From primal to colonial wound: Bolivian adoptees reclaiming the narrative of healing

Atamhi Cawayu & Katrien De Graeve

Department of Languages and Cultures, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium

To link to this article:
https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2020.1757254

Abstract:

This paper provides a critical analysis of the narratives of Bolivian adoptees in Belgium. We discuss how the adoptees look back upon the imagery of family and culture invoked by their parents and wider social environment and how this imagery has affected their sense of self and belonging. We argue that the adoptees’ narratives testify of a discursive struggle to reclaim control over their lives and histories. While they draw upon prevailing discourses that tend to imagine adoptees as ‘wounded’, they do so in diverse, complex and at times contradictory ways. Their perceptions of the familial and cultural imagery show that while they do not entirely reject the idea of being hurt, they seem to make a shift from explaining this ‘wound’ in individual-psychological terms to explaining it in social terms, making use of emerging anti-racist and decolonial perspectives.
Introduction

Recently there has been a renewed academic interest in the colonial power mechanisms that structure current transnational adoption practices (see e.g. Ivenäs 2017; Posocco 2014; van Wichelen 2019; Wyver 2018; Högbacka 2019; Candaele in press), building on earlier work (Ahluwalia 2007; Hübinette 2007; Wekker et al. 2007). This research points to the colonial roots of transnational adoption and problematises the reproduction of colonial dynamics in contemporary transnational adoption practices, including in the way racial difference and origins of adoptees become imagined.¹ This paper aims to contribute to this body of work.

Since the 1980s and 1990s, transnational adoptive parents in Belgium and elsewhere have increasingly been urged by adoption professionals and international treaties to pay particular attention to their child’s pre-adoption past. In line with article 16b of the 1993 Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, adoption agencies and adoption intermediaries in Belgium have sensitised (prospective) adoptive parents to tell their children openly about their pre-adoption history and to express a positive attitude towards their country of origin.² In her work on transnational adoptive parents in Belgium, De Graeve (2010) pointed to the dominant imagery that portrays adoptees as unavoidably ‘wounded’ because of their being uprooted and disconnected from their biological family and culture of origin. Adoption professionals train adoptive families to anticipate potential psychological distress and unsafe attachment through different techniques, including through attention to the child’s pre-adoption past, also in terms of national and cultural origins (De Graeve 2013, 2010). De Graeve argues that while the current discourse breaks away from ‘the clean break’ narrative, it still starts from a depoliticised and psychopathological model that individualises and pathologises
mental distress rather than pointing to the (global) socio-political dimensions that shape adoption trajectories.

In this paper, we aim to re-politicise the terms of the debate, by reporting on interviews conducted with men and women adopted to Belgium who were born in Bolivia, most of them with an indigenous Aymara and Quechua background. In these interviews, we asked them to narrate their adoption experience, their experience of their adoptive parents’ parenting work and their own feelings and practices in relation to their country of birth. Their stories oscillate between reproducing the dominant psychopathological understanding of their displacement and socio-political understandings that centralise the colonial dynamics in transnational adoption. We argue that a shift from imagining the adoptee as wounded in psychological terms to imagining the adoptee as wounded as a result of colonial and racialising discourses and practices, enables adoptees to reclaim ‘the right to classify’ (Mignolo 2005, 8) and create narratives that have the capacity to overwrite the discourses of individualised pathologization with decolonial social critique. Centralising ‘the colonial’ (and the wounds it causes) not only constitutes an important tool in adoptee activism, it can also serve as a useful metaphor for rethinking the work adoptive families need to be able to move beyond the persistent bio-essentialist and cultural essentialist views on family and nation.

The article is structured as follows. In the first two sections, we elucidate our theoretical framework and describe our methods. In the next three sections, we present an analysis of the data. The first empirical section elaborates on the adoptees’ experiences regarding ‘culture work’ and the ‘Bolivian’ gatherings that were organised by adoptive parents. The second section focuses on gatherings organised by Bolivian adoptees themselves. The last
empirical section discusses how the Bolivian adoptees describe their racial and ‘ethnic’ identity. In the conclusion, we come back to the imagery of wounds and possibilities for decolonial healing through ‘delinking’ and ‘reexisting’, implicit in the adoptees’ narratives.

Theoretical framework

Culture work and the culturalisation of colonial difference

Since the 1990s, in Belgium and elsewhere a discourse that conceptualises the child as ‘rooted’ in her pre-adoption past has become dominant and has largely replaced the previous paradigm that promoted a ‘clean break’ with that past (Yngvesson 2003; Modell 1994). A significant number of studies has critically examined the increased attention for the pre-adoption past and the birth country’s cultural peculiarities in ‘transracial’ adoption in various national contexts (e.g. Anagnost 2000; Quiroz 2012; Volkman 2003; Willing and Fronek 2014; De Graeve 2013; Jacobson 2008; Marre 2007).³ De Graeve (2013, 551) uses the term ‘culture work’ to refer to the creative and constructive parenting work Belgian transnational adoptive parents do to shape the identity and citizenship of themselves and their children. This work may include all kinds of cultural practices, including consuming food, music and artefacts that originate from their adoptive child’s birth country.

However, despite the paradigmatic shift in adoption, prevailing adoption discourses still tend to start from the idea that adoptees suffer from a ‘primal wound’ (Verrier 1993) that has been caused by the adoptees’ separation from their first families and cultures. The narrative of the traumatic rupture of the mother–child relationship (and by extension the nation-citizen relationship) draws on essentialist notions of family (and nation) and renders adoptees’ life journeys pathological (for a discussion on the
pathologizing of displacement more general, see Malkki 1992). This narrative is all pervasive in adoption discourse, including in the discourses that assign a different cultural essence to adoptees that requires culture work. De Graeve’s and other studies on adoptive parents’ culture work have denounced the practice for its underlying cultural essentialist and bio-essentialist notions which put an alleged genetic-cultural origin at the core of adoptee’s identity formation (De Graeve 2014; Howell 2006). Various researchers have criticised adoptive parents’ culture work for being a form of ‘cultural tourism’ (Quiroz 2012), cultural commodification (Park Nelson 2006) and for even further alienating adopted children from their cultures of origin because of the ‘fictional and distorted construction of identity with limited possibilities for maintaining real or substantive ties to the culture of origin’ (Quiroz 2012, 532). Moreover, several studies have pointed to the parents’ tendency to conflate culture and ‘race’. This conflation is particularly evidenced by the observation that in transracially adoptive families the cultural background of the adoptive child is usually given more attention than in ‘white’ families with children of white colour (Jacobson 2008; Marre 2007). Mignolo (2005, 37) critiques the culturalisation of race as, according to him, it overlooks the imperial/colonial power differentials. Therefore, he pleads for the use of the term ‘colonial difference’. He emphasises that race plays a central role but not in ‘the sense of the color of one’s skin but in the sense of how one has been located in the chain of human being by Western imperial discourses’ (Mignolo 2006, 481). This brings us to our second central concept.

Coloniality and decolonial thinking

We aim to situate the adoptees’ narratives in a broader scope, including in wider practices of relocating indigenous populations in
Bolivia and elsewhere to govern and control them. The case of transnational adoption of Aymara and Quechua children resembles other practices of displacing indigenous children in the US, Canada and Australia as part of projects of forced assimilation and civilising during and after European colonisation. Drawing this parallel reaches back to earlier interpretations of transnational adoption as a colonial practice embedded in a larger history of exploitation of the Global South and the stratified migration dominated by the Global North (Eng 2006; Fieweger 1991; Hübinette 2007; Wekker et al. 2007). These parallels seem to be justified when we consider the fact that transnational adoption is a demand-driven industry plagued by recurrent practices of abuse, child trafficking, and other irregularities (Smolin 2004; McKee 2016; Cheney and Rotabi 2015; Leifsen 2008).

Several authors have argued that the ‘colonial reality’ of transnational adoption is not limited to the macro level but also infiltrates the most intimate spheres of transnational adoptees’ lives (Tigervall and Tobias 2010; Wekker et al. 2007). Drawing on decolonial thought (Maldonado-Torres 2007; Mignolo 2005, 2017; Quijano 2007), we use the term ‘coloniality’ as defined by Maldonado-Torres (2007, 243) to point to the global socio-political reality that shapes transnational adoption. Maldonado-Torres argues that ‘coloniality survives colonialism’ and ‘is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the selfimage of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience’. According to him, modern subjects ‘breath coloniality all the time and everyday’.

Mignolo (2005) argues that discourses and practices of coloniality cause ‘colonial wounds’, or, with reference to a term coined by Ureña (2019, 1642), ‘invisible wounds of coloniality’. The ‘colonial
wound’ points to the physical and/or psychological pain that is a consequence of racism, the hegemonic discourse that questions the humanity of all those who do not belong to the locus of enunciation (and the geo-politics of knowledge) of those who assign the standards of classification and assign to themselves the right to classify’ (Mignolo 2005, 8). We suggest that this struggle over the standards of classification is at the heart of the adoptees’ claims to belonging. While the adoptees in this study did not use the concept themselves, the ‘colonial wound’ captures a discursive field that they start to construct. Some of the strategies the Bolivian adoptees used, include what could be interpreted as ‘decolonial tactics’ and processes of ‘delinking [oneself] from foreign powers’ control over lives’ (Mignolo 2017, 44, emphasis added). These tactics and processes constitute a counter-narrative to the prevailing discourses that tend to psychologise adoptees’ experiences by explaining them through narratives of primordial blood ties of family. Discursively shifting the root of their metaphorical wounds from the psyche to the ‘colonial’ can be seen as a way of what Mignolo calls ‘rebuilding and re-existing under new conditions and modes of existences that are your own’ (Mignolo 2017, 44, emphasis added).

Methodology

This article draws upon the first author’s research conducted in the framework of his master thesis, under supervision of the second author, and complemented with the preliminary research from his ongoing doctoral study (2017–2021) on ‘roots’, child relinquishment, search and reunion in transnational adoption from Bolivia. Interviews with 12 Bolivian adoptees (eight women, four men) have been carried out combined with multiple participant observation sessions during Bolivian adoptee gatherings and festivities mainly in Flanders, Belgium. The participants were
selected through the contacts of the first author with considerable attention to the variety of experiences, self-identifications and different ways of giving meaning to their birth country. They were adopted between 1983 and 1996 and their ages range from 21 to 37 at the time of the interview, yet the majority of them have been raised in Belgium after 1990. Nearly all of the participants have travelled to Bolivia at some point in their lives (eleven participants), five of whom several times.

We have used a critical discourse analytical frame of moving from the micro to the macro to better understand our data (Blommaert 2005; Van Dijk 1993) and have looked to how the narratives of the participants are embedded in the broader web of culturally, socially, and historically situated discourses and power dynamics. Therefore, it was essential to look at the adoptees’ stories, not as expressions of essential truths, but as discursive strategies which might have both restraining and potentially empowering and transformative effects. More specifically, we coded the transcripts by identifying frequent topics, clustered them into themes and grouped the themes into three meta-themes, i.e. adoptees’ reflections on their parents’ culture work, adoptee gatherings, and adoptees’ identity formations. We then assigned the coded text passages to emerging conceptual categories that reflect the discursive strategies employed by the interviewees and their relation to wider ideological configurations.

Adoptions from Bolivia to Flanders, the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, occurred between the early 1980s until the end of the 1990s. We estimate that in that period about 45 Bolivian children have been placed in Flemish adoptive families. However, as back in the days not all adoptions from Bolivia were monitored by the Flemish Community government, the total number of children adopted from Bolivia to Flanders is basically unknown. Before the Belgian ratification of the Convention of The Hague on
Intercountry Adoption in 2005, only accredited adoption agencies carried out transnational adoptions under supervision of a governmental organisation of one of the three community governments in Belgium. Interadoptie, the accredited adoption agency that was responsible for adoptions from Bolivia to the Flemish Community indicates that they placed 25 Bolivian children with Flemish adoptive parents in the period between 1982 and 1999. However, information collected for this research shows that there have also been adoptions through other channels, such as unofficial adoption intermediaries who facilitated adoptions to Flanders. In at least one case this involved the kidnapping of a child.

The focus on Belgium, and on Flanders in particular, was mainly for practical reasons, as both authors live and work in Flanders. However, this focus is also needed as, so far, knowledge of the experiences of adult adoptees in the country is almost completely lacking, a few very small studies notwithstanding (see Buysse and Vandenbroeck 2015; De Pauw, Hoksbergen, and Van Aelst 1998; Paulis 1991). The country’s colonial history is also remarkable, especially in light of the lack of a critical debate concerning the colonial history and colonial remnants. Several researchers have observed how the general amnesia concerning the colonial past goes hand in hand with the denial or minimisation of race and racism (Ceuppens and De Mul. 2009; De Graeve and Kanobana in press). A multiculturalism discourse is adopted in relation to the country’s linguistic-cultural divide, yet the Flemish-speaking and French-speaking communities are imagined as ethnically and culturally homogeneous (Coene and Longman 2008; Blommaert and Verschueren 1998). In the northern, Flemish-speaking part, in particular, autochthony discourses have an increasingly strong appeal in imageries of who the ‘real’ locals are (Ceuppens 2006). Policy-making aims at assimilation of immigrants and points to cultural differences of immigrants and their descendants (not race)
as the cause of the persistent barriers that immigrants face in navigating the job and housing market for instance. While anti-immigration sentiments are strong in Flanders, family and reproduction policy still actively supports transnational adoption. Policy makers tend to see transnational adoption as a viable way for Belgian citizens to expand their families and tend to draw on an imagery that valorises adoptees as symbols for racial harmony and as living diversity tokens (Hübinette 2007).

The focus on adoptees from Bolivia with an indigenous background (Aymara or Quechua) is important because transnational adoptions from the Latin American continent have been understudied in general (with the exception of e.g. Briggs 2012; Dubinsky 2010; Posocco 2014) – despite the high numbers of adoptions from this continent (Selman 2009) – with an even greater dearth of information available on adoptions of indigenous children from the Andean region (Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador). Despite a few exceptions (e.g. Leinaweaver 2008; Clavero 2002), the study of adoptions of indigenous children so far has been limited to the US, Canada and Australia (see e.g. Cardinal 2016; HeangaCollins and Gibbs 2015; Jacobs 2014). So far, transnational adoptions of Latin American indigenous children to mainly white families in the Global North have seldom been analysed through a decolonial lens and/or as part of the ongoing structural violence against and displacements of indigenous people in the America’s.

Bolivia into our home: the parents’ culture work

During the interviews in this study, most adoptees recounted memories of being surrounded by artefacts that referred to Bolivia and its indigenous people in one way or the other. They talked about the Bolivian (folkloric) music, the cuddly toys, the books, the paintings, the little Inca statues, the Bolivian national flag, the
Bolivian crib, the panpipes, the knitted caps, the textiles with llama designs, the woven blankets (awayus), etc., that figured prominently in their houses. Most of them perceived the presence of Bolivian artefacts with rather positive sentiments. Twenty-four-year-old Naya, for instance, who was adopted at 16 months of age, even explicitly stated that she felt thankful and had appreciated how her parents ‘brought Bolivia into our home’. \(^5\) Guillermo, 28 years old, who was almost five when he was adopted together with his younger brother, indicated that their parents ‘wanted that we could keep some of our culture’ and seemed to have experienced this as a positive thing.

Some adoptees, however, also recounted memories of being dressed up as ‘Indians’ and wearing ‘Indian’ costumes during carnival or during gatherings of their adoptive families.\(^6\) While some did not particularly problematise these occurrences, a few adoptees discussed these memories as an example of having felt stereotyped and racialised, at least in retrospect, or recalled to have felt uncomfortable during some of these occasions. They indicated that they found they were somehow forced to embrace ‘their’ cultural origins and perform ‘foreignness’ for their white families (Falvey 2008). Yet, some explained that back in the days they were not aware of the racist implications of being dressed up as ‘an Indian’, but that it was only later that they realised that they were somehow staged as an exotic ‘Other’ in their parents’ fantasy of the ‘multicultural’ family. However, Asamie, a 25-year old woman adopted a few days after birth, explained how even as a child she resisted being stereotyped as ‘Bolivian’:

Asamie: Well, if something about Bolivia was on TV, my parents often called me and asked me to watch. Then I said I did not want to watch and even now, I still don’t want to watch it.
Atamhi: And why not?

Asamie: I think I don’t want to watch because this is forced upon me, it is as if things belong to me. But I don’t want to be forced into this, I want to discover what I’m interested in by myself.

During the interviews, many of the adoptees also talked about the Bolivian adoptee gatherings that were organised in Belgium for about 10 years from the second part of the 1990s onwards. Previous research (De Graeve 2013, 2016; Howell 2006) shows that festive gatherings have become a common practice among adoptive families and have even been encouraged by adoption agencies, adoption organisations and adoption guides in Belgium. These festive gatherings are usually considered by adoptive parents as an important means to share experiences with each other and to bring their adopted children in contact with other adoptees from the same or other countries of origin. The gatherings of Bolivian adoptive families took place in different Flemish towns, and were alternately organised by one of the families, typically in the hometown of the organising family. The gatherings were relatively small and usually attracted about 10 adoptive families with their children. The participants in this study who were adopted from 1992 to 1996 all recalled having participated in these gatherings at least once in their lives.

The majority of the interviewees looked back on those gatherings with positive memories. Most of them recalled the gatherings as pleasant and fun, yet some had some reservations. Carlos, for instance, 23 years old and adopted at the age of 6 months, said that he remembered that he never understood why he needed to connect to other people from Bolivia.

What I remember of those gatherings is that I didn’t like to go because I was seen as a Bolivian child while I
wanted to be seen as a Belgian child. Well, I was not completely annoyed because I like to meet other people, but I didn’t like to have my Bolivian-ness emphasized. That is why I stopped going to those gatherings. (Carlos, 23 yr.)

Some adoptees recounted that young as they were (between 5 and 10 years old), playing with other Bolivian adoptees was not necessarily an activity they looked particularly forward to. They said that they did not really feel Bolivian at that age and were not specifically interested in Bolivia nor in adoption.

The quotes exemplify the complex discursive struggle in the adoptees’ narratives. When Asamie says that she wants to decide for herself what she likes, she draws on neoliberal notions of self-actualisation and individual choice to criticise moments of having been stereotyped by her parents. She denounces her parents’ parenting work as too pampering and paternalistic, which contradicts the plea for intensification of adoptive parents’ training which is often advocated by adoptee organisations in Flanders. Local adoptee advocacy groups argue for monitoring adoptive families even more, including intensifying the adoptive parents’ training in terms of preserving the culture of origin, more low-threshold assistance and/or obligatory aftercare for adoptive families and adoptees. This standpoint draws on the dominant Western middle class ideologies of intensive parenting on the one hand (for a discussion of intensive parenting see Hays 1996; De Graeve and Longman 2013) and prevalent discourses that depict the care for adoptees as extraordinary demanding and challenging. Adoptees’ pleas for increasing monitoring of adoptive parents implicitly endorse the mainstream and official policy rhetoric that starts from the idea that adoptees are likely to be psychologically unstable, incomplete and/or damaged, and therefore in need of specialised guidance and expert knowledge.
However, when both Carlos and Asamie look back on and criticise their parents’ attempts to (re)connect them to their ‘birth culture’, they draw on entirely different presuppositions and concerns. Here, they fall back on antiracist critiques that are increasingly vocalised in Belgian society – yet are still the object of intense contestation – and provide people of colour with a vocabulary to frame their experiences and feelings of racialisation, discrimination and non-belonging. In contrast to earlier generation adoptees, they have had parents who were already subjected to a considerable amount of monitoring and control, and were instructed on how to do culture work, yet the adoptees criticise the paternalistic and essentializing aspects of the parenting work. Doing so, the adoptees implicitly shift the focus of the problem (or the ‘wound’) away from their purported psychological vulnerability (primal wound) to the adoptive society that is unable to sustain difference (colonial wound).

Feeling of togetherness: Bolivian adoptee gatherings

While the previous section focused on how the interviewees looked back upon their parents’ culture work, this section discusses the adoptees’ own work of trying to reclaim a positive identity. Although some indicated to have mixed feelings about the gatherings for Bolivian adoptive families, many of the research participants explained that these gatherings have resulted in long-term connections with other adoptees and that many of them have kept seeing each other. After the family gatherings stopped being organised, little groups of female friends stayed in contact, met each other repeatedly and went to parties, to the movies or to a ‘girls night’ together. Interestingly enough, several of the adoptees emphasised that these friendships had not so much to do with their common identity as ‘Bolivian’ or as adoptee, but more with being of the same age and having common interests.
Some of the interviewees recounted that once they were in their early twenties, they had taken the initiative to organise a sort of reunion of all the Bolivian adoptees who had been participating in the gatherings for Bolivian-Belgian adoptive families and to keep in contact through a self-created ‘Bolivian Adoptees’-online platform. They said that the first adoptee meetings, unlike the family gatherings, had a clear purpose to them, notably the need to share experiences and knowledge about return trips to Bolivia with people who were in the same situation. Yet they continued to meet each other regularly, which made the meetings evolve into a space for discussing not only things about Bolivia, but also about all kind of themes, including everyday life, school and relationships. Some interviewees said that for them it was important that the gatherings enabled them to talk in a safe and non-judgemental way. Meetings happened once to twice a month, with the whole group sleeping over in the house of one of the adoptees. Naya, who had gone to live in Bolivia for a couple of years, has then returned to Belgium, yet has also stayed in contact with her social network in Bolivia mainly through social media, described the gatherings as follows:

The beauty of the gatherings is that you are with other people who are in the same boat and therefore can understand you. I do have very good, respectful and nice Belgian friends but because they are not in the same situation as me, they can’t imagine what it is like to live in-between two worlds. (. . .)That is why it is very important to have friends who are going through this process and this allows us to understand each other very easily. (Naya, 24 yr.)

Using the expression ‘in the same boat’, Naya articulated her experience of having a lot in common with fellow Bolivian
adoptees. Also Sarah, 21 years old and adopted at 10 months of age, described the gathering with other Bolivian adoptees as a way of sharing a ‘feeling of togetherness’. Some of the Bolivian adoptees even designated this feeling as a sense of kinship. The adoptees’ phrasing in terms of togetherness and kinship seems to creatively use both family of choice discourses and discourses of biological kinship, claiming (almost) kin connections with people with whom they are not biologically related but share national and racial origins. Kim (2007) made similar observations in her research on Korean-US adoption. She observed that Korean adoptees tend to experience their connections with other Korean adoptees as a ‘powerful form of relatedness that is based on radical contingency, shared generational consciousness and elective affinities that articulate adoptees’ ‘unnatural histories’ and struggles for cultural citizenship in the West and in South Korea’.

Naya’s expression ‘living in-between two worlds’ refers to her experience of having lived in Bolivia for several years and the subsequent process of having to re-adapt to Belgian society again. Naya explained her decision to go and live in Bolivia in terms of her search for racial belonging and a growing desire to acquaint herself with Bolivian culture. Her return to Bolivia, to use Mignolo’s words, was a practice of ‘delinking’ from the colonial legacies that structure her life and have put her in a position in which the legitimacy of her presence in Belgium is constantly being questioned. She experienced her new life in Bolivia, finding a job, being surrounded by Bolivian people, learning more about Aymara culture and practices, getting acquainted with different knowledge systems, etc., as a tool to ‘re-exist’ and heal from the hurt that she thinks colonial and racist discourses in Belgium have caused. When Naya talked about her decision to go back to Belgium, she emphasised her need to keep finding ways of delinking and re-existing, for instance through attending Bolivian adoptee
gatherings. These gatherings, she explained, tend to provide her with a feeling of comfortableness similar to what she experienced in Bolivia, a space in which she can safely express her feelings and experiences as a Bolivian adoptee. The adoptees’ reference to the gatherings as places that evoke feelings of togetherness and understanding also hinge on a politics of intimate citizenship in which advocacy groups become spaces in which ‘deviant’ bodies are normalised and develop their own visible and positive cultures that can leak into broader public spheres and have the capacity to shift boundaries in society at large (Plummer 2001).

Disguised as a Bolivian: negotiating racial and national identities

In this section, we discuss how the Bolivian adoptees in our study negotiate their racial and national identity, an identity that they tend to imagine as multiple and complex. The subject of racial, ethnic and cultural identifications was brought up multiple times by Bolivian adoptees during the interviews or gatherings. Guillermo (see above) for instance, pointed to the various identities with whom he is able to identify:

Yes, I do feel like a Fleming. My friends also tell me ‘you are a real Belgian’. [...] For sure I’m also Bolivian. [...] East-Fleming as well. [...] And actually I feel citizen of the city where I grew up first, and a Bolivian second. (Guillermo, 28yr.)

What is interesting, however, is that most of the interviewees expressed to have a white identity:

Yes of course I am white. I was raised here, and I haven’t received any culture from Bolivia or their ways of thinking. Not at all. So, I’m actually white inside and brown outside. [...] So, I’m actually disguised as a Bolivian, but I’m just like the [white] people here. I only look different. (Pablo, 21yr.)
Using race and culture as interchangeable, Pablo, who is 21 years old and was adopted at 6 months of age, argues that his acquaintance with Belgian culture makes him white. Some of the Bolivian adoptees also explicitly stated that they only date white partners, or like Pablo ‘rarely date people of colour, actually almost never’. Hübinette (2007, 143) argues that this white self-subjectivity for people of colour can be seen as the result of ‘constantly copying, imitating and mimicking whiteness on an everyday level’. He relies on Butler’s (1993) performativity theory to explain the mechanisms that make transracial adoptees ‘perform’ whiteness. In addition, he notes that this desire towards whiteness is not uncommon for colonial subjects. The preference of some of the adoptees for white partners might also be a result of this white self-subjectivity and an illustration of how colonial imageries promote whiteness as the universal standard of excellence, beauty and desire, but at the same time stipulate which bodies are able to reach this standard and which bodies are not (Wekker et al. 2007). Hübinette refers to transracial adoptees as ‘ethnic drags [. . .] who are troubling, mocking and parodying supposedly fixed racial, ethnic, and national identities and belongings’ (p. 143). Pablo’s words ‘disguised as a Bolivian’ perfectly grasp this performativity of racial identity.

While some of the interviewees’ claimed to identify as white, most of the participants also identified as Bolivian. They often described themselves as either a mixture of Belgian and Bolivian or as a ‘Belgian with Bolivian roots’. The adoptees thus seemed to feel the need to acknowledge their Bolivian background, and even said to be proud of their country of origin. However, most of the interviewees were rather reticent in fully claiming a ‘Bolivian’ identity. Some even reported that they had not always been comfortable with being non-white and being associated with Bolivia. They explicitly recounted childhood memories of their
desire to be white. Even Naya, who recently moved back to Bolivia for a couple of years (see above) said:

In High School, around the age of twelve, thirteen, I started to have a distaste for Bolivia. I wanted to be Belgian, I wanted to be white ( . . . ) I didn’t want to have anything to do with Bolivia. I did not want to be reminded every time again that I come from Bolivia. It irritated me a lot (Naya, 24 yr).

In this quote, Naya explicitly connects her memory of wanting to be white to her memory of having an aversion to anything Bolivian and an aversion to her own body. She presents this memory as a memory of a turning point (‘I started to’), yet leaves the repeated events (‘every time again’) that had led to this turning point implicit. Her narrative highlights that she had come to see her own ‘brown’ body as something Bolivian, and therefore ‘other’, unable to be Belgian. She explained that the ‘colonial’ gaze that she had learned to adopt, had made her believe that Bolivia represented nothing but poverty and underdevelopment, which was something she did not want to be associated with (see also Leinaweaver 2013). Further on in the interview, Naya explained that her aversion to her country of origin and to the colour of her skin has disappeared when growing older. She said that she now identifies as a ‘proud Latina’.

While the adoptees did not tend to see their Bolivian-ness as an essential identity, they nevertheless sometimes reverted to bio-essentialist ideas, which may be informed by prevailing stereotypes of Latin Americans. Several of the adoptees, for instance, tended to support the idea that Bolivians have a natural sense of rhythm. When Elio, 22 years old and adopted at age one, was asked what made him a Latino, he replied:
The rhythm, it is something that is highly present. The feeling I have with dancing. The macho part is present too. I always want to show I am here, I will never quickly move away from someone or something. (Elio, 22 yr.)

While most of the adoptees in this study claimed to be white, some claimed to be brown rather than white and explained that their frequent experiences with racism and racialisation had heightened their awareness of being non-white. Unlike most of the adoptees’ narratives that only implicitly referred to feelings of non-belonging, these stories explicitly discussed experiences of exclusion in society. Some of the adoptees explicitly pointed to the adoptive society for failing to fully embrace transracial adoptees, due to their non-white bodies rendered illegitimate by discourses of race and coloniality. They explained that, as a strategy, they had chosen to show pride in their origins rather than hiding or minimalizing their racial differences. By wearing Bolivian accessories, by speaking Spanish in public with peers from Latin America, by travelling back to or by moving to Bolivia for longer periods of time, by frequenting places where other people with a migration background gather or by exclusively dating people of colour, etc., they aimed to highlight the position of Otherness that they occupy in Belgian society. Using these strategies, the adoptees move beyond the dominant narrative of adoptees’ need for individual psychological healing and/or restoration of a presumed lack of ability to attach to family and nation. These strategies of fully embracing the own Otherness and shaping spaces in which it is not whiteness and Eurocentric perspectives that centre themselves as the norm, can be interpreted as another example of the strategies of delinking and trying to regain pride, and dignity, and assuming humanity ‘in front of an un-human being that makes you believe you were abnormal, lesser, that you lack something’ (Mignolo in Gaztambide-Fernández 2014, 207).
Conclusion: from ‘primal wound’ to ‘decolonial healing’

This paper has aimed to make a novel contribution to the scholarship on (indigenous) adoptees from Latin America through a study of the narratives of Bolivian adoptees in Flanders, Belgium, regarding their cultural, ethnic and racial identifications. We aimed to investigate how the heightened importance that has been accorded to the adoptees’ birth countries since the early 1990s, and that has urged adoptive parents to do culture work, has influenced adoptees’ feelings of belonging. We have tried to lay bare the struggle implicit in the adoptees’ stories that tries to reclaim discursive control over their own lives and histories. We have shown that the adoptees try to make sense of their experiences, drawing on various and contradicting discourses that circulate in society, and do so in rather ambivalent and complicated ways. Implicit in their stories is the feeling of living somehow exceptional lives (exceptional identities) that can cause pain and rejection. Their narratives both reproduce and reject hegemonic explanations that depict adoptees as ‘wounded’ per definition, be it through their being snatched away from the naturalised mother-child bond, be it through their being uprooted from the national ground where they allegedly belong (racially and culturally). In spite of the ambivalence in their stories, they seem to reject victimisation and reclaim control over the narrative of their identity and (psychological) wellbeing. We have argued that in their stories a shift is discernible from explaining their being hurt or wounded in individual-psychological terms (the primal wound) to explaining it in social terms (the colonial wound). According to Ureña (2019, 1643), ‘the invisible wounds of coloniality cannot be healed without radical changes in politics, [. . .], and in narratives about the full humanity of oppressed people’. Some Bolivian adoptees in this study have actively searched for options to delink themselves from colonial discourses and practices in order to find...
pride and dignity in spaces in which their non-white bodies are being denied legitimate membership.

The stories presented in this paper show that Bolivian adoptees draw on various discourses to build their narratives of (non)belonging and healing, including on postcolonial and decolonial perspectives that only recently have become introduced in Belgian activist spaces. We believe that decolonial perspectives offer promising possibilities for adoptees to reclaim control over the narrative of their life and possibilities for healing. They create space (although not without contestation) for voicing the pain inflicted by colonial oppression, which, according to Mignolo (2005, 62), ‘offers the starting point not only for acts of rebellion but for thinking-otherwise’. The narrative shift from primal to colonial wound can be seen as an act of reclaiming control and of resisting the omnipresent discourses that tend to render adoptees’ life trajectories pathological, and provides them pathways to decolonial horizons of liberation.

Notes

1. We use the term ‘colonial’ to refer to not just historical colonialism but also to ongoing forms of ‘coloniality’, i.e. the perpetuation and reconfiguration of colonial legacies in hegemonic discourses, practices and social relations (Maldonado-Torres 2007; Mignolo 2005).


3. We place terms such as ‘transracial’, ‘race’, ‘white’, etc., between quotation marks the first time they are used in the text, to emphasise that they are socially constructed – as opposed to objective biological markers.
4. The number of Bolivian children that have been placed in the southern, Frenchspeaking part of Belgium, is unknown.
5. The names of all the participants are replaced with pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.
6. The word ‘Indian’ was used repeatedly by the participants to refer to indigenous people. We aim to emphasise that we are aware of the colonial connotations of the word.
7. Te Awa's recommendations concerning intercountry adoption are available at http://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/d0abee_e7965980e22941f49043de71fb87b999.pdf (accessed 7 November 2018).
8. Kim (2007) uses the term ‘unnatural histories’ to refer to adoptees’ shared histories of displacement and search for belonging, while at the same time their lives have been marked by untraditional forms of kinship.
9. East-Fleming refers to being an inhabitant of the Belgian province of East-Flanders.
10. Hübinette’s (2007) use of performativity theory suggests that transracial adoptees’ white subjectivities destabilise dominant notions of whiteness while they at the same time underline how colonial power mechanisms set the limits of racial identity formation.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the Bolivian adoptees who participated in the study on which this paper is based. We also want to thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments on an earlier version of the paper.
Funding
This work was supported by the Research Foundation – Flanders under Grant [number 11B8718N].

References


