



“Should we move to a racially diverse area?”

Exploring the impact of environment on an adoptee’s lived experience, specifically as it relates to their transracial identity & safety within a predominately white population.

Cam Lee Small, MS, LPCC

Part of why the history curriculum in school felt so distant to me was because I struggled to see myself in it.

I almost didn’t graduate high-school because I was failing history class. As a teen, I struggled to connect the curriculum to my personal experience.

One could argue that’s the case for all teens, that history class is “boring.”

Maybe.

But as an Asian American, history for me was barely recognized. Despite it being a major part of the invisible system that positioned me as a foreigner, perhaps as punchlines to jokes, or as lumped together with other Asian-looking folks in the community (if there were any).

Teachers aren’t at fault. It goes way deeper and originates as far back as ancient Greece, where the East was an “other world” filled with fantasy and beasts, gems and

mystery. Not to mention policies and exclusions, internments and anti-misogyny laws, etc.

Adoptive parents have an incredible opportunity this season to introduce their trans-racial adoptees to a new kind of education system.

One that deviates from the white-centered master narrative. Let them know the importance and significance of their histories, and how it personally connects to the realities in which they live today.

And that “people who look like them” are most certainly included in the building of a much better place for our communities now and for generations to come.

One way to foster a sense of belonging is to locate them in history rather than exclude them from it.

Watch short films.

Use YouTube clips.

Read parts of articles.

Facilitate a family book club.

Analyze song lyrics.

Initiate discussion on current events.

Look at artwork online.

Google lists of “100 great people.”

Explore “nations and tribes.”

Plan a “dream vacation.”

Take a “virtual” tour.

*Is your child going to be the first non-white person
you've loved and served?*

Parents, your transracial adoptee will strongly benefit from you knowing, befriending, and standing in solidarity with folks who look like them. If that's a struggle for you, your child might also struggle to understand why they were adopted in the first place.

Please consider how it could feel to be relinquished from one country and a birth family within it, and then sent to another country whose racial and ethnic identities are visibly and even socially different than their original.

Imagine the outcomes! They could be wonderful, and I PLEAD with God they would be. And they could be wrought with isolation, fear, confusion, and tears that flow day and night. We must recognize how both do happen.

And we need serious grace to hold all kinds of adoption experiences faithfully. I'm on the road with and beside you, I certainly don't have all the answers, we reach out to the triune God, the perfect community, the faithful Shepherd and Father for wisdom and strength and hope so that we might participate in a child's movement not just from danger to safety, but from loneliness to connection, fear to hope, blindness to sight, from emotional turmoil to confidence and peace, from death to life.

Is it absolutely dependent on factors related to race? Probably not. And yet, there's something to explore, and maybe actions to take next, if the first non-white person you feed and protect is "your" child.

What if it was already normal to be inviting people of color into our homes and feeding them, taking care of them, and cheering for them as they say goodbye? Not because whiteness is the rescuer but because you chose not to live in a segregated space, you chose to set your home in a place where white was not the only option.

The stories from adoptees are out there, folks who suffered through childhood and beyond due to a lack of racial representation and heightened interaction with racial inequities.

My prayer is you'd be inspired and equipped to represent a better story with and for your family, one where racial differences are not just talked about and celebrated but also accessible and appreciated in real life.

Do all immigrants matter? Or just the ones we can adopt?

Have you ever thought of your child as an immigrant? Why or why not? And how does that notion add to or hold captive your love of other immigrants?

Immigration policy has a long history in the U.S., and it's hard sometimes to make sense of how it applies to us presently. Angel Island is just one example to help think about what's going on at "the border" right now.

Research [Detained on Angel Island](#) when you have time, I've organized just a few ideas here for dialogue.

The hope is we can develop a stronger sense of empathy for one another's history while participation in some sense of confession and conciliation here and now.

Not all of us are working together for a more loving and just fellowship here on earth, but for the ones who are, I'm with you. Legally, through adoption, but ultimately through something and someone better than anything this world has to offer.

*How inconsistent is it for a country to adopt babies and then
build walls and policies against their peers and parents?
Children notice this.*

It's a stretch to say adoption exists in a vacuum, as if it's not touched by policies and institutional practices that perpetuate racism.

Children are so observant! And they are so confused sometimes. When they hear leaders in their lives speak about them, when they witness how others are (mis)treated and (dis)honored, even murdered unjustly.

My role here is not to tell you what to think and do as much as it's to encourage you to imagine the world from your child's window, that you'd be sure to let them know, in some way shape or form, that you see it too, that you are WITH them and are committed to conduct that fosters compassion individually and to the ends of the earth, rather than policies that sustain partiality far and near.

We are certainly in this together! Please be sure to make that message clear to your children.

Are the only people of color in our church the ones we adopted?

Some children struggle to believe in a non-white Hero because all the leaders surrounding them are white.

(ps: not all churches, not all adoptees; nothing is impossible) Let's do what we can to ensure the local church is a safe harbor from racism, not a safe harbor for it.

Are we trying to free our Black neighbors from the prison industrial complex as much as we're trying to adopt their children?

There's more than one way to be a good neighbor 🗝️ 🔑 🗝️ ⚖️ 📧

"One of the traits I inherited from my adoptive parents was my fear of black people." -transracial adoptee client

Dear white adoptive parents, part of the good news is you can help change this. You have more power than you think. Please be faithful with it.

What happens when adoption becomes a positive character reference for the adopter?

Please be careful when elevating others solely based on whether or not they adopted a child.

The assumption itself holds us back from fully seeing and serving the children involved.

There's more to a person than whether or not they've adopted a child. For better or worse, I'll add.

We're even better served by the idea that parenting in an adoptive family requires a significantly different approach compared to a non-adoptive family.

Further, to assume that adoptive parents and the adoptees under their care are doing just fine because they've participated in "adoption" limits us as family members as well as a community.

How unfortunate would it be to assume someone's character and ability based simply on their navigation of a system that disproportionally favors whiteness?

It's unfortunate. And unfair. Find a struggling single black mother whose parenting and life style doesn't fit yours, and you'll begin tapping into the depths of your bias and bent toward others.

Find a married white mother, articulate, who speaks good English, who has adopted those black children, and again you'll notice your bias and bent toward others.

I'm not saying it's wrong to care for children from "hard places," to advocate for their safety and truly go to bat for them when they need it the most.

I'm also not telling you to "send the children back to the orphanage because adoption is bad."

I'm asking us to be mindful of our biases, to check in about our understanding of adoption and the multi-layered experiences of the those who are adopted, and those who are adopting.

"You've done such a good thing!" is a dangerous message for adopters to hear, because it crowds out the possibility that adoptees in that family might not agree, and they might not know how to ask for help, especially when the majority of society tells them they've already been helped and they should feel thankful for it.

Interesting how even in these adult years we do ask for your help. Adoptees aren't the villains, so when we speak up and out about our stories, we thank you in advance for your attuned responses.

*Please don't make yourself a god among adoptees.
It's too much for you to fulfill and it crushes us.*

"Oh thank goodness, he would have grown up Godless."

A passerby commented, relieved at the fact the child had been adopted. The child was there listening, by the way.

If you think your child will be “saved” because you adopted him, your god is small and depends you. That’s a dangerous place for both of you.

Re-evaluate that power dynamic and consider what it truly means to be in fellowship with a wise and compassionate Redeemer who is mindful of His people, desires for everyone to be saved, Shepherd to the ends of the earth, and has mercy on whom he has mercy.

Children can know Love without you being part of their lives. They could also perish despite your loving presence.

If that’s a stuck point for you, you’re not alone. Me, too. I wish I knew the mechanics of that truth, but I’m still wrestling with it.

Regarding adoption, though, I take it all to mean we are NOT recipients of wages, but recipients of a gift through a cost born by an other, namely Jesus Christ on the cross and the Son of God resurrected, whose work accomplished the impossible demands required from each one of us.

That’s redemption. The death of one family to build another? That’s not redemption but only an occasion for a power and love from out of this world to work and to heal those within it.

*Equating a child’s birth culture with “sin” - and
American culture as its savior - is child abuse.*

Socially, emotionally, and spiritually.

And elevating it as fully “supreme” might not be the best for our relationships either.

Think about ethnic cleansing. And abuse of power and control.

And so I wonder how these tendencies of pride and insistence, which have the power to hijack each one of us, requires a work of grace and justice we pursue together.

Research the Duluth models for abuse, power, and control, and notice how these interpersonal forms of violence operate within the narrative of adoption.

Whether top-down from the way our nation's leaders talk about other cultures (e.g., the ethnic cleansing of "Kill the Indian Save the Man," COVID-19 as "China Flu," etc.), or heart to heart from the way we speak about them in our family.

Children especially receive a sense of safety (or threat) from the way their caregivers speak about their birth culture and the way their birth culture is represented (or erased) in the home.

If you equate my birth culture with "sin" and American life with non-sin, I'm afraid there's been a gross appropriation of who Jesus is and what kinds of fellowship he represents.

It is absolutely true that folks from other cultures can receive unspeakable joy and restoration from the living God who knows and loves them, without needing to become "American."

What would it look like to allow the adoptees in your family to access that kind of fellowship?

If instead you show me that the best and only way to connect with divinity is through the way we do it in America, gosh it's tragic how deep and devastating that kind of self-hatred and misdirection could become.

We can't replace what's been lost through adoption. And yet, we can labor to preserve what's been granted to us before our government sanctioned adoption into "America" - domestically or internationally.

I don't believe that's a sin. I think it honors the unique God-given stories we've each been called to name and steward.

*"I had been convinced my biggest flaw, my physical appearance,
was offensive and irredeemable."*

-Nicole Chung via All You Can Ever Know

In her memoir *All You Can Ever Know*, Nicole Chung elegantly negotiates racism, discrimination, and social dynamics with loss, dual loyalties, and wonders of birth family.

“I could see even more clearly what a trial elementary school had been. I had been anxious every day; sometimes bullied, but my parents still didn’t know the worst of it.”

“And while I was glad my birth mother didn’t know about any of this - glad my parents hadn’t told her the truth, because she had given me up so I would be happy - sometimes I wondered if I’d have had the courage to tell my Korean parents what I had never told my adoptive parents.”

“I wondered if they might have understood me, or at least understood that pain, better than my white family.”

For trans-racial adoptees, outward appearance can feel like a barrier. In many ways, it is.

Personally, I don’t believe it needs to stay that way.

We can collaborate together as a community, fueled by Love and Justice, so that our brothers and sisters would not be overcome by the division happening around the world today but perhaps be transformed and empowered through it.

What can you do? Push back. Disrupt. Stand up. Speak up. Love. Avoid indifference; engage. Take breaks when needed. Get back in the ring.

Nicole Chung was able to break into the scene and tell her story

For children today facing the trials she referenced, they’ll need your help to break into spaces where we’re not welcomed.

“Eww! She’s eating worms!!”

Over the course of the past decade I’ve had the privilege of listening to adoptees tell me what’s on their mind and heart.

I write them down because these experiences need to be brought into the light.

This quote was from a transracial adoptee sharing with me about her classmate’s reaction when she brought udon for lunch one day.

How embarrassing is that? To feel excited about this slice of your story and then have it smashed in a school cafeteria, in front of everyone?

She stopped eating Asian food. Bummer.

How are we supposed to explore and taste and enjoy and embrace and decide for ourselves which pieces of our birth culture we'd like to integrate into our lives... when the folks at school despise it?

We can't. So, we stop eating worms and try to be as white as possible, hating ourselves and feeling a split loyalty toward the people whose acceptance we long for and yet we wish so bad to go far away from, to be somewhere better, to where our God-given gifts and talents and colors and smells and tastes are celebrated, rather than demonized.

Today, it's almost the year _____. It doesn't matter how long ago this story was disclosed. Yesterday? Ten years ago? Doesn't matter.

Right now adoptees are trying as hard as they can to just be. It's SO frustrating to hear these kinds of interactions are regular, daily, common, normal.

If you're looking for good news or encouragement from this story, please join the club. We're standing with and for this fellow adoptee and pleading for help.

*"Go back to China!" no longer has power over me,
that's why I'm going back in for the others.*

I was in fifth grade, standing on the playground, at Alexander Middle School in Nekoosa Wisconsin, fall. Someone made slant eyes at me and called me a chink.

How do we support adoptees who continually hear these kinds of messages, "Go back to where you came from!" Or, "You don't belong here!"

"Perpetual foreigner" (existing as an alien in our own land) is one of the first and most insidious racial micro-aggressions transracial adoptees negotiate throughout their lifespan. Along with color blindness and the pressure to assimilate.

Some might tell us, "Hey, get over it." We could respond, "Hey, stop it."

Are you an adoptee? You belong here. You belong. You completely belong here. No one on this planet has the authority or power to challenge your place in this world. The gates of Hell cannot shake that truth. It stands. You belong here. You were created to stand secure and on purpose this very hour.

People will try to hold this from you because of deeply embedded beliefs they've inherited from their families and from the multi-generational layers of hatred into which they've been grafted in. Because of grace, and the resilience and dignity of the human soul they do have the opportunity and capacity to change, but individuals who continue to shout and believe these kinds of insults are themselves victims of cognitive and spiritual genocide.

In the best stories, victims don't change. It's the heroes and guides who change, who change the world. Dear adoptee, you are a hero, you are a guide, for all of us.

Therapy Redeemed is about possibility.

To be frank, you can't do this alone. But I believe it's possible for adoptees who've been hurt and crushed and isolated and bruised to heal into someone stronger and brighter beyond their wildest imagination.

I'm not finished hearing these messages. I trust I'll hear them thousands more times in some way shape or form. But I'm done being held back by these messages. Because for me, it is finished. I feel confident in who I am, where I've been and where I'm going.

I'm not afraid to speak up against these lies. And my work now is to reach back with a better truth for the ones who need to hear it.



I hope this article was a helpful launchpad for folks considering the impact that living in a racially diverse context (or not) could have on their adoptee; also for transracial adoptees to consider what it means for you to choose your living space intentionally as you have the opportunities to do so. [You can see others' comments here.](#) And there will be a more in-depth discussion at [Office Hour with Your Therapist](#) at some point in the future, so please do stay tuned for that.

Cam Lee Small has been working to raise consciousness about faith, child welfare, and mental health since 2012, after meeting his biological mother in Korea. Trans-racially adopted and founder of Therapy Redeemed, he holds a Master's in Counseling Psychology from University of Wisconsin-Madison and is a licensed professional clinical counselor. Cam is [PACC certified](#), and registered as an accredited service provider through [TAC via Center for Adoption Support and Education](#). He is also a vetted clinician with [MN ADOPT](#). He provides therapy services online from Minneapolis, Minnesota, where he lives with his wife and family. Find Cam's adoption-related dialogue on instagram at [@therapyredeemed](#).

In addition, he is trained in biblical counseling, certified in non-violent crisis intervention and is a member of the American Psychological Association's Minority Fellowship Program. Cam's mental health and education services are accessible 100% online and uniquely tailored for individuals and families on the adoption and permanency spectrum. He also provides trainings and workshops in a variety of professional and clinical settings.

Services

[Workplace Open Forums](#) are tailor made for your team to process themes and gain tools related to AAPI and BIPOC experiences.

Registration is currently open for Cam's 12-week
[Online Adoptive Parent Workshop](#)

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including the workbook for adoptees.



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Discussion Guide

by Cam Lee Small, MS,LPCC



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Should we move to a racially diverse area if we're adopting trans-racially?

Should we adopt a child into a non-diverse area? Why or why not?

Family > no family...?

For transracial adoptees with white parents:

- 1) How would you describe the racial diversity in your area as you were growing up?
- 2) What, if anything, would you change if you could go back in time?

- 3) For you personally, what do you see as the pros and cons of living in a predominantly white, racially homogenous neighborhood and/or city?
- 4) For those TRAs who do live in a racially diverse area today, what's that experience been like for you, how is it working out? Are there any particular benefits you've noticed from living in (and establishing/raising your family if that applies) in a racially diverse context?
- 5) And, are there layers of need that you continue to address, despite your living in a racially diverse area, how would you describe that?

For adoptive parents:

- 1) Where do you live currently?
- 2) How did you decide to live there? What factors were considered as you were making your choice? What were the pros and cons of that particular space and place?
- 3) How would you describe the racial diversity in your area?
- 4) What other layers of identity or ability represent "diversity" in your geographic location?
- 5) What would it take for you to move to another location?
- 6) What did it take for you to stay?
- 7) For those APs who do live in a racially diverse area today, what's that experience been like for you, how is it working out? Are there any particular benefits you've noticed from raising your trans-racially adopted children in a racially diverse context?

Thanks so much for being here y'all!! These conversations are so helpful as we seek to build that better world together, for our children and families and all that's possible in & through them.

****If you're using this discussion guide for a group and want to hear from***
Cam Lee Small directly, you can email him at therapyredeemed@gmail.com
and [schedule a live Zoom Q&A](#)*