

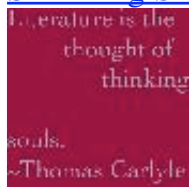
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Thinking Souls: A Monthly Literary Series

Outsiders Within: From a Far Country



[Sun Yung Shin, one of the editors of "Outsiders Within"](#)



[Thinking Souls](#)

November 9, 2006

Shannon Gibney

Shannon Gibney interviews the editors of "Outsiders Within," the first anthology of writings by transracial and transnational adoptees. The book's diverse genres transmit a vivid picture of what it is to find oneself displaced into one's own family.

Jane Jeong Trenka and Sun Yung Shin, along with Julia Chinyere Oparah, a professor of Ethnic Studies at Mills College, have edited the first anthology of its kind: a book by and about transracial adoptees. Almost all of the existing literature on transracial adoption (or, that is, the process of White people adopting children of color), has been written by White adoptive parents. Trenka and Shin contend that this has tended to limit the creative and political discourse around the issue, which doesn't help anyone involved in the adoption triad (birth parents, adoptees, and adoptive parents). *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption* (South End Press, 2006) is an attempt to deepen our understanding of this complicated and far-reaching institution.

SG: Why the title *Outsiders Within*?

JJT: The title is a tip of the hat to theorist Patricia Hill Collins, who has asserted that an "outsider within" standpoint enables black women to gain unique insights that may not be available to those who share the worldview of the dominant community in which they operate. Being within—yet excluded from—that dominant discourse has been the situation of transracial adoptees; the literature has been dominated over the past fifty years by the people who do the adopting and the people who facilitate the adopting. By taking *Outsiders Within* as our title, we are affirming adoptee-centered knowledge production as an important piece of the adoption literature that to date has been missing.

SYS: Most of us grew up being racially “othered,” as well as being a kinship “other,” and often a national or religious “other.” The title is a way to claim that otherness as a kind of knowledge and as a new center for adoption discourse.

SG: Why are there three editors for this book? What was your editorial process?

JJT: I’m really excited about the editorial team for this book because we have complementary strengths and experience. Sun Yung Shin, a Korean adoptee who grew up in Chicago, is a poet and children’s book writer. She also has the theoretical knowledge that’s needed to edit some of the more scholarly pieces, plus that she is a strong Asian-Americanist, which she shares with her English students at Perpich Arts High School in Minneapolis. Julia Chinyere Oparah, is a diasporic Igbo woman and member of the Umochoke clan, Owerri, Nigeria. She was born in Scotland and grew up in a multiracial adoptive family in the south of England. She is a professor of ethnic studies at Mills College in Oakland, CA, author of *Other Kinds of Dreams*, a book about Black women’s organizing in the UK, and editor of *Global Lockdown*, a book about the prison industrial complex. She is also a co-founder of Sankofa, a support group for transracial adoptees in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Julia brings a global consciousness to the book, as well as a political consciousness that is informed by radical African American organizing in California; her mentor was Angela Davis. Julia’s also just an enormous political thinker who balances academia with activism. My strength is memoir and personal narratives, and just in general being tapped in to the adoptee community, so I had a good feel for what was happening around the world and where to go to looking for contributors for the book.

This is actually the second attempt to create this book. About a decade ago, Julia had independently sent out a call for submissions for a similar anthology that was to be titled *Borderlands*. In the meantime, without ever having heard of or met Julia, I had written *Language of Blood* and gone on book tour with it, and I kept meeting all these transracial adoptees at my readings who were not just Korean, but from many different ethnicities. And they told me their stories and I thought, wait a minute, there’s something here....

So I imagined a book like *Outsiders Within*, and I did some research on the Internet to see if there was a similar book. Turns out there was not, but I found Julia’s call for submissions. I contacted her to see what happened with this book, and she said she had not gone through with the book because there were too many Korean adoptee submissions, and she didn’t feel qualified to edit them. In the meantime, I had also met Sun Yung Shin and was enormously impressed with her, so that’s how we all got together. We have been working together now for three years and Sun Yung and I have met Julia only once, which is the beauty of the Internet as a tool to bring people together.

I sent out the call for submissions on a Friday night from Minnesota, and by the next morning, we had responses from adoptees living on five continents. It was breathtaking. It was obvious we had tapped into something big, and that other adoptees had also noticed a need for this book.

SYS: Having three editors has been a tremendous strength—there’s always someone to break the tie. Three is a magic number, after all.

SG: There are so many books out there about adoption, even transracial adoption, already -- how is this book different or new? What new knowledge is being added to the field?

JJT: This book is different because it’s an international, interethnic book that is transracial-adoptee centered. What that means is that it is written by people of color adopted by white people, and our allies.

Our allies are people who are looking critically at the transracial adoption, not as facilitators of adoption, but as scholars, family members, and activists who are conscious about how these adoptions are affecting the world on the intimate level of family, throughout communities, throughout academic fields and artistic disciplines, and also on the national and global scale.

SYS: This book is about the power of first person subjectivity, and about intervening into the various master narratives that have shaped and policed our lives.

SG: Who is this book for? Who is the intended audience?

JJT: The book's dedication is for transracial/national adoptees. It is a wonderful book to be able to put into a transracially adopted person's hands. I get a big thrill out of it. But of course a lot of other people are involved in adoptees' lives and can benefit from reading this—spouses, friends, social workers, family. And of course what has been missing from the debate of transracial adoption the whole time is any critique by either white feminists or feminists of color; I hope this book will partly serve to reframe transracial adoption as a site of struggle for women of color, who are struggling not just for legal abortions--but the right to raise their own children.

SYS: This book is for anyone who thinks that the liberation of people of color, of women, and of children matters to the destiny of human rights in our globalized world.

SG: Who are the book's contributors? Where do they live and what are their disciplines?

JJT: We have a wide range of contributors, mostly adults who are transracially adopted, but also people who are allies of transracial adoptees. Our contributors reside in eight different countries: the U.S., Germany, Sweden, Canada, Australia, Denmark, Korea, and England, and come from even more ethnic backgrounds. Our amazing contributors represent a wide range of disciplines. They work in academia, literature and the arts, grassroots activism, psychology and counseling, business, government, journalism, and education.

SG: Why a mix of genres -- critical and creative essays and poetry?

JJT: As we surveyed the adoption literature, we noticed that not only were the experiences of adult adoptees most often frequently excluded from studies, but that our creative expressions were simply not acknowledged as adding anything valuable to the adoption debate. So we have collected art, poetry, and memoir here, as well as the academic work of adoptees--which is really turning the adoption world on its head because the ways adoptees understand and describe themselves and transracial adoption is completely different than how we have been described by white adopters and social workers.

So in this book, the interlaced personal accounts, critical analysis, and creative expressions create a multifaceted dialogue that challenges the privileging of the rationalistic, "expert" knowledge that excludes so many adoptee voices.

SYS: Academic ways of knowing are not the only valid methods of knowledge production. We wanted to have a broad conversation that was accessible to many types of people and different types of workers.

SG: What is the "Minnesota connection" with this book? What kind of an impact do you think it will have here? What kind of an impact do you think it will have nationally and internationally?

SYS: Nine of the Asian adoptees have lived in Minnesota for an extended period of time; Greg and Cathy Choy, who now teach at Berkeley, are not adopted but developed an interest in adoption when

they taught at University of Minnesota until a couple of years ago, Heidi Adelman is a Minnesotan whose mother worked in a Minnesota agency at the time of my own adoption. We also have Sandra White Hawk (Sicangu Lakota) and Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Star and Kekek Jason Todd Stark (Turtle Mountain Ojibwe) who are living and working in Minnesota.

The joke is that Minnesota is the Land of 10,000 Korean adoptees, and for the reason of such high transracial adoption activity and perceived liberalness that echoes that of Scandinavia (Sweden has the world's largest population of transnational adoptees per capita) I think Minnesota registers in the consciousness of Korean adoptees globally. That said, there are more Koreans who have been transnationally and transracially adopted than any other group globally, so Minnesota is important for transracial adoptees, if we conceive of ourselves as a multi-ethnic, international group with a majority of Korean adoptees within it.

My goal has never been to make books will make money, or books that make everybody feel good inside. And I don't think it's possible to guess what the average book buyer--who is not exactly in the same demographic as are contributors are--will purchase. So I guess even though I would love global, immediate social change as a result of this book, realistically all I can know is that we have now made a small mark on the historical record, that these ideas are recorded and will be archived. I hope that perhaps one day the ideas put forth here will be used for positive change in our world—perhaps picked up by academics and taught to students who will become the social workers and teachers of the next generation; perhaps used by policymakers today as they work to find ways to solve problems of child welfare.

SYS: I am coming to think of Minnesota as a kind of frontier, a different kind of coast. Radical things are afoot...

SG: Why should people who are not adopted care about, or read *Outsiders Within*?

JJT: When I've visited college classrooms in Minnesota, I've sometimes asked for a show of hands to see how many people know someone who is adopted, whether they are a close friend or just an acquaintance. Invariably, almost every student in a Minnesota classroom will raise his or her hand. Certainly transracial adoptees are very visible on urban sidewalks, and even in rural Minnesota communities. So whether or not someone is adopted, they usually have an idea about transracial adoption--and I think they often feel uneasy about it.

But people don't have a way to frame that uneasiness; probably they fear that if they ask the wrong questions, they're going to sound racist. Part of that is because we are living in a neo-conservative time that frames whites as being disadvantaged if they aren't allowed to adopt whomever they want. And while I think most adoptive parents are more educated these days, to at least give lip service to the fact that colorblindness only works for white folks, there is still a very powerful liberal trope of love and family being able to conquer all. So against these powerful narratives, I think most people in some kind of proximity to transracial adoption just try to mind their own business.

Yet when a transracial adoptee is involved, that adoption usually signifies a lot of other things that are wrong in the world—and I think that's why people at the gut level feel uneasy about it. It's about racism--not necessarily on the personal, name-calling level—but the cultural racism of entire societies that makes some women so poor that they have no choice but to relinquish their own children, and others so comparatively wealthy that they can adopt those same brown children.

When we start digging around in the “whys” of transracial adoption, what we find is American adoption fees symbiotically feeding brutal foreign patriarchies; we find unjust race relations in the United States

and globally; we find U.S.-led wars in foreign countries and domestic policies that destroy communities of color. Transracial adoptees, always seen in our raced and often imported bodies, often against the backdrop of white family members and communities-- signify all these things. So in a way, if we can shift the narrative a bit to focus not on “love” or “good adjustment” or “happy multi-cultural families,” but rather on peace and social justice for our mothers and communities of birth--then we have a great opportunity to remind people in our adoptive communities every day of how much work there is to be done for justice in the world, simply by walking around in our own bodies.

SYS: Anyone who is interested in the cultural and economic imperialism of the United States abroad should care about intercountry and transracial adoption.

Panel Discussion with “Outsiders Within” Contributors:

Monday, November 13, 3:30 pm

*Moderated by Kim Park Nelson, University of Minnesota Ph.D. candidate in American Studies
Dept. of American Studies, University of Minnesota*

Outsiders Within Book Launch

Saturday, November 18, 7-9 pm

Barbara Barker Center for Dance, 500 21st Ave. S., Minneapolis.

*Local contributors will read their work, Ananya Dance Theatre will perform a selection from their work *Duurbaar: Unstoppable*, which explores women of color's power to determine their own destiny, and Sandy White Hawk will lead a healing ceremony.*

Free and open to the public.

Please write outsiderswithin@gmail.com for more information.

Related Links

- [Outsiders Within](http://www.outsiderswithin.com)(<http://www.outsiderswithin.com>)
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- [Outsiders Within: The Blog](http://www.outsiderswithin.blogspot.com)(<http://www.outsiderswithin.blogspot.com>)
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- [Thinking Souls Read: The Book Club](http://mnartists.org/forums/forumdisplay.php?f=26)(<http://mnartists.org/forums/forumdisplay.php?f=26>)
Click here to visit the forum for discussion of the current book on Thinking Souls.

Author Bio

Shannon Gibney

Shannon Gibney is a writer who lives in Minneapolis. A 2005 Bush Artist Fellow, she is currently executive director of Ananya Dance Theatre (ADT).

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