Rethinking Adoptee Politics in the Netherlands: A Queer of Colour Critique

By

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Abstract

After the Council for the Administration of Criminal Justice and Protection of Juveniles published its policy advice to the Dutch government to stop intercountry adoptions in late 2016, a new movement of adoptees emerged. In this thesis, I turn to queer theory to critically reflect upon this new adoptee movement on a primarily theoretical and conceptual level. Taking a Foucauldian biopolitical framework, I first conceptualize how the Dutch self-perception as a white nation—an imagined genetic community—informs a biopolitical discourse of social belonging based on origin. Based on previous scholarship, I then show how a discourse of neoliberal colour-blindness comes to facilitate the dynamics of this biopolitical discourse of social belonging, deploying mechanisms of assimilation and roots-essentialism. I subsequently apply this conceptual analysis to contemporary Dutch adoptee politics to show how certain activist aims and strategies tie into these normalizing mechanisms of assimilation and roots-essentialism. Then, I turn to the work of David Eng, to demonstrate how his concept of queer diaspora provides an answer to queer liberalism, which is very similar to neoliberal colour-blindness. I take up the psychoanalytical underpinnings of queer diaspora, most notably the concept of racial melancholia, to re-interpret contemporary Dutch adoptee politics. Subsequently, I re-interpret the concept of racial melancholia itself by considering the common conflation of race and ethnicity. I show that such a re-interpretation suggests a strategy that entails building communities to bridge the gap between adoptees of colour and non-adopted people of colour. Finally, I turn to the work of José Esteban Muñoz to show how John McLeod's concept of adoptive being can be read as a strategy of disidentification, not least because disidentification and adoptive being build on racial melancholia in a similar fashion. I conclude by formulating several brief thoughts on how disidentification constitutes a promising strategy for an adoptee politics that aims to question the racial norms of neoliberal multiculturalism and colour-blindness.

In dedication to my beloved friends and comrades from the Szabad Egyetem *student movement, with whom I stood up and fought for academic freedom in Hungary—the very precondition that enabled me to write this thesis.*

Szabad ország, szabad egyetem!

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following word count for this thesis are accurate:

Body of thesis (all chapters excluding notes, references, appendices, etc.): 23,412 words

Entire manuscript: 26,709 words

Signed MAX BAOSHI CHRISTIAAN DE BLANK

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Introduction

In the morning of 26 April 2019, I entered the building of the *Erasmushogeschool* in Brussels to attend a two-day symposium titled *Intercountry adoption: How to continue? Perspectives from the social sciences and humanities*. As an adoptee myself, born in China and adopted to the Netherlands at the age of 15 months, this was my first academically-inspired symposium on adoption to attend as well as my first time meeting such a large group of about 50 fellow transnational adoptees of colour in the same place. After my first and thus far only "roots trip" to China back in 2012, my decision to attend this symposium followed from a more recent renewed interest in the topic of adoption on both an intellectual and a personal level. However, having lived and studied abroad for the past years, I had never had or taken the opportunity to meet with any community of adoptees until I attended the symposium in Brussels.

The symposium served as a platform to bring together the wider non-academic community of Flemish and Dutch adoptees, adoptive parents, and adoption professionals on the one hand, and recent Critical Adoption scholarship on the other hand. To my understanding, this was a novelty. Although the programme was quite varied, a recurring topic concerned the many questions that have arisen following the recently emerged and increasing controversy over malpractices and fraudulent intercountry adoptions in both Flanders and the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, public attention to these malpractices was first drawn on 2 November 2016 when the national *Raad voor Strafrechtstoepassing en Jeugdbescherming* (RSJ) [Council for the Administration of Criminal Justice and Protection of Juveniles] published its policy advice to the Dutch Minister of Security and Justice, unexpectedly recommending to immediately stop all intercountry adoptions from China, the United States, and other member states of the European Union. This sudden public attention for adoption was also what triggered my current intellectual and personal interest in adoption. By following the news as well as several online communities of adoptees, it had become clear to me that the RSJ's policy advice gave

momentum for the emergence of a new movement of adoptees (although hardly centralized) in the Netherlands. Attending the symposium made me better understand these fellow adoptees' personal motivations for taking part in such a movement. Yet, it also confirmed some of the impressions that I had gotten from this newly emerging movement based on the limited information I had had access to previously. Most profoundly, it confirmed my impression that for many (though not all) adoptees—or at least for the most vocal ones—being critical as an adoptee means being critical of the practice of intercountry adoption in the way it is currently institutionalized in the Netherlands and Flanders. For them, being critical also means keeping the government responsible, as most intercountry adoptions in the Netherlands and Flanders take place through adoption agencies that must be licenced by the state (Federale Overheidsdienst Justitie, n.d.; Stichting Adoptievoorzieningen, n.d.). I remember that the ones yielding the biggest applause during the symposium were those calling most loudly for the Dutch and Belgian states to take their responsibilities for the malpractices within adoption of the past and the present. At the same time, the individual attendee representing the Flemish Central Authority for Adoption, the agency monitoring intercountry adoptions for the Flemish government, became the target of critical questions as well as personal attacks for formally being part of the Flemish intercountry adoption system.

It is important to acknowledge that my experiences at the symposium are merely anecdotal evidence, which is not representative for the wider population of Dutch and Flemish adoptees. However, attending this symposium did affirm my already existing motivation to critically reflect upon the newly emerging Dutch adoptee movement. Such critical reflection certainly does not imply that I aim to delegitimize or plainly reject the aims, goals, and political strategies that are currently being deployed. After all, I have to acknowledge that among adoptees, I am in a relatively privileged position. This privilege is constituted in the first place by the fact that my own adoption (for the moment disregarding my pre-adoptive history) has

to my current knowledge not been subject to direct or significant malpractices, unlike the adoptions of several others who have been more invested in the new adoptee movement than I have. Rather, I am interested in theorizing the dynamics that underly this movement, its subsequent limitations, and the conceptualization of alternative strategies that could come *in addition* to the currently evolving adoptee politics in the Netherlands.

Adoption has been academically studied for a long time, but (with only few exceptions) it was not until the early 1990s that the first scholarly critiques of the previous psychologizing and pathologizing approaches to adoption appeared. At that time, Anglo-American sociologists and anthropologists introduced a constructivist perspective to the field of adoption studies, creating what Allen Fisher (2003) calls the "Sociology of Adoption." Drawing on qualitative empirical methods, such as interviews and observations, these scholars analyze stigmatization and the role of biogenetic ties in normative constructions of kinship (Carsten, 2000; March, 1995; Miall, 1996; Wegar, 2000). As their research shows, this stigma of adoption is not only a general phenomenon in society, but also reproduced by both adoption clinicians as well as in academia. The latter can be observed from the fact that "most adoption studies have been clinical and problem-oriented" (Wegar, 2000, p. 364), disregarding the at that time already existing scientific consensus that on average adoptees' mental health is not significantly different from non-adopted people.

When Fisher (2003) called for the inclusion of the concepts of gender, race, ethnicity, and class into the Sociology of Adoption, he probably did not foresee the ways in which by now scholars from various backgrounds have introduced feminist, queer, and critical race perspectives to the study of adoption. These new approaches, often in an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary fashion going "beyond the boundaries of existing disciplines" (Lykke, 2011, p. 142), are since recently know by the umbrella term Critical Adoption Studies. Such Critical Adoption scholarships includes, for example, studies on adoption, roots trips, and belonging

(Yngvesson, 2003, 2010), family-making and kinship norms (Myers, 2014), race and the racialization of adoptees in Sweden (Andersson, 2012; Hübinette & Andersson, 2012; Hübinette & Tigervall, 2009; Lindblad & Signell, 2008) and Catalonia (Marre, 2009), and online communities of adoptive parents (Quiroz, 2012; Volkman, 2003). Moreover, although still less common, several scholars have also turned to the understudied topics of adoptability (Briggs, 2012), including one study taking a queer necropolitical perspective (Posocco, 2014), and diasporic literature analyzed from a postcolonial perspective (McLeod, 2015, 2017, 2018). Although several studies cited here take a European perspective, in general the field of Critical Adoption Studies is still very much dominated by U.S. American scholars and scholarship, as Critical Adoption scholar John McLeod pointed out to me (personal communication, April 27, 2018). This stronger presence in the United States has also led to the institutionalization of this still relatively small and young field of studies since the mid-2000s in The Alliance for the Study of Adoption and Culture (ASAC). ASAC's academic journal *Adoption & Culture*, which has been irregularly published since 2007 by the Ohio State University Press (JSTOR, n.d.), its relatively new book series *Formations: Adoption, Kinship, and Culture* from the same publisher (Ohio State University Press, n.d.), and its biannual conferences have played a large role in this. As a leading journal within Critical Adoption Studies, *Adoption & Culture* also provides a good insight in the current state of affairs within the field. In the summer of 2018, the journal published a special issue titled *Critical Adoption Studies*, formulating the future aims and goals within the field. Its introductory article (Homans et al., 2018) presents a collection of very short essays by a wide range of scholars affiliated to ASAC, many of whom are themselves part of the adoption triad of adoptee, adoptive parent, and first parent—something that has hardly been the case for adoption scholars up until the creation of Critical Adoption Studies as a field. In one of the short essays in this introductory article, Peggy Phelan (in Homans et al., 2018, pp. 5–9) explains that the "critical" part of Critical Adoption Studies

is defined by its resistance to marginalization and its rejection of existing perspectives on adoption, such as superficial romanticized perspectives or sociobiological perspectives that appropriate adoption to answer questions on the relation between nature and nurture. In addition, she notes (among other things) that Critical Adoption Studies should take a global focus that is not restricted to the United States only, as much previously discussed research is. Furthermore, in this introductory article, both Phelan and Kit Myers (in Homans et al., 2018, pp. 17–20) emphasize that Critical Adoption Studies is a respectively transdisciplinary or interdisciplinary and intersectional field of studies, underlining the aforementioned feminist, queer, anti-racist, and postcolonial perspectives that are central to the field. Following the earlier Sociology of Adoption, the perspectives that underlie Critical Adoption Studies continue to contest the pathologizing research in studies on adoption.

Critical Adoption scholarship that focuses on the Netherlands specifically is very rare. One work that is worth mentioning in that regard is a strongly underacknowledged exploratory study by Gloria Wekker, Cecilia Åsberg, Iris van der Tuin, and Nathalie Frederiks (2007). Written in Dutch, this study analyzes the identity formation of adoptees of colour in the Netherlands based on interviews with adult transnational adoptees of colour and an analysis of several websites of organizations for such adoptees. The study contains an intersectional postcolonial feminist analysis on how adoptees of colour, a term that the authors claim to newly introduce (at least within Dutch language as "geadopteerden van kleur"), negotiate their ethnicity in relation to dominant whiteness in the Netherlands. In addition, a Dutch scholar who is herself related to ASAC is Elisabeth Wesseling. Among other things, her work focuses on colonialism and adoption in literature (Dahlen & Wesseling, 2015; Wesseling, 2014; Wesseling, in Homans et al., 2018, pp. 30–32).

Aside from the lack of Critical Adoption scholarship on the Netherlands, the use of queer theory also still seems to be quite rare in studies *on adoptees*. Although queer theory is

mentioned as one of the central theoretical frameworks within Critical Adoption Studies by Homans et al. (2018), it is not commonly used beyond the topic of same-sex parenting and adoption. Yet, the theoretical lens of queerness goes beyond matters that directly involve non-normative sexuality. According to queer theorist Michael Warner's (1993) definition, queerness first and foremost means questioning normalcy in both academic theory and political praxis. As a critique of gay and lesbian studies and identity politics, he argues that queerness means rejecting an approach that is only interest-based. Rather than merely focusing on issues of toleration and representation and aiming for inclusion into society as it exists, a queer approach should question existing institutions and heteronormative assumptions *in addition* to the traditional gay and lesbian politics and strategies. Moreover, Warner argues that taking the questioning of normalcy as its point of departure, queerness also implies questioning and challenging society in general beyond matters that directly concern sexuality at all. Such a conceptualization of queerness, going beyond matters that directly involve (non-normative) sexuality, is very much in line with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (2003) approach. As Sedgwick points out,

> there are some lesbians and gay men who could never count as queer and other people who vibrate to the chord of queer without having much same-sex eroticism, or without routing their same-sex eroticism through the identity labels lesbian or gay. (p. 63)

Thus, Sedgwick argues that same-sex sexuality and queerness do not always necessarily neatly overlap or depend on each other.

A scholar who has convincingly shown that queerness and sexuality have (theoretical) implications for society at large, is Michel Foucault. In his famous work *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, Foucault (1976/1978) shows how his analysis of sexuality implies a much larger theory on the workings of discourse, normalization, and (bio)power in general. Moreover, later scholars have show how queerness (both in reference to sexuality and the larger structures of society at large) intersects with gender (Butler, 1990) and

race. Studies addressing this latter intersection between queerness and race, also know as the queer of colour critique, will inform a central part of my own analysis and argument within this thesis. Most notably, I will draw on the works of José Esteban Muñoz (1999), who conceptualizes a queer of colour politics of disidentification, and David Eng (2010; Eng & Han, 2000), who combines this queer of colour approach with a psychoanalytical perspective to write about diaspora as well as adoption specifically.

In this thesis, my aim is to respond to the mentioned theoretical gaps within Critical Adoption Studies. First, by analyzing the current Dutch adoptee movement, I will contribute to the scarce amount of scholarship on adoption and adoptees in the Netherlands. Due to its recent emergence, the current Dutch adoptee movement constitutes a case which has, to my knowledge, not yet been studied before. Moreover, focusing on the Netherlands will also answer to the necessity to challenge the U.S. American hegemony within adoption studies and knowledge-production on adoptees. Second, my thesis aims to provide an answer to the relative absence of queer theories and perspectives within Critical Adoption Studies. By drawing on the mentioned works of Foucault, Eng, and Muñoz, I aim to analyse and show how mechanisms of normalization, biopolitical regulation, and racial melancholia play into the goals and strategies of the current Dutch adoptee movement and how disidentification may provide a promising basis to conceptualize new strategies that could come in addition to the existing ones.

In addition to its theoretical aim, this thesis also has a practical aim. By critically rethinking adoptee politics in the Netherlands, I hope to contribute to the existing adoptee movement by showing how its very legitimate claims and strategies also have certain limitations and how possible alternatives might constitute meaningful additional directions. Although my analysis will primarily focus on the Netherlands, the context with which I myself am most familiar, its implications will not be strictly limited to the Dutch context. Anecdotal

evidence based on my own experiences seems to indicate that there is a large overlap between adoption and contemporary adoptee politics in the Netherlands and Flanders. Therefore, parts of my analyses and argument might be applicable to the Flemish context as well.

Methodologically speaking, my thesis is of theoretical rather than of empirical nature. Although I do not present a structured empirical analysis, my first chapter will combine theoretical interpretations and conceptual connections between existing pieces of academic literature with empirical evidence. In the subsequent chapters, I will from time to time return to the empirical examples given in chapter one and reassess them through the theoretical lenses that I deploy in these chapters. The Dutch adoptee movement is hence not only a case that will be analyzed in this thesis; it will also serve as a practical line along which I perform my analyses and present my arguments. Overall, this thesis should thus not be seen as an extensive empirical study of the current Dutch adoptee movement itself, but rather as an exploratory inquiry that will hopefully provide new theoretical and conceptual bases for further research on this matter.

I also want to re-emphasize that the present thesis represents both an academic and a personal journey. As is often the case for scholarship in the fields of Gender and Queer Studies, I follow the feminist tradition of combining theoretical analyses with personal experiences and perspectives, following Donna Haraway's (1988) account of feminist epistemology that knowledge is always inherently situated and objectivity is always partial. This is not to say that experience should always be taken at face value. As feminist historian Joan Scott (1991) points out, experience is inherently embedded in a context of discursively constructed social structures—the very same oppressive structures that also *restrain* our own thinking and self-understanding. Yet, as an adoptee myself, with this thesis I do want to contribute to a practice of knowledge-production that is not only *about* adoptees, but also *by* adoptees—something that has, as mentioned, only started to take place on a larger scale since the relatively recent emergence of Critical Adoption Studies.

Furthermore, as a matter of academic conformity, I have to mention and acknowledge that small parts of this thesis have been taken from my own previous course papers (written to obtain this degree in Critical Gender Studies), sometimes in a somewhat modified form.

Finally, before turning to the chapter outline of this thesis, let me first provide several conceptual and terminological clarifications. First, in this thesis I am specifically interested in adoptees of colour who have been transnationally adopted by white adoptive parents, like myself and to my knowledge most of those involved in the Dutch adoptee movement (which does not imply, though, that my argument is exclusively applicable to them). When speaking of this specific group of adoptees, several terms are often deployed interchangeably. In the absence of a term that accurately and unambiguously captures this group of adoptees, I will unfortunately not be able to avoid this. However, I want to at least clarify my considerations and my usage of these terms here. The group of adoptees in question is, for example, often described by the plain terms "transnational" or "intercountry." However, technically these terms only refer to the movement from one country to another without specifying how, for example, race is at play. On the other hand, the term "interracial" refers to adoptees whose first and adoptive parents are from a different race. Yet, this term can be used to describe both domestic as well as transnational adoptees. Moreover, although the term is generally understood as referring to adoptees with first parents of colour and white adoptive parents, it is often forgotten that the term can technically also refer to the smaller number of adoptees with white first parents and adoptive parents of colour, whose cases cannot be simply equated under the same term. Furthermore, the term "adoptee of colour" similarly does not imply anything about the racial characteristics of the adoptive parents. As I mentioned, I will be using these different adjectives, and in addition also the single term "adoptee," interchangeably throughout this thesis to indicate adoptees of colour who have been transnationally adopted by white adoptive parents, except where indicated differently. When citing or referring to previous

studies, it is my aim to stick to its authors' own terminology as closely as possible. However, I will occasionally choose to use a different term to emphasize a specific characteristic of adoption or the adoptee. Second, I recently learned from fellow adoptees that the commonly used terms "birth parents" and "birth family" have come under criticism for reducing these parents to the moment of birth. To acknowledge these parents' position and their personal struggles after (sometimes forced or fraudulent) adoption, I will use the term "first parents" and "first family" instead, except in certain cases when paraphrasing or citing others. Third, my use of the terms "adoptee activism" and "adoptee politics" is a conscious choice. By using the word "adoptee" instead of "adoption" in such combinations, I want to emphasize that such activism and politics are done *by* adoptees, not merely *about* adoptees. As adoptee Rodrigo van Rutte mentions, the aim of his yearly recurring temporary Pop-up Museum of Adoption in The Hague (which I will more extensively discuss in chapter one) is "that we adoptees can *ourselves* say who we are, what we think, and what we do, instead of being talked *about*"[1] (van Rutte, as cited in van der Zalm, 2018). With that, he points at the relative absence of adoptees' own voices when adoption is being talked about in the Netherlands. My conscious use of the term "adoptee" to indicate activism and politics is not to imply that such politics does not require allies. Neither do I want to reduce this matter to a form of identity politics limited only to those who have been adopted themselves.

In the upcoming chapter, I will first turn to a conceptual discussion on the connection between Foucauldian biopolitics and the nation as an imagined genetic community. I will argue that, in the Dutch context, the idea of a white nation ties into a discourse of neoliberal colour-blindness that facilitates a space for biopolitical mechanisms of regulation based on a racialized notion of origin. I will bring these conceptual connections in conversation with existing

[1] The original language of this quote is Dutch. The translation to English is my own. This goes for all following quotes of which the original language is Dutch and the displayed language is English.

academic literature on adoption, before applying them to my analysis of the normalizing forces that are at play within contemporary Dutch adoptee politics. I will conclude this chapter with a brief Foucauldian critique of experience as a political point of departure. In the second chapter, I will turn to the work of Asian American queer theorist David Eng and show how his concept of queer liberalism broadly overlaps with the discourse of neoliberal colour-blindness. I will take up his concept of queer diaspora and its psychoanalytical underpinnings (most notably the concept of racial melancholia), which figure as an answer to queer liberalism and hence also constitute a promising ground for contesting neoliberal colour-blindness. I will then apply Eng's psychoanalytical approach to the Dutch adoptee movement and argue that a reinterpretation of this psychoanalytical approach should take into account the conflation of race and ethnicity. I will explain how such a reinterpretation constitutes an imperative to build communities in which adoptees of colour and non-adopted people of colour come together. Finally, in my third chapter I will turn to queer of colour theorist José Esteban Muñoz's concept of disidentification. I will argue that John McLeod's concept of adoptive being can be read as a disidentification from biogenetic normativity, not least for the way in which his concept and Muñoz's disidentification tie into the concept of racial melancholia in similar ways. Finally, I will conclude by formulating some brief thoughts on how disidentification provides a promising basis for an adoptee politics that aims to question the racial norms of neoliberal multiculturalism.

Chapter 1: The Biopolitics of Belonging in the 2016 Dutch Adoption Debate

On 2 November 2016, the *Raad voor Strafrechtstoepassing en Jeugdbescherming* (RSJ) [Council for the Administration of Criminal Justice and Protection of Juveniles] published its policy advice to the Dutch Minister of Security and Justice to immediately stop all intercountry adoptions from China, the United States, and other member states of the European Union. In addition, it recommended to "shift focus from intercountry adoption to … the juvenile protection system in the country of origin" (Raad voor Strafrechtstoepassing en Jeugdbescherming, 2016). Referring to the principle of subsidiarity (adoption only as a last resort, if the child cannot be cared for in the country of birth) and the allegedly demand-driven nature of the current system of adoption, the RSJ dismissed the Minister's original request for an advice on how to design a future-proof intercountry adoption system. The RSJ's sudden radical position was received with great surprise, as well as both strong approval and disapproval, by all those in the Netherlands who are concerned with adoption. For example, on the day of the publication itself Emeritus Professor René Hoksbergen, who has been a well-known participant in the Dutch adoption debate due to his extensive pedagogical studies on adoption, stated his full support for the RSJ's position in an interview with national newspaper *De Volkskrant* (Singeling, 2016). On the contrary, in the same newspaper the two professors Femmie Juffer and Rien van IJzendoorn, prominent in the fields of respectively Adoption Studies and Pedagogy at Leiden University, argued that the RSJ's advice lacks sufficient evidence (Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2016), a claim that was supported by several other academics as well (for example, Weijers, 2017).

More telling, however, was the mixed response from adoptees themselves. Less than 12 hours after the RSJ published its advice, representatives of two groups of adoptees appeared in a radio debate on the national NPO Radio 1 (Evangelische Omroep, 2016). On the one hand,

adoptee foundation United Adoptees International (UAI) welcomed the RSJ's position, stating that the advice resembles their own long-time position within the adoption debate to abolish adoption in its current form. On the other hand, the *Stichting Interlandelijk Geadopteerden* (SiG) [Intercountry Adoptees Foundation] presented a more critical view on the policy advice. I am not necessarily interested in the longstanding political and academic debate whether adoption practices should continue, change, or be abolished at all. Rather, both the radio debate as well as what I would call the general 2016 Dutch Adoption Debate that followed the RSJ's advice reveal the different and often conflicting discourses on adoption, identity, and belonging that are being reproduced by both adoptees themselves and society at large. A telling example is the very different response from UAI and SiG during the radio debate, after former neoliberal conservative politician Arend Jan Boekestijn, who was present in the studio, problematically presented his proposal to the representatives of both groups of adoptees to build an adoption system in which one's "real" parents are always traceable. Whereas as a response the UAI representative affirmed the importance of knowing one's first parents, the SiG representative claimed that the desire for tracing first family is not a structurally present issue for most adoptees.

In this chapter, I will address the discourses and dynamics that underlie the positions of both these groups of adoptees. First, I will turn to a theoretical discussion revealing how racialized notions of nation, genetic normativity, and origin constitute a Foucauldian biopolitical discourse of social belonging. Then, I will turn to the Dutch context to show how the Dutch self-perception as a white nation goes together with a discourse of neoliberal colour-blindness, paradoxically promoting both an aim for assimilation and assimilability on the one hand and the pathologizing deployment of origin as a mode of roots-essentialism on the other hand. Based on existing academic literature on adoption and adoptees, I will show how these two paradoxical practices can be read as a form of Foucauldian biopolitical racism that goes

beyond the conventional understanding of the term racism. Finally, I will return to the 2016 Dutch Adoption Debate and its aftermath, which gave momentum to an increasing movement of adoptees that are critical of adoption as it is currently practiced. I will show how this group of adoptees and those adoptees who are not "critical" of adoption in a similar fashion reproduce the aim for assimilation as well as elements of roots-essentialism, before briefly turning to a Foucauldian critique of taking experience as a political point of departure.

1.1 Belonging as a Biopolitical Affair: Genetics and the Nation

To understand the regulatory and normalizing forces of belonging, nation, genetics, and origin, I will first turn to the concepts of discourse and biopolitics in the Foucauldian sense. Through his application of the concept of discourse to sexuality, Michel Foucault (1976/1978) shows how knowledge and power are closely intertwined. His conceptualization exceeds the conventional understanding of the relation between the two, in which knowledge functions as a source from which one can exercise power as individual. Rather, he argues, it is through the discursive definition of truth that knowledge inherently constitutes omnipresent structures of power relations that function in a bottom-up manner. Taking the concept of sexuality, Foucault for example shows how the discursive construction of truth defines homosexuality as abnormal, perverse, and even unnatural and pathological. This is contrary to the popular belief that sexual liberation has taken place in societies that define themselves as Western and goes instead hand in hand with the discursive normalization and naturalization of heterosexuality. With this, he also shows that power cannot be simply located around single individuals (meaning that it is nonsubjective) or be exercised through the top-down mechanisms of law and sovereignty. It is important to point out, however, that power always also entails resistance. Given the omnipresence of power, Foucault argues that resistance can never be outside of power. Rather, it is through the discursive productions of truth—which is both a mechanism through which

the power-knowledge nexus operates, as well as an effect of power—that certain norms as well as sites of resistance are both enabled and constrained. This also implies that discourse in general defines what is thinkable or imaginable and what is outside of imagination.

Foucault (1997/2003) further specifies his conceptualization of power by turning to the concept of biopower and its relation to normativity and normalization. He explains that what he calls "the normalizing society" (p. 253) is characterized by its location at the intersection of both a disciplinary and a regulatory forms of biopower. Unlike sovereign power, which according to Foucault used to be the sole form of power until the seventeenth or eighteenth century and which was exercised by the sovereign as individual entity in order to "take life or let live" (p. 241), disciplinary and regulatory power are concerned with "the regularization of life" (p. 249). This means that not the decision to "do" death by killing or not killing, which is central to sovereign power, but rather life itself is at the center. In the case of disciplinary power, this takes place through a focus on "individuals and their bodies" (p. 245) in which docile bodies are produced by the tools of discipline and surveillance. However, in the case of regulatory power individual bodies are not the primary focus. Instead, individual "bodies are replaced by general biological processes" (p. 249) to regulate entire populations and treat humanity as a species.

This also means that in general discourses of belonging are a highly biopolitical affair. Not only do such discourses discipline individual's identifications by enabling certain understandings of the self and restraining others. On the population-level, they also regulate who does and who does not belong to a certain community or nation. As Foucault (1997/2003) explains, his conceptualization of biopolitical racism does not simply concern "mutual contempt or hatred between races" (p. 258), but rather "the break between what must live and what must die" (p. 254). He argues that power's ability to let die expresses itself in the sub-speciation of humanity. This division of humanity into multiple sub-species does not simply

mean that different groups attempt to kill the other, but also that they aim to purify themselves. When it comes to questions and discourses of belonging, it is through such a form of biopolitical racism that belonging defines who is "in" and who is "out." In other words, biopolitical racism is about distinguishing who is worth to belong and assimilate in order to purify the self, and who does not belong and can hence be exposed to biological or political death.

To better understand belonging in relation to the nation, it is worthwhile to now turn to Benedict Anderson (1983). In his iconic work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Anderson conceptualizes the nation as an imagined community. He argues that the nation as community is imagined, because its members will never be able to actually know all of each other. Furthermore, the nation has its borders (not merely geographical) because it is always limited by its boundaries that divide and distinguish it from other nations, and it is sovereign in the sense that it is not subjected to any higher power. In Anderson's conception, the latter specifically refers to the way in which the nation as a concept emerged as part of a rejection of the religious world order in the western world during the Enlightenment. He shows how nations, although generally understood as timeless, are by definition grounded in a larger historical context. The perceived timelessness of the nation, however, constitutes a linear conception of time that not only directly connects the present, but also the future, with the past. Often, the nation is imagined as a group of people within a state, across a few states, or as neatly overlapping with the nation-state.

In Anderson's own work, it is not made explicit how his concept of nation relates to matters of ethnicity, race, and racism. However, Bob Simpson (2000) has taken up Anderson's conceptualization of the nation to further specify what this relation looks like. Simpson argues that earlier blood and nowadays genes have become central to imagine the unity of a community that we call a nation or ethnicity, in fact determining its boundaries. He argues that

within popular understanding, ethnicity is being essentialized within genetics so that one can in fact speak of "imagined genetic communities" (p. 4). By showing how ethnicity can just like the nation be understood as an imagined community, Simpson points out that the two are quite intimately linked. He argues that the language of family and kin (implying genetics) to describe the nation is an example in which this link between ethnicity and nation becomes visible. Speaking of biopolitical racism in Foucauldian terms, genetics are thus used as a criteria to sub-speciate humanity, to determine who belongs and who does not, and to regulate what must live and what must die.

The notion of genetics regulating social belonging to the nation is closely related to the idea of origin. This becomes visible through Simpson's later discussion of the case of imported Danish sperm by British sperm banks. He points out that the import of this Danish sperm is framed in British media as a threat and referred to as a "Viking Baby Invasion" (The Mail on Sunday, as cited in Simpson, 2000, p. 4), referring to the Viking invasions twelve centuries ago of what is nowadays the United Kingdom. He furthermore notes that such an understanding even incentivizes certain British men to provide additional sperm to British sperm banks in order to genetically protect the British nation. Rikke Andreassen (2017) agrees with Simpson that such "Viking sperm" is framed as an invasion, but also points out that a different media frame presents this Danish sperm as "an expensive luxury product" (p. 127) due to its Scandinavian whiteness, which is often seen as the purest form of whiteness within Europe. Although these two media frames seem to oppose each other, they are concerned with racial pureness in similar ways. In the invasion frame, Danish sperm is considered to degenerate the pureness of the British nation because it comes abroad. On the other hand, in the frame that presents Danish sperm as a luxury product, it is considered to improve the pureness of the British nation because it is part of the same white European imagined community. In both cases, the meaning that is given to the Danish sperm's origin is thus what determines its value.

Moreover, the Viking sperm case also reveals how the notion of origin is racialized. Specifically the second media frame, presenting Danish sperm as a luxury product, shows how its Danish origin comes to represent whiteness. Thus, social belonging to the nation is regulated in reference to a racialized notion of origin, constituting a biopolitical regulation of fertility, a regulation of what must live.

I will return to the racialization of origin in the next section, in which I will turn to the connection between white innocence and neoliberal colour-blindness in the Netherlands and show how this functions as a biopolitical discourse regulating who belongs and who does not.

1.2 White Innocence and Neoliberal Colour-Blindness: The Paradox of Assimilation versus Roots-Essentialism

Having shown how social belonging is biopolitically regulated through the deployment of the nation as an imagined genetic and racial community, I will now further explore the role of race in the Netherlands by turning to the work of Dutch postcolonial feminist scholar Gloria Wekker. I will then show how this is related to a discourse of neoliberal colour-blindness, resulting in a paradoxical deployment of two contradictory forces of assimilation and roots-essentialism that operate within the same biopolitical discourse.

1.2.1 "White Innocence," Race, and Ethnicity in the Netherlands

In her by now already iconic monograph on the topic of colonial silences in the Netherlands, titled *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*, Gloria Wekker (2016) argues that contemporary racism and its origins in the Dutch imperial past are generally not recognized and sometimes even actively denied through a common self-perception and narrative of tolerance and innocence. She points out that unlike "religious, class and regional differences" (p. 21), within the Netherlands race is generally seen as a social and political division home to

other countries, such as the United States. According to Wekker, the non-recognition and denial of racism and the imperial past entails both "not-knowing, but also not wanting to know" (p. 17). Such a self-understanding often leads to paradoxical situations. For example, as Wekker points out, the white Dutch nation does not want to be identified with the racialized notion of migrants, while forgetting a large share of the population has in fact (white) migrant ancestors. Furthermore, seeing itself as a small country that was occupied by Nazi Germany during the Second World War, Dutch colonial violence in recent history has been erased from Dutch collective memory and has only started to be taught in schools as of the 1990s to a limited extent. Paradoxically, this silenced colonial violence includes the colonial wars in the years directly after World War II, that ultimately led to the independence of the Dutch East Indies, eventually becoming contemporary Indonesia. Nowadays, these colonial wars are still commonly referred to as mere "police actions" (p. 12). Altogether, these mechanisms of silencing and narratives of innocence are what Wekker argues to constitute modernity. This, in turn, constitutes the belief that compared to the "progressive" West, other parts of the world are backwards, unemancipated, and perhaps even uncivilized.

The Dutch self-perception as a white nation also becomes visible in the racialized character of the common terminology that, formally speaking, only distinguishes between migrants and "native" Dutch people. As Wekker notes,

> people of color will forever remain *allochtonen*, the official and supposedly innocuous term meaning "those who came from elsewhere," racializing people of color for endless generations, never getting to belong to the Dutch nation. The counterpart of "allochtonen" is *autochtonen*, meaning "those who are from here," which, as everyone knows, refers to white people. [emphasis in original] (p. 15)

Following Wekker's logic, the distinction between *allochtonen* and *autochtonen* thus implies that those who are not white have their origin "elsewhere," implicitly justifying that they do not belong "here," to the white Dutch nation. These dynamics are still at work after two

important government-related institutions formally replaced the *autochtoon*/*allochtoon*-binary in late 2016 by instead distinguishing between those with a "Dutch background" and those with a "migration background" (NOS, 2016).

The racialization of origin plays an important role in the common conflation of race and ethnicity in the Netherlands. As Wekker notes, the term race has been almost entirely replaced by ethnicity since World War II. She notes that, following Stuart Hall's definition, "race and ethnicity as two sides of the same coin, subsuming and merging a more natural, biological understanding of race with a more cultural view" (p. 24), in which ethnicity more specifically indicates "the social system that gives meaning to … differences based on origin, appearance, history, culture, language, and religion" (p. 22). In other words, since race and ethnicity both refer to an origin elsewhere, racial appearance and cultural background have become almost inseparable in common understanding. This conflation becomes troublesome in cases of adoption and adoptees, as I will show throughout this thesis.

1.2.2 Neoliberal Colour-Blindness: The Aim for Assimilability

The dynamics of silencing colonialism, white innocence, and modernity that Wekker analyzes strongly tie into the context of neoliberalism and colour-blindness in contemporary Northern and Western Europe. In his analysis of neoliberalism in the United States, which is nowadays arguably also applicable to the European context, Foucault (2004/2008, p. 243) argues that neoliberalism as a political system generalizes and naturalizes the logics of market economics onto society as a whole, including non-economic domains as well as individuals and the relationships between them. This means that, as Catherine Rottenberg (2014) points out, "individuals [are regarded] as entrepreneurial actors" (p. 420), making structural mattes such as sexism and gender inequality into women's personal and individual responsibility. When applying such logics to the matter of race and racism, the individualizing force of neoliberalism

means that race is likewise no longer seen as a relevant social category or identity marker—constituting, in other words, colour-blindness—hence resulting in what Akwugo Emejulu and Leah Bassel (2017) call political racelessness in their analysis of minority women and possibilities for resistance in France, England, Scotland, and in general Northern and Western Europe. This non-recognition of racism as a nowadays still existing structural axis of oppression is very similar to Gloria Wekker's concept of white innocence and her analysis of modernity.

Under the discourse of neoliberal colour-blindness, adoptees of colour are being structurally individualized and their racial experiences, which often differ significantly from the white majority in their adoptive country, are being rendered invisible. Indeed, as Wekker et al. (2007) point out in their intersectional analysis of the identity formation of adoptees of colour in the Netherlands, many adoptees of colour have to generate understandings of and meanings to their racial minority status by themselves, as the colour-blind discourse is still very prominent within the ways in which adoptive parents raise their adopted children. The belief that this is an individual responsibility (although framed as choice) for adoptees has been internalized by many adoptees, which they Wekker et al. illustrate by analyzing two Dutch newspaper opinion articles written by adoptees (pp. 4–5). As the invisibility of race leaves space for racist beliefs and racial preferences, a structural demand for assimilable adoptees—in addition to children being *made* assimilable through the practice of adoption itself—also fits within the boundaries of the normal. This reveals the biopolitical dynamics of the neoliberal colour-blind discourse: Only those who are deemed sufficiently assimilable are allowed to belong to a nation that bears racial and ethnic whiteness in its core. As Pamela Anne Quiroz (2007) points out in her analysis of adoption agencies' websites and online adoption forums in the United States, many white adoptive parents and those considering adoption have a preference for white adoptees. Alternatively, they are also generally happy to adopt Asian,

Latinx, Hispanic, or mixed-race children, as long as such mixed-race children are not partially African American. According to Quiroz, this ties into a broader ongoing process in the United States, in which the more desirable racial categories of those mentioned here are increasingly being assimilated into whiteness in general, unlike African Americans. In addition, Quiroz points out that this racialized demand also results in adoptive agencies' decision to set stricter requirements (for example, age requirements) for people adopting white infants than for those adopting non-white—and specifically African American—infants, and that the fees that these agencies charge for adoptive parents also differs based on the adoptee's racial background. She adds that, strikingly, these racial dynamics are also reproduced in the language that such adoption agencies use to describe their adoptable infants. For example, the term "healthy" was often associated or equated with white infants on the agencies' websites. As Quiroz points out, all these racial dynamics take place under the guise of colour-blindness. Through that lens, adoption and the many choices it entails for (prospective) adoptive parents are seen as an individual preference or as a humanitarian matter of saving vulnerable children, hence putting the racial aspect out of the picture. Moreover, according to Quiroz, some even argue that transracial adoption is a way of overcoming racism. Yet, the racialized practices that Quiroz points out in this analysis do not indicate that anti-racist strategies are at play, but rather that through their racial preferences adoptive and prospective parents imply that they want their adoptive child to be assimilable within their own racial category.

The demand for assimilable adoptees is identified by Diana Marre (2009) as well. In her study on adoption practices in Catalonia, she points out that several prospective parents indicated preferring to adopt from Russia or Eastern Europe to be able to pass as genetic kin to their children and hence conceal the fact that they are adopted. Moreover, she argues that the belief in assimilability also plays a role in cases in which passing as genetic kin is impossible due to racial differences between adoptees and adoptive parents. She demonstrates this with

the fact that several parents in her study believe that their adopted children of colour are different from other immigrants, whose integration into Catalan society often fails due to cultural differences according to these adoptive parents. They uphold this belief despite the fact that these "immigrants and adopted children come from the same regions" (Marre, 2009, p. 227), indicating that assimilability functions as a tool of not merely racism as the term is conventionally understood, but as a mode of Foucauldian biopolitical racism and sub-speciation of assimilable adoptees versus immigrated cultural "others."

Speaking in more general terms, Barbara Yngvesson (2010) points out that the (legal) erasure of adoptees' pre-adoptive histories often functions as a way to make them adoptable in the first place. Such erasure may take place in the form of, for example, the rewriting of birth certificates turning adoptive parents officially into "birth parents." Yet, practices like these do not only create a state of adoptability, but arguably also the desired assimilability to be absorbed into a new adoptive family in an adoptive country without being "burdened" by any past ties to the country of birth. Furthermore, in another article Quiroz (2012) draws attention to the assimilative practice of renaming adoptees by replacing their birth or earlier name with a name that is more common in the adoptive country. She emphasizes that such renaming functions to individualize "the burden of [ethnoracial] identity to adoptees" (p. 543), which ties into the aforementioned dynamics of neoliberal individualization.

The general aim for assimilability also appears in the definition of the aforementioned Dutch term *autochtoon*. Before abolishing the term, Statistics Netherlands[2] defined the term as "persoon van wie de beide ouders in Nederland zijn geboren, ongeacht het land waar men zelf is geboren" [person of whom both parents are born in the Netherlands, regardless of the country

[2] In Dutch, Statistics Netherlands is commonly known as *Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek*, literally meaning "Central Agency for Statistics."

where they themselves are born] (Statistics Netherlands, as cited in Ensie, 2016).[3] The reason for considering one's parents' place of birth as a criterion for being *autochtoon*, and hence for belonging to the nation, is presumably because this allegedly implies that one is raised Dutch, emphasizing the aim for assimilability. Ironically, according to this definition most adoptees are also considered to be *autochtoon*, as in most cases their legal (adoptive) parents are themselves born in the Netherlands.

It is important to note that the mechanisms behind assimilability and assimilation are always imperfect. Although (certain) adoptees are deemed relatively assimilable, especially in comparison to non-adopted migrants and ethnic minorities, there is no doubt that many adoptees of colour occasionally fail to pass as part of the white nation. As a result, they face racism and racial discrimination. As Frank Lindblad and Sonja Signell (2008) point out, adoptees of colour's coping strategies to resist and endure racial discrimination and harassment range from minimizing one's own negative emotions and the avoidance of certain situations (by avoiding specific places or adapting one's own behaviour) on the one hand, to confronting the perpetrator, identifying with other minorities, or explicitly identifying with the adoptive country on the other hand. In all these situations, although to varying extents, the burden is put on the individual adoptee to act or identify themselves with something or someone, which is typical for the individualizing mechanisms of neoliberalism. Similar individualizing dynamics are found by Malinda Andersson (2012) in an analysis of Swedish transnational adoption policy documents. Andersson furthermore argues that the racialization and othering of adoptees' non-white bodies prevents them from feeling a complete sense of belonging on the levels of both nation and family. Similarly, Korean-born Swedish adoptee Tobias Hübinette and Andersson (2012) argue that in an allegedly colour-blind society such as Sweden, adoptees of colour

[3] Since Statistics Netherlands abolished the term *autochtoon* in late 2016, its formal definition has no longer been present in the list of definitions provided by Statistics Netherlands itself. I regret the absence of a source more reliable than the one given here.

struggle to find a sense of belonging and end up somewhere between Swedish whiteness and immigrants of colour in terms of identification. This, in turn, makes adoptees of colour doubt whether the discrimination and harassment that they face actually constitutes racism. Such doubts are also observed by Hübinette and Carina Tigervall (2009, p. 344). In their qualitative interview-based study on the racialization of adoptees and adoptive parents in Sweden, they show that some adoptees and adoptive parents understand harassment and invasive (racialized) questions from strangers not as racism, but rather in relation to issues of roots and genetic ties. This inability to identify racism, as a result from the neoliberal individualization, constitutes a severe restriction of adoptees' political agency to resist it.

Finally, aside from adoption, the demand for assimilability similarly appears in the case of assisted reproductive technologies. This is not entirely surprising, as adoption often functions only as a last resort in cases in which assisted reproductive technologies are not successful or available (Mahoney, 1995, p. 48; Szkupinski Quiroga, 2007, p. 145)—something that also logically follows from Simpson's previously mentioned conclusion that the nation is in fact an imagined genetic community, upholding a genetic normativity that prefers assisted reproductive technologies over adoption. Studies by Seline Szkupinski Quiroga (2007), Daisy Deomampo (2016), and Maura Ryan and Amanda Moras (2017) point out that in cases of external sperm provision, white couples or single women often prefer sperm from white providers.[4] As the former of the three points out, this is caused by the desire to have children pass as genetic kin to their parents, tying into the previously addressed genetic norms. In addition, both Deomampo as well as Kari Karsjens (2001) point out that white egg providers are paid significantly higher amounts of money than, in Deomampo's study, non-white Indian egg providers. Karsjens specifically focuses on so-called "boutique egg donations": eggs

[4] Rather than the commonly used terms "donor" or "seller," I am using the more neutral term "provider" here to not take a position on the complexity of altruism and economics within ART. The term provider was first introduced to me by Daisy Deomampo (2016), who speaks about "egg providers" (pp. 306–307).

provided specifically by women who are white, normatively attractive, able-bodied, healthy, and well-educated.

Having shown how the discourse of neoliberal colour-blindness provides a space for the biopolitical regulation of social belonging through the ideal of assimilability in both assisted reproductive technologies and adoption, I will turn to another biopolitical norm in the next section. There, I will return to the concept of origin as well as the race/ethnicity conflation and show how the norm of genetic kinship disciplines adoptees to understand themselves in relation to their "roots."

1.2.3 Roots-Essentialism: The Pathologization of Adoptees and Staged Authenticity

In the previous two sections, I have shown how white innocence goes together with a discourse of neoliberal colour-blindness and how the two result in a Dutch self-perception as a white nation as well as space for racial preferences and an aim for assimilability. However, paradoxically the Dutch white self-perception also results in another belief: the belief that adoptees must recover their cultural or genetic roots to become a full subject. Perceiving itself as a white genetic community, the idea of a Dutch nation implies that those who are not white and genetically related to the nation are *allochtoon*, belonging "elsewhere." In the previous section, I have argued that in spite of occasional failures to pass, adoptees of colour are generally considered to be more assimilable (or perhaps become assimilable through the adoption itself) than the immigrants that, for example, adoptive parents in Marre's (2009) aforementioned study speak of. Indeed, regardless of the formal definition that considers transnational adoptees like myself *authochtoon*, within common Dutch understanding I also do not recall being labelled as *allochtoon* together with (first, second, third generation) people from Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese, or Antillean descent, who constitute the four largest ethnic minorities in the Netherlands (Wekker, 2016, p. 6). However, even without the visible

label *allochtoon*, the paradoxical belief that adoptees are both supposed to be assimilable and at least partially belong "elsewhere" is still being structurally upheld by the underlying logic, assigning the adoptee a belonging in a space of in-betweenness.

The essentialization of origin implies that, given the aforementioned conflation of race and ethnicity, transnational adoptees expected and disciplined into finding both their genetic as well as their cultural roots. The idea of cultural roots is often presented by the term "birth culture," culturally essentializing adoptees who were in some cases adopted at infancy and were never socialized into their presumed birth culture at all. Yet, the essentialization of origin is not only upheld by the mechanisms described so far. Roots-essentialism is also reinforced by ideas that pathologize specifically the adoptee, such as Nancy Verrier's (1993) concept of the "primal wound" of adoption. Verrier argues that the effects of an early separation between child and birth mother constitute a primal wound that could and should be healed by tracing one's roots. She thereby implies that not knowing one's birth mother is in fact a pathological condition to which the supposed truth of origin is the medicine. Such an idea fits the essentialization of origin under the belief of white genetic nationhood very well.

Several scholars have previously criticized different aspects of these roots-essentialist ideas. Already in 1995, Karen March analysed the relation between social stigma and adoptees' will to trace their first parents. Writing from a sociological constructivist perspective, she argues that for the 60 adult adoptees she observed and interviewed in Canada, the social stigma of not knowing one's first parents formed a strong motivation to search for and reunite with them. This ties into several scholars' later problematization of the normativity of biological or genetic kinship. For example, postcolonial literature scholar and Irish-born British adoptee John McLeod (2017), whose work I will more extensively discuss in chapter three, links what he calls "biocentrism" to processes of "discursive normalisation" (p. 31) that nowadays uphold notions of nation, race, culture, and personhood that reinforce modernity. Following Asian

American queer theorist David Eng's (2010) critique of the fact that generally "diaspora is firmly attached to genealogical notions of racial descent, filiation, and biological traceability" (p. 13), a critique to which I will turn in chapter two, McLeod (2017) similarly argues that diasporic writing too often sticks to consanguineous modes of personhood, including literature written by or about adoptees. He explains this phenomenon with his observation that "adoptees are often obsessed with blood and blood-lines precisely because they have been led to believe they cannot obtain whole personhood without this information to hand" (p. 37). Thus, the effect of this discursive normalization of biocentrism is that it limits adoptees' self-understanding and subjectivity to genetic and consanguineous modes of kinship and hence often disciplines them to go in search for their first family.

Critiques of biocentrism have also been formulated from a philosophical perspective. Charlotte Witt (2014), for example, points out that those defending the allegedly superior value of genetic kinship uphold what she calls bionormativity. According to her, such arguments indirectly claim that genetic kinship is required "for the healthy psychological development of children" (p. 50), which for example relies on the assumed relevance of physical resemblance between family members. Witt, however, argues that this disregards the many cases pointing out that physical resemblance is neither necessary nor sufficient for making healthy family environments. Furthermore, adoptee and philosopher Kimberly Leighton (2012, 2013) argues that genealogical bewilderment, or in other words the psychological claim that those who do not know their genetic parents necessarily suffer from that (Wellisch & Sants, as cited in Leighton, 2012), does not describe the suffering that adoptees might experience, but rather causes it by naturalizing genetic kinship and pathologizing those who are not in touch with, or did not grow up with genetic kin, including adoptees. In addition, she argues that the concept of genealogical bewilderment reproduces essentializing notions of race. She points out that the suffering within the aforementioned conceptualization of the term assumes (among other

things) that this suffering is the result of not knowing one's racial past and hence not knowing how one racially reproduces. The concept of genealogical bewilderment thus forces race into a reproductive and pathologizing framework. Furthermore, in her argument against the belief that one has a fundamental right to know one's genetic parents as part of the debate on anonymous gamete donation, she argues that such a right is "hetero-bionormative" (Leighton, 2013, p. 54) as it relies on "the claim that family-making should be done through biogenetic reproduction" (p. 54). Yet, she critiques this desire to know and search not only within a rights-based framework, but also for how it often (though not necessarily always) functions as a tool of Foucauldian domination, naturalization, and discipline (Leighton, in Homans et al., 2018, pp. 37–41). She argues that practices of search and reunion with first family are often driven by a desire to know an allegedly pre-existing truth of identity that supposedly gives the adoptee certain political agency that hence has a healing effect—a pathologizing belief very similar to Verrier's concept of the primal wound. Instead of following this "ideology of authenticity" (Patton, as cited by Leighton in Homans et al., 2018, p. 38) as a product of liberal modernity, Leighton argues that search and reunion should be practiced ethically by adoptees, as either a search for "new modes of being" (Leighton, in Homans et al., 2018, p. 38) or as a way to give agency to adoptees. Such agency should not be acquired by knowing some authentic notion of the self, but rather through being able to give one's own meaning to roots and origin. In my further analysis of McLeod's work in chapter three, I will show how he has already conceptualized such a mode of being that centers adoptees' agency.

The failure to entirely assimilate into the white nation, as mentioned in the previous section, and the essentialization of roots can perhaps be seen as two sides of the same coin. In their aforementioned study, Hübinette and Tigervall (2009) observe that for adoptees of colour "the most common form of racialisation … is above all the constant bombardment of questions regarding the national, regional, ethnic and racial origin" (p. 344). As mentioned earlier, they

point out that not all adoptees and adoptive parents regard this as a form of racialization and that some even tend to neglect the whole topic of race and themselves prefer to talk about roots instead. This again emphasizes that when adoptees are not considered to be "from here" for failing to pass as entirely assimilated, they are considered to be (at least also partially) "from elsewhere," where their roots lie. As these adoptees and adoptive parents generally consider questions from others about roots and origin as a regular, unproblematic phenomenon, they further normalize the understanding of adoptees in terms of their roots and origin.

How this internalization of roots-essentialism is taught to adoptees becomes visible in the way many white adoptive parents pay attention to the culture of the adoptee's country of birth and the adoptee's possible desire to trace their (cultural) roots, under the appearance of cultural sensitivity. The strong belief in the progressive nature of such presumed cultural sensitivity can be observed in Toby Alice Volkman's (2003) study and superficial interpretation of online communities of adoptive parents. Although Volkman (herself a white U.S. American adoptive parent) does not phrase the argument literally, her way of situating assimilation in history not only implies that contemporary practices around adoption are strikingly different from practices of assimilation, but also that they have almost come to entirely replace these. According to her, nowadays adoptees are increasingly visible due to the existence of adoptive communities that are primarily present on the internet, although she also seems to indicate that these communities mostly consist of adoptive parents. Although she acknowledges some of the critiques of certain attitudes that are reproduced through such communities, she argues that the existence of these communities is meaningful in several ways. For example, she argues that they enable white adoptive parents to exchange ideas on how to teach their adopted children "pride in culture" (p. 37). Furthermore, according to her these communities also benefit adoptive parents individually as they enable them to "strive for some deeper transformation of their own identities and lives" (p. 41). Moreover, she ultimately cites

and agrees with others' previously given argument that communities of white adoptive parents of adoptees of colour might inform a form of anti-racist politics. She thus believes that through such communities, a more culturally sensitive, meaningful, and progressive politics can be practiced. However, what she does not thoroughly discuss is how such adoptive communities of primarily adoptive parents also provide a space for them to strengthen each other's understandings of and attitudes towards adoption and raising adopted children through a white gaze. Ideas tying into either assimilative thinking or roots-essentialism can still be freely reproduced in these spaces without any critical response. Furthermore, although Volkman's U.S. American context differs from the European context that I myself am familiar with, even today (16 years after Volkman's article was published) the increased visibility of adoptees that Volkman claims to observe is not something that has not yet substantially unfolded in the Netherlands. Perhaps the relatively recent 2016 Dutch Adoption Debate is one of the first of such instances in which adoptees finally gain more visibility in the Netherlands. In this light, it thus seems to be very unlikely that, as Ann Anagnost argues, the communities of adoptive parents actually "[open] the possibility of pushing politics of parenting … as the basis of a broader politics of anti-racism" (Anagnost, as cited in Volkman, 2003, p. 36). In her previously mentioned study on adoption practices in Catalonia, Marre (2009) also notes how adoptive parents conflate race with culture by aiming to maintain what they believe to be their children's "cultural origins." Moreover, they sometimes even trace back their children's behaviour to the culture of their birth country as if such cultural traits have been genetically inherited. As mentioned earlier, ironically these cultural elements are the same habits and traditions that they consider to be incompatible with Catalan culture in the case of other immigrants. Exactly that paradox reveals how the strategy of presumed cultural sensitivity is profoundly superficial and certainly not something that informs anti-racist strategies.

The white gaze of adoptive parents often leads to practices of cultural appropriation and exoticization. Quiroz (2012), directly speaking to scholars like Volkman, explains this with the concept of staged authenticity. Studying online communities of adoptive parents, just like Volkman does, she argues that the safe spaces that these communities provide enable adoptive parents who lack sufficient ethnoracial awareness to specifically participate in cultural tourism by presenting to their children a staged authenticity of the culture of their birth country. They do so by appropriating certain symbols and rituals from these cultures, which may also have informed adoptive parents' choice for a certain country to adopt from in the first place. This also gives a different meaning to Quiroz's (2007) claim that practices of assimilation in adoption do not "promote transnational identities …. [but rather constitute] colonial projects" (p. 25). In the case of the staged authenticity, the colonial dynamics of cultural appropriation do not exclude but rather aim to constitute transnational identities.

In sum, the self-perception of the Dutch as a white genetic nation fosters the belief that those who have their origin elsewhere, most notably people of colour, are also tied to an essentialized notion of cultural and genetic roots that lies in that place. As research from elsewhere in Northern and Western Europe and the United States has shown, such a belief results in practices of racial othering and authenticity staged through a white gaze as well as a pathologization of adoptees, disciplining them to go in search of their roots. Thus, it is again a mode of biopolitical regulation assigning transnational adoptees of colour's belonging to be "elsewhere."

1.3 Contemporary Adoptee Politics in the Netherlands

Finally, I will now turn to my case of contemporary adoptee politics in the Netherlands. Taking up the theoretical insights from the previous sections, I will show how they help to analyze the dynamics behind the emerging Dutch adoptee movement that is critical towards adoption as a

practice as well as those groups of adoptees who do support adoption. Furthermore, I will briefly discuss the often-proposed strategy that takes visibility and experience as a political point of departure in the light of Joan Scott's Foucauldian critique of the use of experience.

1.3.1 The 2016 Dutch Adoption Debate

Within the 2016 Dutch Adoption Debate, that was incited by the RSJ's policy advice to immediately stop intercountry adoptions from certain regions, both forces of assimilation and roots-essentialism seemed to be at play. Starting with the RSJ's policy advice itself, one of the specific arguments that the RSJ presented in its advice to the Dutch government against intercountry adoption is that it prevents a child from growing up in their "own country and culture" (Raad voor Strafrechtstoepassing en Jeugdbescherming, 2016). Problematically, this argument naturalizes the idea that the place where (potential future) adoptees essentially belong is the country of birth and its culture. What the RSJ contests here is thus not per se the question whether the intercountry adoptee belongs in the country of birth or in the adoptive country; rather, it questions whether a child's already assumed belonging to their birth country may be violated under certain circumstances by intercountry adoption within the current adoption system. The naturalization of the assumption that belonging lies in one's origin thus shifts the debate from questioning belonging itself to questioning the violation of a pre-given notion of belonging; it discursively puts the flexibility of belonging out of the question, as something no longer debatable.

In the Dutch radio debate mentioned in the introduction of this chapter between the two opposing organizations of adoptees UAI and SiG, the former of the two discursively naturalized the notion of belonging in origin as well, although in a somewhat different manner. Unequivocally supporting the RSJ's advice and its argumentation and calling for the abolition of adoption in its current form, UAI representative Anand Kaper agreed when being asked

about it that one of the major problems of the current adoption system is that often the adoption agencies involved make it impossible for adoptees to trace their first parents. I do not want to doubt here that the current adoption system has indeed allowed for or even stimulated practices of abuse and exploitation. In fact, in the aftermath of the 2016 Dutch Adoption Debate it was once again revealed that practices of adoption fraud have taken place in, for example, Bangladesh in the 1970s and 1980s through the falsification of documents and adoptions that were not authorized by or even know to first parents (Brans, 2017) and in Sri Lanka in the 1980s, where babies were abducted or produced on so-called "baby farms" to meet the international demand for adoptees (Boogaard, Ytsma, & Otten, 2017). However, what I do want to point out is that many adoptee activists who are critical of adoption directly connect such forms of abuse, exploitation, and fraud within practices of adoption with specific notions of roots and origin. Seeing adoption itself as a process of abuse and exploitation, these activists often argue that adoptees should not only investigate the problems within their own adoption process, but also rectify these past wrongdoings by reconnecting with their roots. Often, this is primarily focused on tracing one's individual first family. For example, following the aforementioned revelations of adoption fraud, several Dutch adoptees and adoptee organizations, among which an international group of adoptees and adoptee organizations led by UAI (United Adoptees International et al., 2017), are advocating for state-sponsored financial compensations for roots investigations and the use of DNA databases that are aimed at what Dewi Deijle calls "truth-finding" (Deijle, 2018; Deters, 2018). Deijle, an Indonesian-born Dutch adoptee and lawyer who started an online petition and who said to be preparing a legal case against the Dutch state on behalf of the organization *Mijn Roots* [My Roots], argues that the Dutch government has been negligent as it knew or could have been reasonably expected to know of the adoption fraud and child trafficking that took place in Indonesia the 1970s and 1980s, which was quite similar to the aforementioned cases of adoption fraud in Sri

Lanka and Bangladesh. Likewise, in early 2019 Sri Lankan-born Dutch adoptee Dilani Butink was the first adoptee to not only prepare, but actually submit a court case against the Dutch state for similar reasons (NOS, 2019).

I do not want to doubt the legitimacy of these adoptees' experiences, claims, and court cases. Rather, what I want to point out is that even when such claims are legitimate, the strong discursive connection that these cases build between adoption in general and the rectification of a past wrongdoing through truth-finding and tracing roots contributes to the naturalization of the idea that the loss of, and separation from, origins is a pathological condition that should be healed through finding truth in origin—very much in line with Verrier's aforementioned notion of the primal wound of adoption. This is specifically the case for the attention that adoption has received in the Dutch media during and after the 2016 Dutch Adoption Debate. It also often reproduces the assumption that adoptees' current personal identities are entirely incorrect because of past adoption fraud. This is something that, after finding out about her fraudulent pre-adoptive identity and adoption records, Sri Lankan-born Dutch adoptee Amanda Janssen expressed as follows in national newspaper *NRC*: "Ik ben niet meer dezelfde als wie ik was. Er mist een stuk" [I am no longer the same person as I used to be. A piece is missing] (Hilhorst, 2018). Such an understanding of the situation hence reproduces the idea that one can only find their identity by investigating who one "truly" was before the fraudulent adoption process.

Roots-essentialism is also being reproduced by media representations of adoption, such as television programmes about search and reunion. For example, every episode of the television programme *Eindelijk Thuis* [Finally Home] (KRO-NCRV, 2018a), broadcasted on Dutch national television since March 2018, follows another adoptee and one of their adoptive parents on their first roots trip to the adoptee's country of birth. The programme frames the adoptee's desire for such a roots trip in relation to the existence of emotional or (past)

behavioural problems or a crisis in identity formation that the adoptee experiences. However, a specific focus that exceeds the usual framing of identity crisis is the focus on the adoptee's relation to the adoptive parent with whom they are making their roots trip. As broadcasting company KRO-NCRV notes, one of the aims of the roots trip is to bring the adoptee and adoptive parent "closer to each other and closer to themselves" (KRO-NCRV, 2018b). Unlike usual, the primal wound of adoption that the roots trip is supposed to heal thus not only consists of a psychologized or pathologized wound of the individual adoptee, but also of the difficult or ambiguous relationship between adoptee and adoptive parent.

Whereas *Eindelijk Thuis* addresses a reunion between the adoptee and their so-called birth culture, the Dutch television programme *Spoorloos* [Without a Trace] (KRO, 1990) depicts reunions between long-lost "blood relatives." Having started broadcasting 29 years ago, the core characteristic of this programme is that the tracing of blood relatives takes place with the help of the programme presenter and their team. Although the tracers in this programme are not necessarily adoptees, the programme has strongly shaped common understandings of adoption in the Netherlands. Interestingly, in an opinion article in Dutch newspaper *Trouw*, UAI founder Hilbrand Westra (2009) criticizes the programme for appropriating and commercializing the stories of adoptees. He argues that the programme has not only broken the taboo around tracing one's first parents, but also normalized outsiders' intrusive behaviour of inappropriately questioning adoptees about their own history and potential tracing process, which he calls "Spoorloos-terreur" [Without a Trace-terror].

Similarly, in the radio debate between UAI and SiG, UAI representative Anand Kaper problematizes the radio host's question whether he himself has searched for his birth parents. Kaper argues that, although he himself later answers the question, even posing such a very personal question sometimes socially pressures adoptees into reluctantly answering. Thus, paradoxically both Westra and Kaper problematize the very disciplinary effects of the roots-

essentialism discourses that they, as representatives of UAI, themselves reproduce. The intrusive questions that both Westra and Kaper address are all too familiar to most transracial adoptees of colour. Specifically, the perhaps most widely shared experience among this group of adoptees is the question "Where are you from?" with the inevitable follow-up question "But where are you *really* from?" The problem of this pair of questions does not necessarily lie in its to adoptees often annoyingly repetitive character, but rather in the assumption that the place of origin and birth is the most "real," or at least more real than the adoptive country in which the adoptee has grown up.

Aside from the discursive naturalizations of roots-essentialism, practices reproducing the assimilative aim of adoption also became visible during the 2016 Dutch Adoption Debate. Here, it was mostly in the form of adoptees and news articles arguing against the RSJ's policy advice by presenting cases in which adoptees were happy or grateful about their adoption. For example, the magazine *LINDA.* (specifically targeting an audience of younger and middle-aged women) published an article on its website on the day of the RSJ advice, interviewing a Sri Lankan-born Dutch adoptee about how she is personally happy with the fact that she was adopted (Borren, 2016). She mentions that her young single birth mother was unable to raise her and that due to her adoption, she has gotten many more opportunities in her life than her siblings who were not adopted and grew up in Sri Lanka. Although she also talks about her roots trip to Sri Lanka and in fact mentions that she feels a partial sense of belonging to her birth country (hence partially rejecting the aim of assimilation), the main framing of the article seems to be around her gratefulness and understanding for her adoption, retrospectively constructing her adoptability as a child. This framing also ties into the expected gratitude that Frank Lindblad and Sonja Signell (2008) observe in their aforementioned study on Asian-born female adoptees in Sweden and the degrading attitudes they face. The framing is, moreover, especially evident from the interview quote taken for the title of the article, "I have ended up

very well" (Borren, 2016). In addition, the interviewee strikingly mentions how, aside from feeling different, she and her equally adopted sister did not have problems growing up as the only people of colour in the village in which she grew up, thus reproducing the assumed colour-blindness of neoliberalism.

Having shown how the biopolitical forces of both assimilation and roots-essentialism come into play in the 2016 Dutch Adoption Debate, in the next section I will finally turn to a general often-proposed strategy against neoliberal colour-blindness: the strategy to take one's own lived experiences as a political point of departure. I will analyze how this strategy is also being deployed by different adoptees and how, although sometimes politically productive, such a strategy also has its limitations.

1.3.2 The Foucauldian Critique of Experience as a Political Point of Departure

In an article in *The Guardian*, Korean-born U.S. American adoptee Nicole Chung (2019) writes about the reception of her recently published memoir. She recalls the surprise followed by a sense of relief that many showed after reading or hearing that she is still on good terms with her adoptive family. To many, this is indeed a surprise, given the many stories of adoptees who failed to emotionally attach to their adoptive parents, which are now being popularized for their allegedly "critical perspective" as well as for affirming the bionormative belief that a child is always better off with their biogenetically related birth parents. Chung argues that this relief in fact ties into people's own "requests for reassurance." She implies that the many questions about the relationship between her and her adoptive parents function as a way of policing the gratitude that adoptees are expected to feel for their adoption when she says that such questions function as "little tests I have to pass if I want to be perceived as anything other than a resentful adoptee, an ungrateful daughter, an angry person of color." Instead of seeking for the

comforting narrative that adoption and its outcomes are always positive and perhaps even constitute an anti-racist practice, she concludes by arguing that people should rather

> listen to transracial adoptees and make room for their perspectives, including the ones that make some uncomfortable – because when it comes to the wellbeing of adopted people and their families, the truth will serve far better than even the most comforting of lies.

She thus poses adoptees' lived experience as a point of departure for challenging the comforting narratives that people hope to find. A somewhat similar approach of visibility is deployed by Dutch adoptee of colour Rodrigo van Rutte in his yearly recurring temporary Pop-up Museum of Adoption in The Hague. In this museum, van Rutte brings together several existing series of photographs displaying portraits of Dutch adoptees of colour. He explains that his aim is

> to make the adoptee visible [because] every adoptee has his own story, his own truth, and that is what I want to show, so that we adoptees can *ourselves* say who we are, what we think, and what we do, instead of being talked *about*. (van der Zalm, 2018)

Thus, van Rutte fulfils his own aim to make the adoptee visible quite literally through the use of photographs.

The strategies proposed by both Chung and van Rutte are very much in line with the strategy against political racelessness under neoliberalism that Emejulu and Bassel (2017) propose in their aforementioned study on minority women in Europe. Drawing on Patricia Hill Collins's work, they suggest that an intersectional politics centered around lived experiences as a point of departure is necessary to achieve "epistemic justice" (p. 29) in the face of the erasing forces of neoliberalism and modernity. Although in some occasions, taking lived experiences as a political point of departure to make oneself visible is certainly a meaningful and emancipatory political act, such a strategy has also been critiqued. As Joan Scott (1991) points out, for a long time historians of difference (i.e. historians who study non-normative "others") have attempted to uncover non-hegemonic perspectives and to give visibility to the

marginalized. They have done so, based on the assumption that visibility is a matter of knowledge production and hence (following Foucauldian logic) also a mechanism of power. Therefore, these historians of difference have also taken and used lived experiences of marginalized groups and individuals as (historical) evidence. However, Scott argues that taking for granted the evidence of experience actually tends to essentialize the difference that such historians claim to study. It often negates the way in which difference is produced by oppressive structures as well as how experience is embedded in a context that is itself discursively constructed.

The dynamics that Scott describes indeed become visible in van Rutte's Pop-up Museum of Adoption. As van Rutte notes, "I have been able to find my family, at least I know what my story is. That completed me a lot. I think other adoptees deserve this as well" (van der Zalm, 2018). This implies that his strategy of making visible adoptees of colour is directly connected to making visible and centering their place of origin. The latter was indeed confirmed to me when I myself visited van Rutte's museum in the summer of 2018, when he told me about his habit to take a picture together with other visiting adoptees in front of a photograph displaying an adoptee born in the same country as the visitor. This is, of course, not to imply that van Rutte's museum does not make a meaningful contribution. Rather, just like the adoptee movement that gained momentum and became more visible following the 2016 Dutch Adoption Debate, van Rutte's aim is a very legitimate one, even though it also contributes to certain normalizing biopolitical mechanisms at the same time.

Chapter 2: Re-imagining Adoptee Politics as Queer Diaspora

When I first watched the eighth episode of science fiction film franchise *Star Wars* (Kennedy, Bergman, & Johnson, 2017) in late 2017, there were two scenes that stuck with me. After lead character Rey finally finds Jedi Master-in-exile Luke Skywalker (in the closing scene of the previous film) and Luke, not having met Rey before, asks her "Where are you from?," Rey responds with a single word: "Nowhere." A later scene in the film emphasizes this absence of an origin story by showing Rey in a mysterious cave, speaking out her desire to know who her parents are. As she is standing in front of a partially transparent wall, she sees two silhouettes approaching from the other side. Just few moments later, these silhouettes merge into one, before the single remaining silhouette reveals to only be a mirror image of Rey herself. The explicit and seemingly intentional absence of any origin story for Rey's character, which is most strongly signified in these two scenes, is something that has kept fans speculating about her ancestry up until today (Kleinman, 2019; Phillipson, 2019)—awaiting the yet to be released ninth episode of *Star Wars*—as all that is known about her is that she grew up as an orphan on the desert planet of Jakku after being forcibly removed from, or perhaps sold by, her parents. Yet, unlike many, I admire Rey's character precisely for the writers' refusal to, at least up until now, put her in a determinist framework with an inherent relation between her actions and her ancestry before being orphaned. Such a refusal is not the case for many other appearances of the figure of the orphan in popular culture, such as Luke Skywalker himself in previous *Star Wars* films (for example, Kazanjian & Marquand, 1983) or Harry Potter in J. K. Rowling's novel series (for example, Rowling, 1997).

Sometimes, I like to think of myself as Rey, as a subject without an origin. I imagine myself as someone unbound to history, as someone not born to any parents, people, or nation, as someone who just came to be one day—dropped from heaven onto the earth, deployed by

some higher entity, or maybe just by sheer coincidence, as one of nature's mistakes. A fantasy such as this one might sound like a desire to become an unrestrained neoliberal subject, one that just like the figure of the orphan in many of its cultural appearances has the potential to fulfil the ultimate neoliberal dream of the self-made subject. It is a desire for, in Caren Irr's (2017) words, the figure of "[t]he orphan as a mobile, independent entrepreneur of the self" (p. 228). However, this fantasy can also be read differently, as one that in fact has an origin story similar to the biblical explanation of the origin of humanity, with the sinning pair Adam and Eve falling down from heaven onto the earth not long after God had created them. Although this origin story of humanity is often used as a justification for heterosexuality as a natural given, Benigno Sánchez-Eppler and Cindy Patton (2000) show that this biblical explanation can also be read as a queer narrative. Such a reading centers the relation between God and Adam before the creation of Eve as a homosocial one and hence hints towards Adam and Eve's expulsion form Eden as the first queer diaspora.

One scholar who has taken up this concept of queer diaspora is Asian American queer theorist David Eng, who shows how the queering of diaspora and the subsequent rejection of heteronormative and linear notions of reproduction and origin can figure as an answer to what he calls queer liberalism and neoliberal multiculturalism. In this chapter, I will further unpack the concepts of queer liberalism and neoliberal multiculturalism and show how they broadly overlap with the dynamics of white innocence and neoliberal colour-blindness as discussed in chapter one. However, unlike the political strategies that take experience as a point of departure as briefly discussed in chapter one, Eng shows how his concept of queer diaspora constitutes a more promising basis for resistance. I will take up this concept as well as Eng's psychoanalytical approach of racial melancholia and racial reparation to reinterpret the contemporary Dutch adoptee movement. Finally, I will argue that Eng's use of racial melancholia too much relies on the assumed conflation of race and culture, and that undoing

this conflation results in the imperative to create communities that include both adoptees of colour and non-adopted people of colour.

2.1 Queer Liberalism and Queer Diasporas

Before applying Eng's concept of queer diaspora to the current Dutch adoptee movement, I will first show the overlap between queer liberalism and neoliberal colour-blindness as well as further unpack the psychoanalytical underpinnings of queer diaspora.

2.1.1 Queer Liberalism and/as Neoliberal Colour-Blindness

David Eng (2010) positions his work on transnational adoption in relation to the concepts of queer liberalism, the racialization of intimacy, and queer diaspora. Situating his analysis within the U.S. context, he argues that contemporary U.S. American lesbian and gay politics follows a liberal framework that is primarily occupied with inclusion, citizenship, visibility, rights, and the law. This is what he calls queer liberalism: not queer as questioning normalcy, but rather "queerness" in the sense of lesbian and gay politics, which is turning towards liberalism. According to Eng, this liberal inclusion-focused approach also entails the acceptance of consumerism and the liberal dualism of public versus private. As the public sphere is shrinking under neoliberal capitalism, not only lesbian and gay politics, but also race is being privatized into the sphere of kinship and family, hence depoliticizing both and detaching sexuality and race from each other. Eng argues that this privatization and depoliticization of race, for which he uses the term racialization of intimacy, goes hand in hand with a colour-blind politics that constitutes what Jodi Melamed calls "neoliberal multiculturalism" (as cited in Eng, 2010, p. 9). Rather than allegedly contributing to a non-racist multicultural society, Eng argues similar to Gloria Wekker that this colour-blindness instead contributes to the collective forgetting of a colonial and imperial past, hence tying into Euro-American modernity. He argues that therefore

race is disappearing as a social and political category and hence being historicized "such that it can only return as a *structure of feeling*, as a melancholic trace demanding historical explanation" [emphasis added] (p. 10). As an answer to queer liberalism and the racialization of intimacy, Eng brings race and sexuality together again in what he calls queer diaspora. As he explains, queer diaspora is both a concept and a methodology to think outside of the neoliberal multicultural framework. On the one hand, introducing diaspora functions to racialize queerness and shine a critical light on the workings of heteronormativity within normative notions of race, nation, social belonging, exclusion, and the global workings of capitalism. On the other hand, queering the concept of diaspora is necessary to challenge the ways in which conventional notions of diaspora have not only resisted, but also reproduced the normalizing and naturalizing mechanisms of the modern nation-state. Eng argues that diaspora is generally conceptualized "as displacement from a lost homeland or exile from an exalted origin" (p. 13). According to him, this contributes to the ideas of nationalism, racial purity, and heteronormativity, and ultimately modernity. Queer diaspora, however, rejects this belief in a return to origins and aims to contest normative notions of kinship, race, and belonging. Furthermore, queer diaspora aims to move beyond the liberal framework of rights and visibility to instead acknowledge race *as* a structure of feeling to also capture "the more ephemeral, intangible, and evanescent feelings of kinship" (p. 15). Ultimately, he thereby aims to conceptualize kinship through a poststructuralist lens.

The privatization of race under queer liberalism is very similar to the individualization of race under neoliberal colour-blindness. One could say that, in fact, queer liberalism and neoliberal colour-blindness are two terms to describe the same dynamics, although approached from a different angle. Therefore, Eng's turn to queer diaspora as an answer to queer liberalism implies that queer diaspora could as well provide a productive basis for resistance against the mechanisms of neoliberal colour-blindness as discussed in chapter one. Therefore, I will use

the following section to further unpack Eng's concept of queer diaspora and its connection to the psychoanalytical concepts of racial melancholia and racial reparation.

2.1.2 The Psychoanalytical Underpinnings of Queer Diaspora: Racial Melancholia and Racial Reparation

Moving beyond the much-discussed black-white racial relations in the United States, Eng turns to queer Asian diasporas instead. Specifically, though not exclusively, he turns to two cases of Korean-born U.S. American adoptees, arguing that transnational adoption as a typical post-World War II phenomenon strongly ties into liberalism and norms and beliefs of kinship and belonging. His psychoanalytical reading of the first of these cases, adoptee Deann Borshay Liem's (2000) documentary *First Person Plural*, does indeed reveal a lot about belonging both in Borshay Liem's case as well as beyond that, as I will show later. This takes place specifically through Eng's use of the concept of racial melancholia, which he originally conceptualized in an article written together with Shinhee Han (Eng & Han, 2000). For this, Eng and Han strongly draw on Sigmund Freud's work. They explain that according to him the loss of any object—which can range from "a loved person … to the loss of some abstraction …, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on" (Freud, as cited in Eng & Han, 2000, p. 670)—can result in two different psychic states: mourning and melancholia. In the case of mourning, the person who mourns can eventually let go of the lost object by declaring it to be dead and finding a new object to invest libido in. Melancholia, on the other hand, describes the psychic state and largely unconscious process in which the mourner cannot resolve their grief, cannot process the ambivalences that the loss produces, and hence cannot let go of the lost object. Attempting to psychically keep the lost object alive, the mourner starts to identify with both the object itself and its emptiness to the extent that it becomes psychically damaging. This may ultimately result in suicide, either physically or according to Eng and Han also in the form of a "suicide" of identity. For Freud, this means that melancholia, or in other words "a mourning without end"

(Eng & Han, 2000, p. 670), should unlike "normal" mourning be seen as a pathological condition. On the contrary, however, Eng and Han argue that melancholia is not a pathology as for many people it is an everyday experience shaped by processes of racial othering (Muñoz, as cited in Eng & Han, 2000, p. 693). To further conceptualize and illustrate their concept of *racial* melancholia, they turn to people of colour living in diaspora, specifically Asian Americans, and bring in Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry. In Bhabha's conceptualization, mimicry refers to the colonial power structures in which people of colour are impelled to mimic whiteness (Bhabha, as cited in Eng & Han, 2000, p. 676). Eng and Han argue that mimicry functions parallel to melancholia through the centrality of ambivalence in the workings of both concepts. When melancholia, as mentioned before, is characterized by the inability to resolve the ambivalences that follow from a loss, they argue that mimicry is characterized by ambivalence for its inherently complex relation towards assimilation. Returning to the aspect of race, they point out that "mimicry for Asian Americans is always a partial success as well as a partial failure to assimilate into regimes of whiteness" (Eng & Han, 2000, p. 677). For Asian American diasporic people, the ambivalence of mimicry is thus directed towards both whiteness as successful assimilation and origin as the exact opposite. Speaking in terms of racial melancholia, it is thus the loss of origin or Asianness that cannot be properly mourned, and whiteness into which Asian Americans cannot properly invest new libido as they are racially rejected by U.S. American racial power structures.

In reality, the workings of racial melancholia for Asian Americans are not as straight forward as it might seem. Eng and Han emphasize that in practice, Asian Americans often psychically negotiate between mourning and melancholia. They also point out that melancholia can either be resolved or transferred over generations. The former may take place through, for example, the formation of new communities. Yet, as Eng shows with Borshay Liem's case, for transnational adoptees this communal aspect in resolving melancholia is largely absent. He

explains that Borshay Liem's racial melancholia is not recognized by her adoptive parents, as they do not recognize her losses in the first place. For example, Borshay Liem's pre-adoptive history in Korea as Cha Jung Hee is erased and forgotten, even though she still used to have many memories of her birth country and parents right after her adoption at eight years old. This erasure subsequently came to determine her place of belonging: no longer Korea, but only the United States. Ultimately, Borshay Liem is thus forced to face her racial melancholia in isolation. What is, however, implicitly recognized by her parents is the racial difference between them, even though the hegemony of colour-blindness forecloses this to be spoken or thought out loud. According to Eng, the recognition of racial difference results in "an emotional cleaving of great consequence in the intimate space of the family.… [which] serves to redouble the effects of racial melancholia" (Eng, 2010, p. 122). Thus, taking up the concept of racial melancholia as the structure of feeling as which race returns, Eng ultimately shows how race is indeed disappearing under the colour-blindness of queer liberalism. Through Borshay Liem's case, he shows that for transnational adoptees specifically this privatization of race, or the racialization of intimacy, effects a political individualization that is generally speaking typical for neoliberalism. As Eng notes, "in Borshay Liem's words, [racial melancholia] reduces memories to dreams and agency to fantasy" (p. 123). The privatization and individualization of race thus take place to the extent that they impact the transnational adoptee's political subjectivity.

Having shown the connection between the larger context of queer liberalism and the racialization of intimacy and the individual lives and experiences of transnational adoptees, Eng takes on a queer diasporic lens by turning to Melanie Klein's object relations theory and concept of psychic reparation. As Eng explains, Klein's theory comprises the psychic splitting between "good" and "bad" objects. The clearest example of such psychic splitting is one that is particularly usual for infants, who according to Klein picture their real mother in their head

as two different mothers: a "good" mother, feeding them and satisfying their needs, and a "bad" mother, who the infant perceives to be a source of frustration. As the infant grows older, this psychic split is usually followed by a phase of what Klein calls reparation, during which the infant realizes that there is in fact only one real mother, who is both good and bad. According to Eng, a similar psychic split is visible in Borshay Liem's case. The ambivalence that Borshay Liem feels towards both her birth mother and her adoptive mother, the rejection that she faces from both of them, and the fundamental reality that there are in fact two real mothers instead of one, result in the fact that she cannot psychically perceive either of them as a good object. This directly ties into the connection between Klein's theory and Freud's work on mourning and melancholia. As Eng and Han explain in their earlier article on racial melancholia, Klein conceptualizes mourning as the "clustering of the lost object with the good objects of the past" (Klein, as cited in Eng & Han, 2000, p. 688). Thus, according to Eng, not being able to conceive any of the two mothers as a good object is the reason that Borshay Liem is stuck in her state of melancholia. Acknowledging that the two mothers take up two racialized positions for Borshay Liem—and arguably also represent the two racialized positions of U.S. American whiteness and Korean Asianness, beyond the mothers specifically—Eng argues that the process of reparation is in fact a process of *racial* reparation. A return to the lost object, either in the form of the birth mother or Korean Asianness, is thus not only unproductive for denying to declare the lost object dead and hence preventing it from being put together with the good objects from the past. Neither is it unproductive merely because attempting to hold on to the lost object denies the reality that, as in Borshay Liem's case, such "a personal narrative of self-realization, completion, and closure … is unattainable" (Eng, 2010, p. 132). As an answer to racial melancholia, a structure of feeling as which the disappearing element of race still appears under neoliberal multiculturalism, racial reparation must also logically reject a simple return to origins to take on the lens of queer diaspora. According to Eng, Borshay Liem must thus reject

the desire to return and instead "return to mother and motherland not by going back, but by moving forward" (p. 135).

This "moving forward" is made more concrete in the two chapters that follow the analysis of Borshay Liem's documentary. In the case of Mina, the other Korean-born U.S. American adoptee whose racial melancholia he analyses together with Shinhee Han, Eng shows how racial transitional objects can play an important role in negotiating the ambivalences of racial melancholia on an individual level. Eng and Han show how such objects create a psychic space for Mina to repair the psychic split between on the one hand whiteness and her "good" adoptive mother, who she idealized, and on the other hand Koreanness and her birth mother, who she strongly devalued. Just like the lost object, a transitional object can be anything, ranging from a person to an idea, which thus provides a ground for the melancholic to bring together the many different and contradicting feelings and ambivalence that cause the psychic split. Finally, Eng turns to racial reparation on a collective level. In his reading of Rea Tajiri's (1991) documentary *History and Memory: for Akiko and Takashige*, he shows how collective racial reparation takes place through so-called affective correspondences: By introducing forgotten memories of the internment of Japanese Americans in the U.S. during World War II—experienced by her mother, but not by herself—in her documentary and bringing them together with her own experiences of being racialized, Eng argues that Tajiri affectively brings the past into the present. In other words, Eng argues that that Tajiri's recalling of forgotten memories on the collective Japanese American level allows for rethinking what he calls the what-could-have-been. She thereby rejects the liberal writing of history as linear with a clear division between the past and the present and contests the logics of colour-blind neoliberal multiculturalism. Eng argues that the documentary figures as a means of collective racial reparation and poses this form of reparation in the psychoanalytical sense in opposition to political reparation, which according to him underwrites the liberal lineal notion of history. As

Eng (2011) explains, political reparation refers to the idea of restitution or compensation for unjustifiable harm or violence that has been done to any individual or group, including state violence. On the other hand, the psychoanalytical notion of reparation in Klein's object relations theory refers to the reparation of psychic harm and the hatred towards bad objects. According to Eng, political reparation relies on legal notions of objectivity as well as a liberal individualist framework as it is based on a human rights claim, even though according to him political reparation always has an emotional component as well. He thus argues that in Tajiri's case, political reparation in the form of a national apology and financial restitution to all surviving internees in 1988 only reinforced the embedding of the internment of Japanese Americans into a historical past. Rather than following the liberal logics of political reparation, it is thus the psychoanalytical notion of reparation that helps moving forward, bringing the past into the present.

2.2 Towards a Queer Diasporic Adoptee Politics

Following Eng's psychoanalytical reading of his cases, one could argue that the adoptee activism that has been emerging recently in the Netherlands is caught up in similar dynamics of racial melancholia. As discussed in chapter one, recent activist mobilization by adoptees and the politicization of adoption in the Netherlands generally means taking a critical stance towards adoption itself, calling for the abolition of the contemporary system of transnational adoption or at least a strong reform. As shown most notably in the example of Dewi Deijle's petition mentioned in chapter one, this also entails a return to roots specifically through a call for political reparation, something that Eng is sceptical of as just discussed.

This newly emerging adoptee movement can be read as a case of racial melancholia. In such a reading, the desire for political reparation figures as a way of tracing back a "homeland" or "authentic identity" that has not just been lost, but in fact stolen by those responsible for the

adoption procedures. Such political reparation then takes the form of a formal apology, transparency regarding the Dutch state's role in these malpractices, or the abolition of the transnational adoption system in which it is currently institutionalized. These adoptee activists hope that this political reparation will enable them to (at least partly) undo the losses that they have suffered and serve them justice. However, form a psychic point of view, undoing a loss is not possible. Rather, the aim for political restitution can be read as a melancholic move itself that follows from holding on to the lost object. Even if the Dutch state were to recognize its own responsibility in the malpractices of the past, a return to roots and a desire for reconnection with places and people from the past will always remain unfulfilled. In other words, as Barbara Yngvesson notes, "going back may complicate the experience of identity, constituting it as dynamic, discontinuous, and *always in need of one more return*" [emphasis added] (Yngvesson, 2010, p. 9). It is this very insatiability of tracing roots what seems to make these adoptees' racial melancholia reduce, as Eng noted, "agency to fantasy" (Eng, 2010, p. 123).

Simply reading the Dutch adoptee movement as a case of racial melancholia would, however, be short-sighted. Although it certainly seems to be the case that racial melancholia is involved, merely reading as such does not allow one to see how this adoptee movement also constitutes a means of *claiming* agency, not just *losing* it to fantasy. First, as mentioned earlier, Freud's conceptualization of melancholia entails both not being able to let go of the lost object as well as not being able to invest libido into a new object. However, the mobilization of certain adoptees into this movement is becoming not only a means, but also an end in itself. The meaning that this aim gives to adoptees, as well as the communal nature of the project, constitutes a meaningful new object for adoptees to invest libido in. As such a community constitutes a non-white space that consists of (at least in majority) adoptees of colour, there is no direct rejection from the side of whiteness involved. The collectivity which goes against the neoliberal individualization of transnational adoptees helps to move from melancholia to

mourning. Moreover, the aim for political reparation is not merely aimed at undoing the past. The connection between recognition and transparency in many of these adoptees' own cases and the call for the abolition or reform of adoption also implies a future-oriented goal (preventing that history keeps on repeating itself) into which new psychic libido can be invested.

Second, one could argue that the aim for political restitution is not a melancholic move, but in fact a last move after which the adoptee can finally let go of their lost roots. This would, according to Eng's line of thought, contribute to the liberal logics that inscribe (in this case) the colonial dynamics behind transnational adoption into the past, hence historicizing them. Yet, on the other hand, the aim for political restitution is also a move against the privatization of such dynamics. Furthermore, as just mentioned, the Dutch adoptee movement is also future-oriented in the sense that it connects the malpractices from the past with a call for the abolition or reform of transnational adoption as it is currently practiced. The presentation of adoptees' experiences and impact from the malpractices of the past is being affectively connected to the present through the speaking out of the desire that they do not want any new adoptees to experience the same, combining political reparation with an approach to memory that is similar to Tajiri's.

At this point, it also seems worthwhile to return to Wekker's (2016) note on the conflation of race on the one hand and ethnicity on the other within contemporary discourses of multiculturalism. As mentioned in chapter one, Wekker defines race and ethnicity as the respectively biological and cultural components of the same socially constructed category. As pointed out, ethnicity also comprehends "differences based on origin, appearance, history, culture, language, and religion" (G. Wekker, 2016, p. 22). Whereas in some cases the two indeed overlap in accordance with hegemonic racial-ethnic norms and expectations, this is specifically for transnational adoptees hardly the case. Yet, the way in which Eng uses his

concept of racial melancholia does not thoroughly question or substantially contest this conflation. Within his psychoanalytical framework, for Eng the lost object seems to always in one way or another be the mother as individual or Koreanness or Asianness in general as either represented by the mother or in the form of the *mother*land. In turn, the rejection that his subjects of analysis face is coming from a general U.S. American whiteness. He thus presents Koreanness, Asianness, and U.S. American whiteness as a singular whole without distinguishing between the racial and the ethnic elements within them. Yet, for both Borshay Liem as well as for Mina, the loss is not so much constituted by the loss of race as it is by the loss of Korean Asianness as cultural/ethnic characteristic: As Eng and Han explain, as a result of her racial melancholia Mina psychically regards non-adopted Korean Americans as bad objects for the way they perform Korean ethnicity through cultural appearance and language, for example for speaking Korean instead of English amongst each other, which she does not speak herself and for which she in turn blames her adoptive parents and the way in which they culturally raised her. On the other hand, the rejection they face by U.S. American whiteness is a rejection based on their race and racial appearance in the first place and not so much on their white cultural subjectivity and understanding, which privileges them in relation to non-adopted first-generation migrants whose rejection by U.S. American—or in other cases European—whiteness is based on both race and culture/ethnicity. Thus, understanding the transnational adoptee as a subject which is culturally but not racially assimilated into U.S. American/European whiteness, the social isolation in which the transnational adoptee has to negotiate racial melancholia is thus first and foremost a form of *racial* isolation. Eng's argument that the recognition of racial difference by Borshay Liem's parents serves to reinforce her experiences of racial melancholia should thus be read as concerning the loss of a non-white or *racially* Korean/Asian social environment. Resolving transnational adoptees' racial

melancholia should therefore entail the undoing of this conflation of race and ethnicity, in the first place when it comes to adoptees' self-understanding.

A practice in which the undoing of the race/ethnicity conflation takes a central role for East-Asian adoptees is the so-called banana analogy, with which many are familiar. In some cases, this analogy is put forward by the adoptee themselves in a somewhat joking manner: "Just like a banana, I am yellow from the outside, but white from the inside." Yet, by undoing the race/culture conflation, this joke does not necessarily carry an anti-racist connotation itself. Posing the "yellow" of racial Asianness on the outside in opposition to the cultural whiteness on the inside implies that Asianness only belongs to the realm of the visible on a superficial level, as a layer wrapped around one's inner subjectivity that is constituted by cultural/ethnic whiteness. Therefore, it is not surprising that this banana analogy is often put forward as a joking response to an uncomfortable situation in which one is being racialized. To better illustrate this example, imagine the following situation, which is quite typical for transnational adoptees: Someone (most likely a non-adopted white person) who does not know you asks you (a transnational adoptee of colour) where you are from. Rather than answering by mentioning your country of birth as expected by the inquirer, you mention that you are from white-majority country X, where you were raised. When the inquirer responds saying "But you don't look like you are from there," you in turn respond with the banana analogy, saying "I am indeed yellow from the outside, but I am white from the inside." As can be seen from this example, such a typical application of the banana analogy is not an anti-racist means of undoing the race/ethnicity conflation, but rather an assimilationist means (although perhaps as coping mechanism against the inquirer's "micro-aggression") of excusing one's own East-Asian appearance to affirm that one is actually white. The banana analogy thus comes to mean "*Despite* being yellow from the outside, I am white from the inside." Yet, this does not mean that the analogy necessarily serves as an assimilationist coping mechanism. It is precisely this

close reading of the analogy that enables us to reformulate it in a way that invites us to rethink the possibilities for an anti-racist adoptee politics: "I am yellow from the outside, *despite* being white from the inside," or in other words, "I am racially Asian, despite being culturally white."

Understanding the transnational adoptee as a subject whose loss has taken place on both the cultural/ethnic as well as racial level, but whose rejection takes place on the racial level only, stimulates us to not only consider racial reparation in Eng's conceptualization—which is in fact *cultural* or *ethnic* reparation—on the psychic level, but also to consider both a psychic as well as a political response on the racial level. As the transracial adoptee of colour is generally culturally/ethnically assimilated into whiteness, the psychic libido that faces a rejection from whiteness is the libido which in a state of racial melancholia fails to detach from the loss of a racially non-white social environment. Yet, this loss of a racial community is arguably not as definite as the loss of culture faced by the transnational adoptee, as it can be recreated more easily than a culture can be (re)learned. This impels us to think of adoptee communities as not a strict community of adoptees only, in which the loss of origin, culture, and ethnicity is often at the center of attention, but as also involving a connection with non-adopted communities of colour—a connection that, as Tobias Hübinette (2019) points out, has so far hardly been made.

The construction of non-white racial communities for adoptees of colour operates precisely on the intersection of the psychic and political dimensions of race. Psychically, these communities can come to figure as new objects to invest libido in, similar to the Asian American communities which Eng mentions as an answer to racial melancholia for non-adopted Asians Americans. In more political terms, they can also figure as a means to contest the privatization of race under neoliberal multiculturalism, or in other words, the racialization of intimacy. This goes for such communities' presence within the strict neoliberal-public realm itself, but also for the connection and hence undoing of the neoliberal distinction between the

public and the private. As social spaces of belonging that operate on both the political level of visibility as well as on the affective level of belonging, tying into race as a structure of feeling, such communities thus have the potential to challenge the logics of neoliberal multiculturalism and queer liberalism in their very core through the lens of queer diaspora.

The question is then how such communities of adoptees and non-adopted people of colour can fulfil this aim of queering diaspora, without falling prey to the aforementioned normative logics of diaspora based on origin and hence nationalism, racial purity, heteronormativity, and modernity. One aspect that is certainly important is to not merely focus on the country or region of origin in the creation of such communities. Especially among adoptees, taking the country of birth as a principle of organizing is a common practice. This happens both on the national level within the adoptive countries as well as on the international level. Although organizing based on the place of birth can be beneficial in some instances, an adoptee of colour politics based on queer diaspora should certainly reject this as the sole principle of organizing when it comes to both adoptee-only communities as well as communities of adoptees and non-adopted people of colour to not restrict itself to the limits of an identity politics based on a specific place of origin.

I will take up this question in the next section, in which I will turn to José Esteban Muñoz's work on disidentification.

Chapter 3: Adoptive Disidentifications

I was eight, perhaps nine or ten years old when my classmates from elementary school started teasing me with my last name, de Blank, which was passed on from my adoptive father onto me following my adoption. Unlike in French, where the somewhat similar *blanc* means "white," in Dutch the word *blank* literally means "plain" or "colourless." Until recently, this word was commonly used and accepted to indicate racially white people. It was thus not surprising that my classmates, among them some of my close friends, found this to be something easy to make jokes about by pointing out the contradiction between the meaning of my name and my East-Asian racial appearance. It was not until years later that I realized that specifically this joke was so humiliating to me because it used my own name as a means of racially othering me.

I had not heard such jokes about my name for a long time, until the usage of *blank* to indicate racial whiteness became increasingly criticized for its colonial connotations. On 24 January 2018, Dutch public broadcaster NOS announced that it would no longer use *blank* when speaking about race, and instead from then on only use the word *wit* (literally meaning "white") in such occasions. In their announcement, they cited among others black feminist Anousha Nzume, who points out that the colourlessness and pureness that *blank* indicates implies a certain racial superiority, whereas *wit* simply indicates a colour (Nieuwsuur, 2018)—a critique of the implied colourlessness of *blank* that is very much in line with Gloria Wekker's (2016) concept of white innocence, as discussed in chapter one. This decision from the NOS was immediately met with strong criticism from neoliberal conservatives and the radical right (among which several national politicians), ridiculing the choice for *wit* over *blank* by summing up unrelated Dutch terms and expressions in which replacing the word *blank* by *wit* makes no sense as well as coining the hashtag #ikbenblank [I am *blank*] (Dijkhoff, 2018; Klei, 2018). As a result of this wave of right-wing criticism, people started to make remarks about my name in

relation to my racial appearance again, specifically on social media after I made several anti-racist statements there. For example, people sarcastically told me that I should first change my own "racist" name before criticizing others for their racism. To my own surprise, one person actually accused me of using a false name on my social media profile. In response to these remarks, I decided to describe myself in the biography section on my social media profile as the "only Dutch person who is *Blank* and not *wit*," contrasting the two terms by re-appropriating the colonial term *blank* for myself as a person of colour bearing that name while explicitly assigning the term *wit* to white people, as well as drawing on my position as adoptee given that all of my family members who bear the same (quite rare) last name are in fact racially *wit*.

At the time that I wrote this phrase on my social media profile, I did not realize that such a tactic can in fact be read as what José Esteban Muñoz (1999) calls an act of disidentification, which he conceptualizes as "a strategy that works on and against the dominant ideology … to transform a cultural logic from within" (p. 11). Indeed, within the specific structure of the phrase "only Dutch person who is *Blank* and not *wit*," the term *blank* is not simply rejected as a colonial means of obscuring white people's colour, but instead taken from the dominant discourse of white innocence and re-signified as part of an anti-colonial formation. Muñoz takes his conceptualization of disidentification from French linguist Michel Pêcheux's schema, in which disidentification operates as a third mode in which a subject can relate to a dominant ideology or hegemonic discourse, next to identification and counteridentification. In a racial context, Muñoz describes identification as the assimilation of a subject of colour with the dominant racial structures of society, whereas counteridentification would entail anti-assimilation through, in its purest form, people of colour's racial separatism from the white majority (Muñoz, 1999, p. 18)—something that, within Muñoz's logic, ultimately only reproduces the logic of the dominant ideology. As an alternative to both

identification and counteridentification, Muñoz argues that disidentification has the potential to form a mode of resistance from within the structures of discourse and power in the Foucauldian sense, not least because according to Foucault there is nothing outside of discourse (Muñoz, 1999, pp. 18–19) as discussed in chapter one.

In the upcoming section, I will further discuss Muñoz's concept of disidentification and show how and why such an approach, at least in theory, constitutes a promising basis for a new adoptee of colour politics in line with the discussion of David Eng's work in chapter two. As a means of exploring alternatives to the current Dutch adoptee movement, I will then turn to adoptee-scholar John McLeod's work and show how his resignification of blood lines into "life lines" can be read as an act of disidentification from biogenetic normativity and the hegemony of roots and origin. Finally, I will formulate several brief thoughts of how disidentification cannot only be useful to challenge biogenetic normativity, but also to work on and against the racial logics of neoliberal multiculturalism for adoptees of colour specifically.

3.1 Disidentification

Disidentification's method to work and transform the dominant ideology and hegemonic discourses from within is highly apt for the adoptee of colour and their position of in-betweenness under white neoliberal multiculturalism. As discussed in chapter two, deconstructing the hegemonic conflation of race and ethnicity shows how adoptees of colour are, more than non-adopted people of colour, socialized into ethno-cultural whiteness. Hence, taking whiteness as point of departure to disidentify from constitutes a promising strategy. As Muñoz notes, however, turning to disidentification should not mean that other strategies of resistance must by definition be rejected. He emphasizes that direct resistance or conformity are equally necessary to survive dominant ideologies in the public sphere in certain occasions. Disidentification should thus be seen not as a replacement for, but rather as an alternative in

addition to some of the existing strategies of the contemporary Dutch adoptee of colour movement. Having already analyzed and critiqued the normalizing mechanisms that are sometimes at play within these existing strategies, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to argue in which specific situations disidentification would or would not be a better strategy than the existing ones.

To better understand the mechanisms of disidentification, it is worthwhile to consider several examples that Muñoz analyzes. One of these is his discussion of the origins of the fictional character Superman in the late 1930s. As he points out, the figure of Superman was invented in a context in which Nietzsche's *Übermensch* was re-conceptualized and deployed by National Socialism to propagate white superiority and the anti-Semitism belief of Jewish bodily weakness. Muñoz argues that through Superman, its two Jewish creators attempted to re-appropriate the idea of the *Übermensch* from National Socialist thought and instead deployed it as a fictional protagonist with Judeo-Christian characteristics. He thus points out that Superman's creators attempted to contest National Socialist logic by, following his own conceptualization of disidentification, working "on and against" it. A second example that Muñoz mentions is Jack Halberstam's concept of female masculinity, which he unfortunately does not discuss in much detail. Muñoz notes that by detaching masculinity from the male body so explicitly, Halberstam disidentifies from masculinity through "a critical recycling of the term" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 58). Third, and discussed most in detail out of these three, is Muñoz's analysis of drag artist and queer of colour Vaginal Davis. He argues that in Davis's drag performance of the figure Clarence, a white supremacist militiaman, it is precisely through parody, the failure of passing, that disidentification does its work. By performing Clarence but not passing as a real, white militiaman, Davis deploys what Muñoz calls a "tactical misrecognition" (p. 106): intentionally leaving parts of the black and queer self visible in the parody performance and hence undermining the pureness of the performed militiaman's

whiteness, heterosexuality, and white supremacy. Muñoz describes such an act of disidentification as "ground-level cultural terrorism" (p. 102); not as commercial drag aimed at the majoritarian public, but "as *terrorist drag*—terrorist in that she is performing the nation's internal terrors around race, gender, and sexuality" [emphasis in original] (p. 108). According to him, such cultural terrorism constitutes counterpublics, a term that was first coined by Nancy Fraser (1990) as "subaltern counterpublics" (p. 67) and later further conceptualized within the field of queer theory by Michael Warner (2002). Fraser defined subaltern counterpublics as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). I will briefly return to this notion of counterpublics in relation to disidentification later.

In the section that follows, I will first discuss how a strategy of disidentification can be applied to address the normativity of biogenetic kinship based on already existing scholarship, before giving a more speculative reading of disidentification from racial norms. More specifically, I will now turn to the work of Irish-born British adoptee and scholar John McLeod, whose concept of adoptive being constitutes a promising strategy for both adoptees and the non-adopted.

3.2 *Life Lines* and Adoptive Being as Disidentification

In his book *Life Lines: Writing Transcultural Adoption*, John McLeod (2015) explores the transfigurative potential of what he calls transcultural[5] adoption through his reading of several British, Irish, and U.S. American fictional and non-fictional literary works. Taking up Barbara Yngvesson's (2010) conclusion that transcultural adoption disrupts existing norms but does not

[5] McLeod (2015, pp. 7–8) intentionally uses the term "transcultural" to emphasize how adoption does not only cross borders on the macro-level (such as the border of the nation, as implied in "transnational"), but also at the level of culture central to everyday life.

provide any alternatives, he conceptualizes this transfigurative potential, most specifically the potential to contest the normative notions of biogenetic kinship and belonging, in the new model of being which he calls adoptive being. In this section, I will discuss how McLeod's concept of adoptive being can be read as a disidentification from biogenetic normativity in kinship formation.

McLeod's disidentificatory move becomes quite directly visible in the justification for the title of his book. Aiming to question the normativity of biogenetic kinship, he wonders

> [w]hat might happen if we were to think about blood-lines *in another mode*: as vital life lines of connectivity to a circulating complex of material histories and cultural traces, and not as the primary substance of inherent cultural identity and personhood biocentrically conceived? Could we think of blood-lines more like the life line that creases the palm of a hand: the lined epidermis, biogenetic creation of our birth-parents, that tells our fortunes, not necessarily theirs? How might we handle the hidden historical and cultural legacies we have been handed from our biogenetic relations, to deal (with) as we please, not as we must? [emphasis in original] (McLeod, 2015, p. 26)

By reformulating "blood-lines" into "life lines," McLeod takes up the common analogy that signifies biogenetic kinship to conceptualize a non-hegemonic, non-essentializing, alternative mode of belonging that leaves space for individual agency. He thus does not entirely reject the biogenetic bond between adoptee and first family—something that "a cheerful advocacy of nurture over nature" (p. 26) would do, thereby constituting a counteridentification that would not challenge but rather reproduce the belief that adoptive belonging is caught up in a nature/nurture dualism. His recognition for the fact that for some adoptees the biogenetic bond can still be meaningful, and his choice for disidentification over counteridentification, is also symbolized in his choice for the life line as metaphor. Just like the bloodline, the life line refers to the body. It is not in spite of this bodily reference, but precisely because of it that McLeod is able to rethink the body as no longer a means to naturalize and essentialize the biogenetic kinship tie, but as something that comes to signify agency, hence working "on and against" the body as a metaphor.

McLeod emphasizes that his idea of the life line and the concept of adoptive being that follows from this line of thought is not meant to neglect the racial and colonial mechanisms and other power structures behind transcultural adoption as a phenomenon. However, he explicitly states that his aim is to move beyond the heated debate whether one should be in favour of adoption as a whole or against it. Rather, by taking up the question what insights adoption as it exists can provide us with, he aims to overcome the normative, biogenetic, and linear conceptualization of personhood to instead recognize its multidirectional character, specifically in relation to adoption, and to recognize the plurality of "origins across seemingly diverse places and temporalities" (p. 30) that can be found in the literary works he is analyzing in his book. Yet, his turn to multidirectional personhood does not mean that such a mode of being is only restricted to adoptees or those within the adoption triad of adoptee, adoptive parents, and first parents. Both the literary works that he studies, as well as the implications of his analysis, stretch beyond the narrow realm of adoption and the adoptee. McLeod emphasizes that sticking to the notion of *being adopted* as an identity—rather than *adoptive being*—would inhibit rather than stimulate the transfigurative potential of adoption, as its implications are concerned with the wider structures of society, without dismissing the various meaningful results that such identify politics has yielded. He points out that "[b]eing adopted is … not a prerequisite for adoptive being" (p. 32), or in other words, that adoptees do not necessarily practice adoptive being whilst those practicing adoptive being are not necessarily adoptees. He observers the former in, for example, U.S. American adoptee activist Betty Jean Lifton, who "argued that adoptees could not consider themselves whole until they searched for their biogenetic relations" (McLeod, 2015, p. 18), hence reproducing the normativity of biogenetic kinship and its pathologizing mechanisms.

McLeod's critique of identity politics is in line with Muñoz's critique of firm identification with and counteridentification against the dominant ideology. In addition,

another argument for understanding McLeod's concept of adoptive being as a strategy of disidentification can be found in the similar ways in which adoptive being and disidentification relate to the concept of melancholia. Temporally preceding the work of David Eng, discussed in chapter two, Muñoz points out that his conceptualization of disidentification builds on the concept of melancholia as a structure of feeling. Similar to Eng, he takes up Freud's notion of melancholia as the stage in which libido cannot be withdrawn from a lost object, generally preceding or alternating with the stage of mourning in which this libido is eventually withdrawn. As he points out, another way of looking at melancholia is to understand it as the state in which the ambivalences surrounding the loss of a certain object cannot yet be immediately processed, as "hold[ing] on to a lost object until the inner feelings of ambivalence are worked out" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 72). It is precisely these ambivalences that Muñoz subsequently takes up as not something negative or pathological, but as something that can form a productive basis for a strategy of disidentification—temporally preceding Eng in acknowledging that for "queers of colour, [melancholia] is not a pathology but an integral part of everyday lives.… [and] a mechanism that helps us (re)construct identity" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 74). After all, disidentification plays right into ambivalences by taking up parts of the dominant ideology to work "on and against" them, occasionally creating a "shock effect" (Mercer, as cited in Muñoz, 1999, p. 70) that seems to be present in various works that Muñoz analyzes, including Vaginal Davis's aforementioned drag performance of militiaman Clarence.

McLeod's concept of adoptive being builds on melancholia in a way similar to disidentification. This relation between melancholia and adoptive being becomes most strikingly visible in McLeod's fourth and last chapter in which he returns to his earlier reading of Barbara Yngvesson's conclusion as implying that the transfigurative potential of adoption cannot be realized without the conceptualization of alternative models. Reading mixed-race adoptee Jackie Kay's (2010) autobiographical work *Red Dust Road*, McLeod shows how

imagination can constitute a basis, or in Kay's case even a prerequisite, for adoptive being. Unlike the case for most other works that he discusses, McLeod shows that Kay's text implies that adoptive being does not necessitate a physical reunion of some kind, whether between adoptee and first family or between adoptive, not biogenetically related siblings. He argues that Kay's childhood fantasies of relating to famous and iconic black people, in order to make the racist environment in which she grew up bearable, amount to a form of storytelling that can as well be understood as adoptive being. The same goes for the narrative about her first mother that her adoptive mother had constructed for her. Crucial here is that in neither of these two cases, these narratives were believed to bear a static truth by either Kay herself or her adoptive mother, as they recognized that such narratives are always incomplete. The ambivalences surrounding the loss of biogenetic kin are thus being acknowledged and re-worked into fantasies that embrace this unavoidable incompleteness, as fantasies that never pretended to be more than fantasies. In other words, the notion of biogenetic kinship's materiality as bearing truth is being undermined by literally re-imagining biogenetic kinship—an act of disidentification.

Finally, to conclude my reading of adoptive being's roots within queer theory, I will briefly turn to McLeod and Eng's discussions of memory. More specifically, McLeod's reading of adoptive being as realized through imagination in Kay's text shows certain similarities to Eng's analysis of Rea Tajiri's documentary. On the one hand, Kay's biogenetic imaginaries lead McLeod (2015) to also read her physical reunion with her first parents, as well as adoptees' practices of tracing in general, as "a moment of narrative-making" (p. 218). First parents' memories can thus be seen as narratives "in which no one account can stand as a reliable, verifiable origin" (p. 220). On the other hand, as discussed in chapter two, according to Eng, Tajiri's recalling of the forgotten memories of the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II stimulates a rethinking of the what-could-have-been. This rethinking of the what-

could-have-been can be read as an act of imagination as racial reparation, hence showing how imagination can serve as a reparative tool to racial melancholia. Unlike Eng's reading of Deann Borshay Liem's case, for whom racial melancholia counter-productively "reduces memories to dreams and agency to fantasy" (Eng, 2010, p. 123), for Kay as well as for Tajiri imagination thus comes to play into the ambivalences surrounding loss that are typical for melancholia, the only difference being that for Kay such a strategy follows the logic of disidentification, whereas for Tajiri it constitutes an act of psychic reparation.

Having shown how disidentification can be a productive strategy to undermine biogenetic normativity, in the following section I will briefly touch upon the possibilities for disidentification to challenge the racial norms of neoliberal multiculturalism.

3.3 Adoptive Communities as Counterpublics

Finally, in this section I will very briefly set out some exploratory thoughts on the possibilities for an adoptee politics that takes disidentification from neoliberal multiculturalism as its aim. As previously observed in Muñoz's discussion of Vaginal Davis's terrorist drag, the counterpublic constitutes a vital element in the creation and performance of cultural terrorism. For a strategy of adoptive disidentification, this emphasizes the importance of adoptive communities as counterpublics. As mentioned towards the end of chapter two, undoing the conflation of race and ethnicity implies that a re-reading of racial melancholia for the case of adoptee politics suggests that such communities should not only include adoptees, but instead bridge the gap between adoptees of colour and non-adopted people of colour.

Rethinking the idea of adoptive communities from the perspective of disidentification in relation to the racial norms of neoliberal multiculturalism implies that such adoptive communities should not become spaces of counteridentification, deploying a mode of non-white identity politics that plainly rejects whiteness. Rather, these communities should come

to facilitate a disidentification from whiteness. This also gives a new meaning to my conclusion from chapter two that adoptive communities provide a new object to invest psychic libido in for not posing a rejection of the adoptee of colour *by* whiteness. An adoptive community that takes disidentification from neoliberal multiculturalism as its aim also does not involve a plain rejection by the adoptee of colour *of* whiteness.

Finally, an adoptee politics of disidentification from neoliberal multiculturalism could very well involve strategies of tactical misrecognition and shock as a mode of cultural terrorism. Given adoptees of colour's position of in-betweenness, being culturally white but racially of colour, an adoptee of colour politics could very well explore disidentification through practices of passing and parody.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have analyzed contemporary Dutch adoptee politics from a queer perspective. I have shown how neoliberal colour-blindness creates a space for a Foucauldian biopolitical discourse that is grounded in the Dutch self-perception as a white nation, racializing origin and deploying forces of assimilation and roots-essentialism. Subsequently, I have argued that during and after the 2016 Dutch Adoption Debate, which gave the current adoptee movement momentum and visibility, adoptees on both sides of the debate presented arguments, aims, and strategies that tie into the normalizing mechanisms of this biopolitical discourse. I have shown how David Eng's notion of queer diaspora and its psychoanalytical underpinnings provide an answer to queer liberalism, which is very similar to neoliberal colour-blindness. I have taken up Eng's psychoanalytical concept of racial melancholia to reinterpret its application it in the light of the conflation of race and ethnicity. This reinterpretation hints towards the creation of communities that bridge the gap between adoptees of colour and non-adopted people of colour. Turning to José Esteban Muñoz's work, I have subsequently demonstrated how John McLeod's concept of adoptive being can be read as strategy of disidentification from biogenetic normativity and how both these concepts tie into racial melancholia in similar ways. Finally, I have made a few brief suggestions of how a disidentification might inform an adoptee of colour politics that aims to question the racial norms of neoliberal multiculturalism. Thus, by rethinking and analyzing contemporary adoptee politics in the Netherlands, I have shown several normalizing mechanisms and effects of existing aims and strategies and conceptualized possible alternatives that could come in addition to these strategies, grounded in the concepts of queer diaspora and disidentification.

With this thesis, I have aimed to contribute both on a theoretical as well as on a practical level. Theoretically speaking, I have aimed to contribute to the relatively new field of Critical Adoption Studies by shifting away from the U.S. American focus of the field to instead analyze

adoptee politics in the Netherlands, a context that has thus far been gravely understudied. Furthermore, I have brought in a queer of colour perspective, which (with few exceptions) has been largely absent within Critical Adoption Studies so far, despite queerness being defined as one of the main theoretical perspectives of the field. In addition, on a practical level, I have mapped out certain limitations of current adoptee activism and politics in the Netherlands as well as theoretically explored alternative strategies. My hope is that such a theoretical exploration contributes to the future development of new directions in addition to the already existing goals, aims, and strategies.

Although having contributed on a more theoretical and conceptual level, this thesis's limitation lies in the absence of a structured empirical analysis of the contemporary Dutch adoptee politics. Although I have introduced empirical evidence and examples throughout the thesis, this does not add up to a full empirical inquiry into the case. Furthermore, the analyses have primarily focused on the Dutch context specifically, without touching upon similar adoptee movements around Europe in more detail. Finally, although I have performed the analyses from my own position as adoptee, my personal engagement with the Dutch adoptee movement has been fairly limited so far. Although experience itself is not necessarily a guarantee for a critical or meaningful analysis, as we have seen in Joan Scott's critique of the evidence of experience, a deeper personal involvement in Dutch adoptee politics would certainly have been beneficial for yielding new insights.

Future research on adoptee politics should engage with these limitations through a more thorough and structured empirical inquiry into the Dutch adoptee movement. Such a study could, for example, entail an ethnographic approach based on interviews or observations. Although this would already be a meaningful objective in itself, it is also worth turning to a more comparative perspective to analyze contemporary adoptee politics across Europe. Furthermore, wanting to shift focus away from the U.S. American context that is dominant in

much scholarship, including Critical Adoption Studies, I have not studied or discussed the long-standing tradition of adoptee activism in the United States or elsewhere in the anglophone world. A comparative study on adoptee activism in Europe and elsewhere in the world sounds promising. Second, future theoretically-oriented research on adoptee politics should further engage with the concepts of queer diaspora, racial melancholia, and disidentification. Having made a first step in applying these concepts to adoptee politics, it would be worthwhile to further realize their potential for studying and understanding this case. Certainly, the concept of disidentification could be more thoroughly drawn upon if one can find more and better examples of disidentificatory adoptee politics (to the extent that they currently exist)—particularly adoptee politics that disidentify from the racial norms of whiteness and neoliberal multiculturalism. Further engagement with queer theory should also consider the relationship between disidentification and other modes of adoptee activism. Perhaps, one could turn to queer theorist Douglas Crimp's extensive work on AIDS activism to further combine the psychoanalytical perspective with queer approaches to direct and cultural activism. In that regard, it would also be relevant to turn to David Eng and Shinhee Han's (2019) latest book, which builds forth on Eng's book *The Feeling of Kinship* that is central to my second chapter. As this most recent book came out only few months ago, I have unfortunately not been able to include it in my own analysis. Lastly, it would be promising to engage more with critical race theory. As mentioned, both in theory and in practice there is little engagement between adoptees of colour and non-adopted people of colour. Involving more critical race theory in the study of adoptee politics would thus be very much welcomed.

Finally, let me conclude by saying that I hope that this first theoretical inquiry will be one of my many contributions to follow to adoptee politics in the Netherlands, both in theory and in political praxis.

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