

## **A Response to *The Colour of Difference***

Edited by Sarah Armstrong & Petrina Slaytor  
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“The Colour of Difference” is primarily about the experience of being adopted where the adopted person has a different racial background from their adopters and from the community in which they were raised. Loss, gratitude, denial, racism and disconnectedness are disturbing, recurrent themes in this book. The twenty-seven contributors to the book (six men and twenty-one women) are adopted people aged between twenty and fifty-four. Most of them were adopted in Australia, are now aged between twenty and thirty and were adopted as infants. Most were adopted from other countries, although some were born in Australia. Almost one fifth of the participants reported having been abused by members of their adoptive families. Every one of their stories makes harrowing reading.

Because “The Colour of Difference” contains the words, feelings and experiences of people who have been personally affected, it is very powerful and will be useful to those seeking to understand the outcomes for adopted people and in particular those who have been adopted and raised in situations outwith their own culture and ethnicity. While it contained no surprises for me, I am aware that there is still a great lack of understanding and awareness in the community in general about adoption issues. This thought-provoking book makes a significant contribution to increasing community awareness.

However, the statement on the back cover that the editors “...draw together the common threads of the contributors’ experiences to give us the adoptees’ recipe for how transracial adoption can best work” suggests, as does the introduction, that the editors accept adoption, transracial or otherwise, as inevitable and are seeking from their contributors indications as to how the damaging outcomes of transracial adoption can be managed. This approach causes me some dismay, considering our experience in Australia of the outcomes of separating indigenous children from their families.

It seems that most Australians now recognise and understand the issues relating to the members of the *Stolen Generation* and the impact of their experiences. Indigenous Australian children were taken from their communities, from their families and from their mothers. They lost their language, they lost their culture and they lost a sense of belonging to the nation into which they were born. Their communities suffered, their families suffered and their mothers suffered, from the loss of those children. Many Aboriginal children were raised in non-indigenous families in which some of them were abused, some suffered the effects of racism and in which many of them did not feel a sense of belonging. Although the damage caused by the removal of Aboriginal children is now clear to most Australians, it has taken some time for the existence and the importance of their feelings to be acknowledged. There is considerable debate in Australia as to who is responsible for the policies and practices which allowed this to happen and who, if anyone, should apologise to the Aboriginal people. However, in spite of the lack of resolution of these issues, we, as a nation, no longer remove Aboriginal children from their communities in the way that we used to do. We understand now that those communities were not assisted by the removal of their children. Our energy and resources now go into supporting indigenous communities and families to raise their children in healthier and safer environments. Many of those who were removed may have had some material advantages, but they have become adults who have had to work very hard to gain a sense of their own identity, a sense of their own self-worth and any sense of belonging anywhere. Many of them are now growing older with a deep sadness as the legacy of the policies and attitudes which separated them from their own people.

But what of the children, such as those who contributed to this book, who are now being brought to Australia from countries in Asia, South America and Africa? Are they not also being taken from their communities, from their families and from their mothers? Are they not also losing their language, their culture and their sense of belonging to the nations into which they were born? Are not their communities, their families and their mothers also suffering from the loss of those children? Are not those children being damaged in the same way in which we recognise that Aboriginal children were damaged, regardless of any possible material advantages? We no longer remove Aboriginal children from their communities, because

we do not want any more Aboriginal people to suffer in this way. Sadly, we seem to be creating a new *Stolen Generation* of displaced persons who have been removed from their countries of origin and placed in not just a foreign culture, but also a foreign country. As this book graphically shows, many of those children are also growing older and struggling to find a sense of their own identity, a sense of their own self-worth and any sense of belonging anywhere. What of their legacy of sadness? Who is responsible for the policies and attitudes which have allowed them to be taken from their own people and ***will they also one day be seeking an apology?*** How can it be that Australians seem unable to understand that the experiences and emotions of indigenous children are being repeated in the lives of children adopted from other countries into Australia? How long will it be before the existence and the importance of their feelings are recognised in order that this practice will cease in the same way that the removal of Aboriginal children has ceased?

Overall, I have to say that I found the book agonising and depressing reading and my heart went out not only to the contributors, but also to the mothers, the families and the communities from which they have been removed. Like Aboriginal children in the past, children from other countries have been uprooted from their cultural heritage and transplanted, apparently without due consideration being given as to the long term outcomes, into an Australian (usually Anglo/Australian) culture. In this way their own culture is devalued in favour of the dominant Australian culture. This usually happens because these children are considered, by Australians, to be socially disadvantaged in some way in their own communities. Those communities, however, like our indigenous communities, are not being assisted by the removal of their children. Those who read “The Colour of Difference” have the opportunity to understand that we can learn from the mistakes of the past rather than repeating them. Hopefully those who are concerned about the needs of children in other countries will learn from the experiences of indigenous Australians and translate their concern into providing energy and resources to support communities and families overseas to raise their children in healthier and safer environments. This book provides a powerful illustration of why such a change in attitude is urgently needed.

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