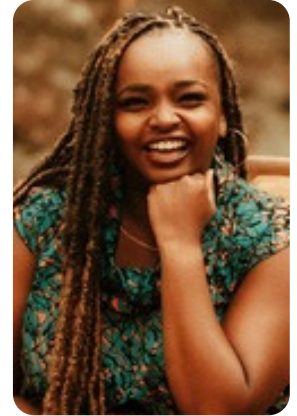
According to the US Department of Health and Human Services, approximately 38% of all domestic infant adoptions are transracial. The Department of State reports that 284,088 adoptions of foreign-born children have occurred in the United States, more than 80% of which are considered transracial. If you are a white family raising a child of the global majority, you need an up-to-date toolkit for every stage of their life, and we can help.

ETHICS & ADVOCACY

When we listen to the individuals whose lives are most impacted by adoption, when we allow ourselves to sit in uncomfortable spaces, we learn and we grow. We begin to understand the ethics -- and sometimes the lack of ethics -- in adoption, and we become the change-makers, improving outcomes in adoption for our children, for ourselves as adoptive parents and adoption professionals, and for the birthparents who chose to place their children for adoption.

RELINQUISHMENT, GRIEF & HEALING: A BIRTHPARENT PANEL DISCUSSION

In this panel discussion, we are joined by three birthmothers: **Marcia Lane-McGee**, author and co-host of the podcast *Plaid Skirts and Basic Black*, **Sarah Schmidh**, adoption education advocate, and **Muthoni Gaciku Kittredge**, co-host of the podcast *Birth Mothers Amplified*. They discuss birthparent experiences with relinquishment, navigating adoption agencies, and adoptive relationships through grief and healing.



An unvarnished, deeply nuanced look at the real experiences of birthmothers.

TYPES OF GRIEF IN RELINQUISHMENT AND ADOPTION AND PATHS TO HEALING: A BIRTHMOTHER PERSPECTIVE

Adoption is widely assumed in our culture to be a win for everyone involved. However, there is a growing community of adult adopted people, first parents, and adoptive families speaking up about the trauma of relinquishment and the associated lifelong mental health issues. In this session, **Candace Cahill**, a first mother and author of the critically acclaimed memoir, *Goodbye Again*, uses her personal story of relinquishment, reunion, and the subsequent death of her son to explore types of grief and loss in adoption. With contributions from adult adopted people and adoptive families, Candace shines a light on the need for comprehensive pre-and-post-placement mental health resources and provides tools and tips for healing.



Continued education about first/birth parent experiences is important for the adoption community because it is easy to make judgments about what you don't understand. The narrative around adoption is inaccurate and irresponsible. Having knowledge of the first/birth parent experience will help correct the issue and steer towards truth: that adoption starts with trauma.

- Marcia Lane-McGee

RELATIONSHIPS

TRUST, COMMUNICATION & FRIENDSHIP: BUILDING BETTER OPEN ADOPTION RELATIONSHIPS



Creating a healthy open adoption relationships is something that birthparents and adoptive parents need to do together to create more positive adoption outcomes, not just for their children but also for themselves. But nobody talks about *how* to do it. Until now. Join **Maryellen Kandu** (birthmother) and **Pauline Pearce** (her son’s adoptive mother) as they candidly share the challenges they faced building the kind of deep trust and friendship necessary to help the adoptee in their triad thrive. Educators like Maryellen and Pauline are critical for anyone whose adoption constellation includes open adoption, because not only are both experts in adoption, but they are in the same adoption triad. When they give advice, it comes from their lived experiences with each other, as a birthmother and her son's adoptive mother, as they built what is ultimately the roadmap you need to make your own open adoption productive, happy, and adoptee-centered.

How do healthy relationships get built between adoptive and first families? Hear from both sides of the same adoption triad.



I would totally recommend this session to anyone considering adoption, especially those with trepidation about what openness looks like. This is the most positive example I have ever seen.

-MD, Adoption Professional & Social Worker

BIRTHMOTHERS & ADOPTIVE FATHERS: BUILDING HEALTHY OPEN ADOPTION RELATIONSHIPS

You know who is often left out of conversations about adoption? Adoptive fathers.

In the adoption community, the phrase “adoptive parents” is often code for “adoptive moms,” and it's rare to hear from fathers at all, either birthfathers or adoptive dads. However, the work to create and maintain a healthy open adoption requires *both* adoptive parents. Communication

and understanding between birth mothers and adoptive fathers are critical components in a healthy open adoption relationship. Birthmother **Shanyce Henley** and **Ron Lundeen**, her children’s adoptive father, talk candidly about their experiences in building an adoption triad based on friendship, mutual respect, and trust.



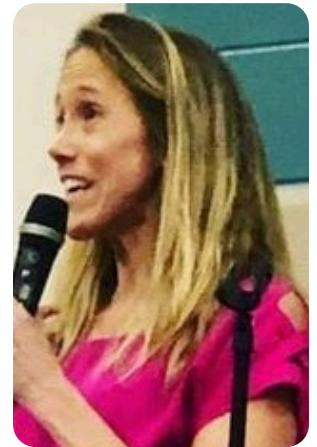
BEYOND THE EARLY YEARS: GROWING WITH THE CHILDREN WE PLACED



Nearly all adoption education focuses on adopting a baby, but does not address what happens as their baby grows into a teen, and then an adult.

The tools and information you may need to bring an adopted child into your home aren't the same tools you may need as they grow into adulthood. We hear a lot about preparing for openness in the early years of the adoptees life. But what does the relationship look as the adoptee grows up? How do we prepare for a healthy open relationship through those years? Join two seasoned birthmothers, **Vicki Twomey** and **Jessica Figlio**, who have each experienced over 20 years of openness in adoption, as they share their stories.

What does open adoption look like when your child is a teen or young adult?



“We don't have models for what open adoption is, both for the people who have to live it, but also for people outside it. Even though openness is the norm in adoption, it remains an oddity in our broader cultural idea of adoption, and people who live in an open adoption are constantly having to figure out this relationship on their own in a world that doesn't understand what that looks like.

-Dr. Gretchen Sisson

NAVIGATING ADOPTION RELATIONSHIPS FROM A BIRTHMOM PERSPECTIVE



Birthparent **Cathy Crossno** tells the story of how she came to place her daughter for adoption, and how she was able to build a strong relationship with both her daughter and her daughter's adoptive parents. Cathy acknowledges the complexities of relationships within the adoption triad, while highlighting ways to honor birthparents in closed adoption and finding positive ways to navigate open adoption relationships. The discussion includes information for birthparents on how they can advocate for their wants and wishes and will give the audience the tools to help adopted children build a strong sense of self-identity.

How do birthparents feel watching their child grow up in another family?

ECHOES THROUGH GENERATIONS:

THE LEGACY OF BIRTHPARENT EXPERIENCE



Join us for a powerful conversation with **Kelsey Vander Vliet Ranyard** and **Vicki Twomey**, two birthparents whose families embody the multi-generational experience of adoption. We'll explore the rarely discussed phenomenon of generational birthparents — families where the experience of placing a child for adoption ripples across multiple generations. They'll share their unique perspectives as birthparents whose own mothers walked the same path before them. With Kelsey's family extending this experience to three generations and Vicki's family spanning complex adoption connections through in-laws and her son's adoptive mother, their stories illuminate how adoption creates intricate webs of shared experience and understanding.



THE INNER SEA: A CONVERSATION WITH DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKER AND BIRTHMOTHER KATE STAPLETON

Kate Stapleton joins us to discuss her award-winning documentary, *The Inner Sea*, which offers a rare glimpse of the adoption experience through the eyes of a birthmother. Directed by Stapleton, a birthmother and first-time filmmaker, *The Inner Sea* invites audiences to witness the emotional complexities of adoption, identity, and healing.

The Inner Sea film debuted in 2025 at the prestigious Julien Dubuque International Film Festival, won Best Film at the Lake Effect Film Festival and Best New Filmmaker at the Fresh Coast Film Festival in Marquette, MI. The film has also won laurels at the Door County Film Fest, the Buffalo Roots Film Festival in Rome, the Red Cedar Film Festival, Houston International Film Festival, Soo City Film Festival, and the Saugatuck Film Festival.



RESILIENCE

FINDING HOPE AND LIGHT

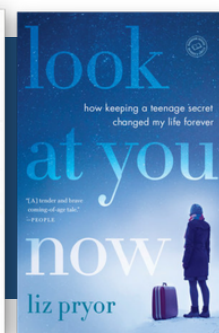


Speaker, birthmother, and author of the memoir *Finding Hope: A Birthmother's Journey into the Light*, **Hope O. Helder** talks about building resilience and learning to thrive despite the circumstances life throws you. In conversation with moderator, advice columnist, and birthmother **Liz Pryor**, author of the memoir *Look at You Now: How Keeping a Teenage Secret Changed My Life*, this session gives an unvarnished and nuanced look at adoption from a birthmother perspective, giving adoptive parents, adopted people, and adoption professionals the opportunity to better understand what birthparents need in order to build resilience and thrive.



“No matter how often we wonder, ‘why do things happen in my life the way they do,’ it’s really important to remember that it’s not so much what happens to us in our lives as how we choose to get through it.

- Liz Pryor, birthmother



DEVELOPING RADICAL HONESTY AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE



Clemencia Deleon, a birthmother who placed her child in a kinship adoption, unpacks the complexity of kinship adoption, and the importance of honesty and emotional intelligence in navigating this form of adoption. There are a lot of obvious benefits built in to kinship adoption: the adopted child has racial and cultural mirrors, are already a member of their adoptive parents' family, and one or both of their birthparents are likely known to them as part of their extended family. But the more difficult aspects of kinship adoption are often glossed over, or ignored entirely. Kinship adoption creates complex family dynamics, emotional stress, potential for role confusion within the family, and the added pressure of managing family relationships. Families are complicated and full of history, and Clemencia addresses how that history can impact the adoption dynamic in unexpected and difficult ways, and how to best navigate complicated adoption relationships by practicing radical honesty and building emotional intelligence.

“In order for there to be any real, authentic openness, there has to be radical honesty — honesty with yourself and honesty with the child — honesty about who you are, and why you chose adoption.

-Clemencia Deleon, birthmother

RECLAIMING THE NARRATIVE: A 7-STEP APPROACH TO TRAUMA, HEALING AND ADOPTEE WHOLENESS



Dr. Liz DeBetta is an adopted person and the author of *Migrating Toward Wholeness: Adult Adoptees and Writing to Heal*. Dr. DeBetta also is performer of the award-winning solo show *Un-M-Othered: A Story of Adoption & Patriarchy*. She is an interdisciplinary scholar-artist-activist who is committed to changing systems and helping people navigate trauma through creative processes. She also offers trauma-informed coaching for adoptees (adults & teens), adoptive families, and women using the methodology developed from her 2021 pilot of Migrating Toward Wholeness© with the Rudd Adoption Research Program at UMass-Amherst. Being able to question, reject, and rewrite the dominant narratives that make adoptees the object rather than the subject of their stories is essential to finding healing and wholeness. Using Howard Bath's 3-pillars of Trauma-informed Care (2008) and the 7-step trauma-healing framework embedded in the Migrating Toward Wholeness© method of expressive writing to heal, attendees will learn how the process of re-narrativizing for adoptees can be used to find clarity, understand the effects of trauma, and promote personal growth, to help to shift internal narratives and create healthy dialogue among families. She is a proud member of Actor's Equity Association, SAG-AFTRA, Affiliate Faculty at the Institute for Research on Women and Gender and part of the Diversity Scholars Network at the National Center for Institutional Diversity at the University of Michigan. She holds a Ph.D. in Interdisciplinary Studies (Humanities & Culture) with certificates in Women's & Gender Studies and Creative Writing.

Learn to shift internal narratives and create healthy dialogue among families.

MORE THAN ONE IDENTITY: RESILIENCE AND BELONGING FOR BLACK AND LGBTQ+ ADOPTED PEOPLE



For Black and queer adoptees, identity is often layered, complex and negotiated in spaces that were not built with them in mind. When you grow up adopted into a society shaped by racism while also navigating queerness, the questions “Who am I?”, “Where do I belong?” and “Am I safe to be fully seen?” can carry a different weight. Join **Shania Ives**, an adopted person, therapist in training and the founding director of The Dunbar Project CIC, a UK-based non-profit organization that supports adoptees and care leavers, as she describes how adoption intersects with loss, attachment, identity formation and, for many, developmental trauma.

Shania examines how intersecting identities shape mental well-being, relationships, and the sense of belonging, and highlights the unique challenges and resilience of adopted people living at these intersections. Shania highlights how adoption professionals and parents can better understand, support, and advocate for adoptees whose identities exist at the crossroads of race, sexuality, and adoption.

PARENTING IN SPACE™: THERAPEUTIC PARENTING IN DIFFICULT TIMES



TreeHouse Health’s President & Clinical Director **Billy Kaplan, LCSW**, discusses the critical importance of providing adopted children therapeutic parenting through an attachment-focused, trauma-informed lens, but with a reminder to parents that nobody benefits when parents don’t also take care of themselves and their needs. Parents raising adopted kids know that a trauma-informed parenting approach, one that fosters feelings of safety and connectedness, is vitally important for children who have experienced the trauma of adoption. But the advice on how to do so often encourages parents to disregard or neglect their own needs, leading to burnout. You can be a trauma-informed parent without burning out. Parenting in SPACE™ is a new framework, developed by TreeHouse Health’s psychotherapists, that gives parents a new set of tools for making sure they are meeting their own needs while effectively parenting adopted children.



Put on your oxygen mask first. Really. Because to help our kids, we have to help ourselves first. Then take care of our primary partner relationship. Then take care of the kids. If the focus is on the kids the kids won't be better, won't get better, they won't feel better, because if you're anxious, your anxiety is going to spread to them. *-- Billy Kaplan, LCSW*

MAKING A COMBACK: LEARNING SKILLS TO NAVIGATE AND OVERCOME TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES

Cordan James, Executive Director of Fathering Together and a transracially adopted person, is a social entrepreneur whose work focuses on education and empowerment. He rose from adversity to become a leading motivational speaker and youth/family mentor, guiding children and adults through exercises designed to build self-esteem, self-reliance, and emotional resilience. His unique insight, a product of being a child that came up through the foster care system, gives him tools built with evidence-based knowledge, along with the empathy necessary to help adoptive and foster families through their unique struggles. Cordan’s talk is a judgment-free zone, aimed at providing real insight into the experiences of adopted and foster children, and his life’s work is rooted in mentoring, advocacy, and leaving the world a little better than he found it.



The first step is to realize you don't know what you're doing. We're all trying to figure this out. So just lend yourself some mercy and some grace. *-- Cordan James*

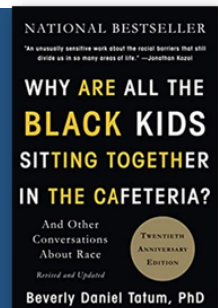
A CONVERSATION ABOUT RACE AND ADOPTION



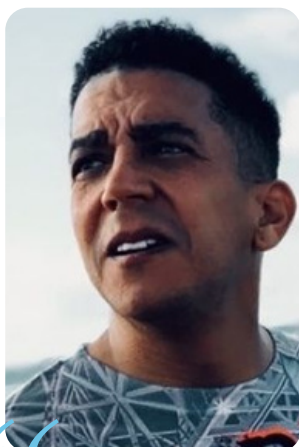
Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum, President Emerita of Spelman College and author of the best-selling and critically acclaimed book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations about Race*, guides us in a discussion that explores what it really means to be a parent of a transracially adopted person, how Black children experience racism, and how white adoptive parents and adults can learn to understand that experience. Joined by panelists **Shanyce Henley**, a birthparent, and **Kevin Hofmann**, author and transracially adopted person, Dr. Tatum walks us through knowledge critical for understanding race in America, including understanding that birthparents often have fears when placing their child in a family of a different race or culture, that many white parents aren't provided the education they need to unpack the impact of race on their children, and what concrete action they can take to navigate a transracial adoption successfully.

For young people growing up in white families, sometimes there is a real sense of distress when the topic of racism has not been easily approached in the family. If the parents are hesitant to even acknowledge racial difference, or talk about it, that puts the child in a very challenging position.

- Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum



LESSONS FROM THE LIFE: GROWING UP BLACK IN WHITE



Author and transracially adopted person **Kevin Hofmann** was born into the racially-charged Detroit of 1967 to a white mother and a Black father, placed into foster care, and then adopted by a white minister and his wife, who were also the parents of three biological children. Hofmann's talk is based on his best-selling memoir, *Growing up Black in White*, which tells his story through the lens of hope and promise. In this session, he shares the choices his family made in order to connect him to the Black community, which included moving the family from a white neighborhood to one that was predominantly Black. Kevin provides adoptive parents with a roadmap to help their children build strong racial identities based on self-respect instead of outside judgment.

People do not understand the burden of being 'the only one.' It is your job as parents to help your children and those around them manage the diversity. It should be painfully obvious by now but I will state it again: your children shouldn't be the diversity in every circle they are a part of.

- Kevin Hofmann



WHEN YOUR FAMILY DOESN'T LOOK LIKE YOU

Transracially adopted person **Isaac Etter** is an activist, racial bias consultant, and social entrepreneur, and the founder of *Identity*, where the focus is on re-imagining post-placement support for adoptive and foster families. He is the author of *A Practical Guide to Transracial Adoption* and the founder of the podcast *Inside Transracial Adoption*, which he co-hosts with his white adoptive mother and where, together, they unpack the complexity of transracial adoption. Joined by moderator and birthmother **Shanyce Henley** and adult adoptee **Nam Holtz, LMSW**, Isaac takes a deep-dive into the intersection of race and adoption, providing an audience of adult adoptees, adoptive parents, and adoption professionals an unvarnished look at some of the challenges inherent in building a multi-racial family.

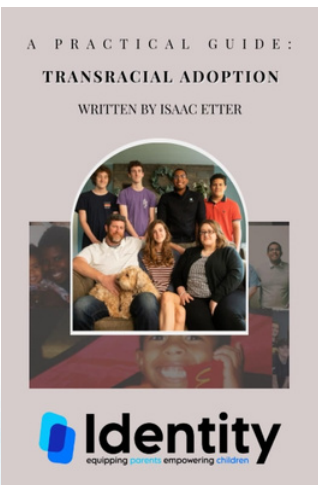


RACIAL IDENTITY AND MENTAL HEALTH: INSIGHTS FROM ADOPTEES OF COLOR

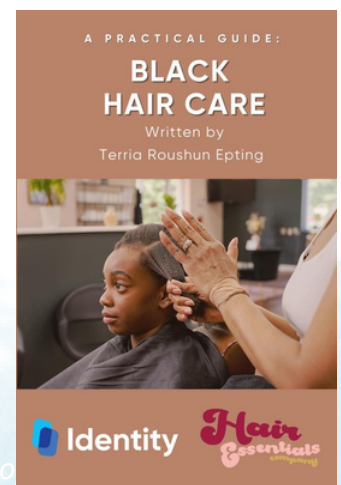


This session explores transracially adopted person **Torie DiMartile's** dissertation research on how racial identity and family belonging is created and understood by Black, adult, transracial adopted people. Drawing from interviews with dozens of adult adopted people, along with her own experiences in adoption, she discusses the challenges many adopted people of color face when being raised in white homes, such as intra-familial racism, racial gaslighting and colorblindness, and the impact these have on their connections with their adoptive family, their racial identity development, and their mental health.

What can I do to best support my transracially adopted child?



“Your children should understand the reality of racism in America, from police brutality to what they may experience at school – all of these things – and you should be creating the opportunity for your child to come to you when they experience those things.”
-Isaac Etter, transracially adopted person



FOUND IN KOREA: A CONVERSATION WITH DOCUMENTARY

FILMMAKER NAM HOLTZ, LMSW

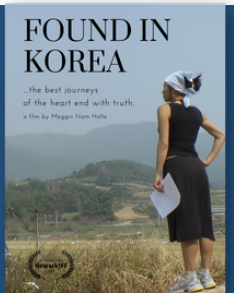


Meggin (Nam) Holtz, LMSW, a transracially adopted person born in Korea, has been involved in adoption advocacy, awareness, and support for a decade. Her award-winning documentary film, *Found In Korea* 한국에서 발견된, about birth search, identity, and adoption was created to serve as a point of entry for meaningful conversations about adoption and the impact of adoption, and is aimed at both youth and adults. Her film serves as the catalyst for this talk, in which she discusses what it is like when transracially adopted people go back to their country of origin, in search of their family and their roots. It's a must-watch for anyone whose family was built via international adoption, but the resonance of not knowing anything about your origins and searching for where you truly come from is just as applicable for families built via domestic adoption.



Educate yourself about adoption, period. You know, adoption from all voices: adoptive parent voices, adoptee voices, birthparent voices. I think that acknowledging the paradox of adoption is crucial.

- Nam Holtz, LMSW, transracially adopted person



ADOPTION & INTERSECTIONALITY: NAVIGATING RACE, CULTURE, CLASS, AND QUEERNESS AS AN ADOPTEE

What is intersectionality, and why does it matter so much in adoption?

Adopted people often find themselves caught in a web of different identities, systems, and predicaments, all of which intersect in complex ways that can be very difficult to navigate. **Joe Toolan**, a transracially adopted person born in Guatemala discusses what those intersectional roots meant for his experiences growing up in a white family.



Transracially adopted people often find themselves in situations where they do not feel like they fit in, and can struggle with identity and self. At the same time, they are attempting to navigate challenging conversations with their adopted parents around race, class, and identity formation. As a queer person, Joe talks about navigating coming out, being authentic, and living a truthful life, both with his adoptive parents and in reunion with his birthfamily. Joe also discusses working as an advocate for the community, as a leader in the non-profit and advocacy world, and how education and relationships can make a better world for adopted people.

INTERSECTING IDENTITIES: SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS AMONG BLACK INTERRACIAL ADOPTEES



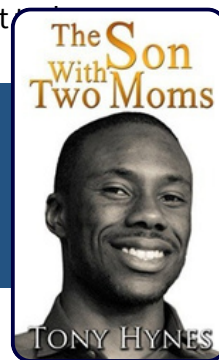
Dr. Tony Hynes shares groundbreaking research exploring how young, adult, Black interracial adoptees experience connection, identity, and belonging. Drawing from in-depth interviews across the U.S., this session examines the lived realities of adopted people and how race, family, and community shape well-being. As both an interracial adoptee raised in an LGBTQ+ headed household and a Ph.D. researcher, Tony brings unique insight to this critical topic. Author of *The Son With Two Moms* and featured in *The Atlantic* magazine, he reminds us: "Without activism, we fail to adjust the systems that have deemphasized the best interests of the child."

This session is for adopted people, adoptive parents, and professionals who need to understand these experiences beyond just racial identity—exploring what disconnects adoptees from their families, peers, and communities.



A good home for a child of color is one that emphasizes race in affirming and protective ways.

- Tony Hynes, PhD



THEY ARE NOT INVISIBLE: CENTERING ADOPTED BOYS' IDENTITY, BELONGING, AND SUPPORT

Adopted boys—particularly Black adopted boys—are often rendered invisible when adoption is understood as an endpoint rather than a lifelong experience. While stability and love are essential, they do not automatically address the layered identity, emotional, and belonging needs adopted boys carry as they grow into adolescence and adulthood.

Dr. Adam Anthony is a same-race Black adoptee who draws on his professional work in mentorship and leadership development, and research insights from his doctoral dissertation on identity and support systems to expand the *They Are Not Invisible* framework. This framework names the subtle but significant ways adopted boys' needs go unrecognized, especially when they appear "well-adjusted" or are raised in stable, loving homes.



INSIDE TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION



It can be difficult to see the full picture in adoption, because we often only hear from one side of an adoption triad at a time. However, adopted people and adoptive parents within the same family have individual and unique perspectives and struggles that require the context of the rest of their triad to fully understand and learn from. Adoptive mother **Julie Etter** and her transracially adopted son **Isaac Etter** open up to give adoption professionals and adoptive parents a window into their real-life struggles, lessons, and joys, discussing their individual perspectives and how they learned to see each other's viewpoints.



I felt a lot of confusion about why I was placed for adoption and I didn't necessarily know where to go with those feelings ... There was a real insecurity that started to form around the choice that ... my birth mother made about placing me for adoption. *– Isaac Etter*

BLACK SHEEP GOLD FLEECE: UNCOVERING IDENTITY & PURPOSE

This session explores **Sasha Mack**'s journey as a Black same-race adopted person. Through her powerful "Black Sheep" art collection, Sasha delves into the complexities of identity, cultural connection, and belonging. She addresses the nuances of same-race adoption in the Black community, navigating cultural identity, and the challenges of uncovering one's roots. Sasha's unique perspective illuminates the intersection of adoption, race, and activism, offering valuable insights for adopted people, families, and professionals. Her journey from feeling like a "black sheep" to discovering her "gold fleece" promises an enlightening and thought-provoking presentation that centers adoptee voices in the broader adoption dialogue.



I always wondered why my biological mother couldn't raise me. Because somehow, even though I was loved so much by my family, I still felt out of place. I would often be described as the special one. And I internalized that as shame. *– Sasha Mack*

FINDING MY PEOPLE: JOYS AND CHALLENGES IN ADOPTION AND REUNION

Dr. Maxine Bryant provides an important and rarely highlighted perspective as a domestic Black adoptee adopted by Black parents during a time when formal adoption in the Black community was rare. Alongside her personal story, Maxine also brings crucial insight into the history of the practice of adoption within Black families, providing perspective regarding how Black communities 'take care of their own.' Her story includes initiating reunion through Ancestry.com and meeting, building, and sustaining relationships with her biological siblings. Dr. Bryant also discusses the adult adoptee experience, which often is overlooked in adoption education, research and practice. Dr. Bryant offers meaningful insight into what it looks like to process and explore identity over many years and discusses how she has reached a place of healing and resilience despite her hardships. Dr. Bryant is the Director of the Center for Africana Studies and the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Center at Georgia Southern University.



How can adoptive parents support their child if their feelings and views about adoption change? How can adoption professionals prepare families to more honestly engage with the difficult and uncomfortable parts of adoption?

RELINQUISHED: THE POLITICS OF ADOPTION AND THE PRIVILEGE OF AMERICAN MOTHERHOOD



Sociologist **Gretchen Sisson** discusses her new book *Relinquished: The Politics of Adoption and the Privilege of American Motherhood*, and her ten years of research on adoption in the United States. How do relinquishing mothers feel about the support and counseling they received (or didn't) during their pregnancies? How is openness explained to expecting mothers, and does the marketing of open adoption align with their reality of open adoption? How do birthmothers feel about their adoptions over time, and how can their longer-term needs and traumas inform how we support mothers moving forward? Where does our society fail birthmothers, and what do they wish more people understood about their experiences? Through her multiple interviews over the years with numerous birthmothers, she uncovers the answers to these questions and more, providing adoptive parents the information necessary to better understand their child's first mother, and her experience as part of an adoption triad.



Herein lies the cultural contradiction of how we portray adoption. We view certain parents as fundamentally incapable of and inadequate to the task of raising their children, but relinquishment demonstrates their worthiness. They are better parents because they do not parent their child; the permanent separation rendered by adoption redeems them of their deviations and deficiencies. Birthmothers are perfect mothers—the embodiment of love and self-sacrifice—until they express any desire to raise or know their child.

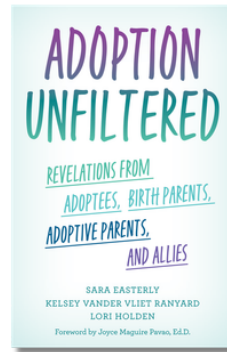
-Dr. Gretchen Sisson

ADVOCATING FOR QUALITY CARE FOR ADOPTEES

Marcella Moslow, LCSW, RPT, is a trauma therapist and a transracially adopted person born in Columbia. Adoptee activism doesn't always have to be through large scale practices or platforms, it can take the form of becoming educated and advocating for adoptees who face disparities when it comes to receiving care, whether it be from schools, clinics, medical providers, therapists and more. Historically, there has been a lack of quality care available for adoptees and those impacted by the experience of adoption. In this session, Marcella discusses the role of activism in bridging the gaps in understanding about the unique needs of adopted people. Marcella will share insight on ways adoptees, birth/first families, adoptive families, professionals and those wishing to be allies can work toward/advocate for quality/more informed care that will promote more comprehensive healing.



ADOPTION UNFILTERED BOOK TOUR (FILMED LIVE)



Adopted person **Sara Easterly**, birthmother **Kelsey Vander Vliet Ranyard**, and adoptive mother **Lori Holden** researched adoption from all sides for their groundbreaking book *Adoption Unfiltered: Revelations from Adoptees, Birthparents, Adoptive Parents, and Allies*. They interviewed dozens of adopted,

people, birthparents, adoptive parents, social workers, therapists, and other allies, all of whom shared candidly about their challenges in adoption. While finding common ground in the sometimes-contentious space of adoption may seem like a lofty goal, it reveals the authors' optimistic aim: working together with truth and transparency to move toward healing. The Birthparent Support Alliance hosted the Chicagoland stop on the 2024 Adoption Unfiltered Book Tour. This AiA session was filmed live at that event. Learn more about what the authors discovered during their research into adoption from each side of the adoption triad.

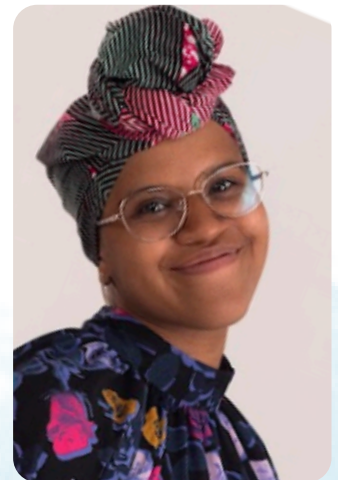
“ Liberation is when we access all parts of our lost identities. -- Anna Linde

SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH FROM AN ADOPTEE'S PERSPECTIVE: TO BE SEEN OR TO BE VISIBLE

Join us for a conversation that's never been had before in adoption spaces, as **Anna Linde, MSc**, a transracial adopted person, sexologist, and sexual health specialist, brings a completely new perspective to Activism in Adoption, one that will challenge everything you think you know about adoption and identity. This isn't just another adoption talk - it's about reclaiming parts of ourselves that have been invisible for too long. Adopted people face unique challenges around sexual health, racial fetishization, and reproductive rights that are rarely, if ever, discussed openly.

It's time to talk about:

- How early separation and racial trauma impact sexual health,
- The intersection of reproductive justice and adoption,
- Breaking free from harmful stereotypes and fetishization,
- Reclaiming sexuality as part of adoptee identity and healing.



~Anna Linde, MSc

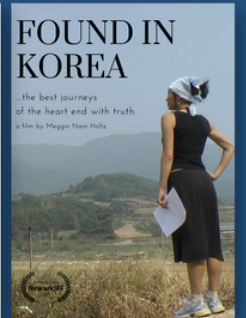
IMPROVING EXPERIENCES FOR EXPECTANT MOMS CONSIDERING ADOPTION



Hope O. Helder, birthmother and author of the critically acclaimed memoir, *Finding Hope: A Birthmother's Journey into the Light* and **Nam Holtz, LMSW**, a therapist, transracially adopted person born in Korea, and award-winning documentary filmmaker of *Found in Korea*, discuss how we can improve outcomes for expectant parents considering adoption, ensuring access to more resources and unbiased options counseling. Improving the hospital experience for expectant mothers mitigates their trauma, and *if* they place, the trauma for their child, giving them, and the adoptive parents, a better chance at improving outcomes and creating a healthy open adoption triad.



“Someday, you are going to have to tell your child the circumstances surrounding their adoption. Are you going to be able to tell them that you did everything you could to make sure their adoption was ethical? That you made sure that their birthmother had access to the resources she needed to heal?”
– Hope O. Helder



RAISING THE LEVEL OF ADOPTION COMPETENCE



Rachel Boyer, MSW, LMSW, a social worker and transracially adopted person, provides her expertise and insight about trauma-informed and adoption-competent social work practice. She discusses how our society views adoption, identifies the gaps in adoption storytelling, discusses why those gaps have persisted and who those gaps are serving, and how we can learn to engage in adoption advocacy at the local, state, and federal level. Rachel provides concrete examples and suggestions for how to be an advocate, encouraging everyone to make their voice heard, both to provide diverse perspectives on adoption to our media and lawmakers, but also so that we can all work alongside adult adopted people, who are currently shouldering the bulk of the burden of advocacy.

“I am so excited that birthmoms are finally getting a strong voice. We are so much more than a stereotype or a statistic.”
– LF, birthmother

UNVEILING THE UNKNOWN: HOW DNA TESTING IS CHANGING THE ADOPTION NARRATIVE



Bethany Fraser is a transracially adopted person and host of the podcast, *The Adoptee Diaries: Truth, Trust, and Transparency*. Bethany always knew she was adopted, but it wasn't until she did a home DNA kit that she learned some stunning secrets about her origins, including the discovery that she was multiracial, something that had been kept hidden from her, and which ultimately led her to connect with her birthfamily. Bethany is leading the conversation on the intersection of ancestry and adoption, the lifelong search for identity and belonging, and the unique challenges of being mixed race in America. Drawing from her own emotional journey of discovery, Bethany sheds light on the complex issues surrounding the identities and family relationships of adopted people, and how the power of DNA testing is reshaping the adoption narrative, especially in closed adoptions.

“ I know now that a piece of my personality comes directly from what I experienced. It's the lies, not having context, that feeling of not being good enough. It's only now that I finally feel like I am able to trust my gut; finally I'm able to say no. Now I trust my judgment about people. Now I make my own decisions and get to embrace life unapologetically. -- *Bethany Fraser* ”

SHIFTING THE ADOPTION NARRATIVE: THE ROLE AND POWER OF ADOPTIVE MOTHERS

While reflecting on her theater piece, *Placing Home*, which centers birthmother stories, adoptive mother **Katy Finn** unpacks the powerful role adoptive mothers can play in shifting the pervasive adoption narrative. Katy's talk centers around three questions: *What role does the adoptive mother play in shifting the narrative? Where can these shifts happen? And finally, Why does it matter?* Katy uses examples from her own journey in adoption to demonstrate why this shift in thinking is so necessary, and addresses how both prospective adoptive parents and adoptive parents can take clear action toward empowering birthparents and adopted people to bring their stories to the forefront of the adoption landscape.



“ For a child to grow up happy and healthy, they have to be secure in their identity, and we know that adoption brings a whole slew of complexities to a child's identity. Identity involves traits from the birthfamily. We are very quick in our family to say, “It's not nature OR nurture; it's nature AND nurture. -- *Katy Finn* ”

ADVERTISING CHILDREN ON SOCIAL MEDIA: ETHICAL CONCERNS IN REHOMING PRACTICES



Kirsta Bowman, an adopted person well-known on social media for her thoughtful and nuanced videos discussing the adoption landscape, joins us to discuss her research into unethical rehoming practices on social media. Unregulated custody transfer, often referred to as “rehoming,” is the practice of adoptive parents transferring legal custody of their child to another individual or family without the involvement of the child welfare, oversight, or other appropriate systems. Photos and biographies of minor children whose adoptive parents want to rehome them can be found in numerous places on social media, advertising them to potential new parents without concern for who they might be.

“I’m writing to thank you for the excellent webinar your organization put on the Uniform Law Commission (ULC) recently finalized a model law on this topic called the Uniform Unregulated Child Custody Transfer Act (UUCCTA). The UUCCTA provides states with a uniform regulatory framework to deal with two issues: (1) the unregulated custody transfer of children; and (2) provision of better information and guidance to prospective adoptive parents of children in certain adoptions.

The UUCCTA has already been enacted in Utah and Washington and will likely be enacted in more states in the future.

What responsibility do we collectively hold for keeping all adopted children safe from harm?

Below are real comments taken from a rehoming Facebook group (the photos are stock photos and the names are changed, to protect the children’s privacy).

"Anna is an organized and clean child who keeps her room neat."



"David is stronger than he looks, and loves to do yardwork."

"Cayleigh loves to clean and sweep."



“My jaw was on the floor throughout this entire talk. How is there no oversight for these kids? Who is keeping them safe?”

FROM ORPHAN TO ADOPTION SCHOLAR: RESEARCHING FAMILIES OF ORIGIN

Dr. Atamhi Cawayu was born in Bolivia and adopted to Belgium. In 2023, he earned his PhD in Gender and Diversity Studies from Ghent University. Dr. Cawayu's academic work centers on childhood and child protection, with specific interests in transnational adoption and the right to live in a family. Drawing on his lived experience as an adoptee, alongside his work as a scholar and activist, Dr. Cawayu strategically uses academic spaces to challenge dominant adoption narratives and influence public debate. For birth parents, his research validates experiences that are too often minimized or dismissed. For adopted people navigating reunion, his work offers critical insight into what families of origin may have endured. And for mental health professionals and social workers, Dr. Cawayu's work demonstrates why centering the voices of adoptees and birth families—rather than agencies or adoptive parents—leads to more honest and ethical conversations about what adoption really is.

