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ADOPTION INITIATIVE



St. John's University in Collaboration with Montclair State University

10th Biennial Adoption Initiative Conference
St. John's University, New York City
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AI STATEMENT ON BLACK LIVES MATTER

For the past few months, the conference organizers for the Adoption Initiative have been meeting to plan our 20th anniversary conference. Our topic was going to be: "The Evolution of Adoption Practice: Activist and Community Perspectives", acknowledging the shifts that have taken place in adoption discourse over the years, and aiming to further bring forward occluded voices not represented within the dominant culture. What started with extremely high hopes and expectations was slowed and then stopped by a global pandemic. As life-changing as this once-in-a-lifetime event was, we still persevered, imagining alternatives such as postponement, virtual conferencing, and then, more recently, the very logistical meaning of a "conference" in and of itself. Now another global event, similarly triggered by quite local circumstance, has us not just halted, but viscerally and psychologically stunned.

The murder of George Floyd, a Black man in Minneapolis, Minnesota, at the hands of a white police officer is of course news, but then again, not news. For the communities that have been on the receiving end of such societally endemic violence, this is another one of many crimes waged against them. The nine minutes that Mr. Floyd begged for his life while Derek Chauvin knelt on his neck does not even fully translate for us. The full nine minutes that it took for his life to leave his body is instead represented by a fleeting video clip, or a glanced-at image in a newspaper, or a scrolled-by social media feed. This more than suffices for those whose day-to-day is sheltered from such violence. For communities under siege, especially Black communities in North America, this is nine minutes at the end of infinity; one Black body in an endless parade of similar extirpative actions.

In proposing keynote speakers for our conference and its theme, one name stood out: Dorothy Roberts. Dr. Roberts is a professor at the University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School. She is well known for a body of literature and a lifetime of work that focus on issues of health, social justice, and bioethics. Much of this focus is on these communities that have been targeted for destruction for centuries now. In her book *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, she defines liberty in this way:

The primacy of liberty over equality, then, accepts the possibility that inequality may be inevitable in a liberal society. Although the pursuit of equality, once liberty is assured, is commendable, liberalism cannot guarantee its realization. Proponents of this view hold that adequate protection of individual liberty may simply make substantive equality a pipe dream. Inequality is the price we may have to pay for freedom.

Over the past few months, the United States has witnessed a variety of uprisings and demonstrations, all premised on the notion of "liberty". They are far from equivalent, however. One is premised on the idea of individual liberty; the freedom to *not* abide by community-based confines or restrictions. The other is premised on the idea of communal liberty; the freedom for particular communities to live free from oppression based on dominant beliefs concerning race. What we have witnessed in both is a state apparatus which, in providing "adequate protection of individual liberty" has jeopardized the commonweal. First, by allowing for the free spread of contagion among the population, and second,

by allowing for a hyper-violent police uprising solely designed to bring bodily harm and death to those defined as Other within society.

The release of pent-up rage witnessed in the protests over those killed by the repressive machinery of federal, state, and local forces has not abated. It signals a radical change not just in how we talk about issues of race, but in the givens of those conversations, the mythologies that have let us carry on for too long, ignoring those multitudes and their endless “nine minutes”. The protests are holding us to the clock, and they are measuring out those nine minutes, second by second. They maintain, and will likely continue, until we face up to the historical reality of a nation-state founded on principles of white supremacy, class difference, colonialism, structural racism, and imperialism. The violence that was meted out upon George Floyd is encapsulated in those nine minutes, but the greater violences visited upon the Black community in particular span generations.

In her book *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare*, Dorothy Roberts takes a look at one aspect of this state- and society-based violence. In examining the foster care system, and echoing the call of Black social workers in the 1970s who decried the destruction of the Black family via putatively beneficent means, she states the following:

Some people think that the best way to help thousands of Black children in foster care is to terminate their parents’ rights and place them in adoptive homes. These people do not see themselves as racists who are bent on destroying Black families. They may even endorse stronger social support programs for America’s struggling families. But they do believe child protective services must intervene immediately to save Black children from their current crisis. “These children can’t wait for social programs to eliminate poverty and racism,” these advocates argue. “We must act now to move them from their destructive families and neighborhoods into stable homes.” I hope this book demonstrates that this new cadre of child savers is wrong.

In choosing suppression of voice over equality, government officials state that there shall be “no quarter” given to protesters; a de facto extrajudicial death sentence passed on those who bear the burden of not being seen as embodying liberty; of not being seen as human. As such, with nothing to lose in terms of protest, we are witnessing the resistance of those who have run out of patience waiting for “social programs to eliminate poverty and racism”; these empty promises of liberal democracy spanning centuries. So too, perhaps, there should be “no quarter” given to child savers; to the formalized policing of Black communities; to endless discussions for discussion’s sake; to myriad takes on narratives of those deemed as expendable from birth. Perhaps in this moment of great pause, we—as a conference, as attendees, as adopters and adoptees, as industries academic as much as corporate beholden to the destructive practice of adoption—are being asked to face what has been wrought systemically, structurally, and irrevocably in the name of saving children and creating family, but which has resulted, for communities around the world, in the exact opposite.

In our most recent planning meeting for the conference there was no agenda. There was a checking in for all of us situated in different parts of North America, discussions of current events, questions concerning how everyone was holding up. Much was left unsaid, but there was also a focus on the unknown; a future that seems to elude all ability to pin it down. And here we are introduced to how most of the planet lives, in a precarious day-to-day, with no sense of the long term. Here is made evident the insecurity of most; here is rendered obvious the luxury and privilege that has allowed many to ignore most for too long a time. In reflecting on this moment, there is yet a hope, tied to what was formerly deemed impossible. It is a hope that is premised on rethinking the tired old canard: “That’s just the way things are”.

This moment requires not just critical thinking and research, but critically important action and praxis. This pause in the conference schedule perhaps presents a challenge: How do we move from describing and examining, to practicing and activating not within our status quo, the structural level that we are used to, but on a communal level designed to actually bring about change? What would a conference based on these Activist and Community Perspectives look like? Be like? All of us need

ask the question: “How is what I do, and what I have done, tied systemically and structurally to what is happening in the world right now?” “Substantive equality” will be determined by how we answer this question, keeping in mind that inequality is no longer “a valid price to pay for freedom”. We long for the day when we may no longer need to ponder this for ourselves, and to that end we are prepared to take up this challenge. We long for peace and peace of mind for all who have been affected by societal violences that have continued for far too long. We realize our role in bringing about such peace, and its premise within the quite simple understanding that Black Lives Matter. We are looking forward to your answers and your actions as well.

Daniel Drennan ElAwar, on behalf of Adoption Initiative

Visit the Adoption Initiative website at <http://adoptioninitiative.org/> for more information on past conference themes, organization and publications.