

Outsiders Within
Writing on Transracial Adoption

Edited by Jane Jeong Trenka, Julia Chinyere Oparah and Sun Yung Shin
South End Press, 2006

Outsiders Within makes powerful and fascinating reading. It contains thirty chapters written by thirty different authors. Twenty-five of them identify as adults who were transracially adopted as children. Most were raised in the United States, but six grew up in Europe and four in Australia. Their stories are sometimes tragic, sometimes uplifting, but always interesting. The other contributors have either a personal experience with or a personal interest in transracial adoption. The book also contains art work and poetry. *Outsiders Within* contains many powerful words and ideas. I have selected some of them to support my comments.

Outsiders Within is an American book and is professionally produced and presented. My only complaint about the book is that I am disturbed by the fact that American writers used to understand the correct use of 'practise' vs 'practice' and 'dependent' vs 'dependant' (as you will see if you read work published by American writers some years ago), but now, much to my frustration, many of them have abandoned correct usage.

I highly recommend this book to anyone who has an interest in adoption and especially in transracial adoption. It reinforced many of my long-held views about transracial adoption, which encompasses adoption of children from one country to another and from one racial group to another within the same country. As Ellen Barry, Nobel Peace Prize nominee in 2005, writes: ...*children removed from their own communities and placed in white adoptive homes face lifelong emotional repercussions* (p62).

The value of personal narratives

Transracially adopted adults are described in the book as *an untapped source of knowledge* (p90) and...*expert documenters of their own lives* (p262). Much of the research into transracial adoption in the past has represented the views of adoptive parents about how well-adjusted their children were. However, many of the contributors point out that...*Repressing grief does not make one "well-adjusted"* (p172). It is impossible to judge the lifelong outcomes for adopted people by basing research on children. The editors explain in the introduction that it is often not until transracially adopted people reach middle age that they...*reach a point where [they] can acknowledge and heal from the pain of isolation and alienation* (p1).

Much of the research into outcomes for transracially adopted people has measured them against members of the society into which they have been adopted and explored how they deviate from the norm (ie the dominant culture). The assumption in such research is that it is healthy for the adopted person to assimilate and that lack of assimilation of the dominant culture represents a failure on their part. The authors in this book stress the importance of recognising the value of the personal narratives of those who were adopted transracially and bemoan the fact that their experience is too often devalued and considered inferior to the opinions of supposed experts.

As John Raible, who is a transracial adoptee and an adoptive father, states: ...*the literature on transracial adoption will remain incomplete and inadequate until the voices of mature adoptees and family members are included* (p182). In order to guide current and future policy and practice, it is vital that we understand what life has been like for mature adults who were transracially adopted as children and how they feel about the impact of adoption separation in their lives.

The political perspective

Some contributors examine transracial adoption from a political standpoint. One points out that...*Western economic, military, and empire-building forces that have caused serious and permanent disruptions to families in the Third World are notably absent in many adoption narratives* (p261). Not for the first time, intercountry adoption is compared to slavery...*Both practices are driven by insatiable consumer demand* (p143). Also it is made clear that the mothers who lose their children from 'Third World' to 'First World' countries are never given a voice. Intercountry adoption is described as...*a poverty policy...[which]...brutally punishes women - and their children - for being poor by taking their children away* (p86).

Some contributors focus on the over-representation of 'children of colour' in the care system, the dangers of terminating parental rights and the push to hasten adoptions. They also point out the dangers in

the 'colour-blind' approach to transracial adoption. They describe the long term outcomes for the communities who are losing their children and for the children themselves:...*children of color who are placed with white adoptive parents also face the real, and potentially devastating, impact of losing their cultural and racial identity* (p62).

Adoption and loss

Many of the contributors describe the profound and complex losses that come with being adopted into a different racial and cultural group from the one into which they were born and their frustration at being pressured to feel grateful for having suffered that loss. "*Adoption is like having all of your birth family die and getting a replacement family and being told by society how lucky you are that all of your family is dead but we gave you a new one*" (p210). Mark Hagland writes ...*The gap between one's self-definition and the identity attributed to one by others has been at the heart of what I call my "cognitive dissonance" as a Korean adoptee* (p41).

There are stories of attempted suicide, substance abuse, self-harm, isolation and depression. Beth Kyong Lo advises approaching these issues from a loss and grief perspective (p174). Some of the contributors describe the trials they have faced, while others also describe the efforts they have made to connect with their culture of origin and manage their losses. The narratives centre to a large extent around loss, alienation, sadness, separation, racism, cultural dislocation, second-hand ancestry, patronising attitudes and...*the burden of feeling grateful* (p274). Sandra White Hawk stresses that...*Quality of life is not solely determined by money and possessions. Quality of life is family and sense of belonging* (p300). Indigo Williams Willing describes one transracially adopted woman:...*Compounding her own sense of difference was that she felt pressured to be "grateful" for being adopted and believed that this silenced her sense of grief and loss* (p263).

There is also mention of the on-going effects on the children and grandchildren of those who were transracially adopted and the...*intergenerational trauma...a result of the systematic removal of our children* (p299).

Adoption and recovery

The book also contains stories of healing. The editors mention...*the growth and transformation that comes from facing the losses we have experienced* (p10). Some chapters stress the value of support groups and the healing that occurs when members share their pain and are thereby able to reduce their sense of dislocation and alienation. Many adopted adults are able...*to construct an authentic, integrated identity* (p8) through a combination of support group attendance, counselling, reading and personal reflection.

For many, their recovery work takes many years. I found the chapter written by Robert McLay, who was born in Scotland to a white mother and a Pakistani father, adopted by a white couple and then brought to Australia as a child with his adoptive family, extremely moving. He describes his journey through substance abuse, attempted suicide and self-loathing to a productive life and healthy self-esteem.

The chapter written by Mark Hagland is both thoughtful and thought-provoking. He describes himself as a gay man and a Korean adoptee. Mark explains how he has come to terms with being...*a member of diverse, often highly marginalized, categories in society...to reach...a level of self-acceptance and self-actualization that will allow me to be at peace and in harmony in the world* (p42). Mark draws parallels between his experience of being gay and his experience of being a transracial adoptee. He comments that gay people and transracial adoptees both find themselves...*compelled to consciously construct an identity, often struggling through isolation and confusion to reach clarity and peace* (p40).

Many of the contributors recount their stories of reunion, whether it be with their family or with their country of origin. Their reunion narratives are touching, enlightening and heart-rending. Sadly, as a result of denial, ignorance and poor service provision, few of them were well-prepared. The book closes with the statement...*Generation after generation we are coming home* (p299).

Post adoption services

None of the contributors is satisfied with the current level of understanding and awareness among service providers or among politicians who fund services. Many of the contributors describe uninformed and sometimes damaging interventions by social workers, counsellors, psychologists and members of the medical profession. There are calls for more education and openness about the underlying issues involved in transracial adoption and an end to the shallow, destructive way in which it is generally presented. Some

contributors stress the need for education in the core issues of adoption and loss to assist them to face the challenge...*of transforming the wounds of separation into marks of compassion, intensity, and joy* (p37).

The transracially adopted contributors to this book describe themselves as different, displaced, abandoned, on the outside, suffering rejection, rage and melancholy, confused, with hearts broken by the separation, with a sense of emptiness, marginalised, emotionally and socially isolated, alienated, humiliated, helpless and shamed. Interestingly, these very same words are often used by parents who have been separated from their children by adoption. This reinforces my view that adoption separation creates a loss that is difficult to grieve and that appropriate post-adoption grief counselling can be very valuable for all those who have been separated from family members by adoption.

The future?

Looking to the future, John Raible foresees...*a backlash...to the global round-up of children from impoverished and war-torn nations* (p180). In fact, I believe that the backlash began some years ago and is growing in strength, as adults who were adopted as children gain the courage to speak out honestly and overcome the pressure to feel grateful. The numbers of children adopted into Australia from other countries has fallen over the last ten years and I believe that they will continue to fall. I believe that we are now sophisticated and educated enough to see interracial adoption in its historical context of colonialism and exploitation and that we will soon find that Western governments will abandon the practice and replace it with more ethical, child-centred alternatives. I share the hope of the editors that...*our writings create a hopeful vision of a different world, where children of color are neither sold nor expendable, our mothers and families neither erased nor exploited* (p3).

Some of the contributors describe what they have experienced as hostility towards intercountry adoptive families. In my view the hostility is not necessarily a sign of racism, but more likely a hostility towards the racial elitism inherent in the practice of intercountry adoption. I predict that, in the near future, instead of taking advantage of less fortunate countries by removing their children from them, inhabitants of 'First World' countries will show their concern for the inequities in the world by supporting programmes to improve conditions for those who suffer.

Describing attitudes in 'Third World' countries which are currently losing children through intercountry adoption, Tobias Hübinette writes...*most governments treat intercountry adoption as a necessary evil, even though they consider it a degrading and humiliating business* (p139).

Conclusion

It is clear from books such as this that many who were adopted transracially have suffered long term grief and loss issues, not because they were not well cared for and loved in their adoptive families, or because they did not build close relationships with their adoptive parents, but in spite of the fact that they were and they did. Clearly, love was not all they needed.

These are examples of people's experiences and, as with all adoption research, it is impossible to guarantee that they are a representative sample. However, the underlying issues shared by all of them stand out loud and clear and it is these issues, not the personal experiences as such, that I believe we must address, if we care about the best outcomes for children in need of care. Many of the issues faced by those who were adopted transracially also feature in the lives of those who were adopted within their own culture. For those who are adopted into a different culture from the one into which they were born, there are additional challenges to be confronted.

Have we learned from the mistakes of the past? Apparently, we have not. A clear understanding of the history of adoption is vital to inform current and future policy and practice. We no longer remove Aboriginal children from their families and communities and place them in non-Aboriginal homes and we have apologised for the fact that that did happen on a large scale. We no longer routinely remove newborn babies from unmarried mothers. In South Australia adoptions of locally-born children have reduced in the last forty years from almost one thousand per year to one per year. Discussions are currently taking place for a government apology to the many families who were affected by past adoption policies. These policies and practices have changed over time because we came to understand that they created long term, complex emotional issues for those affected.

As a society, in which we care about children at risk, we must now insist that our government stop repeating the mistakes of the past. Those whose main aim is to "create a family" for themselves cannot be allowed to hijack the debate around the future of intercountry adoption. If adoption is now considered not to have been in the best interests of those who are affected by past policies, then we must seriously

examine whether or not we can still justify removing children from their parents, families, heritage, culture, language and homeland and allowing them to be adopted into a family, a culture, a language and a country which are all foreign to them, to live with people with whom they share no heritage.

Outsiders Within makes a brave and very valuable contribution to the intercountry adoption debate, because it focuses on the long term outcomes for the children who were adopted. It is educational and enlightening and a moving tribute to the efforts made by those who have been adopted transracially to work through the issues with which they have been presented in life, as a result of the decisions made when they were children, by adults, who claimed to have their best interests at heart. *Outsiders Within* is a vital addition to the library of anyone who genuinely wants to understand transracial adoption from those who have had to live with it.

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