

Transcript of interview with Z Watts 2026

Jena Heath: Okay, so I think we're good to go.

Z Watts (they/them): Cool, sounds good.

Jena Heath: And it is great to see you, Z. It's been a decade.

Z Watts: I know!

Jena Heath: A while. And so, it's a lot to ask you to catch me up on a decade, but... can you catch me up on a decade?

Z Watts: I went to college. I got my BFA in sculpture. And I worked at an arts nonprofit in Texas that I absolutely loved, and then the pandemic hit. And I was dating someone at the time, and went to visit them in Portland, and then lockdown happened, and I got stuck.

Jena Heath: Wow, that's like a long date.

Z Watts: Yeah, and then I... so I drove back to Texas. I did 30 hours, like, all in one sitting, because I was like...I just want to be home. And then, yeah, pandemic time. I played a lot of Animal Crossing. And then I got hit by a car.

Jena Heath: Oh, no, in Texas?

Z Watts: Yeah, and spent... Like, most of 2021, like, healing my body.

Jena Heath: Wow. Oh, I'm so sorry.

Z Watts: Yeah, and then, got really into climbing again, and went to grad school. So, I moved to Boston. I was in Boston for three years. I got my MFA in art, which is now functionally, unfortunately, not very useful right now, because the current administration doesn't support any art programs. So, I, post grad, I moved to Colorado, which is where I am now. I initially moved for a job, and then the job got defunded. So, I needed to find something new, and I started, I got my RBT certification, Registered Behavior Technician, so I started working with kiddos with autism. But recently, my roommate got a really fun, fancy new job in California, which I love for her, but that means I have to move. So now I'm looking for stuff in Denver. And that is the last 10 years of my life.

Jena Heath: Wow, that's a very relatable 10 years, because...

Z Watts: Period.

Jena Heath: It sort of feels like it's for... for...how do I say this without sounding ancient? For people of your generation, it's just been really difficult...

Z Watts: Yeah, yeah.

Jena Heath: ... especially, you know, it's never easy in the arts and humanities. It's not like you go into the arts and humanities because you think...

Z Watts: you'll make a killing, but... Right, right.

Jena Heath: There was always kind of a way, a path.

Z Watts: And...

Jena Heath: It just seems, you know, as you say, it's... it's... what was challenging is even more challenging now. The job that was defunded, was that funded through a federal grant?

Z Watts: Yeah. Yeah.

Jena Heath: Yeah. So, when we last talked, you were at Southwestern. Is it...

Z Watts: Okay, okay, I don't... I genuinely... I... I'm so sorry, I remember having that conversation, I don't remember what age I was.

Jena Heath: So, I have to... I just re-listened to your interview, and now I'm... how old are you now?

Z Watts: I am 28.

Jena Heath: So. you were probably somewhere in the 18 to 20 range. Okay, okay. You were an undergraduate.

Z Watts: Okay.

Jena Heath: You're an artist. Yes. We talked a lot about... Your, kind of, your younger years, your... your experience of intentional and unintentional slights and racist assumptions, and some of which was, as I remember, kind of kids just being sort of clueless, and some of which was not, you know, some of which felt...for you, very, not clueless, like, very intentional. And you had a real kind of awareness about all that. You... you talked a lot about how you thought about it, and how it was helping you see yourself, and working with young people. You were... you were then doing some work with... with kids, so... We talked about your mom and your feelings about, you know, birth parent or birth family searching and stuff like that, and at that time, you were kind of on the fence, not particularly engaged in thinking about that, but you know, overall, I would say you were very, mature, for lack of a better word. And had kind of a

real... a real sense of yourself. And so it sounds like you've had the post... college graduate life begins, and the road is not straight. Yeah. Yeah.

Z Watts: Yeah, for sure, for sure.

Jena Heath: Yeah. So, what are you going to look for in Denver? What do you... what kind of work do you think you'd like to do?

Z Watts: I mean, I would love to teach art, that's what I have been doing for the past, like, couple of years, like, I, when I was in Boston, I was teaching, like, woodworking and art classes, and, like, I really loved that. I think that that's, yeah, that's where, like, I, that's where I'm at. And that's where I'm happiest. But I, you know, like, if the opportunity... like, if, like, if those jobs aren't available, then I can... I... I can do whatever. I'm, like, I'm, like, I'm versatile. I have a master's degree. I think that, like, I would ultimately... I've been trying to work on my personal practice a little bit. And, like, build on my thesis work, which was, still about identity, but more from a like, reclamation standpoint. So, it was... it was about... The ways that we develop our own identities based on the places we live and the places we're from, and whether or not those things are, like, static or not. And I did that by combining Chinese myths and, like, mythologies and mythical creatures with, like, the landscape of the American Southwest, where I grew up. And I wrote a book... I don't know, I don't have one, I don't have a copy within reach, but I did a, yeah, I wrote a book, and then my art install... my installation was a, like based off of, like, museum dioramas, and I created an entire, I called it a taxology, because it's like, it's, like, a mythical taxonomy for all of these, like creatures that I created that are, like, combinations of, of, like, Chinese, like, mythical creatures, and then, like, American... Like, flora and fauna. It was a... it was a ton of fun. So now I'm just, like... I'm trying to do, like, build on that, and yeah.

Jena Heath: Wow, that sounds amazing. I would love to see the book.

Z Watts: Yeah, I have a, there's a PDF on my website, which is zoeWattsart.com. But my art is... is there. And I've been making, like, bolo ties, and I've gotten into printmaking.

Jena Heath: Wow, that's fantastic.

Z Watts: Yeah.

Jena Heath: what... sort of meditations or conclusions, maybe you didn't come to any conclusions, maybe it's more just an ongoing process did you come to through doing this work about identity? Yeah. Or the ways you've been thinking about identity in the years since we talked last?

Z Watts: Yeah, absolutely. I have... I think I've... I have, like, a much healthier relationship with, like, my identity now, I think, for a long time, I felt, like, really... I mean, we talked about it, I felt really, like, stuck in between, and, like, was trying to manage people's expectations of, like, who

I was versus who I wanted to be. And I think now I have a much better understanding, which is that I can be Chinese, and I can be Texan, and that doesn't have to look a specific way. And... I also... came out in the ten years. So, I'm... I'm non-binary, I use they-them pronouns, and, like, that was something... finding, like, a queer community and an Asian queer community specifically, was really empowering, because I... I got to, like, connect with people that had shared experiences, and, it just made me feel a lot more confident.

Jena Heath: How old were you when you... when you sort of understood that you were nonbinary, or were ready to, you know, say it?

Z Watts: Yeah, I was in... I would... I was definitely doing, like, the... the soft launch thing that, like, in the queer community, it's the joke of, like, you... like, it's the... it's the, oh, I might be bi, too, I might be lesbian, too, I might be trans, like, like, it's like a pipeline. So, I was definitely doing that, for a while in undergrad, like, I was like, yeah, I think I'm, like, might date girls, and then, and then it was really, like senior year when I was like, you know what, I actually... it's, like, really empowering and makes me feel really good to, like, present mask, and like kind of inhabit these... these, like, roles. But I... I also, like, the thing that I love about being nonbinary is that it's... it... like, it is fluid. Because it's like, I can wake up one day and be like, oh, I... like, I'm feeling really pretty, and I want to put on a dress, and then I can wake up some days, and I'm like, nope, I'm gonna, like, I'm gonna bind, I'm gonna pack, I'm gonna, like be a man, and that's okay, too. And that's, something that I think actually ties in a lot to my, like race as well, because there's a. there's a whole history of, like, queerness, and gender fluidness in, in Chinese mythology. They didn't get, and, like, also in ancient China, like. they didn't get, like, really... they didn't get homophobic until colonization. And there was this, like, under... there's this, like, understanding, that's very similar to a lot of, like, Indigenous cultures and, like, like, scenic mythologies as a whole, where, like, you don't have to... you don't have to, like, live in a gender role. Like, you're just a person, and that can change, and that can evolve. And that's... I think that's where I've... I've been existing for the past... Six-ish years?

Jena Heath: Do you... did you, at the time you were doing the work, and now, did you see a connection between that, you know, coming to that awareness and your... your work kind of...

exploring your Chinese identity and your Texan identity as not oppositional. Sounds like you came to the conclusion these two things are not in opposition to each other, and you didn't have to pick one or the other.

Z Watts: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. They're... they're, like, intrinsically linked.

Jena Heath: So, it sounds like you've been on this journey where you're realizing for yourself that you don't have to move through life in kind of one definition on any front where you think about identity.

Z Watts: Yeah. So, this is so interesting to me. How did you... you mentioned community. ???

Jena Heath: and particularly Asian queer community. So, how did you find that community? And when you were an undergraduate, and you were kind of as you say, you were...

Z Watts: eater.

Jena Heath: Merging, but not there yet, so you were kind of moving through the different stages.

Z Watts: Yeah.

Jena Heath: How did you find people to talk about this with, and what was that like?

Z Watts: Yeah, I... I mean, I feel like in... in undergrad, it was tough because there wasn't... there weren't a lot of us. Like, it was... it was... there were, I think four or five, like, Asian people at the school, and then there was a pretty significant, like, queer alternative community, but it was all white, and I, like, white queer spaces tend to not be very accepting, we'll just say that and leave it at that. And I think moving to Boston, where there was, like, such a high population of not just people of color, but, like, students. So, like, people that were in the same situation that I was, people that were... like, I think Boston, I... the, like, joke or, like, statistic... but it's, like, based off of a real statistic, is that, like. Like, when school is in session, Boston's population is, like, 50% students, because they have so many, like, colleges there. And so it was like, I was just surrounded by, like, a bunch of people doing the same thing I was doing, and kind of in the same stage in life, and, we had... oh, hello. Okay, thank you. And we had, like, an opportunity to, like, explore those things and talk about those things. And it was one of the places where I first, like, met just, like, a ton of Chinese people, and a fair amount of adoptees as well. So, it was...

just being able to, like, Talk with people, and have, like, I think for the first time, just have, like, friend groups where it was, like, all Chinese people, and all people of color, was really gave me a lot of perspective, and made me realize that, like, a lot of the insecurities that I had, and the, like, honestly, like, self-doubt and, like, self-hatred, and, like, insecurities about my features and, like, who I was just came from not being around people that looked like me. Awesome. And that led to just being way more confident in who I was as a person. Yeah.

Jena Heath: Do you... in the adoptees'... in the adoptee space, you know, there's the... the conversation, at least, you know when I began doing this project so much of the conversation I was having with... with participants was about identity in terms of being Chinese and being adopted. And of course, because a lot of the participants were young, they were pre-adolescent, their parents were part of it as well, so I'm interested in how, in these intervening years, the conversation around sexuality, gender, these aspects of identity have

developed. And so, is there, you know, did you find meeting other adoptees, too, that there was much conversation about this, about gender identity or sexuality, that was kind of specific to the adoptee space?

Z Watts: Yes. So, it's... it's interesting because more and more, I've also, become a little bit... Can I cuss?

Jena Heath: Absolutely. You... you... be yourself. That is... that is the idea here.

Z Watts: I... have... gotten a little radicalized. So, I'm going to answer your question, but there's backstory.

Jena Heath: Sure.

Z Watts: I have, through meeting with all of these... I... I just... sorry, she's stuck, and...

Jena Heath: So, so Kitty has burrowed under the blanket.

Zo Watts: ... and now she's stuck.

Jena Heath: And I... do what you need to do to free her.

Z Watts: No, I think it's hilarious. It's enrichment. She's not, like, hurt or anything. If she was, like, actually stuck, I would do something, but she's okay. It's just a big blanket, and she doesn't understand. So, in, in meeting so many adoptees, and, like, being part of that community so much, I have become, like, so radicalized. I am! I, I would not, there are a lot... there's a pretty significant adoption abolitionist community, and I... I would not necessarily go as far as to say I'm anti-adoption, although I think that there needs to be significant change in the way that we, like, view adoption and see adoption. Because so much of it, like, there is a whole history of adoption being used as, a form of genocide, right? Like, with Indigenous kids, with, like, migrant kids, back in 2020, when, well, like, from... from, like, 2018 to, like, 2021-ish, there was, like, this whole... Things where the government was, like, separating kids from their parents, and then putting those kids in, like, white homes. And...

Jena Heath: Our government?

Z Watts: Yes, yes.

Jena Heath: United States government.

Z Watts: Yeah, the United States government.

Jena Heath: Hmm.

Z Watts: And then, back when we were... when we were colonizing and... and putting, like, Native people in residential schools, there was also, like this push for, like, adopt these poor,

Indian kids, you know, like, and it was just a way of... of appropriating them. And... I think that... there is a tendency that comes from a really, it comes from a really good place....But I think that there is a tendency when in, like, interracial adoptions, to, to like, ignore the fact that, like, race is a... is a huge... race and culture is a huge part of people's identity, right? And that gets taken away from them, forcibly, when they're adopted, because the child isn't given any choice in the matter. And... that is not to say that there's not, like really good things that happen from adoption. Like, like, there are, like, the... the idea as a whole is great, right? Like, there are kids that need homes, there are people that want to raise kids, like, let's pair them up. But it was... Just... it was just, like, really, like, the origins of adoptions are, like, so insidious and weird, and came from this idea that, like... and this wasn't... this wasn't... we... we, like, hadn't even started with, like, interracial adoptions. This was, like, the orphan trains. It was like, here are a bunch of kids, do you need free labor? Like, adopt them. And I think that that history gets so erased because we're just talking about, 'Oh my gosh, it's so beautiful, it's so lovely, like, everyone should be so grateful, like it's a blessing, whatever, and, like, yes, that can be the case, but it's like most things in our society, it's like, there is a history that needs to be addressed in order to stop perpetuating, like, this cycle of trauma. And where I'm going with this is that in my time connecting with all of these adoptees, and being in conversation with them, there are so many people that got adopted and have so much trauma, and their families are not... it's... it's not even that they're, like, malicious, but they're just incapable of dealing with it, because they are not... they have never had to have that conversation. And something that I encountered, and a lot of other, trans people that I talk to have encountered, is, being adopted with the understanding that it's like, oh, you're getting a girl, or you're getting a boy. You're getting... a girl from China, you're getting, a, like, a little boy from Uganda, and then when that, when that adoptee, like, forms their own identity and transitions, or comes out as queer, it's... it... it, like, is a... is a shock to the adopted family, and then becomes a point of tension. To say politely. And I've had issues with, like, my own, like, my own mom, like, not, she doesn't like that I'm trans, because she's like, I don't understand why you would do this. I don't understand why you would make your life harder. And I'm like, well... it's like... like...and having that conversation with someone when the... I mean, when you're like dealing with your family is, like enough in itself, if you're... if you're biologically related, right? But then, in adoption, you, you get this kind of power imbalance, where it's like, yeah, I... yeah, I... like, I didn't, I didn't choose this, you have expectations and now we're here and we have to, like, work through these things with just extra layers. And it's such a, like unfortunately common thing. And it's, it's not even about, like, just about, like, queerness, right? That was like, a big part of it, but there's. there's just, I spoke with one adoptee who was like, they were like, 'Yeah, my parents, like, adopted a Black child, and then they were, like, surprised when I was Black.' Like, I, like, yeah, he was like, yeah, 'I, like, started, like, doing my hair a certain way, I started dressing a certain way, I started listening to certain music, and my parents were, like, shocked.' And he was like, 'I don't know what you

expected, because you adopted a Black kid,' who is now, like, absorbing all of this culture, and... Yeah, and I, I, like, felt really similarly in a way, because it was... And Asian people, specifically Chinese people, have, like, a lot of proximity to whiteness, and so it's... it's... I'm definitely not comparing my experiences to this person, but it's like... I think that some people, like, adopt with the idea that, like, an adopted child is a blank slate. And that's just, like, not the case.

And the conclusion that I came from, like, came to from all of these conversations, is not even about adoption, it's about, like, having kids. And I think that there's a very clear distinction between wanting kids and wanting to be a parent. And I think that you have to want to be a parent. It's not enough to just want kids, because you have to be prepared for your kid to be queer, to be trans, to be disabled, to be autistic, to be nonverbal, like, all of these things. And, like, if you're not prepared for any of those things, then, like, you, you don't want kids. Like, you, like, if, if your desire to have a family hinges on that child being healthy and normal and... like, in, in, quotes, then, like why, like... like, I feel like there is a conversation there where it's like, why, like, you, like, you have to be okay with your child, biological or not, or adopted, being their own person. And if you're not, then, like, we should rethink, like, why you would have kids, because... they're... I think that... And I... I know that, like, my mom loves me. I know that she loves me. I know that she cares about me. But it's, like, one of those things that... I'm like... this just, this just, like, never occurred to you, that you were going to have to have this conversation, and maybe get a little bit uncomfortable, and, like, change how you saw me as I grew up. And I have it easy in, like, the grand scheme of things, cause I, I'm not, I'm not being, like, rejected, I'm not having to, like, leave my community, leave my family. But it's still just really hard, to... not be, like, entirely accepted, and I think that, coupled with the, like, expectations of adoption, is, like, a lot for someone. And it's something that we should be taking into consideration when talking about adoption, and, like, not just being realistic about it, and not sugarcoating the experience. Because there is an amazing amount of acceptance and love that can come from it, and then, but there's also this, like, inherent loss, like, you are, the adoptee is, like, losing their birth family, and a lot of... And then in transracial adoptions, they're losing their culture, and their language, and all of this, like, background that creates a need for, like, community and conversation that, like, not all people can have the ability to fulfill.

Jena Heath: When you've talked about this with your mother, what do you think the... the center of her... anxiety is, or...

Z Watts: I think it...

Jena Heath: ...the tension in discussing it?

Z Watts: Yeah! I think it comes from... I do think it comes from a well-intentioned place. I have an aunt who is a lesbian, and they have had a really tough time, and I think that my mom sees,

but, through her experiences, how hard it is to be a queer person. And lived through, I mean, she lived through the, like, 80s and 90s, and, like, saw how queer people were treated. And I think that she... She does see it as, like, as just, like, she loves me and wants me to be safe, so therefore why would you make choices that, like, put you in an unsafe place, right? And I can know that and acknowledge it, and accept it and still... be a little bit sad. But I think I get a lot of, like, there's... there's so much joy in the community. And I think that I can, I was really resentful, I think, of my mom for a long time, and not just about her acceptance of my identity, but also just conversations around race and stuff like that, because I would, like, tell her that something had happened to me, and she's like, 'oh, just, like that's ridiculous, just, like, ignore them,' you know. And I... I, like, got really upset for, like, a long time, and I was really, really angry, and I think that now... I'm at a place where I'm, like, I think people can do their best with what they're given, and that's, like, all we can do. And if, because, like, our... our beliefs are shaped by our experiences, and if you've never experienced something, like, you, it takes a lot of work to put yourself in someone else's shoes. And I'm not saying that I'm not saying that we shouldn't be doing that, but I think that it's also just important to be aware that, like, for me, like, being mad at my mom, like, didn't make her more accepting.

Jena Heath: Imagine that.

Z Watts: Yeah, like, like, being upset that she didn't understand these things didn't make her understand them more, and so I just, and unfortunately, that puts the child in an uncomfortable position where they have to kind of be the bigger person, and, but I... am also... Yeah, I think that finding a community that is, like, accepting and validating and supportive. In a way that, like, I think my mom and my family, like, really wants to be, and just doesn't know how, and I... can either be, like, upset about that, or I can, like, show them how. And it's, like, it's disappointing because I came out to them about five years ago, and they still really struggle with pronouns, and, I think with, like, full acceptance, but it's like, but I have, like, a community. So it's, I have a found family as well, so it's like, I can maintain different relationships. And just, like, set a healthy boundary. And, like, be like, this is, this is how this relationship is going to look, and this is how this relationship's going to look. And I'm very lucky that I have, like, that community support. Cause not everyone finds that, and that really sucks.

Jena Heath: Do you feel like you've been in a position of having to educate your family, like...

Z. Watts: Oh, all the time. Yeah. Yeah, it's the adoptee... it's like the transracial adoptee burden. It's like such a shared experience. Like, yeah, and not even... Yeah, I think, yeah it's really hard. People get really defensive. And I think, and this is just true for everyone, it's like, no one is born knowing everything. That would be crazy! But I think that people... and we see this, like, a lot in our political system, right? Like, I think that people tie their beliefs so much to their identities that when you question their beliefs, you're questioning their identities. And, and, like, it's an

attack on a belief is an attack on an individual, which is just simply not the case because... when, when we, like, look at society as a whole, it's like, like, nothing good has come out of believing staunchly that your ideas are the best, and no one else has ever had a good idea on a... on a... on a big level. And then on a micro level, it's like I, I really struggle with, like, it's like, why would you put yourself in a position where you have a child. And this doesn't even... like, just in general, like, biological or adopted, like, why would you put yourself in a position where you have a child that you know is going to grow up, and go to school, and make friends, and have interests, and... navigate the world, and you know that you're going to have to have a, be in conversation with them, and be in conversation with that process. And... I think... there's a...

Yeah, it just feels like there's... there's a disconnect. Like, if you... If you want to, like, live in a world where everything is, like, exactly as you want it to be. Like, you can't have kids. You can't go outside.

Jena Heath: Yeah, it sounds like... Yeah, it sounds like you're saying that parents, regardless of how they come to parenting... Tell me if I have it right.

Z Watts: Yeah.

Jena Heath: Parents, regardless of how they come to becoming a parent somehow, the understanding that this person, this child, is a separate person. And that's true even when they're an infant, that they are... they are... or a toddler, however old they are when you become their parent. They're a separate person with a separate identity. And you are very important, clearly, even central in their life and in the formation of their identity, and certainly in the first years of their life, but then, ultimately, you have to understand that you're going to look one day at this person and really fully be confronted with the reality that they are a separate person. And there may be things about this person that are incomprehensible to you, that you don't understand, but you...

Z Watts: ... or that you don't like.

Jena Heath: Yeah.

Z Watts: I think that's the thing that so many people miss, is it's like... it's like, yeah, you don't have to like everyone, you know? You don't have to like certain things, like, I know... I know my mom, our house is so clean. It's so clean. I... I am not a, like, I'm not dirty, but I'm, like messy, as... as, like, a... as... like a teenager. I was, like, stuff all over the place. I was one of those kids who would come in the door and just, like, dump my bag. And, like, it made her so upset. I'm like, yeah, and I grew up and I realized that that, like, maybe wasn't the best way to live, but it's like, in that moment, it's like, yeah, like, you're going to have to deal with this, like, asshole 13-year-old being kind of a slob in your home. Yeah, anyway, that's...

Jena Heath: And your ability to... I think what you're saying when you... tell me if I've got this right, when you talk about the difference between wanting to have a child and wanting to parent, it sounds like what you mean by wanting to parent is the full acceptance that This is a separate person with this... who may, you know do things you don't like, and who may, in some ways, you don't like. You're like... but your obligation, if you're going to be a parent, is to figure out a way to try to at least understand and to kind of live with the fact that you don't have to like everything about each other. Yeah. And that's okay, and that your job as a parent is not to produce this facsimile of yourself. And... I just, you know, it's... it's something that I think, virtually all... anyone who has been engaged in parenting does have to confront at some point, and does confront that your child is their own person with their own identity, and your job is to help them become that person, and to figure things out if you don't totally get it.

Z Watts: Yeah.

Jena Heath: So, if you were, you know, you said earlier that you... you... you have, you know, very clear critique and concerns about adoption that go back to so much of the, really criminal violations that have occurred and continue to occur in the name of adoption, domestic or international or... But you wouldn't throw adoption out as a... as, as an institution. So, if you could reform it, if you could, like, because you work with young children, you're a teacher, you've come through all this yourself. If you could make adoption in the image you think it should be made, what should it be?

Z Watts: Yeah, absolutely, I love this question. In a perfect world, we would have systematic reform beyond adoption where people are given the social services that they need, if they need financial help, if they need food, if they need housing, everyone has access to those things. Everyone can be provided for. Because so much, so many adoptions are just caused by people not having the financial ability to take care of a kiddo, not being in a safe living situation, feeling like they don't have any support systems. And I think that would eliminate a lot of the need for adoption. And then... beyond that, like, we have prioritizing, like, interfamily adoptions, so, like, if there are grandparents, aunts, uncles, whatever, that can like, raise that child, or want to raise that child, like, placing... kids in homes that are... still, like, connected to their biological families, and then when we are in cases where that isn't possible, we are aligning the needs of the child with like hopeful adoptive families, right? There's so many. There are so many people looking to adopt. And there's a really, and this happens with biological kids, too, but there's, like, a really troubling trend of, like, looking for kids that, like, look a certain way, act a certain way, right? Like, shopping for babies. And this happens on, like there are Facebook groups for, like, adopting children where those are outside of a... of a...

Jena Heath: an adoption agency, or an adoption system, as we understand it, and have both been part of. Yeah. So, this is like people going on Facebook looking for a baby. Yeah. And even rehoming children.

Z Watts: Yes, yeah, there's a lot of rehoming as well, but there is... the, like, troubling thing about this is that these groups have, like, hundreds of thousands of members. And it's like, there's no oversight, there's no regulation, but it's just, like... and these kids are having to, like, basically make profiles for themselves to try to get... adoption... I saw one video where it was, like, literally a bunch of adults standing around, and the kids were, like, having to, like, basically do a runway where they, like, talked about their interests and all the adults just sat around and, like, watched them, and, like, took notes. And it's like... they're... It's, like, so dehumanizing.

Jena Heath: So, that sounds like an argument. Sorry. Sorry, sorry, no. No, I didn't mean to get... interrupt you, mid-thought.

Z Watts: No, no, no, you're fine, you're fine. I was going off on a little bit of a tangent, but no and in the cases where... the... the child can't be adopted by, like, a family member, or someone in their community, they are adopted by... Like, we, we, we place kids, not... not based on, like, what parents want, but what the kids need. And that looks like adopting... Well, I also think that there should be a more. I think it should be harder to adopt, which sounds crazy, but... I think that... because what our system looks like right now, very often, and I'm talking specifically domestically, is it basically just goes to whoever can pay. And where it should be going is, what we should be doing is looking at families, and what their needs are, and what their... we can take into account, I guess, their wants as well. And, like looking at the kids that need to be adopted out, and... and saying, which of these really match up? Does this family, like... I think also a majority of adopted... The statistics show that, like, a majority of, like, hopeful adoptive families, are white, just because of the system, and there should be, this is where it gets tricky, because it's like, I... I don't think it's enough to just do, like, a test, or, like, a... think, because I think that there... there's a... there's a conversation within... Anyway, my answer to your question is social reform that provides resources to families, and then placing kids in communities that are equipped to support them. That's my...

Jena Heath: Okay, perfect. And it sounds also like these sort of informal things that have popped up on social media, like, outside of any kind of, however lax and flawed, and we all know it is, the adoption systems are, because there are these... Adopting from China is different from adopting from Russia, and adopting internationally is different from adopting domestically, and adopting in the public system domestically is different from adopting through a private agency. So, there isn't even really an overarching framework, but it sounds like you're also saying that any of that, reform of all of that is what matters, and that, this kind of informal — whatever the hell is going on in social media has... has got to... has got to stop.

Z Watts: Yeah, I would actually... I'm going to add on to my little... my little concise thing. I think we should get rid of private adoption agencies. I think it should all have to be public, and I think it should have to be with, with, like, government oversight, and say I... I'm not crazy happy about all the things that the government does, right? But I think that the idea that you can... There are just so many, like, predatory things about private adoptions that are... are just, like, very strange. Including, like, the manipulation of birth parents. And it's, like, the money that these private agencies make on a single adoption could just go to, like, supporting the family, of, like the birth family. Like, that's crazy!

Jena Heath: So that, that leads me to my last question on this, unless there's more that you want to say, and that is, you were adopted through the international system from China, which is a system that's really run by the Chinese government. And so, adoption agencies around the world that participated in the Chinese adoption system were really implementing a policy through... Chinese... policy, government policy. And because of the narrative that we were all understood was that this was an unintended consequence of the One Child Policy, that there was an overwhelming... although there are boys available for adoption, primarily with special needs, what we had were girls who were being abandoned because of the One Child policy, over-quota girls. It's not a transparent system, so adoptees have done some DNA testing, some searching. There are some who have found biological family, and there are a few of these folks tell their stories on the Our China Stories site.

Z Watts: Yeah, yeah.

Jena Heath: But I guess, and this may not be a fair question, so tell me if it's not, but what do you think about being adopted from China? What do you think about that whole system? Is that something that shouldn't have happened, should have happened differently. I don't know how much you've reflected on.

Z Watts: Yeah.

Jena Heath: That specific system that... You're very much part of.

Z Watts: Yeah, yeah, I... I think that... Well, we all... I think everyone has different feelings about the One Child Policy. I think that it was not thought out very well at all, obviously. I... I go back and forth, because I have made... I have done, like, so many things. In my life, that are, like... contingent upon being adopted. And I'm really grateful for those things, and I'm really grateful for the friends I've made and the connections, and, oh my gosh, I have to plug in my computer.

And... I don't... I don't have any, like, regrets or anything about, you know, like, being here.

One of the things I do think about a lot is, like, what my life would have looked like if I had stayed in China. Because, like, it's not... I don't think it's, like... Sorry.

Jena Heath: That's okay.

Z Watts: I don't think it's all... I got told a lot as a kid that, like, oh, you would have been, like, way worse off, you wouldn't have had support, you wouldn't have had, whatever, but I... I've, like I've been to China, and I've talked to AFAB Chinese people, and queer Chinese people, and...

people who went through the adoption system in China and were not adopted. And... they were given financial support, they were given free education, they have... health care? And so it's like... I think that... this narrative of, like all these Third World countries, Uganda and Ethiopia and China and even, you know, like, Russia and, like, the, the, what's the word for them? But, like, Eastern Europe is where I'm... Like, regardless, there was, like, this narrative of, like, oh my gosh, look at how amazing America is, we have freedom, we have, like, all of these opportunities, and then it's like... it's not... it's not, like, black and white like that, I think. And... I guess... I'm, like...

I'm... I can't say that I'm, like, happy that I was adopted, or... like, I can't... and I... but I also equally can't be like, I wish that I was raised in China because it's just, like, there's infinite multiverse possibilities for that. But I think that the important thing is just that we're here, and we're having conversations, and we're talking to adoptees and, like, letting them tell their own stories, and it's not a perfect system, but there are perfect matches that are... that are made. There are really beautiful things that come out of it. And I think that... I think just the only difference is that it's important to... tell... the not-perfect stories just as much as it is the perfect ones, so that people are aware of... the realities of adoption and the realities of raising an adoptee. Because it's not all sunshine and rainbows and blessings and... That kind of thing. Yeah, that's...

Jena Heath: Yeah, so, so I think have a more complete and honest narrative about. And I think it's interesting what you say, that you can't help wondering... it's what would life have been like? Yeah. And... also, entertaining the idea that maybe nothing is... is... You know, being adopted is not this sort of fairy tale story, and... and having stayed in China is not a horror story, you know, that there's... there is this sort of much more... complicated set of facts and emotions and realities that the whole thing just doesn't... needs to take into account more. And I think that's what, as you guys get older and are sharing your stories and are engaged in these conversations, that is what is starting to happen, because the initial narrative is set by the adoptive parents, who have their own assumptions and hopes and beliefs and all of this, and they're education or lack of education about, you know, most parents from the United States,

certainly, who adopted from China, probably knew nothing about China, you know, so they're engaged with a culture thousands of years old that they only encountered, probably most people for the first time when they went to adopt their child.

Z Watts: And so...

Jena Heath: there's this... I think what you're saying is, let's... let's be more real about everything, and let's really talk about it. And, so I have one last question on a different topic, but it's something I'm asking everyone, and so I'd be curious to know how you are thinking about it. And that is your identity as an immigrant, whether you... in the current discussion and debates and everything going on around immigration, and I am very respectful of the fact that people come to this project with different political beliefs, so I'm always very careful to say I'm not asking this question to provoke an argument, or pick a fight, or, you know... I really am genuinely asking this question because it occurred to me that you're immigrants.

Z Watts: Most of you...

Jena Heath: Many of you, most of you, are certain, certainly post-2001 in the Child Citizenship Act.

Z Watts: ...are naturalized American citizens at a time of real...

Jena Heath: heated, what's the word for what's happening right now? I don't think debate quite...

Z Watts: Yeah.

Jena Heath: ...does it around immigration. So, I'd just be interested in how you're thinking about that, what you're... what you're thinking, and what's your feeling?

Z Watts: Yeah, I... It has made... It's made me confront a lot of the things that I... thought... being an American would look like. I... Have been, like, reading the stories of adoptees that are getting deported. And... or having their citizenship questioned, and that is really scary. I think that... immigrants who take up the... assumption that because they came here, came here legally, came here the right way, that they are... in some way, safer, or, God forbid, better than other people, are... completely disillusioned. Because, yes, America is a nation of immigrants, and we are also super racist, and like, you are going to... It takes all of us acknowledging that Regardless of your race, your religion, whatever, if you are an immigrant, like, you are like, being affected by... the current administration and the... The rhetoric around immigration. It's funny, because I didn't... I... I didn't consider myself an immigrant until, like, I was, like, an adult, you know? Like, as a kid, I was just like, oh yeah, I'm an adoptee, and I'm an American, and, you know, meh. And then I was like... I was having a conversation with someone, and it was, like, it, like, hit me in that moment, because I was like, oh yeah, like, I'm... I was born

in China, but I... like, now I'm here. And then I was like, oh! That means that... like, and I think ever since then, it's like I've just become, like, really aware of when the... idea of being American is brought up because we have, like, all of these... obviously, in a perfect world, racism wouldn't exist, right? But we have all of these, like, disclaimers. They're labels, but they're essentially disclaimers of, like, to, like, separate American identity. So, we have, like, Asian American, we have Chinese American, we have Black American, we have Mexican-American, whatever. And it's like people...

Actually, I don't know if this is the case or not, but, like, when I was in... when I visited...

like France and Spain. There was, like, there was not a Black person living in Spain was not like, yeah, I'm Black Spanish. They were just like, I'm Spanish. And, like, the Asian students in France were not like, yeah, we're Chinese-French. They were like, we're French! And I feel like America is, like... We haven't, like, figured out a collective identity yet because people come from so many places, and I don't think that they're not, like... and I don't mean that we all need to, like, homogenize, but, like there is a... Our sense of, like, national... national pride is... like, this very specific thing that is not inclusive. And... I think that the reason that we're having, we're in the situation that we are now, is because we finally started debating what it means to be an American, 'cause we've never had that conversation before! I'm really proud to be an immigrant. think that America does... I mean, we're getting slowly to the point where this is not the case, but, or actually, it's not even slow, it's very quick, but we're getting quickly to the point where, criticizing the government and, having freedom of speech and opinion is, like, not okay, but, I... I think that... the American Ideal... As a concept is lovely, and I am a product of... that... concept. I would just like to see it realized in my lifetime, which I don't think it's going to do, because we have... thousands of years of history to... confront. Yeah, anyone, anyone who... moves from one place to another is an immigrant, you know? And, like... I think people who... I think we, like, forget that, because... oftentimes race and religion and gender and all of this stuff, like, affect our different experiences with it, but it's like, we're all... yeah, we're all, like, from somewhere.

Jena Heath: Do you feel vulnerable right now? Like, when you... you live in Colorado, outside of Denver, right? So... Sorry.

Z Watts: Oh, no, no.

Jena Heath: So, when you go out, are you... I mean, it may not enter your mind at all, it may enter your mind, I really don't know. Do you feel like some ICE person comes up to you in a parking lot, or does that seem... As much solidarity as you, feel with all immigrants and

clearly, you know, as you've gotten older, as you say, you sort of realized, wait a minute, I'm an immigrant. Yes, I'm a... grew up in America, and I'm a citizen, but I'm an immigrant. But does

it... do you feel nervous when you're outside now, or is it something that still feels a little bit removed, what's going on right now.

Z Watts: I...Living in Colorado Springs specifically, I am less worried about ICE when I go outside, I'm more worried about getting hate- crimed for a different reason. But... when I was in... Texas recently, visiting, I was nervous, yeah, 'cause I was like... I'm just going to get...profiled, and there's a bunch of... People that are licensed to... kidnap people hanging out in the parking lot of HEB, so... Like, what is that... Yeah, like, like, what is...do I... like, the thing... that gets me is, I'm like, do I have enough privilege to avoid this? Because I have a lot of privilege. And I'm...

And I think that a lot of people think that they're safe from this. And they're not. I like to think that... They couldn't detain me, but who fucking knows? Like, there's no rules anymore. And the people that are being shot by ICE that we hear about are the white people. ICE killed, I think, like, nine people this year? And the deaths that, like, aren't being talked about and, like, broadcast are the ones of people of color. There was an Asian person, there were a couple of Hispanic people, and there was, like, I think there was definitely, like, at least one Black person.

And... I never read about them on the news.And... That... that's what scares me is that... myself and my friends, because I have like, I have friends that are undocumented, I have friends that are first gen, I have friends... obviously friends that are adoptees, and it's, like, all of our... if everyone's American-ness is being questioned right now, then it's like, these people are... the first to feel the effects of that. And I think that's what really scares me.

Jena Heath: Well, I, I really appreciate your thoughts about this, and everything else today. And I'm going to ask you if there's anything we haven't talked about or I haven't asked.

Z Watts: Yeah.

Jena Heath: That you would like to be part of this.

Z Watts: Yeah, there... there is, like, so much community in like, within, like, the transracial adoptee community that I, like, love. It's been, like, really amazing, getting to, like, connect with so many people, and... Have so many conversations and I feel like I'm kind of a Debbie Downer, but, like, there are so many great, like, stories of adoptions that, like, went really well, and parents that are super supportive. And I'm not going to, like, my mom isn't great about the gender thing, but she's very supportive about everything else. So, it's like, I'm not going to look a gift to us in the mouth, but, like there is...yeah, if there's... there's anything that I want to take away, that I want people to take away from this conversation, it's just that, like we... We can celebrate... All of the beauty without ignoring the ugly parts of everything. Like, it's... it's like, we can be... all of our collective good and bad experiences can be, not can be, but are essential parts of the narrative. And we're all... just... like people floating on a big rock in space,

and we should be nice to each other. What I... what I teach my kids is, I was, like, the three... the three, like, lessons in my classroom that I, like, tie everything back to is, creativity, compassion, and critical thinking. Those are my three C's, and I think if we have that, those three things. The world would be a perfect, amazing place.

Jena Heath: Well, I could not agree with you more, and I think any school that gets you is very lucky indeed.

Z Watts: Thank you.

Jena Heath: So, I will be crossing my fingers, and I'm going to stop recording now.

Z. Watts: Okay, sounds good.