

# Black, White Asian

## Moving Beyond Our Own Racial Boundaries

by Amy Klatzkin

*In the aftermath of the Hurricane Katrina, when race and class often marked the dividing line between life and death, it's time for adoptive parents of children from Asia to talk about race and racism as well as culture and heritage.*

For most parents who have adopted children from Asia, it's really hard to talk about race and racism without becoming defensive or angry or dismissive. Most of us have adopted across racial lines and want desperately to do what's right for our kids. We know in our guts that our kids will have a different experience of American life, at least sometimes, because their origins are written on their faces, but we don't know what to do about it. Celebrating Asian holidays in traditional dress may put a positive spin on the ethnic differences in our families, but it is poor preparation for handling racism in America. We need to face that demon head on.

When our children leave our homes to spend the rest of their lives as adults in the country they have grown up in, they are going to face things most of us never experienced in our homelands: compliments on speaking their primary language competently, assumptions about traits thought to be typical of Asians (passive-seductive women, sexless men, good at math, "inscrutable"), suspicion of people assumed to be foreigners (as adult Asian Americans so often are)...and so on.

We white parents of Asian children are learning to recognize some forms of racism against Asians, and as a group we react quickly and decisively to those. But when vast systemic racism against people not in our families is laid bare for the entire world to see, we don't easily comprehend how that might affect our children.

If we're really defensive about racism, or if we believe in "color-blindness," our kids will probably keep their experiences of racism to themselves. They will minimize what they do talk about, fearing that we will react in ways that will just make things worse. They will come to see, very soon, that people like us, who have never experienced racism directly, usually don't see it

very well and haven't a clue how to respond effectively. They will also be looking to see if we white parents have simply made an exception for them, bringing them into our families as honorary whites ("we don't see her as Chinese; we just see her as one of us"). Our kids are "one of us," but we are no longer white families—we're multiracial now.

Unlearning racism is a lifelong task for those of us who have had the privilege never to be on the receiving end of racial prejudice. Yes, there are other types of prejudices. I'm Jewish; 6 million of us were exterminated in WWII. I get it that racism isn't the only "ism."

But as white parents who have chosen to adopt Asian-born children and raise them as Americans or Canadians or whatever, we need to understand that, along with all the wonderful things our families provide, we also have provided an environment where racism against people of color exists and persists in part because we don't see it. Or rather, we see only the obvious, intentional kind, whereas the cruelest, most persistent kind is often systematic, hidden, and not talked about in polite company.

The evacuation of New Orleans has laid bare this hidden side of racism in our country. With a million people displaced, race and class were often the dividing lines between who lived and who died.

There were not a lot of white middle-class bodies floating in the putrid waters of New Orleans this September. Many of our older children noticed that and discussed it in school. We would be wise to discuss it at home as well. I truly hope we will seize the moment to begin or ramp up long, hard conversations about race and racism, not just among other white adults but reaching out to include adult people of color to tell us their experiences. We need to hear it directly from people who live it every day. For white people of good will who want to do what's right, it is a long, difficult,

and painful process to recognize racism within ourselves and our communities and begin to unlearn it. We all have it, and we'll never be finished unlearning it.

Cheri Register, in her book *Beyond Good Intentions*, talks about how easy it is to be "blinded by our own whiteness." We proclaim ourselves racism free because that's what we want to be, and we get really angry if anyone suggests that we still have work to do. But of course we have. Almost every day we benefit from white privilege—when we are not stopped by the highway patrol for "driving while white," when we are not followed around a store as a potential shoplifter, when strangers do not cross the street out of fear of our whiteness, when people do not congratulate us for speaking our native language, when customs agents, clerks, police, passersby give us the benefit of the doubt after a quick glance at our skin color and the outward signs of our class status.

Our kids share that privilege only while they are with us. When they go out into the world by themselves, people who don't know them will see just another Asian face.

Over time most transracially adopted children question the sincerity of their white parents' anti-racist commitment. Do we really oppose racism, or are we simply making an exception for them and their heritage? Many adult Korean adoptees feel tremendous anger about the racial exceptionalism they experienced growing up in white families. They feel they've been treated like "honorary whites," and they don't see that as an honor at all. Why should they feel honored to be accepted as something they are not?

Often white parents who adopt Asian children divide up people of color—consciously or unconsciously—according to racial hierarchies. We regard our Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Cambodian children as higher on society's racial totem pole than Latino or African American kids, and we keep our distance from those adoptive families because they're "not like us."

We may even avoid workshops on transracial adoption unless they are specifically for parents who have adopted from the same part of the world that we chose to adopt from. These hierarchies represent another form of racism that ultimately harms our children and limits their connections.

When we relate only to families exactly like ours, we miss the opportunity to build larger circles of inclusiveness and support for our families. We also cut our children off from connections with kids who share the experience of growing up as children of color with white parents. Their origins may be different, but their lives here have many more commonalities than differences.

It's not enough, then, for us to be anti-racist when the victims of racism are Asian. Anti-racism isn't a pick-and-choose commitment. Our kids will be watching to see if we are making exceptions for them or if we really are committed to standing up against racism whenever it appears, whether it's the obvious intentional kind of racism or the far more common but just as damaging unintentional systemic kind writ large in New Orleans in September.

The real choice for us is whether we're going to get to work unlearning racism now, individually and collectively, or whether we're going to get the message in anger and resentment from our future Asian American teenagers and young adults. For a preview, sit down as the only white parent with a randomly selected group of young adult Korean adoptees and ask them about race and racism in America. If you're lucky, they won't protect you from the anger and pain racism has caused them. Many of them feel on this subject.

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