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January 1998

### Who Should Adopt Our Children?

Ruth-Arlene W. Howe

*Boston College Law School, rutharlene.howe@bc.edu*

Randall Kennedy

*Harvard Law School*

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#### Recommended Citation

Ruth-Arlene W. Howe and Randall Kennedy. "Who Should Adopt Our Children?" *Essence* 28, (1998): 64, 66, 130-.

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# dialogue

THE ESSENCE

Is transracial adoption a form of "cultural genocide," as the National Association of Black Social Workers once claimed, or is it a healthy, hopeful solution for children trapped in a dysfunctional foster-care system? In this ESSENCE Dialogue, law professors Ruth-Arlene W. Howe of Boston College and Randall Kennedy of Harvard University grapple with an issue that affects thousands of our children's futures.

—FACILITATED BY LISE FUNDERBURG

**ESSENCE:** *Why is transracial adoption such a flash point in the United States?*

**Ruth-Arlene W. Howe:** Because there are so many unresolved and emotional issues about race and color in this society. Some perceive [transracial adoption] as an inappropriate usurping of responsibility from the Black community; others want to use it to make a statement about where they would like society to go in terms of breaking down racial barriers.

**Randall Kennedy:** Also, the need for such adoptions suggests some of the deep problems—disorganization and social failures—within the Black community. Why do so many Black kids need homes? To some extent there's shame and embarrassment about that. Those feelings are not limited to Black communities; Korea has made it more difficult for foreigners to adopt because of some of the same impulses.

**R.W.H.:** Randy, I think you're putting too much onus on a breakdown within the Black community without

placing responsibility on adoption agencies for their insufficient outreach to and involvement in the community. A National Urban League study identified 3 million Black households interested in adopting—so even if there are 40,000 Black children legally free to be adopted, there's a potential pool of more than 75 Black families for every foster-care child. Why, then, don't the matches get made? It's my contention that the breakdown sometimes is in agencies that do not have large numbers of Black workers—workers who are familiar with and competent in making the assessments of Black families—so people don't get through the door.

**R.K.:** To the extent that that's true, it's a terrible problem. The most important thing is to get children who need families into the hands of families.

**ESSENCE:** *Regarding those families, Professor Howe, is it ever appropriate for White people to adopt Black children?*

**R.W.H.:** If the White family is sensitive about race

issues, if they already have meaningful daily interactions with Blacks, then sometimes it can be appropriate. When someone who has absolutely no connection with Blacks wants to take a child into a completely White environment, then he's going to be raised to be something other than what many people would suspect him to be, based on how he looks. I think that poses a problem.

**R.K.:** I don't think that poses a problem at all. I would be absolutely opposed to a system of checking sensitivity. After all, I was raised by two people who are Black, and nobody asked them their views or associations. There is no established, correct way of bringing up anybody. Assuming people pass a minimum standard of acceptability, that should be it.

**ESSENCE:** *But Professor Howe, you believe there can be an evaluation for what you've called "cultural competency"?*

**R.W.H.:** Yes, and people are working on creating that evaluation. Another thing to recognize is that because children have languished in foster care, it is easy to argue that adherents to same-race placement have harmed those children.

**R.K.:** Arguably, they have. Take a state like Massachusetts: About half the children needing foster care or adoptive homes are children of color, but the Black and Latino population is not nearly that large. Even if Black people were adopting beyond their portion of the population, there would still be a tremendous need for people to take in these children.

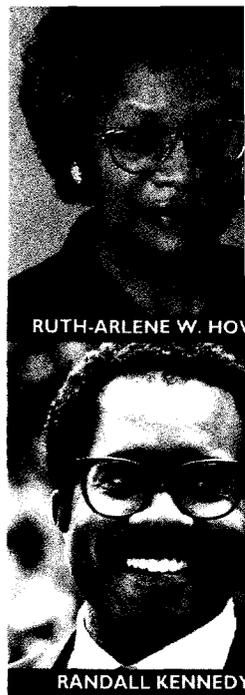
**R.W.H.:** When you talk about numbers of children, you are not asking some up-front questions: Why are so many Black and Latino children in the system in the first place? Who is servicing them there? And what happens when interested Blacks call agencies?

**R.K.:** Let's assume everything you're saying is true. What does that have to do with the subject?

**R.W.H.:** Something's going on that discourages and discounts Black families that try to adopt. Let me shift this discussion slightly. I've got a question for you, Randy. How do you respond to the fact that in this society today, sometimes one is still physically at risk simply because one is Black?

**R.K.:** Oh, I agree that's true.

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COURTESY OF THE SUBJECTS

**R.W.H.:** Now is it reasonable to place a Black child in a White family that has no awareness of those dangers and say you are serving that child's best interests?

**R.K.:** I'm willing to assume that anybody willing to take on the responsibility of raising a child is going to do the right thing by that child.

**R.W.H.:** Ooooh, but if they don't have—

**R.K.:** Why assume such great knowledge among Black people?

**R.W.H.:** Let's focus on the White family that steps forward.

**R.K.:** I assume they will do their best and God bless them.

**R.W.H.:** Maybe the responsible thing is to inquire if that assumption is actually reasonable.

**R.K.:** No. I wouldn't want to do that. What would the correct answer be, by the way? Let's assume some applicants say, "I live in an all-White neighborhood." Under your system,

would those people be precluded from raising a Black child? What about Black applicants who live in all-White neighborhoods?

**R.W.H.:** I would ask whether they would be open to moving.

**R.K.:** And if they say, "No, we like where we live"?

**R.W.H.:** Then I would ask who they associate with, had they talked to family members—

**R.K.:** And if they gave answers you didn't like, you would prohibit them from having the child?

**R.W.H.:** I would do no different from what happens now—

**R.K.:** —which is terrible! That's precisely the problem!

**R.W.H.:** Randy, wait a minute.

**R.K.:** So you're the Czarina of How to Raise Children?!

**R.W.H.:** Randy, would you please be quiet so I can finish the sentence? What is happening already is that when predominantly White workers

make assessments of Black applicants, those applicants don't get through the door.

**R.K.:** And that's terrible! But you want to hold Black kids hostage in order to, one, force the hiring of more Black social workers and, two, to have power in this domain! That's what you want to do!

**R.W.H.:** Randy, stop ranting.

**R.K.:** What's animating you, at least to a large extent, is a resentment against these White people. Am I wrong?

**R.W.H.:** Some of this doesn't warrant a response. You don't hold any child hostage, but it is reasonable to wrestle with how to determine who would be most appropriate to raise the child. And I want to point out that the children in foster care about whom we hear so much are not the ones most people go looking to adopt.

**ESSENCE:** Are you referring to the difference between older and "special needs" children versus healthy infants?

**R.W.H.:** Yes. Increasingly, newborn infants are changing hands on the private side.

**ESSENCE:** And "private" generally indicates greater cost to the adoptive parents?

**R.W.H.:** That's right.

**ESSENCE:** Let's return to placement of Black children with adults of other ethnic or racial backgrounds. Professor Kennedy, what harm do you feel results from a system that prefers same-race placement?

**R.K.:** Delay in placement is bad for kids. The more delay, the more difficulty, ultimately, in placing kids. As Professor Howe rightly stated, a newborn's going to be attractive to more people than a kid who's 4 years old. Another problem is that race-matching presupposes the preferability of same-race families. It suggests that it is better to have the Blacks with the Blacks, the browns with the browns, the Whites with the Whites.

**ESSENCE:** And that's not true?

**R.K.:** It's not a question of being true or not. I don't think it's a good system. Certainly the government should not privilege same-race [CONTINUED ON PAGE 130]

## WINDOWS

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trade workers, with its feminist overtones, is hardly adequate to describe the slavery of sex work in Bombay. Yes, the women are brave and proud and paid, but they are ensnared in a system of indentured labor, working year after year with the faint, distant hope of one day buying back their bodies. ♦

*Vinita Srivastava is a freelance writer who lives in Brooklyn.*

## DIALOGUE

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families over multirace families.

**ESSENCE:** *Professor Kennedy, as you've noted elsewhere, this society remains a pigmentocracy. Is there no way in which African-American parents, on average, might be better equipped to help Black children navigate that?*

**R.K.:** First, let's suppose it's true that, on average, Black parents would be better able. I would still stand by my position. We prohibit race discrimination in employment, even though it is true as a generality that White people are better educated, live longer and have fewer problems with the police. For these reasons, an employer might want to employ White people over Black people, but we don't allow that. We demand individualized assessment without considering race in the calculation. So too should we have an anti-discrimination policy with respect to children. Second, I don't buy that Black parents are more capable, frankly. Parenting is a mysterious thing, and I'm willing to assume that people will parent in all sorts of ways. Imagine a Black couple has a child who is born blind or a genius—even though the parents are just regular folk. People will learn what they need to learn in order to help their child along. I'm willing to assume that with respect to all parents, including White people who want to adopt Black kids.

**ESSENCE:** *Professor Howe, what do you think are the dangers of unregulated transracial placement?*

**R.W.H.:** Raising children involves much more than just the parents. Randy says if somebody comes forward and says they're ready to love the child, that's all he's concerned about—but when have Whites, on balance, loved Blacks? Some transracially

adopted young people now in their twenties and thirties are very troubled. They don't know who they are.

**R.K.:** Aren't there Black kids brought up by Black parents who are troubled and don't know who they are?

**R.W.H.:** That's not the issue.

**R.K.:** But you said these people are troubled...

**R.W.H.:** I was trying to explain. If there is some obvious dichotomy between the way that child looks and the way he or she is socialized, it may develop into quite a mental-health problem. Also, if that child absorbs all that negativity toward Black people, they won't want to associate with Blacks.

**ESSENCE:** *Can this transracial experience ever be beneficial?*

**R.W.H.:** Yes. That's why I'm not absolutely opposed. But one should demand assurances that these people will give that child positive interaction with Black people. And that experience should not be negative or isolated—you can't just do it on a museum visit—but should give the child the chance to live and interact with them.

**R.K.:** I believe, as does Professor Howe, that we live in a society where White racism is a big presence, and I would want to be on record as having said that. One last thing: I do want to apologize, Professor Howe, because a little while ago I got overheated.

**R.W.H.:** Apology accepted. In closing, I would make a real plea for interested Blacks—singles or couples—to make the application [to adopt] and demand full consideration because the children are there and need them.

**R.K.:** Now, we both agree on that. ♦

## RECIPES

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- bell pepper
- 2 corn tortillas, halved, cut into ½-inch-wide strips
- 1 pound medium or firm tofu, sliced, drained well
- ½ teaspoon turmeric
- ¼ teaspoon salt (optional)
- ⅛ teaspoon ground white pepper
- 2 cups cooked black beans

### Sauce:

- 8-ounce can salt-free (or regular) tomato sauce
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh cilantro
- ½ teaspoon ground cumin
- ⅛ teaspoon garlic powder

Heat butter and oil in large nonstick skillet over medium heat. Add onion and bell pepper; cook, stirring frequently, about 5 minutes. Add tortillas; continue to cook until onions are lightly browned, about 3 additional minutes. Meanwhile, place tofu in large bowl and mash with fork. Add turmeric, salt (if desired) and pepper; mix well. To make sauce: In small saucepan, combine all sauce ingredients; heat until hot and bubbly. Add tofu mixture to browned onions and tortillas; cook, stirring frequently, until heated through. To serve, spoon tofu mixture onto 4 serving plates; top with sauce. Serve with black beans. Makes 4 servings.

*Per serving: 399 calories, 28 grams protein, 17 grams fat, 39 grams carbohydrates, 86 milligrams sodium, 8 milligrams cholesterol.*

## KIWI AMBROSIA WITH YOGURT

- 4 large kiwifruit
  - 1 small ripe pineapple
  - 2 tablespoons confectioners' sugar or honey
  - ½ cup shredded or flaked coconut
  - 8-ounce container low-fat plain or vanilla yogurt (drain liquid from surface)
- Peel kiwifruit. Over large bowl, hold kiwi and cut into chunks or slice. To prepare pineapple: Cut off crown and bottom, then stand pineapple upright on cutting board. Using large chef's knife, slice off rind and remove eyes. Cut pineapple lengthwise into quarters; remove core. Cut each quarter lengthwise in half, then slice into chunks. Add to bowl with kiwi. Sprinkle fruits with sugar and coconut. Cover and chill 2 to 3 hours. Spoon into dessert bowls; top each with dollop of yogurt. Makes 8 servings.

*Per serving: 111 calories, 2 grams protein, 3 grams fat, 21 grams carbohydrates, 41 milligrams sodium, 2 milligrams cholesterol.* ♦

## The Black Man's Perseverance

Today is a new day,  
We see  
Today is a new day,  
They say.

But those who see  
Will seldom say,  
And those who say  
Pay as they pass this way.

—BETTY STEVENS CONEY

Excerpt from *My Soul Speaks Truth*.