

Angela Tucker: An Interview by Maggie Yang

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Angela Tucker is an African-American transracial adoptee activist, filmmaker of the Emmy-nominated *Closure* documentary, podcast host of *The Adoptee Next Door*, and acclaimed author of *You Should Be Grateful: Stories of Race, Identity, and Transracial Adoption*. Based in Seattle, Washington, She is a well-known voice in transracial adoption and centers her work around shifting society's fairy-tale narrative of adoptions. Through diversifying adoptee voices and guiding the accurate depictions of adoptee stories in modern media, Angela draws on the power of storytelling to uncover the layers of rejection, loss, and complexity of the adoption experience. She continues to support the adoptee community through initiatives like founding the *Adoptee Mentoring Society*.

Maggie Yang 00:00

Audit. Hello, Angela, I wanted to start off by saying thank you for your time. I really appreciate you being here and sharing your experiences with us. The work you do for the adopting community is so incredibly important. And I can't wait to learn more about it. If at any point you feel uncomfortable, feel free to stop me and we can enter whenever you want. Besides that, I'm very, very honored to have you here today.

Angela Tucker 00:21

Thank you. Glad to be here.

Maggie Yang 00:24

To start, Angela, could you please tell me how you started your work with the adoption experience? And how has that evolved into your work today?

Angela Tucker 00:33

Well, as an adoptee, I think it started really early on as a transracial adoptee, meaning my parents are white, and I'm black.¹ So, we were very conspicuous. We had lots of people inquiring often about it, not just me, but many of my siblings. My parents adopted a lot of kids. For a long time, I've been involved as a teenager, I started speaking publicly at different events, primarily for adoption agencies. And my work at that time was I think I was sharing cash. It was a long time ago. But I think I was talking at that time about the perils of closed adoptions. And I don't think I knew that's what I was talking about at that time. But I was talking about wishing I knew more about my story

¹ Transracial adoption, or interracial adoption, is when a child of one racial identity is adopted by parent(s) of another racial identity.

about my birth parents. In retrospect, I can say that I was talking about the harms of closed adoptions.

Maggie Yang 01:48

I've been following your work on social media. You're very vocal about your experience as a black transracial adoptee growing up in an environment where you were a racial minority, how did that shape your identity, and understanding of identity and influence your perspective on transracial adoptions?

Angela Tucker 02:06

Yeah, immeasurably. I was usually the only black person in a room. The city where I grew up, Bellingham, Washington, in the 90s, was predominantly white. It's a college town. So, the diversity would fluctuate throughout the year, because of the students and professors coming into town, but in general, pretty white, middle class. Lovely city, it's great in between Seattle and Vancouver, Washington. However being the only the only black person in the room, oftentimes the only adoptee in a room, the only transracial adoptee in a room other than my siblings. I think that just meant that I had to learn about how to educate others at an early age, people were often very curious about my blackness and how I got to a city like Bellingham. I needed to teach other people about only the history of black America and how that interacts with transracial adoption, you know, it wasn't enough for me to just say, Yeah, I guess I just ended up across the country from my birth state of Tennessee. But instead, I wanted to share, like, why that is, and how that relates to the Jim Crow era, and redlining segregation, even things like mass incarceration of black folks and basically wanted to put it in context for people that there is a reason why so many white folks are adopting black and brown kids.² And we don't see the inverse very often. I don't think I was having that conversation. Like, in middle school, in high school, I started to have some of that awareness and desire to set the record straight. I think this primarily came because people would say to me, how awesome that you're adopted, you must be so thankful to get away from a bad situation when in reality, I didn't even really know why I was adopted. It didn't make sense to me how other people could assume that I had a better life. And so, in trying to deconstruct that, it was really clear that a better life equal being in closer proximity to white people.

Maggie Yang 04:55

Yeah, pivoting to this grateful narrative, you talked more about this idea of being grateful this past year in your recent publication *You Should be Grateful*. This is a truly insightful and informative

² Under Jim Crow, African Americans in the United States were treated as second-class citizens through legalized racial segregation.

book. By the way, I would encourage anybody who wants to understand the nuances of kinship and belong to read this book. How do you envision a more inclusive and adoptee-centered adoption process? In an ideal world, what steps do you believe are essential to achieve this transformation?

Angela Tucker 05:25

Thank you for your kindness about my book. First of all, my hope for more adoptees centered—I shouldn't even say adoptee centered—I just want to say my hope is that we can start to understand the value of preserving families. So, adoption is really a subtraction problem. And you know, we erase one set of families and replace them with another set of parents. And I don't understand why we can't have it be an addition problem, that perhaps we have a set of parents that aren't able to fulfill all the duties to parenting, do we need to terminate their parental rights in order to keep a child safe? I don't know that we need to do that. I think we can add more community people support around a child, and perhaps that can be helpful and healthy. I've seen this model in the Treehouse Foundation out of Boston, SOS Children's Villages all over, but they have a place in Chicago.³ And essentially, it's like communal, a more communal approach versus the nuclear family structure of let's take this kid out and put them in this other family. I think it's the way I view inclusion is, first, if we can humanize biological parents quite a bit more, and we're able to see them not as just bad people. Instead, people who are in precarious situations, people who need more support, think there's a very small percentage of people who truly are unsafe and don't want their children. I think that percentage is not equal to the number of adoptions we have. That makes me really sad. So instead, let's think of a different way, I do a lot of work on the openness concept. So, if an adoption has happened, how can we make sure that the child is still connected to their biological families? I think that's a good solution. But it's not absolutely the best because the adoptive parents still have a lot of the control and power to say, you know, we don't want to meet with the birth parents or they are dangerous, or they are scary, or they aren't appropriate. When in reality, that may not always be the case, from my work and my consulting more often than not, it's a matter of discomfort, that the adoptive parents are really uncomfortable because it's maybe across racial lines or across class status that makes it makes having a true relationship really unusual. And that I think, is not a great reason to keep a child away from their biological family.

Maggie Yang 08:41

Thank you for sharing that. I think the ideas you touched on are so important. In the adoptive world, there's a dominant narrative that adoptees are at the receiving end of a giving relationship and that

³ Treehouse Foundation (<https://www.treehousefoundation.net>) has two major initiatives: the intergenerational Treehouse Community and The Re-Envisioning Foster Care in America (REFCA) Movement. SOS Children's Villages (www.sos-usa.org) is an organization building families for children in need through a village-based model.

they should feel inherently grateful. We touched upon it briefly in our conversation. You also addressed this through a book, could you please elaborate on the importance of understanding that the current process is a subtractive problem? What are some other stereotypes or myths that cloud the current adoptee experience?

Angela Tucker 09:13

Are there other myths in addition to the message that we get from media, which is typically a fairy tale narrative that all is better after you're adopted. I think other myths that I've seen within the adoption world are attributing all negative stereotypes to birth parents, and all positive stereotypes are all positive traits. So, I'll say that again, attributing all negative traits to birth parents and all positive traits to the adoptive parents. So, this nature versus nurture, debate which is valid is really black and white and binary when it comes to the birth parents, which is a real pity because there are so many aspects of nature that have more to do with positive traits, but we just don't attribute it that way. So I think that's a real sad truth.

Maggie Yang 10:26

Yeah, what about other stereotypes, for example.

Angela Tucker 10:37

Yeah, another stereotype is the Saviorism, just that you're saved from a bad place to a better place. That if an adoptee wants to know their biological parents, then they're mad at their adoptive parents over their rebelling. Which is absolutely not true. Myths that adoptive parents are noble, humble saints that can do no wrong when in reality, they're human just like all of us. And that gets tricky when adoptees have adoptive parents who divorce and then they feel a lot of shame in how would they articulate that to their biological parents, if they ever reunited with them, that can feel like a big thing because there's this grand promise that sometimes birth parents as well believe that their child will be in a very stable environment versus the natural rhythm of relationships in life. Yeah, so those are a few. There's a stereotype about angry adoptees, which is pretty much any adoptee who's speaking out without first showing an immense amount of gratitude to their adoptive parents.

Maggie Yang 12:10

Thank you so much for sharing these limiting notions. There are so many that shroud the adoptee community that need to be dispelled for this process to be an inherently human centered process. We also talked a bit about the perception of birth parents, when people outside the adoptee community read your book, what do you want them to take away?

Angela Tucker 12:33

Oh, I've worked so hard to portray my biological mother and father as more than just this really tough moment in their lives when my birth mother was pregnant and homeless and not sure what to do with multiple of her pregnancies. So I'm hoping that when people read my book, or that they watch, I think I do a little bit of sharing around my ghost kingdom, which is a term coined by Betty Jean Lifton.⁴ That's basically this hypothetical world where adoptees go when they imagine who their birth parents are. I talked about my ghost kingdom being "Magic Johnson is my birth father", who is a famous basketball star back in the day and had a humongous smile. I talked about [him] being potentially my birth father, even though he's not because of his basketball athleticism, which I have, and then his huge smile, which I also have. And just in that anecdote, my hope is that people can see birth parents for more than just that difficult incident, but that they are humans with humor and hobbies and likes and dislikes. And that would be if we're able to do that, I think that would really move the needle forward. That we aren't just thinking of birth parents as criminals in jail, but oh, yeah, they might. Someone might be incarcerated, and they also love chicken noodle soup. You know, that's like an important detail to humanize the birth parent community.

Maggie Yang 14:20

Wow. Yeah, I do think that your writings, especially, are working towards crafting a new, more inclusive narrative. Also, this idea of a ghost kingdom is super interesting. I have to do more research and more reading on that. Angela, your work has echoed throughout the field of adoption, particularly among younger adoptees who may not possess the same clarity about the whole experience as you do. That brings me to my next question. Can you please tell me more about what motivated you to fund the Adopting Mentorship Society?

Angela Tucker 14:51

Yes. When my documentary *Closure* was making the rounds, I would occasionally go and do a Q&A for the audience after the film.⁵ And when I did that, I would meet so many adoptees, they would come running up to the stage and say thank you for sharing your story. I wish I could do the same. But I could never speak publicly about wanting to find my birth parents, because my adoptive parents would be hurt. My adoptive parents would feel like I was like, rebelling against them or no longer loyal to them. As I continued to hear these stories, it was perplexing to me because my adoptive parents were in the crowd whenever they could. And they were just proud and glad to be there. It was interesting because I would see so many people go over to my adoptive parents and say things like, are you okay with how Angela portrays adoption? and they were really trying to

⁴ Ghost Kingdom is a term coined by Betty Jean Lifton, author of *Los and Found*, to describe a place where the "ghost" mother and father hang out in an alternative life imagined by the adoptive child.

⁵ The *Closure* documentary traces the journey of transracial adoptee Angela Tucker as she searches for answers to questions about her birth story. <https://closuredocumentary.com/>.

console my adoptive parents, who were like, we're happy. She wants to talk about this. It's great. So that was a big dichotomy that I was noticing. I started virtually mentoring a lot of these adoptees who came to the screenings saying things like, I could never talk about this publicly, because it hurt my adoptive parents' feelings. In doing some of that virtual mentoring, I just kept amassing more and more and more adoptees who were saying the same thing. I decided to create groups and mentor them in a group setting. That was really powerful because some of them would say, I've never been in a room with only adoptees before. And that experience of being understood without having to explain themselves was like, completely foreign. And it just made me feel great. But also like, this is a need. Some transracial adoptees that I was mentoring had never heard the word transracial adoption before. They were like, wow, there's a word for this. Things like the ghost kingdom, things like ambiguous loss, disenfranchised grief, like all these terms that I knew and gave me some peace and feeling. That sense of a lack of belonging. It was it was new and revolutionary for others. I kept doing that and didn't really realize I was mentoring so many like 280 adoptees at a certain point. Some of my advisors said, let's try to build this out, scale it up. Maybe we can train other adoptees to mentor other adoptees. I thought that was a great idea. And so that's currently where we're at. We've incorporated it as a 501c3 nonprofit. We have trained adoptees to mentor, and it has been a little rocky, as any new endeavor is, but the need is so great.

Maggie Yang 18:10

I'm excited to see where the mentoring society goes. The idea you have for it to be like a self-sustaining mentorship program is just so important because all these adoptees do need the support and resources that you are providing. I do want to come back to the documentary society for something you said was just so interesting. adoptees tell you that they found it difficult to share their stories, whereas your decision to publicly share your completely complex adoptee stories is incredibly impactful. How do you navigate the vulnerabilities of sharing such a personal journey?

Angela Tucker 18:47

I have really learned about boundaries. And that to differentiate between sharing my personal, vulnerable, vulnerable stories for the sake of appeasing everyone's curiosity is not what I do. I think I used to do that when people were just so curious, and so I would meet their curiosity by just blabbering. Now I feel way more in control. And I have utilized the strategic story sharing or some people call it ethical story sharing models where you're really aware of what stories you're sharing and what the purpose is. So are you sharing certain aspects of your story to educate others to influence policy and legislation to stimulate conversation, knowing the "why" is really important, and that's something I've worked really hard to do. Now I feel very comfortable sharing and I know my boundaries of what pieces are not available for the public, and I feel very empowered. When I'm at an event and people ask a question that I don't share, I feel very strong. I feel very proud to be able

to say that's a private. That's something that I don't share, or that's like my birth parents' story. So I don't have permission to share that. I feel like those answers are helping to teach and mentor others to know you can have boundaries around your story. I'm proud to offer that too.

Maggie Yang 20:28

Adoptee experiences are just so multifaceted. There are so many crossroads and so many intertwining individuals—having parts of your story you want to keep yourself is it's very impactful.

Angela Tucker 20:42

It's hard to it takes work to, like you said, so many of the stories are intertwined. It takes work to figure out which part of your story is yours. I think I do this work with adoptive parents a lot to help them figure out which aspects belong to them and what aspects don't belong to them. That is a very respectful process. I really love it when folks do that work. And I think it feels freeing to everybody.

Maggie Yang 21:19

It's a very empowering process to share stories, but also understand which stories are yours to share. Thank you for sharing that. Back to the process of organizing the documentary society. What are the main challenges you face in establishing and growing these mentorship initiatives?

Angela Tucker 21:42

I would say the biggest hurdle that we're having right now is the training of the adoptee mentors. There are so many adoptees who are very passionate about wanting to become a mentor, to help to give back to be something that they wished they had when they were growing up. But then the reality of mentorship is, is a little bit different. There's the issue around mentors being triggered by things that the mentee will say, and if they haven't yet processed that, then it's hard sometimes for the mentors to keep the focus on the mentee, which is absolutely important. So, in psychology, people call that the parallel process. So, I have been revamping our training modules, to support our mentors to be able to have a separate place to process their own story, so that they do not need to do it in a mentor session, and they can focus fully on the mentee. I think the other aspect is [that] when you're being mentored, you do have a lot of lightbulb moments and immediate gratification. It's exciting, you feel seen, being a mentor, you don't have those moments. And sometimes there's an expectation that that's if I, you know, if I loved being mentored so much, of course, I love being a mentor to others. And that's just not true. It's a completely different position. And so I need to do a better job of setting expectations, I think for what that's going to look like. There's one of the scariest parts for me of building this is how to end well. I've been working with a lot of other mentoring organizations around this. Still, the tricky part is for adoptees, abandonment issues are so deep within our veins that it would be very easy to replicate that if someone doesn't show up for a

scheduled session, you know, that could do a lot of harm to an adoptee. I just didn't want that when I was just doing all the mentorship on my own. I would never miss a mentor session that I had scheduled, no matter what it's a really high bar, but for this specific identity, it has to be that way. Rescheduling can feel like it can feel really triggering. And so that's been something I've had to work really hard with my mentors around is we can't take this lightly. You schedule a session, you've got to be there.

Maggie Yang 24:45

You talk about potential triggers that are very, very important because for adoptees, that's an incredibly vulnerable part of their identity. I know that you study psychology at Seattle Pacific University.⁶ As a university student myself, I'm curious as to how this academic background carries over into your continued work at the adoptee mentoring society. I would love for you to elaborate more about how that background assists you in your role.

Angela Tucker 25:18

Well, I think human development and understanding. I think the biggest support that my undergrad degree has had is probably more around the different ages and developmental stages for adoptees, so, I mentor adoptees ages 12 to 16 as a group, and then 17 to 22 as a group and 23 and up. There are very different focuses for those age groups that I like to focus on when mentoring. In addition to that, understanding that development is a little bit different for adoptees, especially those who perhaps were in foster care for many years and, or those who had no ability to process their adoption within their family. I think that the overlapping and the intersectional identities. Learning about that in psychology has been really helpful. Here, to be nimble to adjust to knowing that a one-size-fits-all model is just not going to work. When I studied the prefrontal cortex, the amygdala, and the fear center, I think those have stayed with me as I understand that every mentor session, not only lines up have to line up with their developmental age, but also thinking about their history and their past and how that plays into it.⁷

Maggie Yang 27:13

I want to shift focus now to the Closure documentary. It's a truly fantastic film. It touched upon so many topics in just 72 minutes. It was moving how you navigated meeting your biological family. In combination with your work establishing the adoptee mentoring society. Could you please explain what adoptive parent curiosity means for adoptees? You talked a bit about crossing social lines and social classes and the idea of a ghost kingdom. I'm curious to learn more.

⁶ Seattle Pacific University is a private Christian university in Seattle, Washington.

⁷ The amygdala and medial prefrontal cortex are structures that facilitate the consolidation and retrieval of fear memories.

Angela Tucker 27:47

Can you ask that question again? Sorry.

Maggie Yang 27:50

Yeah, no worries. Could you please explain what adoptive parent curiosity means for adoptees?

Angela Tucker 28:03

Yeah, that's a big question. Because of the inherent power differential that adoptive parents have over their child, even if the child is a teenager or is an adult, often the adoptive parent's voice is really loud for not just us adoptees but [in] society. It can feel like walking on eggshells. When adoptees interact with adoptive parents because, for so many adoptive parents, they're just losing this sense of identity: I didn't want to harm you. I thought adoption was a beautiful thing. I didn't know it would be so complicated. There's a lot of that sort of language, which can make it really hard for an adoptee to express themselves. Thankfully, I have been in contact with a lot of adoptive parents who understand the need for adoptee-to-adoptee relationships, especially white adoptive parents of black and brown kids who understand that they can't possibly meet all of their kid's needs and their kid is going to need racial representation racial mirroring and that they will never be able to provide that. So, a lot of adoptive parents, thankfully, are fully embracing that concept and, therefore, are encouraging their children to be part of programs like mine. But it still doesn't come without its it's just that the heavy layer of fear that we're going to hurt them.

Maggie Yang 30:04

Yeah. In your documentary, you also talk about your own experience reuniting with your birth family. What was that process like? If you feel comfortable, I invite you to share your most memorable moment. This could be like an unexpected challenge or a surprising discovery throughout the entire filming process.

Angela Tucker 30:23

Well, the filming process in and of itself was a surprise we had. My husband is the filmmaker. We had talked about getting home video footage just for me because this was such a big moment. And I thought, if I only see my birth mother once, and that's it, I want it captured on camera so I can look at her forevermore. However, at the time, I was working at an adoption agency with many families who said things like, we're going to be the best adoptive parents ever. And our kid won't even need to know their birth parents because they will have all their needs met through us. And so I was, I had really loving adoptive parents who had my needs met and knew that that wasn't enough. So, I my husband was like, why don't we share what we're capturing some of your process with your

clients? So, I decided to do that. That's how this morphed into becoming a documentary, my husband thought, I'm going to go get some editing software. So, he did that and [got] some nicer filming equipment. We were just really surprised when Netflix, Hulu, and iTunes called and wanted to put it on their platforms. We [had] crowdfunded. I think \$20,000 to help with some of the filming costs, but [we] really didn't have a budget. So, it was a surprise and a beautiful thing to understand that people really wanted the adoptee's perspective of this labor union. But it caught us off guard. And I certainly would have had some different fashion choices. If I knew it was going to be a big a big thing.

Maggie Yang 32:19

You talked about crowdfunding and your husband picking up equipment and things. I'm curious, was this your guys' first time working with the film or working different types of media to represent the adoptee experience?

Angela Tucker 32:36

Yes, yes. My husband is a filmmaker now. But at that time, he was working in property management. He was working in real estate and just had a budding interest in it. And so that catapulted his career, which is fantastic. And we've done some work together in that regard. But no, this was our first time.

Maggie Yang 33:02

It is [such] a great film to me for [your] first-time [as a filmmaker], I would not have believed it if you did not tell me because it's just received so many like accolades as well. It's a major part of representing the adoptee community. If you could rewind to before filming this documentary and meeting your birth family, what are some things you would do differently? What is something that you wish you'd known?

Angela Tucker 33:36

Good question. I don't know [if] there was a lot different than I could have done. I waited until I was 21, which is the age that Tennessee allows people to get their original birth certificates. When I turned 21, I applied for that because that could show my biological mother's full name. So I applied and didn't get it. They said no, still. Then I had to take matters into my own hands. The resounding question that still is with me is, who's right is it? Do I have a right to meet my biological mother? And does she have a right not to let me know her? At the same time, I think this is the tension. In trying to find her, I was always aware that I wanted her to be able to say no, and at the same time, I did feel like I had a right to know some more aspects of my story. That tension is ongoing. I think the way to mitigate that is through this advocacy work that I'm doing now, which is openness and

making sure people know each other sooner so that we can make our preferences known. And we don't have to wonder about our health history, medical history, or things that are very important. I'm not sure that I would even do anything different, but it's just an important piece that to keep front and center.

Maggie Yang 35:30

I wanted to ask more about how the revelations and meaning of your birth parents impact your relationships with your adoptive family. Did it impact your broader understanding of the concept of family itself?

Angela Tucker 35:46

Yeah, I mean, it definitely strengthened my relationships with my adoptive parents going through the search process. And that's actually what research shows, too, is that adoptees gain greater attachment with their adoptive parents when the adoptive parents are along for the ride. So that certainly happened for me. I do have a more expansive and inclusive definition of family now. But I think growing up, I had foster siblings and foreign exchange students who were living with us and, of course, all the adoptions in my family. I do think my parents instilled that quality quite early on that families can look very different ways. It wasn't a far stretch for me to now consider all my birth family as part of our family. And my adoptive parents do as well. They send all my birth siblings, you know, birthday cards, and all that. And it's it feels right.

Maggie Yang 37:04

Because your adoption was closed, which we touched upon briefly earlier, the Tennessee law posed an obstacle in your search for your birth parents. I want to give you the space to talk a bit more about your advocacy work. What is your current process with that? What is your ultimate goal and how did this experience with the Closure documentary play a role in it?

Angela Tucker 37:30

Well, I'll answer that last question first. There are a lot of other adoptees doing this work prior to my film coming out. What this showed me is the power of stories, personal stories, that really hit home for people versus perhaps an academic report. People really love storytelling. I have used that in my ongoing work, whether it's through podcasts or other films. Some of the work that I'm focused on is thinking about whether or not we need to terminate parental rights for a child to be adopted. I'm also working hard on family preservation issues. So, helping agencies understand their own biases around child protective services and removing a child from their parent's home. Sometimes that decision is made because of subconscious biases. And so I'm trying to work on that. And that carries over to current adoptive parents who've already adopted their children, I'm trying to help

them understand the ways racism plays out and how important it is to admit and be comfortable with the fact that there is an aspect of racism that's at play inevitably within a transracial adoption, power differential. And lastly, the multi-ethnic placement act is a really frustrating one that I'm not doing a ton of work around, but I often like to educate people about what it is. And I do think it should be repealed. Essentially, this is legislation that says any adoption agency that receives federal funding cannot mandate prospective adoptive parents to learn about culture or race. It can be an elective, like an added class, but it can't be required in the same way other pieces are required. And I feel like that's a really big disservice.

Maggie Yang 39:56

Yeah. I was also wondering, what's next for you as a filmmaker?

Angela Tucker 40:03

I am currently working on a documentary with an agency in LA about the issue of overmedicating foster youth. There is a phenomenon where kids and kids in foster care, their records don't always transfer with them wherever they go, and whichever home they're moved to. And so, some of our foster youth are immunized several times when they should have only gotten an immunization ones. Sometimes there are foster kids who are given medication are more of a form of behavioral control versus what they actually need. That can have really dire consequences for the rest of their lives. So I'm working with a team on a documentary around that. And I think that's my only filming process right now.

Maggie Yang 41:08

What got you into this issue surrounding foster care? I know you are a transracial adoptee so your work with adoptees is inherently connected.

Angela Tucker 41:23

Well, I was in foster care for a year. That was an incredibly important time in my life, right after I was born. I had loving foster parents who did not do that thing where they said, We can't attach, you know, because we're going to lose her. Instead, they loved me really well. And that has stuck with me because I think I owe my ability to have healthy attachments to their care at that time. I've been married for 14 years. I think that's partly because of their love at that time. So yeah, I'm definitely very involved in the foster care community. And especially around the issue of kids ageing out of foster care without a home without a family. It's related to all of this work around openness and the inclusive expansive definition of a family because, again, I don't feel like you need to have a legal status to care for children. To have people ageing out of the system, or to think that a state can be responsible for meeting a child's needs, is wild to me. A state cannot be a prudent parent and that's

why the medication issue happens. That's where the overlap of foster care really happens for me. I also am the host of a podcast called Innovate, where I interview individuals who have been named revisioning foster care champions, and I have this honor as well. It's anyone who has been in foster care and is now working to improve the system. So that's been a thrilling time to interview people who have very innovative ideas about how to change the system.

Maggie Yang 43:41

Openness seems to be a recurring theme echoed throughout your work in your Adoptee Next Door podcasts, which I know is another podcast of yours. You said that you want to shift societal perceptions through adoptee podcasts. What common themes or other issues surrounding the adoptive community necessitate this shift in public perception? Why do you think societal perception needs to be changed?

Angela Tucker 44:09

Well, I think because there is a desire to latch on to a single story like one adult, if people hear one adoptee story, it's really common for them to think that is everybody's story in everyone's opinion. And so for my podcast, The Adoptee Next Door, my goal and my mission is to shift that to understand that adoptees are as varied as we all are individuals, and they're some adoptees may want to go do a search and reunion like I did, and others may be really content with getting file, getting DNA results that tell them more about their ancestry, and both are okay. I think of Chimamanda Adichie's TED Talk. She's an author. She had this TED talk called *The Danger of a Single Story*.⁸ And that is always echoing in my head when people look at me as the standard for what all adoptees think. And I'm like, absolutely not. It's important for me to amplify adoptee voices to get more perspectives out there and hopefully have society validate them as true, real, and believe them.

Maggie Yang 45:31

The adoptee experience is a complex network consisting of adoptees, adoptive families, and birth parents, among others. How do you account for the experiences and voices beyond the adoptees themselves?

Angela Tucker 45:47

Birth parent voices are really quiet. Well, I shouldn't say quiet; they're just not heard, not listened to, not amplified. I would love that to be the next generation of voices we'd hear. Again, I think there's

⁸ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "The Danger of a Single Story" Ted Talk, delivered in July 2009, explores the negative influences that a "single story" can have.
https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en

this desire for people to find their perfect version of the birth parent or, usually, the perfect version is somebody who's totally assimilated into the culture to which the person exists within and that isn't fair or wide-ranging. I know of a few really great organizations that are doing good work for birth parents, and I hope to see that continuing in the future. I'm thankful for things like TikTok, which is real loud around adoptee voices. I think that's fantastic. Foster youth as well. And I was recently talking to some judges who didn't realize that youth in foster care were talking about their rights on TikTok. And I thought that was fascinating and a little disheartening because we need our systems to talk to each other and to integrate. And that isn't happening just yet.

Maggie Yang 47:21

I want to shift gears back to your journey. Angela, you previously worked as a domestic infant adoption caseworker. What inspired you to create the post-adoption department? How did you begin recognizing a need for post-adoption support or similar services?

Angela Tucker 47:43

Oh, my goodness. I couldn't believe that. At the agency I worked at and then many others, they have a tagline that says adoption is a lifelong journey. Yet, while working within the agency, I saw how all support ends once an adoption is finalized. And that was true for birth parents, too. So, we, at times, would be supporting birth parents financially, helping with their rent while they were pregnant, and when I was working at an agency, I saw how that support would end right when a baby was placed for adoption. No longer would we be supporting birth parents in ways that were absolutely essential and that really broke my heart. I think about all birth parents who aren't afforded a way to process what has happened and how that actually impacts openness. So we get back to this concept. I think about my own birth mother, who, in many ways, is very stuck in that moment of her trauma when I was born, and has a really hard time really believing that I'm an adult [while] she's really still looking for her baby. I think she said that and the documentary, I'm looking for my baby. And that is a direct result of not offering post-adoption services. The adoption agencies can almost be looked at as an industry [or] a business. Once the business transaction is completed, like the child has been in the new home and legal documents are signed, then moving on to the next is just not going to work. There are way too many ongoing issues that need to be supported. So that's where my focus and ultimately moving to become the director of post-adoption services and a different agency stemmed from.

Maggie Yang 49:58

Angela, you have such an inspiring array of adoptee-centered work. You foster transparent and inclusive dialogue surrounding the adoptee experience. I wanted to ask, are you personally

continuing to learn more about these different complexities of your identity? Or is that journey sort of complete for now?

Angela Tucker 50:20

Oh goodness, I'm always learning, and things are always shifting and changing. Something I think that's really common for adoptees that's actually written about in this new adoptee consciousness model, which was conceived by JaeRan Kim, Susan Bronco Alvarado, and a couple of other adoptee researchers, is understanding the ways that our adoptions impact us at key milestones in our lives.⁹ For many people, if an adoptee chooses to become pregnant, that's a time when they might feel a lot of things about their adoption resurface. Birthdays are often complex and might trigger thoughts about our birthdays. I certainly have that each year. I think about the day of my birth and what that must have been like, and not just an automatically joyous time. My birth mom is getting older. There are lots of thoughts that come with an ageing parent. My birth father passed away three years ago. That made me think that we only had seven years together and that he never had the opportunity to even know I was alive before then. So certainly, there's just life events and milestones that make all of this come back to the floor and make me rethink and edit my beliefs and worldview. I think that's a good thing.

Maggie Yang 52:15

Are there any specific projects you hope to pursue in the future?

Angela Tucker 52:22

I have a lot of ideas for projects. Yes.

Maggie Yang 52:28

Which ideas and projects get you most fired up?

Angela Tucker 52:36

Gosh, there's so many. I'm pretty excited about this Revisioning Foster Care conference that I hosted in Boston this past month and doing it again.¹⁰ I'm really excited. It is a conference that's developed solely by people who have lived experience in the foster care system. The conference just feels different because the focus is not. It's not like so ambiguous. We lead differently. So that is really exciting. I think still focusing on the Adoptee Mentoring Society gets me

⁹ Adoptee Consciousness model is a concept by which marginalized groups develop awareness about oppressive systems introduced by Branco et al. in "Out of the Fog and into Consciousness: A Model of Adoptee Awareness" <https://intercountryadopteevoices.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/adoptee-consciousness-model.pdf>

¹⁰ Treehouse Foundation REECA Conference November 3-4th 2023. Angela Tucker was the Emcee.

excited and trying to make it stronger, make the training components better, get new partners involved and have more collaboration opportunities.¹¹ I think our adoption and professional community are a little bit siloed. I hope that perhaps my nonprofit can change that in little ways. Just to be very collaborative. That makes me excited.

Maggie Yang 53:47

Yeah, next time I'm in Boston, I'll make sure to check out the conference. It sounds like a very inclusive conversation that you're fostering. What advice would you give younger people wanting to participate or contribute to adoptee activism?

Angela Tucker 54:07

To find other adoptees to connect with first. [It] can be a very lonely and crucifying journey if we don't have our people. You know, I regularly get emails that are not kind, and it's helpful to have adoptee friends that I can reach out to who is going to help me look past that and keep it moving. There is absolutely something profound that happens for adoptees being in a relationship with one another. So, I think you have to have that community support first.

Maggie Yang 54:41

Could you talk a bit more about some of these negative emails you've touched upon?

Angela Tucker 54:48

I often get people saying, back to the book title, why can't you just be grateful that you were adopted? This is an example that comes up a lot. Why do you hate transracial adoption? Why do you hate white people? Which is not true. Neither is true. I don't believe that. I don't think that transracial adoption can be abolished. The reason that transracial adoption is so common is because of a deep-seated belief that we don't feel like black and brown people can parent ourselves. And that is troubling. And so usually, the messages I get are very individual—people feel like I am attacking them. When in reality, I'm talking about a system, a larger system that people are all a part of. There's a lot of fragility in the community, and I get the brunt of that.

Maggie Yang 56:03

To end on a more positive note, your work as an author, filmmaker, and podcaster is definitely contributing to building a more understanding system, which will potentially trickle down to the individuals who can have a more comprehensive understanding of what the adoption experiences. Thank you so much for sharing with me, Angela, I'm so grateful to have this insightful conversation

¹¹ <https://www.adopteementorship.org/>

with you. I want to end by saying that your dedication to the openness of the cause is not only for adoptees, but for societal perception of what adoption is and what adoption is not. It's just so inspiring. Is there anything else you want to add before we wrap up?

Angela Tucker 56:47

The thing I forgot to talk about is my work with the media. That's actually very exciting. I have a podcast coming out really soon, where I interviewed the producers of *Long Lost Family* show on TLC that did a really great job in centering adoptee reunions in an ethical way.¹² And I enjoyed working with the writers of the TV show, *This Is Us*, who really wanted to learn and get this Randall character accurate and correct.¹³ I loved working with Broadway's *Jagged Little Pill*, where the main character is a translational adoptee.¹⁴ This is all exciting to me because I do think that TV and mass media have a huge influence on society the same way. I was talking about storytelling being really important. That's another place where I would love to see more adoptees become more involved as consultants on projects with a mass appeal. So, they're just to think that there's more than just legislation and ways to make substantive impacts.

Maggie Yang 57:59

That is super exciting. I'm going to continue following your work with storytelling and increasing portrayals in the media. Thank you again for this conversation.

¹² Long Lost Family is a TLC show where Chris Jacobs and Lisa Joyner help people reunite with loved ones.

¹³ This Is Us (2016-2022) is a TV series about a set of triplets and their struggles navigating family.

¹⁴ Alanis Morissette's Jagged Little Pill. <https://jaggedlittlepill.com/>.