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Black Skin, White Masks: Racial Identity and Belonging- The Case of Ethiopian
Transnational Adoptees in France

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Abstract English

This master's thesis explores the lived experiences of adoptees of Ethiopian origin in France, with a particular focus on questions of racial identity and belonging. The issue of racial identity is especially relevant in the case of transracial adoptees, as they are mostly socialized within white social structures. Far from being biologically given, the adoptees' racial identity is socially produced. However, later in life, they are confronted with racialization, racism, and experiences of othering, which compel them to negotiate the tensions between their early socialization and their lived realities as racialized individuals.

Methodologically, alongside literature and theory grounded in critical race theory, postcolonial perspectives on identity and belonging, and scholarship on adoptive kinship, this study adopts qualitative interviews. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with Ethiopian-origin adoptees raised by white French parents. This interview format enabled participants to narrate their experiences while allowing space for emergent themes, and the resulting data were analyzed through thematic analysis.

The findings show that adoptees socialized within their adoptive families see their original cultural and racial differences minimized through a combination of kinship practices, white normativity, and colorblind ideology. As a result, many adoptees internalize whiteness as a normative identity, generating an initial dissonance with their racialized embodiment. Adulthood often marks a turning point: confronted with racialization, everyday racism, and othering, adoptees begin to renegotiate their racial identities and sense of belonging. Their in-between position, neither fully "French" nor "Ethiopian," neither fully "white" nor "Black,"¹ produces feelings of fragmentation and an identity and belonging crisis. Yet, it also becomes a space of agency where new and alternative forms of identity and belonging are constructed.

¹ Following contemporary journalistic and scholarly conventions, I capitalize Black and Blackness, but not white or whiteness, to reflect their non-equivalent social meanings: Black denotes a shared historical identity, while white operates as an unmarked position of power (Laws 2020).

Abstract German

Diese Masterarbeit untersucht die gelebten Erfahrungen von Adoptierten äthiopischer Herkunft in Frankreich, mit einem besonderen Fokus auf Identitäts- und Zugehörigkeitsfragen im Kontext von rassialisierten Strukturen. Die Frage der rassialisierten Identität ist im Fall von Adoptionen zwischen unterschiedlich rassialisierten Gruppen besonders relevant, da die Adoptierten überwiegend in weißen sozialen Strukturen sozialisiert werden. Weit davon entfernt, biologisch vorgegeben zu sein, wird die rassialisierte Identität der Adoptierten sozial hervorgebracht. Im späteren Leben werden sie jedoch mit Rassialisierung, Rassismus und Erfahrungen des Othering konfrontiert, was sie dazu zwingt, die Spannungen zwischen ihrer frühen Sozialisation und ihren gelebten Realitäten als rassialisierte Subjekte auszuhandeln.

Methodisch stützt sich diese Masterarbeit neben Literatur und Theorie aus der Critical Race Theory, postkolonialen Perspektiven auf Identität und Zugehörigkeit sowie der Forschung zu adoptiver Verwandtschaft auf qualitative Interviews. Es wurden acht halbstrukturierte Interviews mit Adoptierten äthiopischer Herkunft geführt, die in weißen französischen Familien aufgewachsen sind. Dieses Interviewformat ermöglichte es den Teilnehmenden, ihre Erfahrungen narrativ darzustellen, während zugleich Raum für aufkommende Themen blieb. Die gewonnenen Daten wurden mittels thematischer Analyse ausgewertet.

Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass Adoptierte in ihren Adoptivfamilien erleben, wie kulturelle und rassialisierte Differenzen durch verwandtschaftliche Praktiken, weiße Normativität und Annahmen von sogenannter „Farbenblindheit“ (*colorblindness*) verhandelt werden und letztlich nivelliert werden sollen. Infolgedessen internalisieren viele adoptierte Personen Weißsein (*whiteness*) als normative Identität, was eine anfängliche Dissonanz zu ihren rassialisierten Erfahrungen erzeugt. Das Erwachsenenalter markiert häufig einen Wendepunkt: Konfrontiert mit Rassialisierung, Alltagsrassismus und Othering beginnen die Adoptierten, ihre rassialisierte Identität und ihr Zugehörigkeitsgefühl neu zu verhandeln. Ihre Zwischenposition – weder vollständig „französisch“ noch „äthiopisch“, weder vollständig „weiß“ noch „schwarz“ – erzeugt Gefühle der Fragmentierung sowie eine Identitäts- und Zugehörigkeitskrise. Gleichzeitig wird diese Position jedoch zu einem Raum von Agency, in dem neue und alternative Formen von Identität und Zugehörigkeit konstruiert werden.

Abstract French

Ce mémoire de master explore les expériences vécues des adopté·e·s d'origine éthiopienne en France, notamment sur les questions d'identité raciale et d'appartenance. L'enjeu de l'identité raciale est particulièrement pertinent dans le cas des adopté·e·s transraciaux, puisqu'ils et elles sont majoritairement socialisé·e·s au sein de structures sociales blanches. Loin d'être biologiquement donnée, leur identité raciale se construit socialement. Toutefois, plus tard dans leur vie, les adopté·e·s sont confronté·e·s à la racialisation, au racisme et à des expériences d'altérisation, qui peuvent affecter leur identité raciale et leur appartenance, les obligent à négocier les tensions entre leur socialisation initiale et leurs expériences vécues.

Méthodologiquement, en complément d'un corpus théorique et littéraire ancré dans la théorie critique de la race, des perspectives postcoloniales sur l'identité et l'appartenance, ainsi que des travaux sur la parenté adoptive, cette étude repose sur des entretiens qualitatifs. Huit entretiens semi-structurés ont été menés auprès d'adopté·e·s d'origine éthiopienne ayant grandi dans des familles françaises blanches. Ce format d'entretien a permis aux participant·e·s de raconter leurs expériences tout en laissant de la place à l'émergence de nouveaux thèmes., et les données ont été analysées à l'aide d'une analyse thématique.

Les résultats montrent que les adopté·e·s, socialisé·e·s au sein de leurs familles adoptives, voient leurs différences culturelles et raciales d'origine minimisées par une combinaison de pratiques de parenté, de normativité blanche et d'idéologie colorblind. En conséquence, nombre d'entre eux·elles internalisent la blancheur comme identité normative, générant une dissonance initiale avec leur corps racialisé. L'entrée dans l'âge adulte constitue souvent un tournant. Confronté·e·s à la racialisation, au racisme et à l'altération, les adopté·e·s se voient amené·e·s à renégocier leur identité raciale et leur sentiment d'appartenance. Leur position d'entre-deux ni pleinement « français·e » ni « éthiopien·ne », ni entièrement « blanc·he » ni « noir·e » engendre des sentiments de fragmentation et une crise identitaire et d'appartenance, mais devient également un espace d'agentivité où se construisent de nouvelles formes alternatives d'identités et d'appartenance

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1 Introduction

Between 2011 and 2013, in response to widespread abuses, corruption, illegal practices, and child trafficking, Ethiopia began restricting international adoptions and ultimately banned them in 2018 (Gulema et al. 2024: 333).

As emphasized by Gallego Molinero et al (2024) in recent years, “irregular adoptions” have attracted significant attention from both academics and international organizations (Gallego Molinero et al. 2024: 196). Although many international adoption programs begin as humanitarian initiatives, they gradually turn into profit-driven systems as Western demand for adoptable children grows. This leads to widespread corruption, including child trafficking, document falsification, and coercion of birth parents. In the case of Ethiopia, the lack of regulation as a non-signatory to the Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption (HCIA) enables such abuses to flourish. The Convention is an international agreement that establishes shared standards for intercountry adoption, with the primary aim of preventing illegal practices and promoting the best interests of children (Steenrod 2022: 111).

Nevertheless, in the Ethiopian case, studies have shown how illegal practices have occurred at every stage of Ethiopia’s legal adoption process, from child separation to court approval (Gulema et al. 2024: 335). This reality stands in stark contrast to Western imaginings of international adoption, where the term has been associated with positive practices such as acts of generosity, humanitarian efforts, and saving “orphans” from poverty. However, in a lot of cases, these imaginaries do not reflect the reality of adopted children (Gallego Molinero et al. 2024: 195).

Similarly, in this master’s thesis, I will be questioning another narrative concerning transnational and transracial adoption, notably the one linked to racial differences in the adoption process. Indeed, adoption is often idealized as an act of unconditional love that transcends differences, particularly racial ones. However, this narrative of “love is enough” frequently leads white adoptive parents to adopt a colorblind approach, minimizing or ignoring their adopted children’s racial differences. Such an approach, although well-intentioned, fails to prepare adoptees for the lived realities of racialized individuals outside the protective bubble of their white families (Wexler et al. 2023: 56). For instance, Tobias Hübinette and Carina Tigervall (2009) show that international adoptees in Sweden experience disproportionately high rates of suicide, mental health problems, as well as difficulties in achieving the same

socio-economic status as their adoptive parents, despite being raised in privileged families. While these outcomes are often attributed to pre-adoption trauma or biological factors, the authors argue that they are more accurately explained by the persistent effects of racialization and everyday racism in Swedish society.

The early socialization of transnational and transracial adoptees takes place primarily within white social and cultural environments. For Ethiopian adoptees raised in France, these formative experiences shaped by kinship practices, colorblind ideologies, and whiteness as a hegemonic force profoundly affect their identity formation. Within these kinship settings, adoptees are socialized to become culturally French, while colorblindness and whiteness function as an unmarked and valorized norm, both invisible and pervasive. These dynamics have significant epistemic implications, shaping how adoptees come to understand race, belonging, and their own positionality within French society, particularly during the identity-sorting years (Gailey 2010: 51).

To proceed further, a few key definitions are necessary. *Adoption* can be understood as a legal and social process through which a parental relationship is created between individuals who are not biologically related, granting the same rights, responsibilities, and obligations as those between a child and their biological parents. *Transnational adoption*, also referred to as *international* or *intercountry adoption*, specifically denotes the adoption of a child from one country by an individual or couple residing in a different country. In this context, *birthparents* refer to the child's biological parents, *adoptive parents* to those who obtain legal custody and parental rights, and *adoptee* to the child who has been legally adopted (Lippold 1995).

Transracial adoption is commonly defined as “the joining of racially different parents and children together in adoptive families” (Silverman 1993, cited in Lee 2003: 712). It may occur in both domestic and international contexts. This form of adoption is the most visibly marked, since the physical differences between adoptive parents and adoptees are immediately apparent and immutable. In most cases, transracial adoptions involve white parents adopting children who are racial or ethnic minorities within the country of adoption (Lee 2003: 712).

Thus, by exploring the lived experiences of Ethiopian adoptees in France, this research aims to contribute to challenging the narrative that, in transnational adoption, love alone can transcend racial differences. Although adopted children are legally and socially incorporated into their host societies, they continue to grapple with race, identity, and belonging. Furthermore, this

research seeks to highlight the broader tensions and discomfort associated with racial difference and minority status in the Global North. In doing so, it exposes the persistence, in France as well as in the general Western context, of essentialist and biologized understandings of race, culture, and national belonging. At the same time, it reveals, through the lived experiences of transnational and transracial adoptees, that the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion based on those essentialized notions are socially constructed rather than natural (Wade 2022).

1.1 Literature review

The theoretical framework of this master's thesis is situated at the intersection of Critical Adoption Studies, Critical Race Studies, and Postcolonial Theories. First, analyzing transnational adoption from a critical historical perspective is important to understand the origins of the phenomenon and to propose a critical decolonial perspective that contrasts with the mainstream narrative. I will notably refer to the work of Yves Denéchère, Professor of Contemporary History at the University of Angers, who offers a valuable historical analysis of transnational adoption, particularly in France. In his 2021 article, “L’adoption transnationale entre idéologies, humanitaire et catharsis,” Yves Denéchère traces how post-war humanitarian ideals, decolonization processes, and Cold War dynamics shaped transnational and transracial adoption in France and the United States between 1945 and 1975. He also highlights the neocolonial relationships and asymmetries of power that underpin the dominant narratives surrounding transnational adoption.

Kirsten Lovelock, a New Zealand scholar specializing in Migration and Public Health at the University of Otago, offers a critical perspective on the evolution of transnational adoption. In her 2000 article, "Intercountry Adoption as a Migratory Practice," she demonstrates how adoption, initially framed as a humanitarian response to children in need, has evolved into a demand-driven system increasingly shaped by the interests of prospective adoptive parents in the Global North, rather than by the needs of children and their biological families.

The theoretical perspective on race, identity, and belonging draws on a social-constructivist understanding of these concepts, informed by postcolonial feminist scholarship and critical race studies. These approaches challenge essentialist understanding of these notions and emphasise how they are shaped through social, historical, and political processes of power, racialization, and inclusion and exclusion. Focusing particularly on the work of Stuart Hall, a

Jamaican-born Cultural Theorist, will be crucial. Hall's conceptualization of race and identity challenges the idea of racial and cultural identity as singular, unified, and fixed. Instead, he defines identity as a dynamic process shaped by power relations, historical contexts, and cultural disruptions (Hall 2011). Judith Butler, an American philosopher known for her theory on gender identity as performativity, will further clarify how racial identity can be understood as performative in contrast with essentialized, fixed definitions (Butler [1999] 2011).

Similarly, national belonging is often constructed through essentialised links between race, culture, and nation, positioning racialised individuals in the Global North as simultaneously inside and outside the national narrative. Yet, studies on belonging, particularly on the in-between condition, show that liminality can both fragment and enable alternative forms of belonging, notably through Bhabha's concept of Hybridity. Homi K. Bhabha is a key postcolonial theorist whose work focuses on cultural identity, hybridity, and power in colonial and postcolonial contexts. He introduces the concept of the "in-between" or "*Third Space*" as a site where cultural meanings are negotiated and new, hybrid identities emerge, challenging ideas of fixed, authentic, or pure cultures (Bhabha 2011).

Critical Race Theory will be essential for understanding the concept of race, but also racial identity and adoptees' struggles with internalized racism, racial discrimination, and their complex positioning within dominant white social structures. In this regard, I draw upon Achille Mbembe, a Cameroonian academic whose book *Critique of Black Reason* has been central to understanding the formation of race along the way of Blackness and whiteness as racial identity (Mbembe 2020).

Frantz Fanon's work remains foundational in postcolonial and critical race studies. A Martinican psychiatrist, philosopher, and revolutionary, Fanon critically examined colonialism, race, and identity in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). His experience as a Black intellectual in French colonial society and his participation in the Algerian independence movement deeply inform his analysis of the psychological effects of colonial oppression.

Fanon's analysis of whiteness and the notion of the "white mask" imposed on colonized Black individuals under racial and colonial hierarchies is particularly relevant to the experiences of Ethiopian adoptees in France. He highlights the ambivalent position of Black individuals, caught between the expectations of white colonial society and a disrupted connection to their culture of origin, which compels them to adopt a "white mask" to secure social acceptance.

Finally, bell hooks, an American Black feminist scholar, has been particularly influential, especially through her book *Black Looks* ([1992] 2015), which has deepened my understanding

of how racism and racialisation operate in a contemporary world that often imagines itself as “postracial.”

This master’s thesis will also largely focus on extensive existing empirical research concerning transnational and transracial adoption and the questions of identity, race, and belonging. To cite only a few sources, I will, for example, rely on Hewan Girma and Alpha Abebe’s article “Outsiders Within: Examining Ethiopian Adoptee Experiences Through a Diasporic Lens” (2024), which will help situate Ethiopian adoptees’ positioning within the Ethiopian global diaspora network. Both authors, scholars and members of the Ethiopian diaspora settled in North America, provide an empirical perspective on the diasporic experiences of Ethiopian adoptees in the United States.

To further examine questions of belonging and identity among transnational and transracial adoptees, this thesis also draws on the anthropological work of Signe Howell (Howell 2006), Diana Marre (2006), and Peter Wade (2022). Their research connects kinship in the context of transnational adoption to broader issues of ethnicity, race, and belonging. Signe Howell, a Norwegian anthropologist, bridges classical anthropological studies of kinship with contemporary analyses of nationalism and ethnicity. Diana Marre, Professor at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, specialises in human reproduction, gender, and childhood, and has produced key studies on transnational adoption in Spain. Peter Wade, a British anthropologist, focuses on the topics of race, ethnicity, and Blackness. Together, their work offers valuable insights into how adoptive families, notably in Norway and Spain, construct kinship and negotiate belonging across cultural, racial, and national boundaries.

Christine Ward Gailey’s *Blue-Ribbon Babies and the Labor of Love* (2010) offers a detailed sociological analysis of how race, class, and gender intersect in adoption practices in the United States, with a particular focus on transracial adoption. In this work, Gailey develops a typology of parental attitudes toward race and racism that mostly converge towards minimisation (Gailey 2010: 36–37).

Tobias Hübinette, a Korean-born adoptee and Swedish scholar in Critical Race, Whiteness, and Adoption studies, offers a crucial perspective for understanding the racialised experiences of transnational adoptees, notably in the Swedish context. Jessaca Leinaweaver, Professor of Anthropology, specializes in kinship, child welfare, and transnational adoption in Latin American and European contexts. In the article “Otherness and Belonging: The Quiet Migration Redux”(2014), she examines adoptees’ experiences through the lens of migration, arguing that although this framework may seem limited with respect to childhood, it becomes

increasingly relevant as adoptees grow older and negotiate identity, belonging, and racialisation beyond the adoptive family.

This master's thesis addresses a significant geographical gap in the literature by offering an empirical analysis of how Ethiopian adoptees in France negotiate their racial identity and their sense of belonging within French society. Indeed, many empirical studies on transnational adoption are situated within a North American perspective, particularly in the United States. In Europe, empirical studies related to transnational and transracial adoptees are primarily located in Norwegian, Swedish, and Spanish contexts. However, there is very little research focusing on France. I think that understanding how adoptees, particularly from Ethiopian origin, perceive their racial identity in France is particularly interesting because French universalist ideals have rendered the term "race" a taboo. In a colorblind French society, the mere acknowledgment of race often appears as a form of racism itself, based on the belief that not recognizing race will lead to equality (Kennedy and Fisher 2007: 905).

In the French context, sociologist and CNRS researcher Solène Brun (2024) has recently explored racial dynamics within transracial adoptive families, with particular attention to colorblind ideologies, kinship, and the negotiation of racial difference. Notably, her article "*L'adoption comme trajectoire corporelle. Soin du corps, apparences et différences physiques dans l'adoption d'enfants non blancs par des parents blancs*" helps in situating adoptees' racial differences within their adoptive white families, particularly through the lens of bodily differences. Although questions of race, identity, and belonging have been widely explored in the context of transnational and transracial adoption, my academic background in Critical Development Studies has enabled me to approach adoption through a combination of theories that I see as an original contribution, particularly within the French academic context.

1.2 Research question

The points that I would like to address in this master's thesis can be summed up by this main question and the following subquestions:

How do Ethiopian transnational adoptees in France experience, negotiate, and construct their racial identity and sense of belonging within a predominantly white social structure?

- How do Ethiopian-origin adoptees in France describe and experience early socialization within a predominantly white social structure?

- Which social interactions and contexts bring race to the forefront of their lived experience, and how do these moments shape their self-perception?
- How do adoptees respond to, challenge, or reinterpret the racialized expectations and exclusions they might encounter?
- What practices, spaces, and relationships enable them to reconstruct a sense of identity and belonging?

1.3 Structure of the Work

The structure of this master's thesis will broadly follow that of the main research question. In Chapter 3, I will begin by historically contextualizing transracial and international adoption through a critical and postcolonial lens. This chapter is important, first, to understand the history of international adoption, but also to better grasp the topic addressed in this study. Indeed, the aim here will be to show how, historically, international adoption has paid very little attention to the child and the birth family's well-being. Building on this historical background, it becomes easier to understand the adoptees' struggles with identity and belonging.

Chapter 4 will provide a direct entry into the core subject, focusing on the first part of the research question, how transnational and transracial adoptees experience their racial identity. It will first clarify the concepts of race and racial identity in a theoretical section, in order to better understand the analysis that follows. Then, the chapter will delve into the lived experiences of transnational adoptees concerning racial identity. The first section will examine kinship practices within white families, where adoptees often develop a racial and cultural identity that suppresses their Black identity and culture of origin in favor of whiteness and French cultural practices. Whiteness, as an invisible norm, notably through cultural representation but not exclusively, shapes adoptees' perception of their bodies and their epistemological understanding of Blackness. Finally, a section dedicated to colorblindness will demonstrate how this ideology, both within French society and within adoptive families, further reinforces the normalization of whiteness and the devaluation of Blackness. The analysis will particularly focus on how adoptive parents project their white privileges onto their Black adoptive children.

Chapter 5 will address the second part of the research question, how adoptees negotiate and construct their racial identity and sense of belonging. Their experience of growing up within white families and a white-dominated society often produces an identity and belonging crisis, but also allows for the emergence of new forms of identity and belonging that transcend the duality and the *in-between* position characteristic of their experience. The first section will theorize the concepts of belonging and in-betweenness. It will show that this position is often a source of conflict and annihilation. Yet, in a second step, it will be shown that this in-between space can also become a creative and agentive space, where adoptees redefine what racial identity and belonging mean, in a way that aligns more closely with their lived experiences.

2 Methodology and Methods

2.1 Positionality

While reading a 2009 article by Yves Denéchère, a historian at the University of Angers, on the history of international adoption in France, one sentence at the very end particularly resonated with me:

“Tomorrow, much more than today, when the large cohorts of adoptees from the 1990s and 2000s in turn reach adulthood, they will increasingly become actors in the international phenomena generated by intercountry adoption: the search for their roots, development aid to countries of origin, cultural and economic bridges, and so on.”²

Denéchère highlights that internationally adopted children will, once adults, play an increasingly active role in shaping the international dynamics generated and influenced by adoption. Thus, during my readings for this master’s thesis and in conversations with other adoptees, I was struck to observe how many of us have written, or intend to write, academic papers on transnational adoption. In this sense, I am not an exception to Denéchère’s foresight. The first step in remaining true to my methodological approach is to recognise who I am and how my background influences my work. This meant being transparent about my role as a researcher, acknowledging how my personal experiences shape my perspective, and critically reflecting on my own biases. As Donna Haraway ([1988] 2008) explains, knowledge is always

² « Demain, bien davantage qu’aujourd’hui, quand les cohortes nombreuses des adoptés des années 1990 et 2000 deviendront adultes à leur tour, ils seront de plus en plus acteurs de phénomènes internationaux induits par l’adoption internationale : recherche de leurs racines, aide au développement des pays d’origine, traits d’union culturels et économiques, etc.” (Denéchère 2009: 128)

situated, partial, and embodied. It comes from a specific person, place, and experience, rather than from a neutral or universal standpoint. Instead of pretending to take a “view from nowhere,” I openly place myself in the research, and I acknowledge that my perspective is shaped by my experience as a Black transnational adoptee. This approach is more honest and responsible because it shows how and why my knowledge has been formed and encourages ongoing reflection throughout the research process (Haraway [1988] 2008: 350).

I was adopted from Ethiopia at the age of six by white French parents, together with another child of Ethiopian origin. I grew up in an upper-middle-class family in a small rural village in northern France, where my adoptive brother and I were among the very few Black children. This remained the case until I left for college in Rouen, where, for the first time, I was in regular contact with other Black or racialised peers. Adoption and my lived experience as a Black person within a predominantly white social structure have profoundly shaped my identity, sensitivities, and many of my life choices, including the academic path that led to this master’s thesis. As a Black transnational adoptee, my background significantly informs my interest in questions of migration, identity, belonging, and race, as well as the analytical angle adopted in this thesis.

Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* has been particularly formative for my thinking. The book’s mirror-like effect strongly resonated with my own lived experience of estrangement and disconnection, what Fanon describes as being “enclosed in one’s Blackness” (Fanon [1952] 2015: 12). The racial identity crisis evoked in the book and its deeply personal dimension, informed my decision to echo Fanon’s title in this thesis, using it as a conceptual anchor for examining racial identity and belonging among Ethiopian adoptees in France.

The insider perspective may present emotional and analytical challenges, but also an epistemological advantage, following Patricia Hill Collins’ notion of the “*outsider within*”. Being both inside and outside the dominant culture allows me to perceive the racial and cultural structures shaping adoptees’ position with greater clarity. Rather than a bias, this standpoint deepens my understanding (Collins 1986: 14-15). But still, while my personal experience as an adoptee offers a unique lens through which to explore these questions, this proximity also requires ongoing reflexivity to avoid projecting my own experience onto others. I remain aware of the diversity of adoptee experiences, shaped by differing socioeconomic backgrounds, family histories, genders... They both challenge and enrich my own perspective.

Nevertheless, this insider perspective also facilitated deeper engagement with my interview partners. The relationship between the interviewer and interviewee plays a significant role in shaping the interview process. Critically examining this dynamic helps to better understand how meanings were constructed and how this may have influenced the data produced (Dannecker and Englert 2014: 162). Thus, Ethiopian adoptees often appeared more at ease sharing their experiences with someone who shares a similar trajectory (Girma and Abebe 2024: 5). I sensed this during the interviews, as participants frequently identified with me and spoke openly about their experiences. For instance, in the transcript, I observed several moments where, while sharing their experiences, adoptees integrated me into their narratives by using, for example, the pronoun “we.” This dynamic helped create a safe space, which, I believe, had a positive impact on the depth and authenticity of the data collected.

Finally, returning to knowledge production and mirroring Yves Dénéchère, I place particular importance on my position as a researcher writing about transnational adoption. Historically, adoption has been institutionalised by states in the Global North and has not always prioritised the rights and well-being of children. However, dominant narratives have often framed adoption as unquestionably serving “the best interests of the child” (Wexler et al. 2023: 514). These mainstream narratives have often overlooked the voices of actors such as adoptees or birth families (Schindele 2022: 4864). For these reasons, it appears crucial to me that adoptees reclaim knowledge production about phenomena that directly concern them.

2.2 Methodology

Alongside literature and theory, this study employs qualitative interviews. Qualitative interviews are among the most important methods of data collection in empirical research. According to Petra Dannecker, a development sociologist at the University of Vienna, and Christiane Voßemer, a development sociologist at HAW Hamburg, the primary aim of qualitative interviews is not to produce statistically comparable data, but rather to explore the meanings, perspectives, and interpretations of participants, thereby seeking to understand social phenomena in their complexity and context (Dannecker, Voßemer 2014).

This is one of the main reasons that prompted me to adopt qualitative interviews as a method for exploring questions of racial identity and belonging among Ethiopian-origin adoptees in France. These topics are highly subjective and context-dependent, and therefore, they may vary from one person to another. Thus, standardized or statistical methods would not adequately capture all the complexity around these questions. Furthermore, qualitative interviews allow

for openness, which enables unexpected themes to emerge (Dannecker, Voßemer 2014: 155). This openness was particularly relevant in my case. Indeed, my position as both researcher and adoptee may have influenced the research process, as there was a risk of projecting my own experiences onto those of other adoptees. However, the openness inherent in qualitative interviews also challenged my perspective, since themes emerged that differed from those I had anticipated based on my personal experiences and prior readings. Semi-structured interviews supported a fluid conversational dynamic and were adapted in addressing predefined themes related to the topic, while still allowing deviation from the script when participants' narratives required further exploration (Dannecker, Voßemer 2014: 158).

2.3 Sampling and Data Collection

This study employed a criterion-based, purposive sampling method. In this approach, participants are selected based on predetermined inclusion criteria and are expected to possess relevant experiences and insights related to the phenomenon under study (Palinkas et al. 2016: 335). The criterion for participation was being an Ethiopian-origin adoptee raised in a white family in France. As an adoptee, I had access to several online spaces and social media groups, which served as the main recruitment platforms. These communities provided a direct and trusted avenue for identifying potential participants while fostering a sense of familiarity and safety. Recruitment messages clearly outlined the study's aims and procedures, ensuring that participation was entirely voluntary and based on informed consent.

My strategy was to share a concise summary of the research topic and objectives in order to attract participants, spark interest, and encourage those who felt personally concerned and reflective about the topic to volunteer. This approach supported the selection of participants who met the predefined criteria relevant to this study. In particular, I focused on recruiting participants from online communities dedicated to French Ethiopian-origin adoptees, which enabled me to reach individuals who fit into my sampling strategy. As such, this method did not aim for statistical representativeness, but rather for the collection of information-rich narratives from individuals who could speak meaningfully to questions of racial identity and belonging in the French context (Palinkas et al. 2016: 339).

A total of eight adoptees participated in this study, comprising six women and two men. The final sample size was determined pragmatically, taking into account time constraints and the point at which sufficient depth and richness of data had been achieved. The implications and

limitations of this sample size are discussed further in the conclusion. Although gender parity was sought during recruitment, the sample is characterized by an overrepresentation of women. This trend is consistent with previous qualitative research with adoptees, such as Abebe and Girma (2024) or Hübinette Tigerwall (2009), who similarly reported a predominance of women among their respondents. Scholars suggest that this imbalance is partly linked to the gendered nature of the adoption field, where women, both adoptees and adoptive mothers, tend to be more engaged in therapeutic, support, and community spaces related to adoption (Agoglia and Herrera 2021; Leinaweaver 2014 as cited in Abebe and Girma 2024: 5).

All interviews were conducted in French and recorded with the participants' consent. They lasted between 25 and 50 minutes, with an average duration of 33 minutes. However, for each interview, this official recording time was followed by an informal conversation that, in most cases, exceeded one hour. These informal exchanges were essential to share a moment with the participants, whom I had just met, offering an opportunity to discuss our lived experiences more freely and beyond the framework of the study. Although these informal conversations were not directly included in the analysis, they provided valuable contextual insights that informed my interpretation of the data.

The interviews were anonymized by assigning each participant a unique identifier code and removing all direct identifiers, including names and locations. For analytical purposes, only gender and age were retained. For example, the code *11/f25* refers to participant 1, a 25-year-old female, while *15/m40* refers to participant 5, a 40-year-old male. The full index of participant codes is provided in Appendix 1. This approach ensured the protection of participants' privacy while retaining essential contextual information for analysis.

The interviews were transcribed in French and later translated into English using a combination of AI-assisted translation and manual revision. As English is not my mother tongue, I relied largely on AI-based translations for reasons of accuracy and time efficiency. However, all AI-generated translations were carefully reviewed to ensure accuracy and fidelity to the original French version, particularly for the quotations included in the paper.

2.4 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to provide a structured framework for examining qualitative data by identifying key themes that emerge from participants' narratives (Bryman 2012). This approach enables researchers to explore recurring ideas and connections within the data, fostering a deeper understanding of adoptees' experiences. Although one of the most widely

used qualitative methods, thematic analysis differs from grounded theory or critical discourse analysis in that it does not have a distinct methodological lineage or fixed set of techniques. Instead, the search for themes is a flexible practice found across many qualitative approaches (Bryman 2012: 578).

Initial codes were generated inductively through repeated readings of the transcripts, allowing themes to emerge from participants' narratives (Bryman 2012: 579). The coding process was supported by the use of a qualitative data analysis software (Nvivo). At the same time, deductive codes were applied based on the study's theoretical framework, particularly in relation to racial identity and belonging. Through this combination of inductive and deductive coding, the main themes and subthemes were identified and subsequently organized into a table, with cases arranged according to thematic categories (see Appendix 2). Codes with similar meanings were merged and grouped in line with the research questions into broader analytical categories. The main categories were: (1) *Transnational adoption*, (2) *Belonging*, (3) *Racial Identity*, (4) *Cultural Identity*, and (5) *Racism and Racialization*. Although these overarching categories may initially appear broad, their subcategories provide more precise and meaningful insights into each dimension. For instance, within the category *Transnational Adoption*, several subcategories were identified, such as:

- a) Illegality, uprootedness, and critique of the adoption system
- b) Age at adoption and related dynamics
- c) Psychological and emotional repercussions

While coding facilitates systematic analysis, it can also fragment narratives and risk overlooking their depth. Despite these limitations, coding remains valuable for its methodological rigour and compatibility with qualitative analysis software. Ultimately, meaning in qualitative research arises not from description alone but through the critical interpretation and theorization of participants' lived experiences (Bryman 2012: 578). In this sense, the existing literature and the study's theoretical framework guided the interpretation of the themes that emerged through the coding process. These themes were subsequently organized into coherent analytical chapters, enabling a deeper understanding of how Ethiopian adoptees experience racial identity and belonging within the French context.

3 Understanding Transnational and Transracial Adoption from a Critical Historical Perspective

3.1 Between Wars: The Historical Roots of Transnational and Transracial Adoption

The French-American artist Joséphine Baker symbolized the early phase of transnational transracial adoption, having adopted nearly twelve children starting in the early 1950s. For instance, in 1954, she adopted so-called “occupation babies” or “GI babies”, who are children born to American soldiers and Japanese or Korean mothers. Two years later, she also adopted two children during the Algerian War (Denéchère 2021: 100–102). These examples marked the early development of what would become the contemporary practice of transnational adoption, which took shape in the second half of the twentieth century and was initially grounded in wartime and postwar contexts.

Following World War II, thousands of orphaned and displaced European children, many from Greece, Italy, and Germany, were adopted by American families, who often shared similar ethnicities, under the U.S. Displaced Persons Act (Denéchère 2021: 97). Some were born of relationships between foreign soldiers and local women and were later abandoned due to economic hardship or social stigma. Similar patterns emerged during the Cold War and during colonial conflicts, such as the First Indochina War (1946–1954), where mixed-race children born to French soldiers and local women were transferred to France by organizations like the *Fédération des œuvres de l'enfance française d'Indochine* (FOEFI) and assimilated as colonial elites. Comparable actions also took place in Algeria (Denéchère 2021: 102).

The institutionalization of transnational adoption in its contemporary form took shape during the Korean War, when thousands of children were left orphans. Among them were mixed-race children born to unions between American soldiers and Korean women. Because of the circumstances of their birth, the children were often stigmatized and abandoned. The adoption of Korean children by Americans and the institutionalization of this system have been facilitated through laws such as the 1953 Refugee Relief Act and measures implemented by the South Korean administration (Denéchère 2021: 103). By the late 1960s, the number of adoptions increased drastically, notably from Vietnam. Efforts by the Vietnamese government to control the phenomenon failed. In 1975, Operation Babylift, launched amid the fall of Saigon, evacuated 2,000 children to the U.S. despite beginning with a tragic plane crash.

During this period, state and private actors played a key role in facilitating adoptions, thereby accelerating the development of the practice into its modern, transnational form (Denéchère 2021: 105).

3.1.1 Adoption in Ethiopia

Adoption in Ethiopia is not a foreign or modern concept, but rather a longstanding social practice rooted in the country's diverse cultural traditions. While community-based care has historically been the most common response to orphanhood, formal adoption has also been practiced, however, less frequently and often as a last resort (Gulema et al. 2024: 332). Historically, adoption practices in Ethiopia have varied significantly across ethnic, religious, and regional groups. These practices ranged from informal kinship arrangements to full integration of a child into the adoptive family, granting the child social and legal status equivalent to that of a biological child. Among the dominant ethnic groups, the Oromo and Amhara offer illustrative examples of customary adoption. Among the Oromo, the practice known as *gudifecha* involves complete assimilation of the child through a structured ritual. (Beckstrom 1972: 145) This form of adoption dates back to at least the 1800s and involves ceremonies that include elders, symbols, oath-taking, and feasting. The Amhara have similar practices, known as *yemar lij* (honey child) and *yetut lij* (breast child), which involve symbolic rituals such as the use of honey and breastfeeding gestures. These acts signify the child's complete incorporation into the adoptive family. In both traditions, the consent of the biological parents or relatives is essential and is typically given during the ceremonial process (Beckstrom 1972: 147).

In 1960, Ethiopia adopted a new Civil Code, drafted primarily by René David, a French legal scholar. The Code was mainly modeled on European legal systems. René David's limited understanding of Ethiopian traditions led to significant gaps between the new legal provisions and longstanding local customs. The result was a legal framework that disturbed several key aspects of traditional adoption practices (Beckstrom 1972: 150). Some of the differences between customary adoption practices and the new legal system are that in customary practice, adoption approval was typically given by a local authority figure, such as a priest or elders. With the new legal system, no adoption is valid without the approval of a legal authority, which formalizes the process and ensures its validity. Another significant difference is that child welfare is taken into consideration when adopting, and therefore, the adoption must show a clear advantage for the child. In contrast, in traditional practices, the child's well-being was

often an afterthought and not the primary criterion, with the main goal being to secure an heir for the adoptive parents. Finally, the maintenance of biological ties in the new system contrasts with the customary practice, which often resulted in the cutting of child ties. (Beckstrom 1972: 152)

In parallel with the rise of urbanization and population mobility in Ethiopia, a new phenomenon of abandoned infants emerged in the 1960s, particularly in cities such as Addis Ababa (Beckstrom 1975: 159). Young women who became pregnant were often unable to identify the father of their child or hold him legally accountable. Indeed, the new Ethiopian Civil Code made it virtually impossible to impose paternal responsibility without the father's acknowledgment. Consequently, when paternity is denied, many women feel they have no choice but to abandon their newborn (Beckstrom 1972: 160). This is still the case nowadays. Under Ethiopian federal law, there is no legal difference between a child born inside or outside of marriage. All children have the same rights to maintenance, inheritance, and recognition, provided paternity is established. However, establishing paternity remains both legally and practically challenging, as it relies on voluntary acknowledgment by the father or a judicial declaration, all of which can be difficult to prove in practice. These obstacles often leave mothers solely responsible for childcare (Kibret 2022: 10).

Moreover, according to Beckstrom, whose work stems from the 1970s, Ethiopians used to be reluctant to adopt abandoned children primarily due to deep-rooted cultural beliefs. Adoption was traditionally seen as a socio-economic arrangement, and less as a child welfare system or a response to childlessness and infertility (Beckstrom 1972: 160). Social work campaigns have had little success, leaving many orphans without homes (Beckstrom 1972: 160). Thus, foreign adoption, beginning with Swedish families, emerged as an alternative to national adoption (Beckstrom 1972: 160). But transnational adoption from Ethiopia truly accelerated from the 1970s onwards due to a combination of socioeconomic difficulties, severe famine, civil war, and the spread of viruses such as HIV, which left many children in the country orphaned (Gulema et al. 2024: 332). In the 2000s, international adoption from Ethiopia reached its peak. Between 2005 and 2009, the number of Ethiopian adoptions tripled, rising from 1,713 to 4,676 (Gulema et al. 2024: 333). The success of transnational adoption in Ethiopia is because “[t]he children were young and healthy, and it was cheaper and faster than adoption from other countries.” (Gulema et al. 2024: 333). Indeed, Kassaye Berhanu-MacDonald highlights the fact that Ethiopia had not ratified the 1993 Hague Convention, which regulates international adoption practices. As a result, adoption agencies were able to operate without regulation, and many privately run orphanages relocated to Ethiopia. However, between 2011 and 2013, in

response to widespread abuses, Ethiopia began restricting adoptions and ultimately banned international adoption in 2018 (Gulema et al. 2024: 333).

3.1.2 Adoption in France

In France, two forms of adoption coexist: plenary adoption, which severs all legal ties with the birth family, and simple adoption, which adds a legal bond without removing the original filiation of the child to its biological parents. If simple adoption originated in the Napoleonic Code of 1804 and was designed for inheritance purposes, plenary adoption is more recent, having been introduced in 1939 (Mignot 2015: 525). Simple adoption has been more common in France, particularly since the 1970s. This increase is primarily due to the rise in divorces and the formation of reconstituted families, with many stepparents adopting their stepchildren. International or transnational adoption is mainly concerned with plenary adoption in which the adoption severs all legal ties with the birth family (Mignot 2015: 530).

Yves Denéchère (2009) examines the historical development of transnational adoption in France, highlighting the progressive expansion of intercountry adoption to additional sending countries. For instance, in 1974, adopted foreign children came principally from South Korea, Vietnam, and India. A few years later, in 1980, they originated from more than ten different countries, reaching 77 by 2004. The number of adoptions also follows this trend, as the number of adoption visas increased from 935 in 1980 to 3,000 in 1990 and over 4,000 in 2004 (Denéchère 2009: 123). It is also important to stress the key role played by French associations in structuring international adoption. Those associations acted as intermediaries between adoptive families and foreign states. Their motivations and actions have evolved, often reflecting broader humanitarian, religious, or developmental ideologies (Denéchère 2021: 125). From the 1980s, many new associations emerged to facilitate international adoption and meet growing domestic demand. A typology can be drawn between officially accredited organizations and informal networks supporting individual adoption efforts. These new organizations also represented a shift in the international adoption system. Even though these newcomers advocate for humanitarian purposes and the well-being of adopted children, many of them primarily focus on facilitating adoptive families' access to children (Denéchère 2021: 125). This aligns with Kirsten Lovelock's insights in her article, "Intercountry Adoption as a Migratory Practice," (2000) where she shows how adoption, initially framed as a humanitarian response to children in need, has become a demand-driven system shaped

increasingly by the interests of prospective adoptive parents in the Global North, rather than by the needs of children and their biological families.

3.2 A Critical Analysis of Transnational and Transracial Adoption

The concept of biopolitics, as developed by Michel Foucault, refers to the various mechanisms, strategies, and interventions through which states seek to regulate populations. It encompasses a range of policies and practices aimed at managing life, particularly about health, reproduction, and sexuality, in ways that optimize the functioning of society. Rather than relying solely on coercive power or legal enforcement, biopolitical governance operates normatively, meaning it shapes how individuals think, act, and make decisions in alignment with what is socially and politically seen as rational or desirable. Importantly, biopolitics is not only exercised by the state, but also through the actions of social institutions, civil society actors, or NGOs (Kim 2015: 66). In the context of transnational adoption, biopolitical mechanisms have historically played a crucial role in both countries of origin and receiving nations.

Moreover, the adoption system is deeply embedded within ideological frameworks of “modernity,” “civilization,” “progress,” and “development” (Mantz, 2021). These ideas have been used to justify the large-scale transfer of children, particularly from the Global South to the Global North, under the humanitarian rhetoric of serving the “best interests of the child” (Denéchère 2021).

However, when examined critically, the origins and functioning of transnational adoption reveal motivations that extend beyond the welfare of the child. They reflect populationist, pronatalist, and ideological objectives of Western states.

3.2.1 Populationism, Biopolitics, and Ideologies in the Rise of Transnational, Transracial Adoption

Post–World War II transnational adoptions in France were not solely motivated by humanitarian concerns, such as assisting orphaned children facing abandonment, war, or difficult socioeconomic conditions. Denéchère (2021) highlights how these adoptions were embedded in a larger national strategy, shaped by the rise of a “populationniste” doctrine, particularly in the French context (Denéchère 2021: 107). This doctrine was based on the belief that France needed both an active workforce and higher birth rates to support postwar recovery. Therefore, intercountry adoption was aligned with broader governmental efforts to increase the

population, including policies promoting immigration and childbirth. This political and demographic doctrine involves a selection of adoptable children, as they will constitute the active workforce of the country in the future, including as mothers and fathers. Denéchère notes that during this period, after World War II, a form of “adoption d’État” (state adoption) (Denéchère 2021: 107) emerged, where the French government took control of repatriating German children born in the French-occupied zones to give them for adoption to French families. Authorities deliberately erased records of these procedures, so that even the adoptees often never knew they had been adopted. In many cases, adoptive parents did not publicly acknowledge these adoptions. These actions prioritized state interests, with little regard for the children’s well-being or the possibility that they could be raised in their birth country (Denéchère 2021: 108).

In the U.S. context, the loosening of the highly restrictive immigration policies regarding child migration from Europe, Korea, and Vietnam was driven not only by humanitarian principles but also by biopolitical and ideological considerations. For instance, following President Truman’s directive of December 22, 1945, the Displaced Persons Act was created in 1948, which allowed the migration of refugees and unaccompanied minors to the U.S. Under this act, the country allowed 3,000 orphans from Europe to enter the U.S. This migration also coincided with U.S. adoptive parents increasingly seeking healthy Caucasian infants from Europe to meet domestic demand, as the supply of white infants available for adoption in the U.S. was insufficient. Intercountry adoption thus shifted from a humanitarian response to a solution for satisfying racial and cultural preferences in domestic adoption (Lovelock 2000: 912).

Furthermore, beyond providing humanitarian aid to children in need, the U.S. decision to open its borders coincided with its involvement in conflicts in Europe and, most notably, in Asia (Lovelock 2000: 912–913). Transnational adoption served U.S. geopolitical goals. It not only addressed the domestic need for adoptable children but also, within the Cold War framework, allowed the U.S. to present itself as a humanitarian superpower. By establishing orphanages and promoting international adoption, the country wanted to mitigate its involvement in the conflicts and the role of American soldiers in creating these orphans (Lovelock 2000).

3.2.2 The Biopolitics of Access to Parenthood in the Global North

Since the 1970s, intercountry adoption has mainly been demand-driven, with policies in countries such as the U.S., Canada, and New Zealand prioritizing the desires of adoptive parents and national interests over the welfare of the children (Lovelock 2000). Along the same lines, Ingvill Stuvøy and Lene Myong (2023) analyze and compare transnational adoption and surrogacy in Denmark and Norway, framing both practices within the notion of the biopolitics of parental access. The biopolitics of parental access is used as a lens to examine how parental access is regulated by state practices (Stuvøy and Myong 2023: 1091). The Scandinavian welfare state, particularly in Denmark and Norway, invests heavily in family policies and fertility support, illustrating how states are deeply involved in managing citizens and their reproductive lives. In the early 2010s, scandals involving the Danish adoption agencies DanAdopt, for unlawful procurement of children, and AC Børnehjælp, for financial mismanagement and embezzlement. Those cases added to an already long history of controversies in Denmark's adoption sector, sparking public debate on transnational adoption. The rise of critical voices from the general public opposing transnational adoption led the Danish government to prioritize reforms aimed at preserving Danish citizens' access to adoption (Stuvøy and Myong 2023: 1095). Reforms included mandatory pre- and post-adoption counseling until adoptees reach 18; the promotion of openness in adoption, including adoptees' right to access their personal history and reconnect with birth families; and encouragement for adoptive parents to send updates to sending countries and first families (Stuvøy and Myong 2023: 1098).

This example from Denmark illustrates how receiving countries regulate and optimize access to parenthood through state-managed biopolitical strategies. Despite scandals and revelations surrounding the transnational adoption system, the Danish government chose to overlook these issues, prioritizing access to parenthood instead. The reforms introduced were mainly moral rather than legal obligations. This reveals how such policies often favor adoptive families over the well-being of the children and birth families. Furthermore, as we will see in the following examples, the biopolitics of access to parenthood in the Global North mirrors those that regulate reproductive lives in the Global South. In the case of South Korea, the governance of single mothers and the institutionalization of adoption are central to the transnational circulation of children.

3.2.3 Biopolitics In Sending Countries: The Case Of South Korea

Hosu Kim's article "The Biopolitics of Transnational Adoption in South Korea: Preemption and the Governance of Single Birthmothers" (2015) illustrates how biopolitical mechanisms in South Korea have contributed to the normalization and legitimization of adoption, particularly among single mothers. Since the mid-1950s, transnational adoption from South Korea has resulted in the overseas placement of more than 180,000 children in North America and Europe, with over 120,000 of these children born to single mothers. The author argues that the disproportionate representation of single mothers as "birthmothers" is not a coincidence; instead, it is deeply rooted in biopolitical strategies that have been used to regulate single motherhood in South Korea (Kim 2015: 59).

Indeed, in patriarchal South Korean society, motherhood outside of marriage or being a single mother has been seen as a threat to society and the country's population goals, which has led from 1980 to the mid-2000s to coordinated actions by the government, non-governmental organizations, and religious groups to manage and control it (Kim 2015). Traditional patriarchal norms, such as the *hojuje* family register system, which registered families under the male head of household, played a central role in many administrative procedures until its abolition in 2008. Indeed, under the *hojuje* family register system, a single mother was identified not as a mother but as a cohabitant with her child. Thus, this system stigmatized and marginalized single mothers and their children. Although abortion was illegal in the country, it became a largely tolerated self-regulatory practice and the more preferable outcome in the case of child conception outside marriage (Kim 2015: 63). Furthermore, single mothers turn to maternity homes, which were often run by Christian organizations closely linked to adoption agencies and provided shelter but primarily facilitated adoption rather than family preservation, further enhancing adoption as the most rational choice and sustaining society regulation of single mothers (Kim 2015: 64).

As in the South Korean case, in Ethiopia, restrictive paternity laws and cultural norms associated with the stigma of illegitimacy left single mothers with few viable options, often resulting in child abandonment (Beckstrom 1972). In both contexts, international adoption emerged to fill this gap.

We see here how biopolitics also operates in sending countries through the active consent of the population to the implicit rules of the state. Rather than using direct laws or force, various actors collaborated to create social norms and support systems that encouraged single mothers

to conform to certain behaviors. This approach disguised control as help or care, but in reality, it effectively monitored and limited women's sexual choices and reproductive rights to protect and regulate the nation's demographic stability according to established norms. We also see how the involvement of actors such as Christian organizations and adoption agencies contributed to making children available for international adoption, rather than supporting single mothers and promoting family preservation.

These biopolitical strategies, both in sending and receiving countries, must be understood within the broader framework of the colonality of power, which describes the continuity of colonial mechanisms beyond formal colonialism. Thus, this system continues to structure global hierarchies, rendering women in the Global South reproductive laborers, whose bodies are regulated and instrumentalized to serve national and transnational goals.

3.3 Decolonizing Transnational and Transracial Adoption: The Exploitation of Reproductive Labor from a Historical Perspective: Colonialism, Racism, and Classism

3.3.1 The Colonial Roots of the Exploitation of Reproductive Labor

Analyzing transnational and transracial adoption systems through the lens of reproductive justice brings us back to colonial times and highlights how adoption has historically been rooted in the exploitation of the reproductive labor of Indigenous women and women of color in the United States and the Global South (Wexler et al. 2023: 512). The early removal of children from Indigenous and other vulnerable communities by white settlers can be traced to settler colonial strategies aimed at the physical and cultural eradication of Indigenous populations. In the U.S., child removal was a central instrument of this project. Indigenous children were forcibly separated from their families and placed in white homes and institutions, severing their ties to their communities. U.S. policies such as the creation of Indian boarding schools and the Indian Adoption Project sought to assimilate these children into white society, systematically erasing their languages, cultures, and familial ties.

This practice, which began during the so-called American Indian (Frontier) Wars (1609-1890), extended into the era of boarding schools and culminated in formal adoption programs like the 'Indian Adoption Project'. Between 25–35% of all Indigenous children were adopted into white, non-Indigenous families during this period, which has been later described

as a form of cultural genocide justified by the rhetoric of civilizing and rescuing the child (Wexler et al. 2023: 512).

This history of removal is not limited to Indigenous populations. The legacy of slavery in the United States also shaped the contemporary child welfare system. Enslaved Black women were denied ownership over their reproductive labor, and their children could be sold at any moment. After the abolition of slavery, the placement of Black children into white families, often under moral betterment or protection, echoed these earlier logics of dispossession. Throughout the 20th century, especially during the civil rights era, poor Black families continued to face the threat of child removal, reinforcing structures of racial hierarchy and control under the guise of welfare (Wexler et al. 2023: 512).

Classism further compounded this dynamic. One striking example is the Orphan Train Movement (1854–1929), a child welfare program designed to relocate poor urban immigrant children, primarily of Irish, Italian, and Jewish descent, from the Eastern cities to rural areas in the U.S. interior (Leonard 2022: 112).³ Ostensibly aimed at saving children from the perceived immorality and chaos of urban life, the program often placed them in white Christian households as indentured laborers. Parental consent was rarely sought, and the cultural backgrounds of the children were ignored or actively erased in the process (Wexler et al. 2023: 512).

Relatable practices also emerged in the French colonial context. For instance, Christina Elizabeth Firpo discusses the French colonial and postcolonial practice of removing fatherless *métis* (mixed-race) children in her book “The Uprooted Race, Children, and Imperialism in French Indochina, 1890–1980” (2017). Those children born to Vietnamese, Cambodian, or Lao mothers and French fathers were taken from their native environments in Indochina. Initially appearing as isolated incidents, this became a systematic policy aimed at “protecting” *métis* children by uprooting them from their indigenous cultures and raising them in French-run institutions to instill loyalty to France. Mothers were often coerced or forced to give up their children. Between 1890 and 1980, more than 10,000 children likely passed through these institutions. The system arose from colonial anxieties about mixed-race populations and their ambiguous legal and cultural status, especially those not legally

³ It is also important to stress that, at that time, Irish, Italian, and Jewish people were not considered as white within the dominant U.S. society.

recognized by their French fathers, who were classified as natives and lived in poverty (Firpo 2017: 2).

Another case is the scandal of the “children of the Creuse,” which refers to the deportation of more than 1,600 children from Réunion Island to mainland France between 1963 and 1982. Initiated by Michel Debré and the French child welfare services (DDASS), the program aimed to repopulate rural departments such as the Creuse. The numerous testimonies of the deported children reveal that they were often taken from impoverished and illiterate families under false promises of education and a better life. Many children, while in France, endured abuse, discrimination, and profound loneliness, resulting in depression, social marginalization, and, in some cases, suicide (Magdelaine-Andrianjafitrimo 2009).

Thus, through these early examples, one can see that poor families and families of color, particularly in the U.S have historically been viewed as incapable of caring adequately for their children, while white, middle-class families have been positioned as morally and culturally superior caretakers. Similarly, French colonial child removal practices often targeted vulnerable or marginalized populations under the guise of protection or welfare, while serving French demographic interests.

3.3.2 Coloniality: Contemporary Transnational and Transracial Adoption as Colonial Continuity

In the article “Continued Oppression: Modern Practice in Context”, Anisa Joy Leonard (2022) highlights the parallels between historical and contemporary practices in child welfare, showing how they remain rooted in colonial, racial, and class-based hierarchies. She particularly emphasizes the ongoing forms of coercion that characterize the adoption industry, reflecting enduring coloniality. Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni defines coloniality as the global condition of Euro-modernity, characterized by patterns of power, domination, and exploitation that originated during the colonial era and continue to shape various aspects of society today. The coloniality of power is inherent and operates through systems such as global capitalism, neocolonialism, neoliberalism, racism, and heteropatriarchy, all of which are considered part of this colonial matrix of power (Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, as cited in Mantz, 2021: 477). Historically, adoption in settler colonial contexts, such as during the Orphan Train era in the United States, prioritized the desires of adoptive parents over the well-being of children. These initiatives often addressed adult needs, including labor shortages in rural America, rather than

centering the rights and best interests of children (Leonard 2022:112). This logic persists today in transnational adoption, where the trauma and disconnection experienced by adoptees are often overlooked in favor of satisfying the parenthood aspirations of individuals in the Global North, aspirations increasingly legitimized as social expectations or even rights by states through biopolitical frameworks (Stuvøy & Myong 2023).

Historically, Indigenous women and women of color in the United States were subjected to the exploitation of their reproductive labor, as their children were forcibly removed and placed into white homes and institutions under the guise of assimilation, protection, or civilization (Wexler et al. 2023: 512). Similar forms of coercion still occur today. Leonard identifies various mechanisms, including asymmetries in information and resources, as well as subtle or overt pressures applied by family members or professionals such as social workers. Coercion is not always violent or direct. It often disguises itself as care or support (Leonard 2022: 120). Kassaye Berhanu-MacDonald wrote about the conditions under which Ethiopian birth families accept adoption. Biological families are often misled or insufficiently informed when agreeing to adoption. Promises of education and ongoing contact are emphasized while the permanent severing of familial ties is minimized or concealed (Gulema et al. 2024). For instance, parents often relied on word-of-mouth accounts from neighbors or acquaintances who had already placed their children for adoption. These individuals sometimes portrayed the process as highly beneficial, claiming they received financial support from adoptive families and maintained contact with their children abroad. The coercion also comes from Government and orphanage officials. Instead of offering support through community-based, foster, or institutional care, officials have pushed parents toward foreign adoption. Many parents believed this pressure stemmed not from concern for the children's welfare but from the officials' personal or financial interests in facilitating international adoptions (Alemayehu et al. 2025: 9). These practices align with what Leonard (2022) defines as forms of coercion operating within the modern adoption system.

Another continuity between past and present is the commodification of children. As Leonard argues, adoption markets today continue to treat children as commodities (Leonard 2022: 120). Lovelock (2000) describes the shift toward a supply-and-demand logic, where children, particularly from the Global South, are positioned to meet the growing demand for adoptable children in the Global North. Migration policies have been adjusted accordingly to facilitate the flow of those children, often at the expense of child welfare. This has given rise to ethically

dubious practices, including the creation of "paper orphans" (Leonard 2022: 121), which describes children who still have living relatives but are misclassified as orphans to meet adoption demands (Leonard 2022: 121). Some are forcibly taken from their families and sold to orphanages. Within this market-driven system, Black children remain the most abundant and the least expensive and deregulated, reflecting deep-seated racial hierarchies that devalue Black lives. As Leonard notes, their overrepresentation and low cost highlight a racialized logic in which Blackness is marked as surplus and undesired (Leonard 2022: 121). French scholar Solène Brun showed that, paradoxically, in colorblind French society, adoption agencies are among the rare institutions that explicitly use racial categories when it comes to transnational adoption. Through her research, Brun demonstrated that the only consistent refusal in adoptive parents' geographic and ethno-racial preferences is systematically directed toward African, Black children (Brun 2020).

Contemporary adoption practices thus continue to echo colonial logics by extracting children from the Global South to fulfill family-making desires in the Global North. The persistence of these dynamics underscores the need for a decolonial paradigm in the study and practice of transnational and transracial adoption. Critical Adoption Studies advocate for this shift by analyzing how intersecting forces of colonialism, racism, classism, and gender-based oppression shape adoption (Wexler et al. 2023). A central goal is to amplify the often-overlooked voices of marginalized actors, especially birth mothers, who have historically been excluded from adoption discourse.

3.3.3 Adopting a Position: Decolonising Transnational Adoption

According to Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, for former colonies to move forward, they must disentangle themselves from colonialism. He further asserts that decolonization and decoloniality, particularly in the African context, primarily constitute an epistemic project that begins in the domain of knowledge (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018, as cited in Mantz 2021: 478). In this sense, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o introduces the concept of "re-centering" (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1981, as cited in Woldegiorgis 2021: 897), which plays a crucial role in the debate on decolonization in Africa. The idea involves understanding oneself (the local) in relation to others (the global). It emphasizes the importance of contextualizing local experiences within global frameworks and insists on the need for epistemological transformation by including local knowledge and perspectives (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1981, as cited in Woldegiorgis 2021: 898).

In the context of transnational and transracial adoption, coloniality manifests not only in the material transfer of children from the Global South to the Global North but also through "the epistemic erasure" (Mantz 2021: 477). The Western narrative on transnational transracial adoption has positioned Western families as saviors and mothers in the Global South as unfit or deficient. Critical Adoption Studies is committed to re-centering voices that have been silenced or marginalized, particularly birth families, and especially birth mothers, whose subjectivities have long been erased in dominant adoption discourses (Wexler et al. 2023).

This epistemic hierarchy is powerfully critiqued by Anna ChuChu Schindele, a Swedish scholar and adoptee of Ethiopian origin. In her article "Adopting a position analysing, theorising and decolonising transnational and transracial adoptions in Sweden" (Schindele 2022), she introduces the concept of the "First World Mother" which refers to a Western, typically white and middle-class adoptive mother, whose role in transnational adoption reflects global power imbalances, racial privilege, and humanitarian rescue narratives (Schindele 2022: 4863). In contrast, "Third World Woman" describes how birth mothers in the Global South are seen, often portrayed by adoption agencies in the Global North as individuals embedded in complex socio-economic contexts, faceless and silenced victims, thereby legitimizing the extractive logic of adoption and positioning the receiving adoptive mother in a more exclusive position. This reveals, according to Schindele, how birth mothers are not only excluded but also constructed through colonial imaginaries as impoverished and passive (Schindele 2022: 4859). The Author then introduces the idea of "adopting a position," which challenges how knowledge is constructed in the context of adoption. Her reunion with her birth mother becomes a transformative moment that contests colonial assumptions and brings forward lived experiences that expose the deep inequalities inherent in adoption. Hearing her birth mother's story revealed that poverty, social stigma, and a lack of institutional support played significant roles in the decision to relinquish her child (Schindele 2022: 4864). Thus, adopting a position similar to what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o calls re-centering, this approach aims to place the lived experiences of local and marginalized people at the heart of knowledge production. Re-centering is essential to decolonial work because it disrupts Eurocentric thinking and actively challenges colonial structures. In the adoption context, this means refusing the passive roles assigned to both adoptees and birth mothers and instead creating new narratives that expose how adoption has operated through epistemic control.

4. Transnational and Transracial Adoptees Between Racial Identities

4.1 What is Racial Identity?

4.1.1 The Making Of Race

To understand the concept of race, it is essential to comprehend the historical contexts and ideologies that shaped its construction. The term “race” first emerged in English in the 16th century as a folk concept, not yet carrying the modern biological or hierarchical connotations it has today. At that time, it was used loosely and interchangeably with words like “type,” “kind,” “breed,” or even “species.” But over time, particularly by the late 17th century, it began to refer more specifically to Europeans, Africans, and Native Americans in colonial North America (Smedley and Smedley 2005: 19).

Achille Mbembe identifies three historical moments in which the concepts of Blackness and race took shape, leading to the formation of whiteness (Mbembe 2020: 2).

The first moment corresponds with the Atlantic slave trade, from the 15th through the 19th century. This marks the initial period in which Black people were transformed into “human objects,” into commodities. It is the foundational moment of the forced construction of Blackness, where race was instrumentalized to justify economic exploitation, and whiteness was constructed as superior, legitimizing their domination. During this period, particularly in the 18th century, race emerged as a powerful ideology that created fixed social categories (Mbembe 2020: 3). It is also crucial to understand the context in which this racial ideology took shape. In Europe and North America, Enlightenment ideals such as liberty and equality were gaining traction, while the Church's moral authority remained significant. These ideals and Christianity were incompatible with the exploitation of other human beings. Thus, race as ideology became a tool that served to dehumanize and justify slavery, therefore bypassing the moral safeguards of the Church and Enlightenment ideals (Smedley and Smedley 2005: 19).

The second moment, according to Achille Mbembe, came at the end of the 18th century, when racial identity became a site of struggle and Blackness began to reclaim subjectivity. Black people started writing, organizing, and advocating for the right to be recognized as full subjects. This moment was marked by the fight for independence and the abolition of slavery. However, this reclamation and subjectivation were drawing on whiteness, which remained the dominant model and norm, therefore reinforcing it in subtle ways (Mbembe 2020: 3).

The third moment, which Mbembe describes as “the becoming Black of the world”, is marked by the era of globalization and neoliberalism. Racial capitalism did not end with the formal end

of colonialism or slavery. Instead, the objectification, exploitation, and exclusion that had historically been imposed on Black people have become the fate of more and more populations across the planet, albeit in different forms and modes of operation. In this global system, racial identities are still operative, but their visibility has changed. whiteness often appears as invisible, neutral, and normative, linked to market success and privilege, while Blackness is associated with failure, marginality, and disposability (Mbembe 2020: 4-6).

For Mbembe, these three historical moments have contributed to the formation of what he calls "*The Black reason*," the Western consciousness of Blackness. This consciousness is produced and reproduced through narratives, images, rituals, and discourses that position Blackness as the antithesis of the Western "I", the rational, modern, and normalized subject. In doing so, it has justified the exclusion, domination, and exploitation of Black people and others deemed racially inferior (Mbembe 2020: 28). Homi K. Bhabha complements this perspective by showing how colonial discourse similarly fixes the colonized into a position of radical "otherness" while claiming full knowledge of them. He writes, "colonial power produces the colonized as a fixed reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible" (Bhabha 1986 in barker et al. 2013: 156). The "Other question" revealed that colonial power dominated the colonized not only materially but also in how they were defined and understood. The colonized were constructed as fundamentally different from Europeans. This "othering" is central to colonial discourse because it legitimizes authority by presenting domination as necessary. Racist stereotypes and pseudo-knowledge create a cycle in which the colonized are portrayed as both the cause and the consequence of their subjugation (barker et al. 2013: 171). The most significant and enduring racial boundary throughout the historical development of the concept of race in the U.S. has been the binary opposition of Black and white. For instance, 19th-century Asian immigrants who arrived in the U.S. were placed between whites and Blacks in the racial hierarchy. Similarly, Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants were initially associated with Blackness and not considered white during that period, only gradually being assimilated into the "white category" (Smedley and Smedley 2005: 20).

This historical construction of race, rooted in binary oppositions, biological determinism, and legal enforcement, has profoundly shaped how racial identity is understood and lived. Instead of being seen as fluid, relational, or socially constructed, racial identity is too often framed as essential, fixed, and tied to visible markers like skin color.

4.1.2 Race: An Essentializing Identity

Stuart Hall observed the omnipresence of identity discourse towards the end of the twentieth century. However, according to him, this moment of identity affirmation also suffers from a crisis of the concept itself (Hall and Du Gay 2011: 1). The deconstruction of the concept of identity has occurred across a variety of disciplinary fields, challenging the notion of identity as a fixed, essentialist category, which is immutable or defined by nature. For Hall, identity is neither fixed nor essential, but rather the result of a discursive construction situated within specific historical and cultural contexts. It is a constantly evolving process, shaped by power, history, and culture, and marked by difference, contingency, and transformation. It does not reflect a pre-existing reality but is produced through social and political discourses (Hall and Du Gay 2011: 4).

Judith Butler writes: “You are not just born a subject; you are made one” (Butler [1990] 2011:182). With this quote, Butler challenges the idea that we are born with a ready-made identity like being a “woman” or “Black”, as if those identities existed inside us before society touched us. Instead, she argues that we become these identities through processes of socialization and recognition. A good illustration of this, according to Butler, is that there is no unified identity of a “woman” because women’s identities and experiences are diverse, multiple, and shaped by different social, cultural, racial, and economic factors (Butler 2011: 181). Along the same lines, Achille Mbembe critiques the notion of “Black” as a unified identity. He highlights the fact that Black people from Africa, the Caribbean, and the U.S. don’t share an automatic unity, despite ancestral ties (Mbembe 2020: 24).

Another central aspect of identities is that they are fundamentally constituted through a logic of difference. They have been a point of identification and attachment only because of their capacity to exclude. Identities always produce an outside. What they exclude becomes necessary to their constitution. In other words, we only feel like we have a stable, unified identity by contrasting ourselves with what we are not. This excluded “otherness” becomes the very thing that makes our sense of identity possible, even though that identity is fragmented and not truly unified (Hall and Du Gay 2011: 5). Homi K. Bhabha, for example, shows that the figure of the racial other is not simply external to the nation, but actively contributes to its construction by stabilizing the sense of a national self (Hall and Du Gay 2011: 56). Thus, identities should not be viewed as fixed or original points but as realities in continual evolution, always defined by what they exclude.

4.1.3 Race: A Performative Identity

Judith Butler encourages us to shift towards understanding identity as performative, meaning that identities are created, negotiated, and expressed through everyday actions. Butler argues that a person forms their identity using the language, labels, and cultural signs (signifiers) that already exist. Identity is not something we invent from within, but something made possible by preexisting structures of signification. In other words, identity is not an inner truth but becomes meaningful through the repeated performance of norms that society has already established. Categories such as gender or race only become thinkable or speakable because existing cultural labels and meanings make them available to us (Butler 2011: 183).

People have been categorized using racial labels, which have profoundly shaped identification processes, with significant social and psychological consequences. The historical evolution of Black labeling in the United States demonstrates the performative and socially constructed nature of racial identity. Over time, this group has been referred to as “African,” “Negro,” “Colored,” “Black,” “Afro-American,” and “African-American”. Each of these terms has carried distinct social effects, implications, expectations, and associations throughout history (Beyers 2019: 104). These labels represent ascriptive identities, meaning they are not merely roles that individuals perform based on their skin color, but rather individuals are expected to embody a particular way of being because they have been assigned that label, not because they have chosen it (Appiah 1998: 7). However, even if one cannot decide how society consistently defines their identity, one can influence how central that identity becomes in their own life. Therefore, identity and racial identity in particular are a combination of social ascription and personal identification (Appiah 1998: 108). Nevertheless, unlike other forms of identification, such as ethnicity, racial identification is more challenging to resist because of its immediate visibility (Appiah 1998: 100).

4.1.4 Rethinking Racial Identity

Judith Butler writes: “I began with the speculative question of whether feminist politics could do without a ‘subject’ in the category of women” (Butler 2011: 181). The problem she identifies is that feminism has often created an essentialized “we” and a fixed identity of what it means to be a woman. Butler argues that this essentialization has been considered necessary to organize feminist resistance against patriarchal structures. She, however, critiques the idea that

we need a stable, pre-existing identity to act politically or resist oppression. Thus, she warns against treating identity as a fixed, stable basis for politics and resistance. Traditional identity politics often assumes that people fit into clear, unified categories, thereby excluding those who do not. Butler encourages us to shift towards understanding identity as performative. Understanding identity as performative creates new possibilities for agency and resistance by questioning and challenging the very rules and norms that shape and limit how identities are understood (Butler 2011: 189-190). Butler's point is that identity and agency emerge together in the process of navigating the world. You don't need to *be* something fixed before you can *do* something (Butler 2011: 182). In short, for Judith Butler, deconstructing identity does not mean abandoning political struggle; instead, it reveals that identity itself is a political terrain.

This critique also applies to Black identity when it is framed in essentialist terms as a unified, fixed identity based solely on racial lines, to organize politically against white oppression. While solidarity can be powerful, assuming a single, universal "Blackness" risks ignoring the diversity of Black experiences across geography, culture, class, and history. Black thinkers like Frantz Fanon and Achille Mbembe advocate for rethinking Black identity (Fanon 1986, Mbembe 2017 in Beyers 2019). They argue that the designation "Black" is not a neutral or self-chosen identity but rather a label imposed from the outside, functioning both as a mode of subjectivation (the process of becoming a subject) and devaluation (a way of being made inferior). For Fanon, the danger of accepting a racialized identity as essential is that it often reproduces the logic of colonialism. Even when it appears to break with colonial framing, it can end up re-creating that logic under new names. Fanon calls this a "false identity". For example, when some Black individuals try to imitate white people to gain social recognition, this happens because, within colonial frameworks, Blackness is associated with inferiority. To achieve equality, some felt compelled to embody whiteness. For Fanon, then, authentic identity cannot be reduced to racial categories. He seeks to universalize identity beyond mere color. As he writes: "My identity is human. Black is a nickname." (Beyers 2019: 3-4).

However, according to Stuart Hall, the critical deconstruction of identity should not lead to its abandonment. On the contrary, identity remains a crucial terrain of political and cultural struggle, particularly about race and racism. While Hall rejects essentialist or fixed understandings of identity, he argues that identity continues to be a powerful site through which power is exercised and contested. As he writes, "without the concept of identity, certain key questions cannot be thought at all" (Hall and Du Gay 2011: 1). Thus,

a reconceptualization of identity is necessary, not its erasure. Even though Hall acknowledges that race is not defined solely by racism, he maintains that the persistence of racism and its lasting effects on institutions and subjectivities make racial identity politically significant. In this context, Hall urges us to continue to center racism in analyses of race, as it continues to shape how individuals experience and navigate the world. Identity, therefore, becomes not just a reflection of oppression but also a potential tool for resistance. This opens up the possibility of “strategic essentialism” using identity categories tactically for collective political mobilization, while remaining aware of their constructed and unstable nature (Hall 2021: 111).

In sum, deconstructing identity does not mean abandoning it. Instead, it invites us to engage identity as a dynamic, contested, and politically charged site, shaped by ongoing struggles over race, power, and representation. Through their socialization within white adoptive families, Ethiopian-origin adoptees often transcend conventional racial boundaries, revealing that racial identity is not an inherited or biologically fixed essence but a socially produced and learned category. Their lived experiences illustrate how whiteness can be transmitted and acquired through kinship ties, demonstrating that race operates as a cultural and social construct rather than a purely biological one.

4.2 Kinship and the Reconfiguration of Adoptees’ Racial and Cultural Identity

Kinship refers to the social process through which individuals are incorporated into families and, by extension, into broader social and cultural systems. In European and more generally in Western contexts, kinship has traditionally been framed in terms of nature, meaning that family relationships are often perceived as biologically determined, rooted in blood ties, genetic inheritance, and shared ancestry (Wade 2022: 1). Peter Wade argues that kinship further serves as a key metaphor for legitimizing ideas of race and ethnicity. Symbols such as blood, ancestry, or heritage are invoked to naturalize differences between groups, creating the impression that racial and ethnic identities are inherited and immutable. Historically, kinship, race, and nationhood have been deeply intertwined, shaping a system of thought in which family, ethnicity, culture, and national identity are defined along racial lines. The family occupies a central role within this framework, as it is through familial structures that notions of biological continuity, ancestral legitimacy, and racial purity or mixture are symbolically produced and reproduced (Wade 2022: 6).

4.2.1 Transnational Adoption and the Disruption of Classical Kinship

Transnational and transracial adoption, among other elements, has challenged the classical definition of kinship, thereby disturbing conventional views of what is considered “natural” about families. Transnational adoption questions the widespread belief that family relationships must be based on biological connections. Instead, it shows that people can become part of a family through various means, such as social, legal or, emotional bonds (Howell 2006: 9). To describe this, Signe Howell introduced the concept of “kinning”, which represents the integration of a person into a family and social structure through kinship language (Howell 2006: 9). In practice, even though adoption is, by definition, non-biological, Western societies often attempt to make it appear and feel natural by borrowing the language, symbols, and practices of nature-based kinship. Adoptive parents use this language of kinship to integrate the new member into the family, imitating the process of biological reproduction. Signe Howell and Diana Marre (2006) state that the kinning process begins before the adopted child’s arrival, in a way that mirrors the three prenatal stages of biological reproduction. The first stage is the *pre-pregnancy stage*, during which prospective adoptive parents begin the emotionally intense process of adopting a child from abroad, often selecting a donor country based on cultural affinity or practical factors. Disruptions to this plan can cause emotional distress for the prospective adoptive parents. *The pregnancy stage* starts with official approval, during which parents prepare emotionally and practically, often anticipating challenges linked to race and differences. Finally, *the birthing stage* begins when a specific child is assigned and ends with the handover, an emotionally charged moment often described as destined, reinforcing feelings of bonding and belonging despite the absence of biological ties (Howell and Marre 2006: 302-304).

From interviews with Ethiopian-origin adoptees in France, one can observe that other symbolic practices are employed to mimic biological reproduction. Similar to a newborn, adoptees are often given a new name, usually one that is more common in their country of adoption. The name plays a central role as a symbolic tool for integrating the child into both the family and the host society. Adoptive parents often have to balance respect for the child’s original name and history with the desire to give a new one. This usually results in retaining the original name as a second or third given name, while modifying the first name to facilitate cultural and national inclusion. These choices also reflect parents’ awareness of the racial and religious connotations of names, as they often seek to protect their children from potential

discrimination. Thus, the act of naming reflects the intersections between kinship inscription and racial boundaries within both the family and the nation (Brun 2021: 67-71).

However, the kinning process and the demand for adhesion from the adopted child can appear unnatural or even traumatic, particularly for children adopted at an older age. For instance, interviewee I3/f26 remembers the moment she was told to call her adoptive parents “Papa” and “Maman. “I also remember the violence I felt when they asked me to call them papa-maman, because for me it meant betraying my parents (biological). So it was quite violent, and little by little I conformed, but it was not without pain.”⁴ Similarly, respondent I2/f31, prior memories and understanding of her former kinship ties also make it challenging to adapt to the new one. “I knew where I came from. I knew I wasn’t their daughter. I knew who my mother was, my father.”⁵

Thus, for some adoptees, conforming to the symbolic practices of the kinning process was difficult to grasp, as they already had parents in Ethiopia. This generated a deep sense of confusion for children who were not yet fully aware of the implications of adoption. This illustrates how the kinning process materializes, whereby kinship language mimicking biological reproduction is used to facilitate the child’s integration into the adoptive family (Howell and Marre 2006).

As previously noted, in France, two forms of adoption coexist. Plenary adoption, which severs all legal ties with the birth family, and simple adoption, which adds a legal bond without removing the original filiation. Transnational adoption, however, most often takes the form of plenary adoption (Mignot 2015: 525). In the French legal system, plenary adoption emerged in 1939. At that time, adoptive parents preferred plenary adoption over simple adoption because the child’s biological parents were frequently unknown. Plenary adoption ensured exclusive parental ties, particularly for couples unable to have children, whereas simple adoption was more commonly associated with succession and inheritance purposes (Mignot 2015: 528).

In the context of transnational adoption, this erasure of previous legal ties with the birth family can be understood through the historical conceptualization of adoptees as a “tabula rasa,” a blank slate upon arrival. This framing positions the child as an empty vessel into which

⁴ “Je me souviens aussi de la violence que j’ai ressentie, quand ils m’ont demandé de les appeler papa-maman, parce que pour moi, en fait, c’était trahir mes parents (biologiques). Donc c’était assez violent et voilà, petit à petit, je me suis conformée, mais ce n’était pas sans douleur” (I3/f26, interview by author, online, August 2025)

⁵ “Je savais d’où je venais. Je savais que je n’étais pas leur fille. Je savais qui était ma mère, mon père.” (I2/f31, interview by author, online, August 2025)

adoptive parents can inscribe belonging through kinship-making practices, thereby cultivating exclusivity and a perceived intrinsic sameness with the adoptive family (Howell 2009: 334). This quote from interviewee 11/f25 illustrates what, according to her, kinship meant in the context of transnational and transracial adoption, which aligns with the comparison to the notion of *tabula rasa*: "It's your child, he's yours, and that's it, and you want to shape him. A bit as if he hadn't had anything before, so to speak, you know, before the adoption."⁶ This testimony further highlights how kinship is constructed through the negation of the child's past, as if they were a blank page, like a newborn, to be shaped in the image of the adoptive parents. In this process, the desire to create sameness between the adopted child and the family often entails not only the erasure of their former kinship ties and history but also the erasure of both racial and cultural identity.

4.2.2 "You are not really Black" Kinship and the Erasure of Racial Difference

Research on the resemblance between parents and children is another key aspect of kinship. This assumes that children take after their parents or other relatives in terms of physical features and other characteristics, such as personality traits and musical tastes etc. All of this is based on the notion of shared blood (Howell and Marre 2006: 308). However, for transnational adoptees, although the idea of blood does not exist, adoptive parents are still looking for bodily, intellectual, or emotional resemblance, negating the differences that exist between themselves and the children they have adopted. This process, by which transnational adoptees are integrated into kinship networks, not only provides adoptive parents with personal satisfaction but also has broader social implications that secure the child's place within both the family and the wider society (Howell and Marre 2006: 309).

Howell demonstrates how the kinning process profoundly shapes adoptees' identities. She uses the concept of "transubstantiation" to describe how transnational and transracial adoptees have their social and relational essence, their non-physiological being, transformed. While their physical body and origins remain the same, the child becomes a full member of the adoptive family and takes on a social identity that overlaps with the parents' kinship network (Howell 2006: 64). This example shows that identity is not inherited by birth, but actively produced over time through kinship practices such as parental work (Howell 2006: 82). Nevertheless,

⁶ "C'est ton enfant, il est à toi, et c'est tout, et t'as envie de le façonner. Un peu comme s'il avait rien eu avant, entre guillemets, tu vois, avant l'adoption." (11/f25, interview by author, online, August 2025)

Howell and Marre (2006) observed that in this process, adoptive parents navigate a subtle but persistent contradiction. On the one hand, they actively work to integrate the child fully into their family, emphasizing bonds, shared traits, and a sense of fate that positions the child as inherently connected to them. On the other hand, in specific contexts, they acknowledge and emphasize the child's national, cultural, and sometimes biological differences, highlighting the aspects that set the child apart from the family. This tension, according to them, reflects the dual aim of adoption: first to produce a social and emotional sense of belonging, while simultaneously negotiating the visible and historical realities of the child's origins (Howell and Marre 2006: 312).

In the context of this study, the qualitative data tend to show that the kinning process often requires the reduction of elements that could disrupt the perceived sameness, one of which involves the discursive erasure of adoptees' racial identity. All eight interview partners have expressed how their Blackness was often not taken into account during their upbringing. In the context of transnational adoption, race is a marker of difference, and parents, to protect their children from feeling different, prefer to avoid it. For instance, participant l6/m24 recalls the lack of transparency from his parents about issues surrounding the adoption process and access to information:

“It was actually quite hidden, you know, regarding the adoption and all that. I think they wanted to make sure I wouldn't be different. I didn't see myself as different from them, and they didn't see me differently either. Maybe they thought that by doing this, I wouldn't feel rejected. That's the impression I have today, having gotten to know them better. And then one day, I said to them: 'But you do know I'm Black, right?' I don't know why. I must have snapped. And they answered: 'To us, we don't see you that way.'”⁷

In this testimony, the respondent later recognizes that his parents' avoidance of talking about topics related to adoption and their disregard for racial differences were intended to create for him and his family a sense of belonging and sameness, so that he would not feel rejected.

⁷ C'était assez caché, en fait, par rapport à l'adoption et à tout ça. Je crois qu'ils voulaient faire en sorte que je ne sois pas différent. Moi, je ne me voyais pas différent d'eux, et eux non plus ne me voyaient pas différemment. Peut-être qu'ils pensaient qu'en faisant comme ça, je n'allais pas me sentir rejeté. C'est l'impression que j'ai aujourd'hui, en les connaissant mieux. Et puis un jour, je leur ai dit : “Mais vous savez que je suis noir, non ?” Je ne sais pas pourquoi, j'avais dû craquer. Et eux m'ont répondu : ‘Pour nous, on ne te voit pas comme ça.’” (l6/m24, interview by author, online, September 2025)

However, according to him, this has been at the expense of his adoption history and physical difference recognition. The kinning process can push some adoptive parents to discursively erase adoptees' racial differences by downplaying their Blackness and affirming their whiteness, as observed in the following testimonies. Interviewee l3/f26 recalls what her parents often said to her about her skin color. "They liked to say to me: 'Oh, but you're not really Black.'"⁸ Similarly, another interviewee l2/f31 recounts a striking moment with her grandmother and a bicolour statue, where her grandmother highlighted her whiteness, while pushing back her Blackness as an outer shell.

"The whole front was black, the back was white, and it was a small statuette, similar to those that represent African women, a wooden statuette, quite slender, with a slight twist in the body. I said to her: it has two colors. And she answered: 'Your outside is Black, but your inside is white. Your inside is white, but your outside is Black.' According to her, that's what the statuette represented. At the time, I didn't really understand. It was only later, with other questions, that I grasped what people call assimilation."⁹

In these testimonies, Blackness is either not acknowledged or treated simply as an external shell, indirectly projecting whiteness as adoptees' true essence. This symbolic inversion enables adoptive families to reconcile visible difference with the logic of sameness required in kinship (Howell and Marre 2006: 309). A similar observation appears in research on transracial adoption conducted by Christine Ward Gailey in 2010. Drawing on Sara Dorow's work on how white American parents approach race when adopting Chinese girls, Gailey identifies six main ways in which interracial adoptive families engage with racial identity and racism. The testimonies discussed above correspond closely to the first category, "denial of the child's social condition." In this category, parents reject racial identification by insisting the child is "mixed," "biracial," or simply "human, not black." They reduce race to biology, ignoring its social construction and the role of black identity as both a site of oppression and solidarity.

⁸ "Ils aimait bien me dire : 'non, mais toi, tu n'es pas une vraie Noire.'" (l3/f26, interview by author, online, August 2025)

⁹ "Toute la face était noire, le dos était blanc, et c'était une statuette, un peu comme celles qui représentent les femmes africaines. Une statuette en bois, assez fine, avec une légère torsion du corps. Je lui ai dit : elle a deux couleurs, et elle m'a répondu : 'Tu as l'extérieur noir, mais l'intérieur est blanc. Ton intérieur est blanc, mais ton extérieur est noir.' Selon elle, cela représentait cette statuette. À ce moment-là, je ne comprenais pas vraiment. Ce n'est que plus tard, avec d'autres questions, que j'ai saisi ce qu'on appelle l'assimilation." (l2/f31, interview by author, online, August 2025)

This denies the child's connection to the wider black community and inadvertently reinforces whiteness (Gailey 2010: 36).

Racial difference is not the only factor that initially disrupts the sense of sameness required in biologized kinship practices. In the early years, cultural differences and markers also need to be downplayed to maintain the perceived sense of the family.

4.2.3 Kinship and the Biologized Cultural Identity

According to the U.N. Declaration on Cultural Diversity, culture encompasses the unique spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional aspects of a society, including its values, lifestyles, and traditions. It varies across time and space, shaping the plural identities of human groups. In this sense, culture is not color-coded. Thus, culture is not determined by race, and one cannot assume that a specific cultural practice is tied to a particular racial group (Beyers, 2019: 2).

The former example of respondent 12/f31's interaction with her grandmother is interesting because it shows how race and culture are entangled. The idea of "whiteness on the inside" represents more than a set of practices and values as described in the UN definition, which seems to define cultural identity. In this context, it is associated with whiteness and therefore is color-coded. In the European context, as Wade notes, culture is often biologized and treated as if it were inherited in the same way as genetic traits. Symbols such as blood and heritage are mobilized to naturalize the impression that culture itself is passed down biologically within family lines. In this framework, cultural identity is essentialized, rendered immutable, and tied to one's racial origins. In other words, race is often treated as culture, and culture can serve as a euphemism for race (Wade 2022: 6). Thus, to achieve sameness within the adoptive kinship structure, both their racial and cultural identities must be reconfigured through the process of kinning. The following example from interviewee 17/f26 further illustrates how, in her understanding, racial and cultural identities are deeply entangled, particularly when she reflects on the "feeling of being white on the inside."

"Well, actually, it's not really a feeling of being white, but it's like having white parents, having a white culture, eating like European whites, well, French whites. It's all those things that make me feel that, in fact, I'm neither Black nor white sometimes, even though, in the end, yes, on the outside, I am Black. But I've been surrounded by so many white people and, like... It's not that it erased my Blackness or anything, but it's

true that, for a long time, I wasn't really interested in my origins, which means that, internally... well, it's really... how to say it? It's tough to find yourself, I think, your identity, and all that.”¹⁰

The reflections of interviewee 17/f26 illustrate how cultural identity operates and intersects within her sense of self, revealing the complex and intertwined relationship between racial and cultural identity, which, in her experience, appears to function as a single, inseparable construct. Her culture is described as being “white,” reflecting Western understanding of culture as defined by Wade. Her upbringing in a predominantly white environment, adopting the cultural practices, values, and daily routines of her adoptive parents, has created a tension between how she is perceived externally, as Black, and how she experiences herself internally, shaped by a “white” cultural environment. This binarity has deeply unsettled her sense of self, creating tension between her internalized identity and the external markers of race. According to her, it has also prevented her from engaging with her roots, which she views as an essential element in forming her identity.

Participant 13/f26 goes further by indirectly pointing to the possibility of an alternative path, where her adoptive parents and children could have met in an intermediate space between the “two worlds”.

“The fact of denying our past, well, my past, I'll speak for myself. The fact of denying my past, the fact that I had to adapt myself to their rules. They never... I feel that I had to enter their world. They never tried to come into mine.”¹¹

The interviewee regrets that her parents never tried to enter “her world,” a term she uses broadly to encompass her identity. Her reflection highlights how her identity was expected to fully adapt to the adoptive family's norms, leaving little room for the coexistence or negotiation of

¹⁰ “Bah, en fait, c'est pas vraiment le sentiment d'être blanc, mais c'est genre d'avoir des parents blancs, d'avoir une culture blanche, de manger comme des blancs européens, enfin, blancs français. Enfin, c'est toutes ces choses-là qui font que, en fait, je suis ni noire ni blanche, des fois, même si, au final, si, à l'extérieur, je suis noire. Mais j'ai tellement été entourée de Blancs et qui, genre...C'est pas que ça a effacé mon côté noir ou quoi que ce soit, mais c'est vrai que, pendant longtemps, je me suis pas vraiment intéressée à mes origines, ce qui fait que, genre,intérieurement, enfin, c'est hyper... Comment dire ? C'est hyper difficile de se retrouver, je pense, son identité, etc., quoi.” (17/f26, interview by author, online, August 2025)

¹¹ “Le fait de nier notre passé, enfin, mon passé, je vais parler pour moi. Le fait de nier mon passé, le fait que j'ai dû m'adapter, moi, à leurs règles. Eux, ils ne sont jamais... Moi, je considère que moi, j'ai dû aller dans leur monde. Eux, ils n'ont jamais essayé de venir dans le mien.” (13/f26, interview by author, online, August 2025)

her original cultural identity. It also shows that, in some ways, her sense of self resisted the pressures of kinship and social integration, as she conceptualized her world differently from that of her parents. One could further argue that Western conceptions of culture, often tied to biological or racialized understandings, may have limited the extent to which adoptees could be entirely accepted or recognize themselves in the French culture (Wade 2022: 6). At the same time, this quote suggests the potential for an alternative approach if her parents had also tried to enter her world, in which cultural and racial identities could intersect to create new, “hybrid” forms (Bhabha 2011).

To conclude this part on kinship, it is essential to acknowledge that some adoptive parents attempted to maintain their children’s connection to their country and culture of origin, as reported by several interviewees. As expressed by Howell and Marre in the dual aim of creating emotional and social belonging while negotiating visible differences, adoptive parents have acknowledged and emphasized the child’s national, cultural, and sometimes biological differences (Howell and Marre 2006: 312). However, these efforts were often limited to material resources such as books and documentaries about Ethiopia, visiting Ethiopian restaurants, or occasional meetings with other adoptive families (Howell 2006: 114). Gailey has described this adoptive parental attitude as “awareness and concern about racism through cultural consumption,” where adoptive parents in America commit to the question of race and racism through cultural consumption, such as providing children with African American history books and attending Black cultural events (Gailey 2010: 36). Adoptees in the interviews have described these initiatives as insufficient in providing meaningful cultural connections to their country of origin. While these attempts show that alternative approaches were possible, they remained partial and often could not overcome the structural pressure of kinship.

Nevertheless, kinship alone cannot account for the erasure of racial and cultural identity or the racial identity crises experienced by transnational and transracial adoptees. To understand how both adoptive families and adoptees navigate racial identity, their experiences must be situated within a broader structural context. Whiteness operates as a normative force, reinforced by racial representations and colorblind ideologies, which position whiteness as the default racial identity. These norms profoundly shape the challenges adoptees encounter when attempting to form and assert their own racial identities.

4.3 Internalized Whiteness

4.3.1 White Hegemony

In “Gramsci’s Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity” (2021), Stuart Hall highlights the importance of Gramsci’s contribution to the study of race. Although Gramsci never wrote directly on race, ethnicity or racism, Hall argues that his concepts remain crucial when applied within contemporary social theory (Hall 2021: 300). Gramsci’s theory of hegemony explains how the ideas of the ruling class become dominant. Hegemony does not describe domination from above by a social group that imposes its will against individuals. Instead, hegemony is established through the active consent of the subaltern classes. Hegemony operates on multiple levels, political, cultural, and economic, and the class that controls one element, especially the economic one, can influence the others (Candeias 2007: 3).

Consent is produced through ideology and common sense. Ideology represents a system of meanings embedded in culture, education, religion, and the media, shaping how people understand the world (Hall 2021: 316). Stuart Hall and Alan O’Shea define common sense as “a form of popular, easily available knowledge... It works intuitively, without forethought or reflection... It is pragmatic and empirical, giving the illusion of arising directly from experience...” (Hall and O’Shea as quoted in Davison and Shire 2015: 23). Sally Davison and George Shire contend that common sense in society comprises a mix of ideas and prejudices from all past historical phases, which leave its mark on popular ways of thinking (Davison and Shire 2015: 81).

The concept of hegemony helps us understand how race and ethnicity are shaped and contested through culture, politics, and ideas (Hall 2021: 321).

4.3.2 Hegemonic Whiteness in the Neoliberal Era

As evoked earlier, whiteness is not fixed but rather historically contingent. It adapts and transforms across time and space. In the context of neoliberalism, whiteness continues to function as a hegemonic force, but it takes on new forms. As Mbembe argues, globalization and neoliberalism mark “the becoming Black of the world.” The exploitation and exclusion once imposed on Black people now affect populations worldwide. Racial identities persist but shift in visibility: whiteness appears neutral and privileged, while Blackness is tied to failure and disposability (Mbembe 2020: 4–6).

In the article “How Neoliberalism Benefits from Discourses of Exclusion”, Sally Davison and George Shire (2015) illustrate the link between race, neoliberalism, and migration. They begin by showing how the legacy of colonialism continues to shape contemporary understandings and representations of race through common sense. Neoliberalism as an economic system, ideology, and mode of governance benefits from these historical residues by mobilizing them to sustain patterns of exclusion, particularly in migration contexts (Davison and Shire 2015: 81). For example, racialized media portrayals of refugees, prisoners, and disease victims subtly reinforcing existing racial hierarchies (Davison and Shire 2015: 82). For example, in the context of Great Britain, nationalist discourse in migration debates often asserts that Britishness is inherently superior to foreign identities, associating Britishness with whiteness and wealth (Davison and Shire 2015: 83). Thus, racism is not only about Blackness versus whiteness; white superiority today is frequently expressed as Western civilizational superiority (Davison and Shire 2015: 83). Neoliberalism uses race and racism as tools to secure not only its hegemony but also white hegemony. For example, Neoliberalism often forges alliances with populist politics in immigration debates. As Davison and Shire observe, “discourses of white/English/British superiority can thus be seen as a resource deployed to help secure cross-class alliances”. Nationalistic and racialized rhetoric is used as a tool to unite elites and the conservative segments of the working class. This alliance helps secure support for neoliberal policies that might otherwise face strong opposition (Davison and Shire 2015: 84). This fits the idea that identities always produce an outside. What they exclude becomes necessary to their constitution. In this context, racial/national identity is essential to the cohesion of British society (Hall and Du Gay 2011: 5). Furthermore, neoliberalism benefits from racialized discourses that present white Westerners as inherently entitled to global mobility while portraying migrants from poorer, non-Western nations as threats or burdens. This illustrates the persistence of racial prejudices embedded in everyday common sense. Neoliberalism, in return, leverages these racialized narratives to build cross-class alliances and secure consent for its policies. Within this ideology, whiteness is framed as a marker of superiority, closely linked to market success, while Blackness is associated with failure and marginality. By presenting these associations as natural, neoliberal discourse renders social exclusion both inevitable and unquestionable.

4.3.3 The Normativity of Whiteness: A Cultural and Epistemological Hegemony

According to Mark Schmitt (2021), artistic productions, such as literature, film, television, music, and painting, do more than offer aesthetic experiences. Indeed, they actively generate social and cultural knowledge as imaginative, representational, and narrative practices. These cultural texts serve as sites where racial epistemologies are reinforced. Rather than simply mirroring racial identities, they participate in shaping how race, class, and gender are understood and valued. Schmitt argues that the figuration of whiteness, in particular, contributes to the broader social imaginary, normalizing white hegemony through the representation, conceptualization, and legitimation of race (Schmitt 2021: 66). However, this is only one example of how whiteness operates. Javeria Khadija Shah's (2021) application of bio-ecological theory to whiteness demonstrates that white normativity is not limited to cultural production or to individual and interpersonal levels. Instead, it functions across interconnected layers of social life (Shah 2021: 281). The social power of whiteness lies in the fact that it often goes unnoticed or unacknowledged and appears neutral. For example, in the context of cultural narratives, unlike non-white characters who are frequently explicitly racialized, those productions do not explicitly represent white as a racial identity. Indeed, since white characters appear so often yet are presented as neutral or universal, their race becomes invisible, reinforcing whiteness as the default identity and subject position against which all others are measured. Thus, whiteness often operates as an invisible norm in cultural narratives, not merely mirroring reality but actively participating in its construction (Schmitt 2021: 67).

bell hooks in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* ([1992]2015) interrogates how race and racism are represented and reproduced in popular culture productions and media. Thus, for her, this representation does not serve the Black cause and realities in a "white supremacist" society. Instead, it teaches Black people to internalize racist ideas about themselves. Those reproductions are so normalized that even Black people enjoy productions that represent the colonization, oppression, dehumanization, and marginalization of Blackness (hooks 2015: 6). Thus, according to her, critically analyzing Black representation is essential. Otherwise, it has epistemological repercussions, particularly in shaping individual identity and broader cultural understandings of what counts as normal and valuable. It produces subjects through consent who internalize these norms and govern themselves accordingly. Thus, the individuals racialized as white benefit from this normalisation and enjoy privileges while marginalizing others who are not identified racially as white (Schmitt 2021: 68).

Thus, through a theoretical analysis of whiteness as a hegemonic force, we see how the dominant white society imposes a vision of whiteness as superior and entitled in relation to the racialized populations. Operating through culture, common sense, and ideology, this hegemony constructs whiteness as the normative racial identity (Hall 2021). These ideas gain consent not only among white populations but also among populations who do not identify with whiteness (hooks 2015: 6)

For Black Ethiopian adoptees in particular, this consent is often reinforced by their primary socialization within white kinship structures, where whiteness is presented, implicitly or explicitly, as the norm. The combination of kinship and white normativity in French society produces epistemological effects that shape how adoptees perceive themselves and their racial identity. The following testimony from participant 15/m40 illustrates how he comes to understand and recognize the mechanisms that may have led him to conform to whiteness and Frenchness as normative and desirable outcomes for his identity.

“You gradually learn to deny yourself, or at least to forget. And through that forgetting, you begin to want to resemble white people. Because, in any case, the environment I was in, and more broadly, even though there were people who accepted me, there were still lingering things: certain atmospheres and subtle reminders. Yes, especially in my time, Ethiopia was experiencing famine. It was highly publicized. You were constantly reminded of it. So you come to understand that you are, in fact, miserable. Over time, these experiences teach you to despise your origins. Because you tell yourself, yes, after all... your country is unstable. Your family, at least according to the people I ended up living with, they would say, yes, basically, your family abandoned you. You see? Many factors make you reluctant to identify with something that seems negative, and eventually, you stop. And since France is something you can identify with, you begin to almost regret wanting to be Black, you see? Because so many things are constantly being negatively reminded to you. As a child, you don't yet have the psychological tools to resist this. So yes, I think none of us were spared from that aspect of it.”¹²

¹² “Tu apprends un peu à renier, du moins à oublier. Et par l'oubli, tu cherches à vouloir ressembler aux blancs. Parce que de toute façon, le climat dans lequel j'étais et aussi quand même le reste, même s'il y avait des gens quand même qui m'acceptaient, mais il y avait des choses quand même qui restaient, des ambiances, des petits rappels. Oui, surtout à mon époque, l'Éthiopie, c'était la famine. C'était hyper médiatisé. Donc, on te rappelle des tas de trucs. Donc, tu te fais comprendre que t'es un misérable, en fait. C'est des trucs qui, au fur et à mesure, finissent par t'apprendre à mépriser tes origines. Parce que tu te dis, ouais, quand même, nanana, ton pays, quand même, il est instable. Ta famille, pour les gens chez qui j'ai atterri, ils disaient, ouais, mais en gros, ta

The interviewee expresses several key elements that resonate with how Western narratives about Blackness, Ethiopia, and adoption shaped his sense of self. Media representations of Ethiopia as impoverished and famine-stricken led him to view his country of origin in a negative light. As a child, he gradually consented to the idea that France and whiteness represented superiority and stability, while Ethiopia and Blackness appeared degenerative. This reflects how media representations and “common sense” embed historical prejudices into everyday ways of thinking that appear natural and self-evident (Davison and Shire 2015). In this way, this testimony exemplifies Gramsci’s insight that hegemony functions not through direct coercion, but by securing the consent of the subaltern to the normative worldview of the ruling group (Hall 2021).

4.3.4 "For the Black man, there is only one destiny. And it is white."

Frantz Fanon famously writes: “For the black man, there is only one destiny. And it is white.”¹³ With this sentence, the author seeks to uncover the “annihilation” or “la déviation existentielle” experienced by the colonized Black subject (Fanon 2015: 10). Fanon argues that colonialism operates not only materially but also psychologically, crushing spirit, personality, and sense of identity. Colonized Black people often perceive themselves through the lens of white society, “le regard blanc” (the white gaze) (Fanon 2015: 108). The white gaze not only observes but also judges, defines, and shapes Black people’s sense of self. The white gaze, which shapes Black subjectivity, is informed by the “*mythe nègre*”, the colonial stereotypes and fantasized representations of Blackness which objectifies Black individuals, making them “other”, inferior (Fanon 2015: 114). The problem is, the colonized do not just face an otherness imposed from the outside; instead, they begin to incorporate this “other,” which is the fruit of colonial stereotypes, as part of their sense of self (Gibson 2022: 461).

Usually, for a self-aware person, the body is an object of consciousness. For the colonized, however, the body shapes their consciousness because racial prejudice and the white gaze

famille, ils t'ont abandonné. Tu vois, non? Donc, il y a des tas de trucs qui font que t'as pas envie de t'identifier à quelque chose qui apparemment a l'air négatif, tout ça, et tu finis par ne plus. Et vu que la France, c'est quelque chose auquel tu peux t'identifier. Tu commences à vouloir, limite, à un peu regretter de vouloir être noir, tu vois, non? Parce qu'il y a des tas de choses qu'on n'arrête pas de te rappeler négativement. Du coup, toi, quand t'es gamin, t'as pas toutes les armes psychologiques pour résister, tout ça. Donc, ouais, je pense qu'aucun de nous n'a été épargné de ce côté-là, je pense.” (15/m40, interview by author, online, August 2025)

¹³ Original text: “Pour le noir, il n’y a qu’un destin. Et il est blanc” (Fanon 2015: 10)

impose limits on their being. In this way, the body becomes a prison that they cannot inhabit freely, restricting their subjectivity (Fanon 2015: 219).

In response to this objectification and the necessity of subjectivation, the Black individual comes to seek white recognition of their subjectivity and humanity. However, for the colonized, the only form of subjectivity they learn is represented by the figure of the white colonizer. From this position, they seek to demonstrate the richness of the Black experience and aspire to reach the same level as the whites, to resemble them (Fanon 2015: 107). Fanon often refers to “Martinicans” or “Antillais” as emblematic of Black people who have become colonized and alienated. In the case of the colonized Antillean, this alienation is not merely a matter of personal desire but the effect of colonial domination that imposes the necessity to adopt the cultural values, language, and whiteness of the French metropolis. This process simultaneously entails rejecting Blackness and local traditions. For instance, Fanon writes:

“In the Antilles, young Black Antilleans repeated at school: ‘Our ancestors the Gauls’.”¹⁴ (Fanon 2015) By identifying with the colonizer, the Antilleans internalize white cultural values and begin to perceive themselves through a white, rather than Black, subjectivity, seeing themselves as distinct from other Black people (Fanon 2015: 146).

This coincides with how transnational adoptees, through their immersion into the French culture, internalize white norms that push them to think of themselves as white. The statement interviewee 17/f26 reflects precisely this mechanism of internalized whiteness and also internalization of the stereotype surrounding Blackness, where, under the pressure of the white gaze, she adapts her behaviours to avoid objectification.

“Like... more in the sense that I didn’t want to seem too Black, that I didn’t want to... You know, like, I always had these little phrases in my head, kind of like... yeah... Don’t talk *that* way, don’t talk with a “street” accent, because otherwise I’ll seem too Black, too ghetto, whatever... Even though my parents are white, I was raised by white people. And anyway, people will have their prejudices no matter what I do. I tried to hide, almost unconsciously, that Black side of myself. But... I think it was without really realizing it, you know. It’s only later that I became aware of it.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Original text: “Aux Antilles, les jeunes noirs antillais répétaient à l’école : ‘nos ancêtres les Gaulois’” (Fanon, 2015: 145)

¹⁵ “Genre... Plus dans le sens où je voulais pas paraître trop noire, où je voulais pas... Enfin, tu vois, genre, j’avais toujours ces phrases un peu... Vraiment, genre, oui... Faut pas parler en mode... En mode racaille, parce

One can see here how the white gaze regulates behavior and language. The fear of “appearing too Black” reveals how stereotypes associated with Blackness as deviant or inferior are incorporated into Black people self-understanding. The subjectivity is thus restricted by the demand to conform to whiteness to be recognized as legitimate and respectable. As the respondent stresses it at the end, all this was an unconscious behavior, and she only recognized the mechanism of interiorization later on.

Participant I6/m24 also reflects on his early experiences with internalizing whiteness, describing how these norms influenced his relationships, particularly his romantic interactions.

“When it came to relationships, I mostly dated white girls. I wasn’t necessarily attracted to Black girls; I didn’t even glance at them. I think it was a form of mimicry, influenced by what I saw and heard around me. [...] Even within the family, ultimately, their social circle became ours. I dated white girls. I was surrounded almost exclusively by white people, literally. I also downplayed being Black. I didn’t really talk about my Ethiopian culture. My hair was short, very short. I didn’t really... I could have had curly hair, things like that, but I often cut it, probably out of fear of standing out.”¹⁶

Through this testimony, the person underscores that the annihilation of self he describes is not the outcome of personal desire. It was imposed on him through his surrounding social and cultural norms. His account of exclusively dating white girls can thus be understood not as a matter of individual preference, but as the outcome of a racialized social environment in which whiteness functioned as the normative ideal. This observation resonates with Frantz Fanon’s analysis in *Black Skin, White Masks*, particularly in the chapter “The Man of Color and the White Woman,” where Fanon argues that a Black man’s desire for a white woman is produced within colonial hierarchies rather than arising from personal inclination (Fanon 2015: 55). In

que sinon, je vais paraître trop noire, trop de cité, blablabla... Alors que mes parents sont blancs, j’ai été éduqué par des blancs. Et dans tous les cas, les gens auront des préjugés, quoi que je fasse. J’ai essayé de cacher, malgré moi, je pense, ce côté noir. Mais... Je pense que c’est sans m’en rendre compte, tu vois. C’est plus tard que je me suis rendu compte.” (I7/f26, interview by author, online, August 2025)

¹⁶ “Déjà, niveau relationnel, je sortais plus avec des filles Blanches. Je n’étais pas forcément attiré par les filles Noires, je ne posais même pas un regard. Je pense par mimétisme, c’est ce qui était entendu autour de moi. (...) Et même de la famille, au final. Leur entourage est devenu notre entourage. Je sortais avec des filles qui étaient Blanches. Je côtoyais que des Blancs, littéralement. Et je minimisais aussi le fait d’être noir. Je n’en parlais pas forcément de ma culture éthiopienne. J’avais des cheveux courts, très courts. Je ne faisais pas forcément... Je pouvais avoir des curly, des choses comme ça, des cheveux bouclés. Je les coupais souvent, par peur de différences sûrement.” (I6/m24, interview by author, online, September 2025)

his theory, the white woman functions as a symbol of access to whiteness, to power, prestige, social acceptance, and even the recognition of one's humanity.

Furthermore, during the interview, one question focused specifically on relationships with other Black people. Most adoptees initially recognized these relationships as challenging, with some noting that, despite sharing similar skin color, they struggled to identify with or form meaningful friendships with other Black individuals. This difficulty can be attributed to various factors, such as the scarcity of racialized peers in the social environments where the adoptees grew up. This lack of identification also echoes Fanon's analysis of the Antilleans that do not think of themselves as Black, but rather distinct (Fanon 2015: 146). This distancing from other Black people can help to explain why adoptees evoke difficulties in feel a sense of identification with other Black people. Similarly, the Racial/Cultural Identity Development model (R/CID) can also help explain this distancing of adoptees from other racialized groups. This framework portrays identity as dynamic, shaped by cultural oppression, and evolving through stages that include conformity, dissonance, resistance, immersion, introspection, and integrative awareness. Experiences such as those described by the adoptees regarding their complicated relationship with other Black individuals are particularly common in the conformity stage, in which individuals from minority groups adopt dominant (white) cultural norms and may devalue or overlook their own group's culture (Sue et al. 2016).

Moreover, adoptees often develop complexes and a difficult relationship with their bodies, which function as visible markers of Blackness. Interviewee l6/m24 recognizes that cutting his hair really short was an attempt to downplay the differences between his white surroundings and himself. The following contribution of participant l8/f22 further illuminates the adoptees' complex relationship with their bodies during their early years.

“It's frustrating in the sense that it's actually something you can't change. You can alter certain aspects of your body, such as your hair, so I would consider straightening my hair. You can do things like injections, and so on. But the rest, my skin color, I couldn't change. [...] So yes, when I was little, I would have liked to be blonde with blue eyes, but that's something beyond my control. Aside from straightening my hair, that was all I could do, so I did it until my second year of high school.”¹⁷

¹⁷ “C'est rageant, dans le sens où c'est en fait quelque chose qu'on ne peut pas changer. On peut changer des trucs sur son corps, comme ses cheveux, donc du coup, je me défrisais les cheveux. On peut changer, je sais pas, on peut faire des injections, etc. Le reste, ma couleur de peau, je ne pouvais pas la changer. [...] Donc oui,

The interviewee recognizes that, as a child, she was willing to do anything to modify her physical features to align with normative and socially valorized traits. She evokes the frustration of realizing that certain aspects of her appearance, such as her skin color, were beyond her control. Specifically, blonde hair and blue eyes are the symbols that represent the most praised physical features. The only feature she could modify was her hair, which she straightened until she was in the 10th grade. This illustrates how internalized whiteness and societal standards of beauty marked by whiteness operate psychologically, pushing individuals who do not conform to those standards to consent to the superiority of those norms that valorize whiteness and render other features less desirable. In this way, adoptees' experience with their bodies echoes Fanon's argument that the body, typically an *object* of consciousness, comes to shape consciousness itself under the white gaze. Racial prejudice and visual hierarchies impose limits on the subject's being, turning the body into a kind of prison that restricts the freedom of self-perception and subjectivity (Fanon 2015: 219).

In short, white hegemony highlights the complexity of racial identity formation for adoptees who grow up in a society where whiteness functions as a normative force and where Blackness is devalued. Thus, adoptees find themselves caught between the internalization of whiteness as a normative identity and their actual racialized embodiment. However, even when the problem of race arises, the principle of colorblindness often functions as a safeguard for hegemonic whiteness, depoliticizing issues related to race and racism, further reinforcing whiteness as the normative and hegemonic force. In transnational and transracial contexts, colorblindness becomes another factor complicating racial identity formation, not only in the public sphere but also in the private realm.

quand j'étais petite, j'aurais aimé être blonde aux yeux bleus, mais ça, c'est quelque chose que je n'ai pas le contrôle dessus. Donc à part défriser les cheveux, je ne pouvais faire que ça, donc je l'ai fait jusqu'en première.” (18/f22, interview by author, online, August 2025)

4.4 Colorblindness as the Safeguard of White Hegemony: Affirming or Recognizing Racial Identity in a Colorblind Society

4.4.1 Colorblindness in France

Amandine Gay is a French intellectual, activist, actress, and documentary filmmaker. She is the author of several influential works, particularly the autobiographical *Une Poupée En Chocolat* (2021), which explores the lived experiences of a Black woman adopted transnationally. In an interview published in *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* (2022), she reflects on her personal journey, her political commitments, and her contributions to debates around race, adoption, and systemic exclusion in France. She notably acknowledges the difficulty of discussing race in a society that struggles to recognize race as a social and historical construct with contemporary implications. Even at the academic level, she emphasizes, critical race studies as a discipline does not exist in France. She further highlights how even the word “*noir.e*” (Black) seems complicated for some people to pronounce. The word is often replaced by the English term “*Black*”, which is, according to her, a paradox to use such anglicisms in a French society that is typically resistant to English borrowings and proud of its own language (Brunetaux et al. 2022).

This brief introduction highlights the profound misunderstanding and confusion surrounding the concept of “race” in French society. Race is often conflated with its biological meaning rather than understood as a social construct, leading to a “colorblind” approach to racial issues. Colorblindness is the belief that merely acknowledging race constitutes racism, and that race should be irrelevant in social and political matters, making colorblindness the official norm of racial enlightenment (Crenshaw et al. 2006: 904-905). Critical Race Theory in the American context has opened up and reexamined the terms through which race and racism are understood. Thus, this new perspective highlights that racism does not operate solely through explicit acts of racial exclusion but is also embedded in everyday social structures. While the legal recognition of racism is essential, it is not sufficient (Crenshaw et al. 2006: 905). France continues to avoid engaging with the structural realities of racial inequality. To understand France’s colorblind approach, it is crucial to trace its origins back to the French Revolution of 1789, whose founding principles emphasized emancipation and universalism (Sabbagh and Peer 2008: 4). These universalist principles of the French Revolution were reaffirmed at the beginning of the Fifth Republic, particularly with Article 1 of the 1958 Constitution, which

explicitly prohibits all distinctions based on origin, race, or religion. Although the article initially appears promising, Daniel Sabbagh and Shanny Peer point out that in France, the social reality of race is not only denied, but efforts to address racial inequality, such as collecting data to combat discrimination, are often regarded as equivalent to practicing racial discrimination itself (Sabbagh and Peer 2008: 1). A notable example of this occurred in 2007, when a major controversy erupted over a plan to incorporate racial and ethnic data into official statistics. This controversy was linked both to a proposed immigration bill and to the *Trajectoires et origines* survey conducted by INED and INSEE (two major French research and statistical institutions). These surveys included questions about skin color to better understand patterns of discrimination and inequality. The proposal faced strong opposition, especially from the NGO SOS Racisme, and was eventually struck down by the Constitutional Council for not respecting Article 1 of the 1958 Constitution (Sabbagh and Peer 2008: 4). This case clearly shows how colorblindness is deeply inscribed in both French culture and institutions, which has serious consequences. Indeed, it not only makes it almost impossible to measure racial inequality but also hinders efforts to address it. Moreover, paradoxically, colorblindness and the refusal to acknowledge structural racism have led some scholars to argue that colorblindness itself constitutes a form of racism, offering an ideology that explains and sustains contemporary racial inequality (Schütze 2023: 3). For example, colorblindness has helped normalize or justify racial disparities, particularly in the workplace, by attributing wage gaps to socio-economic factors rather than to racial ones (Fassin 2002).

Colorblindness also has other implications, particularly in the context of immigration, identity, and belonging. The colorblind model promotes the idea that racial differences should be ignored and everyone assimilated into a common identity, while the multicultural model values and embraces group differences as essential parts of a diverse, unified society (Plaut et al. 2011: 338). France has maintained its colorblind approach in its immigration and integration policy. Colorblindness has embedded an assimilationist perspective on immigration, in which immigrants and their descendants are expected to integrate into the cultural values and behaviors of the majority, or at least confine their cultural specificities to the private sphere (Bereni et al. 2020: 143). However, in the Global North, members of dominant white racial groups often show less support for multiculturalism than minorities and may perceive it as a threat (Plaut et al. 2011: 339).

4.4.2 Colorblindness and the Projection of White Norms onto Adopted Children

Colorblindness is not just a process that affects transracial adoptees in the public sphere; it seems to be the norm within their families. Much like in broader society, white adoptive parents frequently embrace colorblind values that fail to reflect the lived realities of their children in a racialized world. This colorblind approach stems from the same logic that sustains societal colorblindness: the desire to ignore racial differences and assume that race does not matter (Samuels 2009: 88). It also coincides with what we observed with respect to the kinning process, where seeking resemblance with the adopted child is a tool that favors the adoptees' Integration into their adoptive families (Howell and Marre 2006). However, the specific aspect of colorblindness is that, contrary to kinship, colorblindness does not simply ignore the child's racial difference to establish sameness and a sense of belonging within the family. Instead, colorblindness involves adoptive parents projecting their own racial experience, which they perceive as neutral or universal, onto their racialized children, thereby overlooking the significance of race in their children's lives (Samuels 2009: 92-93). This has powerful consequences for adoptees' racial identity because it further legitimizes whiteness as a normative racial identity.

Beyond the discursive erasure of race, another theme in the interviews and informal conversations concerned adoptive families' lack of knowledge about Black body care and its specific needs. Adoptees often expressed frustration that their parents neither sought out information nor adopted adequate care practices regarding their skin and hair. This neglect, whether due to ignorance or the projection of parents' own white embodied experience as normative, resulted in overlooking the particular requirements of their children's racialized bodies (Brun 2024: 24). Solène Brun (2024) addresses this very issue and shows that hair styling is far from trivial in the context of transnational and transracial adoption. Hair and skin are visible markers of racialization, reminding both adoptive parents and adopted children of their difference daily. Hairstyling thus becomes not only a symbol of belonging but also a test of parental legitimacy, especially for white mothers. Hair styling is strongly gendered; it largely falls to mothers and mainly focuses on daughters, for whom it serves as a key practice of feminine socialization. Knowing how to care for Black hair, braid it, or use the right products is a racially coded skill tied to Black identity (Brun 2024: 25). For instance, participants l3/f26, and l4/f27 recall how their parents cared for their bodies while growing up.

“I really never felt any sense of being valued. It especially makes me think about my hair; my sisters would often go, at least once a month, to get their hair done. I never went to the hairdresser; maybe I went twice to get my hair braided back in middle school, something like that. But I could feel that I wasn’t treated the same way, because my hair is kinky, and the family hairdresser only did straight, ‘Western’ hair. So, as a result, I just didn’t go to the hairdresser. It’s little things like that that made me realize they didn’t take into account that I, too, needed to be cared for, that I also needed someone to do my hair, to pamper me.” [13/f26]¹⁸

“I learned all of that on my own... really, as soon as I left my parents’ house. I moved out after high school and lived in a dormitory while attending ‘une école préparatoire’. And it was then that I realized, it’s silly, you know, but when my skin looked dry, it meant I needed to put on lotion. And my curls... well, I realized I actually had to take care of them too.” [14/f27]¹⁹

Thus, participant 13/f26 recalls feeling left out when her (white) siblings regularly visited the hairdresser. In contrast, she, with her kinky hair, was overlooked because the family’s hairdresser only knew how to care for “western” hair. Participant 14/f27 only learned later, when she was already entering adulthood, how to care for her dry skin and hair. This socialization is vital not only for the bodily well-being of adoptees but also for the epistemological effects. Indeed, these experiences align with Samuels’s findings. They show how, by failing to recognize the specific needs of Black hair and skin, adoptive families often impose their own white embodied experience as the universal standard (Samuels 2009: 92–93).

¹⁸ “Je n’ai vraiment senti aucune valorisation, notamment ça me fait penser à mes cheveux où mes sœurs allaient souvent, au moins une fois par mois, se faire coiffer. Moi, je n’allais jamais chez le coiffeur, donc c’est que peut-être j’ai dû aller deux fois me faire tresser au collège ou des choses comme ça, mais je sentais que moi, je n’avais pas les mêmes traitements parce que mes cheveux, c’est des cheveux crépus, donc la coiffeuse de la famille, elle ne fait que les cheveux occidentaux et du coup, par conséquent, moi, je ne vais pas chez le coiffeur. Donc, c’est des petits trucs comme ça qui m’ont fait comprendre qu’ils ne prenaient pas en considération que moi aussi, j’avais besoin d’être chouchoutée, que j’avais besoin qu’on coupe mes cheveux.” (13/f26, interview by author, online, August 2025)

¹⁹ “Tout ça, je l’ai appris par moi-même... En fait, dès que je suis partie de chez mes parents. En fait, je suis partie de chez mes parents après le lycée. Je suis allée dans un internat parce que j’étais en prépa. Et en fait, c’est à ce moment-là que j’ai appris que... C’est bête, hein, tu vois, mais quand ma peau était grise, il fallait que je mette de la crème. Que mes boucles, bah en fait, il fallait que j’en prenne soin...” (14/f27, interview by author, online, August 2025)

Furthermore, as noted by Brun, this affects adoptees' sense of belonging and raises questions about their parents' legitimacy to care for them (Brun 2024: 25).

The experience of Black transnational adoptees within white kinship not only erases the significance of race discursively but also at the level of the body. This dynamic profoundly shapes adoptees' understandings of their racial identity, positioning them as devalued or deviant within dominant normative frameworks. In this context, whiteness operates as the unmarked and desirable standard, a norm that often materializes in practices such as straightening one's hair to align with white aesthetic expectations.

4.4.3 The Difficulty of Affirming One's Black Identity and Understanding Racial Discrimination

bell hooks evokes the relatable experience of Black persons who have been the "only" one in all-white settings and who have to laugh at "corny race jokes" and go through various forms of racist harassment. She also underlines that many of these people believe throughout their socialization that racism does not exist. For illustration, hooks takes the case of Black college students who were often raised in predominantly white settings; however, when they suddenly leave home and enter institutions and experience racist attacks, they are often not prepared. "I hear so many narratives of black students who accepted the notion that racism did not exist, who felt there was nothing wrong with being with white friends and sharing similar interests, only to find themselves in circumstances where they had to confront the racism of these people." (hooks 2015: 16).

Anna ChuChu Schindele's work (2022) comes to the same conclusion regarding Black transnational adoptees' experiences in Sweden. According to her, adoptees tend to interpret racist encounters as isolated incidents rather than as manifestations of systemic racism. Schindele attributes this tendency to the fact that they were raised by white adoptive parents, whose racial privilege and limited racial literacy may prevent them from recognizing or addressing structural racism (Schindele 2022). The following statement by participant 11/f25 points precisely in this direction. When asked about past experiences of racial discrimination, she replied: "Before, I think I had already experienced it, but since I didn't know what it was, I never really paid attention, I think, you know. I hadn't put words to it. I think it was more

when I grew up.”²⁰ As a child, interviewee I1/f25 may have encountered racism. Still, because she did not attribute particular significance or words to these experiences at the time, she was unable to recognize them as such. It was later on when she grew up, that she interpreted it and became more aware. Her lack of awareness of racism aligns with Schindele’s observations.

To grasp the challenges adoptees face in recognizing structural racism, it is essential to consider how racism and racialization are experienced during childhood. Parents worry that bringing up racism and racial differences might cause the child to focus too heavily on race and, as a result, distance themselves or even reject their adoptive parents (Gailey 2010: 51). In the interviews, when participants were asked about racial aggression, they often recalled their earliest memories of racism, many of which took place in school. Most described incidents from early childhood. However, when reflecting on how adults in the school environment or their parents reacted, they emphasized that these experiences were frequently minimized, treated as ordinary conflicts among children, or dismissed as isolated, personal acts. As a result, adoptees were left with only a partial understanding of the broader societal implications of racism (Samuels 2009: 88). These two short excerpts describe two participants’ early encounters with racism and their parents’ reactions.

“My parents had heard about it. But apart from telling me ‘just ignore them’ or ‘go complain,’ that’s all the support I got. As for understanding... well, not really. Since they’re white, honestly, they can never truly understand what we might feel. So yeah, that’s how it was. And once again, my mom told me, “I’ve experienced racism too.” Yes, through me, but that means you didn’t really experience it yourself.” [I8/f22]²¹

“And they just said, like, ‘If it were me, I’d teach him a lesson,’ you know, like, ‘I’d set him straight.’ But nothing ever actually happened. And we didn’t really talk about it that much... We didn’t talk about the fact that I’m Black, you know? We only talked about the fact that he’d done something inappropriate, as if I’d been hit or something like that,

²⁰ “Avant, je pense que j'avais déjà vécu, mais vu que je ne savais pas ce que c'était, je n'avais jamais fait attention, je pense, tu vois. J'avais pas mis les termes dessus, tout ça. Après, je pense que c'est plus quand j'ai grandi.” (I1/f25, interview by author, online, August 2025)

²¹ “Donc du coup, mes parents, ils en avaient des échos. Et à part me dire « ignore-les » ou alors « plains-toi », c'est tout ce que j'ai eu. Sinon, après, de la compréhension... Enfin, pas vraiment, comme ils sont blancs, j'ai envie de te dire, ils ne pourront jamais vraiment comprendre ce qu'on peut ressentir. Donc du coup, voilà. Enfin, encore une fois, ma mère, elle m'a dit ‘moi, j'ai vécu du racisme’. Oui, à travers moi, mais du coup, tu l'as pas vraiment vécu.” (I8/f22, interview by author, online, August 2025)

like it was on the same level. But for me, it was really something beyond that, though I couldn't find the words to say it. And I think they themselves didn't really know how to pinpoint it or how to deal with it." [16/m25]²²

These testimonies show how acts of racism experienced by racialized children growing up surrounded by white people and, more specifically, socialized within white families are often misunderstood by those around them. In the case of adoptees, white parents' responses were limited to telling their children either to ignore the incidents or to complain to school authorities. However, these experiences were not theorized or framed as racism, but rather treated as being on the same level as other forms of aggression. Furthermore, those testimonies point out that their parents never really understood what they were going through. This can be interpreted in several ways. First, it may reflect a deliberate choice by adoptive parents to avoid introducing the issue of racism into the parent-child relationship (Gailey 2010). This avoidance is also partly linked to the fact that, as white individuals, adoptive parents often lack racial literacy. Consequently, they tend to perceive racism as an isolated interpersonal incident rather than as a structural phenomenon, which then explains why adoptees may later misunderstand or downplay structural racism. This interpretation aligns with Schindele's work (2022), which shows that transnational and transracial adoptees frequently interpret racism as a series of isolated acts - an understanding shaped by being raised by white adoptive parents whose racial privilege and limited racial literacy can hinder recognition of structural racism.

4.4.4 Colorblindness or the White Terror

bell hooks stresses the impact of colorblindness and the widespread belief that, in contemporary society, racism operates only through explicit acts of racial exclusion. This has led some white and Black people to believe that racism no longer exists. However, this erasure only diffuses and hides the representation of *whiteness as terror* in the Black imagination. The "terror" in bell hooks's sense does not mean literal physical violence alone, but rather the deep, enduring fear and trauma that whiteness represents in the Black imagination. This one is rooted in a long

²² "Et ils m'ont juste dit, moi, je lui ferai la tête au carré, genre je vais le corriger. Mais il s'est jamais rien passé. Mais on n'a pas parlé en tant que... On n'a pas parlé du fait que je sois noir, tu vois. On a juste parlé du fait qu'il a fait quelque chose de déplacé, comme si on m'avait frappé, ou vraiment au même niveau, en fait. Là, c'est vraiment... Pour moi, ça n'avait pas de question de ça. C'était vraiment au-dessus. Mais je n'arrivais pas à l'évoquer. Et je pense qu'eux-mêmes, ils n'arrivaient pas forcément à mettre le doigt dessus, genre comment gérer ça. Donc, ouais, c'était... On n'a pas mis ma couleur de peau en avant ou quoi que ce soit. (16/m24, interview by author, online, September 2025)

history of enslavement, segregation, and systemic domination. Assimilation and inclusion not only hide what hooks calls the terror, but also legitimize it and become a way to perpetuate it (hooks 2015: 176). Black people continue to experience the trauma linked to whiteness, yet often struggle to express the many ways this terror manifests, as their voices are easily dismissed either through accusations of reverse racism or claims that speaking out is simply an attempt to play the victim or seek preferential treatment. Black individuals who embrace and affirm their Blackness by “decolonizing their minds”²³ and rejecting internalized white supremacy are often punished for defying societal norms. In professional and social spaces, affirming one’s Blackness can lead to being labeled as threatening or unfriendly. Conversely, those who suppress their difference and strive to align with white norms are rewarded with greater material and social success. This dynamic reinforces white supremacy not through force, but through seduction, offering rewards in exchange for the erasure or denial of Black identity (hooks 2015: 176).

For instance, interviewee l3/f26 recalls a racial incident that occurred at work, where she hesitated to speak out because she feared being dismissed or accused of overreacting:

“I’ve had situations like this when I was still working, about two years ago. I had worn my hair down and went to the office, and the accountant came over, touched my hair, and said, ‘Wow, what is this?’ She didn’t even ask if she could touch it, she just did. So it was a pretty violent moment. And at work, I felt so trapped because if I said something, people would just say, ‘No, what are you talking about? It’s well-intentioned, etc.’ So, these are moments that, unfortunately, I had to keep to myself because I sensed it would create a big scene. To avoid all that, you end up saying nothing. It’s really... how can I put it... insidious, because then I find myself thinking, “If I say, hmm, what you did is a little... weird, actually...” It’s me who has to stop the moment. I know perfectly well she would say, ‘No, I’m not racist,’ things like that. The person might not be consciously racist, but they have racist biases. And the problem is, they don’t recognize them. So we experience a double violence: we’re subjected to these things, but we can’t say anything. We’re forced to shut ourselves in.”²⁴

²³ In hooks’s understanding, decolonizing one’s mind means unlearning and critically analyzing the ways colonialism and racism have shaped how Black people see themselves (hooks 2015).

²⁴ J’ai eu des cas quand je travaillais encore il y a deux ans. J’avais lâché mes cheveux, j’étais allée au bureau et en fait, la comptable, elle arrive, elle touche mes cheveux, elle me dit ‘waouh, mais qu’est-ce que c’est?’ Elle ne m’a même pas demandé si elle pouvait toucher, elle l’a touché directement. Donc, c’était un épisode assez violent. Et en fait, dans le cadre du travail, moi, je me suis sentie tellement prisonnière parce que si je commence à dire

The experience of participant 13/f26 aligns with bell hooks' observation that white terror under colorblindness is manifested in the fear of speaking out against racial aggression, which might be interpreted as overreacting, and the fear that the situation could backfire against her. This situation is described as a form of "double violence": on one hand, she has to endure these traumatic events, and on the other, she must suppress her voice. As further illustrated by another quote from the same respondent, within private white social structures, the lack of understanding of her lived experiences, linked to the false assumption that racism no longer exists among friends or family, creates a sense of loneliness when facing racial questions and discrimination.

"This is really incredible. Because, actually, since I'd been isolated all this time, all my feelings, all the misunderstandings, everything I had, I could only share with myself. My white friends didn't understand. They're really kind, I love them. But I could see that when I tried to talk about it even a little, it fell flat. They would reassure me, say, 'No, don't worry.' But that's not what I wanted to hear."²⁵

Adoption is often idealized as an act of unconditional love that transcends differences, particularly racial ones. However, this narrative of "love is enough" frequently leads white adoptive parents to adopt a colorblind approach, minimizing or ignoring their adopted children's racial differences. Such an approach, although well-intentioned, fails to prepare adoptees for the lived realities of racialization and systemic racism outside the protective bubble of their white families (Wexler et al. 2023: 56).

quelque chose, on va dire 'mais non, mais qu'est-ce que tu racontes? C'est bienveillant, etc.' Donc, c'est vrai que ce sont des épisodes où malheureusement, je l'ai dû les garder pour moi parce que je sens que ça va faire un drame. Donc, pour éviter tout ça, on ne doit rien dire. Enfin, oui, c'est des choses hyper... comment dire... insidieuses parce que du coup, moi, je me retourne en situation où je me dis si je dis hum, en fait, ce que tu as fait, c'est un peu...C'est bizarre. En fait, c'est moi qui vais devoir arrêter le moment. Donc, je sais très bien qu'elle va dire « ah non, mais moi, je ne suis pas raciste . Des choses comme ça. Après, la personne n'est pas raciste, mais elle a des biais racistes. Et le problème, c'est qu'ils ne les reconnaissent pas. Donc, en fait, on subit une double violence parce qu'on dit des choses comme ça, on ne peut rien dire. On est obligé de nous renfermer. (13/f26, interview by author, online, August 2025)

²⁵ "Ça, c'est vraiment incroyable. Parce qu'en fait, déjà, vu qu'étant donné que j'étais isolée depuis tout ce temps, moi, tous mes sentiments, toutes les incompréhensions, tout ce que j'avais, je ne pouvais que les partager avec moi-même parce que mes amis blancs ne comprenaient pas. Ils sont hyper bienveillants, je les adore. Mais je voyais bien que quand j'essayais d'en parler un petit peu, c'était vide. Ils vont me rassurer, dire non, mais t'inquiète. Mais ce n'est pas ça que je veux entendre." (13/f26, interview by author, online, August 2025)

Furthermore, the “terror” of a colorblind society lies in the false belief that racism no longer exists. Racism is not only expressed through direct verbal aggression; it can be subtle, such as touching a Black person’s hair without consent. Yet, Black individuals often hesitate to speak out because previous attempts may have backfired, being dismissed as overreactions, overly focused on race, or even as signs of the speaker’s own supposed racism. This creates a form of double harm: the original racist act and the silencing of the victim’s response. As a result, transnational adoptees often feel isolated, as their predominantly white surroundings may not fully understand or validate their experiences. Colorblindness, rather than eliminating racism, thus perpetuates it subtly.

“The misfortune of man, said Nietzsche, is to have been a child.” (Fanon 2015: 10). Frantz Fanon emphasizes that childhood is a formative period during which individuals absorb societal norms and hierarchies long before they have the capacity to question or resist them. For Ethiopian transnational adoptees in France, this insight highlights how their earliest experiences within predominantly white families and social environments profoundly shape their developing sense of self. Within these kinship contexts, adoptees are socialized to become culturally French, as whiteness operates as a hegemonic force, normalized, valorized, and often rendered invisible through colorblind ideologies. Childhood thus becomes the moment where racialized self-perceptions are first formed: here lies the “misfortune,” as adoptees grow within structures in which embodied Blackness is frequently misrecognized or devalued.

As we will see in the following chapter, adulthood often becomes a moment of transformation, where agency emerges, and adoptees begin to renegotiate this inherited racial identity. The internalization of whiteness as a primary identity later comes into tension with their visible racial markers and their lived experiences as racialized subjects in French society. This dissonance prompts many adoptees to develop strategies to reconstruct and reclaim identities that more accurately reflect both their appearance and their lived realities.

5 Negotiating and Constructing Racial Identity and Belonging

5.1. Conceptualizing Belonging

The concept of belonging has become increasingly relevant in migration research and is often used alongside, or even in place of, identity. Drawing on the work of Floya Anthias (2009), Ana Mijić argues that while belonging and identity are closely linked, they are not interchangeable. Identity refers to narratives of self and other, whereas belonging concerns the lived experience of being part of the social fabric (Mijić 2022: 1110). The author conceptualizes belonging through three interrelated dimensions.

First, belonging operates as an *everyday mode of being*, often taken for granted and largely unconscious. Individuals experience belonging when their “thinking-as-usual” is a stable, routinized engagement with the world that remains unchallenged. In other words, belonging is usually invisible until it is threatened. Second, the “thinking-as-usual” is socially acquired through interactions with “significant others,” particularly during primary socialization. Belonging is thus not an inherent internal state, but it is socially constructed, learned, and continuously reproduced in relationships with others. Third, belonging is not only about knowing and adapting to norms but also about having the agency to participate in their production. It involves access to spaces of participation and the power to shape the social order (Mijić 2022: 1110-1111).

Nira Yuval-Davis further differentiates belonging from the *politics of belonging*. The politics of belonging involves the social and political processes through which boundaries are drawn to determine who is allowed to belong and under what conditions. While *belonging* is experienced subjectively, the politics of belonging is about power, classification, and inclusion or exclusion. Thus, individuals may *feel* they belong, but political or social structures can question or deny their membership (Yuval-Davis 2011: 24-25).

Building on these conceptualizations, research on transnationalism shows that access to belonging is uneven. Belonging is shaped by intersecting hierarchies of race, class, gender, culture, and legal status, which act as boundary-making mechanisms and makers of both inclusion and exclusion (Yuval-Davis 2011: 25). However, in transnational contexts, belonging cannot be reduced to national, racial, or cultural identity. Individuals move across multiple social and cultural spaces. This ambiguous positioning often places individuals in a

liminal or “in-between” space, where identity and belonging must be constantly renegotiated in relation to dominant national narratives (Bhabha 2011).

5.1.1 The Dual Space: Between Alienation and Reconfiguration

As discussed in earlier chapters, modern understandings of nationhood often rest on an essentialized and biologized link between race, culture, and national belonging. Within this framework, national identity is constructed along racial and cultural lines, which undermines the sense of belonging of individuals who do not fit within the nation’s naturalized myth of racial and cultural origins. Paradoxically, such individuals are also indispensable to that myth. As Homi K. Bhabha has shown, the figure of the racial “other” is not simply external to the nation; rather, it is internal to its formation, actively contributing to the construction of a stable national self (Hall and du Gay 2011: 56). This paradoxical position, being both inside and outside the national narrative, has been a central concern of many scholars examining the negotiation of racial identity and belonging.

For instance, W.E.B. Du Bois’ concept of “double consciousness” illustrates the psychic conflict experienced by Black Americans as they navigate two opposing “souls, thoughts”: as members of the nation, and as Black individuals devalued by a dominant, white society (Du Bois 1903: 9-10). *Of the veil* symbolizes the boundary separating Black and white worlds and produces a divided self. It refers to both how Black people perceive themselves and how they perceive themselves through the gaze of white society. This condition can lead to a sense of alienation articulated by the concept of *twoness*: “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (Itzigsohn and Brown 2015: 238). Similarly, Frantz Fanon describes the in-between space of the colonized individual as profoundly destabilizing. Caught between two worlds, the Black subject must often efface himself to wear a white mask molded by colonial expectations. This divided condition produces what Fanon terms an existential deviation, as the subject internalizes contradictions and risks psychic dislocation (Fanon 2015).

Nevertheless, for Du Bois, double consciousness does not only signify alienation; it also carries the potential of second sight, a moment of critical awareness through which the racialized subject sees both the self and the structures that shape oppression and the possibility of an alternative world (Itzigsohn and Brown 2015: 240). Frantz Fanon advocates for moving beyond a fixed “Black identity”, which he views as essentializing and perpetuating colonial hierarchies,

to strive toward a universal human identity that transcends racial boundaries (Fanon 2015). Similarly, Patricia Hill Collins' concept of the "outsider within" analyzes Black women's status in a dominant, white patriarchal society, where they are positioned as both insiders and outsiders at the same time. They live within a worldview largely shaped by white patriarchal norms, which they often internalize. Although this position can generate feelings of alienation, Collins argues that it also enables Black women to perceive social structures with greater clarity and to resist full identification with the dominant culture. This perspective grants them a particular form of epistemic privilege and the ability to produce knowledge that challenges the dominant worldview (Collins 1986: 14–15).

Homi K. Bhabha further conceptualizes this ambivalent condition through the concept of "liminality" or the "in-between" space. While migrants and minorities remain excluded from full recognition, this space also becomes a site of negotiation and hybrid identity formation. Within this space, cultural meanings are reconfigured, dominant norms are unsettled, and belonging is reimagined from the margins (Bhabha 2011: 58).

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives illustrate that the in-between position is structurally produced by national and racial boundary-making. This liminal space might result in alienation, self-effacement, or existential crisis. Still, it can also foster agency, critical consciousness, and new identities and forms of belonging are forged, in the process challenging dominant narratives.

5.2 In Between: Identity and Belonging in Crisis

5.2.1 In-Between Space: Migrants vs. Transnational and Transracial Adoptees

Howell and Melhuus (2007) observed how cultural differences serve as criteria for belonging in Norway, particularly in the cases of immigrants and adoptees, whose physical appearance, notably their phenotype, marks them as distinct. The trend that the authors observed is that with an "increasing influx of immigration" from outside Western Europe and North America, a tendency to emphasize differences between people in cultural rather than explicitly racial terms has become increasingly apparent in receiving societies (Howell and Melhuus 2007: 53). Although the term "race" is largely absent from official discourse, racialized thinking persists, often reframed through the language of culture and ethnicity (Howell and Melhuus 2007: 57). This can be seen in the term "immigrant", which has become racially coded, implicitly referring

to non-white and non-European populations. Meanwhile, multiculturalism is frequently problematized and framed as a national concern, especially in European public discourse. This occurs in a broader context, where identity and belonging in the Global North are increasingly biologized. Cultural fundamentalism, the perception of cultural differences as essential, fixed, and incompatible, emerges as a key mechanism of social boundary-making. As a result, discourses of inclusion and exclusion reinforce notions of who can or cannot truly belong to the nation (Howell and Melhuus 2007: 53-57).

Transnational adoptees and migrants may share non-European origins, but are, as groups, perceived and positioned differently within Norwegian society. Through kinship, adoptees have been incorporated into the culture of their country of adoption. However, despite integration efforts, most immigrants remain on the margins of social and cultural life (Howell and Melhuus 2007: 60).

What is interesting in this comparison is that in the case of immigrants, race has been replaced by culture to determine their status as outsiders in Norwegian society, thereby legitimizing their exclusion. In contrast, transnational adoptees often experience inclusion in their adoptive societies when they explicitly identify themselves as adopted. In doing so, they are perceived not as "foreign" or "other" but as part of their adoptive family and community, effectively bypassing the usual racial or ethnic barriers. Kinship and cultural inclusion tend to mask their racial differences, legitimizing their perceived resemblance and belonging (Howell and Marre 2006: 312). Paradoxically, the integration of transnational and transracial adoptees within their families and more broadly within their adoptive societies then challenges traditional, biologized narratives around family, race, culture, and national belonging. In doing so, this not only reimagines kinship but also exposes the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in Western societies as socially constructed rather than natural (Wade 2022: 1).

Among the interview partners, 18/f22, 13/f26, and 14/f27 recognize that, as adoptees, their kinship ties, cultural identity as French, as well as their socio-economic status, allow them to bypass the usual racial boundaries. This enables them to benefit from a certain sense of integration and belonging within the French society.

“We appear more quote-unquote civilized. It was made very clear to me when I was in middle school. People told me, ‘You’re not like the other Black kids, because you were raised by white people.’ They literally said that. Because I wasn’t loud, I was calm, etc. Let’s say we kind of have Western codes, which supposedly allow us, quote-unquote,

to behave better. [...] My last name is also a bit of an advantage, in the sense that if I don't put my photo on a CV, 'M.' sounds very French. People won't automatically say, 'Oh, she's Black.' They'll think I'm French. So yes, that can help." [18/f22]²⁶

"I'm very aware that I'm much more fortunate than other Black people, at least in France. Because I grew up in a privileged environment, even if, relationally, things were not good at all. But I still socialized with white people. I went to private schools. So I can clearly see that I've acquired white cultural codes. And I think that makes things easier for work, for advancing in France. But still, there is my skin color, which will always play a role." [13/f26]²⁷

"Honestly, I never... I never felt employment discrimination. At least, before wearing the headscarf. If we're talking only about skin color, honestly, I never experienced it. I think that for a long time, I went through competitive exams and things like that, where people don't actually see you that much... It's your results that speak for you, you know." [14/f27]²⁸

These testimonies illustrate how adoptees' kinship ties within a "privileged" social circle, combined with their cultural inclusion, provide access to forms of cultural, social, and economic capital that further facilitate their integration into the broader receiving society. This process masks their racial differences and legitimizes their perceived resemblance and belonging, as described by Howell and Marre (2006, 312). This social and cultural capital,

²⁶ "On paraît plus civilisé, entre guillemets, on me l'a bien fait remarquer quand j'étais au collège, on m'a dit, mais toi, t'es pas comme les autres noirs, parce que du coup, t'as été élevé par les blancs, on m'a vraiment dit comme ça, parce que du coup, t'es pas là, tu cries pas, t'es calme, etc., on va dire qu'on a un peu les codes occidentaux, ça permet un peu 'de mieux se comporter' entre guillemets [...] Mon nom famille, c'est un peu un avantage dans le sens où, si je mets pas ma photo sur un CV, M., c'est bon, ça fait très très français, les gens ne diront pas, ouais, elle est noire automatiquement, ils disent c'est une française, donc oui, ça peut aider." (18/f22 interview by author, online, August 2025)

²⁷ "Je me rends bien compte que j'ai beaucoup plus de chance que les autres, en tout cas en France, les autres personnes noires. Parce que j'ai grandi dans un milieu privilégié, même si, voilà, relationnellement, ça n'allait pas du tout. Mais j'ai quand même fréquenté des personnes blanches. Je suis allée dans des écoles privées. Donc, je vois bien que j'ai les codes des Blancs. Et ça, je pense que c'est une facilité pour le travail, pour évoluer en France. Mais il y a quand même la couleur de peau qui va, voilà." (13/f26, interview by author, online, August 2025)

²⁸ "Franchement, j'ai pas eu de... J'ai jamais ressenti la discrimination à l'emploi. En tout cas, avant de porter le voile. Si on parle juste de couleur de peau, franchement, je l'ai jamais ressenti. je pense que, en fait, pendant longtemps, je suis passée par des concours et des trucs comme ça où, en fait, finalement, on te voit pas tant que ça... Enfin, c'est tes résultats qui vont parler, tu vois." (14/f25, interview by author, online, August 2025)

acquired during their socialization within their white families, is described in the interviews as “the mastery of “white codes”. This allows them to be integrated into white social structures. This often functions as a passport in many contexts, including the workplace. Furthermore participant 14/f27 explains that her cultural capital enables her to circumvent potential racial discrimination, as she has benefited from a system structured around the notion of meritocracy (Howell and Marre 2006).

This shows that beyond race alone, inclusion and exclusion in France intersect with other criteria, such as cultural identity and socio-economic ones.

However, adoptees’ integration is also limited. As interviewee 14/f27 noticed changes when she began wearing a headscarf, which highlights the intersectionality of class, race, religion, and gender in her experience. Indeed, despite relative integration into French society, adoptees’ experiences show that racial boundaries are never far. Racialization and racism remain central to their lived experience. They are often subtly reminded of their Blackness through comparisons with other Black individuals. In addition, experiences such as having to anticipate the impact of one’s skin color on job applications further demonstrate that the dominant society continues to perceive them primarily in racial terms. These dynamics produce a form of double consciousness in which adoptees perceive themselves as part of French society, yet simultaneously as Black individuals devalued by this same society. As Du Bois describes, this creates “twoness”, a split sense of self and a constant negotiation between how they perceive themselves and their awareness of society’s racialized gaze (Itzigsohn and Brown 2015: 238). We see that beyond racial dimensions, belonging also intersects with culture, class, which is an important lens for understanding the different positions of migrants and adoptees in terms of inclusion and exclusion within French society. However, despite being integrated into kinship structures and, more broadly, into their adoptive societies, transnational adoptees remain visibly marked as different. This visible difference often positions them as “others,” making their experience of being outsiders comparable to that of other racialized minorities.

5.2.2 Outsider Within: Racialization and Racism

The concepts of *racialization* and *racism* require clarification and differentiation.

Karim Murji and John Solomos (2005) argue that racialization refers to the social processes through which race is constructed, invested with meaning, and mobilized in particular contexts. They stress that racialization is not a fixed condition but a dynamic and relational process that

can apply to groups, institutions, practices, or discourses, varying with historical, political, and social changes (Murji and Solomos 2005).

When it comes to Racism, Stuart Hall stresses that its power does not mainly derive from visible bodily differences. Racist discourse gains its strength because such visible traits are believed to signify something deeper, something supposedly biological or genetic that fixes racial differences in essential terms. Thus, visible signs such as skin colour or curly hair are only part of a broader system of meaning, a discourse that assigns them negative connotations. These signs only make sense within a larger ideological framework that links them to certain ideas or values.

In semiotic terms, racism, the sign, operates through the relationship between signifier and signified:

Sign = signifier + signified,

I.e. racism = (black skin, curly hair...) + (concepts associated with blackness such as inferiority, backwardness, poverty, etc.) (Hall, 1997 as cited in Gilroy and Gilmore 2021: 347).

While racialization concerns the process through which racial meanings are produced and attached to particular bodies, groups, or practices, racism refers to the ideological and structural mechanisms that use those meanings to justify inequality, exclusion, or domination.

In her article *Otherness and Belonging: The Quiet Migration Redux: International Adoption, Race, and Difference*, Jessaca B. Leinaweaver (2014) explores adoptees' experiences through the lens of migration. While migration may not initially be the most useful lens to interpret adoptees' experiences, as they grow and detach from their families, migration becomes an important framework for understanding their lived experience (Leinaweaver 2014: 66-67). Even though adoptees and migrants differ from each other both ethno-culturally and socio-economically, one factor erases these otherwise enormous differences for the white majority population: their non-white bodies (Hübinette and Tigervall 2009: 341-342).

Thus, like migrants, transnational and transracial adoptees are confronted with racialization and racism. The problem of racism is exacerbated for transnational and transracial adoptees through non-preparation and a lack of ethnoracial socialization. Indeed, adolescents whose parents are inattentive to racism tend to do poorly during these identity-forming years. They are raised to think of themselves as white and suddenly must navigate a world in which they are judged immediately based on their skin color (Gailey 2010: 51). In a study, Tobias

Hübinette and Carina Tigervall (2009) demonstrate that international adoptees in Sweden face significantly higher rates of suicide and mental health issues as well as difficulties in achieving the same socio-economic status as their adoptive parents, despite being raised in privileged families. Traditional explanations often blame pre-adoption factors such as trauma, maternal separation, or genetic issues. However, the authors argue that these outcomes are better understood as the result of systemic and everyday racial discrimination that adoptees face due to their non-white bodies, which hinders their integration and impacts their well-being (Hübinette and Tigervall 2009: 338-339).

The questions of structural racism and microaggression were evoked extensively during the interviews. The specificity for transnational and transracial adoptees is often that racism is also lived through their own social circle, friends, extended family, and sometimes even their parents. This is because being integrated into white social circles is not always an assurance of being protected against racial discrimination. bell hooks argues that the social inclusion of Black people into white society and even within personal social spheres such as family, friends, or even romantic relationships, might look like progress. Still, if the broader white supremacist structure and cultural attitudes remain unchanged, this kind of integration can be harmful in subtle ways. The social integration may suggest that absolute equality has been achieved, even though deep-seated racism still exists (hooks 2015: 10). One participant, 16,/m24, highlights the latent racism he observed during his interactions within his own white social environment, noting that, despite his integration into these spaces, racism still occurs and, even if not oriented directly towards him or his racial group, it may be expressed against other minority groups.

“I realized it when I was a bit older. Since you are close to them, with white people, they won’t necessarily say anything inappropriate to you, but they will take it out on another ethnic group. For example, I’ve heard things about Indians or Arabs, or whatever. Even then, I still take it personally, because I think that if I hadn’t been there, they would have targeted Black people anyway. Even when I hear them talking about Arabs, I ask myself, why are you saying that? Because I think they are also a minority, and attacking one minority, they could also attack another minority, in any case, even without my presence.”²⁹

²⁹ “Je m'en suis rendu compte en étant un peu plus adulte. Vu que tu es proche avec eux, avec des Blancs, ils ne vont pas forcément dire quelque chose de déplacé avec toi, mais ils vont se défouler sur une autre ethnie, par exemple, j'ai déjà entendu les Indiens, ou j'ai déjà entendu les Arabes, ou quoi que ce soit. Même ça, je le prends

This intervention aligns with what bell hooks describes as the disillusionment with white progressives, as integration does not necessarily imply a distancing from broader white supremacist structures or from dominant cultural representations of Blackness (hooks 2015: 10) . This testimony also fits within Michael C. Dawson's analysis, Who argues that African Americans develop a "perceived link between one's own fate and the fate of the race" (Dawson 1994: 61). This means that individuals evaluate situations not only through their personal experience but also in terms of their possible implications for the wider racial group. He conceptualizes this mechanism through what he calls the Black utility heuristic, which describes how individuals use group interests as stand-ins for their own (Dawson 1994: 61). Although l6/m24 refers to other minorities being victims of racism in the quote above rather than explicitly focusing on himself or even other Black people, his reaction reflects Dawson's Analysis. The interviewee has developed a shared sense of identity with other racialized groups, regardless of numerous differences, such as socio-economic, ethnic, and cultural. He understands that hostility directed at one minority can easily be redirected toward another. His perceived interests intersect with those of other minorities because he recognizes himself as part of a broader racialized and racism-prone group. This reinforces a sense of converging minority identity. Thus, racist discourses about other minorities or again negative discourses about immigration directly affect adoptees who have developed a form of "minority-linked fate". Such a phenomenon further complicates adoptees' sense of belonging within their white social environment and pushes them to question their identity and place in contexts marked by racialization and racism.

Furthermore, visible markers of racialization often prompt questions about origin, such as "Where are you from originally?" questions that implicitly suggest that anyone who looks different from the majority population must be 'from somewhere else'. This again impacts negatively on the adoptee's sense of identity and belonging in their country of adoption. Leinaweaver stresses that for migrants, these questions may be an opportunity to share their story. However, for native-born minorities and transnational adoptees, such questions can feel like expressions of racism (Leinaweaver 2014: 66).

quand même pour moi, parce que je me dis que si je n'avais pas été là, je pense qu'ils auraient quand même tapé sur les Noirs, tu vois ce que je veux dire. Même ça, quand j'entends les Arabes, je me dis pourquoi tu dis ça. Parce que je me dis que c'est aussi une minorité, et donc taper sur une minorité, tu peux aussi taper sur une autre minorité dans tous les cas, sans ma présence". (l6/m24, interview by author, online, September 2025)

Participant 15/m40 emphasizes how the question of origin is interpreted as the racialization of Frenchness as being white. For him, this question serves as a reminder of his non-Frenchness because of his skin color.

"They remind me that I will never be French. So, you see, French here really means that I will never be white, which is true. Because when they say you will never be French, they are reminding you of your origins. Yet legally, you are French, you see?"³⁰

Similarly, participant 18/f22 explains in the following quote how, even though she feels French, the constant reminder of her origin through being asked about it pushes her to prefer the national identity of her country of origin as an answer.

"Even if I say that I feel French, people ask me, 'So, what are you then?' I always say that I'm French, that I come from Sarthe. That way, they don't bother you. But they will always ask, 'Yes, but really, what's your origin?' So then, you have to say that you're Ethiopian, etc. But then, even if I feel French, for others, I won't be enough because I'm not white."³¹

These two cases are interesting in the French context, where national belonging is biologized and tied to whiteness. Black adoptees feel the effects of racialization, how their skin color is given meaning and associated with foreignness. Thus, even though adoptees in both contexts feel French, the social structures question or deny their Frenchness (Yuval-Davis 2011: 25). These constant reminders push them to distance themselves from the dominant culture and national identity they have been socialized to identify with, and instead to identify with the cultural and national identity of their country of origin. In this case, we see how their racialization in French society leads them to dissociate and distance themselves from it and to perform the racial and national identity that is expected of them. For adoptees, this position of

³⁰ "Ils me rappellent que je ne serai jamais français. Donc, tu vois, non, français, c'est-à-dire, je ne serai jamais blanc, ce qui est le cas. Mais parce que quand ils disent que tu ne seras jamais français, ils te rappellent tes origines. Alors que tu es français d'après la loi, tu vois, non?" (15/m40, interview by author, online, August 2025)

³¹ Même si on va dire que moi, je peux dire que je me sens française, on me demande, mais toi, du coup, t'es quoi ? Je dis toujours que je suis française, je viens de Sarthe. Comme ça, on te fait pas chier. Mais on me dira toujours, oui, mais vraiment, c'est quoi ton origine ? Du coup, là, t'es obligée de dire que t'es éthiopienne, etc. Mais du coup, moi, on va dire que si je me sens française, pour les autres, je ne serais pas assez, parce que je ne suis pas blanche. (18/f22, interview by author, online, August 2025)

outsider within is not only relevant in the broader adoptive society but also within their adoptive families, where they often position themselves on the margins (Girma and Abebe 2024: 6).

5.2.3. Outsider Within: Adoptees, Family, Identity, and Belonging

Questions related to origin also extend to kinship filiation and belonging within the adoptive family. In societies where kinship is strongly tied to blood, adoption disrupts these narratives, making it difficult for some people to fully understand the complexities of social ties. As a result, adoptees are constantly reminded of questions about their "original" filiation and their "true parents", which further amplifies their existing reflections on their origins and, therefore, their identity and belonging in relation to their adoptive families (Deckens 2023).

During the interviews, it became apparent that identification and a sense of belonging to the adoptive family are not always a natural or straightforward experience for adoptees. About half of the interviewees reported having difficult relationships or even no contact with their adoptive families. While multiple factors may contribute to this, the adoption process itself appears to play a significant role, producing feelings of marginalization. For instance, interviewee I2/f31 expresses how her feeling of being different affects not only her sense of belonging in public spaces but also within her own family.

“For example, I feel like a foreigner within my own family. I feel like a foreigner... Yes, in spaces where... It’s not that I’m not welcome, but I definitely feel my difference. The looks, everything speaks, bodies speak.”³²

Similarly, participant I3/f26 emphasizes how, in her case, both bodily and psychological differences serve as markers of otherness that profoundly affect her sense of belonging within her family.

“The difference, at least within my family, is more physical. My sisters are very slim, etc. And so, it’s true that I didn’t feel like I belonged to that family, physically and mentally, because we don’t share the same mindset at all. And also physically, because

³² “Par exemple, je me sens étrangère au sein de ma famille. Je me sens étrangère...Ouais, dans des espaces où... C'est pas que je ne suis pas la bienvenue, mais en tout cas, je sens ma différence. Les regards, tout parle, les corps parlent.” (I2/f31, interview by author, online, September 2025)

I couldn't identify with them. It was very difficult for me to grow up in that family, because they don't have the same nose, they don't have the same face... So the issue of identification went beyond skin color.”³³

The adoptee's position as an outsider within the family is shaped by societal ideas of what constitutes a family, ideas that in France are strongly linked to bloodlines and physical resemblance (Howell and Marre 2006). Although adoptive parents may try to minimize these differences through kinship practices, the question of otherness remains central in adoptees' lives. This creates a tension between how they have been socialized to experience family and their lived experience, as well as the broader societal view of what defines family (Deckens 2023). Such tensions affect their sense of belonging and highlight the limits of kinship in the context of transnational and transracial adoption, particularly its inability to transcend societal norms based on biological family ties.

Thus, this in-between position is difficult to navigate for transnational and transracial adoptees, who find themselves torn between identifying with their adoptive family and society, and their lived experience that continually marks them as other. The painfulness of these tensions is particularly well represented through the following quote from participant I3/f26, telling about her experience living abroad in Australia.

“In Australia, I felt much more at peace because I knew I was a foreigner. I knew I wasn't Australian. So my status was much clearer. There wasn't the same conflict as in France, where I am French, but people make me feel that I am not. And then I wonder: should I identify as French?”³⁴

³³ “La différence, en tout cas au sein de ma famille, c'est plutôt corporel, mes sœurs, elles sont très très minces, etc. Et du coup, c'est vrai que moi, je ne me sentais pas appartenir à cette famille physiquement et mentalement aussi parce qu'on n'a pas du tout la même mentalité. Et aussi physiquement, parce que je ne pouvais pas m'identifier à eux, donc c'était très difficile pour moi de grandir dans cette famille parce qu'ils n'ont pas le même nez, ils n'ont pas le même visage, voilà, donc l'identification était au-delà de la couleur.” (I3/f26, interview by author, online, August 2025)

³⁴ “En Australie, je me sentais beaucoup plus en paix parce qu'en fait, je savais que j'étais une étrangère, je savais que je n'étais pas australienne. Et du coup, mon statut, il est beaucoup plus clair. Il n'y a pas ce conflit comme en France où je suis française, mais on me renvoie que je ne suis pas française. Et du coup, je me dis, est-ce que je m'identifie ?” (I3/f26 interview by author, online, August 2025)

To escape this tension, the interviewee went to live abroad, and this, according to her, helped her to clarify her status and find a sense of peace concerning her identity. Similarly, some adoptees turn to their country of origin, Ethiopia. However, once again, this strategy is not as straightforward as they might think. Despite sharing origins with Ethiopians, adoptees still struggle with identification and a sense of belonging. The mark of otherness once again reappears in this new context.

5.2.4 “Encounter with Another’s Other”

Achille Mbembe describes how, at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, Black American thinkers claimed both their *Americanness* and their *Africanness*, notably through W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of Double Consciousness. However, as Mbembe points out, some Black Americans who traveled to Africa or chose to live there never felt at home. “Their encounters with the Blacks of Africa from the first constituted an ‘encounter with another’s other’” (Mbembe 2020: 25). This dual experience of estrangement, both in the country of origin and in the host society, echoes broader diasporic conditions. Ethiopian-origin adoptees in France are no exception. However, their sense of estrangement from their country of origin is often even stronger due to their unusual migration path.

Hewan Girma and Alpha Abebe’s article “*Outsiders Within: Examining Ethiopian Adoptee Experiences Through a Diasporic Lens*” (2024) helps to situate Ethiopian adoptees’ cultural belonging and positioning within the broader Ethiopian diaspora. Transnational adoptees also experience this dynamic of *double consciousness* and *outsiderness* as they navigate questions of identity and attempt to re-appropriate their *Ethiopianness*. However, the process is complex and filled with ambivalence. Having spent most of their lives in their adoptive countries, many adoptees have experienced profound linguistic, familial, and cultural ruptures from their country of origin. Girma and Abebe note that structural barriers further complicate diasporic experiences and belonging for Ethiopian adoptees growing up in North America. Many were adopted into white families and raised in predominantly white environments, often far from established Ethiopian communities. Language barriers, limited access to Ethiopian cultural spaces, and the absence of community networks make the development of a cohesive ethnic identity particularly challenging. Thus, they remain peripheral within both adoptive societies and Ethiopian diasporic spaces (Girma and Abebe 2024: 9). Consequently, when adoptees return to Ethiopia, their expectations are often high. They hope to reconnect, bond, and find a

sense of identity and belonging. However, they are frequently confronted with an analogue feeling of strangeness that they experience in France. Howell and Melhuus (2007) emphasize that when adoptees return to their country of birth, they do not, contrary to popular belief, blend in easily. The authors explain that adoptees are often identifiable through their clothing styles, hairstyles, and bodily comportment. The contrast is especially striking among girls, underscoring that the body is neither neutral nor static, but continually shaped by cultural and social influences (Howell and Melhuus 2007: 67). For instance, respondent 12/f31 recalls her experience in Ethiopia, where she felt misunderstood by Ethiopians.

“From the moment they hear you speak, it’s almost over for you. They hold it against you; they just don’t understand you. So, you have to start explaining your story... There were many times when I went back, and it was like, ‘I’m Ethiopian! I’m Ethiopian! I’m Ethiopian!’, but on the other side, no, you’re a foreigner. So, in both countries, wherever you are, you remain a foreigner.”³⁵

The interviewee felt largely misunderstood in Ethiopia, primarily due to the language barrier. She explains that people’s attitudes toward her changed the moment she began to speak. She then had to justify her migration story, which, even though it reaffirmed her Ethiopian origin, still left her feeling like an outsider within Ethiopian society. Another participant, 16/m24, who also traveled to Ethiopia with similar hopes of reconnection, ended up with the same sentiment of estrangement, an experience that ultimately pushed him to reconfigure his identity and belonging:

“You see, before my trip, I would have said I felt 100% Ethiopian [...] Today, I truly consider myself French. I think I now see myself for who I really am. Before, I didn’t. Through my trip to Ethiopia and living in Canada, I’ve come to understand that I am a French adoptee, a French and Ethiopian adoptee.”³⁶

³⁵ “À partir du moment où on t’entend, j’ai presque envie de dire, c’est fini pour toi. Genre, on t’en veut, on ne comprend pas presque. Et du coup, t’es obligé un peu de déplier l’histoire. Il y a quand même plusieurs fois, quand je suis retournée, en fait, c’est plus genre, “je suis éthiopienne! Je suis éthiopienne! Je suis éthiopienne!” Et que de l’autre côté, en fait, ben non, t’es une étrangère, en fait. Donc, en fait, dans les deux pays, quoi qu’il arrive, tu restes quand même étranger, étrangère.” (12/f31, interview by author, online, August 2025)

³⁶ “Tu vois, avant mon voyage, je dirais que je me sentais 100 % éthiopien [...] Aujourd’hui, c’est vrai que je me considérais comme français. Je pense que je me considère comme ce que je suis vraiment. Avant, je ne me considérais pas comme ce que je suis vraiment. Avec mon voyage en Éthiopie, avec le fait de vivre au Canada,

The journey to Ethiopia begins with the idea that returning to his “roots” would confirm or restore a lost or authentic Ethiopian identity. However, once in Ethiopia both participants are confronted with a perceived feeling of estrangement rather than recognition. Thus, adoptees’ bodily features and comportment do not go unnoticed in their country of origin, which makes blending in more complex and might make adoptees feel like strangers (Howell and Melhuus 2007: 67). Furthermore, because adoptees grew up far from Ethiopian communities and cultural practices, they have not developed resources such language proficiency and coherent ethnic-related knowledge that might have helped make their diasporic experience in Ethiopia more natural (Girma and Abebe 2024: 9). However, in the case of participant l6/m24, this experience leads to a reconfiguration of his identity and a renewed sense of belonging. He recognizes his French identity and accepts that he is not only Ethiopian.

The encounter with Ethiopia and Ethiopians within the country is thus another moment when adoptees feel a sense of disconnection. This further reinforces their sense of being “in-between.” However, such encounters can open new perspectives by reshaping how their identity and sense of belonging are formed. Furthermore, traveling to Ethiopia constitutes a key moment for adoptees to construct a coherent personal narrative, which appears essential to their process of identity formation and, consequently, to their sense of belonging. Indeed, it would be incomplete to analyze transnational and transracial adoptees’ racial identity and crises of belonging without connecting them to the uprooting involved in the adoption process itself. For some adoptees, the lack of continuity in histories and narratives between their lives in Ethiopia and France makes it hard to build a coherent story of themselves, which may hinder the development of their identity and belonging.

5.2.5 Identity and Belonging Nexus Adoption

A central challenge in the identity formation of transnational adoptees lies in the erasure or falsification of their pre-adoption history. Even when some adoptive parents appear transparent about these adoption records, several adoptees interviewed describe them as incoherent and lacking key information or contradicting their own memories. Indeed, studies have shown that in many cases, adoptees’ personal information, such as names, birthdates, or the circumstances of their placement for adoption, has been fabricated by social workers or adoption agencies. This deliberate cleansing of biographical information particularly allows adoptive parents to

c'est là où je comprends que je suis... Français adopté... Enfin, français et éthiopien adoptés.” (l6/m24, interview by author, online, September 2025)

receive a "clean" adoption, decontextualized from any ethical complications such as trafficking, coercion, or poverty (Wexler et al. 2023: 515).

As a result, for some adoptees, this erasure of their early history often means that their life appears to begin only at adoption, disconnecting them from their roots and their culture of origin. The lack of access to accurate personal history disrupts narrative identity coherence, which is a critical component of integrated identity development. Without the knowledge of their origins, adoptees struggle to construct a stable sense of self across time. For instance, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) affirms every child's right to know their origins, including the identity of their biological parents (Wexler et al. 2023: 515). Across the interviews, the absence of information about their origins, biological families, and adoption stories emerged as a key factor that shaped my interview partners' search for a cohesive personal narrative. The following two examples illustrate different stages in and outcomes of this identity-formation process, showing how access to one's history and the ability to construct a coherent narrative can influence identity development as well as the broader well-being of adoptees.

"It's quite complicated. I'm in a phase of rebuilding myself right now, so it's difficult. As I told you, I want to change my first name because I had to suppress my Ethiopian identity all this time, for 20 years. Now, I really feel the need to reconnect to regain my confidence, to stop living in this robotic way, and to feel truly connected to myself. I feel that I need to reclaim and relearn my culture, to reaffirm my story, and to take back the name my parents gave me, because it makes much more sense to me, especially given its meaning." [13/f26]³⁷

"Today, yes, I feel grounded. I know where I come from because I got answers to my questions through my birth family. Even though my language... It's gone; some things are missing. But at least I knew where I came from." [12/f31]³⁸

³⁷ C'est assez compliqué. Là, je suis en reconstruction, donc c'est compliqué. Comme je t'ai dit, j'ai envie de changer de prénom, parce que j'ai dû opprimer mon identité éthiopienne pendant tout ce temps, pendant 20 ans. Donc maintenant, j'ai vraiment ce besoin pour revenir aussi sur... pour regagner ma confiance, pour ne plus vivre dans ce truc robotique, être connectée à moi-même. Je sens qu'il faut que je regagne, que je réapprenne ma culture, que je réaffirme mon histoire, que je reprenne le prénom que mes parents m'ont donné, parce que ça a beaucoup plus de sens pour moi, en plus, voilà, vu la signification, etc." (13/f26 interview by author, online, August 2025)

³⁸ "Aujourd'hui, oui, je suis ancrée. Je sais d'où je viens parce que j'ai eu des réponses à mes questions avec ma famille d'origine. Malgré que ma langue... il y a plus... Il y a des choses qui manquent. Mais je savais d'où je venais." (12/f31, interview by author, online, August 2025)

In the last testimony participant, l2/f31 explains that having answers to her questions about her origins and reconnecting with her biological family helps her feel grounded and able to move forward. By contrast, participant l3/f26 expresses that she feels ungrounded, largely because she lacks a connection to her past, her history, and her origins, elements that are important to her. A solely French identity is not enough to make her feel fully anchored. Changing her name and reappropriating her birth name is the first step. During the interview, she mentioned that in the upcoming months, she plans to go live and work in Ethiopia, as part of her ongoing process of rebuilding herself and nurturing her Ethiopian side. This highlights that identity formation and sense of belonging for transnational and transracial adoptees are further complicated by the lack of knowledge about their pre-adoption history, which appears to be crucial in the process. This absence often leads adoptees to engage in practices such as traveling to Ethiopia, searching for biological family members, and seeking information to reconnect and gain a deeper understanding of themselves.

This chapter shows that transnational and transracial adoptees often experience a crisis of identity and belonging, shaped by their “in-between” positioning across racial, national, and familial boundaries. Difficulties identifying as fully Black or white, French or Ethiopian, or with either adoptive or biological families can be partly explained by Western essentialist understandings of identity (Howell 2006: 9), as well as by migration trajectories and ruptures from pre-adoption histories. This results in unstable identities marked by tension, alienation, and fragmentation (Wexler et al. 2023). At the same time, this in-between position can also function as a space of agency, enabling the creation of alternative forms of identity that challenge fixed notions of race and national belonging.

5.3 Constructing One’s Racial Identity and Belonging

5.3.1 Reappropriating Black Identity and Belonging

For bell hooks, breaking with internalized racism is pivotal for Black people, since the structural devaluation of Blackness gives rise to a profound and ongoing crisis of self and identity. According to her, this can only be addressed through sustained, radical movements for self-determination and decolonization. In this journey, one must first break through the barriers of denial that mask the profound wounds of Black self-rejection (hooks 2015: 20).

The Racial/Cultural Identity Development (R/CID) model provides a valuable framework for understanding how identity is shaped under conditions of cultural oppression and evolves

through distinct stages. Each stage reflects changing attitudes toward the self, one's own group, other minority groups, and the dominant group. It begins with a phase of Conformity, where individuals try to fit in by adopting the values and norms of the dominant culture, sometimes ignoring their own background. Then comes Dissonance, when they start questioning these beliefs and feeling torn between different parts of themselves. In the Resistance And Immersion Stage, they turn toward their own group, often with pride but also frustration toward the dominant culture. During Introspection, they begin to look inward and search for a more personal and balanced understanding of identity. The final stage, Integrative Awareness, reflects a sense of peace and confidence, where one can value both their own culture and others without conflict (Sue et al. 2016). It is essential to note that this model is not a linear process. Indeed, one has to keep in mind that this is a framework and guideline for understanding racial identity development in a multicultural context, thus one that is dynamic and non-linear, and should not lead to stereotyping, overgeneralization, or assuming fixed stages. (Sue et al. 2016: 172).

If we go back to the previous chapters, one can notice that interviewees have been through a few of those stages, particularly the conformity and dissonance one. The resistance and immersion stage is the one we will discuss in this chapter, which is a key stage in the construction of Ethiopian-origin adoptees' sense of identity and belonging. Most of the interviewed adoptees described a specific moment when their perception and sentiments about their racial identity shifted. Participants described this moment using terms such as "transitioning" (16/m25), "embracing a Black identity" (11/f25 and 14/f27), or "deconstructing" (13/f26). These different terms illustrate the process through which transnational and transracial adoptees enter the stage of resistance and immersion and begin to embrace their Blackness (Sue et al. 2016: 172). An important factor emerging from the empirical data is that this often occurs when adoptees distance themselves from their usual white social environment, whether geographically or relationally. This fits with Leinaweaver's observation that for adoptees, as they gain independence and reflect on their origins, migration emerges as a useful lens for understanding how they navigate belonging and identity (Leinaweaver 2014: 66). For instance, Interviewee 11/f25 remembers the moment when she began affirming her identity as a Black person.

"It was when I left my family home, after high school, that I started asking myself questions, as everyone does, you know: Who am I? All of that. And this time, independently of my relationship with my parents. That's when I also began to assert

myself more and to find myself in my identity as a Black person. The fact that I'm an artist, I think that played a big role too in building confidence and simply accepting my difference."³⁹

For the respondent, distancing herself from her white family following high school is the moment when she began to reflect on her own identity and started to affirm herself as a Black person. This process fostered a sense of confidence and self-acceptance, to which other factors, such as being an artist, also contributed, supporting her journey of self-discovery. Contact with immigrants, racialized people, is another key moment that can help adoptees to break with the conformity stage and to begin to embrace their Blackness (Leinaweaver 2014: 67).

Participant 14/f27 notes how such contacts have been important in the acceptance of her Blackness. "Actually, as soon as I left home and started hanging out with racialized people, you know, like more Black people, more North Africans, I was like: 'But wait, you're Black, that's it. Just own it.'"⁴⁰

bell hooks also stresses the misconception of notions such as racial identity, the Black community, or Black nationalism, which have sometimes been analyzed under the lens of communitarianism or Black separatism in the Global North, or among certain scholars under an essentialist form of Blackness. However, according to hooks, those critics often fail to see the protective and constructive role of Black collective formation. The consequence of racialization is that some Black people might prefer to seek the comfort of Black company because socializing with white people is perceived as a threat, potentially being targeted by racism (hooks 2015: 33). This also resonates with Stuart Hall's understanding of "strategic essentialism," in which identity categories (such as Black or African identity) are used tactically for collective political mobilization, while their constructed and unstable nature remains fully acknowledged (Hall 2021: 111). The following quotes from respondent 16/m24 illustrate this perspective, as he prefers now the company of racialized or Black people.

³⁹ "C'est à partir du moment où j'ai quitté le foyer familial, mes parents, après le lycée, que j'ai commencé à me poser des questions, en mode comme tout le monde, tu vois, qui suis-je, tout ça, indépendamment de ma relation avec mes parents. Et c'est là où j'ai commencé à un peu plus m'affirmer aussi et à me trouver aussi dans mon identité en tant que personne noire. Plus le fait que je sois artiste, je pense que ça, ça a pas mal joué aussi dans la confiance et juste d'accepter ma différence tout simplement." (11/f25, interview by author, online, August 2025)

⁴⁰ "En fait, dès que je suis partie et que j'ai commencé à côtoyer des personnes racisées, comme on dirait, tu vois, donc plus de noirs, plus de maghrébins, et ben en fait, je me suis dit mais t'es noire et c'est tout. Genre, assume-le." (14/f27, interview by author, online, August 2025)

“When I got to tenth grade, I was basically only hanging out with non-white people. And from then on, I was like: I have so much in common with them, I have so much to say. That’s when I really made my transition, let’s say. [...] Now I pretty much only hang out with racialized people. And it’s a choice. I do have white friends and all, but honestly, I feel more represented and more comfortable with those people.”⁴¹

Thus, the respondent emphasizes that spending time with “non- people” allows him to feel more represented and comfortable. He uses the term “transitioning,” which indicates how contact with other racialized individuals has shifted his worldview, particularly regarding his racial identity. In this sense, his testimony aligns with bell hooks’ observation that Black communities play a constructive role in the identity formation of racialized individuals.

If we refer back to the Racial/Cultural Identity Development (R/CID) model, the reappropriation of Blackness and distancing from dominant cultural norms appear to be crucial steps in overcoming internalized devaluation and identity crisis. By reconnecting with their origins and forming ties with other racialized individuals, adoptees advance in their construction of identity and belonging (Sue et al. 2016: 167) . However, as we will see in the following section, some adoptees, particularly older ones, articulate a more fluid and reflective understanding of identity that aligns with the next stages of the R/CID model.

5.3.2 Identity As Fluid, Hybrid, And Ongoing

Homi K. Bhabha (2011) conceptualizes the “in-between” as a productive space of negotiation from which dominant cultural narratives can be unsettled and alternative identities imagined. Rather than viewing identity as anchored in a singular origin or cultural essence, Bhabha emphasizes that new cultural meanings emerge precisely through the tension of being located between categories. Migration exposes the instability of national identity and cultural purity by generating hybrid forms of identification that are neither fully aligned with the culture of origin nor completely assimilated into the host society. These hybrid identities reveal that national belonging is not a natural or self-evident truth, but a contested and historically situated

⁴¹ “En passage en seconde, je traînais pratiquement que avec des personnes non-Blanches. Donc de là, je me suis dit, j’ai tellement de points en commun avec eux, j’ai tellement de choses à dire. C’est là où j’ai vraiment fait ma transition, on va dire.[...] Je traîne pratiquement plus que avec des personnes racisées. Et c’est un choix. J’ai des amis blancs et tout, mais pour le coup, je me sens plus représenté et plus à l’aise avec ces personnes.” (I6/m24, interview by author, online, August 2025)

construction. In this sense, Bhabha shifts the focus from questions of cultural “authenticity” to the ongoing, negotiated processes through which belonging and difference are formed within unequal relations of power (Bhabha 2011: 54–58). This understanding resonates with Judith Butler’s notion of identity as performative. For Butler, identity is not a pre-existing inner essence but the effect of repeated social acts shaped by norms that can also be reworked, resisted, and subverted (Butler 2011: 189–190). Seeing identity as performative opens space for agency: one does not need a stable or “authentic” identity to act. Rather, identity and agency emerge simultaneously through the very process of becoming (Butler 2011: 182). Taken together, Bhabha and Butler allow us to understand identity not as a fixed destination, but as a dynamic and relational process, the continuous negotiation in response to shifting social expectations, racialization, and diasporic positionings.

During the interviews, several participants reflected on their ambivalent position and articulated a sense of self that refuses binary or essentialized categories. For instance interviewee 12/f31, a professional dancer, describes how she has come to understand the multiplicity of her identity at different levels. Rather than selecting one side of the binaries that shape her life, she sees them as constitutive elements of who she is. She explains:

“Honestly, it’s still a work in progress for me, because there are still so many things I don’t know. At least, I think I know what I don’t want, which is to be just a Black woman, to present myself like that. I feel like, really, sometimes, I’m not just one thing. With the journey my little brother and I have had, I can’t tell myself that I’m only one thing. A dancer, okay, but then people ask me: ‘Oh, but what do you dance?’ It’s the same thing. I can’t define myself through only one language or one dance aesthetic. Because even I don’t know, there’s so much heritage, so much behind me. It would be a shame to lock myself into one single thing, and then, in the end, maybe that’s not even what I am. Yes, I’m a woman who loves a woman. Yes, I’m a dancer. Yes, I’m Black, I’m Ethiopian, and also now French. And I don’t have just one first name both of them truly exist today. I’m just a woman who doesn’t know a lot yet and who’s moving forward, who’s still searching for truth, you know. And searching for what feels right.”⁴²

⁴² “En vrai, c’est toujours en recherche pour moi parce qu’il y a encore beaucoup de choses que je ne sais pas. Et je crois que je sais ce que je ne veux pas, c’est-à-dire être juste une femme noire, me présenter comme ça, en tout cas. J’ai l’impression que, vraiment, parfois, je ne suis pas qu’une seule chose. Avec le chemin qu’on a eu avec mon petit frère, je ne me dis pas que je suis une seule chose. Danseuse, d’accord, mais parfois, on me dit « Ah, mais tu dances quoi ? C’est la même chose, en fait. Je ne peux plus me définir dans une seule langue ou une seule

This testimony exemplifies what Bhabha describes as the generative potential of the in-between. Indeed, she does not seek to resolve the tensions that shape her identity, but she embraces them as a source of meaning and creative possibility. The metaphor of artistic practice is particularly revealing. The expectation that she must choose a single dance aesthetic mirrors the pressure to fit into a singular identity category. Thus, committing to only one aesthetic would diminish the richness of her art, just as defining herself through a single label would reduce the complexity of her lived experience. Her identity emerges through movement, plurality, and experimentation, rather than through stable classification. This reflection also aligns with Butler's understanding of identity as an active and unfolding process that emerges through movement. As one act, identity is formed (Butler 2011: 182). Her refusal to lock herself into a single definition, and her acknowledgment that she is still "searching for truth," suggest a form of positioned identity that challenges normative frameworks of racial and cultural identification. Rather than internalizing the external categories imposed on her, she exercises subversive agency by redefining the terms through which she is recognizable.

5.3.3 Positioned Belonging: Navigating Multiple Social Horizons

While Bhabha and Butler help us understand how some adoptees come to understand identity as fluid, negotiated, and performative, Brockett's (2000) concept of positioned belonging shows in practice how belongings are claimed from a specific place of ambivalence and exclusion, particularly in diasporic contexts.

Positioned belonging refers to the reflective and situated ways in which diasporic individuals articulate who they are and where they belong in response to exclusion, displacement, or feelings of not fully fitting in. Rather than claiming a seamless or "authentic" membership in either the homeland or the host society, they define themselves in relation to different "others" and negotiate a form of partial yet meaningful belonging. As Brockett explains, this concept helps us understand how individuals reconcile tensions between diaspora, transnationalism, assimilation, and racialization by crafting identities that acknowledge distance from origins

esthétique de la danse. Parce que moi-même, je ne sais pas, il y a tellement d'héritage, il y a tellement de derrière, que ce serait juste dommage que je m'enferme dans un seul truc et qu'au final, peut-être que je ne suis pas ça. Oui, je suis une femme qui aime une femme. Oui, je suis danseuse. Oui, je suis noire, je suis éthiopienne et aussi aujourd'hui française. Et je n'ai pas qu'un seul prénom, il y a les deux vraiment aujourd'hui qui existent. Je suis juste une femme qui ne connaît pas beaucoup de choses et qui avance, qui est toujours en recherche de vérité, quoi. Et en recherche de ce qui est juste. " (12/f31, interview by author, online, August 2025)

without losing legitimacy (Brockett 2020: 148-149). For example, Palestinian Americans may position themselves in relation to both Palestine and the United States, not by claiming complete authenticity in either place, but through political activism, affective attachment, or transnational practices. Their belonging is not based on purity or origin, but actively produced through practices that allow them to find a place within diasporic life (Brockett 2020: 148–149).

One can observe similar practices among Ethiopian adoptees. For instance, participant 11/f25 expresses a form of positioned belonging by embracing both her adoptive white upbringing and her racialized experience without perceiving them as contradictory. She explains: “So... honestly, I own my white side and all, you know. And there’s no reason for me to be more ashamed of it than anything else, since it’s also part of who I am today...”⁴³ What is interesting in this testimony is that participant 11/f25 does not conform to a traditional or essential definition of racial identity. Instead, she recognizes her “white side” as something learned and lived through her upbringing, and therefore as constitutive of her identity. She does not see it as conflicting with her physical appearance or Ethiopian origins. In this sense, her testimony fits within Brockett’s conceptualization. Her identity and belonging are positioned: rather than searching for an authentic or pure white or Black identity and belonging, she accepts and reconciles the tensions of her lived experience, integrating them as part of who she is and where she belongs.

Furthermore, the in-between position of adoptees makes them aware of the constructed and performative nature of both identity and belonging, giving them agency to reposition themselves and create their own sense of self and belonging in a transnational life.

“With our background, I think we learn to create our identity as well. That’s when you realize that identity isn’t fixed or rooted only in the past. [...] When we meet people from our country, some tell us that we’re ‘*Fereng*’⁴⁴.[...] But since I decided that it’s

⁴³ “Donc... franchement, après, j’assume mon côté blanc et tout, tu vois. Et puis, n’y a pas de raison que j’en ai plus honte qu’autre chose, étant donné qu’après, c’est aussi ce qui fait qui je suis aujourd’hui...” (11/m25, interview by author, online, August 2025)

⁴⁴ *Ferenji* is a term used in Ethiopia and Eritrea (in Amharic and Tigrinya) to refer to a non-African person, typically someone of Western origin.

⁴⁵ “En fait, avec notre parcours, je pense qu’on apprend à créer une identité aussi. C’est là où tu te rends compte que l’identité, elle n’est pas figée uniquement dans le passé. [...] Quand on retrouve des gens de chez nous, il y a des gens qui nous disent qu’on est des *Fereng*. [...] Mais comme j’ai décidé que ce n’est pas aux autres de me définir, mais c’est à moi de définir, je suis toujours resté éthiopien. [...] Maintenant que nous sommes adultes,

not for others to define me, but for me to define myself, I have always remained Ethiopian. [...] Now that we are adults, we can define who we are for ourselves... and everything that... the fact that I take an interest in my culture, in topics related to Black people, to Africa, and all of that...”⁴⁵

Here, respondent 15/m40 explains how being perceived as “Fereng” in Ethiopia forces him to confront the instability of externally imposed identity. Instead of giving in to these exclusionary definitions, he asserts his right to define his own identity and belonging: “But since I decided that it’s not for others to define me, but for me to define myself...” His identity is therefore not inherited, but chosen, performative, and politically grounded. By actively engaging with Ethiopian culture and issues concerning Blackness and Africa, he constructs an identity and sense of belonging that positions him within diasporic and transnational practices. This echoes Brockett’s notion of positioned belonging, where belonging is not given but claimed from a reflective position of distance, tension, and agency.

As mentioned above, practices similar to those of Palestinian Americans allow adoptees to locate themselves within diasporic and transnational relations. Hewan Girma and Alpha Abebe (2024) show, Ethiopian adoptees in the U.S. may not fully fit within traditional definitions of diaspora, but still develop alternative ways of diasporization. Their strategies include joining Ethiopian student associations, forming friendships with other Ethiopians, and creating cultural spaces through music, food, and aesthetics, or through online platforms and digital communications. These actions are not superficial, but emotionally meaningful, helping adoptees to position themselves within diasporic fields despite cultural gaps or exclusion. Online adoptee groups provide dispersed adoptees with a space to connect, share stories, and cultivate a sense of emotional belonging (Girma and Abebe 2024: 12–15). This last dimension is particularly relevant to this study, as the online adoptee group and meetings not only function as a diasporic practice, but also provide participants with a sense of belonging that goes beyond essentialized and fixed notions of it. For instance, participant 16/m24 explains how online communication, followed by in-person meetings with other adoptees, helped him develop a sense of connection and belonging to this group.

on peut se définir nous-mêmes qui nous sommes... tout ce qui... le fait de m’intéresser à ma culture, aux sujets qui concernent les Noirs, qui concernent l’Afrique et tout ça...” (15/m40, interview by author, online, August 2025)

“That was the year I met other adoptees. And I remember thinking: I actually feel good with adoptees. It’s crazy. It’s something you need to experience. These are people who have gone through the same thing as you, your whole life. Talking with them is like reconnecting with yourself. When I left that weekend, I was thinking: there were 35 people there who were like me. With different paths, different outcomes. We’re not the same today, but you know... there’s that shared wound, that strong identity you have, and that you share. It’s incredibly powerful. And the more time goes by, the more I feel drawn to being around adoptees.”⁴⁶

We see through this testimony how belonging emerges as relationally constructed and emotionally grounded, as many interviewees emphasized that these groups constitute safe spaces in which they can express themselves and feel understood without the need for explanation among people who have more or less similar experiences. This extract also demonstrates how Ethiopian adoptees construct belonging not by fully aligning with either their adoptive society or their birth country, but by actively creating a third space of relational belonging rooted in shared lived experiences of adoption. This also fits with Ana Mijić’s three interrelated aspects of belonging as “thinking as usual,” a place recognized and formed through interaction with others, and a place of agency and participation (Mijić 2022: 1110).

In short, identity and belonging become a strategic and reflective act of self-location in relation to different communities, often emerging as a response to exclusion or being positioned as not fully fitting. In this process, Ethiopian adoptees demonstrate resilience and creativity as they navigate their peripheral position both within the host society and the diaspora. Their experiences show that national or diasporic belonging is not a fixed or inherited state. Rather than merely integrating into an already established racial, national, diasporic identity and belonging, adoptees actively claim belonging on their own terms and reconfigure what it means to belong. This is shaped through a mix of transnational practices, emotional connections, and acts of self-definition.

⁴⁶ “C’est cette année-là où j’ai rencontré des adoptés. Je me dis que je me sens bien avec des adoptés. C’est fou. C’est une expérience à faire. Ce sont des gens qui ont fait la même chose que toi pendant toute ta vie. Parler avec ces gens-là, c’est te reconnecter à toi-même. Quand je suis parti le week-end, je me disais qu’il y avait 35 personnes qui sont comme moi. Avec des parcours différents, des débouchés différents. On n’est pas les mêmes aujourd’hui. Mais tu sais qu’il y a cette blessure-là, cette forte identité-là que vous avez et que vous partagez. C’est hyper fort. Plus ça avance, plus je vais me rapprocher d’adoptés.” (16/m24, interview by author, online, August 2025)

6. Conclusion

This study challenges the narrative that 'love is enough' in the context of transnational and transracial adoption, since it does not sufficiently support Ethiopian transnational adoptees in becoming healthy adults. Their struggle with questions of racial identity and sense of belonging is shaped less by the affection provided within adoptive families and more by their early socialization within white households and a wider society structured by hegemonic whiteness. Thus, the study adopted a qualitative approach to explore racial identity and belonging among Ethiopian adoptees in France. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allow participants to share personal experiences in depth. This approach also enables unexpected themes to emerge, which is essential when studying subjective and context-dependent phenomena. Eight participants were recruited purposively from online communities of French Ethiopian adoptees. Interviews were anonymized, recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis, combining inductive coding from participants' narratives with deductive coding informed by the theoretical framework. Five main themes emerged: transnational adoption, belonging, racial identity, cultural identity, and experiences of racism. These themes were analyzed using literature on critical race theory, postcolonial theory, and existing qualitative research on transnational and transracial adoption.

Overall, the methodology adopted in this study allowed me to stay focused on the research themes while also allowing unexpected findings to emerge. This was particularly essential given my own position as a researcher and adoptee. One may wonder whether this proximity affected my analytical ability by encouraging selective attention to narratives similar to my own or to those that met my expectations. However, I believe that my positioning was broadly beneficial to the research process. First, the flexibility of the interviews and the emergence of themes that I had not anticipated allowed me to maintain a strong focus on reflexivity throughout the study in order to produce richer and more nuanced insights. Second, my insider position enhanced engagement and facilitated the interview process, encouraging interviewees to discuss intimate topics more openly. Finally, my position and the epistemological advantages that resulted from it particularly contributed to the formulation of meaningful interview questions and interactions with the interviewees, which were inspired not only by my readings and personal experience but also by past informal conversations I had with adoptees.

The results of the study show that adoptees interviewed for this research were often raised in environments that aimed to minimize differences; these practices inadvertently erased their racial and cultural identities. Through the kinning process, adoptive parents used the language of biological reproduction to facilitate adoptees' integration into their families and the broader society. However, within these kinship contexts, adoptees are socialized to become culturally French, and their Blackness is discursively erased in a colorblind approach to dealing with racial differences.

Furthermore, whiteness within the family and the broader French society is not neutral but omnipresent in adoptees' environments, from cultural representations to everyday social interactions. It is consistently valorized and rendered normative, whereas Blackness, on the contrary, is devalued. The combined effects of colorblindness and white normativity exert a strong epistemic influence on how adoptees of Ethiopian origin come to understand whiteness and Blackness. This confrontation with a racial order in which they are expected to identify with whiteness while being socially positioned as Black creates a paradoxical condition. Indeed, it creates a tension that produces a sense of annihilation, internalized self-devaluation, particularly upon entering adulthood.

Finally, their socialization leaves them unprepared for the realities of racialization and racism in France. Ethiopian adoptees thus experience and negotiate their racial identity through a tension between the internalized norm of whiteness learned in childhood and the external racial marking they encounter in public and private life.

Consequently, the sense of belonging is not self-evident, as they occupy an in-between position and navigate national, racial, and familial boundaries that never fully align. Yet this liminal space also becomes a site of agency, where adoptees are pushed to reflect on mainstream understandings of notions such as race, identity, and belonging. This involves rejecting essentialized and binary views of race, identity, and belonging and instead actively reinterpreting, reclaiming, and reconstructing identity and belonging on their own terms. Concretely, adoptees articulate identities that integrate elements of their Ethiopian origins, Black identity, adoptive white upbringing, and the broader French society, reflecting hybrid, fluid, and ongoing processes of self-definition. Thus, adoptees actively construct their own sense of belonging, often through transnational practices, participation in diasporic spaces, both online and offline, that foster relational and emotionally grounded belonging with others who share similar experiences.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations of this study. Although I briefly discussed the importance of intersectionality in adoptees' experiences of racial identity and belonging within French society, particularly by considering their socioeconomic status in relation to racialization and experiences of racism, I largely analyzed adoptees as a homogeneous group. This approach overlooks other factors, such as gender, that may have influenced certain results. In the context of Ethiopian-origin adoptees in France, considering differences beyond race, such as gender and class, can help better understand how adoptees differentially experience and negotiate their sense of identity and belonging within French society. Moreover, the study could have gone even further in exploring adoptees' experiences by analyzing them through the concept of Floya Anthias' *translocational positionality*, as a way to understand how identity and belonging operate not as fixed traits tied to individuals or groups, such as transnational adoptees, but as outcomes of people's shifting positions within complex social structures. Thus, beyond the group context alone, the concept captures the complexity of identity and belonging because individuals occupy multiple intersecting social locations at once, and because these concepts are inherently changing and contextual (Anthias 2001: 633–635).

Furthermore, analyzing racial identity and belonging with other factors related to the adoption process is necessary. Although I briefly noted how the lack of access to accurate personal history disrupts narrative identity coherence, a critical component of integrated identity development, this aspect, along with other elements specific to this group, such as trauma related to early life and to adoptions, might require further analysis to measure their importance in the formation of transnational racial identity and belonging.

Finally, as a master's thesis, this research was conducted with limited time and resources, which constrained its scope. Although the study did not aim to universalize adoptees' experiences, I believe future research could develop alternative sampling methods that may provide broader insights. A larger sample could help produce more nuanced and robust results.

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8. Appendix

8.1 Code of Interview Participants

Code	Gender	Age
11/f25	Female	25
12/f31	Female	31
13/f26	Female	26
14/f27	Female	27
15/m40	Male	40
16/m24	Male	24
17/f26	Female	26
18/f22	Female	22

8.2 Code Book in French

Le thème principal	Sous-catégories	Définition	Références	Exemples
IDENTITÉ CULTURELLE	ASSIMILATION IMPOSÉE / EFFACEMENT	Expériences où les individus ressentent une suppression ou un effacement de leur identité culturelle d'origine, remplacée par la culture adoptive dominante.	13/f26	“J'ai été adoptée à 5 ans, donc j'avais des souvenirs et j'ai essayé de leur dire qu'il fallait retrouver ma famille ; ils m'ont envoyé balader. C'était comme si je n'avais pas de passé. Ils étaient gênés quand j'en parlais : il fallait faire semblant que rien n'existait avant.”
			16/m40	“Le fait qu'on t'oblige à renier tes origines par la force des choses ou clairement imposées, forcément, tu finis par devenir soit breton, occitan ou machin. Mais en tout cas, tu es limite, tu vas revendiquer nos ancêtres les Gaulois, quoi.”
			11/f25	“C'est ton enfant, il est à toi, et c'est tout, et t'as envie de le façonner. Un peu comme s'il avait rien eu avant, entre guillemets, tu vois, avant l'adoption.”
	RAPPORT PERSONNEL À SON IDENTITÉ CULTURELLE	Réflexions sur la perception de soi et l'alignement culturel par rapport au pays d'adoption.	17/f26	“Tu sais, genre, le combat intérieur que tu mènes avec toi-même et où t'as tes deux identités qui se... Qui se... Enfin, qui se font un peu la guerre, on va dire.”
			13/f26	“Parce que pour l'instant, mon identité française ne permet pas d'être alignée. Je sens bien qu'il y a un manque, qu'on ne m'a pas nourrie de ce côté-là. Du coup, aujourd'hui, je sens que juste avec mon identité française, je ne peux pas avancer dans la vie.”
			11/ f25	“Je trouve ça grave terme, alors que, culturellement, par an, il n'y a pas forcément grand-chose, hein. À part peut-être dans les régions en mode Alsace ou Bretagne, tu vois, où c'est vraiment plus indépendant.” “Moi, je me sens pas attachée, tu vois, à ce pays-là, en aucun cas, du tout. Si on me dit que

				demain, je parle de la France, franchement, ciao. Moi, je part avec plaisir.”
			13/f26	“Parce que pour l’instant, mon identité française ne permet pas d’être alignée. Je sens bien qu’il y a un manque, qu’on ne m’a pas nourrie de ce côté-là. Du coup, aujourd’hui, je sens que juste avec mon identité française, je ne peux pas avancer dans la vie.”
			12/f31	“Aujourd’hui, oui, je suis ancrée. Je sais d’où je viens parce que j’ai eu des réponses à mes questions avec ma famille d’origine. Malgré que ma langue, elle me... Il y a plus ma langue, il y a plus... Il y a des choses qui manquent. Mais je savais d’où je venais. Je savais que j’étais pas la fille d’eux. Je savais qui était ma mère, mon père.”
	RECONSTRUIRE SON IDENTITÉ CULTURELLE	Processus de réappropriation et de reconstruction de l’identité culturelle après des expériences d’assimilation.	13/f26	“Donc en ce moment je fréquente des Éthiopiens, donc je me présente, quand je suis avec eux, je me présente comme E., donc mon prénom éthiopien, voilà.”
			16/f27	“Bah, si, y a le côté français, tu vois, mais quand je vais me présenter, maintenant, je préfère mettre en avant le côté éthiopien parce que je l’ai tellement renié longtemps que... que j’ai envie de... Comment dire ? De me le réapproprier et... d’avoir ce côté où, tu sais, tu t’assumes un peu pour... Pour... Comment dire ? Bah, trouver ton identité, quoi.”
			18/f22	“Comme j’étais dans la campagne avant, je pouvais pas vraiment le faire. Du coup, maintenant que je suis à Nantes, surtout que Nantes, c’est une ville bien de gauche, c’est bien dirigé par l’art, on va dire, du coup, c’est pas compliqué. Il y a des soirées afro, donc du coup, j’y vais avec des potes.”

Thème principal	Sous-catégorie	Définition	Références	Exemples
THÈMES LIÉS À L'ADOPTION	ÂGE DE L'ADOPTION ET DYNAMIQUES	Explore comment l'âge au moment de l'adoption influence la mémoire, la relation à la famille d'origine et adoptive et la construction identitaire.	12/f31	“Comme je me souviens, il n'y a pas un truc de tu me racontes mon histoire, je sais mon histoire. (...) Si on s'était fait adopter avec mon petit frère et que moi j'ai trois ans et lui un an, c'est sûr que je me serais fiée seulement au dossier.”
			13/f25	“J'ai été adoptée à 5 ans, donc j'avais des souvenirs et j'ai essayé de leur dire qu'il fallait retrouver ma famille ; ils m'ont envoyé balader. C'était comme si je n'avais pas de passé.”
			18/f22	« J'ai été adoptée à l'âge d'un an et quelques à peu près. Mon frère aussi a été adopté, mais c'est pas mon frère-frère, du coup, il a été adopté 3 ans avant.”
	RÉPERCUSSIONS PSYCHOLOGIQUES LIÉES À L'ADOPTION	Met en lumière les effets émotionnels, identitaires et psychologiques de l'adoption, souvent marqués par un manque d'accompagnement et de reconnaissance du vécu des adoptés.	11/F25	« On a un peu un gros bagage, tu vois. Déjà, sans... On est déjà avec un gros passé historique. (...) Il n'y a pas de suivi psychologique pour le gosse et les parents.»
			16/m40	“Pour retrouver de l'estime de soi-même, pour savoir où on va, il est important de savoir d'où on vient. (...) Nous, on est bien placés pour savoir de quoi on a été privés.”
	DÉCONSTRUIRE L'ADOPTION TRANSNATIONAL: ILLÉGALITÉ, DÉRACINEMENT ET CRITIQUE DU SYSTÈME	Ici les adopté.es réfléchissent sur de manière critiques sur l'adoption internationale et les différents problèmes comme le déracinement, le manque d'information sur	14/f27	“Je trouve que c'est un déracinement et je pense qu'il ne faudrait même plus accepter ce genre d'adoption, tu vois. Donc, il ne faudrait plus... Il faudrait que ça devienne illégal parce que je trouve que moralement,

		leur histoire pré-adoptive et les raisons pour lesquelles les parents adoptive adoptent		c'est trop compliqué [...] d'arracher une personne de sa... Même si les conditions de vie, tu vois, elles sont un peu compliquées, etc..”
			11/f25	“Après, je pense que... Je sais pas, la question des parents, je pense que ça pourrait être évoqué aussi un peu [...] Parce que selon la raison pour laquelle ils adoptent, bah, tout change, entre guillemets. Et souvent, j'ai remarqué que c'était un peu égoïste, en premier lieu, dans le sens où c'est pas en mode « Ah, j'aimerais adopter en premier lieu pour sortir un enfant qui est dans le besoin », ou autre. C'est parce que j'ai pas réussi à avoir un enfant, j'ai une maladie, j'ai ceci, j'ai cela, quoi, tu vois. Du coup, c'est une deuxième option.”
			15/m40	“Après, tu sais, dans cette chose-là qu'on appelle adoption, les histoires, elles sont quand même beaucoup modifiées. Donc de toute façon, si eux, ils étaient même transparents sur l'histoire, de toute façon, ils sont transparents (sur le peu qu'on leur a donné. Et puis, mon dossier, il est plein de contradictions. Donc, c'est pas sur eux. Et de toute façon, c'est pas les gens sur qui j'allais me reposer pour connaître mon histoire. Je savais qu'ils savaient rien, parce que le peu qu'ils disaient au début, je les contradisais déjà.”
			13/f26	“Je me souviens aussi de la violence que j'ai eue quand ils m'ont demandé de les appeler papa-maman, parce que pour moi, en fait, c'était trahir mes parents. Donc c'était assez violent et voilà, petit à petit, je me suis conformée, mais ce n'était pas son douleur.”

Thème principal	Sous-catégorie	Définition	Références	Exemples
RACISME ET RACIALISATION	PRIVILÈGE ET EXCLUSIONS	Cette partie interroge si les adopté.es bénéficient d'avantages implicites en face du racisme et la discriminations (ex. milieu privilégié, nationalité, langage, codes culturels)..	14/f27	“Franchement, j'ai pas eu de... J'ai jamais ressenti la discrimination à l'emploi. En tout cas, avant de porter le voile. Si on parle juste de couleur de peau, franchement, je l'ai jamais ressenti. je pense que, en fait, pendant longtemps, je suis passée par des concours et des trucs comme ça où, en fait, finalement, on te voit pas tant que ça...Enfin, c'est tes résultats qui vont parler, tu vois.
			13/f25	“je me rends bien compte que j'ai beaucoup plus de chance que les autres, en tout cas en France, les autres personnes noires. Parce que j'ai grandi dans un milieu privilégié, même si, voilà, relationnellement, ça n'allait pas du tout. Mais j'ai quand même fréquenté des personnes blanches. Je suis allée dans des écoles privées. Donc, je vois bien que j'ai les codes des Blancs. Et ça, je pense que c'est une facilité pour le travail, pour évoluer en France. Mais il y a quand même la couleur de peau qui va, voilà.”
			18/f22	“On paraît plus civilisé, entre guillemets, on me l'a bien fait remarquer quand j'étais au collège, on m'a dit, mais toi, t'es pas comme les autres noirs, parce que du coup, t'as été élevé par les blancs, on m'a vraiment dit comme ça, parce que du coup, t'es pas là, tu cries pas, t'es calme, etc., on va dire qu'on a un peu les codes occidentaux, ça permet un peu “de mieux se comporter”, entre guillemets (...) Mon nom famille, c'est un peu un avantage dans le sens où, si je mets pas ma photo sur un CV, M., c'est bon, ça fait très très français,

				les gens ne diront pas, ouais, elle est noire "automatiquement, ils disent c'est une française, donc oui, ça peut aider."
	RACISME ET RACIALISATION DANS LES CERCLES SOCIAUX	Dans cette partie il est question du racisme et racialization vécu sein des cercles sociaux en grande partie blanche des adopté.es	16/m24	"Vu que tu es proche avec eux, avec des Blancs, ils ne vont pas forcément dire quelque chose de déplacé avec toi, mais ils vont se défouler sur une autre ethnie, par exemple, j'ai déjà entendu les Indiens, ou j'ai déjà entendu les Arabes, ou quoi que ce soit. Même ça, je le prends quand même pour moi, parce que je me dis que si je n'avais pas été là, je pense qu'ils auraient quand même tapé sur les Noirs"
			11/f25	"Je sais qu'il y en a plusieurs qui ont eu du racisme, même dans leur famille adoptive, et genre, ça, vraiment, on n'en a jamais eu, ça n'a jamais été, enfin, par rapport à notre couleur de peau ou quoi que ce soit, et on n'a jamais été renvoyés à notre couleur de peau dans ma famille, quoi."
			15/m40	"Donc, si tu as le malheur de direv que tu vis tel truc en France, machin, si aujourd'hui, tu dis, oui, la France est raciste, pour eux, ils ne vont pas comprendre. Ouais, c'est une chose, mais ils ne connaissaient pas, en fait, tu vois, non ? "j'ai vécu des violences, c'est aussi parce que je revendiquais toujours d'être Ethiopien."
	RACISME VÉCU ENFANCE	Ici, il est questions des premières expériences de racisme notamment dans le cadre scolaire. Cela montre comment cest premières expériences sont fondamentales et	11/f25	"Avant, je pense que j'avais déjà vécu, mais vu que je savais pas ce que c'était, j'avais jamais fait attention, je pense, tu vois. J'avais pas mis les termes dessus, tout ça. Après, je pense que c'est plus quand j'ai grandi."

		imprègnent leur futur coconditionnement face aux questions de racisme et de racialization.	12/f31	“Et après, c'est des actions racistes, au sein des écoles, au collège. Je suis allée voir un match de foot, et on me crachait sur le dos, je pensais qu'il pleuvait, et ma pote me dit que c'est du crachat. (8:55) Et après, au lycée, on m'appelait, quand j'avais l'afro, parce que j'assumais, c'était les Jackson 5.”
			16/m24	“Franchement, le truc de la maternelle, désolé, mais c'est vraiment un point-clé pour moi pour comprendre que je n'étais pas comme eux et que je devais m'en protéger.”
			16/f25	Bah, du coup, ils ont... Enfin, en fait, c'était deux gars qui avaient dit, genre, c'était un midi, tu vois, ils avaient dit « touche de la peau de singe », genre, juste devant moi, et genre, ils avaient dit d'autres choses, tu vois, c'était il y a un moment, quand même.
	RACISME VÉCU ADULTE	Racisme vécu en tant qu'adulte et l'impact sur les adopté.es notamment dans leur prise de conscience du racisme structurel et micro-agressions au quotidien ect.	17/f26	“En vrai, en étant adulte, je pense que c'est plus, genre, le racisme ordinaire. Où on va s'attendre à ce que j'ai un... Comment dire ? À ce que je sois d'une certaine manière en tant que personne noire.”
			17/f22	“Ensuite, il y avait quelqu'un dans la rue qui m'a sortie, pourquoi vous êtes au soleil, j'avais mes écouteurs, et je fais, voilà, il me fait, vous êtes déjà assez noires comme ça,”
			13/f26	“J'ai eu des cas quand je travaillais encore il y a deux ans. J'avais lâché mes cheveux, j'étais allée au bureau et en fait, la comptable, elle arrive, elle touche mes cheveux, elle me dit « waouh, mais qu'est-ce que c'est? » Elle ne m'a même pas demandé si elle pouvait toucher, elle l'a touché directement. Donc, c'était un épisode assez violent.

Thème principal	Sous-catégorie	Définition	Références	Exemples
IDENTITÉ RACIALE	COLORBLINDNESS	Cette catégorie renvoie aux situations où les parents adoptifs minimisent, ignorent ou effacent la dimension raciale de l'enfant adopté, souvent en affirmant « ne pas voir la couleur ». Cette posture, généralement pensée comme bienveillante, empêche toutefois la reconnaissance des expériences raciales spécifiques de l'enfant, invisibilise ses besoins.	16/m24	“C'était assez caché par rapport à l'adoption, par rapport à tout ça, en fait. Je pense qu'ils voulaient faire en sorte que je ne sois pas différent, si on peut dire ça comme ça, tu sais. Moi-même, je ne me vois pas différent qu'eux, ils ne me voyaient pas différemment non plus. Parce que peut-être que c'est en faisant comme ça que je n'allais pas me sentir rejeté. Tu sais, je pense, en les connaissant maintenant. Il y a beaucoup de personnes... Ouais, c'est l'impression que j'ai. Après, je ne sais pas, mais je pense que oui. Et même un jour, je leur ai dit « mais vous savez que je suis noir et tout ? » Je ne sais pas pourquoi, je pense que j'avais dû péter un câble. Ils m'ont dit « mais pour nous, on ne te voit pas ça comme ça.”
			17/f26	“Mais des fois, je me dis que j'aurais aimé qu'on soit un peu plus valorisés, surtout dans le, comment dire, dans le fait où ils auraient pu, tu vois, faire des recherches sur comment prendre soin de notre peau, comment prendre soin de nos cheveux, et où... plus dans ce sens-là, tu vois.”
				“Donc, c'est vrai que ce sont des épisodes où malheureusement, je l'ai dû les garder pour moi parce que je sens que ça va faire un drame. Donc, pour éviter tout ça, on ne doit rien dire. Enfin, oui, c'est des choses hyper... comment dire... insidieuses parce que du coup, moi, je me retourne en situation où je me dis « si je dis hum, en fait, ce que tu as fait, c'est un peu...C'est bizarre. En fait, c'est moi qui vais devoir arrêter le moment. Donc, je sais très bien qu'elle va dire « ah non, mais moi, je ne suis pas raciste ». Des choses comme ça. Après, la personne n'est pas raciste, mais elle a des biais

				racistes. Et le problème, c'est qu'ils ne les reconnaissent pas. Donc, en fait, on subit une double violence parce qu'on dit des choses comme ça, on ne peut rien dire. On est obligé de nous renfermer.”
BLANCHÉITÉ INTERNALISÉE	Cette catégorie renvoie aux processus par lesquels les personnes adoptées intègrent, souvent de manière inconsciente, des normes, valeurs et idéaux esthétiques centrés sur la blancheur. Cela se manifeste par la dévalorisation de leurs traits raciaux, l'aspiration à ressembler aux personnes blanches...	16/m24	16/m24	“Déjà, niveau relationnel, je sortais plus avec des filles blanches. Je n'étais pas forcément attiré par les filles Noires, je ne posais même pas un regard.”
			18/f22	“Donc oui, quand j'étais petite, j'aurais aimé être blonde aux yeux bleus, mais ça, c'est quelque chose que j'ai pas le contrôle dessus. Donc à part défriser les cheveux, je pouvais faire que ça, donc j'étais faite jusqu'en première.”
			13/f25	“Oui, c'est ça, enfin, au niveau de la couleur, parce qu'ils aimaient bien me dire « non, mais toi, tu n'es pas une vraie noire “
CRISE IDENTITAIRE	Les personnes adoptées décrivent une identité En tension, marquée par un sentiment d'entre-deux (ni perçues comme noires ni comme blanches), des assignations raciales Contradictaires, un décalage entre socialisation familiale blanche et apparence racisée	17/ f26	17/ f26	“il y avait un peu ce, comment dire, ce fossé, et, enfin, tu sais, un peu toutes ces contradictions, en mode, mes parents sont blancs, mais pourtant je suis noire, et genre, j'arrive pas à me faire des amis noirs, et genre, j'arrive pas à me retrouver dans les autres personnes noires, quoi.”
			11/f25	Et ici, bah du coup, t'es trop Noir, et là-bas on te dit 'toi t'es un Blanc maintenant'. Ce paradoxe, là, en fait...”
			13/f26	Parfois, je peux ressentir de la colère parce que je me dis, mais en fait, c'est vous, vous êtes venu me chercher. Voilà, je n'avais rien demandé. Donc, il y a un peu cette incompréhension en France où je ne sais pas comment me positionner. Après, je vois bien que je suis française dans le sens où j'ai les codes, je gère la nourriture française.

			17/F26	“Je suis extérieurement noire mais j’ai une culture blanche... Parfois mes deux identités se font la guerre.”
	REAPPROPRIATION DE LA NOIRCEUR	Cette catégorie renvoie au processus par lequel les personnes adoptées redécouvrent, revendiquent et réinvestissent leur identité noire après une période de distance, de déni ou d’invisibilisation.	11/f25	“Et après, c’est à partir du moment où j’ai quitté le foyer familial, mes parents, après le lycée, que j’ai commencé à me poser des questions, en mode comme tout le monde, tu vois, qui suis-je, tout ça, indépendamment de ma relation avec mes parents. Et c’est là où j’ai commencé à un peu plus m’affirmer aussi et à me trouver aussi dans mon identité en tant que personne noire.”
			14/f27	“Et en fait, dès que je suis partie et que j’ai commencé à côtoyer des personnes racisées, comme on dirait, tu vois, donc plus de noirs, plus de maghrébins, et ben en fait, je me suis dit mais Coline, t’es noire et c’est tout. Genre, assume-le.”
			16/m24	“Et c’est vraiment passage en seconde, où je traînais pratiquement que avec des personnes non-Blanches. Donc de là, je me suis dit, j’ai tellement de points en commun avec eux, j’ai tellement de choses à dire. C’est là où j’ai vraiment fait ma transition, on va dire.”
	IDENTITÉS ALTERNATIVES	Les personnes adoptées reconstruisent activement leur identité en s’émancipant des assignations raciales ou culturelles imposées. Elles revendiquent la capacité de se définir elles-mêmes en combinant différentes appartenances et en façonnant une identité évolutive et choisie. Cette démarche inclut souvent la réappropriation de leur culture d’origine et l’intégration de multiples influences pour créer un soi cohérent malgré les contradictions extérieures.	15/m40	“En fait, avec notre parcours, je pense qu’on apprend à créer une identité aussi. C’est là où tu te rends compte que l’identité, elle n’est pas figée uniquement dans le passé. (...) Quand on retrouve des gens de chez nous, il y a des gens qui nous disent qu’on est des Fereng. (...) Mais comme j’ai décidé que ce n’est pas aux autres de me définir, mais c’est à moi de définir, je suis toujours resté éthiopien. (...) Maintenant que nous sommes adultes, on peut se définir nous-mêmes qui nous sommes... tout ce qui... le fait de m’intéresser à ma culture, aux sujets qui concernent les Noirs, qui concernent l’Afrique et tout ça...”

			12/f31	“En vrai, c'est toujours en recherche pour moi parce qu'il y a encore beaucoup de choses que je ne sais pas. Et je crois que je sais ce que je ne veux pas, c'est-à-dire être juste une femme noire, me présenter comme ça, en tout cas. J'ai l'impression que, vraiment, parfois, je ne suis pas qu'une seule chose. Avec le chemin qu'on a eu avec mon petit frère, je ne me dis pas que je suis une seule chose. Danseuse, d'accord, mais parfois, on me dit « Ah, mais tu dances quoi ? C'est la même chose, en fait. Je ne peux plus me définir dans une seule langue ou une seule esthétique de la danse. Parce que moi-même, je ne sais pas, il y a tellement d'héritage, il y a tellement de derrière, que ce serait juste dommage que je m'enferme dans un seul truc et qu'au final, peut-être que je ne suis pas ça. Oui, je suis une femme qui aime une femme. Oui, je suis danseuse. Oui, je suis noire, je suis éthiopienne et aussi aujourd'hui française. Et je n'ai pas qu'un seul prénom, il y a les deux vraiment aujourd'hui qui existent. Je suis juste une femme qui ne connaît pas beaucoup de choses et qui avance, qui est toujours en recherche de vérité, quoi. Et en recherche de ce qui est juste.
			11/f25	“Donc... franchement, après, j'assume mon côté blanc et tout, tu vois. Et puis, n'y a pas de raison que j'en ai plus honte qu'autre chose, étant donné qu'après, c'est aussi ce qui fait qui je suis aujourd'hui...”

Le thème principal	Sous-catégories	Définition	Références	Exemples
APPARTENANCE	COMMUNAUTÉES NOIRES/ADOPTÉES ET APPARTENANCE	Cette catégorie désigne le processus par lequel les personnes adoptées développent un sentiment d'appartenance, de reconnaissance mutuelle et de soutien	13/f26	“Donc du coup, là, de me reconnecter à des personnes adoptées, je comprends que déjà, on a eu la même souffrance, les mêmes

		au sein de communautés racisées (notamment noires) ou de groupes d'adopté·e·s.		problématiques sur la famille. Après, il y a des cas différents, mais on se rassemble sur le fait qu'on nous a coupé notre identité, qu'aujourd'hui, on est tous là à se demander comment on fait pour évoluer, à essayer de recouper des infos. On a tous subi du racisme dans notre coin et on s'est dit tout ça. Mais en fait, si on s'était rencontrés plus tôt, on n'aurait tellement pas évolué de la même manière. On aurait tellement pu prendre plus confiance, plus se confier, comprendre que l'autre aussi vit la même chose.
			17/f26	“j'ai rencontré d'autres personnes adoptées. Mais d'autres pays, genre Haïti, etc. Enfin, d'autres pays. Et, genre, je me suis dit, bah... Bah, en fait, je suis pas toute seule. On est plein. Et c'est cool, fin... Voilà.”
			16/m24	“Et c'est vraiment passage en seconde, où je traînais pratiquement que avec des personnes non-Blanches. Donc de là, je me suis dit, j'ai tellement de points en commun avec eux, j'ai tellement de choses à dire. C'est là où j'ai vraiment fait ma transition, on va dire. Moi, je traîne pratiquement plus que avec des

				personnes racisées. Et c'est un choix. J'ai des amis Blancs et tout, mais pour le coup, je me sens plus représenté et plus à l'aise avec des personnes racisées aussi, peu importe, Noires, Arabes, peu importe.”
	L'APPARTENANCE FAMILIALE		12/f31	“Par exemple, je me sens étrangère au sein de ma famille. Je me sens étrangère... Ouais, dans des espaces où... C'est pas que je ne suis pas la bienvenue, mais en tout cas, je sens ma différence. Les regards, tout parle, les corps parlent.”
			11/f25	“Mais bon, après, ça, c'est compliqué, étant donné qu'ils sont blancs aussi, c'est des sujets où il y aura toujours, je sais pas, une limite où on peut pas forcément se comprendre, tu vois, où ils peuvent essayer, mais ils pourront pas forcément.”
			14/f27	“Et donc j'avais que des copines blanches. Et je me souviens, il y a une de mes copines qui me dit, je sais plus précisément ce qu'elle me dit, mais en gros elle me dit, mais en fait, toi t'es noire et tes parents ils sont blancs. Et là je me suis dit, ouais c'est vrai, même si ça se voyait, j'avais jamais pris conscience que c'était le cas. Et là je me suis dit, ouais c'est vrai. Et

				pour te le dire, ça m'avait tellement marquée, entre guillemets, que j'avais fait un dessin. J'avais fait un dessin, tu sais, genre c'est bête, j'ai fait un dessin, et en gros j'avais marqué pour ma vraie maman, tu vois, parce que, je sais pas, la couleur ça m'avait impactée. C'est la première fois que j'avais pris conscience que mes parents, c'était pas mes parents, et que voilà.”
			I3/f26	“Après, la différence, en tout cas au sein de ma famille, c'est plutôt corporel, mes soeurs, elles sont très très minces, etc. Et du coup, c'est vrai que moi, je ne me sentais pas, voilà, je ne me sentais pas appartenir à cette famille physiquement et mentalement aussi parce qu'on n'a pas du tout la même mentalité.”
	L'APPARTENANCE NATIONALE	Cette catégorie renvoie au sentiment, souvent ambivalent, d'inclusion ou d'exclusion que les personnes adoptées éprouvent au sein de leur famille adoptive. Elle englobe les situations où l'adopté·e perçoit une distance raciale, corporelle, culturelle, émotionnelle ou relationnelle qui limite la sensation d'être pleinement membre du groupe familial.	I2/f31	“Si mon cœur parle...Oui, mes papiers disent que je suis française, mais mon cœur dit que je suis éthiopienne.”
			I6/m24	“Tu vois, avant mon voyage, je dirais que je me sentais 100 % éthiopien. Après lycée et plus. Aujourd'hui, c'est vrai que je me considérais comme français. Je pense que je me considère comme ma réelle... Ce que je suis vraiment. Avant, je ne me considérais pas comme ce que je suis vraiment.

				C'est comme j'étais vraiment. Avec mon voyage en Éthiopie, avec le fait de vivre au Canada, c'est là où je comprends que je suis... Français adopté... Enfin, français et éthiopien adopté.”
			18/f22	“Même si on va dire que moi, je peux dire que je me sens française, on me demande, mais toi, du coup, t'es quoi ? Je dis toujours, mais par exemple, là, tu dis que t'es française, tu viens de Sarthe, d'accord ? Comme ça, on te fait pas chier. Du coup, je dis que je suis française. Mais on me dira toujours, oui, mais vraiment, c'est quoi ton origine ? Parce que voilà, ça, tu le sais, je pense, voilà. Du coup, là, t'es obligée de dire que t'es française. T'es obligée de dire que t'es éthiopienne, etc.”
	STRATÉGIES D'APPARTENANCE	Cette catégorie renvoie aux différentes manières dont les personnes adoptées cherchent, construisent des formes d'appartenance identitaire au cours de leur vie	11/F25	“Je suis assez indépendante, en vrai. Moi, en tout cas, je ne suis pas... Tu vois, on parle de la notion de case, et c'est vrai que ce n'est pas forcément mon truc, quoi. Mais après, je peux comprendre carrément les gens qui ont ce besoin-là et ce confort-là d'avoir un endroit où se rattacher aussi, tu vois, parce que c'est rassurant, et c'est la maison, c'est là où t'as grandi, c'est... Bon, c'est ce que je comprends, mais ce n'est pas

				forcément mon état d'esprit, quoi.”
			I5/m41	“Tout ce qui...Le fait de m'intéresser à ma culture,le fait d'accompagner des gens de chez nous, de m'intéresser au sujet qui concerne les Noirs, qui concerne l'Afrique et tout ça.”
			I6/m24	“Je fuyais les adopter par peur d'être en face de miroirs ou de personnes qui puissent me lire. Finalement, j'adore être avec des adoptés. C'est assez bizarre comme ressenti. Au début, j'ai refoulé ça longtemps. C'est cette année-là où j'ai rencontré des adoptés. Je me dis que je me sens bien avec des adoptés. C'est fou. C'est une expérience à faire. C'est là où tu te dis... C'est des gens qui ont fait la même chose que toi pendant toute ta vie. Parler avec ces gens-là, c'est te reconnecter à toi-même. Quand je suis parti au week-end, je me disais qu'il y avait 35 personnes qui sont comme moi. Avec des parcours différents, des débouchés différents. On n'est pas les mêmes aujourd'hui. Mais tu sais qu'il y a cette blessure-là, cette forte identité-là que vous avez et que

				vous partagez. C'est hyper fort.”
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8.3 Code Book in English

Main Theme	Subcategories	Definition	References	Examples
CULTURAL IDENTITY	FORCED ASSIMILATION / ERASURE	Experiences where individuals feel a suppression or erasure of their original cultural identity, replaced by the dominant adoptive culture.	13/ f26	"I was adopted at 5, so I had memories and I tried to tell them that we needed to find my family; they brushed me off. It was as if I had no past. They were embarrassed when I talked about it: we had to pretend that nothing existed before."
			16/m40	"The fact that you're forced to deny your origins by the force of circumstances or clearly imposed, inevitably, you end up becoming either Breton, Occitan or whatever. But in any case, you're borderline, you're going to claim our ancestors the Gauls, you know."
			11/f25	"It's your child, he is yours, and that's it, and you want to shape him. A bit as if he had nothing before, in quotes, you see, before the adoption."
	PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP TO CULTURAL IDENTITY	Reflections on self-perception and cultural alignment regarding the adoptive country.	17/f26	"You know, like, the inner battle you fight with yourself and where your two identities... clash. Well, which wage a bit of a war on each other, let's say."
			13/f26	"Because for now, my French identity doesn't allow me to be aligned. I feel well that there is a lack, that I wasn't nourished from that side. So today, I feel that just with my French identity, I can't move forward in life."
			11/f25	"I find that term serious, whereas, culturally, per year, there isn't necessarily much, you know. Apart from maybe

Main Theme	Subcategories	Definition	References	Examples
	Cultural Rebuilding Identity	Process of reappropriation and reconstruction of cultural identity after experiences of assimilation.		in regions like Alsace or Brittany, you see, where it's really more independent." "Me, I don't feel attached, you see, to that country, in no case, at all. If I'm told that tomorrow, I'm talking about France, frankly, bye. Me, I'd leave with pleasure."
			13/f26	"So right now I'm hanging out with Ethiopians, so I introduce myself, when I'm with them, I introduce myself as E., so my Ethiopian first name, you see."
			16/f27	"Well, yes, there's the French side, you see, but when I'm going to introduce myself, now, I prefer to highlight the Ethiopian side because I denied it for so long that... that I want to... How to say? To reclaim it and... to have that side where, you know, you assume yourself a bit for... For... How to say? Well, to find your identity, you know."
			18/f22	"Since I was in the countryside before, I couldn't really do it. So now that I'm in Nantes, especially since Nantes is a very left-wing city, it's well directed by art, let's say, so it's not complicated. There are Afro parties, so I go there with friends."

Main Theme	Subcategory	Definition	References	Examples
ADOPTION AND DYNAMICS	AGE OF ADOPTION AND DYNAMICS	Explores how the age at the time of adoption influences memory, relationship to the birth and	12/f31	"As I remember, there isn't a thing like you tell me my story, I know my story. (...) If my little brother and I had been adopted and I was three and he was one,

Main Theme	Subcategory	Definition	References	Examples
		adoptive family, and identity construction.		I'm sure I would have relied only on the file."
			13/f25	"I was adopted at 5, so I had memories and I tried to tell them that we needed to find my family; they brushed me off. It was as if I had no past."
			18/f22	"I was adopted at around one year old. My brother was also adopted, but he's not my full brother, so he was adopted 3 years before."
	PSYCHOLOGICAL REPERCUSSIONS RELATED TO ADOPTION	Highlights the emotional, identity-based, and psychological effects of adoption, often marked by a lack of support and recognition of the adoptee's experience.	11/f25	"We have a bit of a heavy baggage, you see. Already, without... We already have a heavy historical past. (...) There's no psychological follow-up for the child and the parents."
			16/m40	"To regain self-esteem, to know where we are going, it is important to know where we come from. (...) We are well placed to know what we have been deprived of."
	DECONSTRUCTING TRANSNATIONAL ADOPTION: ILLEGALITY, UPROOTING, AND SYSTEM CRITIQUE		14/f27	"I think it's an uprooting and I think that we should no longer even accept this kind of adoption, you see. So, it should no longer... It should become illegal because I think

Main Theme	Subcategory	Definition	References	Examples
		Here, adoptees reflect critically on international adoption and its different problems like uprooting, lack of information about their pre-adoptive history, and the reasons why adoptive parents adopt.		morally, it's too complicated [...] to tear a person from their... Even if living conditions, you see, are a bit complicated, etc."
			11, f25	"After, I think that... I don't know, the question of parents, I think that could be brought up a bit too [...]. Because depending on the reason why they adopt, well, everything changes, in quotes. And often, I noticed that it was a bit selfish, primarily, in the sense that it's not like 'Oh, I would like to adopt first and foremost to get a child out of need', or something else. It's because I couldn't have a child, I have an illness, I have this, I have that, you know. So, it's a second option."
			15/m40	"After, you know, in this thing called adoption, the stories are still very much modified. So anyway, if they were even transparent about the story, anyway, they are transparent (about the little they were given). And then, my file is full of contradictions. So, it's not on them. And anyway, they're not the people I was going to rely on to know my story. I knew they knew nothing, because the little they said at the beginning, I was already contradicting them."

Main Theme	Subcategory	Definition	References	Examples
			13/f26	"I also remember the violence I felt when they asked me to call them mom and dad, because for me, in fact, it was betraying my parents. So it was quite violent and there you go, little by little, I conformed, but it wasn't without pain."

Main Theme	Subcategory	Definition	References	Examples
RACISM AND RACIALIZATION	PRIVILEGES AND EXCLUSIONS	This section questions whether adoptees benefit from implicit advantages in the face of racism and discrimination (e.g., privileged background, nationality, language, cultural codes).	14/f27	"Frankly, I didn't have... I never felt discrimination in employment. At least, before wearing the veil. If we're just talking about skin color, frankly, I never felt it. I think that, in fact, for a long time, I passed through competitions and things like that where, in fact, finally, you're not seen that much... Well, it's your results that will speak, you see."
			13/f25	"I realize very well that I am much more fortunate than others, at least in France, other Black people. Because I grew up in a privileged environment, even if, you know, relationally, it wasn't going well at all. But I still frequented white people. I went to private schools. So, I see well that I have the codes of white people. And that, I think is an advantage for work, for evolving in France. But there is still the skin color that, you know."

Main Theme	Subcategory	Definition	References	Examples
	RACISM AND RACIALIZATION IN SOCIAL CIRCLES	In this part, it's about racism and racialization experienced within the largely white social circles of adoptees.	18/f22	"We appear more civilized, in quotes, it was pointed out to me well when I was in middle school, I was told, but you're not like other Blacks, because you were raised by whites, they really told me like that, because so, you're not there, you don't shout, you're calm, etc., let's say we have a bit of the Western codes, it allows a bit 'to behave better', in quotes (...) My family name, it's a bit of an advantage in the sense that, if I don't put my photo on a CV, M., it's good, it sounds very very French, people won't say, yeah, she's Black 'automatically, they say she's French, so yes, it can help.'"
			16/m24	"Since you are close with them, with white people, they won't necessarily say something inappropriate to you, but they will vent on another ethnicity, for example, I've already heard about Indians, or I've already heard about Arabs, or whatever. Even that, I still take it for myself, because I tell myself that if I hadn't been there, I think they would have still bashed Black people."
			11/f25	"I know there are several who experienced racism, even in their adoptive family, and like, that, really, we never had that, it was never, well, regarding our skin color or anything like that,

Main Theme	Subcategory	Definition	References	Examples
				and we were never sent back to our skin color in my family, you know."
			15/m40	"So, if you have the misfortune to say that you live such a thing in France, whatever, if today you say, yes, France is racist, for them, they won't understand. Yeah, it's one thing, but they didn't know, in fact, you see, no? I experienced violence, it's also because I always claimed to be Ethiopian."
	RACISM EXPERIENCED IN CHILDHOOD	Here, it's about the first experiences of racism notably in the school setting. This shows how these first experiences are fundamental and permeate their future conditioning regarding issues of racism and racialization.	11/f25	"Before, I think I had already experienced it, but since I didn't know what it was, I never paid attention, I think, you see. I hadn't put the terms on it, all that. After, I think it's more when I grew up."
			12/f31	"And after, it's racist actions, within schools, in middle school. I went to see a football match, and they spat on my back, I thought it was raining, and my friend tells me it's spit. (8:55) And after, in high school, they called me, when I had my afro, because I assumed it, it was the Jackson 5."
			16/m24	"Frankly, the kindergarten thing, sorry, but it's really a key point for me to understand that I wasn't like them and that I had to protect myself from it."
			16/f25	"Well, so, they... Well, in fact, it was two guys who had

Main Theme	Subcategory	Definition	References	Examples
	RACISM EXPERIENCED AS AN ADULT	Racism experienced as an adult and the impact on adoptees, notably in their awareness of structural racism and micro-aggressions in daily life, etc.		said, like, it was at noon, you see, they had said 'touch monkey skin', like, right in front of me, and like, they had said other things, you see, it was a while ago, still."
			17/f26	"Really, as an adult, I think it's more, like, ordinary racism. Where they will expect me to have a... How to say? To be a certain way as a Black person."
			17/f22	"Then, there was someone in the street who said to me, why are you in the sun, I had my headphones on, and I'm like, there you go, he says to me, you're already Black enough as it is."
			13/f26	"I had cases when I was still working two years ago. I had let my hair down, I had gone to the office and in fact, the accountant, she arrives, she touches my hair, she says to me 'wow, but what is that?' She didn't even ask me if she could touch, she touched it directly. So, it was a fairly violent episode."

Main Theme	Subcategory	Definition	References	Examples
RACIAL IDENTITY	COLORBLINDNESS	This category refers to situations where adoptive parents minimize, ignore, or erase the racial dimension of the adopted child, often by claiming 'not to see color'.	16/m24	"It was quite hidden regarding adoption, regarding all that, in fact. I think they wanted to make sure I wasn't different, if we can say it like that, you know. Myself, I don't see

Main Theme	Subcategory	Definition	References	Examples
		This posture, generally thought of as well-intentioned, however prevents the recognition of the child's specific racial experiences, invisibilizes their needs.		myself as different from them, they didn't see me as different either. Because maybe that by doing like that I wouldn't feel rejected. You know, I think, knowing them now. There are many people... Yeah, that's the impression I have. After, I don't know, but I think yes. And even one day, I told them 'but you know I'm Black and all?' I don't know why, I think I must have snapped. They told me 'but for us, we don't see you like that'."
			L7/f26	"But sometimes, I tell myself that I would have liked us to be a bit more valued, especially in the, how to say, in the fact that they could have, you know, done research on how to take care of our skin, how to take care of our hair, and where... more in that sense, you see." "So, it's true that these are episodes where unfortunately, I had to keep them to myself because I feel it's going to cause drama. So, to avoid all that, we must say nothing. Well, yes, they are very... how to say... insidious things because so then, I find myself in a situation where I tell myself 'if I say hmm, in fact, what you did, it's a bit... It's weird. In fact, I'm the one who's going to have to stop the moment. So, I know very well that she will say 'ah no, but me, I'm not racist'."

Main Theme	Subcategory	Definition	References	Examples
				Things like that. After, the person isn't racist, but they have racist biases. And the problem is that they don't recognize them. So, in fact, we suffer a double violence because we say things like that, we can't say anything. We are forced to close up."
	INTERNALIZED WHITENESS	This category refers to processes by which adoptees integrate, often unconsciously, norms, values, and aesthetic ideals centered on whiteness. This manifests through the devaluation of their racial traits, the aspiration to resemble white people...	16/m24	"Already, relationally, I went out more with white girls. I wasn't necessarily attracted to Black girls, I didn't even glance at them."
			18/f22	"So yes, when I was little, I would have liked to be blonde with blue eyes, but that, it's something I have no control over. So apart from straightening my hair, I could only do that, so I was done until 11th grade."
			13/f25	"Yes, that's it, well, regarding color, because they liked to tell me 'no, but you, you're not a real Black'."
	IDENTITY CRISIS	Adoptees describe an identity in tension, marked by a feeling of in-betweenness (neither perceived as Black nor as white), contradictory racial assignments, a gap between white family socialization and racialized appearance.	17/f26	"there was a bit of this, how to say, this gap, and, well, you know, a bit all these contradictions, like, my parents are white, but yet I am Black, and like, I can't make Black friends, and like, I can't find myself in other Black people, you know."
			11/f25	"And here, well so, you're too Black, and over there they tell you 'you're a White now'. This paradox, there, in fact..."

Main Theme	Subcategory	Definition	References	Examples
			13/f26	"Sometimes, I can feel anger because I tell myself, but in fact, it's you, you came to get me. There you go, I didn't ask for anything. So, there is a bit of this misunderstanding in France where I don't know how to position myself. After, I see well that I am French in the sense that I have the codes, I handle French food."
			17/f26	"I am externally Black but I have white culture... Sometimes my two identities wage war on each other."
	REAPPROPRIATION OF BLACKNESS	This category refers to the process by which adoptees rediscover, claim, and reinvest in their Black identity after a period of distance, denial, or invisibilization.	11/f25	"And after, it's from the moment I left the family home, my parents, after high school, that I started to ask myself questions, like everyone, you see, who am I, all that, independently of my relationship with my parents. And that's where I started to assert myself a bit more and to find myself too in my identity as a Black person."
			14/ f27	"And in fact, as soon as I left and I started to hang out with racialized people, as we would say, you see, so more Blacks, more Maghrebis, and well in fact, I told myself but Coline, you're Black and that's it. Like, assume it."
			16/m24	"And it's really in 10th grade, where I hung out almost only with non-White people. So from

Main Theme	Subcategory	Definition	References	Examples
	ALTERNATIVE IDENTITIES	Adoptees actively rebuild their identity by emancipating themselves from imposed racial or cultural assignments. They claim the capacity to define themselves by combining different belongings and shaping an evolving and chosen identity. This approach often includes the reappropriation of their culture of origin and the integration of multiple influences to create a coherent self despite external contradictions.		there, I told myself, I have so many points in common with them, I have so many things to say. That's where I really made my transition, let's say."
			15/m40	"In fact, with our journey, I think we learn to create an identity too. That's where you realize that identity, it is not fixed only in the past. (...) When we find people from back home, there are people who tell us that we are Fereng. (...) But as I decided that it is not for others to define me, but it's for me to define, I always remained Ethiopian. (...) Now that we are adults, we can define ourselves who we are... all that... the fact of being interested in my culture, in subjects that concern Black people, that concern Africa and all that..."
			12/f31	"Really, it's always a search for me because there are still many things I don't know. And I think I know what I don't want, that is to say to be just a Black woman, to present myself like that, at least. I have the impression that, really, sometimes, I am not just one thing. With the journey we had with my little brother, I don't tell myself that I am only one thing. Dancer, okay, but sometimes, they tell me 'Ah, but what do you dance? It's the same thing, in fact. I can no longer

Main Theme	Subcategory	Definition	References	Examples
				define myself in a single language or a single aesthetic of dance. Because myself, I don't know, there is so much heritage, there is so much behind, that it would be just a shame if I locked myself into one thing and that in the end, maybe I am not that. Yes, I am a woman who loves a woman. Yes, I am a dancer. Yes, I am Black, I am Ethiopian and also today French. And I don't have just one first name, there are two really today that exist. I am just a woman who doesn't know many things and who moves forward, who is always in search of truth, you know. And in search of what is just."
			11/f25	"So... frankly, after, I assume my white side and all, you see. And then, there's no reason that I should be more ashamed than anything else, given that after, it's also what makes me who I am today..."

Main Theme	Subcategories	Definition	References	Examples
BELONGING	BLACK/ADOPTEE COMMUNITIES AND BELONGING	This category designates the process by which adoptees develop a feeling of belonging, mutual recognition, and support within racialized	13/f26	"So then, there, by reconnecting with adopted people, I understand that already, we had the same suffering, the same issues regarding family. After, there are different cases, but we come together on the fact that our identity was cut off, that today, we are all there wondering how we do to evolve, trying to piece together info. We all experienced racism in our

Main Theme	Subcategories	Definition	References	Examples
		(notably black) communities or adoptee groups.		corner and we told each other all that. But in fact, if we had met earlier, we would not have evolved at all in the same way. We could have so much gained more confidence, confided more, understood that the other also lives the same thing."
			17/f26	"I met other adopted people. But from other countries, like Haiti, etc. Well, from other countries. And, like, I told myself, well... Well, in fact, I'm not all alone. There are many of us. And it's cool, well... There you go."
			16/m24	"And it's really in 10th grade, where I hung out almost only with non-White people. So from there, I told myself, I have so many points in common with them, I have so many things to say. That's where I really made my transition, let's say. I hang out almost only with racialized people. And it's a choice. I have White friends and all, but for that, I feel more represented and more comfortable with racialized people too, regardless, Black, Arab, regardless."
	FAMILY BELONGING	This category refers to the often ambivalent feeling of inclusion or exclusion that adoptees experience within their adoptive family. It encompasses situations where the adoptee perceives a racial,	12/f31	"For example, I feel like a foreigner within my family. I feel like a foreigner... Yeah, in spaces where... It's not that I'm not welcome, but in any case, I feel my difference. The looks, everything speaks, bodies speak."
			11/f25	"But well, after, that's complicated, given that they are white too, these are topics where there will always be, I don't know, a limit where we can't necessarily understand each other, you see, where they can try, but they won't necessarily be able to."

Main Theme	Subcategories	Definition	References	Examples
		bodily, cultural, emotional, or relational distance that limits the sensation of being a full member of the family group.	14/f27	"And so I only had white friends. And I remember, one of my friends tells me, I don't remember precisely what she told me, but basically she tells me, but in fact, you're black and your parents are white. And there I told myself, yeah it's true, even if it was visible, I had never become conscious that it was the case. And there I told myself, yeah it's true. And to tell you, it had marked me so much, in quotes, that I had made a drawing. I had made a drawing, you know, like it's silly, I made a drawing, and basically I had written for my real mom, you see, because, I don't know, color had impacted me. It's the first time I had become conscious that my parents, they weren't my parents, and that's it."
			13/f26	"After, the difference, at least within my family, it's rather bodily, my sisters, they are very very thin, etc. And so then, it's true that me, I didn't feel, there you go, I didn't feel like I belonged to that family physically and mentally too because we don't have at all the same mentality."
	NATIONAL BELONGING	This category refers to the often ambivalent feeling of inclusion or exclusion that adoptees experience within their adoptive family. It encompasses situations where the adoptee perceives a racial,	12/f31	"If my heart speaks... Yes, my papers say I am French, but my heart says I am Ethiopian."
			16/m24	"You see, before my trip, I would say that I felt 100% Ethiopian. After high school and more. Today, it's true that I considered myself French. I think I consider myself as my real... What I really am. Before, I didn't consider myself as what I really am. It's like I was really. With my trip to Ethiopia, with the fact of living in Canada, that's where I understand that I am... French"

Main Theme	Subcategories	Definition	References	Examples
		bodily, cultural, emotional, or relational distance that limits the sensation of being a full member of the family group.		adopted... Well, French and Ethiopian adopted."
			18/f22	"Even if we'll say that me, I can say that I feel French, they ask me, but you, so, what are you? I always say, but for example, there, you say you're French, you're from Sarthe, okay? Like that, they don't bother you. So, I say I am French. But they will always tell me, yes, but really, what's your origin? Because there you go, you know that, I think, there you go. So, there, you're forced to say you're French. You're forced to say you're Ethiopian, etc."
	BELONGING STRATEGIES	This category refers to the different ways in which adoptees seek, construct forms of identity belonging throughout their lives.	11/f25	"I am quite independent, really. Me, in any case, I am not... You see, we talk about the notion of box, and it's true that it's not necessarily my thing, you know. But after, I can totally understand people who have that need and that comfort of having a place to attach themselves to too, you see, because it's reassuring, and it's home, it's where you grew up, it's... Well, it's what I understand, but it's not necessarily my mindset, you know."
			15/m40	"All that... The fact of being interested in my culture, the fact of accompanying people from back home, (29:47) of being interested in subjects that concern Black people, that concern Africa and all that."
			16/m24	"I fled adoptees out of fear of being in front of mirrors or people who could read me. Finally, I love being with adoptees. It's quite a bizarre feeling. At the beginning, I repressed that for a long time. It's this year that I met adoptees. I tell myself that I feel good with adoptees. It's crazy. It's an experience to have. That's

Main Theme	Subcategories	Definition	References	Examples
				where you tell yourself... They are people who have done the same thing as you all your life. Talking with these people, it's reconnecting with yourself. When I went for the weekend, I told myself that there were 35 people who are like me. With different journeys, different outcomes. We are not the same today. But you know that there is that wound, that strong identity that you have and that you share. It's super strong."