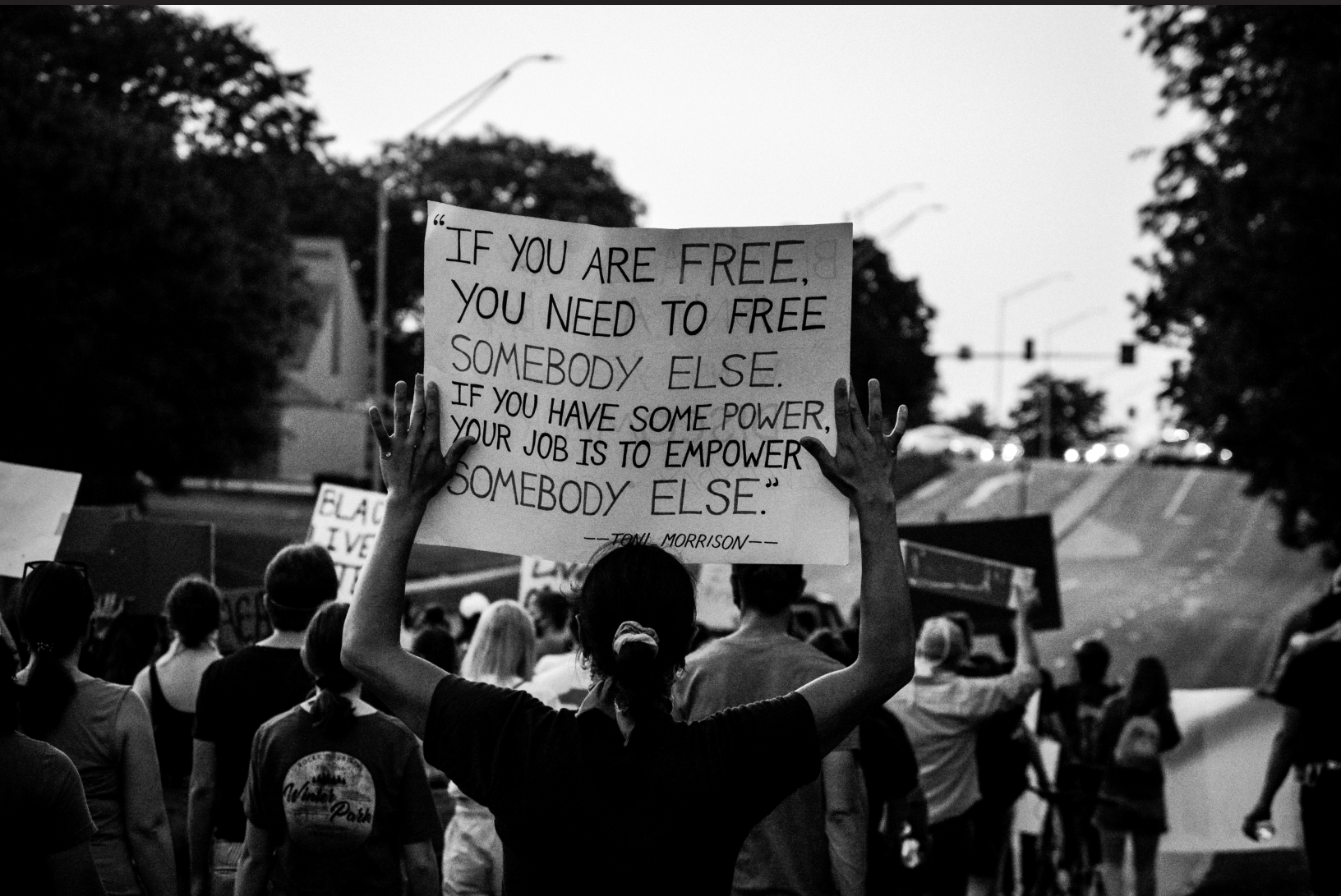


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Oh Umma, we're not in the 80's anymore... A Transracial Adoptee's Reflection

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Abstract

Asian American, transracial adoptee, Aimee Brayman, shares a short reflection on her upbringing and racism in the 1980's vs. today. Written from her first-hand experience, readers are given a descriptive snapshot of how racism has colored her life while remaining hopeful.

Keywords: AAPI, racism, transracial adoption

A dedicated advocate for justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion, Aimee Brayman has worked for five years bringing impactful leadership as an executive leader in Washington State. A graduate of Gonzaga University, Brayman's personal journey as a transracial adoptee from Korea, raised in a White family, profoundly shapes her commitment to fostering inclusive environments. Through her scholarly and professional contributions, Brayman endeavors to advance understanding and action in the realms of social justice and cultural diversity.

I can taste my childhood. I can smell it. I remember it in vivid flashbacks of my white-seated, turquoise bicycle with rainbow streamers and afternoons spent on Old Joe, the neighbor's Appaloosa, galloping through alfalfa fields until dusk. It was summers on slip'n slides, homemade concord grape juice from our small grapevine in the orchard and picking cherries and raspberries at grandma and grandpa's house until our fingers and lips bore berry-stained kisses that lingered for days. It was running to the school bus on gravel roads, a yellow lunchbox featuring Snoopy & Woodstock lazily lounging atop an A-framed doghouse, and white patent leather shoes with bows on the toes worn with ruffled fold-over socks and dresses, all set to a soundtrack of Whitney Houston asking us how we'd know if he *really* loved us. And...

It is the taste of salt through tear-soaked eyelids, the thundering roar of white noise in my eardrums, and the feeling of my fists as they created a beat of fury against a classmate's body as they called me a flat face, a pan face, a China-man, a ching-chong, and told me to "go back to your own country." This exists. It is found in rural America on the Washington/Idaho border town of Newman Lake, Washington where I grew up and across the country in the cacophony of metropolitan areas of Manhattan, New York.

I remember each of my three physical fights as vividly as the raspberry perfumed berry-stains on my hands. *These* memories though, left lasting stains on my heart, not hands. As a transracial adoptee in a White family, the experiences of racism that have colored my life have been difficult *at best* to describe and a lens through which I see that I'm unable to explain fully. Let's talk about racism. Let's say the word that so many are

afraid to look squarely in the eye and humbly accept that there's a course of it running through many of us. Let's sit with it and feel ugly in it and feel our unworthiness and squirm. Because *that* is what it takes for change to happen.

These snapshots of racism-fueled incidents hang on the same strings of my heart that also share moments of furious happiness, acceptance, unconditional love, and recognition – they cannot be erased and hold equal weight. I was raised by a schoolteacher and two military veterans; people who were educated and progressive, while sharing conservative core values. My mom spent many years in the classroom teaching units on cultural diversity and awareness with the "why" always centering around the fact that she had an adopted, Korean daughter. In those early days of the 1980's, this notion of acceptance and diversity and the celebration of differences delivered to the innocence of elementary school children seemed so simple. We ended that unit with a party where every child dressed up in some representation of their unique heritage – *all* of us – Black, Hispanic, Latinx, White, Asian, and Native American children, colorfully dancing in our classroom, sharing different snacks and cups of juice to *celebrate* our uniqueness.

For as much as my encounters with racism happened as a child, it is easier to offer forgiveness for the ignorance and parroting that I can only imagine were the culprits of those encounters. After all, we are but sponges soaking up what we hear and see vs. understanding the impact of words at such young ages. This is not a justification for the actions of those children, but rather, a reflection of a forty-year-old woman who has the hindsight in seeing adolescence as just that.

But we're not in the 80's anymore. And racism has continued to pepper my life, as pervasive as ever, if not more abundant, given the senseless scapegoating of the AAPI community in the wake of COVID-19. I've been spat toward on the street, called a "fuckin' Chinese" in an elevator (I'm Korean, BTW), and felt genuine fear after the attacks and murders of Asian Americans simply living their lives. After the shooting in March of 2021 that left 8 Asian Americans dead in Georgia, I booked an appointment to change my hair color. I wanted to be less. I wanted to blend in. I wanted to be invisible. What a juxtaposition to the celebrations of culture as a child....

My family sat quietly and listened as I told them I felt unsafe and afraid to be who I was. My mom asked me if changing my hair color would really bring me a sense of safety and I remember saying that if from behind I could be passed off as White woman with brown hair and caramel highlights, that I'd take it – because maybe that would allow me an additional minute to run and hide if someone was looking to murder an Asian woman that day. My mom thought I was silly. No one in Spokane, Washington was going to attack me. Well, I'm sure that's what everyone thinks of their town – nothing *like that* ever happens here – until one day, it might.

After sharing my unease with my family, my sister texts me. She apologized for the fear I was feeling and told me that

while she didn't know what it felt like to be me, she understood the need to feel anonymous to find some sort of psychological safety. It was comforting.

I am not Black and I do not pretend to understand the racial inequity and injustice that our Black brothers and sisters have endured; however, I sit in solidarity and understanding with the impassioned words of author Kimberly Jones when she noted that this world is fortunate in that Black people are seeking equality, not revenge.

Let those words soak in:
Equality, not revenge.
Equality.
Not revenge.
Equality. Not. Revenge.

So, I move one foot in front of the other. I walk with caramel and blonde highlighted hair through the streets of my downtown and I pray that I will be *seen*, but *not* seen. I raise my voice through typed words, and I go to work as a Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion advocate, to push for human dignity and social justice of the marginalized and under-represented. And every time I eat summer raspberries, I taste the celebration of what I hope will come to be.

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