



Library podcast

Nicole Chung and Ijeoma Oluo discuss 'All You Can Ever Know'

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[00:00:35] Thank you so much for being here tonight. I'm stash brand and the literature and humanities program manager here at the Seattle Public Library. And as we begin this evening I would like to acknowledge that we are gathered together on the ancestral land of the Coast Salish people. We would like to honor their elders past and present and we thank them for the stewardship of this land. Welcome to this evening's event with Nicole Chong and a Jomaa Elul presented in partnership with Elliott Bay Book Company. Thank you to our authors series sponsor Gary Clunis and to the Seattle Times for generous promotional support of library programs. Finally we are grateful to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Private gifts to the foundation from thousands of donors helped the library provide free programs and services that touched the lives of everyone in our community. So to library foundation donors here with us tonight we say thank you very much for your support. Now without further ado I'd like to welcome Karen from Elliott Bay Book Company who will introduce tonight's speakers wow what a great audience.

[00:01:48] I am so glad that you're all here to share this program with us and this evening we are hosting two visionaries writers whose work both in print and online continue to teach us so much. Nicole Chang was born in Seattle raised in Oregon and currently lives and writes in the D.C. area. She has written for The New York Times GQ long reads BuzzFeed and Shonda Land where she has written about champion figure skater Kristi Yamaguchi among other topics. She is the editor and editor in chief of catapult an award winning Daily online publisher of fiction and nonfiction by both emerging and established writers. Nicole is also the former managing editor of the Toast and she's an active presence on Twitter. So we hope you're all following her there. She's here to speak to you today about her first book. All you can ever know this book's accolades are many including Indie's introduce pic for this fall by independent booksellers all over the nation. And she's an October Indie Next Pick. Barnes and Noble fall 2018 discover new writers left. Library Journal editors pick for fall and her book is on the most anticipated book lists of many many Book Riot the millions Seattle Times Vanity Fair Entertainment Weekly and there was that nice long review that name checked our local Watty mine. She was also featured in Time poets and writers and she had a star Publisher's Weekly review and we also are loving that book as well.

[00:03:28] And I have to say that as a reader and as an Asian American reader she has a perspective that I've been waiting for Asian American adoptee voices are part of our diaspora. And to find a story this open hearted and beautiful. Well it's a gift to readers everywhere. No matter what your background is. So tonight she's going to read a little bit and then she's going to appear tonight in conversation with another renowned Northwests writer Seattle's Ishiyama Aluko whose book. So you want to talk about race has appeared on best seller lists all over the region. Her essays have appeared in The Guardian Isabel the stranger the medium the establishment where she's also an editor at large. She was named to one of the roots 100 most influential African-Americans in 2017. One of the 50 most influential women in Seattle by Seattle met and she also won the 2018 feminist humanist award from the American Humanist Society and most recently the economic opportunity Institute's 2018. Aubrey Davis visionary leadership award. So we'll begin with a short reading by Nicole Chung followed by a conversation between Nicole and Jomaa. Then we'll have our audience questions for the question cards so fill those out when you have a question and then we'll be picking them up from the side aisles and then afterwards they'll both be at the front tables signing books and we have copies of both books are on sale at the Elliott Bay Book Company tab table.

[00:05:05] So with that please join me and welcoming Nicole Chung to the Seattle Public Library thank you all so much for being here.

[00:05:20] It's wonderful to be back home in the northwest from my book launch I can't tell you how much it means to me. So thank you so much for your presence here tonight.

[00:05:29] It's a gift. I'm just going to read a brief prologue before our conversation.

[00:05:36] The story my mother told me about them was always the same your birth parents had just moved here from Korea. They thought they wouldn't be able to give you the life you deserved. It's the first story I can recall one that would shape a hundred others. Once I was old enough and brave enough to go looking when I was still young three or four I would crawl into my mother's lap before asking to hear it. Her arms would have circled me solid and strong where I was slight pale and freckled against my light brown skin at that age.

[00:06:15] A shiny black bowl cut and bangs would have framed my face a stark contrast to the reddish brown perm my mother had when I was young. I was no doubt growing out of toddler cuteness by then but my mom thought I was beautiful when you think of someone as your gift from God maybe you can never see them as anything else. How could they give me up. I must have asked her this question a hundred times. And my mother never wavered in her response. Years later I would wonder whether someone told her how to comfort me if she read the advice in a book or heard it from the adoption agency. Or if as my parents she simply knew it she ought to say. What I wanted to hear the doctors told them you'd struggle all your life. Your birth parents were very sad they couldn't keep you. But they thought adoption was the best thing for you. Even as a child I knew my life too. They were right mom. By the time I was 5 or six I had heard the tale of my loving selfless birth parents so many times I could recite it myself. I collected every fact I could. Hoarding the sparse faded glimpses into my past like bright favorite toys. This may be all you can ever know.

[00:07:38] I was told it was a joyful story but it was their story and mine too. The only thing we'd ever shared and as my adoptive parents saw it the story could have ended in no other way. So when people asked about my family my features the fate I'd been dealt. Maybe it isn't surprising how I answered first in a childish tearful chirrup. Later in the lecturing tone of one obliged to educate I strove to be calm and direct never giving anything away never changing the details. Offering the story I'd learned so early was I thought a way to gain acceptance. It was the excuse for how I looked and a way of asking pardon for it looking back of course I can make out the gaps the places where my parents must have made their own guesses. The pauses were harder questions could have followed. Why didn't they ask for help. What if they changed their minds. Would you have adopted me if you'd been able to have a child of your own. Family lore given to us as children has such a hold over us such staying power. It can form the bedrock of another kind of faith one to rival any religion in forming our beliefs about ourselves and our families and our place in the world.

[00:09:06] When tiny traitorous doubts arose when I felt lost or alone or confused about all the things I couldn't know. I told myself something as noble as my birth parents sacrifice demanded my trust my loyalty they thought adoption was the best thing for you. It was a legend formed and told and told again because my parents wanted me to believe that my birth family had loved me from the start and that my parents in turn were meant to adopt me and that this story unfolded as it should have.

[00:09:42] This was the foundation on which they built our family. As I grew I too staked my identity on it. The story a lifeline cast when I was too young for deeper questions continue to bring me comfort years later. Grown up and expecting a child of my own I would search for my birth family still wanting to believe in it.

[00:10:18] That was beautiful. You know it's been really interesting reading this book actually as a mixed race black person raised by a white parent.

[00:10:30] I think there are some similarities and of course some really stark differences. But as I was getting into the book some of the similarities were hilarious can't like when I was I was born a little over 10 weeks early as well. I didn't know that I was like my mom and dad had been told very similar things about like my prognosis for things like that.

[00:10:53] I also had a brother from because my father went back to Nigeria when I was very young. And then he died who came in trying to get to know a sibling that you like absolutely you've ever known. And all of the weird myths about like what family actually is and what it's like to deal with all of that.

[00:11:15] It was really interesting just reading through and thinking about and some of the ways in which things differed. And we'll probably get a little more into it.

[00:11:22] It was interesting to me was your parents you talk a lot about their goals and the ways in which it can be hard to tell what your parents are doing for you or for them.

[00:11:37] And I think that the stories that parents tell themselves and tell their children and especially when they are crossing racial boundaries. And so it was really interesting to look at how that can differ depending on what your family makeup is so I'm really excited actually to just drive in so I'm not going to just sit here and talk about all this. My feelings will get into it later. So I would love to ask you first the question I think that you'll probably be asked a billion times as you in your book tour but what was your dream to come into this book.

[00:12:07] It's a great question. By now I should have a one firm like that answer. But actually every time I answer it a little bit differently most of the events in the book when I was searching for my birth family when my I was pregnant with my first child and that was like over 10 years ago now. So at the time I wasn't thinking that it would ever be a book. You know it's not like as it was happening I was like oh I better write this down because someday I'll tell everything. It was really I was writing things down. I've kept a daily journal like since kindergarten. I write in it almost every day. So it was a great source for me certainly and going back and having those. But at the time I was writing it down just for myself and for my kids I really wanted like my at the time I had just one. And I wanted her to understand someday when she was older. What I was thinking why why my pregnancy with her is what really pushed me to search. You know what. What I did to try to find out who I was and put parts of my life and my family and my history back together. It was so much so I could share that with her as her mother. So I mean the turning to this book really started with just those really kind of writing it down for me for my family for my daughters.

[00:13:20] And then you know it was five years before I wrote anything or published anything about it. And then I realized once I started publishing essays here and there about adoption that people had a lot of questions. It was not the adoptee perspective was just not one that they had read a lot about. You know I think traditional adoption narratives are really kind of dominated by adoptive parents and by by professionals in the field. And so a lot of people were just curious because they really hadn't hadn't heard this perspective before.

[00:13:51] So really telling the story sort of piecemeal essay by essay was no longer it was hard. It was getting difficult to address all the complexity all the nuance and like a 5300 word piece you know. So I thought maybe this is a book maybe that's where I'll find the space and the time and just the room to really you know answer all these questions and really present it in its full complexity.

[00:14:15] So yeah that's kind of how but I'm continually shocked that it's a book.

[00:14:19] I mean it's still really hard to believe. Did anything really surprise you as you were. You know I do like I personally as I'm writing essays I'm usually kind of process to some degree everything I'm writing about in order to try to figure out what my angle is but I know that when I came to writing my book there were things I hadn't fully processed but they had to go in the book because it was important to the book and I found myself in some really weird emotional spaces that I hadn't been prepared for. What was it like for you or because you had been journaling for so long and it had been so long past. Were you kind of had you already made peace with everything in the book.

[00:14:56] That's a great question. I think that to some degree you do like real experience everything when you're writing about it you know you. It's not that I hadn't done that thinking and that feeling in that processing before but certainly writing it all out start to finish and then I actually tore the book apart. The first half so writing it start to finish again. Was it was it was different. I really had to reflect on things when I reread it. Now the chapter that I wasn't expecting to write when I set out to write the book. It's an early chapter and it's all about my adoptive parents and their life before I came into the picture. It's about like who they are as people before me because I think you have to understand who they are to understand like how much they wanted a child to understand why it was. It

[00:15:41] Took me 25 27 years to really really work up the courage to search and to look for answers. And I love that chapter.

[00:15:50] I mean in part because my adoptive father passed away in January rereading that is it's almost like a memorial to him in a way I think even though I'm not in it at all. It's just one of my favorite chapters because I felt writing it that I was capturing who they were before me and then who they became and also their love for me you know their love for our family which they really kind of willed into being. So yeah I wasn't expecting that. When I set out to write the book but I was really pleasantly surprised by it. Did that kind of shift how you see them and how you saw your childhood time of getting that

[00:16:27] Different view that was less immediate to yourself and more about them.

[00:16:31] Yeah I think it's not that I hadn't really considered their perspective before. I mean there are times when I actually probably considered it like too much but I really do think it helped me empathize and it helped me write the rest of the book keeping that in mind. Like the duty of a memoirist is to. It's not necessary to make sure everybody comes out looking wonderful but it is to look at every single person every character every subject and every event in the book with compassion and with empathy. So that exercise of putting myself not just in my adoptive parents but in different characters shoes. It was I mean I think it made the book deeper and richer and I think it helped me as a writer. Remember these are real people they matter more to me than any book like this. I have to be true to my story and my perspective but I also have to like really respect and try to show who they are like in their full complexity.

[00:17:24] My brother is a storyteller as well and we our mom has featured in many things. Is a delightful loving very kind of complicated hilarious infuriating person. Everyone like people walk up to me and if I'm an event maybe like your mom here or like they're just waiting and hoping that she'll be somewhere and I'm like Oh you would know if she was here.

[00:17:48] But it was interesting like I only really I mean she's throughout my book in pieces because of course one of my childhood and she's single parent. But there's one chapter where you know it talks about discussing issues of race with her but my brother and I have just friends who as we get older and especially as parents as we find that we're trying to balance being whole people and parents. And there are different things you know you're a parent 24/7 but the nurses it's like you have

two computer systems running remembers that you know all of your life and your desires and your daydreams and you know and your petty grievances and all of that. That also runs in the background. Yeah. And you realize how it shifts what you do and how you parent and then you kind of try to reverse engineer that story of your parents and being like Oh we'll is this that and it's been interesting to see my mom a lot in just the thought of if I'm going to tell the story she has to be a whole person and then wondering what does that mean.

[00:18:54] And it doesn't necessarily set everything right. It doesn't make make everything look rosy but it does I think.

[00:19:03] I think also just like as a parent you hope that maybe your kids will be like OK but what else was happening in your life who else were married but you know it's interesting how our stories intermingle. Did

[00:19:13] You have to have conversations with your parents as you were writing this book to kind of prep them for this.

[00:19:20] Absolutely. With my adoptive parents. I mean I told everybody in the family when I was even thinking about having the book out on submission. I was like I might not sell you know let's not panic right away.

[00:19:31] And then once it actually sold I was like OK we're going to have a conversation about this now. And one of the reasons I sent them like basically the first full draft that I had was that they would have a chance again not to challenge or to inject their voices or overrule my perspective.

[00:19:46] But I didn't want surprises you know and I wanted them to feel the portrayal was fair and showed them as whole people and like really to their humanity and their complexity into account. And sure there were probably things that I figured I did remember incorrectly and maybe they could help me. Like right the ship so I did I showed it to several different members of my family including my parents and we had a lot of interesting conversations. They were like remarkably supportive. I mean one of my greatest regrets is that my adoptive father passed before he could finish reading but he had read most of the parts with him in it and loved it and really loved the chapter about them. I really loved that one of his corny jokes Staden.

[00:20:25] I mean that was knew he was like you love my joke and I was like yeah dad it's very illustrative. So it was a good literary choice. You're welcome. But it was great and I mean he met my father before he died.

[00:20:38] He also gave me the great gift of saying like I don't feel this is the book that like your mother I would have written about your adoption or our family and that's ok like it's your perspective. It's your memories and that's what makes this book your book. And I think I think in the end they felt kind of honored by their portrayal which which means a lot to me you know.

[00:20:59] So do you remember the first time you started writing about adoption. What that felt like to kind of begin to embark on that.

[00:21:09] This is probably not what you meant but the first time was like when I was five or six and I made those little construction paper books that you staple together because like a kid had asked me like what does it mean to be adopted. And so I wrote a story about it. I was always explaining it to people who really did not understand it. But you know this this particular story when I started reading about it as an adult for the public for not for myself or for my kids to read some day but actually publishing about it it was really daunting you know and it was it was very rewarding especially to hear like from fellow adoptees you know of all backgrounds you know particularly anyone who's been adopted across you know racial or cultural lines. I feel like it's not like all our stories are the same. You know my stories obviously only mine. But there is a lot of common ground between us a lot of a lot of people saying like oh my gosh I've just I've never seen anything like my story in print before. Honestly the book's only been out two days. My inbox is full of messages from adoptees and I love it so much like it's been when I feel overwhelmed. I go and read those over and over. It reminds me why I write about it so that hopefully this will sound very earnest and cheesy but I kind of wrote for the girl I was in for the stories that I wanted and I really hope this helps some people feel seen and I hope it's the first of many many adoptees stories by adoptees.

[00:22:35] It's wonderful. I mean I've I would definitely say I've noticed when I've been touring and my book couldn't because there are so few stories out there.

[00:22:45] I mean it's not that adoptees of course are telling their stories it's that they don't get the platform and the opportunity to be published I think because it directly challenges a lot of narratives in America about race about family about whiteness about you know the melting pot ideology that we think all write about how much love can overcome or not. Yes. And there's a direct challenge to that. And so I oftentimes would have a lot of interracial adoptees would come to my talks because it's the closest they could get. We're kind of mixed race narratives of children who were raised by white parents and what always stood out to me as I could even look at the audience and see people because the immense amount of pain that they would carry no matter how old they were. You know 50s 60s and people would try to ask a question and they couldn't even get it out because there's something about living your whole life not being fully seen by the people that you depend on and love more than anything and the people that love you more than anything that doesn't that can't really be mitigated. Like there's nothing you can do. It's not you're going to have kids one day it will heal it's not you're going to do this it will heal like that wound until it's directly out with just heal. And we have a national narrative that erases that trauma that acts like it doesn't exist that like the most amazing generous thing you could do is go find a brown child an adopted child. And it will be magic and that will be the fairytale end to that story and gaslights people who are already feeling a lot of pain. So I'm just you know I'm very glad that your story is out there and I hope that we start to see a lot more.

[00:24:27] I think that it's so important not only for the children and former children who were reading it but for parents.

[00:24:35] And I think that parents need to in general. All parents can do better to themselves in the narrative of their children's lives. But I think especially when it comes to parents who are different race their children and especially if you have adopted children because there's just so much in there what are you hoping that like that parents will get out of your book.

[00:24:57] Good question. You know part of it I think is that you know I write I write at one point in the book that I've been asked not just once but like many times people who are thinking about adopting across racial lines will ask me. Basically it boils down to. Do you think we should. That's a really impossible question to answer for somebody else.

[00:25:17] But I do like at the time at the time I got this question when I read about it in the book I was 22. I was not really prepared. I didn't know what it meant even to be a parent.

[00:25:27] I think I just kind of said everything's going to be fine and moved on as quickly as possible. And I knew that's what they wanted to hear.

[00:25:34] But nowadays when I get versions of this or when I'm asked What do you think parents should be thinking about the very basic beginning point for any parent regardless of their race is the ability to put themselves in a child's shoes and think about the world from their perspective. And we do it all the time as parents you know we share a racial background with our kids. So I don't actually think it's asking too much to try and do that particularly if you have a degree of privilege that you know your child won't have moving through the world. I think people need to take a good hard look probably at. Their families their social circles their communities their schools their religious organizations you know if you're bringing a child of color into all these spaces what is it going to be like for them. Are they going to be the only one. Are they going to be one of a few. Will they ever see anybody who looks like them. Can they develop real relationships with people who share their background you know not just superficial like hello or not in terms but you know potential friends and mentors and people who are like family to them. You know it's a very tall order. And I think that's just the really the beginning point for parents who are thinking about adopting a trans or chaley. It's just kind of the first set of questions and it doesn't end there. I think too they have to think about what happens when their child comes home and has experienced like racial bullying or you know microaggression at the grocery store. Are you really equipped to be that child's best strongest ally in every situation. We know from studies a lot of parents don't talk to their kids about racism. We just know that from a fact. But it's not something you can avoid as parents of color.

[00:27:12] You know we have to it's a matter of preparation and survival so yeah I'm just recognizing that it's an it is an additional responsibility or I don't know that's the right word but you'll have to have these conversations it's not just a fun cultural exploration side which is great and I think important and good to do when you adopt across cultural lines but also the harder conversations and really walking with that child everything they experience even if sometimes that's something you've never experienced as a white American.

[00:27:44] That's a wonderful elsewhere. And I think it kind of touches on I think where a lot of the sensitivity lies around those for parents is I think a lot of parents just expect that when you have a child whether you've given birth to that child or adopted that child that their world becomes your world. But I think that one of the hardest things for parents especially white parents to understand is that if you have a child of color there is an aspect of their life that you will never have full access to. There's an experience you'll never be able to fully relate to.

[00:28:17] And I think that feels isolating and threatening to a lot of parents like I had to explain to my mom like you know she was like but I really I'm kind of black and I'm like No no. Literally you'd never bend Black a single day and she would say things like my sister was in the car with Elvis. Country music song came on and she goes this really appeals to the White part of me and my sister was like. You mean the whole the whole party

[00:28:48] Susan Jane Holly from Wichita Kansas.

[00:28:53] But you know I think that can be like a real direct threat. A lot of the times and I I hear even when people get to the chapter of my book where I'm like telling my mom like Mom no literally you have never been Black ever like you are a white person and your wonderful mother and you're my mother. You're a white person and this is your specific role that you have if you want to be fighting racism and stuff but also like you know I know that you love me but you're not.

[00:29:19] You've never walked on the streets black and the fears that you have for me are not fears that you have for yourself and it was a really tough conversation with her and she was like How come you never call yourself healthy. Well because it doesn't. That's not how whiteness works. And what's interesting is you know we read about this and I hear terms time from children of color or white parents who love that chapter it means a lot to them. But I get some I don't think I've ever gotten angrier letters much had through them from white parents of children of color and the fear you can read an e-mail and they literally say I hope my child never grows up to be like you.

[00:30:01] I hope that they never grow up to see to see themselves you know to cut the weight per themselves out. And I hope they never you know grow up to just call themselves black.

[00:30:12] I hope they always call them souls you know half way. And you know I hope you know when all these things and it's them them them then bam there's a whole thing. Right. And it always makes me so sad because I wonder them like how open and free to their children feel because some because I know plenty of mixed race people who identify as mixed race and kind of carry that around and it's complicated and difficult in a world that doesn't quite work that way but they do. And I'm like how free are their kids right now to figure out who they are.

[00:30:45] Are you nervous.

[00:30:47] Have you been hearing from parents of adoptees. I do sometimes hear from parents of adoptees or people who are thinking about adopting I should qualify this and say by and large they're

very positive messages. I've had a lot of white adoptive parents thank me for sharing my perspective and I've had them buy their books. They've actually I mean I had someone buy the book last night for like their future their child they're planning to adopt. They don't even have yet. They just kind of wanted to share. I thought that was very touching. But yes I've definitely gotten those e-mails from some surprising places like from people I wouldn't have expected it from. It's always a little bit a little bit sad yeah because I do wonder I think about their kids and I wonder just how how comfortable do they feel how open is their communication. Of course you can't know another person's family. But I do read a lot of fear and some of these things too and I think I think it is because as you mentioned even hearing adoptees grow up and speak as adults for ourselves from our own perspective there are a few people out there who will always find that a little bit intimidating or a little bit threatening. We're used to thinking of adoptees in particular as like babies or children. Your objects your wanted your acquired your gotten but you don't grow up and you don't speak for yourself. Right. It's interesting that you say some people have said they hope their kids don't grow up to be. I'm so sorry that's really hurtful. I remember distinctly a time in my life when I would talk to adoptive parents and I would sort of toe the party line about how lucky I was and how grateful I was which both those things happened to be true. But I was not willing to kind of complicate that narrative or really interrogate it at that point. And I remember several of them saying I hope our kid grows up to be just like you because I was very much fitting into that mold of exactly what they wanted to hear at that time.

[00:32:32] And I understand why believe me as a parent I want to stress like I understand wanting to believe that your child. First of all won't suffer or that if they do it won't be in a way you can't understand or like shoulder for them. It's very painful for me to think about things like my kids will experience that. Like I can't share and I can't believe they will just happen and I will have to walk with them through that. You know I can't take it away. I can't deny their reality.

[00:32:58] So I understand how hard that is. You know even just coming from a place of pure love as a parent it's yeah a difficult truth to have to face. But as you are saying you know your mother doesn't walk in your shoes. And know my parents for all their love for me didn't quite have never really been able to fully walk in mine. And so that does not mean they can't be really strong allies. It doesn't mean they don't love us so that there isn't really important work for them to do. But certainly I think just that separation. I think sometimes when you when you love someone so much you don't want to believe there's any separation between their life and yours or their experience in yours and you know being confronted with that reality can be really difficult and it can it can make people fearful or sad.

[00:33:40] Yeah I think you know it's interesting for me that I found it was scary to broach definitely and it's difficult to broach. But since my mom and I really talked about it like we're closer than we've ever been. I mean my mom and I have never been estranged in her life. But you know a lot of times a perpetual teenager my mom just constantly annoyed by just constantly like oh my god why would you do this. But you know she would get really nervous trying to find out where she fit in my life as an adult who writes about issues of race. And now that like we've had these difficult conversations and she she gets fully but she's a white woman who playgroups black children. It's fun to watch her like she. She went on this union trip. She's she's really big in her union which state. And so she has a union rep you know or union advocate. You know she went on this trip and she was in a bar and this

guy was tightenings. There is this white guy talking about how he had started this mentorship program to help inner city black kids. But he was being very patronizing about like how he was going to change their lives and all of these things and my mom was like you know what I did because I you know I'm an old white lady and he's not going to yell at me so I just packed my butt next to him and I had a whole glass of wine for my mom that so much mine and she's like and I just explained to him and she's like you know I remembered from your book and I just explained to him

[00:35:08] How he was you know being patronizing and how he need to be asking people what they need and he needed to stop acting like the reason why he can help these people is because he's so great and not because he's a white man didn't like.

[00:35:21] But like you know she wouldn't have recognized her power in that situation as a white person and she was you know literally like OK I am an old white lady who is not going to be yelled at and he's not going to hear anyone else and so yea I get to sit this bar for an hour and lecture this guy. And you know those sorts of things like if we hadn't had those tough conversations you know and I can hear her and I'm not cringing the way I used to when we were growing up you know. I mean it's is sort of like to me. That's that. That was not in the book.

[00:35:57] You got that from. You know it's not perfect just like she always gets it. We're constantly rechecking because it's a whole life of experience. But I hope everyone understands like that that journey has meant a lot.

[00:36:08] How does it match your relationship with your peers to go through this.

[00:36:13] It definitely brought us closer. I think just the simple fact that they had to confront that I did have do have other family.

[00:36:20] You know we always sort of minimized just the importance of biological family. I mean I kept hearing like I grew up hearing like well nurture over nature and stuff like that. I don't know it was very hard at first for them I think just the fear that they'd have to share me or something. But I think they feel really much more secure now. Having seen I have reconnected our relationship mine with my adoptive parents hasn't fundamentally altered or if it has it's gotten stronger because we've had these conversations because they've been forced to see my birth family as like real people a real family and thought about the adoption from their perspective and also from mine. It's just interesting. And I wrote a little bit about this later in the book as well but had a lot of really good conversations with my adoptive mother in particular. And we had to like my reunion sort of forced my search. It forced the issue we could have gone honestly probably decades or the rest of her life never having these conversations. But the fact that I was searching and I was making discoveries made that necessary for us. And I'll never forget her asking me like do you think it would have been like better if you know if they'd kept you do you think it would have been a better outcome for you.

[00:37:34] And she wasn't saying it in like a pained way and she wasn't saying it in a smarter way. She was saying it like a really honest sincere. Let's have that conversation not something that I ever

would have imagined her saying when I was growing up you know that was how much she was putting herself or trying to like in my place and my birth family's place thinking of them as like whole people with their own lives and once in tragedies. And you know that honestly meant a lot of very different sides of the political spectrum from my adoptive family. So it often feels like two steps forward one step. I don't know to the side.

[00:38:13] We'll just keep it positive.

[00:38:15] But no I mean I and even those conditions can be very very fraught honestly particularly right now. But yeah I do see I've movement. I've seen growth and I don't mean that to sound patronizing.

[00:38:26] I've grown to I've changed I've had to change I've had to learn a lot and also learn empathy for them and what they went through. I feel really lucky that writing this book kind of helped me do that.

[00:38:39] It's wonderful. Tell me a little bit but it's been like to get to know your sister and where you guys are now. I know like this was you know coming from years ago.

[00:38:47] So where are you today. I just came from my sister's house in Portland and she was at my lunch at Paolo's last night.

[00:38:53] She is my favorite person. She's my she's my lodestar she's my first.

[00:38:59] Sorry I'm so sorry.

[00:39:02] She's my first call in a crisis and really I can't I don't have words for how much she means to me just how grateful I am to have her in my life and not just my bike in my kids lives like to them she's always just been there because we reunited when my oldest was a baby. So they don't remember a time when she wasn't in their life. Her daughter is my kid's only cousin. And I just think about like not just like our connection but all the other connections that wouldn't exist if we never found each other. So I am I'm continually amazed by how generous and how kind she is and she's the person I like most want to be like.

[00:39:40] I love her a lot. So wonderful.

[00:39:45] I had my brother has been my brother Russell he's my half brother. I really couldn't say my brother. He came here about three years ago and actually the story of him coming if anyone's interested is on this American life as well. My brother did a segment on it called The Wedding Crasher and he quote showed up on a whim. We had been talking on line and then I mentioned he was saying oh we might come one day and they didn't say that like all the time

[00:40:12] All the time and I was like yeah whatever. And I was like oh well you know how you know how I'm getting married in the summer and then he messages me great about a ticket. I will be here for five weeks.

[00:40:23] And it's like.

[00:40:27] And it was really surreal especially looking at the differences in how you define family and you know we don't. And I think especially because there's a very American idea of family that is the people you spend time with that nurture first nature Nigerian family is not that Nigerian family is literally you know like our pictures I guess were on the walls in his house growing up everywhere and we didn't know he existed until we were full adult. But it's been interesting to see how we changed my definition of family. You know and especially I think in this political climate you know I don't think I realized how much he grew on me until I started really were looking at the way that we talk about immigration and things like that and you know look this is my brother this is my brother. I mean he came in with a total crash like he he brought to lose weight loss for my children. Know when he came

[00:41:26] Which isn't a great way to start a relationship. But it is I think it was for Telek of just how much he was going to kind of disrupt everything. Before. Yes. I had neighbors coming by and like I had a neighbor literally ask me like Are you slaughtering cows in your house.

[00:41:43] What's happening because my then 6 year old with the crack of dawn he'd be out there just blowing on this horn. Our cat was so traumatized. But you know it's been interesting to see you like changing family and changing you know challenging. Because I remember being very like I don't know you I don't know you I don't know any of you and I actually I do have still a ton of siblings in Nigeria I don't know and I know him because he's here.

[00:42:13] But it's it's challenged. What we know and what we keep saying is the narrative of family and that there is something to that that biology helps with as well. I mean and but then also we have the idea that there are people we are biologically related to who are very toxic and we cannot have as family. And I think it just I think these kind of experiences open up to how complicated it can be and how many of the rules we create to kind of make it seem simple can actually shut us off from a lot of different experiences.

[00:42:43] So I'm glad that you and your sister are so close.

[00:42:46] Yeah it was funny last night just really briefly and I know we have questions but some of her friends were at the Paolo's reading and they came up after and said it was funny what you read because we saw so many expressions of your sisters like on your face like oh my gosh that's her. You know. Like which ones. And.

[00:43:02] And they are like imitated us. And then yes in fact we both make those same expressions. It's really funny. And I never had that like just the simple like I don't know. Like biological connections I think people take for granted are a lot of people do. You know I had never looked at a face that

looked anything like mine. And so let alone seem like mere expressions so that I still I still love it when people can tell we're sisters. And yeah I feel really really just so grateful to have her.

[00:43:31] Well that is fun to know because you have two kids to watch siblings and know that you have your own sibling. And see those kind of traits and things like that.

[00:43:39] It really is a lot of fun. Yeah. Again like as you were saying before it's like having children like heals everything or fixes things. I think it just makes your issues actually even more like more evidence. You haven't dealt with stuff like You're gonna have to really deal. No.

[00:43:57] I mean it is really fun to watch my girls as you know their sisters and like think about the fact that I now have a sister to her. Like it's amazing.

[00:44:06] Yeah I think that you're right it definitely makes you. I know there were plenty of issues as my kids were younger or thinking our gosh you're going to have to get therapy for that. Because you're good you're going to do whatever that is with your kids are going to be sorry if you don't deal with that issue.

[00:44:23] And I think that that's the most we can ask for is like like going to therapy my therapist being like while you're here. And that's like 80 percent of it like 80 percent of it is just wishing you were doing better and then actually trying to do a couple of things that might or might not work. But I think that like in that journey to when you have these sorts of issues and you see your kids struggle with them as well. You're like where am I in this process and that was interesting to watch you to read you talking about you know where your child is somewhere in the process and you're in a different space in the process. But they also your children need you to guide them through this as well. Is it still something that's kind of accelerating your path in figuring it out. Are you kind of in a really settled place because I know like this election was probably very hard and it brings up issues. And is it something where you feel like now you're kind of able to balance those two tracks of where these things are scary to for families and where you are right now because I know sometimes we feel like we've made a lot more progress than we have.

[00:45:27] And then things happen and we're like oh I didn't quite get there yet. It's not quite done.

[00:45:33] It's interesting. I mean just in terms of being being a parent and then also figuring out who I am as good as a daughter and a sister and like a daughter to many different sets of people.

[00:45:44] I'm still figuring that out or at least I'm figuring out how to talk about it with my kids. I think that's the biggest part of all this is that yeah the election for example was really difficult and I couldn't take a break after because I had to talk to my kids and make sure they were OK and really like advocate and I don't know. I think a big part of it is just teaching them about the privileges they have and how they can be allies to others. And so it's a responsibility I can't set it out right. We don't take a day off. But you know in terms of helping them understand like my adoptions they like that's definitely an ongoing thing. My oldest and I are reading the book together now. Actually it's been really

interesting and she has all these questions and I find some of her questions do kind of poke at things I'm still sensitive about or like I mean I've worked out and then I've worked them on again on the page and I've talked about them a lot. But writing a memoir is a little bit like therapy. Like I don't want to look like over compare the two. But there's just so it brings up a lot and I really did think I had dealt with a lot of this ten times over and then reading it to her and getting her questions I was like oh like seeing it from her perspective.

[00:46:50] Just the fact that she finds the idea of separation from a parent like any parent really really disturbing and then having to see how much the idea upsets her. Kind of like I mean yes I've dealt with this and I've it's my reality. I learned to deal with it at a very young age. But for her it's the first time through. And of course she's like you know how do I know that will never happen to me or how do I know you know how to have those conversations.

[00:47:16] It's hard and I can't shy away from them and it does. I want to talk about it with her and with you know as my as my younger daughter gets older and as my niece gets older we'll talk about all these things. You know we're not going to hide anything from them. We've had enough secrets I think in the family. But I do really think it can be difficult because it's just a little bit. It can be a little bit heartbreaking just sort of part of you wants to keep them sheltered for as long as possible you know. And so I mean I definitely understand that as a parent at the same time I think the truth is so powerful and so important that in a way it's also really an honor and a privilege to have it to be able to share it because for so many years I didn't I didn't have it I didn't know. So I won't I don't take for granted the fact I have a history now that I can pass on even if it's sometimes hard and sometimes traumatic.

[00:48:04] It's wonderful. We're going to take your questions soon so we can be collecting your cards so get ready to pass slim over so that we can start soon. You know it's funny that you talk about reading with your kids because I cannot get my kid to read my book. My older one out. Anything. Yeah. And he'll ask me questions and I'll be like that is literally a chapter in my book. To 12 and you'll just rolled his eyes and you'll be like Well since you already wrote it can't you just tell me what's up. So we're. Having that

[00:48:38] Experience. Maybe one day go up there.

[00:48:43] What are you hoping you know. You know I know that right now like some people are you starting with me and I'm still going to do it because because I can't you're on tour now you just released your book. What are you looking forward to writing because I feel like sometimes a memoir of a very specific thing and it's not like this is part one in five who's my memoir Sirott know or hopefully not because that's odd. What are you hoping is next in your writing.

[00:49:11] It's interesting so well I should talk first what my day job I'm actually like a full time editor of a magazine and a literary magazine. I will go back to that for a while because reading and editing and working with other writers. It's such a privilege and I'm also like more than anything else. Kickstarts my own writing. It's been such a weird year. Like I started when when I needed a break from this sometimes I would work on my novel. And then when my father passed away I kind of just went

through this block where I could not write for like weeks months to be really honest and I know this is not what you asked about. Sorry but like I think when all this is over and I'm done with tour like I have some real grief counseling in my future I feel like there's so much I haven't been able to deal with this year just because of everything.

[00:49:56] And the book certainly and life never stops and parenting never stops. I'm looking forward to some me time a little bit. I would love to edit books. I would love to finish that novel.

[00:50:05] I would love to maybe write a book of essays. I really would. I really would like to continue just working with writers who inspire me and whose voices we need because there are so many of them out there and I think we need more of their books too. So I'm hoping to kind of do both of those things going forward.

[00:50:24] Very sorry for that. That was my first introduction to you. I was an editor. So working together a little bit the establishment but also just before the Toast toast Long Live. And it's wonderful to see the toast up and running and get up again. Not like new things don't get over excited

[00:50:42] Once in a while. And we also have our luggage. Once upon going in post like a random

[00:50:48] Yeah but there were so many times because I reference that was like my go to space when when things were tough it was like I'm going to go read about Possum's again. I would pull it up and it's great to see that resource back.

[00:51:04] The good thing is the those community lives on. I mean the toasties are so many of them. It's great. And also just like I think their relationships just speaking personally.

[00:51:14] The relationships I gained from doing that have meant so much to me like I'm still very close with Nicole and Danny. If anything we've gotten closer since the site closed. And so yeah I feel like the toast gave me one of the many communities I feel really lucky to be a part of. So yeah Ill never die in my heart.

[00:51:34] I've never gotten to meet Nicole in person. We talk on Twitter. I did meet Danny and I messaged him because I was in town and he was like well we'd be great together. I don't drink and I was like well OK so here's the thing it might be weird because it's summer but I really need fancy hot chocolate.

[00:51:54] It's like bitch I'm down you went to go you went. And that's what we did.

[00:52:00] We have fancy hot chocolate and talked and it was a joy because he's an amazing human and genius that intimidates me regularly. So we're going to go ahead and ask some of these questions here. So this one here shows do you have many Asian adoptee friends. And if so how did those relationships start and grow.

[00:52:24] Oh I do have several you know some of them just started in the normal course of life. I made my first really close adoptee friend in college. I actually didn't know she was adopted for a while and then one day it just occurred to me to ask like by the way you don't have an Asian last name what's up with that. I was very rude of me but we've known each other a while. So I was like yeah. Tell me it's OK if you don't want to tell me I'm adopted. Like it's ok. Unlike me she'd grown up in a community with a lot of adoptees in Minneapolis. She knew she knew a lot and then I just say online I mean I ended up finding a lot of adoptees online which is where I find almost everybody who likes me.

[00:53:05] I don't know what that is about me anyway.

[00:53:08] There are blogs and networks and just yeah a lot of a lot of those connections are from like that period where I was looking around and reading like every adoption blog I could find you know wonderful second question to two parter.

[00:53:21] And so it looks like the first half is for you.

[00:53:23] The second half is for me the first half is what can people of color do to make adoptees feel included in communities of color.

[00:53:33] And is such a nice question. My gosh. You know I wish I had a better answer because I grew up in such a white area that like there wasn't there where there was not like a local Korean American community that kind of like welcomed me into the fold and taught me things. It's tough too because like I mean you're if you're encountering like adoptees as kids you're also encountering their families. So like being open and welcoming and talking with those kids also maybe will involve getting to know their like white families and also helping them just which is not so you can't do it it's just it's like there's like a couple different a couple different layers of I guess relationship there.

[00:54:13] But yeah I that's such a good question.

[00:54:17] I think it's hard to imagine it being done in a super organized outreach kind of way maybe make yourself available to like adoptee groups there are a lot of adoptee groups that meet. Sometimes they have a formal get togethers are they for kids. There's camps and there's other things.

[00:54:31] So I know there are already people who are who maybe grew up in Korean American communities and were like you know go and talk with adoptees at camps or at organizations so you know just kind of looking for a local adoptee groups and maybe doing a little bit of outreach. But that's that's one possibility. I also think that if I have any more suggestions I will maybe tweak them. But that's like the first thing that comes to mind is reaching out to adopt reorgs because there are a lot.

[00:54:59] And the second part was what Kim adoptees do to live with not adopted people of color.

[00:55:05] You know I honestly for me I don't necessarily like walk around going like wiring adoptees aligning themselves with us.

[00:55:14] So I would say like you know you can let go of that pressure.

[00:55:21] But I would say mostly just figure out who you are. What do work like that work great artist work. Yeah and it's it's. You're not going to know what your relationship is to a community of color and just come and be open and you know be flexible and make.

[00:55:35] And they think also it's important to recognize that not all communities of color are of the same as well. And the relationships we have the structure we have. You know so like as a as a as a black person I can say that like you know I know a lot of adoptees are going to be able to just they can just come in and they'll be accepted in a certain way. But I also know that there are cultural differences and to how this works. And so I would say just you know there's there's enough work to be done. I think we all struggle in a white supremacist society to find our way. Our authentic selves. And so and when we come we come together because in that struggle we find connection. So you have to actually just start on that struggle of finding who you are in that relationship and then the rest will come depending on what you find out. So you know I would say just focus on that and don't you know. I mean I would love to see everyone at a Black Lives Matter protests regardless of your racial or ethnic heritage. And you know and I think that that's and I would love to actually instead of worrying about like what adoptees of color are doing I would actually just love if more white people worked on that worked on being better allies and let people of color figure out who they are a time and like little that pressure off a little bit.

[00:56:48] Just following up real quick if I could. I mean I think it took me a long time to feel like if I tried to explore my Korean heritage you know it's I really felt it felt like appropriation for so many years like I was gonna do it wrong and mess it up and that it was disrespectful and that I didn't have a right to like. A tiny bit of this was coming from just a few Koreans I met but mostly it was me and my hangups. So I think just again being like kind and patient with people because everyone's like on a journeyman like it's because it's I don't know where I was 10 years ago versus where I am today probably for all of you it's the same thing.

[00:57:24] People really are just figuring out who they are and trying to like be gentle with themselves so you be gentle to defend them.

[00:57:33] This question here. There's a lot of words in it but it looks like it's a good question. OK so how does open communication about adoption help deconstruct the model minority myth. How do we have courageous conversation about cross racial adoption. What took to tackle the first part first.

[00:57:52] Tippett OK. Yeah there's a lot in there if it does because I think that that question assumes it does. If I can think about that. So I didn't. Not growing up in Asian American communities. And just I didn't really learn much about like the model minority myth and what it is until college. And so you know I think when adoptees talk about our experiences is very different. I mean I guess I hadn't really

thought about this particular question before but it's true that adoptees don't necessarily fit into that like expected framework of like what an Asian American or like. He's a Korean American is like you know my parents. I mean I will say this with love and with respect but like my parents would be like I would be really stressed about calculus and they were like Why don't you just drop calculus. And again I don't want to I don't want to say that like all Korean parents or anything like that. I don't when I paint with broad strokes but I remember thinking to myself even in high school my Korean parents would not say that to me like you don't understand.

[00:58:51] You don't understand like what I'm trying to do here. I had a lot of internal drive and they thought I worked too hard and stressed too much and should really just take easier classes. So

[00:59:00] That is an example of how my experience was slightly different from the model minority myth specifically. Again not saying all Asian Americans fall into that of course they don't. That's why it's called a myth. But I remember just feeling like I think recognizing that Asian Americans as Karen was saying earlier you know we are part of the Asian American community too. We have a whole range of experiences just like Asian Americans have a wide range of experiences if they're not adopted just recognizing that we're part of it and that yeah Asian America is a very diverse community communities and yeah we're not a monolith certainly and adoptees are just one more example of how we're not a monolith.

[00:59:41] It's the second part of the question how do we have courageous conversation about cross racial adoption.

[00:59:50] I mean I think just having centering more adoptees more transitional adoptees letting them be the authority on their lives letting us grow up and tell our own stories. That doesn't strike me as courageous in a way it doesn't. This shouldn't be unusual but they do need to be more more stories out there and just more listening to the experiences of adult adoptees. You know we have generations there generations of us now. It's been common for a very long time.

[01:00:17] So we do have like I don't know we have years worth of institutional knowledge that we could be talking about a lot more. I should be able to think of like more writers writing about trans racial adoption like from mainstream publications than I can. But right now it's a very small number so I think as long as adoptees are underrepresented in the conversation you know those conversations are going to be limited. And if you want to have deeper richer more courageous conversations you know you have to invite more trans racial adoptees to tell their stories to publish even if it makes some people uncomfortable.

[01:00:51] So this question here is interesting. I mean to rephrase that slightly. What would you say about adoptees who choose not to search for their parents. Does it mean anything about whether or not they're dealing with issues around their life in their adoption.

[01:01:09] I really believe the adoptees who told me they're not interested. And I've met so many who have said that. So that is their experience. It is 100 percent valid. I was also one of those people for a

very long time and I would have said I really meant it. Everyone is first of all on their own journey. They're at a different place in it. Some of them might change their minds later like I did but many won't and that's fine. Most adoptees don't search in many cases it's because it's impossible. It's just very difficult to get records or even if you have records.

[01:01:40] How do you like you know put your family back together or try to reconnect ties that were broken like across like thousands of miles. You know a lot of adoptees are not from the U.S. So it's much more complicated. China like rebuild those relationships so I mean for various reasons there are all kinds of reasons not to search. Just look there are all kinds of reasons to search. I don't judge anybody who reaches a different conclusion than I did or has different reasons for even doing the same thing. So yeah I don't think it says anything about that particular individuals like thought process or what they don't think it means they haven't faced the truth it could just genuinely mean they're not interested or they don't feel a need.

[01:02:25] So that's what I said.

[01:02:28] We have one last question and then we'll be done. And this is a good one. How did your adoptive parents from your cultural identity.

[01:02:38] The main thing that they did I guess was it's interesting because it is both the best and the most like trickiest thing about it I believe and I say this in the book I truly believe that to them it did not matter what I looked like. You know they were all in from the beginning. They loved me like I was there own I was their own. And so they instilled in me even though we did not talk about race. Even though there were a lot of things I felt like it was difficult to share with them about my reality. They also instilled in me this like sense of self-worth and this like rock solid faith that these people loved me and were like ride or die for me. And that was not going to ever change. If it weren't for their faith in me and that kind of confidence and that kind of love I wouldn't be able to make choices they didn't understand later. I never felt secure enough to like do something I knew would be really difficult to tell them which was to search for my birth family. In the end I think it was you know they weren't setting out to affirm my cultural identity. We really didn't talk about it when I was growing up but. You know there was a lot they could not shield me from. But what they could do was give me and study love and faith that I trusted myself and my ability to make my own choices even when they were choices my parents did not fully understand.

[01:03:50] It's wonderful. And I hope that's something that as parents that we all try to do more and know that that can overcome a lot that sense of confidence and you know my mom was kind of similar in like almost to an extreme were like hey maybe you should worry a little bit more about what you like.

[01:04:06] You'll be fine you're great all the time. But I think especially in creative fields that sort of bravado it's going to be great. I'm going to make a living in the arts. I'm sure you're very well it's been such a real pleasure to talk to you and make sure if there's anything you want me to say real quick before we go or something so I think we covered a lot.

[01:04:31] And thank you so much she did such a wonderful job and made it very such a pleasure.

[01:04:36] Thank you all for your great.

[01:04:47] This podcast was presented by The Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to The Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.