

# Adoption: The Long View Transcript

## Lanise Antoine Shelley

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#### Lori Holden, Intro

This is Adoption: The Long View, a podcast brought to you by Adopting.com. I'm your host, Lori Holden, author of [The Open-Hearted Way to Open Adoption](#) and [Adoption Unfiltered](#). Join me as we take a closer look at what happens *after* you adopt your child and begin parenting them. Your adoption journey isn't over then -- it's just beginning.

In this podcast, you'll hear from a variety of thought-provoking and influential guests as we help you make the most of your adoption journey. Like any trip worth taking, there will be ups and downs and challenges. Here's what you're going to wish you'd known from the start.

Ready? Let's go.

#### Lori Holden, Preview

Before we get started, dear listeners, I want to alert you that this episode may take you to the edge of your comfort zone. It may even tip you over into your discomfort zone. If you hold anything sacred about adoption, anything that cannot be touched or scrutinized, you may want to skip this one and choose another from the Adoption: The Long View library. Today's guest, through her own experience and scrutiny, may prompt you to take a closer look at something you haven't considered before. It's possible that you won't like looking, and it's also possible you won't like what you see and you'll have to re-figure out something you had nailed down. That's never fun, but if we are able to do it -- to examine, evaluate, and perhaps integrate a new perspective -- we grow and become better able to show up in the ways our adoptees need us to. We become less fragile and more steadfast.

It's also possible that you end up feeling grateful, glad to know at this point in your journey all that our fierce guest has to share. I'm betting that you're up for this episode. I bet you are open and curious to listen to what our guest has to say and determine whether or not her message has value for your own journey as an AP. So let's get to it.

#### Lori Holden, Greeting

In a previous episode, biracial and transracial adoptee Torie DiMartile noted that her parents are the center of their story just as she is the center of hers. It's no big duh that the parents of an adoptee and the adoptee themselves experience the same adoption in radically different ways. I'd like to explore this notion that perspective matters in how you see and tell a story. Too often, adoptive parents, as the earliest narrators of an adoption story, may not think to offer the space for the adoptee to figure out how they might tell their own story one day. This is why I've invited today's guest to talk with us.

**Lanise Antoine Shelley**, birth name Lunise Antoine, is a Haitian actress, director, and visual artist and the host of the podcast, *When They Were Young: Amplifying Voices of Adoptees*. She is an adoptee advocate and activator with a mission to centralize adoptees as the hero in their

own stories by helping adoptees, parents, and the adoption-curious understand the importance of doing so.

Welcome, Lanise!

**Lanise Antoine Shelley:** Hi. Thanks for having me.

**Lori:** It's so good to have you here. You're coming in from Chicago today. Is that right?

**Lanise:** Yes. I hail from Chicago. I've been based here since 2009.

**Lori:** Okay. Well, would you start by giving us some context around your story and telling us what you like to share about becoming an adoptee and being an adoptee.

**Lanise:** Well, I was put in an orphanage in Port au Prince, Haiti when I was 2 years old. And oftentimes in 3rd world countries, orphanages play as daycares; temporary holdings for children. And so, my family was around. They actually worked at the orphanage, they would come and hang out with me. And when I was 4 years old, I was adopted. My sister and I were the first to be adopted from this orphanage in Port au Prince. It is called Haiti Home For Children and changed their name to Rainbow of Love quite recently, I think, within the last decade or so because they have an extension that is a hospital as well.

And so, we were adopted; I at the age of 4 and she at the age of 5, and we were taken to California by a single white female and raised in Chico, California. And my sister and I aren't biological, by the way. And that's it, in a nutshell, my adoptive story.

And now I am who I am; an advocate, an activator and someone who is recently out of the fog, as they call it. That was activated in 2021 and 2022 when I launched a panel series after the death of George Floyd, just because I didn't quite – previously, I didn't understand that there was such an impact when it came to being an adoptee and not having the familial support when it came to racial injustices. And I couldn't go to my family and have them truly understand what was happening in the world, what was happening in my life, things that they had dismissed or ignored throughout my lifetime. And this all came to a halting, just a screeching stop for me and I knew I had to address it. And I had to address it for myself and I had to address it for other adoptees who didn't have the platform or the voice that I have.

And so, I launched a panel series that was supported and sponsored by the US Foundation For the Children of Haiti, the organization that helms the orphanage that I came from because I'm still in very much communication with them, and Gladys Sylvester, who is the facilitator of the orphanage and the children's hospital. And so, after about a month and a half of wrangling adoptees, I knew that I could no longer do that. It was such hard work creating a panel by yourself, but I could have one-on-one conversations and that's what launched my podcast; one-on-one conversations that are adoptee centered and led by adoptees. Everyone that's on there, save the first few guests, who are Gladys from my orphanage and the 2 women that raised me, my mom and godmother, all the rest are adoptees who I've befriended and have come on to the podcast. And you also get to witness conversation with those adoptees and their parents and explanations as to how to construct these really challenging conversations, especially when they're interracial.

**Lori:** So, you spent two years with your biological family and then two years in an orphanage within your culture, and then you were brought to the United States. You've spent the rest of your life until now being raised by a white woman, you and your Haitian sister, and about three years ago, because of the George Floyd murder, that there was a coming to consciousness for you.

And I wanted to touch on that just a little bit for people who may not know what coming to consciousness or coming out of the fog means. Do you wanna say something about that?

**Lanise:** Well, there is a movement prompted by an adoptee book about coming out of the fog, which means just coming into consciousness as you said. There is an adoptee, Michelle Madrid, who came on my podcast, who's an author, who created this acronym of Fearlessly Observing Grief, which I love and resonates with me. Fearlessly Observing Grief. And it's tricky because coming out of the fog means numerous things, depending on what your adoption situation was.

Often times it means questioning the construct that you were raised in and really taking a strong perusal of that life. What worked, what didn't? And allowing the trauma's micro, macro to come to the surface and observing them.

For me, there were instances in my childhood where we brushed under the rug and I didn't know that they were connected to my adoption. For instance, a few years ago, my mom told me that when I first came to the States, I cried for 2 years. My sister and I cried for 2 years and she didn't know why. And she stumbled across this podcast that focuses on the Enneagram. Are you familiar with the Enneagram? I'm number 1. Oh, you're 4. I'm 1. And when I discovered that I was 1 on the Enneagram, I was like, "Sounds about right." But this podcast is led by an adoptee and they focus on grief and adoption. And that was a revelation to my mom because she then understood that that weeping, the tantrums, the sensitivities stemmed from grief.

And I didn't even know that. I didn't know at the time why I was crying. I actually had forgotten that. There's a lot of my childhood that I forgot. And so, observing my childhood, observing this grief, the sorrow, the lamenting, the loss as an adult, that is huge for not only the adoptee, but the adoptive parent. And when you fearlessly look into the eye of this grief, as ugly as it is, as excruciating as it is, and saying, "Yes, I participated in that."

And that's the conversation that I've been having with my mom and my other caregivers. And it's tough. It's really tough for them to make peace with the fact that I was not a happy child. Because when they looked back on my childhood, they said, "Oh, you were so well mannered and you were so happy and amenable." And that was just me placating and me just people pleasing because of trauma. I didn't feel like I had a choice. I didn't feel like I had a voice. And I didn't know that until quite recently when I started to observe this grief; observe my childhood from a different lens. All of that stems from my adoption.

And in middle school, I attempted suicide. And at the time, I stated why I was prompted to those ideations. And my mom took me to a hospital. The doctor admonished me, because he thought I shouldn't have done that, instead of bringing me into a place of, nourishment, a place of, "No, you deserve to live because you're a wonderful human being." He berated me. And my mom in turn didn't defend me to the doctor. I didn't know that that was significant. I didn't know until quite recently, again, as I started to do this excavation, that that was setting the cornerstones, the

pillars, to my emotional life. And my inner child was building these protective habits along the way and that was a huge one. That was a huge learning event for me.

And so, my therapist quite recently, last year when I was just breezing through all of my traumas, I was like, "Yeah. And I tried to end my life when I was in middle school and I did this and that." She's like, "Wait, wait, wait. Lanise, this is huge. Why are you so nonchalant about it?" And I said, "Because everyone else was. And so, when you observe what happened, you have to come to terms with certain things that were not in place to protect me, were not in place to preserve, honor, and hold me precious. And that goes for the people that raised me and goes for myself now as I reparent myself and create a pathway towards what is the healthiest route for me right now so that we don't repeat the past."

**Lori:** Thank you for sharing all of that. There's a lot of hard things for adoptive parents to hear and there. And even though coming out of the fog has come to mean something, a process for adoptees, I think there is something that adoptive parents can come out of our own fog as well. Because listening to you, what I'm hearing is that coming out of the fog is coming to terms with your story; your whole story. The parts that you inherited from somebody else and the parts that you have in your body that you feel in your memory that pop up in some ways and how does that fit if the narrative was a really good story but that's a painful memory? How do you integrate those two things?

So, I think it's interesting that we're talking today about adoptees feeling figuring out how to tell their story after it's already been told for them for many years. Just because that's how it works in chronological terms.

So in Chapter 18 of a book that I wrote with adoptee Sarah Easterly, and birth parent Kelsey Van der Vliet Renyard, in Chapter 18 we talk about the savior narrative as it relates especially to intercountry adoption, but not exclusive to intercountry adoption.

I'd like for you to talk a little bit about what saviorism is because this is part of the storytelling and how it affects the adoptee. And it's interesting that you're an actress because to set this up, I want to do the world's shortest play because I think in the drama wheel, you have to have a villain, a victim, and a hero. You can do this whole play with just one prop; nobody else can see, but I've got a napkin here that I'm going to use as a mustache, a bow tie and a bow in my hair. So, this is the world's shortest play, I think.

👤 Voice 1 : *You must pay the rent.*

👧 Voice 2: *I can't pay the rent.*


👤 Voice 1: *You must pay the rent.*

👧 Voice 2: *I can't pay the rent.*

👤 Voice 1: *You must pay the rent.*

👧 Voice 2: *I can't pay the rent.*

 Voice 3: *I'll pay the rent.*

 Voice 2: *My hero.*

 Voice 1: *Curses. Foiled again.*

**Lanise:** Well done!

**Lori:** I'm bowing to your stage. I'm thinking that if the adoptive parent occupies the hero spot in the drama, for any number of years, what space is left for the adoptee? What role is left for the adoptee? So, that whole question is about saviorism and who's the hero.

**Lanise:** The adoptee is the victim; the damsel in distress. And in that chapter, you launch the chapter with religion. And in religion, there's this binary concept of good and evil and this ever pursuit of goodness. What is goodness? You know, it's tithing, it's being a good Samaritan, it's sharing food to the poor, to the less fortunate. And in doing that, you unconsciously put yourself above the other person. And this has been done, and continues to be done globally, this idea of us and them. And let us civilize them. That's prompted colonization. Let us teach them. Let us bring them into our society, our society. And we are hearing a lot of narratives here in the states of just we Americans and them not being American enough.

And this us and them, which is ingrained in adoption, is insidious and toxic and extremely harmful. It places adoptees in a situation and a state of a caste system where they cannot break through.

And I don't know if you've seen the movie, *Origin*. I recommend it to everyone. It talks about the caste system. Isabelle Wilkinson is brilliant and wrote the book *Caste*. I think, especially if you want to adopt interracially, it's important to understand what that means. And caste systems can't be broken. There are groups of people in India, the Dalits. India is the most prolific region for caste systems, even though there's caste systems everywhere, especially in Great Britain. I mean, you talk about a monarchy, that is a caste system. You can create a caste system using any metric. You can use skin color, you can use economics, you can use eye color, you can use body shape.

And so, in the adoption industry specifically, it's mostly socioeconomic. My mom, when she wanted to adopt, when she wanted to leave her hometown, what prompted her was emulating Mother Teresa. And she wanted to go to India, but she ended up going to Haiti as a missionary. And from there, she, of course, fell in love with the people and the culture and not quite understanding that non-black cultures treat white people differently. They see money. They see opportunity. So, they are treated like kings and queens over there, not understanding that it is the global supremacy that affords them such a status, intrinsically, just by showing up. And so, they think that their experience is universal, but it's not. I as a black woman going to a black nation, I went to Senegal and they were lovely. I loved that country. But they didn't treat me differently.

I remember a situation where I was sitting with my friends in an internet cafe and a lot of Frenchmen, they vacation in the places they once colonized. And so, Senegal was once colonized by the French. And so, a French vacationer came in, everyone got up, and they

moved and I didn't. And I looked at my friends, I'm like, "Why are we moving? What's happening here?" And they're like, "Oh, they need the internet." And I'm like, "No, so do I. They're no different than I am." But that's a mindset.

And I was going over some research on this, just to get a little bit more academic. An article that was very helpful for me was in *The Conversation*. That's what the actual article is called. And it opines white savior narratives often lessen the complexity of social political situations. In doing so, they also ignored the role of Western countries in encouraging inequalities and wars in the global south, both state of mind and concrete, unequal power structure between the global south and the western based on white supremacy and exploitation. There is an unequal focus on white people being good in general. And where does that place non-white people? It places them in the bad category.

And this is all part of the dominant narrative around permeating the adoption industry, that people really need to understand and investigate for themselves. Because if you are a savior, if you think that you are better than a group of people, just like Barbara Kingsolver's *Poisonwood Bible*, another great, great book, one of my favorite novels, then you are placing them in a subjugated place. And therefore, you are entitled to everything they have, everything that they do. They lack freedom in that space that you have condemned them to.

And so, it's important to me that adoptive parents do not have this savior complex because when they do, they are afraid of their children meeting their biological families. They become possessive. They guilt trip adoptees into staying, into being, into becoming things that are unnatural for them. And they perpetuate a sense of gratefulness that is mandatory from the adoptee who did not choose the position that they are in. And even though with all of my privileges, my degrees, the things that I have achieved in my life, I do not think that this is a better life. And in the savior construct, you are condemning me to this better life. You are condemning me to your definition of a better life and we all have our own definitions.

And it hearkens back to your words of adoptees having words put in their mouth, having a narrative dictated to them. And when you are above someone on the hierarchy, you dictate how they think, what they believe, and who they are. And it's imperative that we no longer shackle adoptees to that because they are human beings at the end of the day, making their own choices.

**Lori:** It's probably very few parents who go into this consciously needing to be the savior or the hero. It's more something that becomes apparent later when doing all those good deeds doesn't really scratch the itch of feeling good, feeling worthy. And so if in our telling, and I'm talking about the adoptive parents, if in our telling of the story needs to keep us as the savior and the hero at the top of that drama triangle then, because of not doing our own work, we are keeping our adoptees from being able to be the hero in their own story because we've got that that position locked up for us.

So, this is one of those times where we really need to look at are we letting the adoptee tell the story themselves? Are we making the space for that to happen? Or is our need somewhere in there? Is our need for the story to be told our way got that story locked up for us somehow?

I'm thinking that if I adopt because I have gotten the message from my culture, my church, that to be a good person, I go take care of other people. And to be a good person, I'm going to go take somebody from a hard life and give them a better life, and that makes me a good person. I'm a hero. I'm a savior. And if I need that to be my story, then my child is not going to have the room to become the hero in the story because there's already a hero.

**Lanise:** Mhmm.

**Lori:** And so, what's needed for adoptive parents is to take a look at that once in a while: What's behind the way I tell the story? What needs of mine am I getting met with the way I tell this story? What might I be keeping my adoptee from having access to if I don't have the needs around this story?

**Lanise:** I hear that. And you cannot have it both ways in being a savior and being altruistic. And so many people are aiming for altruism, but they have become the savior. And those two things cannot exist in the same room.

When you are the hero as the adoptive parent, you also vilify the birth family. You vilify the culture. And what does that do to the adoptee when that is their first original identity, and you are deeming it bad. You're deeming it unfit, evil. You're deeming it inadequate. They take on those definitions. Whether you pump them full of affirmations or not, that's where they began. So, when you speak ill about – not to say that adopted parents do this universally, but you have to understand that when you say one thing, sometimes you indirectly are saying another thing. And so, when you are the savior, to finish this triad of victim and villain, that's the birth family, the culture, and that's the adoptee. And they are at the mercy of your altruism.

And so, there has been an influx of adoptive parents on social media who document their adoptions, which it's controversial. And honestly, I haven't quite made up my mind about it, but there are people who have monetized their adoptions and there are people who have publicly just advertised themselves as a good person because they adopted. And they're not doing any kind of internal work, any kind of restorative healing work for their adoptees. It's just simply publicly, this looks good just like being on a board, just like winning awards. It's an accolade. And it's hard for people to admit that. But when the adopted child acts out, has behavioral issues, we hear stories about adoptees being re-homed. We hear stories about adoptees being neglected and abused.

And it's imperative that we understand the dark side of adoption as well because there is no better life. Who's to say that the people they were adopted by are better people than those they left behind? You cannot say that you don't know those people. And even if they were addicts, it's unfair to judge them because of the dire situation that they had to succumb to relinquish their child. It's unfair because you don't know their whole story.

And as we know of human beings, reversals can happen, change can happen, revelations can happen within a lifetime. And you it's important to allow other people to evolve, allow the parents to evolve out of their economic situation, out of their addictions or out of their misunderstandings about the adoption. Because in my case, my mother thought that I would be coming back at the age of 18 and supporting the family. That's what's told to a lot of 3rd world country families. They think their children are coming back. They don't think it's forever. There's a lot of misinformation.

There's a lot of exploitation. I know friends who have been abducted. I know friends who have experienced or witnessed human trafficking, which is prevalent in the adoption industry itself.

And so, the parents, I think it's just important for them to evaluate why they are adopting. When I hear people say, "Oh, I want to give a child in need a home," but you have to understand that what came first, the chicken or the egg. At this point in 2024, what came first is the need for a child. And so, they created opportunities for that child to be available to the parent, not the child needing a home. There are innumerable amount of children in the foster care system, in orphanages, out on the streets.

And so, if that weren't the case, then we'd have a very different industry. We I mean, there was an influx of Chinese adoptions, I think, during the eighties because of the One Child's mandate out of China and the suburbanites had no idea why these children were more available, but they just scooped them up, not understanding that they were abducted from their families because there was a mandate from only one child in China.

So, in short and in long, it's all about the investigation. If you're adopting internationally, like Lorelai in chapter 18, understanding the adoption agency. Who are you adopting from? Why are these children available? That's the bigger question. Why are they available? Start there.

**Lori:** Yeah. I would encourage people to read chapter 18 for Lorelai's story. Thank you for bringing that up. You were interviewed in *Adoption Unfiltered* by Sarah for her section, Adoptees Unfiltered – and for the 4th section, which is called Healing and Hope. You talk about opposing perceptions of the storytelling when you were quoted as saying, "Parents get so wrapped up in the excitement for themselves and say, *Oh, now our family is complete*. They do not consider that for many of us, our families were already complete and now they're broken."

Can you talk again about how the story is felt and told very differently depending on who's doing the narrating?

**Lanise:** It is a misconception that the majority of adoptees don't have families. And in my case specifically, I had a family. Both my parents were alive at the time. My father passed away when I was, I think 13.

**Lori:** Have you been able to reunite with your mom?

**Lanise:** Yes. I have reunified with my mom and my siblings. I have 3 siblings who are all half and my mom actually resides in Boston and my older brother lives in New York, I think. But we're not close. There's just a cultural chasm there. I no longer know Creole. I came to the States not knowing English. I had to learn English. And now I no longer know Creole. And so, it's tricky because you have the adoptee triad of what the agencies are telling you and oftentimes you don't have access to the birth family to get the real story as to what happened and why the child is being relinquished.

And then you have this adoptee in the center of it all, oftentimes forgotten because there's so much logistics that people are focusing on. And we're all just coming with this history; a rich history.



And as I said before, when I came when I was 4 years old and I cried for 2 years and little things would set me off and then I would weep for, Nanoosh, which was my grandmother and my mom didn't know who Nanoosh was but just like tried to console me. My sister had major behavioral issues that manifested out of her grief. And as we grieved the loss of our language, our food, our culture, our families, my mom hurriedly tried to erase it. Not intentionally; I'm not saying this to be malicious, but that's what people do in adoptions oftentimes because they have this vision of their life and they're saying, "Oh, they're going to complete my family. I'm going to complete the child," but the child is already complete. The child is coming with a rich history no matter what age they are. The child, even in the womb, has become accustomed to the rhythms and the voice and the scent of their birth mother.

And I had a guest on my podcast, Isaac Etter, talks about one of the greatest things you can do for an infant is give them a cloth or something with their birth mother's scent, and that will help them calm. And it's those sort of things that are overlooked when it comes to adoptees. And so we are left in the wilderness. And as adults trying to piece everything together like I am now and this is going to be a lifelong journey for me.

And so, I think that in adopting someone, seeing them for who they are in front of you, your vision of a family needs to be altered; needs to be flexible to what's in front of you because there is no guarantee and love is not enough. Love doesn't keep marriages together. Love doesn't keep friendships together. Why would it bond a child and a stranger? It won't necessarily.

And you have to come from a place of that being okay. If it is truly altruism that drives you, then whatever that child becomes is okay. You are a guardian. You are someone who is just guiding their path, not dictating it.

**Lori:** Thank you. Thank you. I had this conversation with Tony Hines in a previous episode. I want to ask you the same question. What is the difference between an interracial and a transracial adoptee?

**Lanise:** Well, I don't use transracial because of the LGBTQIA community for which I have much respect for. I understand that trans is to erase. And as I stumble through the fog, I don't think anyone really comes out of it. Once you go in, you're like end it for life. But I came to the realization that I don't want to claim that I erased anything. Things became dormant inside of me, like my language, Creole. I'm sure that I can learn it pretty easily if I actually applied myself. And when I'm confronted with people who think I'm less Haitian because I don't speak Creole, I was born there. That's an objective truth.

And so, I now define myself. This is who I am. I am no longer Lanise Antoine, but in high school I reclaimed my last name Antoine as my middle name. So, it's Lanise Antoine Shelley. I was on this pilgrimage to reclaim myself, my ruptured identity. And so interracial, intercountry, international resonates more with me than transracial.

And transracial as well is more of an umbrella term and it's quite vague in its wholeness. It just doesn't resonate with me specifically because of those reasons.

**Lori:** And a lot of the work that you do is around race and racial issues. How can parents address differences in race and culture in both transracial and same race adoptions?

**Lanise:** Well, on Instagram, I was delighted to see this little white girl playing with brown dolls. And I commented on their page and I just said, "I love that for her because you're exposing her to different skin colors in such a gentle, organic way." It doesn't necessarily have to look like sitting on the couch and reading a book by someone X Kendi or someone like that who is going to unpack anti-racism at a young age. It's those little subliminal nuggets that we drop along the way.

Growing up, we never talked about race. My family thought that it was more prudent for them to be color blind in that. And I just want to state that there's no such thing as color blindness. We are socialized to think certain things about certain people. We just are. And the sooner you own that and understand it and lean into it, the better the world will be.

And so, it's important to not only expose your kids earlier on to movies and TV shows and action figures and toys that are of different hues and cultures and to speak kindly of those people in front of them. That is a subliminal, gentle way to just address it.

That actually happened to me. I had a friend in middle school whose dad was gay and my mom, being staunch Christian, never said anything ill about her situation. So, I didn't think anything bad about it. I was like, "Okay."

And so early on, I was exposed to many different types of people, but we never talked about it directly and I think that that is a misstep as well. I think it is more comfortable for my mom to keep it at arm's length than address it head on when it comes to anti-racism. And she's learning now. She's engaging now in books and things like that, which is great. But also understanding this aspiration of goodness that I talked about in regards to religion and reexamining what that is.

So, in needing to be good, it's really hard for people to own the fact that they have microaggressions, that they have racist thoughts. Everyone does. Everyone does. And once you relinquish the need to be good, you're able to really isolate what you need to do to be a great citizen of this world.

And that's the aspiration is to be a great citizen, not just good, but to be proactive, to be interactive, to be an ally, whatever that means for you, and to be a safe place for your children to come to when horrific things happen. Like a funny story that I have is – I think it's funny. I don't know if you will. But like when I'm with my mom, even to this day, people ask her first, "Can I help you?" They never think we're together because we look so different. I'm very Afrocentric. I have faux locs. I like to be fashionable. And she has on like a cardigan or something. And we'll be in a store and I'll go up to her and take her wallet out and walk away. And the look on the salespeople's faces.

**Lori:** I do find that funny.

**Lanise:** It's so great because I'm just testing it. This is the world that I live in that she's oblivious to. And so, that's just an example of how she and I are just treated differently and you just have to lean into it. Your child is looked at. You know, if they're in an all-white community, an all-white family, they're being stared at and the child knows. I grew up being stared at. People would ask me at family thanksgivings, "Oh, who do you know?" "Well, the host is my uncle." Constantly

having to explain my existence, explain why I'm there, why I was invited in a situation which should be safe inherently.

And those things are happening to adoptees and we're not saying anything about it because we were not taught that our adoptive parents could receive it. And do you want to be someone that can be receptive to everything that's in your adoptee's life? That's the bigger question.

**Lori:** To be able to do that, that takes us doing our own clearing and knowing what's going on inside us moment to moment, whenever we feel uncomfortable. That's when I say, "Look at what's going on inside, not just outside."

**Lanise:** Mhmm.

**Lori:** Would you tell us a little bit more about celebrating an adoptee's culture? What does that look like?

**Lanise:** Well, it looks like acknowledging it, bringing it into the home, just in an organic way. It doesn't have to be a devoted night to their culture. If you have adopted interracial, interculturally, fixing the food of your Korean adoptee, having them eat with chopsticks, learning how to eat with chopsticks. You know? It's those natural moments where they are fortified. When they go into Korean restaurants, when they go into Korean neighborhoods, they don't feel alienated. That's not how I was brought up. We had Haiti Nights, but that was driven by missionary-ism. We ate rice and beans in just remembrance of those less fortunate. We would empty our piggy banks and our clothes would go back to the orphanage.

So, it wasn't a celebration per se, it was an acknowledgement, but it didn't make us feel good. It made us contemplative and honestly instilled a savior complex within me because I was saved from the orphanage. So, when I go back, I've been back twice, there are people who remember me when I was there and they grew up in the orphanage and that feeling is horrific. I don't remember them. So, many things have been stripped from me.

And so, in celebrating one's culture, you just implement it. You weave it into everyday life. You find ways to make it natural to love being Haitian, Korean, Chinese, Puerto Rican, whatever it may be. Just weave it into everyday life and make it something that feels good so that when people are out in the world, when adoptees leave the home, they say, "Oh, I know this about my culture and I can be proud about it."

**Lori:** Beautiful. Thank you. So, now that you've laid all this groundwork, how can parents center the adoptee as the hero in their own story? What do we do that helps and what do we do that can hurt?

**Lanise:** We talked about entitlement and making adoptees feel shackled to the adoptive parents' purpose and vision. So, that's definitely not it. Centering the adoptee really acknowledges who they are, where they're coming from, and supporting them in where they're going. If they want to go and spend time with their biological parent, let them do that. And not really let them, just give space for that because they don't need your permission. They're an individual. They're a separate entity and allow them to be that.

**Lori:** You're talking about adult? Adult adoptees?

**Lanise:** Yeah, adult adopters who seek out their biological families and oftentimes are guilty for it; this idea of being ungrateful. When I was 18 years old, I was a very quiet child. My sister was the ornery one, the one who, like, ran away from home and was very dramatic and I was the one, like, staying at home writing novels and being a nerd. But I was very quiet and didn't know how to express my feelings. And we had a family reunion and I went back to undergrad without really saying goodbye to my mom. I didn't want to be there. I didn't want to be at the reunion. I didn't have fun.

I got an email from my grandmother saying, "Your mom brought you into her family and you are ungrateful. You're undeserving, and I am thoroughly disappointed in your behavior." Can you imagine what that did to me? That's painful. That's deep. There are a few times in my life that I had, like, blood rage. And that was one of them. And can you imagine my mother's response? My mother's response was, "She loves you. She admonishes all of your cousins as well." That was it. So, there are pillars of trauma, of missteps, colossal missteps that led to and lead a lot of adoptees to just saying, "Forget it. I'm out of here."

So, it's important to know that you do not own them; the adoptee. You don't own them. They are their own person. And telling them that they don't deserve to be there is one of the biggest missteps you can make. If you chose to adopt this person, then you choose all of them. And allowing them to be their full self, their full person, whatever that is, is imperative. Yeah.

So, I know that it's tricky for many people to come to grips with the fact that their families, their friends, their community may not embrace the adoptee the same way, the same way that they do. And keeping that in mind too will change the trajectory of where the adoptee is, emotionally, because there's a lot of micro things that are happening that you're unaware of. But I think I answered your question with that. Did I answer your question?

**Lori:** Yeah. Thank you.

And this is the question that's uniform this season. What do you wish all adoptive parents knew from Day 1 or from today?

**Lanise:** Well, I really loved what you said in the beginning of knowing your stuff and knowing what was their stuff and understanding their boundaries. And as I work through my adult stuff, I'm having these hard conversations with my mom and my godmother, and they're saying that they just were unprepared, did not know how to define their role in my life. Like my godmother did not know what kind of parental role she had, but I told her that my exposure to her, having lived with her, makes her a parental guide whether she wants it or not. Like children just surrender to who's in front of them and are very impressionable.

And so, I would say that families need to make a choice about the boundaries that they have around the child. They need to understand and distill what is the child's stuff? What is my stuff? As an adoptive parent, do you have abandonment issues? Do you have issues with your family that are unresolved? Like all of those things will condition your relationship with the child.

And I'm not saying that people need to be healed to do this or do that because none of us will ever be completely healed. There's always something that will activate us, trigger us, set us off. But I just loved how you put it of knowing that this child in front of you, this is who they are and

this is who you happen to be as a parent. How can you come together and compromise in collaboration to honor this guardianship contract that you have created with this child?

**Lori:** I feel like once we become a parent, by adoption or by whatever, we end up also parenting our inner child because that inner child is coming out, the one that didn't have a voice, the one that maybe wasn't seen, and the one that doesn't have the capacity to hold space for the new child; the new actual child.

And so, a lot of, I think, what I have spent the last 20 some years doing is getting reacquainted with that inner child and filling her up, healing what she's showing me. And the more I do that, the more space and capacity I have with my own children. And I think that means that as I've been doing this work, I show up for them in a way that feels a little bit safer and safer to them. They would be the arbiters of saying that.

But I do think that, like, what you were saying, if you have a full grief bucket, you cannot hold your child's grief when they start to feel it about their original family or their losses in their adoptions. If you have a grief bucket full of admonishing, then when somebody in your family admonishes, you're not going to have the capacity to defend and protect your child. So, those are some of the things that you've made me think along the way, and I wanted to thank you for being with us, Lanise.

**Lanise:** Thank you, Lori. It was such a delight to meet you and to be here today. So, thank you.

**Lori Holden, Close:**

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## Show Notes

- **Instagram:** [@youngadoptee](#)
- **Website:** [www.laniseantoineshelley.com](http://www.laniseantoineshelley.com)
- [Torie DiMartile](#) on the stories adoptees tell about our adoption
- [Let Us Be Greater](#) by Michelle Madrid (mentioned)
- [Origin](#), a film based on the book [Caste](#) by Isabel Wilkerson.
- [Ep 305](#): *Is There a Hidden Danger in the Adoption Story You're Telling?*
- [People](#) article about one vlogger who documented an adoption on social media.
- [Adoption Unfiltered episode](#) on the unwanted connection between child adoption and child abduction
- [Ep 307](#): Tony Hynes on interracial vs transracial terminology

